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Los Angeles

Insidious Power:

The Structure of Community College Course Placement Counseling

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in Education

by

Carlos Maldonado

2015

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

### Insidious Power: The Structure of Community College Course Placement Counseling

by

Carlos Maldonado

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Megan Franke, Co-chair

Professor Richard Wagoner, Co-chair

Past research has shown slightly mixed results about the relationship between community college academic counseling and Latino student experiences. Latino student experiences with academic counseling have been shown to be positive within the context of a special program. However, researchers have not examined how academic counseling is related to course access for Latino students. Given limitations of past research, this dissertation sought to examine counselor and Latino student perceptions of academic counseling within the contexts of mathematics and English course placements.

I studied two large and diverse community colleges in southern California utilizing an embedded multiple case study design. A total of 34 counselors and 28 Latino students were interviewed using snowball and purposive sampling techniques. Other data collected were: field

observations, screenshots of college websites, course catalogs, and other relevant documents and artifacts. Relative Autonomy of the State and Social Identity Contingencies were invoked as guiding theoretical perspectives.

The major finding was a relationship between academic counseling and course access for Latino students, and three themes described such relationship. The first theme was a relationship between counselor perceptions about the placement test and perceived accuracy of course placements. Counselors reported that course placements were mostly accurate and did not need cross checking. The second theme was that there was a relationship between counselor perceptions of resources and their perceived role in course placement counseling. Counselors reported that for some students course placements were not accurate, but counselors could not conduct cross checks because they did not have access to the necessary complex resources of authority and ability assessment. The third theme was a relationship between counselor perceptions of Latinos and perceived accuracy of remedial course placements for Latinos. While counselors reported that flaws in course placement accuracy were inevitable, Latino students' remedial course placements were an exception.

The dissertation of Carlos Maldonado is approved.

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## DEDICATION

To my parents and grandparents—Elisa Maldonado, Carlos Maldonado Sr., Elena Solorio, Refugio Solorio, Elvira Maldonado, and Benjamín Maldonado

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My pursuit of a doctoral degree has a long history, and my earning it was partly due to a childhood experience that stayed with me through the years. At a family party, my uncle, Martín said to me that maybe one day I could earn a PhD. I was in middle school at the time, and although I was too young to understand the meaning of a doctoral degree, I knew that it stood for something excellent. But what made my uncle believe that I could earn a doctorate some day? The answer was that he believed excellent students like me had the ability. Even though I consider luck an important factor in my earning a PhD, I thank my uncle immensely for being the first person to genuinely make me feel that I could reach the apex of academic achievement.

Eight years later, and during professor office hours one day, Dr. Jeanett Castellanos asked me if I was pursuing a PhD after graduating from UC Irvine. I said, “No” and she replied, “You should.” Dr. Castellanos, drawing from her own experience as a Latina scholar, described the doctorate and the social significance of someone like me to earn such degree. But Dr. Castellanos went beyond describing the PhD; she saw me as someone who could reach the highest level of academic achievement, similar to my uncle Martín.

Upon enrolling in graduate school, I realized that it would take a lot of guidance and support to make it through. During some of the most difficult moments, I looked inward for guidance. I drew strength and motivation from my own experience with navigating school and life as a Mexican American who also happened to be queer and raised in a rural and immigrant Mexican farmworker community in California’s San Joaquin Valley. The multiple and unfortunate experiences I had with living unapologetically and proud of my identities taught me lessons that later became invaluable and functional.

But I also looked outward to my parents and relatives for guidance and support, and to them I owe a part of my achievement. Frequent family visits served as reminders of our valiance, persistence, and resilience, and that I could be successful if I learned how to apply those virtues in my graduate student experience. My family also taught me, through their stories about what it meant for them to be immigrants, to value selflessness, and that inspired me immensely.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

Community colleges are renowned for their comprehensive nature and non-selective admission standards. By definition, non-selectivity is the opportunity for younger and older students alike to enroll in courses regardless of their academic preparation or academic goals, and comprehensiveness is reflected in the various missions. Across the United States (US), state policies acknowledge that community colleges have the following five functions: academic transfer, vocational-technical, continuing education, developmental (or remedial) education, and community service (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). The claim that non-selectivity and comprehensiveness reflects equal opportunity and access in higher education has been both lauded and scrutinized.

Over the past four decades, scholars have espoused various perspectives about the purpose of community colleges in society. One perspective is that community colleges were developed to contribute substantively to a healthy economy and equality in opportunity (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Advocates argued that one reason for the development of community colleges was that as the US grew more diverse during the latter part of the nineteenth century, so did goals and demands for programs. Perhaps the most important reason claimed by advocates is that community colleges were a response to the public's demand for a new institution that would solve problems, such as racial segregation and unemployment (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Another historical account stated the opposite of advocates. Some scholars argued that the public had virtually no influence in the development of community colleges. The argument was that the idea of community colleges was developed by leaders of elite universities and philanthropists. In fact, leaders from Stanford University, University of Chicago, University of Michigan, and University of California, Berkeley were committed to realizing their vision of a



community college that would enroll “undesirable” students and limit their opportunities to transfer to four-year universities (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Undesirable students were defined as students who by virtue of being disadvantaged were ill-fitted for university education. Even within this more critical historical account, scholars acknowledged that community colleges attempt to create some opportunities—though in a conflicting way—for upward mobility (Brint & Karabel, 1989).

In the latter part of the 1980s, Dougherty (1988a) entered the debate with a new perspective. Dougherty (1988a) argued that the development of community colleges could not be explained by an egalitarian or elite perspective alone. Dougherty’s main argument was that elected officials at the federal and state levels also had a stake in the creation of community colleges, and in their advocacy for community colleges they consolidated demands from four-year universities, businesses, and the broader public. Access to higher education, then was granted to the masses with one important caveat. Community colleges would mostly serve the interests of four-year universities and businesses by limiting the flow of transfers and re-direct potential transfer students to a terminal vocation program (Dougherty, 1988a; Dougherty, 1994).

Still, scholars have left out two major historical events that were simultaneously occurring as community colleges were being developed and expanded during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The overt and pervasiveness of racism at the turn of the twentieth century encourages examination about how such racism catalyzed the development and expansion of community colleges. Ironically, no researcher to date has touched upon, much less examine, the co-occurrence of racism during that time in US history.

The first event was the *Plessy v. Ferguson* court decision of 1896. As historians have noted, Blacks in the southern US were not the only group forced to attend segregated schools.

Latinos also bore the brunt of differential treatment in schooling. Mexican children in Oxnard, California during the early 1900s were relegated to a curriculum that steered them toward cheap labor and marginalization (García, Yosso & Barajas, 2012). In fact, García, Yosso and Barajas (2012) argued that segregation of Mexican students was purposefully crafted within a structure of racial and ethnic integration in order to advance the social and political power of Whites.

Another co-occurring event was the establishment of the white supremacy ideology. Approximately four decades prior to the initial advocacy for community colleges in 1850, Whites in the US and Europe had reached their goal of “proving” that they were innately superior, and that non-Whites were destined to be subordinate (Horsman, 1981). Ideas for the White race as innately superior were based on “scientific” and “empirical” proof in studies about measuring the sizes of heads (Gould, 1996). Intelligence was one such innate trait that was argued to be predictably higher in Whites and lower in non-Whites. Studies of head size and intelligence were convincing to developers of intelligence testing at the turn of the twentieth century, which later became used as the primary tool to sort students based on ability (Gould, 1996; Oakes, 2005).

In Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality, Oakes (2005) stated that schooling traditions are difficult to change. If unfounded theories about intelligence and white supremacy did indeed play a role in defining the social purpose of community colleges, it is plausible that stubbornly persistent racial and ethnic gaps across indicators of enrollment, progress, and completion are not mere happenstance. In her Presidential Address at the 2006 American Educational Research Association annual meeting, Gloria Ladson-Billings argued that the US K-12 public education system was built to create and reproduce racial inequities (Ladson-Billings, 2006). I extend Ladson-Billing’s argument to include community colleges because they are part

of the broader landscape of US public education. As public education institutions, it is likely that community colleges share the same sordid origin as public K-12 schooling.

By the time *de jure* racial segregation was ended, approximately 61 percent of all community colleges were established (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). In fact, the second community college in the US was built in California's San Joaquin Valley in the city of Fresno in 1910. Twenty years later, 31 percent of all community colleges in California were built, and they enrolled one third of community college students nationally and approximately half of all students in California public higher education (Brint & Karabel, 1989).

### **Latinos and Access to Courses: The *Romero et al. v. Mertes, et al.* Case of 1988/1991**

In 1988, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) filed a lawsuit against the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO). Known as the Seymour-Campbell Matriculation Act of 1986, the bill stipulated that the placement tests had to meet the following three criteria: tests were to be utilized as advisory tools only, tests could not exclude students from admission to community colleges, and tests could not be linguistically and culturally biased (Wiseley, 2006). MALDEF attorney, Richard Fajardo argued that Fullerton College unlawfully excluded two Latino students, Martín R. Valdez and Christopher Romero-Frias from enrollment in remedial courses and Fullerton College altogether (Reyes, 1988).

A story carried by the *Los Angeles Times* stated that the motivation to sue the CCCCCO was twofold. The first was that Fullerton College relied only on placement test scores as a measure of students' academic ability. The second was that Fullerton College did not provide a sufficient number of remedial course sections, and as a consequence students recommended to remedial courses were forced to enroll at a different community college in the city of Santa Ana. Richard Fajardo was quoted as stating that the matriculation practices in Fullerton College

created a segregated system, where a disproportionate number of Latino students were excluded from Fullerton College and forced to enroll at nearby Santa Ana College (Reyes, 1988). The CCCCO responded by claiming that the problem was the vague language in the state policy.

The *Romero et al. v. Mertes, et al.* case was settled outside of court in 1991. The CCCCO agreed to establish the Matriculation Advisory Committee in order to provide more rigorous oversight on the ways in which community colleges selected and used placement tests. The settlement has been scrutinized because matriculation is an expensive program that serves all students yet is classified as a categorical program. To be sure, all categorical programs compete with one another for limited funds from the state legislature (Moore, Shulock, Ceja & Lang, 2007). Further, programs classified as categorical are not designed to target all students. Instead, categorical programs target disadvantaged student groups based on income and race and ethnicity (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2011).

### **Counselors and Access to Courses**

Access to courses is important because they predict the likelihood that students will be successful in reaching their academic goals. To be sure, the odds for the majority of students enrolled in remedial courses are bleak, as less than 25 percent will ever complete a certificate or degree, compared to 60 percent of students in college level courses (Bailey, 2009). Most remedial courses are designed as sequences—anywhere between four and five depending on institutional policies. Research has shown that the lower students are within remedial course sequences, the less likely they are to persist (Bailey, 2009).

Since the *Romero et al. v. Mertes, et al.* case, an accountability structure for the placement test and other ability measures was established. First, it was mandated that placement test scores be used in conjunction with other ability measures for course placement

recommendations, though state policy does not stipulate how much weight placement test scores should carry. Second, assessment accountability was built by requiring that all community colleges conduct disproportionate impact (DI) studies. DI occurs when students from a particular subgroup, such as gender and ethnicity are overrepresented in any one particular course or service that is not justified by the predictive validity and reliability of the assessment tools (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2014).

However, there are some challenges that limit the potential benefits of DI studies. The first is that DI studies are contingent upon the capacity of institutional research departments. State policy is unclear about how the CCCCO, state legislature, and individual districts provide support for community colleges that are limited in their institutional research capacity. The second challenge deals with the methodology of DI studies. For each DI study, community colleges must provide disaggregated data on the following five outcomes: access, course completion, English as a Second Language and basic skills completion, degree and certificate completion, and transfer. Data must be disaggregated by: gender, ethnicity, age, disability status, and income. The problem is that state policy does not stipulate how each outcome should be defined and which entity (i.e. community colleges, districts, CCCCO) retains authority to define the outcomes. Finally, state policy is vague about what should be done when DI is found. To be sure, DI studies must be submitted to the CCCCO, and when disproportionate impacts are found, districts must implement a plan to eliminate inequities (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2014). It is unclear how the follow up process is conducted.

Another structural problem with the matriculation program is that it is conceived of as a predominantly seamless process. The CCCCO (2011), describes student progression through matriculation services in the following eight steps: (1) admissions application; (2) assessment

process; (3) orientation and advisement, (4) creation of an educational plan, (5) class enrollment; (6) follow-up with counseling; (7) completion of course requirements; and (8) student success. There is one feedback loop between steps five and six, where it is expected that students will contact counselors on a continuous basis in order to ensure that progress is made. The biggest challenge is that steps one through four are standalone processes, which limits collaboration between the separate departments.

The matriculation program purports that its intention is to assure access to higher education opportunities (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2011). The underlying assumption is that access can be achieved linearly and unidirectional without collaboration between assessment and counseling. The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (2008) states that part of the work of academic counselors is to diagnose academic ability, strengths, weaknesses, and disabilities. However, it is not clear how the current matriculation structure integrates such a role in assessment because there is no feedback loop or language in the state policy that indicates collaboration between counseling and assessment. State policy defines academic counseling different from the academic senate. Specifically, the counselor role is defined in state policy as a service that considers placement test scores and other relevant measures and factors in order to help students achieve their academic and career goals (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2011).

Earlier in 2015, a statewide legislative initiative was launched to address access to college level courses. The initiative is Assembly Bill (AB) 770 and colloquially referred to as the Community Colleges Basic Skills and Student Outcomes Transformation Program. Part of the impetus for the initiative was the persistent trend in the disproportionate number of students recommended to enroll in remedial courses. The rate of remedial course enrollment among first

time community college students in California is at approximately 74 percent, and when disaggregated by ethnicity, 85 percent of all incoming Latino students are recommended to enroll in remedial courses (The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015).

If passed, the bill would create an incentive for the California Community Colleges (CCC) to apply for monetary resources that would improve various aspects of remedial education. Some of those aspects include adopting or expanding evidence-based models for assessment and course placement, improvement of the design and delivery of remedial courses, and improving systems of student support (California Department of Finance, 2015). Among the various important details, the legislation states that the role of counselors would be built into the assessment and course placement apparatus. The passage of AB 770 looks promising, as Governor Brown approved 60 million dollars in the revised budget for the program (California Department of Finance, 2015).

The integration of the counselor role in assessment and course placement is an important part of AB 770. Although the bill does not define the type and level of input counselors would potentially have, it signals that access to college level courses goes beyond merely ensuring that placement tests and other measures of ability are valid and reliable. The bill implies that counselors can cross check students' course placement recommendations, but this remains unclear.

While the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges states that counselors have a role in assessing academic ability, state policies are not clear that counselors have such a role. Given the vague language in state policy, the purpose of this dissertation was to examine the role that counselors played in increasing, decreasing, or safeguarding access to college level courses in two large and diverse community colleges in southern California. One goal was to

describe the structure of academic counseling within the context of course placement recommendations. A second goal was to describe how course placement counseling operated within the context of Latino students. I viewed access to courses, especially college level courses as a social and political enterprise. Granting and denying access to more rigorous courses is a practice that has important social consequences for multiple stakeholders.

Currently, community college course placement is debated and discussed in relation to remedial education. Higher education leaders and researchers argue that a good barometer of course placement effectiveness is course placement accuracy—that is, the extent to which community colleges use the right combination of valid assessments to place students into courses commensurate with their ability (Scott-Clayton, Crosta & Belfied, 2012; Puente, 2012; Rivera, 2012). However, course placement at its core involves using tests that have been shown as inherently subjective and misguided (Gould, 1996). I argue that as a human sorting mechanism, course placement is inevitably political and social, and raises questions about control, power, and disproportionate impact. For instance, who controls access to courses and how that control is distributed among stakeholders is equally important as the sorting effects on groups based on race and ethnicity, social class, and gender. In this view then, academic counseling has the potential to reproduce inequality by mimicking a valve that controls the academic trajectories of Latino students.



## **Chapter Two: Literature Review and Theoretical Perspectives**

Community colleges in California enroll well over half of all students in public higher education with a total enrollment of over 2.3 million (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2015). The sheer proportion of students enrolled in community colleges indicates that they are institutions integral to access in higher education. Lamentably, less attention has been given to how community colleges provide access to higher education when compared to four-year universities.

Even within extant community college scholarship, too few researchers have studied the ways in which access to courses is granted, denied, and safeguarded, particularly the role of counselors. I argue that research in higher education needs to include the role of community colleges as well as the work of counselors in the contexts of course access and race and ethnicity. Furthermore, I argue that access to college level courses is a social and political enterprise.

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **Enrollment in California public higher education.**

Multiple studies over the past decade have documented persistent trends in college participation among students in California. In their research about college access, Oakes, Mendoza and Silver (2006) reported on data that tracked students from the moment they enrolled in high school in 1998 through their enrollment in college in the fall of 2002. The data was focused on a statewide sample, and was limited to enrollments in the California Community Colleges (CCC), California State University (CSU), and University of California (UC). The data appeared clear on one trend. While Latino students comprised approximately 40 percent of the high school ninth grade cohort, only about 13 percent of the cohort eventually enrolled at a UC campus. In contrast, White students comprised approximately 39 percent of the high school ninth

grade cohort, but their enrollment at a UC campus was almost unchanged at 37 percent. A similar enrollment pattern was found for the CCC and CSU.

Other researchers have reported similar patterns. Shulock, Offenstein and Esch (2011) found that the proportion of students of color (i.e. African American, Latino, and Native American) were considerably lower in the UC and CSU systems than the CCC. The data revealed that in fall 2009, over two thirds of Latino students were enrolled in the CCC, 17 percent were enrolled in the CSU, and 5 percent were enrolled in the UC. A strikingly similar pattern was found for African American students, where their enrollment was highest in the CCC at 79 percent and lowest in the UC at 5 percent.

In more recent analyses, the disparities in college enrollment in California continue. In 2013, a policy advocacy coalition known as The Campaign for College Opportunity (CCO) released a report that documented Latino population trends, enrollment in college, and completion patterns. Among the most notable data was that in the fall of 2012, Latinos comprised approximately 20 percent of enrollment in the UC, 33 percent in the CSU and 39 percent in the CCC (The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2013). Similar to past trends, Latino students continue to be least represented in UC enrollment while their enrollments continue to increase at the CCC.

An updated report released by the CCO in April 2015 revealed slight increases in Latino student enrollment across UC, CSU, and CCC. However, enrollment continues to be the highest in the CCC at 40 percent (The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015). In fact, some researchers have found that while the White and Asian student enrollment rates in the CCC dropped by 22 percent and 19 percent, respectively between 2008 and 2012, Latino students increased their enrollment by 1 percent during that same time frame (Bohn, Reyes & Johnson,

2013). The shifting demographics in community colleges are not a surprise, as Hayes-Bautista, Schink, and Chapa (1990) predicted in the late 1980s that the Latino college age population in California would reach a numerical majority.

### **State funding for California public higher education.**

Results from studies and polls have reported relationships between race/ethnicity and state funding for public education. In a survey of 1,702 adults in California, respondents were asked to describe the level of state funding their local public schools received. Fifty-five percent of Latino respondents stated that the state funding level for their local schools was “not enough” (Baldassare, Bonner, Petek & Shrestha, 2014). Seventy-four percent of Black respondents described the level of state funding for public schools as not enough. White and Asian respondents described their levels of state funding differently. In fact, White and Asian respondents comprised the highest percent of respondents who used “more than enough” to describe their levels of state funding, at 17 percent and 14 percent, respectively (Baldassare et al., 2014).

