

**los estuديات migrantes y educación**

**CERPP Project Report**

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## **Project Report**

### *Introduction:*

This report documents the outcomes and emergent research findings from a research meeting with 12 Latina/o immigrant students from across California who have organized themselves into a collaborative research project called *los estudiantes migrantes y educación* (LEME). The LEME project held its second “Migrant Student Summit” in September 2008 and continued work on their grassroots research agenda focused on Latina/o immigrant students’ underrepresentation in higher education. LEME analyzed data from interviews with Latina/o immigrant parents’ participation in their children’s college-going, and continued development of its action-oriented research praxis through intra-group interviews and focus groups. This was a follow-up meeting to the first Migrant Student Summit held in January 2008.

### *Project Description:*

*Los estudiantes migrantes y educación* (LEME) is a grass-roots collective of 12 Latina/o immigrant students from across California and one university researcher, dedicated to the struggle for educational equity in Latina/o immigrant communities. The LEME project is a collaborative and pedagogical research collective that seeks to understand the educational inequities faced by Latina/o immigrant communities, develop action plans, and assist in efforts to increase Latina/o immigrant participation in higher education. To this end, the LEME project has convened bi-annual “Migrant Student Summits,” which, in part, serve as research meetings for the LEME participants to collectively engage in its research and action initiatives. In September of 2008, LEME held

its Fall Migrant Student Summit, sponsored in part by the USC Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice. The agenda focused on LEME's current investigations into the roles of parents in Latina/o immigrant college-going.

The goals of this particular research initiative include understanding Latina/o immigrant parents': participation in students' college-going; perceptions of price and financial aid; and, experiences and perceptions of the college transition process, including but not limited to institutional characteristics/admissions requirements and the potential impact of student college choice outcomes. To meet these goals, LEME sought to answer the research question, "How do Latina/o immigrant parents come to know educational opportunity for their children?"

The LEME project focused attention on the role(s) of parents after carefully reviewing literature on enrollment management, and college access more widely, as well as the findings from the on-going ethnographic work done by Gildersleeve (2006; 2009; *forthcoming*) that focuses on the 12 student participants of the LEME project itself. It has been found that parents wield an unparalleled, yet under-researched influence on students' college enrollment (Choy, 2002; Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; McDonough, 1997; Paulsen, 1990). Yet, with the notable exceptions of McDonough's and Gildersleeve's work, most of what scholars have found in the realm of parental involvement has come from large-scale quantitative studies. Although foundational in establishing the relevance of parents in college-going, as Tierney and Auerbach (2005) state: "These large-scale studies are limited by reliance on subjects' self-reports and by lack of information about the quality, as opposed to the frequency, of parental encouragement" (p. 41).

Furthermore, these studies rely on a normative conception of the family, most closely

representing the ways in which parents from culturally dominant backgrounds (i.e., white middle-class) might engage in college-going. The circumstances under which Latina/o immigrant parents engage in college-going are structurally and culturally different than normative experiences captured in these large-scale quantitative studies (Arzubiaga, Rueda, & Monzó, 2002; Hurtado-Ortiz & Gauvain, 2007; Rothenberg, 1998).

The participants involved in the LEME project identify with multiple marginalized identities – immigrant, first-generation college-going, Latina/o, Spanish speaking, migrant labor, rural and/or urban, and working-poor – each of which have been related to historical marginalization in U.S. schooling and access to higher education (McDonough, 2005; Nuñez, 2007; Oakes, Rogers, Lipton, & Morrell, 2002; Oakes, Rogers, Silver, Terriquez, McDonough, Renee, & Lipton, 2006; Ream, 2005; Gildersleeve, 2006). As a case, then, it is clear that Latina/o immigrant students face marginalization in U.S. higher education and face a tumultuous schooling environment in preparation for postsecondary opportunities.

*Los estudiantes migrantes y educación (LEME):*

The LEME project emerged out of shared experiences between Gildersleeve and the 12 student researcher-participants in the 2005 UCLA Migrant Student Leadership Institute (MSLI)<sup>1</sup>. Following the 2005 MSLI, Gildersleeve and the 12 student researcher-participants began a critical ethnographic engagement that has continued since (see Gildersleeve, 2006, *forthcoming*). The student participants come from immigrant communities across the state of California, and currently are currently attending California public universities, community colleges, and one Ivy League institution. The ethnographic work between Gildersleeve and the 12 students has continued, and the relationships between them have

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<sup>1</sup> See Gildersleeve, 2009; Gutiérrez, Hunter, & Arzubiaga, 2009; Nuñez, 2009 for more information about the UCLA Migrant Student Leadership Institute.

transformed into a collaborative research team dedicated to the struggle for educational equity in Latina/o immigrant communities.

