

# College and Career Readiness Opportunities for Latinx English Learners in Urban High Schools

**Corinne Martinez**

California State University, Long Beach

**Cecilia Mendoza**

California State University, Fresno

## Abstract

*Through interviews and focus groups with 21 high school seniors, this research examines the experiences of Latinx English learners in college and career academies in urban districts across California. In California, the college and career readiness landscape is varied and complex. However, many stakeholders see the Linked Learning approach as leading the reform effort in preparing students for a full range of post-secondary options. Using opportunity to learning theory (OTL) within a social capital framework, we sought to understand the college and career readiness experiences of Latinx English learner students. The results indicated that students expressed a clear desire to attend college and pursue a career. Additional findings reveal that students benefited from the Linked Learning experience in ways that contributed to their self-confidence, increased responsibility, and important 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that could be used beyond the classroom. However, despite having accumulated social capital, students articulated existing challenges that they must navigate as they pursue their post-secondary opportunities, including attending college and entering the workforce. The recommendations include a multi-pronged approach to addressing the college and career readiness of Latinx English learner students.*

**Keywords:** *College and career pathways, Latinx English Learners, urban schools, Linked Learning*

General education systems and practices have long been criticized for inadequacies in educating diverse learners (Olsen 1997, 2000, 2010). This has become a critical issue in major cities and urban public schools that have experienced a dramatic increase in Latinx enrollment. In California, Latinx students make up over 50% of the student population (California Department of Education, 2019). While these demographic changes have led to significant gains in access to higher education, racial and ethnic disparities continue in both high school graduation and college completion (Fry & Taylor, 2013; Villalpando, 2010). For Latinx students with limited English proficiency, graduation rates have trended upward since 2010-2011. However, in most states the percentage of English Learners (ELs) who graduated on time (within four years) was only 67% (US Department of Education, 2016). Beyond the challenges of gaining linguistic and academic proficiency, many secondary-level Latinx ELs face limited access to quality education and they may lack skills to be college and career ready (Mendoza, 2016).

In recent years, career academies have led high school reform efforts to prepare all students, including Latinx EL students for both college and careers (Kemple, 2001; Kemple & Snipes, 2000; Stern, Dayton, & Raby, 2000, 2010). A career academy is a school “that provides a college-preparatory curriculum with a career-related theme” (Stern et al., 2010, p. 4). College and career pathways, like *Linked Learning* (LL), seek to improve high school graduation rates and increase successful transitions to a full range of postsecondary education opportunities, particularly for low income and disadvantaged youth. (Guha et al., 2013, p. 1). Core components of the LL approach include a college preparation curriculum, real-world experiences, work-based learning and personalized supports (Linked Learning Alliance, n.d.). In California, the A-G college entrance requirement is a sequence of high school courses that students must complete (with a grade of C or better) to be minimally eligible for admission to the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU).

Career academies alter the high school environment in ways that can substantially improve high school outcomes among students at high risk of dropping out (Stern et al., 2010). Findings suggest that academic and interpersonal student supports, along with career awareness and work-based learning activities, improve students’ post-secondary opportunities (Kemple, 2001; Kemple & Snipes, 2000; Stern et al., 2010). According to Stern, Dayton, and Raby (2010), career academy teachers act as institutional agents who foster and support social networking among students. Similarly, Conchas (2001) illustrated that institutional mechanisms have a direct effect on Latinx school engagement. Institutional

mechanisms are the schools' system of actors (teachers, administrators, etc.) that function to either construct school failure or success among low-income Latinx students. Broadly, the research has shown that student-teacher relationships play an important role in reducing dropout rates (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Jones, 2002; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Lessard et al., 2009; Montalvo, Mansfield, & Miller, 2007; Stewart, 2008; Wubbels et al., 2006).