Empirical evidence demonstrates that perceptions of state level funding across racial and ethnic groups are aligned with reality. To be sure, Asians and Whites tend to enroll in public schools and universities that spend more per student when compared to schools and colleges attended by mostly Latinos and Blacks. The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), an independent think tank, reported that even in times of fiscal crises, the California legislature spends significantly more on students enrolled at the UC and CSU (Johnson, 2012). When the budget cuts hit California higher education hardest beginning in 2009, the state spent about 12,000 dollars for each full time student enrolled at the UC, while the state spent about 4,000 dollars for each full time student enrolled at the CCC (Johnson, 2012).

Other researchers have examined the effects of state funding on access to public higher education during other fiscal crises. In 2004-2005, in an unprecedented decision, Governor Schwarzenegger announced his decision to not fund all three segments of California public higher education. The choice to not fund higher education was viewed as a perplexing decision, given that all three sectors had experienced enrollment growth (Shulock & Moore, 2005). In 2004, the CCC experienced an approximate 4.6 percent increase in student enrollment. Some researchers set out to examine the impacts of the budget constraints on college access. Among the findings was that a reduction in state funds created a stiff competition for seats in courses, particularly in the CCC. Respondents from multiple community colleges across California stated that students of color were least likely to successfully compete for limited enrollment in courses (Shulock & Moore, 2005). Shulock and Moore (2005) also noted that the competition for seats was worsened by the redirection of approximately 15,000 otherwise CSU and UC eligible students to the CCC.

Sidanius and Pratto (1999) argue that differential funding is a result of the wielding of political power to control resources and subordinate less advantaged groups. Groups who control access to resources (not limited to elected officials) set aside larger proportions and higher quality resources for their own children. In practice, basing school funding on local property taxes is one mechanism by which to create the racial and ethnic disparities observed in decades of education research (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Differential funding can be viewed as a form of oppression.

### **College completion in California.**

Completion across all sectors of California higher education has increasingly become an issue of interest at both the local and state levels. The impetus for increasing student completion

is based on the argument that California's economic viability is dependent on an increase in bachelor degree completion (Johnson, 2015; Johnson, 2010). In a recent policy brief released by the PPIC, Johnson (2015) showed that if current trends in college completion persist, the California workforce will be short one million baccalaureate degrees by 2025.

Meeting the demands of the future workforce is in part dependent on the ability for colleges and universities to improve completion rates for Latino students. In 2013, Latinos were approximately 47 percent of the college age population (18-24 years), yet were least successful in completing their education at the CCC, CSU, and UC (The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015; Moore, Tan & Shulock, 2014). Data drawn from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO), the University of California Office of the President, and the Institute for Social Research in Sacramento showed that the patterns in racial and ethnic gaps in college completion are similar in all three sectors (Moore, Tan & Shulock, 2014; Moore & Shulock, 2010). Moore, Tan and Shulock (2014) found that for every 100 graduating students at the CSU and UC, the lowest percent of bachelor's degrees were awarded to Latino students at approximately 17 percent, compared to Asian and Whites who earned almost 23 percent and 27 percent of those degrees, respectively.

Completion patterns at the CCC level are very similar to those found at the CSU and UC levels. In 2010, researchers at the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy released results about the completion patterns within a six-year period. The results showed that similar to the CSU and UC, Latino students completed an associate's degree, certificate, or transferred to a four-year university at 22 percent compared to the statewide average of 31 percent (Moore & Shulock, 2010). In a different report tracking CCC students over a six-year period beginning in 2007-2008, the completion rate for Latinos was at 39 percent compared to the statewide average

of 48 percent (The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015). The same 9 percent gap remains for students who entered the CCC in 2003-2004 and those who entered four years later in 2007-2008.

Some researchers have argued that increasing the enrollment of Latino and African Americans in community colleges will improve outcomes. Past research illustrates mixed results on the effects of high numbers of ethnic and racial minorities on overall student success. In one study about the proportionality of Latino students and level of academic achievement, higher proportions of Latino students in the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD) was positively correlated with increased academic achievement—measured by cumulative grade point average (GPA), course success ratios and completion of mathematics and English courses (Hagedorn, Chi, Cepeda, & McLain, 2007). The researchers found significant differences between the proportion of Latino students and GPA, where Latino students attending campuses comprised of at least 50 percent Latino had higher GPAs than their peers who attended campuses where Latinos were between 20 percent—30 percent of the student population. Equally important to note is that a lower percent of Latino students were enrolled in the lowest levels of both English and mathematics classes on campuses with disproportionately higher number of Latinos. Hagedorn (2007) and her colleagues suggested that Latino students' sense of belonging and feeling validated explained their high academic achievement.

While some researchers suggest that a higher proportion of Latino enrollment increases academic achievement for Latino students in the LACCD, results from statewide studies suggest the opposite. Outcomes, such as 3-year and 6-year transfer rates, and rates of certificate and degree completion were lower at CCC that were comprised of disproportionately higher numbers of racial and ethnic minorities (Moore, Shulock, Ceja, & Lang, 2007; Wassmer, Moore, &

Shulock, 2004). Notably, campuses with increasing number of Latino students had steadily decreasing 3-year and 6-year transfer rates, holding constant academic preparation and socioeconomic status (Wassmer et al., 2004). Furthermore, students attending campuses located in a relatively higher income area were more likely to complete their academic goals, compared to their counterparts attending community colleges in lower income areas (Moore et al., 2007).

### **Remedial education in community colleges.**

Researchers have found that there are racial disparities in course placement recommendations. In a national study using regression analysis, the results showed that Black students were 16 percent more likely to be placed into remedial courses when compared to their White peers, after statistically controlling for academic preparation and socioeconomic status (Attewell, Lavin, Domina & Levey, 2006). In a more recent study of community college students in California, researchers used logistic regression to examine course enrollment patterns across students of different races and ethnicities. The results showed that Latino students were twice as likely to be enrolled in remedial mathematics and English courses compared to their White and Asian counterparts, after statistically controlling for past academic achievement and parental education levels (Kurlaender & Larsen, 2013). A recent report found that the number of Latino students recommended to enroll in below college level coursework “in one year alone could fill the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, the largest stadium in California, more than one and a half times” (The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015, p. 10). The capacity of the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum is a little over 93,600 seats.

Across the nation, Latino students are overrepresented in remedial courses (Bailey, Jeong & Cho, 2010). In one study of community college students, odds ratios showed that Latino students were most likely to be enrolled in the lowest courses within remedial mathematics and

English course sequences (Bailey, Jeong & Cho, 2010). While the odds of remedial course placements are highest for Latino students, the proportions of their enrollments vary between English and mathematics. Drawing from a statewide sample in California, the majority of Latino students were enrolled in English remedial courses that were one or two levels below college level, compared to mathematics where over half of Latino students were enrolled in the two lowest levels (Perry & Rosin, 2010). Researchers have found that out of 100 Latino students enrolled in remedial mathematics courses, 14 will eventually pass a college level mathematics course (Solórzano, Datnow, Park & Watford, 2013).

Some researchers argue that the heavy reliance on a placement test low in validity explains why students are recommended to enroll in the wrong courses. Some studies suggest that placement tests currently in use across US community colleges are poor predictors of college success (Armstrong, 1994; Armstrong, 2000; Burley, England & Beran, 1996; Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011; Hughes & Nelson, 1991; Phillips, 1996; Scott-Clayton, 2012). Specifically, placement test scores are not correlated with English grades and retention (Armstrong, 2000; Hughes & Nelson, 1991; Phillips, 1996; Burley, England & Beran, 1996). The evidence is less clear in mathematics; one study suggests that placement tests are not correlated with final grades in mathematics courses (Armstrong, 1994), while other researchers suggest the opposite (Roksa, Jenkins, Jaggars, Zeidenberg, & Cho, 2009). In more recent studies, researchers found that community college students are assigned to enroll in the wrong courses, meaning coursework that is either overly or insufficiently rigorous (Belfield & Crosta, 2012). In fact, Belfield and Crosta (2012) argued that error rates (students assigned to the wrong courses) were high for both English (27 percent—33 percent) and mathematics (21 percent—28 percent).



### **Counseling in community colleges.**

As part of the larger set of matriculation services, counselors play a role in the course enrollment process and thus access to courses. However, researchers have paid too little attention to examining the role of the counselor within the context of course placement. Research about how course placement counseling operates with Latino students is another unexamined area.

The extant literature on academic counseling is divided into two areas. One area is comprised of studies that have studied counseling as a broad set of services. A second area of research has examined academic counseling within the context of academically underprepared students, with a particular focus on the types of effects that academic counseling has on students' experiences and outcomes.

Some studies have described community college counseling as an umbrella of services. In a national sample of community colleges, Grubb (2001) found that personal, career, and academic are three forms of services offered within counseling departments. Despite various forms of counseling services offered, counselors reported that the bulk of their time was spent on academic counseling—services related to enrollment and charting pathways to certificates, associate's degree, and/or transfer to a four-year university (Grubb, 2001). Within academic counseling, three challenges were identified as barriers to student success. One challenge was that the low number of counselors was misaligned with an increasing number of students who required academic counseling (Grubb, 2006). Another challenge was that the most common form of academic advising was in the form of supplying information to students without any in-depth discussions about what the information meant for students (Grubb, 2001).

More recent research has described additional challenges to counseling. In a sample of 14 community colleges across California, three different challenges were found in counseling

services. Grubb (2013) found that time was a constraint for counselors who could not spend any more than 30 minutes meeting with students. A second challenge, reported by counselors, was that students did not seek counseling services because the perception was that students did not require advising in reaching their academic, career, and personal goals. Finally, tensions were found between counselors and instructors. Counselors were described by instructors as “useless” because they advised students to enroll in the wrong courses (Grubb, 2013).

Other researchers have studied academic counseling within the context of remedial education. Specifically, studies have described the role of counselors and their effects on students enrolled in remedial courses. Results from the studies are mixed. Some of the positive impacts of advising were found among all students but especially Latinos and Blacks enrolled in remedial courses in the CCC. Using a hierarchical analysis, Bahr (2008) found that counseling was positively associated with successful completion of mathematics remedial courses and successful transfer to four-year universities. However, it was not clear how counseling was defined and measured in the study.

A similar effect has been shown among Latino students in a specially designed community college program. The program known as the Puente Project specifically targets Latino students who are placed one level below college level English, and offers access to a specially trained counselor. Researchers reported that counselors in the Puente Project successfully changed students’ attitudes about entering the workforce and aspirations, although it was not entirely clear how the change in attitudes was measured (Grubb, Lara & Valdez, 2002). Specifically, researchers found that counselors effectively advised their students to complete college prior to entering the workforce because a college education would benefit them in the

longer term. In addition, counselors helped raise students' aspirations with regard to career options.

Other researchers have not found positive effects of counseling on students' experiences and outcomes. In a study of two community colleges in a Midwestern city of the United States, Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2002) found that counselors negatively impacted students who were not initially told that they were enrolled in remedial courses. Researchers found that while withholding information about remedial courses was well intended, some students withdrew from community college when they learned that they were in remedial courses that did not earn them any credit (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002).

In “cooling out”—an institutional practice that reproduces social inequality—counselors have been described as steering students toward vocations and away from transferring to a four-year university (Clark, 1960). The research was conducted in one community college located in northern California, and it specifically focused on students who did not receive high scores in past achievement tests. In fact, Clark (1960) found that it was during the moment students reported low scores on past achievement tests and thus enrolled in remedial courses that their odds of ever reaching their academic goal of transfer are diminished. Although the “cooling out” argument is considered seminal in higher education scholarship (Brint & Karabel, 1989), too few researchers have expanded upon the work in the past 50 years.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Research about access in higher education has largely focused on enrollment, funding, and completion. In addition, access debates have also been shaped predominantly around four-year universities. The irony is that community colleges, especially in California enroll the largest number of Latino students, and data show that there is an upward trend. In addition to the large

Latino enrollment in the CCC, Latino students are disproportionately enrolled in remedial courses, and for many students remedial courses are not always reflective of their ability.

Researchers suggest that in order to improve access to courses, the placement test should carry less weight in the sorting of students. Indeed, access to courses has been debated around issues of accuracy, validity, and reliability of ability measures. One issue that has captured little attention among researchers is the association between academic counseling and course access. The literature demonstrates mixed results with regard to the effects of academic counseling on Latino students' experiences. For Latino students in a special program, researchers have found that counselors support and steer Latino students toward college level courses and completion.

The purpose of this dissertation was to better understand academic counseling within the contexts of mathematics and English course placements. The context of course placement is an important one to study because it is unclear from past research how counselors make sense of and perceive the "achievement tests" noted in Clark (1960). Second, it is not well understood how counselors outside of special programs respond to Latino students, and whether placement test scores are the only types of feedback that counselors rely upon.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

This dissertation drew from two different theoretical perspectives. One perspective is Relative Autonomy of the State (RAS). RAS argues that controlling the flow of students from community colleges to four-year universities is a social and political enterprise. All community college students face low odds of transferring but face higher odds of enrollment and completion of a vocation. RAS is a neo-Marxist perspective that describes power structures; however, it does not address race/ethnicity. Given that this dissertation focused on race and ethnicity, it was necessary to invoke an additional perspective. The perspective of social identity contingencies

(SIC) argues that schooling settings contain judgments and stereotypes about students of color. The judgments and stereotypes have the power to create weak academic identities and sometimes disassociation with academics altogether. Below is a more thorough discussion about SIC and RAS.

### **Social Identity Contingencies.**

SIC is a perspective drawn from the field of social psychology and describes how settings have the power to cue safety or threat (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittman, & Crosby, 2008). Settings can be any one particular context or event that is used as a source for individuals' self-evaluation. SIC is the term used to describe the nature of a context or an event. To be sure, SIC are defined as things individuals have to deal with in a particular situation because a given social identity becomes salient (Steele, 2010). SIC can be either tangible as in the form of restrictive policies or invisible as in awareness of negative stereotypes about a particular social group. In sum, a negative SIC can be understood as contexts that cue threats for a particular social identity (e.g. racial identity), and threaten the way individuals identify within the context in which the threat exists.

Steele, Spencer and Aronson (2002) contend that there are multiple types of identity contingencies. Purdie-Vaughns (2008) and her colleagues argue that negative racial and ethnic stereotypes and devaluing racial and ethnic identity are two types of identity contingencies. More positive or neutral identity contingencies are also likely in particular settings. Moreover, positive and negative identity contingencies can exist simultaneously, and in such cases individuals will weigh the positive against the negative cues before deciding the degree of trust and threat in the setting (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008).

Given the various types of SIC, this dissertation was focused on the more negative or seemingly neutral types. Negative SIC, then, deal with a severe form of social identity threat (Steele, Spencer & Aronson, 2002). Stereotype threat (hereafter ST) is a negative type of SIC that has received much attention from scholars. ST is also a severe form of social identity threat. Throughout the rest of this section, ST will be used to illustrate the postulates, features, and underlying assumptions of severe social identity threat.

This theoretical perspective postulates that performance in any one domain<sup>1</sup> is deep-seated in the extent to which an individual identifies with that particular domain. Furthermore, ST hypothesizes that individuals who identify with a particular domain will use that domain as a reference point for self-evaluation. For instance, academic achievement is a domain that serves as a reference point for self-evaluation for many students. Inherent in this logic is the idea that identifying with academics and good academic performance brings with it various intrinsic and material rewards (Steele, 2009). Importantly, identity is at the root of ST, where strong identification with any one particular domain increases the odds of experiencing ST. To experience ST then, individuals must acknowledge that a negative stereotype exists about a social group they form part of. Once those two conditions are met, ST hypothesizes that individuals will be motivated to dispel the negative stereotype, and by attempting to do so will hinder their performance in the task at hand. Within the educational context, students who are relatively more strongly identified with academics are assumed to be more susceptible to the effect of ST. Conversely, ST hypothesizes that students less identified with the academics domain are less susceptible to ST primarily because these students do not depend on feedback from the academics domain for their self-evaluation (Steele, 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> Domain can be conceived of as any one particular aspect of human life where performance is evaluated (e.g., college, workplace), and that might be the reference point for self-evaluation for individuals who strongly identify with that particular domain.

There are five features of ST. One characteristic of ST is that it can affect any group about whom there is a known negative stereotype. Importantly, ST is not associated with the psychology of stigmatized groups. A second feature is that the activation of ST is contingent upon the concurrence of three things: awareness of a negative stereotype about a group an individual belongs to, the extent to which the negative stereotype might impact an individual's self-evaluation, and the degree to which an individual identifies with the domain in which the stereotype lies within. As an example, a Latino student who strongly identifies with academics and is in an academic setting where negative stereotypes about Latinos are triggered, the student will experience ST because there is an inherent motivation to reduce the threat. Third, ST can occur for a wide range of groups in an equally wide range of contexts, and the effect of ST can also have varied effects between groups. Fourth, the activation of ST is solely dependent upon individuals' awareness of a negative stereotype that applies to a social identity, and therefore believing that the stereotype is true in general or for the individual is not required. Finally, disproving ST for any one individual is short-lived at best because any new setting in which the individual, a negative stereotype, and a strong identification with that particular context concur provides new grounds where the stereotype must be dispelled.

There are four underlying assumptions in social identity threat. The first assumption is that individuals learn that particular social identities are discriminated against, devalued and marginalized by way of cultural knowledge and the larger societal structure (Steele, Spencer & Aronson, 2002; Steele, 2009). The second assumption is that individuals search for cues and evidence about any potential stereotypes about any one of their social identities that might be tied to the context in which s/he is in. Third, individuals who are most identified with a particular domain (e.g., college) resist perceiving any attitudes and behaviors as prejudiced. Finally,

individuals experience a conflict in motivations where on the one hand the individual is motivated to seek evidence of devaluation of a social identity, and on the other hand is motivated not to detect the cues (Steele, Spencer & Aronson, 2002).

The assumptions are important to point out because they facilitate an understanding of: context, cues, norms, ideology, clarity and social identity threat as building blocks of ST. First, social identity threat is most likely to occur when an individual perceives a social identity to have minority status within a particular context. This implies that ST can be experienced in different ways by the same individual. Second, social identities are marginalized when there is a mismatch between the social identities valued by a particular context (i.e., cultural centerdness) and the social identity possessed by individuals. In line with the latter, the ways in which social identities are organized produce meanings that can have a powerful effect for individuals. To be sure, social identities that are disadvantaged within any one particular context will likely remain salient to individuals, and thus will affect their perceptions, behavior and trust within the context (Steele, Spencer & Aronson, 2002). Furthermore, certain social identity ideologies can act to safeguard or threaten depending on both the ideology's meaning in a particular context and cues gathered about the degree to which any one social identity is valued. Finally, contexts where the norm is intergroup insensitivity and the criteria for promotion or evaluation are unclear are important cues that can trigger social identity threat. However, social identity threat does not explain how stereotypes function to threaten the performance of social identities, particularly within schooling contexts.

ST has been tested mostly in the domain of intellectual performance. In the earliest study of ST, Steele and Aronson (1995) observed significant differences in performance on a cognitive ability test between White and Black participants. Specifically, when the test was administered



as diagnostic of cognitive ability Black participants performed significantly worse in terms of accuracy and number of items completed, compared to their White peers. This study provided evidence that when Black participants were aware of negative stereotypes about their racial identity, they were motivated to disprove it and exhibited relatively low performance on the test regardless of its diagnostic or non-diagnostic nature.

Researchers have also observed that settings defined as neutral have potential to trigger severe social identity threat. In a series of experiments with African American participants, Purdie-Vaughns (2008) and her colleagues found that participants found a lack of trust and comfort in settings with low African American representation and that claimed race was irrelevant. Authors concluded by contending that low numbers of people of color and colorblind approaches to hiring, for instance, were perceived as threatening.

