



the differential role of youth development program participation for latina/o adolescents

by Ingrid Nelson

Over the next 20 years, experts predict that the number of Latina/o children in the U.S. will double, so that by the year 2025, one in four school children will be Latina/o (White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans, 1998). Yet the academic achievement of Latina/os lags far behind that of other ethnic and racial groups. Only 63 percent of Latina/os ages 25 to 29 have graduated high school, compared to 87 percent of African Americans and 94 percent of both Asians and whites in the same age group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

In addition, only eight percent of Latina/os in this age group have completed four years of college (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). For decades, and especially now in the era of No Child Left Behind, educators, policy analysts, and researchers have sought to pinpoint the causes of this now-infamous academic achievement gap, yet they overwhelmingly ignore the fact that youth

today spend only 25 percent of their waking hours on school work (Larson & Verma, 1999).

Theoretical explanations of Latina/o youths' academic attainment omit the role that out-of-school time (OST) activities may play, and few studies have explored the role of OST programming in the lives of Latina/o students. The purpose of this study is to investigate the long-term role of OST program participation in the context of Latina/o adolescents' pathways to college. Although a growing number of pre- and post-test design studies link positive outcomes to OST program involvement, few researchers have explored the long-term roles of OST participation, and none of those longitudinal studies have considered the influence of OST

INGRID NELSON is a doctoral candidate in sociology of education at Stanford University and a research assistant at the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities. She received the Edmund A. Stanley Research Grant from the Robert Bowne Foundation in 2008. Her research interests include out-of-school-time participation among adolescents and Latina/o youth. Recent publications include "Street Ball, Swim Team and the Sour Cream Machine: A Cluster Analysis of Out of School Time Participation Portfolios" with Billie Gastic in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*.

programs in the context of other supports available to youth. By looking at a group of Latina/o adolescents in community context—first in eighth grade and again in early adulthood—this study explores differences in the role that OST participation can play for Latina/o adolescents in their pathways to college.

Theories of Failure and Success

Competing and complementary explanations exist, but no theory yet predicts why many Latina/o youth follow national patterns of low achievement while others buck the trend. In the past, dominant sociological theories have focused on factors explaining students' failures. This outlook was aligned with intervention strategies seeking to minimize negative outcomes, such as dropping out of school, teen pregnancy, and drug abuse. With the advent of the positive youth development perspective, both research and practice have shifted toward explaining and promoting success. What follows is a brief encapsulation of dominant sociological theories explaining failure and low attainment among Latina/o youth, followed by a brief explanation of dominant theories accounting for success and high attainment among Latina/o youth. Finally, I draw on these theories to build a theoretical framework for this study.

Proponents of the *deficit* explanation commonly attach academic outcomes to demographic data, so that traits ascribed to categories of people appear to cause low or high achievement in school. For example, even after controlling for family background variables, researchers found that students of Mexican origin were less likely to complete 12th grade than their white peers (Warren, 1996). However, deficit theorists fail to explain why many Latina/o students drop out of school even though they do not match the typical at-risk profile (Fernandez & Shu, 1988); factors that increase the odds of dropping out for African-American and white students, such as misbehavior, having changed schools, and low grades, do not increase the odds for Hispanic students (Rumberger, 1995).

Structural explanations claim that certain school traits cause low achievement among minority students (Valverde & Scribner, 2001). For example, Latina/o students are generally exposed to less qualified teachers and fewer resources per student. These explanations fail to

account for diversity within the Latina/o population and cannot explain how high-achieving youth emerge from subpar schools.

Reproduction theorists assert that schools act as instruments of the dominant group in society; they are intentionally designed to foster low achievement among minority students, thus continually reproducing the status quo in social relations (Bourdieu, 1973; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). These theories strip minority youth and families of any agency in the school system and, again, overlook diversity within the Latina/o population (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).

Stepping away from the notion that youth act as passive recipients to their environments, *resistance* theory recognizes low-achievement behaviors as challenges to certain aspects of schooling: When students believe that graduation will not improve their life chances, they develop identities in opposition to school culture (Fine, 1991; MacLeod, 1995). Current research counters these claims with evidence that some marginalized youth instead develop school-oriented identities (Carter, 2005; Flores-González, 2002).

While deficit, structural, reproduction, and resistance theories may partially account for low academic achievement among minority students, these explanations fail to account for the diversity among Latina/o youth. Many Latina/os drop out of school even though they do not match typical at-risk profiles (Fernandez & Shu, 1988). Academic achievement does not come at the expense of ethnic identity for all groups (Carter, 2005; Mehan, Hubbard, & Villanueva, 1994). Individual agency must be considered in tandem with systemic constraints and opportunities.

