

Article

Social Justice Education at a Latiné High School: Community Coalition and Expectations of College Worthiness

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Abstract

Contemporary education policy requires state and local schools to align their curricula and establish school expectations based on college-readiness standards. However, these practices have generated more concerns than solutions. Test scores and grade point averages, which individually measure students' college readiness, are often conflated with educators' stereotypical beliefs about students' prospects for postsecondary success. These stratifying dynamics of college readiness are particularly affecting communities that are historically excluded from higher education. To respond to these systems of exclusion, this qualitative study explores a community-based, collaborative model of college worthiness through coalition building in a predominantly working-class Latiné high school. Through a comprehensive analysis of interviews, observations, and artifacts, the study describes school leaders' strategic utilization of multi-organizational coalitions to prepare students for college. The findings extend the literature by illuminating anti-deficit, communal approaches to advancing the Latiné educational pipeline. These coalitional practices include a focus on students' wellness, developing trust and caring interpersonal relationships, and enacting positive expectations to foster college-going agency and self-determination. The implications of these findings are significant for school leaders who work to establish college access points as an integral component of social justice education.

Keywords: asset-based education; care; college-going expectations; college readiness; school leadership; school expectations; school–community partnership; self-worth; social network; wellness



Academic Editors: Tonisha B. Lane,
Ebony Perez and Shawna
Patterson-Stephens

Received: 9 February 2026

Revised: 16 July 2026

Accepted: 21 July 2026

Published: 23 July 2026

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1. Introduction

An influential educator is one who inspires students and grants them opportunities to realize their self-worth.

—Woods (2024, p. 13)

For more than two decades, researchers have been paying considerable attention to systemic inequities that inhibit Latiné students' advancement within the educational pipeline of the United States (Gándara et al., 1998; Pérez Huber et al., 2015; Yosso & Solórzano, 2006). In particular, Latiné students' access to and degree attainment in higher education have been a primary concern. Despite early signs of progress in the number of Latinés matriculating into postsecondary education (E. L. Hernandez & McElrath, 2023; Kim et al., 2024; Santiago et al., 2024), college admission has been trending in the opposite

direction for this group in recent years (Cohn et al., 2025). It is widely acknowledged that many of these issues are associated with PK-12 schools' inability to provide them comprehensive preparation for college success. Despite the availability of research intending to strengthen the Latiné educational pipeline, this population's postsecondary pursuits are still excessively negated by issues of low PK-12 teachers' educational expectations, barriers to advanced-placement coursework, school pushout, and other exclusionary practices (Gándara & Contreras, 2010; Madrigal-Garcia & Acevedo-Gil, 2016; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999; Yosso & Solórzano, 2006).

Accompanying these school-level inequities are macro policy changes that presently hinder Latiné education. The latest escalation of anti-Latiné immigrant sentiment, including racial profiling, domestic militarization and surveillance programs, and unlawful deportation tactics used regardless of one's citizenship status, have amplified racial tensions and hostility against these communities (Ong et al., 2025). Such state-sanctioned violence racially constructs Latinés' citizenship and human worth. Patel (2015) emphasizes how these anti-Latiné and anti-immigrant sentiments often subjugate this population by racializing their deservingness as human beings: "Deservingness fundamentally conveys how the state confers and delimits legitimacy as well as how it asserts its own existence as arbiter of racialized rights" (p. 12).

Notably, debates regarding Latinés' deservingness extend into education. In recent years, policies such as the ban on affirmative action programs (Handelman, 2025), the defunding of the Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) status in higher education, and the banning of racially affirming curriculum in PK-12 schools (Hannegan-Martinez, 2025; Liou & Deits Cutler, 2023) have significantly constrained vital resources, decreased college access points, and perpetuated the discourse of deservingness as a form of racial domination. Consequently, schools, particularly those facing financial constraints, find themselves unable to fully support the college aspirations of Latiné students, exacerbating the hardships of those already facing political and economic injustices (Agathocleous et al., 2024; Roche et al., 2024).

These macro policy shifts reinforce America's longstanding history with anti-Latiné racism and systematic devaluation of Latinés' humanity (Donato et al., 2022; Márquez, 2023). Historically, education has been utilized as a mechanism of social control, teaching students who they are (or are not) within a deeply stratified and unjust world (Paglayan, 2022). Latiné students have been told repeatedly that they are academically unworthy (Bernal, 2002; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999) and that their credibility can only accumulate when adhering to long-discredited assimilationist educational frameworks that disregard their cultural and linguistic assets (Rendon, 1992; Rodriguez, 1983).