As educational institutions adopt programs to meet the threshold of providing college and career readiness for all students, college and career pathways have been touted as meeting these aims (ConnectEd, 2012). While college and career pathways have contributed to improved academic achievement, attendance and graduation rates in high school and college (Saunders et al., 2013; Stern et al. 2010; Warner, et al., 2015, Warner et al., 2016), Latinx EL students have been found to have less access to college and career pathway programs (Mendoza, 2016; 2019). Studies of Latinx students indicate that their academic performance and overall development increases when they feel connected to their classroom and school environment (Borman & Overman, 2004; Davis et al., 2010; Suárez-Orozco, Onaga & Lardemelle, 2010). Similarly, creating a sense of school belonging improves the academic and social development of all students and builds social capital (Davis, et al., 2010). This aim is particularly important for high school Latinx ELs who need to acquire college and career readiness skills (Mendoza, 2019) in a program of study in which their interests, aspirations, and engagement are integrated into their learning (Conley, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2014; Olsen, 2010). For Latinx students to achieve academic success and successfully apply to college, they need to do more than take the appropriate courses and get good grades. They must also learn to navigate the college application process (Yosso, 2005).

To understand the college and career readiness experiences of Latinx EL students, this study focuses on the following questions:

1. How do Latinx English learners perceive their experiences in *Linked Learning* college and career pathways in urban schools?
2. What are these students' perceptions of the impact their pathway experiences had on their college and career readiness?

## Theoretical Framework

The current research was guided by an opportunity to learn (OTL) framework. The existing conceptualizations of OTL (Carroll, 1963; Stevens, 1993; Wang, 1998) provide frameworks to analyze students' experiences in formal schooling, which include the importance of providing equitable conditions that promote learning for all students. Researchers argue that disparities in educational opportunities are directly related to student performance (Oakes Saunders, 2008; Rumberger & Gandara, 2004), and that the provision of curricula, learning materials, facilities, teachers, and instructional experiences enable students to achieve high standards (Aguirre-Munoz & Amabisca, 2010). We expound on an OTL framework that represents contextual features that can provide college and career opportunities for ELs. Therefore, we aim to broaden the concept of OTL beyond exposure to academic content and begin to define the types of affordances that can prepare ELs for an array of college and career opportunities.

In the context of OTL, social capital theory (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001) infers a connection between student engagement, peer connectedness, and networks of support which enable EL students to navigate the educational pipeline (McDonough, 1997; Yosso, 2005). Social capital refers to the network of people and resources providing support to students in overcoming the institutional and emotional barriers to academic success (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, 2011). Researchers contend that meaningful relations with peers and school agents (i.e., teachers, counselors, administrators) create opportunities for students that therefore increase the social capital needed for educational achievement (McDonough, 1997, Stanton-Salazar, 2001, 2011). A conceptual framework highlighting the intersection of OTL and Stanton-Salazar's (2011) social capital theory are used to provide a lens to view student engagement, student supports, and post-secondary opportunities for ELs in LL pathways.

## Methods

Research suggests that studies that focus on students' perceptions may enhance the understanding of school experiences as an important component of academic success (Cabrera, Lopez, & Saenz, 2012; Cerna, Perez, & Saenz, 2009; Rivera, 2014). In line with this research, a qualitative case study approach was applied to explore student experiences in LL pathways. The strength of utilizing a case study design for this inquiry was that it

focused on participants' perspectives, meanings, and subjective views (Creswell, 2007). We used a purposeful, criterion-based technique (Patton, 1990) to select participants for the study. This sampling strategy served to identify and select participants knowledgeable about and experienced with the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2002; Creswell & Clark, 2011).

### School Sites

School sites were identified based on the following criteria: a) certification as a LL pathway; b) more than 50% percent of the graduating class had completed the required coursework for 4-year college admission; and c) at least 5% percent of students enrolled in the pathway were identified as Latinx English learners (see Table 1). The high schools were located in urban communities with Latinx student populations exceeding 65% (School Accountability Report Card (SARC) 2017-2018). More than 50% of participants came from economically disadvantaged homes (SARC, 2017-2018). The English learner population at these schools ranged from a low of 6% to high of 31%, with the highest percentage of English learners attending So. Cal HS 2. High school graduation rates ranged from a low of 68% at the So. Cal HS 1, to a high of 100% at Central HS. Although the percentage of students meeting A-G curriculum requirements varied across the 3 schools, the school-wide college eligibility rates as determined by A-G course completion were all lower than the high school graduation rates for each of the high schools (See Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*School Profiles (AY 2017-2018)*