### **Relative Autonomy of the State.**

Relative Autonomy of the State (hereafter RAS) is a sociopolitical perspective developed by Kevin Dougherty to help explain how elected government officials<sup>2</sup> help shape the function and direction of American community colleges. RAS postulates that the social role of community colleges is partly defined by elected officials who participate in educational policy making. The two central premises of RAS are the concepts of relative autonomy and self-interest. Relative autonomy refers to the level of independence that elected officials enjoy in the political process, particularly the ways in which schooling conditions become framed as policy issues and later become addressed by policies. Some researchers argue that elected officials play a key role in deciding which social conditions become framed as policy issues (McLendon & Cohen-Vogel, 2008). Past research showed that the impact of elected officials' relative autonomy

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<sup>2</sup> Government officials are state governors, legislators, chief school officers, US presidents, and members of Congress

on education was vast, and in the context of community college policy the result was the strengthened occupational education function during the twentieth century (Dougherty, 1988b).

Self-interest is the extent to which any one elected official uses the political process to attain a benefit. Within the RAS perspective, it is assumed that the primary self-interest of elected officials is increased power. In one study of community colleges, self-interests were reflected in the elected officials' decisions to expand the community college for increased personal benefits, and thus community colleges proliferated in the early to mid twentieth century (Dougherty, 1988a; Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Beyond the key concepts of autonomy and self-interest, RAS has two predominant features: resource dependency and ideological constraint. Both tenets are functions of the interplay between the idea of constraint, power to attain benefits without participation, and the relative autonomy of elected officials. Specifically, Dougherty (1988b) describes the autonomy of elected officials as relative to the degree of constraint. The constraining forces that elected officials face originate from private interest groups. For elected officials dealing with community college issues, the most powerful interest groups are state universities and the private sector (i.e., businesses) (Dougherty, 1994). Resource dependency, one constraining force, refers to private sector resources sought by elected officials in order to fulfill their self-interests. A second constraining force is ideology, whereby powerful interest groups determine the interests with regard to community colleges that elected officials should adhere to.

RAS fits within the larger theory of neo-Marxism in which power is the main source of the creation and maintenance of social class inequalities. In order to dominate, the powerful must do two things: (a) exercise their power by influencing, shaping and determining the real interests of the dominated, and (b) successfully lead the dominated to be complicit in their own

oppression (Gaventa, 1980; Lukes, 2005). In scholarship, power is defined by the capacity to exercise power and not observable conflict (Lukes, 2005). In line with the latter, Lukes (2005) argues that the worst form of power—third dimensional power—is that which works against people’s interests by misleading them and eventually securing compliance in their own oppression.

The RAS perspective has been employed in two studies. In one study, Dougherty (1988b) sought to examine the expansion and development of community colleges in five states in which he found evidence to support his hypothesis about the influence government officials’ self-interests have in the policies about community colleges. As an example, at the state-level government officials were constrained in three different ways: (1) community college development offered a viable option while simultaneously prevented overspending and safeguarded against rapid spending on higher education; (2) government officials sought to fulfill their self-interests by pitching the development of the community college as a driver of economic growth that would attract outside businesses while retaining local ones; and (3) increased student demand for postsecondary education demanded that government officials latch on to the support from the four-year universities to increase access to higher education by building community colleges over increasing capacity at the existing four-year universities.

In a different study, the RAS perspective was employed to help explain why the community college vocational/occupational function was prioritized to a higher degree compared to other functions. Dougherty (1988a) conducted both a national and state level analysis of the factors that played a role in the prioritization of the vocational/occupational function. Similar to his previous study, Dougherty found that government officials were constrained by ways of resource dependency and ideology. First, government officials were motivated to increase

occupational/vocational programs designed in large part to accommodate and increasing number of low-income students. Low-income students were perceived to be unfit in terms of ability and motivation for the participation in a four-year university. The perceptions were largely in favor of the four-year universities that were not interested in admitting ostensibly academically underprepared and unmotivated students. Second, government officials sought to expand the role of vocational/occupational education because it would be one way to serve the local community. In doing so, the community college gave rise to subtly serving the needs of local businesses under the vague mission of community service. Indeed, research suggests that the community mission is one way community colleges provide local businesses with trained employees at the expense of taxpayer dollars (Dougherty, 1988a; Dougherty, 1994; Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

## **Chapter Three: Research Design and Methods**

As presented in the previous chapters, counseling in community colleges has received little attention from researchers despite some evidence of it being a structural barrier. Beyond the limited research about counseling, extant literature describes counseling at the broader levels, and thus the findings might not be representative of more specific counseling contexts. As such, I examined academic counseling within mathematics and English course placements.

This chapter begins with a discussion about the nature of the inquiry. In the first part of the chapter I describe the method of selecting research sites and participants as well as rationales. In the second part of the chapter I discuss the data collection techniques and data analysis methods. The latter section includes a statement about my researcher positionality as well as the challenges and limitations of this dissertation.

### **Research Questions**

This dissertation was guided by the following three questions:

1. How do community college counselors view students' course placement recommendations?
2. How do community college counselors view their role within the context of student course placement recommendations?
3. How do community college counselors describe the accuracy of course placement recommendations for Latino students?

### **Research Design**

The research questions were answered with qualitative data. A qualitative research design was appropriate for at least two reasons. Perhaps most importantly, qualitative data allowed me to study counseling from data sources that are not otherwise readily available or accessible.

Equally important, I was able to study the perceptions of counselors while simultaneously bringing in other points of view. Given the dearth of research on community college counseling, I sought to contribute to the literature by drawing from theories to help explain the structure of counseling.

The research design also included various data sources from which data was collected. The three different types of data collected were interviews, relevant institutional documents, field observations, and artifacts. Details about each data source are discussed later in this chapter.

### **Case study design and units of analysis.**

I utilized the embedded case study approach to better understand counseling at two community colleges. The embedded case study approach lent itself well for at least two important reasons. First, given the thin literature on counseling in community colleges in California, this study aimed to provide a description based in theory. More importantly, the heterogeneity<sup>3</sup> across the system of community colleges in California behooved me to mind the ways in which contexts help shape counseling.

An embedded two-case study can be described as containing three layers. The outer layer (context) was each respective community college as a whole. Counseling services were considered the cases (middle layer) because they were the structures concerning this dissertation. Finally, the inner most layer are the units of analysis, which were the in-depth accounts from counselors and Latino students.

There are various reasons why Latino students and counselors were identified as the target participants. Counselors were recruited for two reasons. First, counselors were conceived of as representatives of counseling services and the larger community college, and also a group

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<sup>3</sup> All 113 colleges have unique histories and reputations, varied levels of enrollment and student demographics, and located within zip codes with varied funding levels.

that is directly involved in the counseling practice. Second, too few studies to date have focused on perceptions and experiences of community college counselors, particularly with respect to assessment and course placement. The second group of participants, Latino students, was targeted for two reasons. First, I conceived of the in-depth accounts from Latino students as evidence that would either verify or counter data collected from counselors and institutions. Second, while Latinos represent the largest ethnic group of students enrolled in California's community colleges, researchers have paid little attention to this group. In terms of the latter, there is too little knowledge about the perceptions and experiences of Latino students with regard to counseling, assessment, and course placement.

#### **Theoretical replication logic.**

Theoretical replication logic deals with sampling. Theoretical replication logic refers to the increasing in robustness of this research by duplicating the findings in more than one case (Yin, 2009). Theoretical replication can be defined as the use of theoretical perspectives that clearly identify when phenomenon is not supposed to be found (Yin, 2009). According to Yin (2009), sampling standards drawn from quantitative research do not apply in case study research. Robustness in case study research is not achieved by merely increasing the number of cases. Instead, the intent was to carefully select two cases (community colleges) and conduct research that would yield results generalizable to theories. Strengthening theoretical perspectives could then be used to explain similar phenomenon at different community colleges.

## **Identification and Selection of Research Sites**

### **Democracy Community College.**

I identified and selected two community colleges as research sites. One research site, Democracy Community College (DCC) was identified and selected to represent a more unique context with regard to its assessment and course placement mechanisms. DCC is a unique context because English and mathematics grades earned in high school were factored into the apparatus used to identify and recommend sufficiently rigorous courses for students. The important characteristic that differentiates DCC from sister institutions is its more “wholistic” approach to measuring incoming students’ ability. Specifically, students’ grades in courses completed in high school are combined with placement test scores to generate course placements in English, reading, and mathematics. However, it is not known which courses were used, the rationales, and how course grades were weighted. The purported goal of the method is to ensure that courses students are recommended to enroll are commensurate with their academic ability.

As mentioned above, DCC represents a unique context because the apparatus of assessing and recommending students into courses is different from sister institutions in the region. DCC was the initial site to be selected, and I used media accounts and policy reports to identify DCC. In addition, I also browsed DCC’s website for additional information about their assessment and course placement services.

DCC is an urban community college located in southern California. The college is separated into two different campuses, one located in the northern part of the city and the other in the southwestern region of the city. Although the campus is separated into two different locations, it is considered a single community college within a single college district. DCC is



large in terms of student enrollment. In fall 2013, DCC enrolled 24,282 students of which 54.2 percent (12,731) were Latino (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2015).

### **Hope Community College.**

In contrast to DCC, Hope Community College (HCC) was selected to represent a more common context with regard to its assessment and course placement mechanisms. HCC is typical because the placement test is the primary tool used to determine academic ability and identify coursework that is appropriate for students. The assessment method is most common among community colleges in California. While by law HCC is mandated to draw from multiple sources to generate course recommendations, it was not clear which pieces of evidence were utilized and how they were weighted. The purported goal at HCC is similar to DCC, which is to provide students with accurate placement in English and mathematics courses.

As mentioned above, HCC is a more typical context because students are assessed and recommended to courses using mostly placement test results, which is similar to sister institutions in the region. HCC was identified using a different approach than DCC. I identified HCC to mirror DCC in the following important ways: total student enrollment, Latino student enrollment, district size, and locale.

HCC is an urban community college located in southern California. Although HCC has various satellite centers, it is considered a single community college located within a single college district. HCC is a large community college in terms of student enrollment. In fall 2013, total enrollment was 31,993 of which 34.6 percent (11,067) were Latino (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2015).

## **Access to Research Sites**

### **Democracy Community College.**

After DCC was identified as a potential research site, I sought to gain access to the institution. The process to gain access to DCC involved a total of eight steps. The first step was to utilize my professional contacts at DCC in order to be referred to the office that reviews external research requests. Once I received a response, I reached out via e-mail with questions to the director of institutional research (DIR) and dean of institutional effectiveness. The third step was to meet in person with the DIR to discuss some of the foreseeable challenges in gaining access to counselors and students. A solution to the potential challenge of recruiting counselors was to coordinate a meeting with administrators within the counseling and matriculation departments. As such, the fourth step was to meet with administrators from the counseling and matriculation departments to discuss the purpose of the study, participant recruitment, and interview guides. Administrators requested some important modifications to the counselor interview guide and suggested modifications to the conceptualization of the study. Once the modifications were made, I submitted to the DIR a completed the application for an external research request in September 2013. The request to conduct research at DCC was approved two months later in November 2013. The final steps included meeting with the president of DCC to introduce myself and my study, and also a meeting with the dean of counseling to arrange space for student interviews.

### **Hope Community College.**

Gaining access to HCC was comprised of two steps. In the initial step I reached out via e-mail to the institutional researcher to inquire about external research applications. Requests by outside researchers to gain access to HCC entailed submitting an approved application from the

Institutional Review Board from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). As the final step, I submitted the required UCLA IRB documents in September 2013. My request to collect data at HCC was approved in October 2013.

## **Participant Recruitment**

### **Democracy Community College.**

#### ***Counselors.***

I employed several techniques to counselor recruitment. As mentioned in the section above, in order to gain access to DCC I coordinated a meeting with administrators in the counseling and matriculation departments. The first recruitment technique was to reach out to the department chair of counseling and ask for advice on how to best approach counselors. The department chair suggested that I make an announcement of my study at their next counselor meeting in December 2013. I attended the counselor meeting, announced my study, and left with the department chair a sign-up sheet with available dates and times. Zero counselors signed up for an interview. I attended the following counselor meeting in February 2014, announced my study, and left a sign-up sheet with available dates and times. Eight counselors signed up and agreed to participate.

A second technique I used to recruit DCC counselors was to reach out to a professional contact. The professional contact is a program director at a different community college in southern California and who has worked in some capacities with some DCC counselors. Of the four counselors I was referred to, three completed an interview. To recruit additional counselors, I employed the snowball sampling technique where I asked two counselors to refer me to some of their colleagues. I was referred to ten counselors. My first attempt to recruit the counselors

was to send personalized e-mails with the study flyer, a sheet with frequently asked questions, and my contact information. Of the ten counselors I attempted to recruit, five agreed to participate. Counselor recruitment began in December 2013 and was completed in June 2014. The total number of counselor interviews completed at DCC was 16.

### ***Students.***

In order to recruit DCC students, several methods of recruitment were employed. One method was to email and call students directly. The DIR provided me with a list of students and their contact information, and this was done as courtesy by the institution. All students on the list had met the eligibility criteria for the study. Four students completed an interview of 76 who were contacted. A second technique to recruit students was to request permission from several instructors to announce my study in their respective courses. The instructors of these courses were counselors who participated in the study. I announced my study to students in six different courses. A third technique I used was referrals from counselors, and one student was recruited in this way. Student recruitment began in February 2014 and was completed in May 2014. The total number of student interviews completed at DCC was 14.

### **Hope Community College.**

#### ***Counselors.***

In order to recruit HCC counselors, I employed various techniques. The first technique was an e-mail message sent to all counselors on my behalf by the director of assessment. Zero counselors replied to the message. The next step was to individually reach out to the twelve counselors who had received the initial e-mail message sent on my behalf. The approach consisted of a study packet that I delivered to each respective counselor's workplace mailbox.

Each study packet included a personalized letter with information about my study, my contact information, a study flyer, and a sheet with frequently asked questions. Of twelve counselors, zero replied to my personalized study packets. Next, I searched for each counselor in the online HCC directory for their contact information. I called directly seven counselors, and three agreed to participate.

The next step was to reach out to two professional contacts I made at HCC in an earlier research project. I called both counselors to ask if they were interested in participating. Both agreed to participate. The next step was to use the snowball sampling technique, where two counselors referred me to fourteen of their counselor colleagues of which nine agreed to participate. The final technique I utilized was direct contact. The director of assessment, who also served as a counselor responded to my personalized e-mail and agreed to complete an interview. Counselor recruitment began in October 2013 and was completed in April 2014. The total number of counselor interviews completed at HCC was 18.

### ***Students.***

In order to recruit students at HCC, I employed various approaches. The first step was to send students in a Latino program a recruitment e-mail with information about my study and my contact information. The e-mail was sent on my behalf to students. To recruit additional students, I made an announcement of my study to students in four different courses. I gained access to the instructor through a referral from a counselor. I also made a study announcement in a Latino student-run organization meeting. I gained access to the student-run organization from a professional contact. Using a different technique, I asked an instructor to send students a recruitment e-mail on my behalf; however, this yielded zero responses. Student recruitment was

launched in January 2014 and was completed in April 2014. The total number of student interviews completed at HCC was 14.

### **Participant Characteristics**

Table 1 shows a selected set of student participant characteristics. All student participants were Latino. In terms of gender, female participants were overrepresented in the larger sample at 54 percent; however, male participants comprised more than half of the DCC sample. The mean age for both DCC and HCC was 19.1, and the mean age at DCC was slightly lower than HCC. Over half reported receiving financial aid. Similarly, over half of participants reported being the first in their respective families to attend college, at 61 percent.

Student participants at DCC had a slightly higher self-reported cumulative high school grade point average when compared to HCC. Fifteen student participants completed advanced placement (AP) courses during high school, and student participants completed more AP courses in English than mathematics. Approximately 90 percent of the student sample reported that their academic goal was to transfer to a four-year university. The percent of students who reported that their goal was to transfer was higher at HCC compared to DCC.

	Total (N=28)	HCC (n=14)	DCC (n=14)
Percent female	54%	57%	43%
Latino	100%	100%	100%
Mean age (years)	19.1	19.4	18.7
Born outside the United States	3	1	2
Financial aid recipients	54%	57%	50%
First in family to attend college	61%	79%	43%
Mean high school grade point average (cumulative)	3.1	3.0	3.2
Completed English advanced placement courses	12	4	8
Completed mathematics advanced placement courses	3	1	2
Transfer goal	89%	93%	86%

The range of course placement recommendations varied by site and academic subject.

Table 2 shows the range of mathematics course placement recommendations by research site.

The range of mathematics course placement recommendations was larger at HCC than DCC. As an example, the range of reported mathematics course placement recommendations at HCC was between basic arithmetic (five levels below college level) and pre calculus (college level).

Similarly for English, the range of reported English course placement recommendations was wider at HCC. Table 3 shows the range of English course placement recommendations by research site. While the lowest English course placement recommendation reported by DCC student participants was college English skills (three levels below college level), basic reading and writing (five levels below college level) was the lowest course placement recommendation reported by HCC students participants.

Table 3.2. Range of mathematics course placements by research site			
Research Site	Course	Transferable to CSU/UC?	Number of levels below college
DCC			
	Elementary Algebra	No	2 levels below
	Geometry and Intermediate Algebra	No	1 level below
	Math for Elementary Teachers	Yes	College level
	Elementary Statistics	Yes	College level
HCC			
	Basic Arithmetic	No	5 levels below
	Arithmetic and Pre Algebra/Basic Arithmetic (dual)	No	4 and 5 levels below
	Pre Algebra	No	4 levels below
	Arithmetic and Pre Algebra	No	4 levels below
	Elementary Algebra	No	2 levels below
	Intermediate Algebra	No	1 level below
	Pre Calculus	Yes	College level

Table 3.3. Range of English course placements by research site			
Research Site	Course	Transferable to CSU/UC?	Number of levels below college
DCC			
	College English Skills	No	3 levels below
	Fundamentals of Writing	No	1 level below
	Reading and Composition	Yes	College level
HCC			
	Basic Reading and Writing	No	5 levels below
	English Fundamentals (Part 1)	No	2 levels below
	English Fundamentals (Part 2)	No	1 level below

Table 4 shows a selected set of counselor participant characteristics. Females comprised approximately 71 percent of the total sample. In terms of employment status, 59 percent of



counselor participants reported that they were full time employees. A disproportionate number of counselor participants were part time at HCC, while part time counselor participants were underrepresented in the DCC sample. In terms of race and ethnicity, the sample was diverse. The largest ethnic group represented in the sample was Latino, followed by white. Counselor participants reported affiliation with various counseling programs. Sixteen counselor participants reported that their work was housed within the general academic counseling program, while sixteen counselor participants reported that their work was housed in a special program. Two counselor participants reported that they had a dual appointment in both general academic counseling and a special program.

Table 3.4. Counselor participant characteristics

	Total (N=34)	HCC (n=18)	DCC (n=16)
Percent female	71%	67%	75%
Percent full time	59%	33%	88%
Race/ethnicity			
Latino	24	17	7
White	5	1	4
Black	2	0	2
Asian	2	0	2
Pacific Islander	1	0	1
Type of counseling program			
General academic	16	8	8
Special program	16	10	6
General and special programs	2	0	2

### Data Collection

In this section, the data collection process is discussed. First, a rationale for why more than one source of evidence was utilized is provided. Second, details and descriptions about each source of evidence are discussed. Third, the development and maintenance of both the case study

database and chain of evidence are described in the latter part of this section. Data collection was launched in November 2013 and was completed in June 2014.