Against this political backdrop, the systemic negation of Latiné students as knowledge producers (Bernal, 2002) and the ways that they are consistently excluded from college outreach and advanced courses (Salazar et al., 2026) amount to enduring forms of epistemic injustice that negate their college-going credibility (Fricker, 2007). Within these experiences, educators' negative expectations of Latiné students often cast their knowledge, language, and frameworks as illegitimate, invoking a sense of belief and disbelief in their postsecondary aspirations (Liou et al., 2009). The deeply embedded logic of this group's alleged racial incapacities has created and re-created an unspoken psychic baseline in the use of whiteness as a measure for one's human potential.

As an educational practice, educators' expectations of students are one of the most direct and powerful influences on students' academic achievement (Gay, 2023; López, 2017; Rubie-Davies & Hattie, 2025). It is also an organizational mechanism with which whiteness is enacted in education (Allen & Liou, 2019; Yoon, 2012). Jupp et al. (2016) refer to whiteness as the "hegemonic racial structuring of social and material realities

operating in the present moment that perpetuate racialized inequalities and injustices” (p. 1154). As such, school expectations manifest a set of organizational processes to facilitate learning based upon educators’ predictions about whether and how their students will be academically successful (López, 2017).

Specifically, Convertino and Graboski-Bauer (2018) find that conformity to standards of whiteness serves to distort educators’ expectations of students’ college readiness. They write, “discussion[s] of college readiness exhibited [the] belief that readiness must be predicated on adoption of certain White, middle-class morals and values that were drawn from [White educators’] own upbringing and personal beliefs” (p. 46). These shared norms often translate into baseline standards that measure Latiné students’ intellectual legitimacy and presumed deficits in relation to white norms. We refer to this dynamic as an *expectational default*, wherein individualized, assimilationist frameworks of merit and responsibility engender a hegemonic structuring of racialized opportunities. As a core facet of schooling, students are steered into distinct life trajectories, upholding unmarked mechanisms leading to racially stratified outcomes (Allen & Liou, 2019). The basis for college readiness is universalized and applied to all individuals, disregarding their context and life experiences. These standards default educators’ normative understanding of one’s college readiness, perpetuating an inequitable system that comes with stereotypic assumptions about one’s intellectual worth (Liou & Rojas, 2020).

To disrupt this expectational default, our study draws on the story of Hermila Galindo High School (HGHS)¹, a school located in a predominately Latiné neighborhood in California. We look to feature the school’s expectations of college worthiness to advance the literature on ways to further strengthen the Latiné educational pipeline amidst political opposition. This article comes at a time when the federal and state governments are looking to regulate higher education, especially with regard to research on and the teaching of race and racism (Bryant & Appleby, 2025; Garces et al., 2026). To protect our rights to use evidence to speak truth to power (Lane et al., 2023), we share HGHS’ story to call for greater solidarity with PK-12 communities under assault by the current administration.

This study uniquely contributes to the literature in three ways. Our first objective is to understand a community-based, collaborative, multiorganizational model of college worthiness developed through coalition building, challenging individualistic notions of college readiness. Second, this study seeks to add to the existing literature documenting asset-based educational practices and what these practices can look like from leadership perspectives. Stanton-Salazar’s (1997, 2011) network-analytic approach to educating Latiné students focuses on the interrelatedness of social capital acquisitions and institutional support. He argues that cumulative social ties and institutional networks can convert into resources and support to transmit social capital through obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness. Our work deviates from this intellectual trajectory by illuminating asset-based approaches to social networks. Our stance differs from the traditional use of social capital, which privileges institutional agents instead of students as the primary source and transmitters of knowledge (see Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2011). This hierarchical transmitter–receiver dialectic reproduces power relations while assigning fixed values to various capitals that privileges white middle-class conceptions of a college-going student (Rendon, 1992).

Our third objective is to empirically highlight how school leaders and local partners respond to students’ needs amid the current anti-Latiné political climate. In a context where many school leaders are preemptively complying with the federal, state, and local governments’ anti-diversity laws and education policies, this article is a call to action for school leaders to remain agentive and become even more intentional about and committed to the education of Latiné students.