Recent sociological research weaves together impacts of both personal and structural factors, shifting its focus from failures to successes. *Social capital* theorists agree that low achievement has structural roots but locate success in the individual's ability to navigate the educational system. Successful Latina/o youth must seek out supportive adults in their school in order to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for academic progress (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995).

Role identity theory explains that successful Latina/o youth are those who effectively reconcile the differences

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and manage the transitions between school and home (Flores-González, 2002). Students are most likely to manage these transitions well if their worlds are congruent, but many others succeed by adopting aspects of school culture while still maintaining their home culture—in other words, accommodating without assimilating (Mehan et al., 1994). Developing this all-encompassing “school kid” identity requires that the “school kid” role be socially appropriate both at school and at home, that social supports be available to the youth, and that rewards exist for adopting that role. It also requires the presence of identity-enhancing events and the absence of identity-threatening events (Flores-González, 2002). Students are successful in school to the extent that they can adopt and sustain the “school kid” identity. This process can be facilitated or hindered by school staffs and structures.

I argue that OST programs can also facilitate the adoption of the “school kid” identity. This study brings together social capital and role identity theories, examining OST programs as settings that simultaneously provide access to the social capital necessary for academic attainment and college matriculation as well as opportunities for the social support, relationships, and rewards necessary for young people to construct and maintain a positive “school kid” identity in the face of adversity.

How OST Programs Help Build Social Capital and Role Identity

While the best teachers go beyond the basic cognitive tasks of schooling by working to meet children’s physical, social, and emotional needs, more often these requirements must be attended to outside of school. Afterschool programs, weekend activities, and summer camps seek to supplement schooling by emphasizing multiple aspects of adolescent development. Specifically, many of the ways that OST programs have been shown to benefit participants align with social capital and role identity theories of academic attainment among Latina/o adolescents.

First, OST programs provide a context for youth to connect with caring and knowledgeable adults in their communities (Jarrett, Sullivan, & Watkins, 2005); such connections are the basis for building social capital. Among Latina/o adolescents, academic success arises from the combined influences of loving parents and sup-

portive non-parent adults (Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2006). The presence of non-parent adults who can provide information becomes crucial to Latina/o youth striving to overcome barriers to college-going, including minimal adult supervision, misinformation, and poorly informed choices (Immerwahr, 2003; Zalaquett, 2006). Staff members of OST programs often cater to smaller groups of youth and thus demand higher standards than do schoolteachers. Personal attention from staff members also fosters better work habits, increasing efficacy and raising educational aspirations (American Youth Policy Forum, 2004; Bodilly & Beckett, 2005).

Second, OST programs provide opportunities necessary for school engagement and positive identity development. Studies link participation in extracurricular activities to numerous positive outcomes, including increased academic achievement (Broh, 2002; Schreiber & Chambers, 2002); lower dropout rates (Mahoney, 2000; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997); and psychosocial improvements such as stronger self-image, positive social development, and reductions in risk-taking

behavior (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Gordon, Bridglall, & Meroe, 2005). Involvement in extracurricular activities is also associated with positive school-related attitudes and behaviors such as school connectedness and reduced truancy and delinquency (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006a, 2006b; Jordan & Nettles, 2000; Thompson, Iachan, Overpeck, Ross, & Gross, 2006). Programs provide youth with leadership opportunities and encourage the acquisition of life skills such as teamwork, communication, and problem solving (American Youth Policy Forum, 2004).

In addition, the voluntary nature of programs empowers youth. While in school, students reported high concentration and low intrinsic motivation; during unstructured leisure time, students reported low concentration and high intrinsic motivation. Research showed that students report simultaneously experiencing high concentration and high motivation only while participating in structured voluntary activities, such as clubs and sports (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Larson & Kleiber, 1993). That disadvantaged students demonstrate the largest gains from participation shows that out-of-school-time programs can chip away at the achievement gap (Camp, 1990; Gerber, 1996; Holloway, 2000; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). Flores-González (2002) argues that

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developing a “school kid” identity is contingent on factors including the social appropriateness of the “school kid” or “good kid” role, social support, prestige and rewards, extensive and intensive relationships, and the presence of identity-enhancing events. As discussed above, many of these factors have been tied to OST participation.