### **Multiple sources of evidence.**

Data for this study was collected from various sources. The data was collected from interviews with counselors and Latino students, relevant documents, college websites, and field observations. There are two reasons for using multiple sources of evidence. First, multiple sources of evidence helped create converging lines of inquiry (Yin, 2009). Converging lines of inquiry allowed me to support my case study findings using more than one source. Second, construct validity was strengthened by utilizing several different sources of evidence because each data source was considered one measure of the phenomenon. According to Yin (2009), six different sources of evidence can be used, and as the number of evidence sources increases so does the level of support for the research findings. I used half of the evidence sources available due to limited resources and limitations in research methods training.

### ***Interviews.***

The interview method was selected as a source of evidence because it afforded access to individuals' perceptions about various aspects of course placement counseling. A primary goal of the interview method was to capture in-depth responses from participants about how they perceived assessment and course placement in their respective community college. A total of 62 interviews were collected; 34 counselors completed an interview and 28 Latino students completed an interview.

The following is a description about the interview design and how the interviews were run. In terms of the design, the interviews were semi-structured. Two interview guides were developed, one for counselors and the other for Latino students. The questions in the interview

guides were developed to reflect propositions in RAS and SIC and to capture perceptions about assessment and course placement. Prior to conducting each interview, participants read and signed a consent form. The mean length of the interviews was approximately 60 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded. Please see Appendix for interview guides.

### ***Documents.***

Various types of documents were collected from each site. The documents were collected to help create converging lines of inquiry, or triangulation, as discussed above. Relevant documents collected included college catalogs. Each college catalog contained information about matriculation services, including assessment and course placement policies. At HCC, course catalogs were obtained for fall 2013 and spring 2014 in paper form. At DCC, one course catalog was collected; it was downloaded from the college website and printed.

Other relevant documents collected were screenshots of college websites. The goal was to collect publicly available information from each site about matriculation in general. The following represents the steps in collecting website information. The first step was to create a spreadsheet that would store website information. After the database was created, I visited each research site's website and searched for the assessment and course placement information. Once the information was identified, I captured screenshots of each webpage and pasted them in the database. Each screenshot was labeled, for instance, "Main Page (1 of 2)" in order to keep screenshots organized. At the DCC website, I collected screenshots about the following: online orientation, purpose and content of assessment, preparing for the assessment, assessment and orientation schedule, assessment results, understanding placement results, important information and college terms, frequently asked questions, contact information, ESL students, and an enrollment priority program for high school seniors in specific school districts. At the HCC

website, I collected screenshots about the following: general information about assessment; location and directions; testing requirements; academic integrity; learning outcomes; information about their respective assessment preparatory program; testing policies for new, concurrent, and current students; retesting policies; testing policies for out of area California students; testing policies for out of state students; the mathematics challenge exam; information about how to prepare for and challenge the chemistry placement test; ability to benefit test; information about how to fax results to a different college; proctoring services; waivers and exemptions; information about how to interpret test results; placement eligibility information; placement recommendations; and placement charts and brochures.

In addition to college catalogs and website screenshots, other relevant documents were collected. Campus newspapers were collected at each site. At DCC, the following relevant documents were collected: a new student checklist; a list of assessment and orientation dates and locations; a flyer about an assessment preparation course; syllabus for the assessment preparation course; program sheet for assessment preparation course; counseling services pamphlet; sheets with course sequences for English, mathematics and ESL; and a prerequisite course evaluation form. At HCC, the following relevant documents were collected: a copy of the admissions letter students receive; a copy of an e-mail sent from the counseling department chair to counselors with information about a “case example”; a copy of a request for placement prerequisite waivers; a sheet with the five steps of matriculation; a sheet with course sequences in mathematics, chemistry, and biology; and pamphlets about student services and counseling.

### ***Observations.***

A third source of evidence was field observations. A primary goal of conducting field observations was to visit assessment offices at each respective research site on multiple

occasions. Observations afforded me the opportunity to describe each setting, respectively. More specifically, observation data provided descriptions of the context in which various aspects of the matriculation process takes place within each respective research site. Observation data was collected on three different occasions for each site. The total amount spent observing at each research site was approximately 120 minutes.

The following is a description about the field observation guide design and how the observations were run. In terms of the design, the field observation guide was developed in accordance to Miles & Huberman (1984). After each session of observations, I wrote about some of the main points and my impressions during the time I was observing the assessment offices. In addition, I also wrote about points to follow up with during the next observation session. A primary goal during the observation sessions was to use propositions in RAS and SIC to help guide my observations. I recorded field notes from the standpoint of nonparticipant observer (Creswell, 2013). I did not breach confidentiality because I completed my observations in public spaces, such as office building hallways and student waiting areas. Please see Appendix for field observation guide.

### **Case Study Database and Chain of Evidence**

In addition to the collection of multiple sources of data, the development of the Data Collection and Tracking Log was equally important to the overall rigor and quality of the study. The creation of a case study database is related to reliability in more traditional social science studies, where the case study database helps strengthen the reliability of the data by organizing and tracking the data collected (Yin, 2009). Equally as important, the case study database helped create a chain of evidence. For any one particular piece of data or evidence it is possible to trace it back to the database, given the careful and meticulous method of data collection and entry.

The case study database was developed and maintained in the following ways. In developing the database, I used an electronic spreadsheet that would be used to store the data collected. In one section of the spreadsheet, I stored the research questions and hypotheses. In a different tab section, I kept an index of all the data collected, and each piece was assigned: an identification number, research site collected from, type of data (i.e., interview, observation, document), and the date it was collected. In a different section of the spreadsheet, I kept an interview log where I entered data collected after each interview. Examples of the data entered were: participant identification number, research site, participant category (C=counselor, S=student), participant name, date completed interview, recruitment attempts 1-5, method of recruitment, and preferred method of contact. Some data was entered specific to counselors, for instance, the total number of years working as counselor. Similarly for students, the following data were collected, entered, and stored: birthplace, age, academic goal, highest mathematics course completed in high school, type of 12<sup>th</sup> grade English completed (i.e., regular, advanced placement, honors), self-reported cumulative high school grade point average, mathematics course placement recommendation, English course placement recommendation, and number of advanced placement courses taken in high school.

### **Data Analysis Strategy**

The data analysis strategy drew from broad concepts in the Creswell (2013) data analysis spiral. The concepts are broad and general and they serve to frame the data analysis strategy employed in this dissertation. The following three procedures frame the data analysis strategy: reading and memoing; describing, classifying and interpreting data; and representing and visualizing the data. While the data analysis spiral is comprised of four procedures, the first procedure, data management and organization, is very similar to the case study database and

chain of evidence procedure discussed in the section above. Cycle analysis and coding techniques drawn from other sources were the analysis techniques employed (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2009). Cycle analysis and the coding techniques will be discussed more in detail later in this chapter.

### **Reading and memoing.**

The first step in analysis was to become familiar with the data. The purpose of this phase was to gain a sense of the data as a whole before conducting any further analysis (Creswell, 2013). This phase in the analysis was comprised of three procedures. The first procedure was transcribing the interview data. Transcription was followed by the development of a transcription database. The third procedure was the creation of a codes list, which initiated first cycle analysis. Reading and memoing were integral to the first cycle analysis.

Given the large number of interviews collected, a company was hired to transcribe the bulk of the interviews. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and a denaturalized approach was taken. The denaturalized approach is less concerned with utterances, pauses, and other details in verbal communication (Oliver, Serovich & Mason, 2005). Transcriptions were in the form of sentences and phrases because the primary focus of this dissertation was on the content of responses and not on the minutiae of verbal communication.

Once the interviews were transcribed, I organized them in a transcription database. The purpose of the transcription database was to create a centralized location for all interview data in order to access raw data more quickly. The transcription database organized interviews alphabetically by each participant's last name, participant category (i.e., student, counselor), and research site.

First cycle data analysis was initiated prior to conducting reading and memoing. The first step was to develop a codes list. The codes list was comprised of mostly deductive codes built from the guiding theoretical perspectives. The building of deductive codes was in accordance with structural coding (Saldaña, 2009). The goal of structural coding is to create larger “bins”, linked with theoretical constructs, in order to conduct more in-depth analysis. In addition, the list also included a brief description and definition for each code. The purpose of the list was to relate codes in a coherent way and provide unity among them (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). As an example, SIC:INT was linked with the SIC perspective, and aimed to code counselors’ descriptions of interactions with students in the context of course placement counseling.

The codes list was modified a total of five times because initially some codes did not fit the data and others were vague and ill-defined. The list was also modified in order to add inductive codes—those that arose during later data analysis. For example, RAS:RC:JUDG, an inductive code, was later added in order to code the descriptions of involvement that counselors had in course placement counseling. The final version of the list contained 15 structural codes.

Then second step of first cycle coding was to create word tables for interview and non-interview data. The purpose of word tables was to begin the reading and memoing phase. The goal of word tables was to organize initially coded data. All data were coded manually without the assistance of any computer software. The initial data coding process involved using structural codes to organize interview and non-interview data into larger “bins”. Word tables included fields, such as participant identification number, research site, group, first code, second code, datum, and personal notes. In order to continue working toward making sense of the data, I conducted passes through the coded data and wrote impressions and other comments.



### **Describing, classifying and interpreting data.**

The subsequent step in data analysis was to conduct a more in-depth analysis of the data in the larger “bins”. As such, the second cycle of analysis was initiated. As described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), second cycle analysis is a process marked by the development of patterns and themes. In order to identify patterns and themes in the data, a second round of coding was conducted.

The second round of coding involved a different type of coding technique. The technique selected was values coding (Saldaña, 2009). Values coding was appropriate in this dissertation because it involved the identification of research participants’ attitudes, beliefs, and values. The topic of the dissertation also lent itself well to analyzing how research participants viewed themselves and each other, and their respective attitudes and beliefs about issues, such as culture, ethnicity, race, and other topics (Saldaña, 2009).

Similar to structural coding, values coding involved a manual passing through the word tables. Each “bin” was coded using attitudes (A), beliefs (B), and values (V). This step in the analysis yielded a total of 1,118 codes. Given the sheer amount of codes, an excel spreadsheet was created to organize the codes. The spreadsheet contained 15 tabs; one tab per structural code. Within each tab, the codes were arranged in the following way: code type (i.e., A=attitudes, B=beliefs, V=values), actual code, bin to which the code was linked, research site, group, and participant identification number.

Once all values codes were organized, codes were sorted by code type. For each “bin”, attitudes, values, and beliefs were grouped together in order to reflect on their meaning and how they interacted with each other (Saldaña, 2009). In reflecting on the meaning and interaction of codes, I created a document to begin organizing codes into patterns. As an example, 90 codes

were generated for the RAS:RC-JUDG “bin”. Of those 90 codes, seven themes were identified for attitudes, five themes for beliefs, and zero themes for values. For the attitudes themes, 15 patterns were identified. Thirteen patterns were identified for beliefs.

To obtain a clearer understanding of how themes fit together, further reflection on the meaning and interaction was conducted. The process involved placing all themes and their patterns alongside each other to better understand how they related to each other. Reviewing literature about both theoretical perspectives helped create links between the themes and patterns.

A total of three major links between the data were made. The first relationship was that beliefs about initial course placement recommendations as accurate were related to views of the placement test as a diagnostic tool. The second was that counselors identified two complex resources that they viewed as important for their overall effectiveness in course placement counseling. The final was that ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and income differences among students were not built into the structure of course placement counseling. All three meanings were the major findings of this dissertation.

### **Representing and visualizing the data.**

The final step in the data analysis strategy was to represent in a visual way the major findings of the dissertation. In accordance with Creswell (2013), narration was selected as the principle method for representing and visualizing the data. The goal of the narration was to focus on the relationships and processes found in the data. Within the narration, various excerpts were included from interviews and non-interview data. In order to avoid elite bias—overweighting the more articulate accounts, while under-representing the less articulate excerpts—conscious effort was made to include accounts from multiple participants. Furthermore, effort was made to

include accounts that disrupted observed patterns in order to provide more complex and nuanced reporting of the data (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014).

### **Researcher Positionality**

In this section, I respond to the urging of Stephen J. Gould who argued that it is imperative for all researchers to recognize their own biases and their influences because claiming neutrality is impossible for scholars with “inevitable backgrounds, needs, beliefs, and desires” (Gould, 1996, p. 36). I pursued this dissertation with a clear understanding of my orientation toward social justice in public higher education.

My personal experience with schooling connects directly with why my orientation toward social justice. Growing up, school became part of my identity, and I was taught that working hard would help me achieve my goals. My belief in meritocracy was challenged during my last year of high school when the school district decided to honor as valedictorian a White student with a lower grade point than mine. After several unsuccessful private meetings with the high school principal and the superintendent, I organized a yearlong campaign against the school district. A few days before commencement at about 9:00 PM, the superintendent called my father to rectify the situation, and admitted to pressure from the White student’s mother who was intolerant of the idea that her daughter was not first in rank. My experience taught me a lesson about what it meant to be an excellent low income Mexican American student in our society. It was as if bearers and supporters of white privilege felt compelled to dim my glowing academic excellence and achievement.

My personal experience is also linked with my choice to study community colleges in California. By the time I graduated high school, I was by most standards an excellent student. I was valedictorian, senior class president, and had earned A’s in college courses at my local

community college and UC Berkeley, yet I did not reach my goal of attending a very selective university immediately after high school. Part of the reason was that two high school teachers instilled in me and my classmates that “students from Avenal don’t make it in places like Berkeley,” which meant that my goal of attending a very selective college was out of touch with reality. I was taught that there was a hierarchy of ability across California, and that Mexican American students from the San Joaquin Valley were at the bottom.

After high school, I bounced between California State University, Bakersfield and my local community college. While attending West Hills College (WHC), I learned from a friend that in order to transfer I had to meet with a counselor and fill out the Intersegmental General Education Transfer Curriculum (IGETC) form. By the time I met with a counselor, I had already completed more than a year of coursework, and I do not remember thinking that meeting with a counselor was important for my success. It was during my time attending WHC that I began asking myself whether my experience of feeling lost, confused, and disenchanting with college was unique to me or shared by my Latino peers.

### **Challenges and Limitations.**

This dissertation contains two limitations related to research participants. A first limitation is that the study focuses on Latino students only. Therefore, it is not clear which parts of the experiences shared by Latino students are unique to them and shared by other students of color. Adding, for example, African American students would highlight unique and shared experiences between students of different races and ethnicities. However, a lack of resources severely limited the possibility of adding additional student groups.

A second limitation is that reliance fell on institutional documents for the verification of the course placement counseling structure. The information published by each respective

research site is not the most accurate method of collecting perspectives from administrators. Including administrators in the sample could have provided more accurate and updated information about their beliefs and attitudes about the placement test and other aspects of assessment and course placement. Similar to above, adding additional groups to the sample was beyond the amount of resources available to conduct this dissertation.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

This dissertation was an embedded multiple case study that involved exploring the work of academic counselors within the context of course placements. The following questions guided this study:

1. How do community college counselors view students' course placement recommendations?
2. How do community college counselors view their role within the context of student course placement recommendations?
3. How do community college counselors describe the accuracy of course placement recommendations for Latino students?

In the sections below, I discuss the three major findings in this study. The results are discussed as they relate to theoretical constructs of Relative Autonomy of the State (RAS) and Social Identity Contingencies (SIC). Specifically, the first two findings deal with ideology and resources, both constructs that pertain to the RAS perspective. The third finding deals with how counseling practices mimic social identity contingencies and how that ultimately impacts Latino student experiences within the context of academic counseling sessions. Each section below includes a discussion about the major theme found in the data along with three corresponding sub-themes.

### **Perceptions of Course Placement Accuracy**

One major theme deals with course placement accuracy. Course placement accuracy is a theme that is comprised of beliefs and attitudes, specifically about students' initial course placement recommendations. Three sub-themes were also revealed. The first sub-theme describes beliefs and attitudes about using initial course placement recommendations as starting

points. The second sub-theme describes beliefs about the retesting option. Finally, beliefs and attitudes about the value of the placement test comprised the third sub-theme.

In the sections below, I report the beliefs and attitudes for each of the sub-themes. The counselor data is reported first. Student data and institutional data are reported in the latter sections.

### **Initial course placement recommendations as starting points.**

In the process of matriculation, counselors in the sample reported meeting with students after they had successfully completed the assessment process. When counselors met with students for the first time, it was not unusual for the counselor to structure the bulk of the meeting around developing an educational plan followed by assisting students with course enrollment. Educational planning and course enrollment are long term and short term guides that aim to help students reach their academic goals.

While there was some acknowledgement of the limited accuracy of initial course placement recommendations, counselors in this sample reported beliefs about mostly accurate initial course recommendations. A total of eight counselors in the sample reported on their views about the accuracy of initial course placement recommendations. There were important differences between the eight counselors. Six counselors believed that initial course placements should be used as starting points, while two counselors reported that initial course placement recommendations were questionable.

Beliefs about initial course placement recommendations as starting points were not evenly split between the two research sites. Four counselors at Democracy Community College (DCC) and two counselors at Hope Community College (HCC) held favorable views about

initial course placement recommendations. There were differences in beliefs about why initial course placement recommendations made for good starting points.

One belief about initial course placement recommendations was related to efficiency. An account provided by Ernesto, a counselor at DCC, captured the way he advised students during the first meeting. Ernesto shared:

Typically, though you have to have – five months have to have passed at that point for them to [retake the placement test], so it makes it a little challenging to move them up. I mean, they can obviously move down if they feel like it's too difficult, and we discuss [that] and we come up with the fact that, you know, it doesn't make sense for them to do that specific course. I typically don't recommend they wait [to enroll]. Sometimes students come in and say, "Well, I think this class is going to be too easy for me." But the next thing, well, if it's too easy for you and you take the assessment again in a couple of months, and you score at the same level [as] before, [or] you score lower, guess what? You just wasted a semester of being able to get your basic skills so that you can hopefully transfer out.

In Ernesto's account, two issues are evident. One is that Ernesto discouraged students from retaking the placement test. Per DCC policy, no student is permitted to retake the placement test until after five months have passed, which is roughly equivalent to the length of one semester. Equally important was that Ernesto asserted his belief that retesting did not change students' initial course placement recommendations. One way to interpret Ernesto's account is by arguing that academic gains were earned when students did not delay course enrollment. In addition, it was unproductive to advise students to wait close to half a year before they enrolled in courses.



Another belief about initial course placement recommendations was related to dealing with potential discrepancies identified by students. In one case at HCC, a counselor named Raquel described how she negotiated a situation where a student subtly communicates that she was recommended to insufficiently rigorous courses. The following is an excerpt from Raquel's account:

And so when I see the student, he is—or she is nervous that they scored really low and they are feeling a little bit embarrassed because you can tell it on their face. They will go, “You know, I scored really low.” And I will go, “Don't worry babe, you know, it's okay.” I used words that are warm and, you know, that are friendly. And it's not that, “Oh well you are too bad.” You know, “This is where we are going to start.” Now I go, “No, it's okay, don't worry about it, and we are going to work our way up from this point on. We can't do anything about the past, but we can do things about today and tomorrow.”

The situation described by Raquel is one where the student cued a potential discrepancy between her course placement recommendations and academic ability. However, Raquel did not mention whether she explored what the student was feeling or thinking at that particular moment. One way to view Raquel's approach is to argue that student initiated concerns about course placement recommendations are hardly negotiable.

Two counselors reported beliefs about the limited reliability of initial course placement recommendations. One counselor from DCC reported on her belief that the mathematics portion of the placement test did not adequately capture the ability of international students. The other counselor was Raquel from HCC. Raquel reported on how course placement recommendations are not always accurate. Specifically, Raquel recounted:

I have had students where in the conversation, they are so eloquent, they speak beautifully, that there is something that didn't – like, but generally they are not going to test at the lower end. They might just test just one level below. Then I ask them how they did in high school and what kind of grades they did in English. Or, “And you know what? I aced my class, I aced my class and I didn't take the AP, but I got an A in the class,” or whatever. I ask, I probe for information. And I say, “You know what? Why don't you try taking the test again,” you know? “Why don't you try taking the test again and you might do better.”