To accomplish these goals, we ask the following research question: through community coalition building, how do HGHS educators and community partners support Latiné students' college worthiness as an expectation of epistemic justice?

2. Literature Review

In the following section, we discuss the existing literature and introduce our conceptualization of college worthiness.

2.1. Organizational Practices of Educators' Expectations

There is no doubt that there are multiple pathways to prepare students for college, but studies also show significant differences in how asset-versus-deficit practices manifest. Deficit conceptions of who is college worthy are consciously and unconsciously predicated on the racial profiling of who counts as a "good student," which has a direct impact on organizational practices that hierarchically include and exclude students based on school structures and norms (Welton & Martinez, 2014). Over time, these organizational practices become institutionalized to shape individuals' routines, membership, and expectations (Liou et al., 2019). Therefore, educational spaces that refuse to consider the role of race in social institutions often re-create norms that are fundamentally racialized (Bonilla-Silva, 2021; Ray, 2019; Wingfield & Chavez, 2020). These racialized spaces can manifest expectations to affirm or negate one's credibility, resulting in a rigid understanding of students' worthiness and whether they should be included or excluded from particular learning opportunities. These organizational processes, based upon educators' racialized expectations, often obscure interpersonal dynamics that reproduce racial meanings while continuing to operate under the presumptions of race neutrality (Ray, 2019; Trinidad, 2025).

2.2. Cultural Explanations of College Worthiness

Lewis (1959), Payne (2013), and Wilson (2012), among others, have pioneered trait-based analyses by linking one's culture to academic achievement. Their work sets off decades of debates insisting that some communities are culturally poor and that, conversely, poverty has a culture that inhibits families' commitments to children's education. This "culture of poverty" thesis has since been utilized to understand student outcomes in communities of color, with calls to reject students' ancestral cultures and language in favor of adopting white, middle-class behaviors in order to become academically successful (McWhorter, 2000; Ogbu, 2004; Rodriguez, 1983). Although this body of research has long been repudiated (Gorski, 2008; Osei-Kofi, 2011; Rendon, 1992; Sato & Lensmire, 2009; Solórzano, 2019; Valencia, 2010), poverty is consistently applied as a proxy for race and culture, while the "cultures" of various communities of color have been falsely racialized through impoverished frameworks to inform educators' expectations of students' propensities to attend college (Liou et al., 2016).

When students do not succeed in schools, educators tend to individualize blame by identifying students' learning or cultural "deficits." These blames are then utilized as instructional cues for lowering expectations into what educators believe are caring practices (Delpit, 2026; Gay, 2023). Practices associated with pitying, sheltering students from learning, and giving false validations can distort students' sense of accomplishment, undermining their capacity as knowers (Schoneveld & Brummelman, 2023). We contend that conscious and unconscious practices in treating students' knowledge as a source of vulnerability devalue the intangible qualities and transferable skills that can contribute to their success in higher education (Lane et al., 2023). The epistemic negation of Latiné students has led us to consider white expectational defaults as invisible cognitive roadblocks in education.

2.3. Anti-Deficit Education Grounded in Students' Intellectual Assets

Instead of centering whiteness as the expectational default in determining students' college potentials, we argue for a shift in the current focus on individual's academic outputs toward a sustained belief in the inherent value of the whole person (Valenzuela, 2010). The Latiné community has a history of resistance against inequitable school systems, resulting in families and activists calling for the hiring of Latiné administrators and teachers, the addressing of racism, and the establishment of a curriculum that reflects the histories and lived experiences of the community (Aguilar-Hernández & Bernal, 2018; Bernal, 1998; C. Muñoz, 2007; S. Muñoz et al., 2014). Our conceptualization of worthiness derives from this history of political struggle, where effective schooling for Latinés is consistently based on conditions such as positive expectations, familism, interpersonal connections, student empowerment, increased wellness and mental health supports, addressing anti-Latiné racism, and centering community coalitions and partnerships (Hendrickson et al., 2025; Martinez et al., 2024).

For example, these wellness practices should be embedded within educational environments where students safely learn to communicate about, reflect on, and cope with challenges such as racism and other dynamics that lead to negative self-belief and internalizations, preparing them to navigate inequities and cultivate self-love (Hendrickson et al., 2025). These holistic practices must lead to inclusivity, defined as school policies and norms to ensure all students and their identities are utilized as sources of empowerment (Hendrickson et al., 2025). Altogether, these practices of wellness and inclusion must result in relational trust and genuine respect for students' abilities to incrementally and consistently perform to higher levels of academic success over a sustained period of time (De Jesús & Antrop-González, 2006; Nieto, 2005; Rivera-McCutchen, 2021).