Since 2007, Gildersleeve has made quarterly individual follow-up field visits with each student in addition to the bi-annual Migrant Student Summits. Students organized themselves as a collective research team with a mission to support and assist Latina/o immigrant college-going in their home communities. In January 2008, the LEME project held its first Migrant Student Summit in Los Angeles, where participants developed their agenda for the year and interview protocols for use with parents in their home communities. Student researchers conducted a series of three interviews with two sets of parents in each of their home communities. Cumulatively, the interview series covers a broad range of topics related to college access for Latina/o immigrant families, situated within their daily lives (e.g., financing higher education and parent's labor; immigration enforcement and relationships with schools; and the rhetoric of educational opportunity for immigrant children and perceptions of the college transition process). The Fall Summit that serves as the focus of this report, served as an opportunity to engage in collective-collaborative analysis, revisit and revise the LEME agenda, and continue ethnographic engagement between Gildersleeve and the 12 student researcher-participants.

#### *Research design*

The 12 student researchers that make up the LEME project used the three interview protocols with two sets of parents in their home communities. One set was the students' own parents. The second set was unrelated. In total, 72 interviews with 24 sets of Latina/o immigrant parents were conducted and transcribed.

The LEME project divided analysis across the three interview protocols into three analysis teams consisting of four student researchers with Gildersleeve floating across each team. The Fall Summit was instrumental in the LEME project's goal of collaboratively discussing, examining, and analyzing the preliminary findings that emerged from these analysis teams. The analysis done at the Fall Summit focused on understanding Latina/o immigrant parents' experiences across the topics of the interview protocols in order to answer the broader question, "How do Latina/o immigrant parents come to know educational opportunity for their children?"

Gildersleeve, a professor of qualitative methodology, trained the analysis teams in a general inductive approach for qualitative inquiry (Bogden & Biklen, 2003). Analysis teams sought to explain how Latina/o immigrant parents' everyday experiences influenced their children's college-going. Each set of interviews from the three protocols were subject to analytic scrutiny by both the initial analysis team and subsequently by the entire LEME project. Initial analysis teams prepared brief presentations to share at the Fall Summit, which engaged the broader LEME group in dialogue about how the preliminary findings "fit" with the interviewing experiences of other participant-researchers, as well as how findings "spoke to each other" across the themes of the interview protocols.

#### *Emergent findings*

Tentative findings emerged from the Fall Summit analysis. Preliminary findings in each line of inquiry related to parents are described briefly below.

#### *College-going:*

Parents provide crucial support in developing and fostering aspirations. Parents routinely cite education as a constitutive dimension to their construction of the "better life" they

sought for themselves and their family in making the choice to migrate to California. As one parent put it,

“We always stressed education. Both the education in school, and the education of being a good person. This is what we mean when we say ‘a better life.’ A nicer house, more food, a chance to have a choice – yes. But we know that education is the best way to get there.”

Parents linked their material conditions to the opportunities that they sought for their children. Parents’ historical knowledge appears to be a cultural asset that the family can draw from in making college-going decisions. For example, in addition to valuing education, parents were also keenly aware of how their material conditions might constrain their students. A brief conversation between one student’s mother and father is illustrative:

Mother: It’s important for you to know where we come from. And how we got here. I know you [to father] don’t like to talk about it.

Father: It was hard [to student]. I didn’t like you having to do that. I don’t like talking about it.

Mother: But if we don’t talk about it, it gets lost. And we didn’t do it to get lost. We did it to have this life – this better life. And ...

Father: And we just want that for you, too. We want what any parent wants. That’s the job of the parent. But it hurts us, too. Because we know that we can’t give you everything that you want.

Mother: You mean we can’t give them everything that they need.

Father: Yes. Because now, even though it’s better for us here, it’s in some ways, harder for you. Like it was hard for us ...

Mother: ... Like it was hard for us in Mexico.

Father: But not like the same thing. Like, our life was hard. We had no other choice.

Mother: Yes. But here, their lives are hard in a different way. Hard for the dreaming.

Parents' analyses of their social condition were linked directly to their family's history with immigration.

Recognizing the new set of constraints placed on the opportunity dreams they imagined with their children, parents found ways to assist their children that worked within their material conditions. Parents viewed students' schooling as valuable work. This work was deemed valuable enough to commit to, even though it did not generate revenue. Rather than enforce expectations for students to engage in part-time labor (e.g., in the fields), parents made a conscious decision to afford students the time and opportunity necessary to remain involved in school and focus on their educations.

One parent shared,

"We don't let her [daughter] work. We have four children. Her oldest sister worked, because we thought we needed the money. And it helped, but we saw how it hurt her. She went to community college. Angelica [youngest daughter] didn't have to work, and she's going to university."

The influence of allocating resources (e.g., time and money) for students to participate in college-going should not be underestimated. It comes at great immediate cost to the family, yet enables students to make an investment that could potentially payback in transformative ways. These practices warrant further investigation, as the data analyzed are limited in their ability to breakdown the nuance of the impact resource allocation might have on students' college-going.