According to Raquel there are some cases where students at HCC might receive inaccurate course placement recommendations. Given that possibility, Raquel relied on feedback from students' verbal communication to identify any potential discrepancy. If a discrepancy was found, Raquel was motivated to encourage the student to retake the placement test.

### **Retesting as a way to affirm counselors' beliefs.**

Given that the retesting process was housed in a separate department, counselors were not part of the retesting process itself. While counselors might not be involved directly in the retesting process, they were instrumental in other ways, for instance, filling knowledge gaps about the retesting option. The option of retesting was designed to instill in students the idea that they had a second chance to demonstrate their ability, should they disagree with their initial course placement recommendations.

Seven counselors in the sample reported on their beliefs about retesting. Five counselors reported on their beliefs that retesting was a method for diagnosing students' ability. Within the group, four were HCC counselors and one was a DCC counselor. Two HCC counselors reported

optimism with regard to retesting, though there were important differences between both counselor accounts.

The four counselors who believed that retesting was diagnostic of ability specifically described retesting as a device for verification of ability. Dorothy, a counselor at HCC described why she believed that the retesting option reflected students' academic ability:

I have had students say, "Well, you know, I really shouldn't have placed here." And I will send them to retest, and then they will come back with the same score. So I think well, you know, if you tested into this twice, then maybe you really need this class. And I am like, "So, like, go in the class, and then you know, and if it is, you know, below your level, then ace the class and get the A." But what's interesting is a lot of times, when they say it's not a fit, they are not acing the class. You know, so I am thinking well, it looks like you need this class because if you're telling me that you are worried you are not going to pass, then I think you need to then. You know, maybe it's their perception that they should be higher, and their performance is not showing that.

Dorothy's belief was both a favorable view of retesting and skepticism about students' odds to earn course placement recommendations that were different from their initial recommendations. An important revelation in Dorothy's account is that her belief was formed in part by multiple sources of data she collected from observing students. One source of data was her observations of students who she encouraged to retest but received the same recommendations twice. A second form of feedback was her observations of course grades. When students who initially shared with Dorothy that their initial course placement recommendations were not commensurate with their ability, they eventually enrolled in those courses and did not perform

well.

Two HCC counselors held optimistic views about retesting. One counselor, Israel reported that he believed retesting as a “second opportunity” if students successfully completed advanced mathematics courses in high school, such as calculus. If the same student received the same math course placement recommendation twice, then he advised the student to challenge his mathematics recommendation at the departmental level. Israel’s colleague, Janey also had an optimistic view of retesting, except she advised her students differently. Janey recounted:

I mean there is sort of like a typical answer that you would prepare a little bit more. The problem is that a lot of times in these situations the students are sort of already like needing to pick a class and so when that happens it’s like you don’t really have a lot of time to prepare and retake the assessment test.

Janey continued:

So, sometimes I’ll tell them, they can go to another school, take the assessment there and see if they can score [higher]. A lot of times that’s sort of like an inconvenience, but sort of show them it “saves you time in the long run because if you place in [college level English] in [nearby community college] you could take it there and can jump in [subsequent college level English course] here, instead of doing the whole sequence.” So, that’s a nice alternative just because it saves them time, and if they reassess here and still they don’t score into [college level English], it takes them a few semesters.

Janey’s account provides one example of how she advised students who did not agree with their initial course placement recommendations. Her advising students to retest at a nearby community college was in the context of time constraints. The purpose of retesting at a nearby community

college was to help students earn course placement recommendations that were more aligned with their academic ability while simultaneously not encouraging them to delay their enrollment.

**Placement test as a strong measure of academic ability.**

Beliefs about the value of the placement test were mixed. Sixteen counselors in the sample reported on their beliefs about the placement test as being a valid measure and diagnostic of ability. Specifically, ten counselors viewed the placement test as being a valid measure of ability, and six counselors described the placement test as a diagnostic tool. Two counselors described the value of the placement test as moderate.

A group of ten counselors viewed the placement test as high in value, particularly validity. Four counselors were from DCC and six were from HCC. In the excerpt below, Jim, a counselor at HCC explained how he viewed the placement test as a valid measure.

It's funny because students come here, "God, you know, your whole placement thing is whole different from my other school." They find it much more complicated. It's usually more complicated because we're really trying to make sure that you're in the right class. I'm not saying they weren't, but I'm just saying that there might be extra steps to ensure that, especially with our math department. Our math department does really, sometimes too much to make sure you're in the right class. So I would say it's something that the entire campus is open to, to making sure that we have placement tools that are accurate.

Two issues stand out from Jim's account. The first is that Jim has learned from students that the placement tests as well as other matriculation services are complicated. Second, Jim made sense of students' feedback by saying that the entire HCC community, but especially the

mathematics department, was committed to making sure that the appropriate tools and methods are used to generate accurate course placement recommendations.

Two other counselors reported that the placement test was an effective tool for predicting future academic performance and the strongest measure of academic ability. Raquel at HCC confidently stated that the placement test predicted future academic performance because “depending on where they are placed—the students, we can see how they [will] perform when they take classes.” In addition, DCC counselor, Helen confidently stated, “From my experience in all these years, I can only see the assessment being the only way to accurately measure a student’s ability.” Raquel and Helen both clearly stated their beliefs about the placement test as having predictive validity as well as being the strongest measure of academic ability.

A group of six counselors believed that the placement test had diagnostic value. The number was evenly split between DCC and HCC. Alejandra from DCC poignantly illustrates the point about the placement test as a diagnostic tool:

So what happens is if I see a student here doing [low reading course], the lowest level, but they tell me, “I don’t think I want to do this.” And this is let’s say a [student not in a special program]. “I don’t want to do that [course] because I know how to read.” I say, “Really? But that’s a 10<sup>th</sup> grade reading test and you couldn’t pass that. And yet you’re showing that. So prove to me that you can read. We will wait the five months, but I want you to come back, and if I see it again for a second time, that you are landing there or you only jumped one notch, you got to work on your reading. You cannot sit and tell me you don’t need reading.”

The belief reflected above was that not only the placement test was aligned with the K-12 curriculum, but that the placement test was diagnostic as well. According to Alejandra, she was

able to sum up students' reading level based on the placement test score. One way to interpret what Alejandra said is by making the point that students' placement test results were objective and fair because the placement test adequately measures what students learned in their high school English courses.

Not all counselors in the sample believed that the placement test was a strong tool. One counselor at DCC and another at HCC provided accounts of the placement test as a moderately strong tool. Larry at DCC stated a difference in accuracy between the English and mathematics portions of the placement test. Specifically, Larry stated:

In terms of the accuracy of the placement, I think it's less accurate with English than it probably is with math. I think with math; math is a lot more objective in terms of can you come to the appropriate conclusion going through some prescribed steps or procedures; whereas, I think English is a lot more subjective. I think there are components such as grammar, sentence structure—do you have a thesis sentence?—that are more the objective side. But in terms of writing style and approaches, there's a lot more variety in how you can come to being a good writer apart from some basic mechanics.

While Larry believed that there were objective aspects of both the mathematics and English placement tests, he believed that the mathematics portion of the test was most objective and thus most accurate. Tracy, a counselor at HCC believed that while the placement test in general was a good measure of ability, it was not a good measure of students' readiness for college "because college readiness in my perspective has multiple factors and the developmental stage of students." Taken together, Larry believed that the accuracy of the placement test depended upon

the academic subject, whereas, Tracy believed that the utility of the placement test was limited and did not predict readiness for college.

### **Student perceptions as verification of structure.**

Data drawn from student interviews revealed significantly different perceptions than those shared by many counselors in the sample. An unexpected yet unsurprising finding was that student level data provided some counterpoints to the ways that some counselors discussed the accuracy of course placement recommendations. In the sections below, I discuss students' attitudes and beliefs with regard to initial course placement recommendations, the retesting option, and the placement test.

### ***Mixed views of initial course placement recommendations.***

There was a mix in terms of how students viewed their initial course placement recommendations. Five students held negative attitudes about their initial course placement recommendations. All five students were enrolled at HCC. Initial course placement recommendations were viewed as setbacks in their academic progress and repetitions of high school coursework. Students' disconcerted attitudes about unresponsiveness from counselors seemed to be partly predicated on the idea that pressure was on counselors to produce course schedules. In one student's case, Francisco, a student at HCC described his unfavorable attitude toward the first counselor he met with. Francisco shared:

I remember the first time that I got placed, and I went to the actual counselor. I felt like they weren't kind of helpful because the person I had I guess wasn't friendly either. Because to them it just seemed like, "Oh, let's get this person's class schedule done. Let's just pick some classes that he might want to take", you know, "that may not necessarily guide him in the right direction," or that might—



like let's say taking a math class and a science class or taking a higher class and a couple of lighter classes, you know. They would just throw random things at an actual schedule, and you think they are doing you a favor but they're really not.

In Francisco's view, the counselor's primary objective was to develop a course schedule. Later in the interview, Francisco shared what the counselor said about his initial course placement recommendations:

Because he was just like, "Oh, these are the classes that I'm going to give you because to me it seems like it's a good way of starting." But he didn't really talk to me like, "Oh, how do you understand? How do you feel?" He just gave them to me like, "Oh, this is what you should do," as opposed to, "What do you feel like you should do?"

According to Francisco, it was a missed opportunity to engage in a discussion about whether there were any questions about his initial course placement recommendations. When I asked Francisco whether he shared with his counselor other relevant background information he answered, "No, because I don't think that the counselor gave me a chance to." Self reported data revealed that Francisco earned an overall 3.9 high school grade point average, successfully completed approximately five advanced placement courses, including twelfth grade English, yet remedial English was his course placement recommendation.

Not all students disagreed with their initial course recommendations. Three students from DCC believed that some of their course recommendations were accurate. More specifically, two students believed that their English course recommendations were accurate, and another student believed that her reading course recommendation was accurate.

*Mixed views of retesting.*

Beliefs and attitudes about retesting were mixed among students in the sample. Four students discussed retesting in favorable and unfavorable ways. Three students from HCC held favorable views about retesting. One student from DCC held an unfavorable view about retaking the placement test.

Among the three HCC students who held a favorable view of retesting, they described retesting as an option that helped them make academic progress. Mike, a student enrolled at HCC shared his belief about the retesting option and his experience with retaking the placement test:

The first time I felt disappointed. I was like, okay, I could have scored higher, so that's when I took it again. I scored higher, but I was still placed in the same classes. So, I was just like okay, this is something that I have to deal with, and I just have to take the courses.

While it is unclear whether Mike agreed with his second course placement recommendations, it was clear that he disagreed with his initial recommendations. Earning the same course recommendations twice led Mike to use them as starting points. Self reported data revealed that while Mike successfully completed an honors level senior English course, his first and second course placement recommendations were at below college level.

Another student at HCC reported that he was not informed about the retesting option. Francisco recalled that this counselor did not discuss with him the option of retesting. Francisco was certain that had he known about the retesting option he “would have not proceeded with [initial course placement recommendations] because once you add a class on the lower division, you're stuck and you have to stay there, so that right off the bat screws you over.”

Tony at HCC was informed by his counselor about the retesting option. In fact, Tony was encouraged to retake the placement test in order to potentially earn a higher mathematics course placement recommendation. Tony's initial mathematics course recommendation was elementary statistics, which placed him the college level category. Although Tony's perception was that his initial performance on the math section of the placement test was "good," his counselor suggested that he consider the retest option. Tony recalled:

I thought I did good, like I was kind of proud of myself. And the after you take the assessment test, it's recommended you go talk to a counselor, which I did. And so that's where she told me to take elementary statistics, but she said if I take the test again and place higher, I mean that's just like one less class I have to take. And so, that's what I did, and got the same score.

It is worth noting that Tony's highest level of mathematics completed in high school was pre-calculus, and he described his mathematics confidence as high. It is possible that Tony was perceived as having a high ability in mathematics, which his counselors believed was not captured by his initial course placement recommendations. In fact, Tony mentioned that counselors not only encouraged him to retest, but also advised him to repeal his second placement test results. Tony mentioned that a counselor gave him "a couple of links and places to go visit" so that it would prepare him for a third exam, which is administered by the math department. Tony's account illustrates his favorable view of retesting, a perspective that was shared by some of his counterparts.

#### ***Mixed views of placement test validity.***

Similar to retesting, student beliefs about the placement test were mixed. Four students reported that the placement test was a strong measure of ability. Three of the four students were

enrolled at HCC. For instance, Iris, a student at DCC reported on her approval of writing test format, citing that an essay was a more objective method of assessing English ability when compared to reading comprehension questions. Rita, a student at HCC reported on the validity of the English portion of the test, mentioning that the English test was “good” because “as long as you got good grades in high school I think you should be good.” Rita’s belief was that the placement test is aligned with the K-12 curriculum to the extent that earning “good” grades in high school was believed to be sufficient for students to perform well on the English portion of the placement test.

Eight students discussed mostly unfavorable attitudes and beliefs about the placement test. Five students were from HCC and three students were enrolled at DCC. Three students reported on what they believed were fundamental weaknesses of the placement test. For instance, DCC student, Robert stated that the placement test was meant to cater to students with average academic ability, and for that reason students with high academic ability were recommended to insufficiently rigorous courses. Specifically, Robert reported the following about the placement test:

It was a simple test, but out of all the questions it was elementary algebra and elementary wording. What I'm saying here is that they did use high level terminology, but it was nowhere near college context were I'm currently at right now. What I'm guessing is that if you want to place higher like finite mathematics, calculus, statistics or things of the nature there is no way to really tell you how to get there. The way I saw it was it was just really if you think you can pass [the test], there's really no room for that test to tell you that you can go

beyond the college context. Something that I see kind of foolish is that's C level work.

Robert was an excellent student in high school and his academic record reflected that. By the end of his senior year, Robert had completed statistics and nine advanced placement courses, of which he passed all nine advanced placement exams. Based on evidence from his high school academic record, it was unsurprising that he believed that the placement test was not rigorous enough. However, the irony was that based on Robert's placement test results he was recommended to enroll in a remedial level English course and elementary algebra. It is important to note that the placement test at DCC is called a computer adaptive test, meaning that the test questions will adapt to students' ability. It is quite possible that Robert incorrectly answered some of the questions at the outset of the test, which then did not move to more challenging questions.

Maria, a student at HCC believed the opposite of Robert. Maria reported on what she believed was a challenging placement test that did not reflect the same level of rigor of her college level courses. In the following excerpt, Maria recounts how she did not believe that the placement test was a good measure of her academic ability. She reported:

I don't think it is because what they teach you here is not like the assessment. It's a lot easier than the assessment. I would think that maybe if I would go back and check it out, which I still doubt it, I would think that the assessment was harder.

Already finishing all my math classes and getting mostly A's and B's.

Maria's initial course placement recommendations were remedial mathematics and English. Maria earned approximately a 2.9 grade point average in high school, successfully completed one advanced placement course, and her highest level of mathematics completed was algebra

two. It was unexpected and surprising to find that a more average high school student believed that the HCC placement test was weak in predictive validity.

### **Institutional data as verification of structure**

Institutional level data included course catalogs, campus newspapers, and college websites. Results from the institutional level data revealed that information about course placement recommendations is aligned with general beliefs and attitudes of counselors and weakly aligned with students' beliefs and attitudes. The pattern hints to a potential relationship between the ways in which institutions and counselors think about course placement accuracy.

### ***Placement test is a good measure of ability.***

Data drawn from both institutions revealed favorable views about the validity of the placement test. In fact, both research sites indicated on their respective websites that the placement test adequately gauged academic ability in the areas of reading, mathematics, and English. For example, the DCC website made public the following with regard to the mathematics portion of the placement test, "The test questions are presented in a computer adaptive mode based on your answers, with quick testing and accurate placement."

At HCC, the college website clearly stated that when compared to other measures of academic ability, the placement test held the strongest validity. Specifically, the HCC website stated, "Placement into a math class at [HCC] is based on multiple measures. However, we place the greatest emphasis on your COMPASS math test." According to HCC, the reason for mostly relying on placement test scores was because "the Math Department is particularly concerned that you do not waste a semester by selecting a class that exceeds your preparation." Evidence about placement test validity from college websites verifies counselors' beliefs that the placement test contains strong validity and that resulted in accurate course placements

recommendations in mathematics. The evidence suggests that counselors' beliefs about initial course placement recommendations as accurate were mere reflections of what the institutions seemed to believe.

***Placement test accurately estimates academic ability.***

In addition to statements about strong placement test validity, data drawn from college websites revealed that the placement test was described as diagnostic of academic ability. Put differently, the placement test went beyond producing accurate course placement recommendations by providing information about the level of academic ability for each student. The DCC website stated the following with regard to the purpose of the placement test, "The purpose of the full assessment test is to identify the Reading, English, and Math skill levels of DCC students so that they will enroll in the appropriate courses." Similar to DCC, HCC described the placement test as diagnostic. Specifically, the website stated:

Computerized adaptive tests allow an examinee's ability level to be estimated and new items can be selected based on the current ability estimate. Relatively few items are needed to be administered to maximize the information about their ability levels from the item responses.

The underlying message from both colleges' websites was that course placement accuracy was a top priority. In the following excerpt from a published interview in the DCC newspaper, an administrator shared why a number of students might earn inaccurate course placement recommendations, "We don't do a very good job of explaining to students that they're going to be given a placement test and many of them do nothing to prepare, and as a result their entire first year of college is based on the placement test." Similarly, at HCC, "The Math Department

believes that the single most important success factor is your current skill level which is measured by math assessment.”

### **Perceptions of Counselors’ Role in Course Placement**

The data revealed important resource restrictions that defined the limits and bounds of counselors within the context of assessment and course placement recommendations. Data reflect two different restricted resources that counselors viewed as desirable for their overall effectiveness. One restricted resource was the extent to which counselors could assess the academic ability of students. A second restricted resource was counselor authority to move some students from a lower course placement to a higher one. In terms of the latter resource restriction, it is important to point out that some counselors believed that some students were recommended to enroll in courses that were below their actual ability. In the sections below, I describe how counselor accounts illuminate restricted access to resources.

#### **Restrictions on academic ability assessment.**

Six DCC counselors viewed their competence to a level they deemed sufficient to be effective in the context of course placements, particularly in cases where they identified inaccurate initial course placements. In this study, competence was defined by counselors as the degree to which they could waive students out of a lower course placement and enroll them in a higher course when needed. However, it is important to recall that counselors reported that the bulk of initial course placement recommendations were accurate.

Perhaps the most surprising finding was that views of competence did not differ between research sites. What differed were reasons why counselors believed that they were restricted access to academic ability assessment. Six DCC counselors strongly believed that they were competent to adequately assess students’ academic abilities but that the counselor role was not



built into the course placement recommendation structure. DCC counselor, Vincent described why he believed he was competent:

If I'm dealing with the student, the whole picture, like yeah, the high school they were having some issues with work and so that's why they got the C in the second semester of elementary Algebra. And now they're here and they're not working anymore, and I can see that they are doing well in their other classes. So based on that, I should—and some guidelines, of course, that they set up for me on what to look for, in terms of assessment scores and grades through high school—be able to make a call on this. So that's really kind of where I am. But it's just that that's not how it's set up here.

Vincent's main argument was that in general counselors had the opportunity to conduct a more complete assessment during the student intake. Student intake can be described as students' first meeting with a counselor, which is an opportunity for counselors to establish rapport, collect relevant background information, and co-create with students next steps in their schooling careers. Vincent considered the student intake as an opportunity where non academic factors were considered in a more complete assessment of students' academic ability. However, Vincent lamented that counselors' assessments of academic ability were not built into the structure of how course placement recommendations were generated.