High School	Central HS	So. Cal HS 1	So. Cal HS 2
Pathway Theme	Performing Arts & Engineering	Performing Arts	Social Justice
Total enrollment	529	430	347
Percent of students identified as Economically Disadvantaged	59.7%	93.5%	96.3%
Ethnic Breakdown			
White	21.8%	0.9%	2.7%
Latinx	69.8%	82.6%	94.9%
African American	0.4%	5.0%	0.5%
Asian	1.4%	10.2%	1.6%
EL enrollment in pathway	6.1%	22.6%	31.4%
Graduation rates	82%	74.3%	68.2%

Students meeting A-G course requirements	92%	61.6%	46%
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## Participants

All participants were recruited from 3 certified LL pathways located in urban school districts within the state of California. Participating students were 12<sup>th</sup> graders who had completed at least three years of academic study in a certified LL pathway. All participants for this study were identified by their school site as English learners in 8<sup>th</sup> grade or at the point of placement in a certified LL pathway. We chose these criteria because Latinx English learners possessing such characteristics continue to be severely underrepresented on college campuses (Ginorio & Huston, 2001).

Table 2 provides a description of student demographics, including ethnicity and English learner status at the time the study was conducted.

**Table 2**

*Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

School Site	Central HS	So. Cal HS 1	So. Cal HS 2
Male	3	1	4
Female	4	7	2
Ethnicity			
Latinx	7	8	6
Other	0	0	0
EL Status			
RFEP*	7	8	6
EO**	0	0	0

\* Reclassified Fluent English Proficient

\*\* English Only

## Interview Data

Data sources for this study included one 1:1 interview with each student and one focus group interview with students representing each of the LL pathways. The focus group participants were selected from among the students who completed the 1:1 interview. All participants were included in focus groups for the purpose of providing a more in-depth examination of topics and themes revealed in the 1:1 interview. A total of 18 students participated in the focus groups, six from each of the respective pathways. In order to

highlight the voices of our participants we used a semi-structured interview protocol, employing open-ended questions designed to more deeply explore sources of support, academic and non-academic, perceptions of skills and knowledge gained and persistent challenges they faced in their personal or academic life (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Plano, Clark & Creswell, 2015).

### **Data Analysis**

All interview data were analyzed using a methodology which included coding, consensus, co-occurrence, and comparison (Willms, et al., 1992). Interviews were transcribed, read, and analyzed by both researchers. The researchers met after an initial review of the data to develop preliminary deductive codes based on the literature and aspects of the data that identified with the social capital and opportunity to learn framework. As themes and categories emerged, their properties were compared with one another, and in some cases repeated categories were condensed into broader themes using NVivo, a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) program (Saldaña, 2016; Creswell, 2007). The themes that surfaced during the analysis were:

- cultivating a college-going culture,
- work-based learning opportunities,
- student supports for learning,
- transferable skills,
- personal growth and persistent challenges.

After themes were modified, and revised, the lead researcher conducted a line by line analysis of the interviews. The researchers then met to discuss the categorical aggregation and determine confirmation or disconfirmation with identified themes. This was followed by an analysis of the coded interviews to identify appropriate exemplar passages to be used when answering research questions. The student responses under each of these themes describe students' perceptions related to college and career readiness within LL pathways. These extracted narratives and themes then served as the primary focus within the study.

## Findings

The data revealed six major themes relevant to the research questions and provide an index into the perceived impact LL had on Latinx EL's college and career readiness. These themes included 1) cultivating a strong college-going culture, 2) access to work-based learning opportunities, 3) student supports for learning, 4) transferable skills, 5) personal growth, and 6) persistent challenges.