Students from different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds participate in structured activities at different rates. Youth from higher-income families are more likely than their peers from lower-income families to participate in all kinds of extracurricular activities, in a greater number of activities and with greater frequency (Bouffard et al., 2006). In most activities, white youth are overrepresented and Latina/o youth are underrepresented. Although few studies have been done on why participation rates differ, researchers speculate that racial and ethnic group differences may result from some of the factors driving socioeconomic gaps, as well as from factors specific to different racial and ethnic groups such as linguistic and cultural differences between families and activity providers (Bouffard et al., 2006). According to Feldman and Matjasko’s (2005) review of the literature, few empirical investigations of participation and educational outcomes of adolescents from different racial and ethnic groups exist. While we know that Latina/o youth frequently experience limited access to extracurricular activities (Flores-González, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999), few studies explore what role OST programs play for Latina/o youth.

Studying Latina/o OST Participation in Context

The purpose of this study is to investigate the long-term embedded role of OST program participation in the context of Latina/o youths’ pathways to college. I use the term “embedded role” because I believe that qualitative researchers cannot isolate the influences of OST program participation from the influences of family, school, and community. Rather, young people’s OST experiences vary in important ways in relation to the experiences and supports available to them outside any single OST program. By looking at a small sample of Latina/o youth in community contexts—first in eighth grade and again in early adulthood—this study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What was the embedded role of a high-quality OST program in the context of other institutions, organizations, and individuals that shape these Latina/o youths’ transition to adulthood?
- For which of these Latina/o youth did OST programs play a more pivotal role?

Site and Sample

The Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL) program began in the fall of 2000 through a partnership between the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (JGC) at Stanford University and a mid-sized San Francisco Bay Area city as a pilot project to assess the needs and strengths of local middle school youth. This program was selected for study based on its exemplary model of youth development, the proportion of Latina/o youth involved, and the depth of data available on participants (Conner & Strobel, 2007). Although the program continues, this study focuses on the first three cohorts of participants at one middle school site.

YELL seeks to instill positive development by encouraging youth to see themselves as valuable contributors to their community and as being capable of succeeding in a variety of settings. At the time of this study, the first semester of the program was dedicated to team building and teaching social science research methods. During the second semester, youth put their skills into action by choosing a current issue in their school or community, conducting research on the topic, and presenting results to relevant groups. Participants were paid a small stipend for participating. The program has changed over its years of operation in response to the needs of the youth, the school, and the surrounding community.

Each year administrators at the middle school and YELL staff members collaborated to select a cohort of about 15 youth to participate. Presentations were made to all eighth-grade classes, describing the project as an opportunity to “make the community a better place while learning new skills and having an employment opportunity” (Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernandez, 2003, p. 5). The application consisted of demographic information and two short-answer questions; about half of the applicants were selected for interviews. Only students

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with at least a C average were allowed to participate, as school officials requested (though one exception was made). A small committee of program staff selected participants based on the following criteria: enthusiasm for the goals of the project; ability to get along with others; and socioeconomic, neighborhood, ethnicity, academic, and gender diversity.

The selection of youth to participate in YELL was biased in many ways. First, only interested youth with free time after school chose to apply. Youth who were not interested in “making their community a better place” or who had other obligations after school (such as working, at home or for pay, or attending private lessons) would not have applied. Students with a grade average lower than C were not allowed to participate. These factors of motivation and availability may distinguish participating youth from their peers. In addition, fewer than 20 percent of applicants were ultimately selected to participate in YELL. Although program staff selected an intentionally diverse group of participants, this vetting process introduces an additional layer of selection bias.

During the entire calendar year of 2008, our research team attempted to contact and interview all youth from the first three cohorts of YELL participants, now five to seven years out of the program. Contact attempts were made first in English by a research assistant, then in English and Spanish by former participants. We began by contacting youth through the home and alternate phone numbers they provided as participants. We met with former program staff members to learn the current phone or email contact information for youth with whom they were still in touch. In addition, we searched the Internet using search engines and social networking sites. Finally, each time we interviewed a former participant, we asked if he or she knew the current contact information of any other youth from the program roster. Of the 47 youth in the first three cohorts of YELL, we were unable to locate half. Of the 23 youth that we located, each was contacted at least four times. Three former participants declined to be interviewed; eight agreed but were too busy during our 12-month research

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period to schedule an interview. In the end, we interviewed 12 former YELL participants, or about half of the located sample.

The sample of interviewees was 75 percent female, 83 percent Mexican or Mexican American, and 17 percent white. Of the Mexican or Mexican-American youth, 80 percent participated in English as a Second Language programs for some portion of their elementary school education. Most of the interviewees attended one of the three local large public high schools; however, 17 percent attended small private day schools on full scholarships. At the time of our interviews, about 33 percent of the sample was attending community college part time, 17 percent was attending community college full time, 33 percent was attending a private university full time, and 17 percent was attending trade school full or part time. See Table 1 for the characteristics of the 12 youth.