Restrictions on assessing academic ability occurred differently at HCC. Unlike DCC counselors, three HCC counselors placed little emphasis on their competence and focused more on their non ownership of the curriculum. It is important to note that HCC counselors did not report any limitations in their skills to adequately assess academic ability. Three HCC counselors reported that the reason for their restricted access to assessing academic ability was because they

were not part of the math and English faculty. In the following excerpt, Ester recounted her experience with restricted access to assessing students' academic ability:

Right, part of the problem is, like everyone is very controlling and protective of their areas. What are they going to do? Fire me? So, if the math department knew that I was doing that with any frequency, oh, they would get on me. Because who am I to say that a student is going to do [college level math course], when the testing or [assessment director] say that they should be in a [remedial math course]?

Ester's excerpt highlights that she technically could assess academic ability. For example, Ester admitted that she waived students out of lower course placements when she understood that such action was prohibited on the part of counselors. What is important to note is Ester's description of a departmental norm as the structure that restricted counselors from assessing students' academic ability.

### **Restrictions on authority over course placement recommendations.**

Fourteen counselors in the sample discussed authority over course placement recommendations as a restricted resource important to their overall effectiveness. Eight counselors were from DCC, while six counselors were from HCC. Authority was viewed as both a valuable and desirable resource. The belief was that authority allowed counselors to be effective in advising students through situations where students were recommended to courses lower than what their academic ability suggested.

Five counselors, all from DCC, reported on the various disadvantages to restricted authority. Some of the reported disadvantages were non-transparency in terms of why authority was restricted and negative attitudes toward the administration. The most reported disadvantage

was that restricted authority was a disservice to students and their academic progress. Lisa from DCC reported the following:

Whereas some of the other community colleges they do allow the counselors to have that discretion to say, "Hey, you met the requirement let me go on and clear you for that math class." So it's an extra step that students have to take. But if we are seeing them I think we should be allowed to say, "Hey, I think you could get in," without having to go through another process and not have to go through all this bureaucracy and paperwork. We have our students jump through the hoops here all the time.

Lisa's account described her experience with restricted authority and how she believed it impacted students. Lisa believed that as a counselor she should be able to "clear" her students and help them enroll in the appropriate course. Equally evident is that Lisa believed that students at DCC confront frequent bureaucratic challenges.

Although increased authority was believed to yield benefits for administrators, staff, and students alike, one counselor cited that departmental norms held restrictions in place. When DCC counselor, Erica was asked to describe how she believed that counselor authority was restricted, she stated the following:

It's just accepted. Like I said, when I first was hired in '96, I thought, "What? We don't do that? You're kidding." Then I just had to accept it because nobody questions. It's just something, it's like the culture here, the counselors don't do that. That's what I hear from my colleagues, they don't trust our judgment, they don't trust us for this.

Erica's account identifies departmental culture as the way in which authority was restricted. The culture in the counseling department was one that did not question restrictions on their level of authority. Perhaps most evident from Erica's account is that since the date of her hire, she decided to abide by departmental norms, even though she did not initially agree with counselors having restrictions on their authority.

### **Unfavorable views of counselor work.**

Five counselors in the sample described several reasons why they believed access to resources was restricted. Whereas three counselors from DCC reported that their work was viewed unfavorably, two counselors at HCC reported similar beliefs. The overall belief was that counselor work was perceived in unfavorable ways by faculty and administrators. Counselors at DCC specifically believed that counselor work was undervalued, counselors as a group were segregated, and academic departments were isolated.

In the prior section, the notion of trust was raised. Erica stated that she believed that counselor authority was restricted because administrators and faculty did not trust counselors. Similarly at HCC, Dorothy discussed in more detail why she believed that counselor authority over course placement recommendations was restricted. In her account, Dorothy stated:

Yeah, well you know what, in the past way back when I first started counseling we did have that power to [move students to higher course placements]. And I used it on various occasions. But I think at some point, and it might have been when we changed our testing methods or whatever, the [assessment] department you know basically took that over. And I think the [assessment] department wants to make that determination. You know, we are counselors, so we are usually trying to lean towards the students, you know. I suspect [faculty] were getting too

many students who were not—well, who were in a class who really shouldn't have been in the class.

One of the most important pieces of information shared by Dorothy was that she was not completely sure when and why counselors were restricted access to authority. It is surprising that a more senior counselor who had several decades of experience working as a HCC counselor could only speculate as to why access to authority was restricted. It is quite possible that a reason why Dorothy did not know when and why access to authority was restricted was because counselors were not part of the decision-making process. In fact, Vincent at DCC shared that the work of counselors is largely shaped by “edicts” that originated from the administration. In the event that disagreement ensued with administrative “edicts”, counselors were provided insufficient amount of time to prepare for a dissenting opinion. One way to interpret Dorothy's experience is by arguing that she was asked to comply with an institutional decision that did not consider her and her colleagues' perspective.

Data from DCC counselor, Larry described the misperceptions administrators have about the work of counselors. In his account, Larry stated:

It's kind of frustrating because I think as professionals, counselors have a lot to offer and that we are not well regarded or respected. And it has to do with some of the institutional history. I mean, there's baggage you know, stuff that happens at different institutions that causes the administration to formulate a certain opinion of certain individuals and sometimes certain areas just because of maybe a few trouble makers, and as a result it impacts that whole area. And also, and again, it affects students negatively.

Larry's account contributes the idea that the work of counselors was not only important in its own right but also because it had a direct impact on students' college experiences. What is equally important from Larry's account was his belief that a small group of counselors potentially caused the administration to create misconceptions about the larger group of counselors. Larry's account is well aligned with Dorothy's because they believed that a subset of counselors directly and negatively impacted consequences for the larger group of counselors.

### **Student perceptions as verification of structure.**

In this section, I will describe two patterns revealed in the analysis of student accounts. Both patterns deal with the concept of resource dependency, particularly how students describe the utility and clarity of information provided by their counselors as well as beliefs about the depth of information received. The context of the data presented below is specific and deals with students who voiced concerns with their respective counselors about their course placement recommendations or a different academic issue.

The first pattern touches on the beliefs about the utility and clarity of information received from counselors. Results revealed a mix of beliefs. While seven students reported on the limited utility and lack of clarity of information provided by counselors, three students reported the opposite. The group of seven students was split between both research sites, where five were enrolled at HCC and two were enrolled at DCC. In the account below, HCC student, Jackie highlights the multiple attempts she made to obtain clarifying information about her mathematics course placement recommendations. Jackie stated:

If I have to take a semester for [basic arithmetic] but I know it was [arithmetic/pre algebra], why did it place me at [basic arithmetic] and not [arithmetic/pre algebra]? You know, so I was actually debating this. I had to talk to four

counselors because all of them were telling me, you have to take [basic arithmetic] first in order for you to get [arithmetic/pre algebra]. But then, I was just like, that doesn't make sense because I placed [at arithmetic/pre algebra].

Like, why can't I just take that class? I think they weren't really honest.

It is important to note that Jackie initially received dual math course placement recommendations, with arithmetic/pre algebra as her recommended starting point. Jackie's first concern was with a dual course placement recommendation, and in fact she reported confusion. However, Jackie's biggest concern was with four counselors who recommended that she enroll in arithmetic even though her placement test results suggested that she enroll in one course level above. Later in her interview, Jackie stated:

Because I went to one counselor and he was Hispanic. The rest were Black, Asian, or white. And I went to the Hispanic person, I told him, "You know what? I don't want to take [basic arithmetic] at all. I want to take [arithmetic and pre algebra]. And in order for me to take [basic arithmetic], they're telling me also that I have to take the [course in a program that focuses on Latino students], and I have to have a workshop for it like the—and it's just too much. Why do I have to do all of that just to take [basic arithmetic]? I want to take [arithmetic and pre algebra]." And then, he was telling me, "You know what? You're right. I don't know why they're telling you that." And I'm just like, finally, I have an answer because you know, it's just weird.

In Jackie's account above, she explained how one Latino counselor was able to clear her enrollment in the higher of two mathematics courses she was recommend. Throughout Jackie's experience in meeting with counselors, she was skeptical of the feedback counselors were

providing her. The meeting Jackie had with a Latino counselor marks the point when she felt relieved that she found a counselor who finally agreed with her.

A DCC student, Thomas described an experience that was somewhat different. Thomas received some information about how to change his English course placement; however, the depth of the information was limited. Thomas' primary goal was to move out of basic English composition (lowest course in the remedial sequence) because he believed that he belonged in college level English. Thomas retold his experience:

I was really obvious to them I was like, yeah, I think I should be in higher English. I kept—I even told the teacher—I told the teacher that, and I told that to the counselor twice. I was like, yeah. I was like oh, found out about it, and I really thought I was going to have this higher English.

Thomas continued by describing how the counselor replied:

I was just like, “Yeah, I thought I was going to score on this – or higher English. Or guess it’s part of this one.” You know, and he also told me about that, “You need to take another test so that you're placed higher.” That was all they told me.

Thomas' account reveals several issues. The first issue is that Thomas was told about taking another test in order to place higher. The second issue is that Thomas describes being clear with his counselor more than once that he did not belong in the English course he was recommended. Having earned high grades in English at a selective learning community within a top public high school in California, Thomas believed that he belonged in college level English. After having nearly failed the English course he was initially recommended to enroll, Thomas retested. However, he earned the same course recommendation. He enrolled in the course once again but did not pass.



The second pattern was about beliefs about the depth of information received in the context of the first meeting with a counselor. More specifically, five students at HCC and one student at DCC reported that they believed counselors withheld important information. Lupita, a student enrolled at HCC described her first meeting with a counselor. One reason why Lupita met with her counselor was to communicate that she was recommended to enroll in an English course lower than what she expected. Lupita recalled, “It was just like, okay well, I thought I could place [higher], but I didn’t.” In the excerpt below, Lupita described what she believed was important withheld information:

With her, it was good. She was helpful because I had no idea what I wanted, like the next steps or any of that, and she helped me out. It’s just that, when I spoke to her there she could have told me, “Oh, so you took placement test?” You know, she could have informed me, and I could have re-taken the test. And so, she didn’t do it either. It wasn’t until this semester when I spoke to another counselor because I told her I’m taking statistics at [university extension program]. She was like, “Oh, well, you know, you could have re-taken your placement test.” And I was like, “No, I didn’t know that.”

Lupita described her first counselor as “good” and “helpful.” However, Lupita shared that had she known about retesting sooner, she would have followed through with the process. Lupita’s initial course placement recommendations were remedial mathematics and English courses, where her lowest recommendations were in mathematics.

#### **Institutional data as verification of structure.**

Data collected from institutional documents verified many counselor accounts. Institutional data revealed attitudes about the general role of counselors. There is evidence that

validates counselors' experiences with restricted access to authority over course placement recommendations. Very little institutional data was found to support counselors' accounts of restrictions to conducting their own assessments of academic ability.

The bulk of the evidence supports the idea that the role of counselors within the context of course placement recommendations is narrowly defined. In fact, the role of counselors is to assist students with educational planning and enrollment. In a printed brochure about counseling services provided in a specialized program for disadvantaged students, the following description was included: "Counselors work with you to develop an Education Plan that maps out the courses you need in order to accomplish your educational goal." A similar statement was found in the HCC course catalog that included the following: "The academic counseling staff at Hope Community College assists and advises ALL students on developing their educational plans, and facilitates the successful transfer of students to four-year institutions." Based on evidence gathered from public documents it is not surprising that counselors would focus on educational planning and enrollment during the intake with students.

While there was no direct evidence of restrictions to the resource of academic ability assessment, there is some indirect evidence. First, the section above provides some evidence as to how both research sites view the role and purpose of counselor work. Furthermore, additional data sources revealed that the role of counselors was defined to assist students with the process of transfer to a four year college or university, assist with enrollment and referrals to other campus services, and assist with helping students manage academic and personal stressors. Within these various descriptions about the role of counselors, it is quite clear that academic ability assessment is not included nor falls within a larger category of counseling services.

The data revealed that the restriction of counselor authority in the context of course placement recommendations was deliberate. In fact, data extracted from email correspondence suggest that the diminished authority counselors reported earlier was intentional. An administrator at DCC admitted that “counselors are highly constrained in placing students.” The administrator went on to describe the structure of the role of counselors in course placement recommendations. At HCC, there is relatively larger latitude, but it was restricted to evaluations of academic ability only as they pertained to transferability of academic records. HCC counselors had the authority to “evaluate prior college-level work at other schools to determine how it transfers to HCC and four-year institutions.”

### **Perceptions of Course Placement Accuracy for Latinos**

As discussed in the previous sections, some counselors recognized that there were discrepancies in students’ course placement recommendations. The argument among some counselors was that some students were recommended to enroll in courses that were either above or below their ability. However, it is not known how counselors dealt with discrepancies among Latino students. In this section, I report the results about discrepancies in the context of ethnic identity.

The results will be presented across three themes. The first theme describes the devices used by counselors to screen for discrepancies. In particular, two specific methods were utilized in order for counselors to decide whether Latino students were recommended to the correct course and whether they were advised to enroll in a lower level course. The second theme describes theories of ability. Counselors reported on theories that explained why Latino students were overrepresented in remedial courses. The final theme is comprised of several patterns about counselor training.

### **Theories about ability as fixed.**

Nineteen counselors used unfounded theories to explain why Latino students belonged in remedial courses. Ten counselors from DCC and nine counselors from HCC reported on unfounded theories of ability. One explanation that counselors reported was that bilingualism negatively affected the cognition of Latino students. The nuances were in how counselors reported the negative impacts.

One counselor viewed learning English after Spanish as a way to negatively impact Latino students' learning of English. Ernesto at DCC reported that, "A lot of Latino students have, you know, their primary language was in many instances not English, so sometimes obviously having two languages and having to do back and forth from those two can be challenging." Ernesto further explained:

So I think when it comes to the English area sometimes just being able to translate from the Spanish language to English sometimes, you know you juxtapose different things and do things like that, so it makes it a bit challenging obviously just because of the different language and not having—I guess just the use of the language.

Ernesto's account of bilingualism illustrates how Latino students learn English by relying on Spanish translations, which to his understanding is a language misuse.

Helen echoed Ernesto by saying:

A lot of our Latinos, especially if they're using two languages and you know, when you translate from Spanish to English, the way the sequence of words are could be different, so I think there's a lot of processing going on, you know.

Helen went further to explain that the challenge for Latinos in their ability to learn English has a negative impact in learning other subjects. Helen reported that her many decades of working with Latino students has afforded her insight as to how remedial course placements in English often predict remedial course placements in mathematics. Helen reported:

But let's say English is their second language and they're going to the system and they're teaching math, and they don't understand. If they're having a hard time, then they don't necessarily get those [math] skills and then they place in the lower level.

Both Helen and Ernesto reported assumptions about all Latino students as being bilingual. In addition, it was believed that languages were learned in a specific sequence, where English is learned second. This perception then led them to explain how Spanish as a first language negatively impacted students' academic performance in English and mathematics.

A second explanation used for the overrepresentation of Latino students in remedial courses was Latino culture. One counselor provided important details in her account of the link between Latino culture and Latino student academic success. Broadly, Latino culture was discussed as having negative implications for Latino student success in community college. Anita at DCC reported in a very assertive manner the following:

I do believe that it's the culture and it's the language barrier for most students in that category, the placement of lower levels. And there are some parents that you know particularly fathers that believe that daughters [should] live at home, get married, you know, and college is not a thing for them. Because now they're not only dealing with trying their best in college, trying to get through the process, now they are dealing at home with a whole another series of issues, culturally

speaking. So they are in a whole different kind of—how do I say this, environment than say your Caucasian student.

Anita's account speaks to her perception of the disconnect between Latino culture and the college environment. Specifically, Anita viewed Latino students as having a particular set of cultural skills, but that those skills are not suitable for success in community college.

### **Screening for course placement discrepancies.**

There were variations in identifying mismatches between course placement recommendations and academic ability. Some counselors initiated a conversation with students about a potential mismatch, while at other times students initiated the discussion. The two most common screening devices were personal observations and verbal communication.

There was an initial step that eight counselors took before they decided what to do with a potential mismatch. Five of the counselors were from HCC and three were from DCC. The initial step acted as a screening device to determine whether a student would be eligible to move on to a subsequent step of switching to a lower or higher course. For instance, counselors' beliefs were used to determine whether students' course placement recommendations were accurate. HCC counselor, Clara discussed how her personal observations help her make sense of course placement recommendations. Clara reported:

I mean again, that's just kind of my analysis is the schools they're coming from aren't preparing them. The test here at HCC it's a little bit harder than other schools that I have worked at. That's just my observation and it's not based on anything factual. Based on the fact that sometimes I see my students testing higher is they take multiple tests at different schools.

In this particular case, Clara was confident that the HCC placement test produced accurate course placement recommendations because the test was rigorous. Clara arrived at conclusions about students' academic abilities based on feedback she collected from students' course placement recommendations. In fact, later in her interview, Clara stated that even students with excellent high school academic records were recommended to enroll in remedial courses, which was a reflection of the low quality high schools they attended and the level of difficulty of the placement test.

In other cases, counselors used a different screening device. Anita at DCC reported that she focused on what she called "communication skills" to determine potential discrepancies in students' academic ability and course placement recommendations. In fact, a total of eight counselors reported using verbal communication as screening devices. Two counselors were from HCC and six were from DCC. The following excerpt is from Anita:

So when I'm sitting here talking face to face to a student and they can't complete a sentence for me or they struggle with the words—and it's not a language barrier at this point, but it is a barrier in how they communicate—I can see what we need to work on. You know we will say, "Okay, no, no you got to do this English."

Anita further reported:

So you know and then there are some kids that come in and communicate very well, but they are placed in [remedial English] and [remedial reading], those are the kids that I will question. And I'll say, "Okay when you took the test, how did you feel?" And they will tell me, "Well I wasn't feeling well" or "I had a lot in my mind." And I say, "Well in six months, you can retake [the placement test]."

So [in] communicating with the student I find out a lot about where they should be.

Anita seemed very confident in her ability to identify discrepancies because of her “years of listening to students.”

It is unclear from Anita’s account what she meant by “communication skills.” Anita’s colleague, Helen offered some detail that might help explain which specific “communication skills” Anita might seek in her practice. Helen stated that some students with remedial course placements are “very expressive and can articulate what they’re thinking.” Students’ level of verbal articulation was the type of communication skill that some counselors used to gauge a potential mismatch in students’ English ability and course placement recommendations.

### **Falling short of adequate counselor training.**

The third theme deals with results about the type and level of counselor training in course placement. Counselors in the sample were asked to report on the training they received upon their hiring. Data from five counselors revealed that little to no training was provided. Specifically, the training was severely limited and did not cover issues about or related to discrepancies between academic ability and course placement recommendations.

Five counselors reported variant types of training that they received. Four counselors were from HCC, and one was from DCC. For example, informal presentations, learning under pressure, and shadow training were reported as some of the ways in which counselors were trained. To be more specific, Janey at HCC described her experience with training in the following way:

So, I mean the training usually happens on the job, honestly, a lot of it. Because some of the things you can’t really prepare for ahead of time. But in terms of



formal [training], like someone sitting down and saying, “Okay, these are the sequences for that, and these are the sequences for English, and this is how the assessment waivers work,” I don’t think there’s like a formal sit down just on that topic, you know.

Learning “on the job” is how Janey described her experience with training specific to the context of course placement. It is important to point out that Janey associated training with learning course sequences and course placement waivers, two very specific and non-technical aspects of course placement counseling.