### **Cultivating a Strong College-Going Culture**

Across all three academies, students shared that teachers, counselors, and even the principal were passionate about ensuring that all students, including ELs, graduate college ready. Students from each of the pathway schools reported that counselors and teachers provided college readiness workshops and activities. One student shared, "They have many workshops where we can go and get information. They ask us to bring our parents. So, they have different type of programs and workshops where they talk about how can we apply for college and FAFSA."

The vast majority of students reported enrolling in college preparation courses that included A-G curriculum. When asked about enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) courses, eight out of the 21 students indicated they had taken or were currently enrolled in one or more AP courses.

### **College and Career Aspirations of English Learners**

All students voiced having college aspirations. Interview narratives illustrate that most students had made informed decisions regarding post-secondary opportunities. In particular, students who attended the Social Justice pathway at So. Cal HS 2 were very specific about the college they planned to attend, the major they intended to study, and the career they hoped to pursue. Students spoke knowingly about the benefits of attending college, including the challenges they are likely to face in navigating the college context.

### **Knowledge about College**

Students provided multiple examples of learning about college through specific workshops and sharing of information from teachers and counselors. Several students discussed attending workshops and seminars, both after school and on Saturdays, to learn more about college opportunities, college entrance exams, and financial aid. A total of eight students commented that they had visited at least one college campus and had met with college recruiters to learn more about college life.



Students from all three schools affirmed that the school had adopted Naviance Connection, a web-based software program to help students with college and career readiness. Through Naviance, students were able to search for colleges and universities and learn about the application process, admissions criteria, and the benefits and costs associated with different types of colleges. Students indicated that school counselors used the Naviance platform to share information about SAT scores, application deadlines, and financial aid applications.

### **Access to Work-based Learning Opportunities**

Students recognized that work-based learning was presented to them as part of the LL curriculum. However, students oftentimes acknowledged that they did not take advantage of work-based learning opportunities. Students from all three pathways expressed that opportunities to participate in work-based learning, including job shadows and internship opportunities, were accessible. The consensus among students, however, was that the work-based experiences were limited and difficult to acquire. The perception was that many of the internships were offered to top students, and average students were not considered. Moreover, some students reported that they were restricted in their participation due to family responsibilities and work obligations. A handful of students shared that their respective schools provided several opportunities to volunteer and provide community service in lieu of work-based learning. One student shared, “There are some internships, but they are mostly volunteer work. I participated in Friday Night Lights, and that’s more like community service.”

### **Student Supports for Learning**

Student interviews yielded information about the school climate. Students voiced strong feelings regarding school being a place that was safe, engaging, and communal. Several students mentioned that they felt at home and that students treated each other like family. Students consistently shared that despite experiencing racism and discrimination outside the school environment, they felt welcomed at their school.

Collaboration between counselors and principals was evident from students’ descriptions of how counselors promoted, planned, and implemented prevention programs, college and career readiness activities, and decision-making activities. Students described several examples in which school counselors advocated for students to participate in tutoring programs, Saturday SAT prep and financial aid workshops, and college visits. Multiple examples surfaced that describe school counselors meeting with students and helping them

academically, as well as with college and personal/social needs. Two students noted that when they weren't doing so well with emotional and personal issues, the counselor "helped me talk through issues and gave me tips to help with my problems." Students across all three schools reported that school counselors helped them establish personal goals and future plans that led them into decisions about post-secondary education, training, and career pursuits. They described interacting with counselors on a weekly basis to access information about colleges, the application process, financial aid and enrolling in college courses. The on-going support from institutional agents helped students gain access to resources and opportunities critical to their academic success.

Students from Central HS and So. Cal HS 2 shared that teachers played an important but secondary role in relation to college awareness. Across schools, students acknowledged that teachers pushed them to succeed in their courses. The common response was that "They want us to be better" and "They always find ways to help you be successful." One student shared that his teacher was very good about having everyone get caught up. He shared, "If one person is falling behind because they don't understand the lesson or the homework, [Ms. L.] helps them get to where the other students are. So everyone stays together as a group, and everyone moves as a group to complete that lesson." Another student reflected on how one teacher helped improve her writing through specialized assistance and instructional strategies. She recalls, "My writing back then was really bad. My junior year, I struggled, then my teacher [Mr. T.] helped me so much. He helped me with writing and gave me feedback, and then I noticed I got a B and I've never gotten that." The small school size and the strong focus on student centered curricula contributed to student success.