*School involvement:*

Schools remain a space of tension for immigrant families. Parents report feelings of isolation from schools. Typical reflections about schools included, “That’s not our place,” or “We feel strange when we go there,” or perhaps, “We go when we’re invited.” It is important to make clear, however, that these comments were directed toward schooling personnel. Parents were eager to attend their children’s sporting events and other public after-school activities. When it came to interacting with school officials, such as administration or teachers, parents expressed frustration and distrust about the extent to which schooling personnel understood their family’s basic needs. As one parent hypothesized:

“If I speak Spanish much better than I speak English, that doesn’t mean I don’t understand what they say when they speak English. And it doesn’t mean I don’t know that my son could use more sleep. They could tell me to make sure he gets more sleep, and well, that’s fine. But say we live in a one-bedroom apartment, and say his niece is just a baby. And when you have a baby in the house, no one gets any sleep. So if I were to tell them that I don’t know what to do, it’s because I don’t know what to do, not because I don’t know my son needs more sleep. I just don’t think they really understand what it’s like in our [immigrant] houses.”

Parents demonstrated a collective sense of frustration with schooling officials, speaking not only for themselves, but for immigrant families more generally. Further, the distrust engendered by such a positionality constrains relations between parents and schools, further disenfranchising immigrant children. When parents do not feel that schools can respond to their needs, they are less likely to advocate for their children.

*Immigration:*

Parents reported insecurities underlying their perceptions of students' opportunities as a result of the increasing presence and activity of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)/Homeland Security in their communities. Although none of the parents interviewed for this project had experienced direct run-ins with ICE, most expressed concern over the increased activity that Homeland Security appeared to be dedicating toward immigration enforcement. A new folklore of immigration enforcement appears to be emerging in students' home communities.

*Future inquiry*

The LEME Project has identified three primary areas to focus on as we continue to dive deeper into analyses of our existing data and plan to collect future data. Each area is discussed briefly below:

- Parent practices of resource allocation deserve further attention. In particular, future inquiry should examine the impact these practices have on both symbolic and material levels. Furthermore, the influence such practices have on the family economy need to be understood more fully, especially in order to establish thresholds of commitment that families might be able to make. That is to say, research could work to assist families in figuring out home equations to determine what sources of revenue are absolutely necessary and what sources of revenue might be more constraining for students' educational opportunity.
- The relationships between schooling personnel and parents needs deeper attention. Of keen interest should be the ways that schooling officials disenfranchise families from meaningfully participating in their children's

education. Alternately, a line of inquiry should also focus on how schools can make themselves more aware and sensitive to the realities that immigrant families negotiate in supporting their children's education.

- Critical discourse analysis should be done to unpack the emerging folklore of immigration enforcement and its influence on families' educational decision-making.

#### *Next steps for LEME*

In addition to analyzing the parent interview data, participants at the Fall Summit revisited the LEME agenda while simultaneously engaging in ethnographic data generation. Specifically, a series of focus groups, individual interviews, and group-process activities were conducted in which LEME participants, including Gildersleeve, engaged in dialogues about their own experiences in education, paying particular attention to their transitions from compulsory to post-secondary education. From these ethnographic encounters, LEME re-assessed its mission and goals. Collaboratively, LEME has outlined its intended activity for the next two years, including:

- An increased focus on the role and influence of immigration in higher education opportunity
- The experiences of Latinas in higher education
- Supporting immigrant parents to recognize and advance the ways they can influence students' college-going
- Asset-mapping of student researchers' home communities
- Developing an online college access awareness campaign for immigrant students and their families.

*Other outcomes:*

- The LEME project will present findings from its work at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in April, 2009.
- Proposal submitted for the annual meeting of the National College Access Network.
- Preparing a manuscript for submission to the *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*.
- Preparing letter of interest to the Ford Foundation.

**Conclusion**

The LEME Project brings together the real-life experiences of twelve Latina/o immigrant college students to bear on the systematic, rigorous, and methodical data that comes from critical ethnographic engagement around a particular issue of concern – immigrant college-going. Thus far, the Fall Migrant Summit provided the opportunity for LEME participants to collaboratively engage in data analysis based on the interview data collected from students' home communities. Findings point to a general need for deeper analysis, but confirm that immigrant parent participation in students' college-going is a largely misunderstood and under-researched phenomenon. Generally, parents recognize the importance of education, work hard to participate meaningfully when and where possible, but face social and cultural challenges perpetrated by the structural shortcomings and/or perceived malevolence of institutions like schooling and ICE. Future inquiry should focus on unpacking the micro-practices that lead to these general perceptions, begging for more embedded ethnographic work. Furthermore, the LEME Project will continue to

engage in a multi-faceted scholarly endeavor, building on its collective and developing expertise to further contribute to the struggle for immigrant opportunity.

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