Similar to types of training, five counselors reported variant levels of training they received. One of the counselors was from HCC, while the rest were from DCC. Some descriptions of the levels of training were very limited, no training at all, adequate training, and no structured training. Tracy a counselor at HCC stated that the level of training she received was very limited. In her own words she recounted:

Can I tell you that it was a very extensive information and training that we went through? I can’t say that’s the case. I think it was brief, it was really more kind of an informational type of presentation, you know. Why [assessment is] required, why it’s important, how it impacts students if they don’t take the assessment. But it wasn’t really a full training in assessment and the purpose of assessment.

Tracy reported that the type of training she received was informational and brief. What distinguishes Tracy’s account is that she was aware about the placement test and its importance for students because she facilitated presentations about the placement test in various high schools. When asked what type of training would be most appropriate for counselors, Tracy responded:

I think if I had to look back and try to identify what I could have benefited from, it probably would have been getting a probably fuller perspective on the impact that the assessment has on students, you know the college experience. We you know it's obvious, I mean there is that typical line, you know the better you perform, the lesser number of classes, the lesser expensive, and the lesser time you stay at the community college. But I think probably just having a clear a understanding of truly—maybe some case examples of how [the placement test] would impact students at different schools, so that, maybe I could have done things a little different maybe place the bigger emphasis on it.

Tracy's statement about a more "fuller perspective" about course placement recommendations is important because some counselors in held beliefs about the academic ability of students who attended predominantly non-white high schools. As an example, one counselor believed that he could predict course placement recommendations based on high school demographics. For example, Gregory at HCC admitted, "I have a case load of high schools that I visit and I can pinpoint which schools students were generally placed statistically slightly higher at college level than not." Gregory explained that there is a "preponderance of Latino and African American students placing at basic skills than other groups."

### **Student perceptions as verification of structure**

Student accounts revealed mixed results across two patterns related to ability. One pattern deals with the ways in which students described their academic ability. A total of 21 students reported on their confidence in ability, and the results were mixed. The second pattern deals with whether students reported that counselors took an interest to know about their ability. Accounts from thirteen students were analyzed, and similar to the first pattern, the results were mixed.

Twelve students reported confidence in their ability. Seven students were enrolled in DCC and five were enrolled in HCC. The following excerpt was drawn from an interview with Thomas, a student at DCC. Thomas described the mismatch between his ability in English and his actual course placement recommendation in English. Thomas stated:

See, I had not honors, those are high classes. I was good in English. And I scored here, and I ended up doing [college English skills]. I like writing a lot, especially essays. And when I—when I got scores to [college English skills]. Scoring twice, too. And I took the test as far as I would take it, so I don't know what happened there. I don't know how to say it. I was in [magnet public high school], they have [learning] academies, and the piece that was mostly like—more academics, so it was more of writing.

Thomas described himself as a student who enjoyed writing “a lot” especially essays. Earlier in his interview, Thomas mentioned that he maintained A and B grades in English since his time in middle school. Feedback from past grades is what led Thomas to be confused as to why he was recommended to enroll in the lowest possible English courses within the remedial sequence. Equally important is that Thomas felt that having participated in a selective learning academy within an excellent high school prepared him to be in college level English at DCC.

Eight students reported low confidence in their academic ability. Two students were enrolled at HCC and the rest were enrolled at DCC. Darla, a student at DCC described her lack of confidence in English because English was not her first language. Darla said:

English is just--it's been my toughest subject, you know. Just--being the ESL student, it's just--I think English has been like my toughest subject, and it's something, like I take it as a challenge every day. But I mean, I feel scared

because I'm really not confident with my writing because ESL and what not. But, I mean I was just like, I'm doing my best, I'm trying to make the best out of this.

Darla was not confident in her English ability because of her learning English after Spanish. Upon completing the placement test, Darla was recommended to enroll in fundamentals of writing course. The course was one level below college level composition. Although Darla was not confident in her English ability, she was a good high school student. Darla completed advanced placement English in twelfth grade and earned an overall grade point average of 3.5. In fact, Darla was admitted to four-year universities but enrolled at DCC instead because of her inability to receive financial aid. Darla was an undocumented student from Guatemala.

The second pattern deals with the extent to which counselors expressed genuine interest to know students' ability. Seven students reported that their counselors did indeed express a genuine interest in their ability. Two students were from HCC and five were enrolled at DCC. The following is an excerpt from Darla's interview, where she described a genuine interest that her counselor took in her academic progress and success. Darla stated:

I didn't want to go to school anymore, and he's like, "No." He was like, "I know you can do it. You're a young Latina, like I know you can do this, you can go for—you can go for further than that." And I was like, you know what? I can. I've taken up so many challenges in life. So, he kind of encouraged me to do it. But I'm still doubting myself for doing it. So I mean he was really helpful, he really encouraged me to continue, and not be like every other Latino that just drops out of school and you know, just goes find a job.

As reported above, Darla was an undocumented student who had been admitted to four-year universities. In her account above, Darla retells her experience with a counselor who encouraged

her to not withdraw from DCC and to acknowledge her potential. The counselor's feedback to Darla was significant on two fronts. First is that the counselor acknowledged what it meant to be Latina in the community college context, which was something that Darla understood. Second, the counselor's encouragement was given during a point when Darla's motivation was waning.

Six other students reported an experience of meeting with counselors who did not express an interest in learning more about their ability. Four students were from HCC and two students were enrolled at DCC. Steven, a student at HCC described a pattern among the first two counselor meetings he had. Steven specifically said:

My first counselor, even my second counselor that I spoke to should have asked me how I felt about my placement test to see, like, "Do you feel you can do better?" or, "Do you feel like you scored to the best of your ability," like if you want to go down a class or something. I almost want to say they should be there while you're taking the test. Like, for me I knew the mistakes I was making, but I couldn't go on and fix them. So, if a counselor saw that they would know all the mistakes that he made, he corrected himself already so he could have been at a higher placement than what he scored.

Steven clearly stated that neither of the counselors he met with initially asked how he felt about his course placement recommendations. Steven would have liked for counselors to take a genuine interest in asking about how he viewed his academic ability, and whether he viewed his course placement recommendations as appropriate. Steven fell in the category of students who were not asked to share additional evidence of ability, including students' own views of their ability.

Student self reports revealed that 13 (46.4 percent) successfully completed advanced placement coursework. Of the 13 students, one student reported that her counselor asked if she had completed advanced placement coursework. Additionally, 11 students (39.3 percent) reported that they were asked to name the high school that they attended, and that number was almost evenly split between HCC and DCC.

Johnny, a DCC student shared how his counselor described his ability based on limited information. During his first meeting with a counselor, Johnny mentioned that the counselor requested information about the high school he attended and whether he was comfortable with his course placement recommendations. Based on that information, Johnny retells how the counselor described him:

A lot of what he said I can tell was dictated by the way I spoke to him because he made a comment that, “Oh, I can tell,“ you know, ”you’re a bright kid. You just need to be kind of pointed in the right direction as far what to do in the community college because it is a little confusing and when you know, there are so many different routes to take.” And he said, “You are smart to take the core classes and try to get those out of the way first, and it’s what you’re doing now, it’s good, but we can do these things better in future.”

According to Johnny, it was in the way that he spoke that exuded his being a “bright kid” and “smart.” It might have been Johnny’s eloquence that was used as a measure of his intelligence, similar to how Anita and Helen used “communication skills” as a screening device. Another way of viewing Johnny’s experience is that his counselor used high school attended as a proxy for ability, similar to Gregory. Johnny attended the same high school as Thomas. Some information about the high school is that it is a magnet school divided into various learning academies and it

has a good track record of alumni who gain admission at the more selective universities in California. A third way of viewing Johnny's experience is that the counselor drew upon both verbal communication and high school attended to make sense of his ability.

### **Institutional data as verification of structure.**

Data gathered from the institution only weakly supports the concept of ability in the context of ethnicity. Data collected from an HCC administrator admitted that race and ethnicity had no bearing in how course placement recommendations were generated. Specifically, George stated, "We cannot say that because you are Latino you're going to place into this course differently than you are African American." In fact, George later reported that what HCC was "going after is what you as an individual has done to prepare, to come up to the college, or what you believe you're ready for in your first semester."

Data from nonparticipant field observations counter George's statement. During the spring of 2014, I explored the transfer center at HCC. The transfer center is located on southwest part of the campus, on the outskirts. The transfer center was a small trailer, and it contained several offices for counselors and administrative staff. The first space that appeared as I walked in was a very small waiting area with some chairs and wooden round table. On the table were several copies of the school newspaper. I sat next to a student who seemed to be waiting for his counselor appointment. I could clearly hear a counselor named Henry as he met with his students. During the approximate 45 minutes that I sat in the waiting area I listened to advice that Henry gave two different students. Both students seemed to be first time college students and their goal was to transfer. Derrick, an Asian student met with Henry to discuss how to transfer to UC Berkeley as a computer science major. Henry explained to Derrick that one piece of advice that would potentially increase his chances of transferring to UC Berkeley was to retake the

placement test at a nearby community college, earn higher course placement recommendations, and transfer the results back to HCC. Derrick seemed pleased with the advice.

Soon after, Henry met with a different student. Rose was a Latina who was seeking advice with transferring to CSU Long Beach as a major in human development. Henry stated to Rose that based on her course placement recommendations he recommended that she complete her remedial and college level courses as soon as possible, and to consider enrolling during winter and summer sessions. Rose did not ask any further questions. My observation seems to suggest that both students were seeking advice about the length of time it would take to transfer to a four-year university. It is unclear from my observations the number of semesters each student completed prior to their meeting with Henry. Perhaps more important, it is unclear whether Henry advised Derrick but not Rose to retest at a nearby community college because he is Asian or male. However, my observation seems to offer somewhat of a counterpoint to George's claim that by not considering students' ethnic and racial background is better and not worse for students.

Similarly at DCC, an administrator reported a valuing of colorblindness. While data reflect that variant counseling practices occurred, it was denied that variant counseling practices were based on race and ethnicity. Ron at DCC stated the following:

They certainly have wide latitude there and could advise students to take courses below their placement (both normal and alternative), and there definitely does seem to be some evidence of that. However, from what we can see, it looks pretty unrelated to ethnicity –just a heads up on that point.



Ron's statement made clear that students' race and ethnicity was unrelated to counselors' advice about enrolling in lower level courses. Further still, Ron reinforced the idea that students' race and ethnicity has no bearing on their experiences by stating the following:

If Latino students indicate that they're not being made aware of their options and are being advised to take lower courses, that could be because they're Latino or it could be because our counselors have that bias for ALL students here. Our counselors appear pretty consistent in their claims about students and when we've looked for ethnicity differences where placements diverge from assignment, we generally don't see any evidence.

However, Ron's account seems to be poorly aligned with what counselors said they did to identify discrepancies in students' course placement recommendations. Ron's account is also not aligned with the unfounded theories counselors used to describe Latino students' academic ability.

### **Summary of Results**

In this chapter, I presented the results in the form of three major themes. The first theme illustrated the ways that counselors thought about the accuracy of course placement recommendations. The results showed that while counselors held mixed views about retesting and the value of the placement test, more than half of the counselors in the sample reported favorable views about using initial course recommendations as starting points for students. Results from student views of their initial course recommendations revealed a counterpoint to counselors. Although students in the sample held mixed beliefs about their initial course recommendations, more than half reported unfavorable views about their initial course recommendations.

The second theme described the resource structure in course placement counseling. Ability assessment and restricted access to authority over course placement recommendations were two complex resources that were viewed by counselors as restricted access. In addition, counselors reported that their work was undervalued by the administration. Student data revealed two patterns that were related to counselors' inability to access complex resources. One pattern was about the level of utility and clarity of information received during the initial meeting with a counselor. While students reported mixed beliefs, more than half of the sample stated that the information was limited in utility and lacked clarity. The second pattern revealed was that students believed that information related to course placements was withheld during their initial meeting with a counselor.

The third theme described the link between theories of ability, ethnicity, and counseling. Counselors in this sample utilized unfounded theories of ability to explain the overrepresentation of Latino students in remedial courses. A second pattern was that personal observations and verbal communication were screening devices for potential discrepancies. In terms of training, some counselors reported little to no training in course placement and related aspects of their work. Student data revealed two patterns. Of the students who reported on levels of confidence in their ability, over half reported that they were either confident or very confident in their ability. A second pattern was the extent to which counselors took an interest in getting to understand students' ability. Students reported mixed results.

## **Chapter Five: Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion**

A relationship was found between course placement counseling and access to courses for Latino students. Course placement counseling was a specific type of academic counseling in which placement test results guided academic planning for students. Perceptions of course placement counseling shaped how counselors and Latino students viewed placement test results and subsequent course enrollment.

The relationship between course placement counseling and access to courses for Latino students can be described in three parts. First, counselors shared strikingly similar beliefs about course placement accuracy, where they were confident that the placement test generated accurate results for the majority of community college students. The lack of diversity in counselor perceptions suggested ideological structure and raised curiosity about how it functioned. Second, counselors believed that the course placement process was inevitably flawed and that it placed some students in the wrong courses. However, restricted access to necessary complex resources prohibited counselors from conducting cross checks of students' course placements. Finally, while counselors believed that some students would be inevitably placed in the wrong courses, counselors viewed Latino students as exceptions. Latino students' remedial course placements were viewed as accurate. Counselors used verbal communication and theories of ability as fixed as screening devices to reinforce the accuracy of Latino students' remedial placements.

Results from this dissertation are aligned with previous research about the role of community colleges in the reproduction of inequality. In his study of one community college in California, Clark (1960) observed what he called the "cooling out" function, where community colleges via counselors steered students toward vocations and away from their goal of transferring to a four-year university. While Clark did not argue that community colleges

reproduce social inequality, counselors were described as unequivocally controlling the flow of students. In later studies, researchers, drawing from Marxist theories, argued that community colleges funneled students into terminal vocational programs because it was a method of protecting the demographics of students enrolled in universities (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dougherty, 1994). In more recent scholarship, control of the student flow appeared as student self-selection. As part of an institutional goal to withhold from students information about their remedial course placements, some students opted to withdraw from community college once they learned that they were in remedial courses and had been deceived by counselors (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2002).

### **Ideological Structure in Course Placement Counseling**

Placement test results went beyond purported psychometric purposes. Course placements and the placement test specifically created *ability cues*. Ability cues provided quick and easily retrievable information about students' academic ability, and were shaped by beliefs about the validity, accuracy, and utility of placement test results. Ability cues had a social utility insofar as they structured the interactions between counselors and students in course placement counseling, and students' experiences were, then a function of counselors' beliefs about placement testing. Given their functionality, ability cues were useful for counselors in the initial student intake. The initial intake was typically students' first meeting with a counselor, where students responded to a series of questions that were used to develop short term and longer term academic plans.

On the one hand, ability cues were efficient tools that provided counselors with relief from the psychological demands of their work. One psychological benefit was that ability cues helped inform how counselors should expedite students through the matriculation process. But on the other hand, effectiveness was traded for efficiency. To be sure, when the reliability,

utility, and validity of the placement test went unquestioned, confidence in the utility of ability cues was bred. As a result, confidence in ability cues heightened their use in course placement counseling.

Ability cues were a form of ideological constraint. The power structure institutionalized beliefs about the accuracy and utility of the placement test and its results. The power structure achieved that end by shaping beliefs through communication and reinforcement. Reinforced beliefs eventually became institutionalized, and such institutionalized beliefs acted as a preemptive strategy on the part of the power structure in order to minimize any potential resistance from counselors. Institutionalization of beliefs also communicated that control over course access did not lie within the jurisdiction of counselors, and it left open the possibility that executive decision-makers utilized course placement counseling to meet their self-interests. Theoretically, it also signified that ability cues were tools hardly meant to benefit students.

Although there was acknowledgement among counselors that some course placements were inaccurate, most counselors believed that a majority of initial and subsequent course placements were accurate. In fact, there was a relationship between counselor beliefs about the placement test and beliefs about course placement recommendations. If counselors believed that the placement test was a reliable tool, they were less likely to believe that discrepancies appeared in students' course placements and academic ability.

For most counselors, students' initial assessment results were viewed as good starting points—that is, a set of mostly reliable course placements that counselors trusted. Beliefs about reliability are institutionalized by means of public and internal communication. Once institutionalized, beliefs about assessment reliability shaped interactions between counselors and students. When students met with a counselor after completing the assessment process, they were

recommended to enroll in courses drawn from their initial course placement recommendations because it was believed that confidence in the assessment process should be honored. As such, virtually no input was solicited from students, which resulted in less than satisfactory and negative experiences for many students.

Similar to initial course placements, retaking the placement test was a mechanism exploited by the power structure. Retesting was a formalized way to reinforce for counselors that initial course placement recommendations were indeed accurate and reliable, and thus should be used with confidence. Observations drawn from students' test taking and course performance was feedback used to conclude that retesting was indeed a verification device. Initial course placements were viewed as accurate among counselors because students who retested did not move from lower to higher placements; students typically received the same course placements. It was surprising to find that while retesting was publicly communicated as a second opportunity to demonstrate ability, retesting served a different function.

Indeed, students were not likely to benefit from retesting for at least two reasons. First, students were not at more of an advantage the second time they underwent assessment, as familiarization with the placement test and procedure was insufficient to increase their overall gains. Past research has shown that even when students prepare for subsequent retakes of standardized placement tests, little, if any, gains will be achieved, especially among Latino students (McNeil & Valenzuela, 2001). Second, even when students earned a higher raw test score the second time, it did not necessarily mean that those scores met the cutoffs for higher subsequent course placements. As an example, Mike who was enrolled at HCC earned a higher score when he retook the English portion of the placement test, but the score did not meet the cutoff for a higher course placement.

When juxtaposed, views about retesting differed between students and counselors. While counselors viewed retesting as wasted time for students, students believed retesting was indeed a second chance to demonstrate their ability. This evidence suggests that course placement counseling and larger assessment apparatuses were built to reach goals not be necessarily aligned with the needs of students. In practice, reliance on initial course placement recommendations meets efficiency goals because counselors often face time constraints during meetings with students (Venezia, Bracco & Nodine, 2010; Grubb, 2001). However, reliance on initial course placement recommendations might be that community colleges wanted to control outcomes of assessment in order to reach unnamed goals. Disagreement between counselors and students about retesting was perhaps reflective of community colleges working to attain unnamed institutional goals while simultaneously preserving the public image of community colleges as second chance institutions.

Relatively recent studies have brought into question the psychometric utility of placement tests. Scott-Clayton and her colleagues (2012) argued that reliance on placement tests alone fail to effectively predict which students require remediation and which students do not. Researchers suggest that placement tests should not be the sole piece of evidence because of their limited ability to accurately recommend students to the right courses. Instead, it is argued that community colleges should opt for using students' high school grades in conjunction with placement test results (Belfield & Crosta, 2012; Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011).

However, researchers have yet to report on error rates and the effects of proposed solutions in states, such as California where students of color are the largest group enrolled in community colleges. Error rates are defined as proportions of students who are not placed in the correct courses (Scott-Clayton, 2012). An unsettling aspect of past research is that disaggregated

data and how the solution of using high school grades may or may not eliminate disproportionate impact has not been reported. According to the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO), disproportionate impact is the overrepresentation of any student group in a type of course or service that is not justified by the predictive validity and reliability of the placement test (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2014). For those reasons then, future studies should first examine how error rates vary between student groups and then encourage community colleges to develop context-specific solutions.