3. Theoretical Framework: From Asset to Worthiness

In response to deficit ideologies in education, researchers underscore the significance of asset-based approaches to assisting students in performing to higher levels of academic achievement (Delpit, 2026; Gay, 2023; López, 2018). In order to see students as epistemically resourceful and agentive, educators must first reject dominant ideologies of deservingness (Patel, 2015), which conditionally measures one's worthiness based on who they are or how they perform in traditional academic matrices in a capitalist, meritocratic, racially stratifying society. By contrast, worthiness is a framework that embraces students' inherent worth as full human beings, regardless of their academic record and prior achievement. Educators must see students' inherent worth in order to fully build on their cultural and linguistic assets for teaching and learning (Nieto, 2001). Such equitable exchanges of human relations can affirm students' self-worth, help them unlock their cultural assets, and lead them to determine their own futures.

To shift educators' mindsets from one of asset-seeking to one of students' inherent worth, we refer to college worthiness in the context of a network of educators, schools, and community organizations with social justice beliefs regarding students' inherent human potential and conviction that their futures can be nurtured systematically (via coursework, community partnerships, and resources) and pedagogically (via inclusive curriculum, positive expectations, and caring relationships) to accumulate momentum toward self-worth (personal wellness, academic and life skills, confidence, and agency) and postsecondary education. In some parts of Latiné communities, worthiness is an interpersonal connection supporting school norms through mutual and reciprocal care, trust, respect, confidence, and affirmation. This concept serves as a mediator of educators' caring practices and positive expectations of students through a liberatory vision of *educación* (Elenes et al., 2001), a model of education that rejects empty expressions of care (Valenzuela, 2010). Rather, in

this model, caring practices are rooted in the removal of structural inequities, the promotion of wellness and mental health, and the creation of opportunities that utilize students' epistemic resources (Hendrickson et al., 2025).

Additionally, worthiness is rooted in the practice of trust, or *confianza*, wherein educators exhibit trustworthy behaviors, contingent on building students' trust and confidence in their self-worth as epistemic agents (Bordas, 2001; Ruiz, 2005). This relational trust must translate into a sense of belonging for students (Schneider, 2007), so schools can create inclusive environments to implicitly and explicitly communicate shared expectations of familial solidarity (Liou & Liang, 2021; Gonzales, 2019). These practices involve the interpersonal recognition, validation, and affirmation of Latiné experiences, histories, languages, expressions, and other cultural assets as a baseline for embracing them as community members (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015; Linares & Muñoz, 2011). When students are surrounded by a network of adults who deeply care for and believe in them, this circle of trust can support students' wellness and reduce their health risks and negative internationalization (Center for Disease Control, 2024; Kapke et al., 2017; Novak & Mihić, 2018).

College worthiness builds on these asset-based traditions and advances research by focusing on learning conditions that foster students' internal self-worth, inviting them to critically and independently think and act without extended reliance on external validation or invalidation. This approach differs from the dominant conception of college-readiness by emphasizing the humanistic notion of worthiness, rather than test scores and grade point averages, as the baseline expectation for college preparation (Liou & Rojas, 2021). As a social justice framework, college worthiness challenges outcome-based conceptions of achievement, especially those that normalize the exclusion of those who do not neatly fit the traditional profile of a college-going student. We hope that this framework provides a counter to the assumption that educational equity can be achieved by having students conform to outcome-based measures of college readiness without creating systems and sustained efforts to meaningfully support them in constructing their own pathways to postsecondary education. This process begins by fostering students' wellness and mental resilience against oppressive conditions to prepare them for higher education. It elicits students' understanding that they matter in this world and that educación can be a source of power to exercise their intellectual and political self-determination.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Study Context

This ethnographic case study took place at HGHS, a small college-preparatory social justice charter school in California, in a community with a long history of coalition building and fighting for educational and racial justice. The study originated as a partnership between HGHS and the manuscript's authors to document effective college-going practices of the school. Both researchers, Daniel and Leticia, were members of the school community.