### **Transferable Skills**

Students provided compelling examples of collaborative, project-based learning (PBL) experiences that contributed to an increase in student engagement and motivation. Students also talked about developing a sense of increased responsibility and other important skills that could be used beyond the classroom. The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21) (2014) contends that skills such as creativity, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking represent "the knowledge and expertise students should master to succeed in work and life" (p. 2). A majority of students stated that through coursework, projects, and assignments they improved communication skills, learned how to get along with others, and developed a professional demeanor when working with teachers and peers. One student from Central HS reflected on his experience working in groups:

The first time we worked in a group, I wasn't that happy because there are some people who don't want to do the work. But, I learned how to collaborate with others and I learned that each one of us has a different opinion.

Several students commented that working in groups helped them become more organized, responsible, and accountable for their own work.

### **Personal Growth**

Participants in all three pathways articulated that teachers held high expectations for achievement and this helped them “stay motivated,” “never give up,” and “try my hardest.” Students connected these expectations to an increase in self-confidence. Several students in the focus group interviews shared the same sentiment about the confidence they gained from attending an LL academy. One student shared: “I went from shy to more open-minded and wanting to share and having confidence.” Similarly, a female student from Central HS described how participating in collaborative group projects helped her gain confidence, “I noticed I gained more confidence in myself, and I didn't, like, care if someone didn't like what I said, if someone didn't agree with me.” Students elaborated that the increase in their self-confidence contributed to their personal belief in their ability to attend college, and pursue a career.

Data revealed that students were expanding and building their social capital, as demonstrated by student perceptions that the pathway environment focused on supports, and instructional tools necessary for success. Participants across all three pathways shared the sentiment that the school's overall environment—familial atmosphere, strong college-going culture and focus on PBL—supported the learning of skills needed to succeed in high school and beyond. Students from all three academies noted that they all had close connections with their academic counselors, pathway teachers, and fellow students. They further commented that these relationships helped them navigate the college application process and remain hopeful about their future. A senior at Central HS elaborated that “[School] gave us the opportunity to not only focus on school, on our classes and things that are interesting to us, but things that we want to study in the future.” A student from So. Cal HS 1 also shared, “Our school is about PBL and working together. Coming here has actually prepared me to be in the world, because businesses need cooperation—that's something that I have as a good quality.” The general sentiment among students was that they felt prepared for college due to their time in the LL pathway.

### **Persistent Challenges**

Students shared that despite participating in LL pathways they still struggled with grammar, writing, and speaking in English. Several students indicated that they felt teachers provided sufficient support through various instructional strategies and out-of-class tutoring; however, they also noted that the college-level work and college-ready assessments they were exposed to were beyond their current comprehension, fluency, and English writing ability. Several commented that they wanted to succeed academically, but had doubts about their ability to meet the academic demands of college.

A current and persistent problem shared by more than half of the participants in this study included financial struggles that forced students to work to help the family. Several students acknowledged that their families worked in industries with low wages, and that they often worried about having to pay for school supplies, college entrance exams, AP exams, and the affordability of college.

Others intimated that they continue to face personal challenges, including social and emotional issues and symptoms of depression. One student shared a traumatic experience within the family that impacted her ability to attend school. She spent several weeks out of school before [Ms. L.] the counselor referred her to a mental health professional. For some participants, their immigration status and that of their friends, neighbors, and family members caused a great deal of anxiety. Moreover, because of the current political climate, a few students expressed fear that their family members and friends would be impacted by deportation orders.

### **Discussion**

Our study results provide preliminary evidence that if a school environment values college attendance, provides access to college admissions processes, and specific student supports, it can have a positive influence on students' motivation to succeed. Moreover, the opportunity to learn collaboratively on school projects helped students increase their self-confidence, improve communication skills, and led to a professional demeanor that could be useful in college or the workforce.