Placement testing has been an important aspect of community colleges for decades. Placement tests gained prominence in community college assessment practices during the latter part of the 1970s, becoming key tools in assessment (Woods, 1985). Yet students of later generations have reported little and inaccurate knowledge about the purpose of the placement test and its high stakes nature (Venezia, Bracco & Nodine, 2010). If the placement test is used to determine students' academic trajectories, then the reported confusion on the part of students raises important questions about the purpose of the placement test. Previous studies are based on the assumption that access to courses (and the broader assessment apparatus) can be fixed without dealing with the politics and racism that likely contributed to the formation of the problem. In fact, prior research has not addressed the importance of accountability for disproportionate impact of placement testing. Placement testing procedures should be publicly tracked and monitored, and any disproportionate impact and its resolution should be transparent and publicly available. Future research should examine how disproportionate impact is discussed and reported by community colleges, especially community colleges with large enrollments of students of color. Results from such research should be used to explore how course placement counseling can help reduce disproportionate impact.



Adequate levels and types of training can improve counselor knowledge of placement testing and course placement. A primary reason why counselors should have knowledge about placement tests is because they do not produce information that is of any value to improve teaching and learning (Grubb, 2013). In his study of California Community Colleges (CCC), Grubb (2013) found that some counselors understood the limitations of the placement test. In fact, the placement test was specifically viewed as a tool that does not reveal information about students' weaknesses or strengths in both mathematics and English. In this dissertation, none of the counselors in the sample discussed the placement test as severely limited in utility, and none touched upon the difference between a placement test and diagnostic test. The divergent findings might be due to differences in training received from community colleges and the graduate program attended. Future research should explore various forms of counselor training. First, researchers should explore the types of theoretical and practical training that counselors receive in graduate programs, and the extent to which graduate programs are effective. Second, researchers should examine whether additional counselor training is conducted within community colleges, and how such training is conducted.

The common placement mandate approved by the California legislature in 2012 is an opportunity to change beliefs about placement tests and modify retesting policies. While the state mandate makes clear that the placement test will continue as a prominent tool, it is assumed that by eliminating variation in placement test use will solve assessment and course placement problems or perhaps makes them easier to manage. But a change in the placement test should be accompanied with an ongoing oversight of how such change is changing perceptions, if at all. Counselors and students alike should be experiencing shifts in beliefs about the utility and limitations of the placement test, and it should be the responsibility of the CCCCO to overlook

the process. The CCCCO should also publicly track and report which and how multiple measures are used in assessment, retesting practices and policies, and the disproportionate impacts of placement testing.

### **Resource Structure in Course Placement Counseling**

Counselors viewed placement testing as inevitably flawed. Inaccurate course placements, or discrepancies, resulted in course placements that were either above or below students' ability. Discrepancies appeared in mathematics, English, or both. Discrepancies were identified in two ways. One way was that students, via their self-assessed ability, communicated placement errors to a counselor. The second way was that counselors identified discrepancies by using their professional judgment.

However, counselors were unable to conduct any cross checks on students' course placements because they were prohibited access to the necessary *complex resources*. Counselors identified ability assessment and authority over course placements as two restricted complex resources. Complex resources can be defined as important resources that cannot be bought, and require institutional effort to construct and allocate (Grubb, 2013).

Restriction to complex resources is a part of the resource dependence structure. Resource dependence limited the type of resources available for making corrections to students' course placements. One way to interpret resource dependence is to argue that the power structure used resource dependence as a preemptive strategy, and course placement counseling practice was one method for achieving desired student experiences.

A main reason for the power structure to create such resource dependence was preventive, as counselors with access to complex resources could potentially alter student experiences. By creating resource dependence, the power structure controlled the counselor role

in course placement counseling. The role of counselors was not merely defined by resource dependence; the role was structured by boundaries of two types.

First, resource dependence created *social boundaries*. Social boundaries defined how counselors would interact with students in the context of resource provision. Departmental norms marked the limitations and bounds of resources that counselors could provide to students. Norms created scripts that spelled out for counselors what to do in two different scenarios. The first scenario involved a student that was unsatisfied with her or his course placements. In that case, and per institutional policy, counselors could inform and encourage an unsatisfied student to retake the placement test. The second scenario involved a student who was satisfied with her or his course placements. In that scenario, counselors created an academic plan based on students' placement test results. In both cases, counselors did not have access to the complex resources required to cross check and successfully change students' initial course placements.

Social boundaries had important negative effects on counselors and students. For counselors, restricted authority to complex resources was viewed as disservice to students. Some counselors understood that complex resources were required in order to improve their effectiveness. In fact, simple resources, such as the shortage number of counselors and time constraints were not identified as barriers in their practice. Past research has found that limited counseling staff and time constraints were the two largest threats to improving the overall effectiveness of counseling practices (Venezia, Bracco & Nodine, 2010). It is not entirely clear why counselors did not identify counselor shortage and time constraints as significant barriers. One explanation is that while the number of counselors and time are important resources to achieve other goals, they have virtually no bearing on access to courses. Many students left their counseling sessions with negative attitudes about their counselors. Negative attitudes were

formed because students received information and resources that were limited in utility and clarity. Students received information that was either limited in depth or unclear, or both.

In sum, social boundaries created negative attitudes about administrators among counselors, while for students social boundaries created negative attitudes about counselors. Students' negative attitudes reflected the resource dependence structure and not the limited potential for counselors to be effective. Indeed, effective counseling practices are dependent on both simple and complex resources. For example, time and size of staff are simple resources, and alone fall short of improving counseling practices (Grubb, 2009; Grubb, 2013). In order to improve counseling practices, Grubb (2013) argued for the creation and allocation of complex resources. Complex resources are those that are difficult to comprehend and to change, and involve vision, collaboration, and trust between faculty, staff, administrators, and students (Grubb, 2013).

Second, resource dependence marked *political boundaries*. The power structure used political boundaries to mark how control over complex resources should be distributed, and in particular who should not have access to such resources. The distribution of control over complex resources is crucial because it led to questions about institutional goals and motives. In this study, the control of complex resources lied outside each respective counseling department. If counselors did not pose a real threat to larger institutional goals, why were counselors restricted access to authority in ability assessment and course placements? I argue that restriction of complex resources suggests that there boundaries to the role of course placement counseling, and that there are larger institutional goals that should not be undermined by counselors, should they be granted access to complex resources.

Political boundaries appeared in two ways. The first is that assessment processes and policies did not build a counselor role into the evaluation of ability portions of the course placement process. As an example, counselors at DCC were relegated to the tail end of the course placement process. At the tail end of the process, counselors merely used results from placement testing to assist students in course enrollment. Second, even when community college policies and processes technically included counselors in the academic assessment process, departmental norms created an uneven distribution of control. For instance, HCC counselors could conduct their own cross checks of students' course placements and honor higher placements by using a placement waiver. However, departmental norms strongly discouraged the use of the placement waiver, and eventually counselors believed that restriction on placement waiver use was because they did not create and contribute to the mathematics and English curriculum.

Restricted access to complex resources created negative consequences for counselors. Counselors viewed restricted access as a way to discredit their professional judgment and competence. However, counselors did not believe they lacked the professional judgment required to evaluate academic ability and use evidence to move students from lower to higher course placements. One way to legitimate the unequal distribution of resources was to make counselors believe that there was a script for counselors. Not following the script would create lasting and negative consequences for the group as a whole, regardless if only a few made a mistake. As an example, counselors at DCC pointed to their respective administrators as vanguards of complex resources.

While community college leaders are integral to institutional decision-making, the structure of such decision-making is unclear. As such, future research should examine the

process by which community college administrators define challenges and then build institutional policies and initiatives to address those challenges. The focus of the research should be on who participates in the decision-making process, how and which resources are allocated, and the institutional responses to such decisions. Course placement and assessment should be contexts of particular interest.

Resistance to power is also a characteristic of domination. Moments of resistance demonstrated how a few counselors used methods not necessarily in line with institutional norms in order to reach effectiveness in their course placement counseling practice. To be sure, several counselors knowingly resisted norms in order to assess and meet their students' needs. Such resistance demonstrated the purpose for the power structure to legitimate resource dependence and the domination of counselors.

Future research should examine the power structure in ways that this dissertation was unable. One area that merits further investigation is resistance among counselors and students of color in order to provide counterexamples of domination. Such research would uncover the confluence of antecedents and individual characteristics that motivate resistance. However, evidence of the power structure must go beyond resistance. Gaventa (1980) urges for studies to include observations and analyses of behaviors during moments of a weakened power structure and moments during interventions of third parties.

### **Ethnicity and its Function in Course Placement Counseling**

While counselors believed that flaws in students' course placements were inevitable, Latino students were an exception. For Latino students, remedial course placements were viewed as accurate. Counselors used verbal communication in conjunction with theories of ability as fixed to legitimate Latino students' remedial placements.

Counselors had some degrees of authority to the extent that they could decide whether to acknowledge discrepancies in Latino students' course placements. Student identified discrepancies were at times met by resistance from counselors because they disagreed with students who believed they belonged in a higher level course. Given their authority, counselors reinforced course placements whether or not Latino students agreed with such feedback. Such reinforcement of course placements, resulted in a lesson that taught Latino students what counselors thought about them and their ability.

In the context of Latino students, course placement accuracy was viewed in a way that was potentially specific and unique to them. The extent to which course placements were deemed accurate was in part contingent upon counselors' assumptions and perceptions about Latinos. In fact, students' social background was coded and served a function. Cues were used to justify course placements or in some cases identify discrepancies. Cues that were tied to unchangeable and immutable background characteristics of Latino students were building blocks of a social identity contingency.

Course placement counseling acted as a gatekeeping mechanism that potentially threatened the academic self-evaluation and persistence of Latino students in community colleges. Even prior to attending their first class, Latino students received two rounds of feedback about their academic ability. Two different departments within each respective community college provided feedback separately and sequentially. The first round of feedback was given in the form of placement test results after students visited the assessment center. Placement test results became the first moment where Latino students understood how the community college judged their academic ability, and whether Latino students agreed.

The second round of feedback was given during the first meeting with a counselor. During that initial visit, counselors justified, reinforced, and legitimated course placements. Even when Latino students disagreed with feedback from counselors, they were consigned to their initial course placements, which potentially came at the cost of their academic self-evaluation. The “objective” feedback that Latino students received from their counselors can be viewed as social identity cues. Cues, or feedback, found in social settings have the power to negatively impact Latino students’ self-evaluations, and as a result, consign them to weak identification with academics and higher education altogether (Steele, 2010; Steele, 2009).

Course placement counseling mimicked a social identity contingency in two ways. The first was *ethnicity cues*. Ethnicity cues formed part of counselors’ points of reference and were informed by assumptions and beliefs about Latino students. Similar to ability cues, ethnicity cues were functional because they provided easily retrievable information about Latino students’ academic ability. In course placement counseling, there were two important perceptions about Latino students. The first was when counselors viewed academic ability as both an unchangeable trait and a function of Latino culture, counselors were more likely to view Latino students’ initial course placements as accurate. Low initial course placements (i.e., remedial course placements) were viewed as especially accurate because they matched counselors’ beliefs about Latinos as low ability. In fact remedial course placements were justified because counselors believed that Latino culture predisposed Latino students to long term low academic achievement. In addition, assumptions about bilingualism also legitimated remedial course placements. The predominant perception was that Latino students were bilingual and that bilingualism was a disadvantage for learning.



Ethnicity cues extend the social identity contingencies perspective in two ways. The first is that cues did not appear incidental as previous research has argued (Steele, 2010). Quite the contrary, cues served a function and they helped counselors make sense of Latino students' ability. It is plausible that ethnicity cues were purposefully created and then used to control the flow of Latino students. Second, in the course placement counseling context, eliminating social identity contingencies would entail changing the messaging that counselors send students. Steele (2010) argues that changing a setting so that it limits or eliminates social identity threats is one solution. However, I argue the solution should be broadened to include interpersonal verbal communication. Lowering the negative effect of social identity contingencies will require changing counselors' attitudes and beliefs about Latino students, not merely changing the aesthetics of counselor offices.

Second, counselors viewed verbal communication as a way to diagnose academic ability. The assumption was that verbal articulation signaled higher academic ability. Verbal articulation served as a socioeconomic cue because it diagnosed a background characteristic of Latino students. Latino students who were deemed as verbally articulate were not first generation college students, and had parents and or older siblings who attended college. Latino students whose parents attended college tend to come from middle class families and tend to score higher on standardized tests than their lower income peers (Gándara, 2005). The problem with verbal screening is that it identifies within group differences that are based on social background and not ability. As such, Latino students who by virtue of being verbally articulate tended to be viewed as higher ability than their less articulate peers. DCC students, Thomas and Johnny are good examples. Both were alumni of a highly selective learning community within a high school renowned for its excellence. Yet, once they enrolled at the community college Johnny's

counselor described him as “bright” whereas, Thomas’ counselor ignored his concern with a low English placement.

In an effort to improve experiences for Latino students, community colleges should commit to and support professional development for counselors. Beliefs about Latino ethnicity informed how counselors should deal with Latino students, but those beliefs were largely based on stereotypes and theories of ability as fixed. One way to improve practice is to create a ethnicity-conscious practice, where counselors draw from students’ race and ethnicity to make sense of who they are as students. People of color detect racial and ethnic intolerance even when contexts appear as colorblind—an ideology that ironically asserts that race and ethnicity are irrelevant (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008).

Beyond creating ethnicity conscious practices, community colleges should change counselor beliefs about intelligence. Social psychologists have found that theories of fixed ability negatively impact schooling experiences for students of color, but viewing intelligence as incremental has been associated with improved outcomes for students of color (Aronson, Fried & Good, 2002; Blackwell, Trzesniewski & Dweck, 2007). While counselors might not necessarily view themselves as educators, they act as teachers of ability. Community college should commit to and support the view of intelligence as an incremental trait, and counselors should form part of that institutional endeavor. Equally as important, researchers should examine how community colleges can most effectively shift and teach incremental views of ability.

The second way that course placement counseling mimicked a social identity contingency was that ethnicity cues worked in conjunction with ability cues. Specifically, ethnicity cues signaled to counselors which students were not placed in the wrong courses. If using ability cues assured counselors of correct course placements, then ethnicity cues

functioned similarly to give counselors confidence that course placements, especially remedial placements, were accurate for Latino students. As a result, remedial placements were justified, reinforced, and legitimated regardless of students' actual ability.

## **Conclusion**

Course placement counseling was a social and political context that was associated with access to courses for Latino students. The structure of course placement counseling should be a concern because it shapes Latino students' experiences and potentially alters in significant ways their academic trajectories. Such problem requires a serious commitment from economically, socially, and morally responsible individuals.

On the economic front, community colleges can be leveraged to maintain California's economy viable and vibrant. But in order to do so, local and state leaders need to commit to their economic responsibility by improving access to higher education. One part of the responsibility is to understand the importance of course placement counseling. Counselors should be granted access to complex resources in order to cross check students' course placements and serve as monitors of disproportionate impact. Since it became a state mandate, course placement counseling for community college students in California are ever more important. In 2012, the California legislature passed Senate Bill 1456, colloquially known as the Student Success Act (SSA). Students whose goal is to complete an associate's degree, certificate, and or transfer to a university are required to complete an education plan. The education plan requires students to meet with counselors, and part of the educational planning will entail using the placement test results as guides.

Adequate funding for counseling is undeniably also part of leaders' economic responsibility. Recent commentary by state leaders has lamented the significant dwindling of

fiscal resources for matriculation services of which course placement counseling is part. A historic slash in the budget has climbed to its original level within a span of less than five years, and is a testament to the volatile matriculation services budget. Of particular interest is whether the current funding level is adequate for the implementation of mandatory academic counseling and the increased number of students who will require such service. Another important issue that warrants attention is the ways in which community colleges utilize funds, and how those funds could potentially be used to build the complex resources needed by counselors.

However, economic solutions on their own will not improve access to higher education for students of color. The low achievement among Latinos enrolled in community colleges is rarely discussed in the context of moral and social responsibility. In California public higher education, Latinos are overrepresented in community colleges. Latino students are also least likely to reach their academic goals compared to their non-Latino peers, in large part because they are overrepresented in remedial courses that decrease their odds of persistence. The future of Latino students and their families rests on the moral and social responsibility of state and local leaders who understand that our country's sordid legacy of racism in education remains a barrier.

Responding to the needs of Latino students is an imperative. One such response is to build and deliver ethnicity conscious course placement counseling services. The SSA provides an important opportunity. Professional development activities should go beyond instructors and include counselors because counselor ideology is functional and plays a role in their work.

Researchers should also share the moral and social responsibility. Researchers should commit to thinking differently about the social function of community colleges. A good starting point is asking how, not if, race shapes the social function of community colleges. Course placement counseling is ethnicity conscious except that it appears as the opposite. By not

examining race and ethnicity, researchers deflect and create a narrative of Latino students as a monolithic group with hardly any within group diversity. Such a narrative limits opportunities for carefully examining how community college practices and educational policies recreate the status quo.

Earlier this year, President Obama and his administration released a proposal to make community college tuition free for two years. Lauds aside, the proposal has real potential to perpetuate the traditional view of community colleges as bastions of access and equal opportunity. For Latinos and other students of color, community colleges fall short of their promise as equal opportunity institutions. Community colleges are not exempt from reproducing similar racial inequalities observed in public K-12 education. Why would community colleges be the exception? For the sake of what is right and what is justice, our efforts should be to challenge traditional beliefs about the social role of community colleges.

## Appendix A

### COUNSELOR INTERVIEW GUIDE

**ID:**

Thank you for your willingness to be a part of my study. The questions I have for you today are about the course placement process. Please remember that there are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions I will ask you. Do you have any questions before we begin?

**DATE:**

**TIME START:**

**TIME END:**

#### BACKGROUND

1. What motivated you to work in a community college? (Grand tour question)
2. How long have you been working at this college?
3. How long have you been in your current position?
4. Can you describe the type of training you received with respect to course placement procedures and policies?

#### COURSE PLACEMENT

1. In general, how does the assessment process work at this college? (Grand tour question)
2. How are course placement decisions made for both math and English?
3. How accurate are course placement decisions?
4. What are the ways to change course placement decisions if they are not accurate?
5. How is evidence other than placement test scores used in the assessment process?

The interview is now complete. Thanks for your participation.

## Appendix B

### STUDENT INTERVIEW GUIDE

**ID:**

Thank you for your willingness to be a part of my study. The questions I have for you today are about the course placement process. Please remember that there are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions I will ask you. Do you have any questions before we begin?

**DATE:**

**TIME START:**

**TIME END:**

#### BACKGROUND

1. Why did you choose to attend this college? (Grand tour question)
2. How old are you?
3. Are you a full-time or part-time student?
4. How many semesters have you completed?
5. How many miles is your home from here?
6. How many total colleges are you currently enrolled?
7. Which high school did you graduate from?

#### COURSE PLACEMENT

1. What was the assessment process like for you at this college? (Grand tour question)
2. Do you think the assessment process was accurate or not accurate for English and math?
3. Did you ever think about trying to go see if you could do something about your placement decisions?
4. Were you ever told other types of evidence were being used or could be used in the assessment process?
5. Were you ever told it was a possibility to retake the placement test?

The interview is now complete. Thanks for your participation.

## Appendix C

### FIELD OBSERVATION GUIDE

<b>Project:</b> COURSE PLACEMENT	<b>ID:</b>
----------------------------------	------------

<b>Date Collected:</b>	<b>Location:</b>
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<b>Collected By:</b>
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<b>Where Is This Data Filed?</b>
----------------------------------

<b>When was Data Entered into Database?</b>
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<b>Main Points/Impressions</b> ( <i>Who was involved? What type(s) of events were involved? What were the main themes or issues? What research questions were addressed? Any new hypotheses or speculations?</i> )

<b>Points to Follow Up:</b> ( <i>What are the target issues for the next visit?</i> )



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