Method

This research was conducted using notes from in-depth interviews conducted in eighth grade, together with interviews I conducted with former participants five to seven years later in young adulthood. Site-based JGC researchers conducted interviews with YELL participants during the fall and spring of each year of participation.¹ The process of data collection and analysis

created opportunities for YELL directors and JGC researchers to discuss youths' experiences as well as programmatic philosophies and research methods. Thus the interview protocol changed each year in response to emerging trends and the curiosities of staff, students, and researchers. Although changes in the interview protocol limited our ability to make direct comparisons from year to year, the adaptations allowed the findings to be of direct use to the program staff and participating youth as well as responsive to community and national events.

The format of interviews conducted in young adulthood builds on the Life History Calendar (LHC) method (Freedman, Thornton, Camburn, Alwin, & Young-DeMarco, 1988), a technique for collecting accurate retrospective data. Generally, topic cues run down the left margin of the calendar while timing cues run across the

Table 1

Category of Influence	Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	ESL	High School	Current Work	Current School	No. of Children	Career Goal
Transformative	Maria	Female	Mexican	Y	Large Public	Human Relations FT	Community College PT	0	Unsure
Transformative		Female	Mexican	Y	Large Public/Community College	Afterschool Program PT	Community College FT	0	Researcher
Transformative		Female	Mexican	Y	Large Public	Food Service FT	Community College PT	0	Unsure
Distinguishable		Female	Mexican	N	Small Private	Community Organizing PT	Private University FT	0	Lawyer
Distinguishable	Teresa	Female	Mexican	N	Large Public	Retail FT	Community College FT	0	Nurse
Distinguishable		Male	Mexican	Y	Large Public/Continuation	Retail FT	Trade School PT	1	Firefighter
Distinguishable		Female	White	N	Large Public	None	Private University FT	0	Photographer
Auxiliary		Male	Mexican	Y	Small Private	Research PT	Private University FT	0	Doctor
Auxiliary		Female	Mexican	Y	Large Public	Public Relations PT	Community College PT	0	Unsure
Auxiliary		Male	White	N	Large Public	None	Trade School FT	0	Electrician
Auxiliary		Female	Mexican	Y	Large Public	Retail PT	Private College FT	0	Doctor
Auxiliary	Ana	Female	Mexican	Y	Large Public	Food Service FT	Community College PT	1	Unsure

top, creating a LHC matrix (Axinn, Pearce, & Ghimire, 1999). In this study, topic cues were school, home/family, and anything else besides home and school. The timing cues were before elementary school, elementary school, middle school, high school, and after high school. The LHC fits the structure of respondents' autobiographical memories by encouraging recall at both thematic and temporal levels (Belli, 1998). Since its inception, the LHC has been used primarily for large-scale quantitative studies; it has frequently been adapted for use with diverse age groups and populations (Axinn et al., 1999).

Using the LHC to capture the embedded role of OST participation offers a number of benefits. First, the LHC captures the process of becoming involved in and disengaging from activities, networks, and behaviors. Second, this method can uncover patterns of continuity and change in individual behavior over time. Finally, the life history method is grounded in social and historical

context, a context that is especially important for understanding the lives of today's Latina/o youth in California.

Because my purpose was to generate rich qualitative data on a small number of individuals, I deviated from the traditional life history calendar. My pilot testing of structured LHC protocols with young adults of working class or poor family backgrounds failed to elicit in-depth responses. A less structured approach to the LHC enabled richer data collection. In this study, I maintained the traditional LHC matrix but began interviews with a large blank page, markers, and stickers. The interviewer and respondent then co-constructed the time cues—from birth to present day—horizontally across the page, and substantive cues—including school, home, and “anything not school and not home”—vertically. This variation on the LHC helped build rapport; allowed for in-depth narratives of the respondents' lives; and placed OST participation in the broad context of family, school, and community.

Degrees of Influence

YELL did not influence all participants to the same degree. Indeed, five to seven years following program completion, some participants were preparing to graduate from college, while others sat in jail. Although we heard from the youth that some of their peers were sent back to Mexico, worked full-time, joined gangs, or were behind bars, all of the youth located for young adulthood interviews were then living within an hour of their middle school and were enrolled in some kind of educational institution. All said they had benefitted from YELL. These youth illustrate a preliminary typology of the influences of high-quality OST programs. However, even high-quality OST programs do not positively influence all participants; the YELL participants who chose not to be interviewed as young adults or could not be located may have included some who were not positively influenced by the program.