For participants in this study, the expectation of graduating from high school and pursuing post-secondary opportunities, coupled with the personalized attention from teachers, counselors, and administrators, contributed to students' self-confidence and

increased social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Given their position “at the fulcrum of information flow regarding students and their performance” (Janson 2009), school counselors are pivotal to the success of students, particularly ELs in LL pathways (Olsen & Lopez, 2019).

Emergent research and practice suggests that transforming high school learning environments into ones that are purposefully organized around smaller, personalized units of adults and students, and include rigorous academic coursework, career-technical education infused with language development supports, and experiences that show students the relevance of education to their future, can make a significant difference in the outcomes for students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. A key component of the LL pathways are the adult structures that support students academically and emotionally. Each pathway was staffed with a core team of teachers and counselors who provided direct and indirect supports for learning academic content and college admissions information.

The LL model, with its promising practices, has mitigated barriers to college preparatory course access and academic success (Lafors & McGlawn, 2013; Warner et al., 2016). However, much work remains in providing Latinx English learners supports that encourage persistence, engagement and preparation for postsecondary opportunities. Pathway programs must do more to provide access points of entry for language minority students who have language development challenges but can benefit from participation in pathways.

This study demonstrates that despite having accumulated social capital, students articulated existing challenges that they must navigate as they pursue their post-secondary opportunities, including attending college and entering the workforce. Conchas’ (2001) study identified that English learners need school personnel as institutional agents to guide and intervene early when issues and problems occur so that EL students are not derailed from their progress. Others have argued that schools must examine their organizational make-up and determine how to address changing demographics as well as students’ academic and social needs (Saunders et al., 2013). The need to address Latinx EL’s college preparation and readiness will continue to be an important issue as the nation’s English learner population continues to grow. Therefore, more research on the effectiveness of *Linked Learning* pathways in improving the academic preparation of ELs in urban schools may help stakeholders identify critical junctures where additional supports and opportunities to learn can be provided.



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*Dr. Corinne Martinez is Chair of the Liberal Studies Department and Associate Professor in Teacher Education at California State University, Long Beach. She is a first-generation Chicana, born and raised on the east side of Los Angeles. Dr. Martinez completed her Ph.D. at UCLA, her master's degree from Cal State Los Angeles in Education Foundations with coursework toward a bilingual teaching credential. Her prior teaching experience includes work as a Language Arts teacher, a Reading Specialist and English as a Second Language teacher. Dr. Martinez has worked as an advisor on policy issues impacting the schooling of urban youth in the city of Los Angeles and as a Professional Expert assigned to provide technical assistance to middle and high schools in Los Angeles. Research interests include Latinx secondary schooling and college access for urban youth. Her current research focuses on secondary school reforms designed to promote college and career readiness within urban communities. In 2020, Dr. Martinez was appointed Co-Director for the California State University, Center to Close the Opportunity Gap. The Center focuses on identifying and refining proven strategies to eliminate equity gaps at all levels of education. This work will serve local educational agencies across California through an online clearinghouse for evidence-based strategies and promising practices. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-1988-055X*

*Dr. Cecilia Mendoza (she/her) is an assistant professor of Educational Leadership at the Kremen School of Education and Human Development, California State University, Fresno. Dr. Mendoza teaches in the Preliminary Administrative Services Credential and Masters programs. She is also a faculty member in the Doctoral program in Educational Leadership at Fresno State (DPELFS). Dr. Mendoza brings 33 years of K-12 education experience as a teacher, dean, site administrator (17 years as middle and high school principal), district-level administrator as Director of Secondary Education, Director of Human Resources, and Executive Director for seventeen K-12 schools in trauma-impacted neighborhoods in Richmond, California. Dr. Mendoza conducts research in the secondary level to advance equity, access, and opportunities for language-minority students in becoming college and career ready. As a result of her dissertation findings, Dr. Mendoza developed a contextual teaching and learning model where English language acquisition is taught in academic core courses through content-based language teaching methods. Dr. Mendoza earned her doctorate degree in Educational Leadership for Social Justice from California State University-Eastbay. ORCID ID: 000-0018860-8835*