In this sample, each participant's path to higher education was unique, including significant variation in the role YELL played, yet clear patterns emerged. Based on eighth-grade interviews and LHC data, I have constructed a typology of degrees of embedded influence:

- *Auxiliary* influence
- *Distinguishable* influence
- *Transformative* influence

In the next sections, I will first define each category of influence and then recount the experiences of one youth who typifies each category of embedded influence.

For which youth, in what contexts, are high-quality OST programs bound to have a relatively strong embedded influence? The weaker a young person's support system, the more potential an OST program has to play a transformative role. We cannot generalize based solely on ethnic and structural categories to discover which youth will benefit the most from such programs. All of the youth profiled below are Latinas.² All were raised in working class or poor homes in the same city. All attended the same middle school. All currently attend community college while holding down a full-time job. Only by peering into multiple contexts—school, home, community—over an extended period of time were we able to see the distinct differences among the roles YELL played for each student.

Auxiliary Influence

Some youth currently attending college started along this path prior to joining YELL. These students possessed the ambition, support from home, and academic aptitude to attend college. Many had been active in high-quality OST activities from a young age. All were surrounded by adults who valued higher education and helped keep the students college-bound; most already possessed strong connections to the school community. Though YELL may have been a good experience, ultimately participation did not change these students' direction. If they had not participated, they would have likely had another enriching activity after school. YELL did not act as a primary support system, nor did it bring about personal transformation. When asked about the most influential forces in getting them to college, youth for whom YELL had an auxiliary influence often cited a parent or adult mentor and their own determination. Many said they always knew they would go to college.

Ana's experience exemplifies auxiliary OST program influence. Born in Mexico City, Ana immigrated to the United States at the end of first grade with her mother and sister. Ana's father had previously immigrated and established a home for the family. According to Ana, "It wasn't going to be possible for [my father] to leave us [in Mexico] while he was here working, and, plus he wanted us to come and go to school and have a better future, a better education for us." Ana spoke no English before moving to California. She described the transition as difficult, but remembered loving her new elementary school. She said she made "a lot of really nice friends," and enjoyed participating in the school's afterschool program. When asked what was most influential in her elementary school life, Ana credited her bilingual teachers and her father. She said:

My dad was really strict with us.... He would come to the library, bring us books, and we would have to read a book, and then he would do a summary, plot and everything for us.... That was our homework for the weekend. I think it was a little frustrating for me, because I was really good in school.... [But] thanks to that we went to school, we went to college. My sister's still in school. I am still in school.

When asked what was most influential in her elementary school life, Ana credited her bilingual teachers and her father.

Ana said that the transition to middle school was scary but that she found it “easy to find friends” and “adapt.” She participated in the school’s afterschool program during sixth and seventh grades, relishing the time to complete her homework. During her free time, Ana reported, she would “always be at home”; she spoke of “having fun with all my family.” Ana did not remember exactly when she participated in YELL, but she liked the program because she got to “help the community,” “meet many people that were really great,” and work on a project—though she had no recollection of the nature of the project. When asked what was influential during her middle school years, Ana cited her parents, “because they were the ones who were always pressuring me to do my homework, to do good in school, to be a good student.”

At the end of Ana’s eighth-grade year, her mother died. The death took a toll on the family. During high school, Ana said that her father was often working. As a sophomore, Ana got a part-time job. She remembered being busy: “I had my boyfriend. I had to go to work. I had to do homework. I had to cook. I had to clean the house.” But Ana did not relent in her pursuit of college: “I had to think more seriously about what I wanted in my life and in my future.” Although she did not participate in afterschool activities in high school, she was active in two lunchtime clubs, one for community service and the other a support group for Latinas. When asked what was most influential in her high school years, Ana credited her dad, her sister, and a close friend.

Although she still was not sure of her major at the time of our interview, Ana said she enjoys attending community college. She enrolled for one year while working full time; then she took a quarter off to give



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birth to her son. Two months later, she returned to working days and going to school at night, leaving her son in the care of her aunt. Both Ana and the people who surround her share a strong commitment to her college education:

Like my dad said, “You know, now that you have the kid, if you want to continue on to school, take one class, two classes until you finish whatever you started.” So, I want to do that. I *really* want to finish school or something that is going to help me for me and the kid.

While Ana recognized her father’s impact on her choices, she also gave herself credit for persevering: “Sometimes you go to school because of your parents, but my dad is not here right now—he’s in Mexico—and nobody’s pressuring me to go to school. It’s just me and I want to go to school.”

For Ana, YELL had an auxiliary influence on her path to college. She remembered the program positively—even calling it the best “one of those programs” in which she took part. However, over the long run, her own dedication and aptitude, coupled with support from friends and family, are what carried her through school and on to higher education in spite of tragedy and complications.

Distinguishable Influence

The next group of YELL participants attributed some of their success to the OST program, even though they had started along the path to college before their YELL experience. Throughout their adolescence, these youth tended to display academic aptitude and a strong commitment to attending college. Though they said they had positive adult role models, they did not perceive themselves as having a tight circle of supports and sometimes felt isolated from their families or school community. YELL

engendered a sense of belonging that they did not feel elsewhere. In YELL, these young people generated strong relationships with adults, got connected to complementary organizations, and bonded with likeminded peers. More than simply another afterschool program, YELL was a significant force in helping these young people maintain their direction. When asked about the most influential forces propelling them to college, youth for whom YELL had a *distinguishable* influence cited YELL along with family and self.

Teresa was born and raised in a mobile home park in an industrial area. She characterized her elementary school as “poorer,” but remembered having “a good experience there” as a shy and “nerdy” child. The school had “a lot of afterschool programs and stuff for kids,” and Teresa said she “did all those afterschool programs.” She particularly remembered that “all the people were really nice” but could not recall details of the programs. When asked what was most influential while she was in elementary school, Teresa cited school and home, saying, “I guess school was...the most influential, and my family. But school, I mean, I learned so much [in school], not only about regular school but just being with the people.” Overall, Teresa felt successful and welcome both during and after school.

Middle school was different. While school work continued to come easily, Teresa found the social aspects of middle school extremely difficult. She remembered the kids being “annoying” and “mean,” so much so that she would “just go [to school] as few days as possible.” YELL stood out in Teresa’s memory as one part of middle school where she felt that she belonged. “It was a good school, just, like, the people I didn’t really get along with. But YELL was a good part.” Teresa cited the people in YELL, particularly adult leaders, as the most pivotal aspect of its influence. “People are just so caring about you, and they always want you to succeed... They just really cared about the kids and their future and everything.” As someone who talked frequently about going to college—even as an eighth grader—Teresa appreciated the knowledge and support of YELL leaders.

Five years after her time in YELL, Teresa returned constantly in her interview to the confidence she gained through participating.

I was still really shy...But, I mean, all this program stuff helped me in going through middle school and high school. It definitely changes you. So, I became more outgoing and everything...[YELL] helped me meet a lot of people... It brought me out of my shell.

Although the relationships she formed with peers and adults did not extend beyond her time in the program, the personal growth Teresa experienced had a lasting role in her life.

Teresa chose to attend a different high school from her middle school peers in order to have a fresh start. Again, academics came easily—and now, for the first time, the social aspects of school were less daunting. Outside of school, Teresa spent most of her time volunteering at the senior center, the public library, or the city’s teen advisory board. She also acted as a counselor for the county’s outdoor education program and as a mentor in YELL. Starting in her sophomore year, Teresa worked part time. When asked what was most influential in her high school years, Teresa cited popular adult leaders in her OST programs, teachers from elective classes at school, and her parents (even though she said they were “boring”).

Immediately after graduating high school, Teresa moved into her own apartment and enrolled in community college to pursue a degree in nursing. She said she likes nursing because, as in many of her high school activities, “you get to help people.” At the time of our interview, Teresa was halfway through the nursing program and was planning to transfer to a four-year university to complete her degree. She was working full-time and volunteering every week at the public library.

YELL had a *distinguishable* influence on Teresa’s path to college. When asked what gave her the determination to attend college, Teresa credited herself, her parents, and YELL:

I don’t want to end up at a dead-end job. I want to do something with my life. So, it was, like, college time, definitely. And then, just my parents, they’re like, “You know, you need to get an education,” and everything...And YELL has definitely helped with school.

While her natural academic aptitude, attitudes toward college, and support from home placed Teresa on a college path before she joined YELL, participating made an impression on Teresa that was distinguishable from other experiences.

Transformative Influence

Other YELL participants were started along a path toward delinquency when they joined. These youth had no college motivation, records of delinquency, and emerging gang ties. This group of former participants

stands out because they changed significantly during and following their time in YELL. In YELL, these young people generated strong relationships with adults, got connected to complementary organizations, and bonded with likeminded peers. YELL qualitatively changed these youth and sparked a domino effect of beneficial supports and experiences in subsequent years. When asked about the most influential forces in getting them college-bound, youth for whom YELL had a *transformative* influence cited YELL emphatically.

Maria was one of those on whom YELL had a transformative influence. Maria attended preschool in Mexico before moving to the United States as a young child. Soon after arriving, her parents separated. Maria grew up with her single mother, moving to at least four different districts during elementary school and living on the edge of poverty with various groups of relatives. Bright but uninterested in academics, Maria had little ambition throughout elementary school.

Middle school was no better. According to Maria, “My sixth grade year I was a little troublemaker in school. I would always be in fights with other people—all through sixth and seventh grade. Girls, and guys too; I got in a fight with this guy; he pushed me and I slapped him across the face.” With each passing year, Maria said, she crept closer to gang involvement and pregnancy. Her grades were poor, and she felt little connection to school. By the beginning of eighth grade she was on the verge of dropping out.

Maria joined YELL at the urging of the guidance counselor; she was the only exception to the minimum C average rule. Over the course of the year, her grades improved significantly. Maria credited YELL for her academic turnaround, citing the opportunity it gave her to think about the problems in her community and the role she could play in the solutions. “When I got in YELL, I started to think a little bit better about who I am and what I want. . . . Everything used to be all blank. I just acted. . . . I didn’t even know what I was doing.” She said that she vividly remembers, “the day when my science teacher said to the principal, ‘I want to show you the star of my class.’ And the principal just looked at me and he said, ‘Oh wow!’” Maria’s commitment to her education prompted her teachers and peers to begin to see her differently.

Although youth for whom the program was an auxiliary influence rarely cited specific aspects of the program that were memorable or influential, all youth for whom the program had a distinguishable or transformative influence mentioned staff members as an important component.

Joining YELL connected Maria with resources and relationships to point her in a new direction. As a high school student, Maria continued as a mentor in YELL. She went on to volunteer as a reading tutor, present workshops at national conferences on youth development, and co-found Latinas in Action, a support group for young Latinas. She credited YELL with providing, “a ladder of opportunities. . . . It is like. . . the trunk of the tree and all these other programs and opportunities are the branches.” Looking back on the most influential factors

during high school, Maria stated clearly, “If I didn’t keep going in YELL, I would be a different person right now. . . . I have a lot of friends who are in jail, some of my friends are pregnant and they have babies, some are married already.” As an eighth grader, Maria was on the path to just such outcomes.

By the time she graduated from high school, Maria had received a prestigious community leadership award and a college scholarship. At the time of her interview, she was a student at a nearby college. Participating in YELL had a *transformative* influence for Maria; while it may not have single-handedly changed

her life, it began a domino effect of opportunities which shifted her path from gang involvement to college.

Influencing Factors

This preliminary typology of the role a high-quality OST program can play in the lives of Latina/o youth illustrates both the commonalities and wide diversity of participating youth. Programs like YELL have the potential to provide a safe and supportive environment, with opportunities for belonging and competence. The voluntary nature of participation helps engender a sense of autonomy. Skilled staff members can provide support, encouragement, and vital information along the path to college. Staff members with local knowledge can also refer youth to subsequent opportunities at the close of the program. For some youth, this combination of resources and opportunities alters their path in life. For others, it may have a distinguishable or auxiliary influence. Indeed, all interviewed youth benefitted from YELL to some degree.

Many of the ways that YELL benefitted participants align with social capital and role identity theories of academic attainment among Latina/o adolescents. Although

youth for whom the program was an auxiliary influence rarely cited specific aspects of the program that were memorable or influential, all youth for whom the program had a distinguishable or transformative influence mentioned staff members as an important component. YELL staff members provided emotional support, academic encouragement, and cultural capital regarding pathways to college—important contributions, given the literature claiming that academic success among Latina/os arises from the combined influences of loving parents and supportive non-parent adults (Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2006) and that the biggest barriers to college-going include minimal adult supervision, misinformation, and poorly informed choices (Immerwahr, 2003; Zalaquett, 2006).

However, the young adults respondents said that the staff members who had the biggest influence were those who built and maintained strong relationships over time. The staff members' presence among youth was not sufficient to providing a distinguishable or transformative influence on youth; the staff member and student must take an active role. For example, this study includes a pair of sisters less than two years apart in age. One sister experienced a transformative influence and the other experienced an auxiliary influence. Surely the difference cannot easily be attributed to differences in home environment or socioeconomic status. In terms of social capital, the difference comes with the strength and duration of their relationships with staff members. The sister who experienced a transformative influence remained involved in the program as a mentor for about three years after she graduated from eighth grade. She also actively participated in other community organizations that had strong ties with YELL. Around the time of her high school graduation, she kept in contact with two former staff members through email, phone, and attendance at community events. Those staff members raised money for a scholarship fund to assist this sister with the costs of books, a computer, transportation, and college tuition. At the time of the follow-up interview, she was still in touch with those two staff members on a monthly basis. Meanwhile, the sister who experienced an auxiliary influence participated in the OST program for only one year and did not communicate with staff members after her transition to high school.

In addition, all youth for whom YELL had a transformative or distinguishable influence also attributed the influence to program activities that encouraged public speaking, attention to interpersonal dynamics, and

opportunities for belonging. In keeping with role identity theory, the program helped these young people develop identities as both engaged students and confident peers. Many students claimed that YELL helped them find their voice, or find themselves, or feel that they mattered. This sense of self carried both into the school day and into their home lives. For example, students remembered being positively noticed by teachers for their involvement in YELL and for working harder in school. Students also remembered being positively noticed by their families for being active in their community. For example, Maria's mother, who did not complete elementary school, rarely took interest in her daughter's academics; however, when Maria had the opportunity to present to the city council, her mother was bursting with pride.

While we know that Latina/o youth frequently experience limited access to extracurricular programming (Flores-González, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999), few studies explore what role OST programs play for Latina/o youth. The results of this study indicate that Latina/o youth benefit to varying degrees from OST participation, and that the ways that Latina/o youth benefit align with multiple sociological theories predicting educational attainment. Participants who experienced a distinguishable or transformative influence built social capital through relationships with supportive and knowledgeable program staff. They also began to develop positive identities bridging their home and school lives together through skill building, community participation, and belonging. Although these results are not generalizable based on the limited sample size, this study provides a foundation for further research exploring OST activities as a beneficial setting for college-aspiring Latina/o youth.

Future Directions

Young people do not experience OST programs uniformly. Depending on the alignment of their personal characteristics; their other school, community, and home supports; and the resources and relationships available in the OST program, participation in an OST program may act as a stopover after school or as a life-changing opportunity. This study outlines a preliminary typology and, by examining the embedded influence of an OST program on Latina/o youth over time, paves the way for future longitudinal research on OST experiences. Specifically, future research can build on this study by further examining what factors predict varying degrees of influence, by exploring the distributions of influence within and

across programs, and by mapping connections among the programs in which youth engage over time.

First, further research is needed on what factors predict what kind of influence a student will experience in a given program. How much of the influence a program has over time can be attributed to alignment between the students' interests and the program's resources? How much of the influence can be attributed to the presence or lack of other opportunities and supports in the student's life? Finally, what role, if any, do race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status play? If alignment turns out to be an important factor, it would follow that each community should have a wide variety of programs. However, if programs fill a void for certain youth regardless of program content, access to any high-quality program would make a difference. As all interviewees in this study indicated that they originally became involved with YELL because they were interested in making their community a better place, this study provides exploratory evidence that program alignment with students' interests may be an important factor in generating participation, while the presence or lack of other support systems may ultimately determine the degree of influence a youth experiences.

In this sample, roughly one in four youth reported that YELL had a transformative influence across their adolescence. Future research should explore whether it is possible, or even desirable, for a single program to have a transformative influence on all participants. Since prolonged relationships with adult staff members were a shared experience among all of the youth who experienced transformative influence, what kind of resources and adult/youth ratios would need to be in place to facilitate such relationships? Further, all transformative-influence youth were well loved by family and friends but lacked social capital with regard to the school system and lacked support and incentive at home for developing appropriate "school kid" identities. What would it look like for youth who already have access to college-pathway social capital and identity support to experience transformative influence in an OST program? Further research could examine the distribution of embedded influences across a wide variety of programs. In addition, as our sample did not include youth who were negatively influenced by OST programs, further research could expand this preliminary typology beyond positive influence.

Third, participation begets participation. Many youth learned of subsequent opportunities for extracurricular participation from YELL-related contacts. For some youth, those subsequent experiences were more

influential than YELL. Research shows that adolescents are drawn to programs that cater to their particular age cohort (Strobel, Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2008). Therefore, as youth age, staff members can help youth sustain their personal and social development by referring youth into age-appropriate programs. However, in order for youth to progress through a community's ladder of opportunities, those opportunities must exist for every age cohort of youth, and staff members at each rung must be knowledgeable of and connected to programs that serve older youth. This pattern in our data, that participation begets participation, indicates the importance of research on the local social networks among OST staff members and on how such influence positive outcomes among youth over time.

Finally, this study shows that youth are influenced by OST programs long after participation has ended. A stronger focus in the OST field on longitudinal research may have much to teach us about how OST programs influence youth's trajectories from adolescence into adulthood.

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Notes

¹ While the majority of participants were active in YELL for only their eighth-grade year, three to five youth were selected each year to return to the program as paid mentors. Youth were interviewed during the fall and spring of every year, whether they were participants or employees. Thus the number of interviews conducted with each participant ranged from one to seven.

² Although all three individuals profiled are female, their experiences are representative of the young men and women in the sample.