Based on publicly available information, HGHS serves 65 students annually. The student population is predominantly Chicanas and Chicanos, comprising 85%, while 10% are biracial and 5% are Asian. Among these students, 56% are female and 44% are male. Seventy-eight percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

Academically, 20% of the students demonstrate proficiency in mathematics, while 50% exhibit proficiency in reading. Seven percent of these students are English language learners, and 7% qualify for special education. Notably, 77% of the students graduate from the high school. Also, according to the school, a significant portion of the students become the first in their families to attend college.

Beyond a categorical perspective of these students' lived experiences, we employ the term Latiné as a more inclusive, dynamic, and gender-diverse way to describe the commu-

nity. At times, we will also utilize Chicanas or Chicanos to specify a particular segment of the community and as a political identity for Mexican Americans (Echeverría, 2014; Gómez-Quíñones & Vásquez, 2014; C. Muñoz, 2007; Rosales, 1997). We acknowledge that the school and state's demographic reporting may overemphasize this group as monolithic, reinforcing gender-binary and heteronormativity, and thus limiting our comprehensive understanding of the community (Miranda et al., 2023).

Many of the HGHS administrators and teachers point to the school's high percentage of students who transferred from or were pushed out of the larger nearby district, where schools historically have not had success educating Latiné students and other Students of Color. Thus, many HGHS students are seen by educators as peripherally positioned within a dominant discourse about college. Some HGHS educators even describe the school as a "last-chance school," where the school consistently enrolls students who do not have enough course credits to graduate from high school. In our informal conversations with and observations of families, many also noted their child's experiences with a sense of unworthiness in their prior school. Given this reality, HGHS students do not meet traditional definitions of college readiness, which refers to students with the academic knowledge, cognitive strategies, and behaviors needed to succeed in college courses without academic remediation (Conley, 2007). Consequently, our selection of HGHS allows us to explore the manifestation of college worthiness with a population that is not traditionally considered able to pursue higher education.

The school employs four full-time teachers who serve across grade levels, teaching multiple subjects. These teachers are supported by an administrative team composed of mostly bilingual Chicana leaders and members of their coalition, who are the unit of analysis in this paper, as they are responsible for creating an environment of college worthiness. Given the school's enrollment numbers, the community faces severe budget constraints due to California's per-pupil funding formula. However, that has not stopped the students from supporting this school. Without prompting, many students and family members mentioned that they were drawn to HGHS because of its ability to cultivate trusting relationships and provide a personalized education. HGHS relies heavily on community coalitions to meet students' academic and personal needs, which helps both the school and their community partners when it comes to resource sharing and increasing the adult-to-student ratio. These efforts have led to co-locating multiorganizational services inside the school, increasing students' direct access to bilingual, college-educated adults.

4.2. Sampling Criteria and Selection

Given this backdrop, this ethnographic case study qualitatively explores the everyday expectations of college worthiness as a result of community coalition building with the purpose of preparing Latiné students for college (Harwati, 2019; Yin, 2018). We utilized a grounded theory approach with our data-collection methods to gather research participants' perspectives and experiences (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 2017) and to compare and contrast similarities and differences in these individuals' organizational practices. Since this is a small school, it was important for us to talk to as many people as possible. Our selection criteria for this study aimed to secure interviews with people in the HGHS community who are organizationally positioned to make decisions, set priorities, and coordinate services within and across the partnering organizations to support students.

Through email and in-person communication, our recruitment resulted in a 100% participation rate from everyone at HGHS who meets these criteria. Table 1 provides background information for each participant.

Table 1. Participants in the study.

Pseudonym	Role at School	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Experience
Raquel	Ethnic Studies intern	Chicana	Female	2 years
Vickie	Wellness intern	White	Female	1 year
Ms. T	Administrative assistant, HGHS	Chicana	Female	8 years
Adriana	Leader of Partnership for Education and College Success (PECS)	Chicana	Female	4 years
Marisol	Support staff of Partnership for Education and College Success (PECS)	Chicana	Female	2 years
Ken	Clinical Program Manager-Mental Health, Empowering Communities for Health Organization (ECHO)	Filipino-American	Male	4 years
Ava	College Counselor, HGHS	Chicana	Female	4 years
Lupe	Principal, HGHS	Chicana	Female	2 years
Nathan	School board member, HGHS	Filipino-American	Male	2 years
Miss	Executive Director, HGHS	Chicana	Female	4 years

4.3. Data Collection

Data collection for the study spanned two years and included interviews with 10 participants who were either a community partner or part of the HGHS leadership team, including a school board member, the executive director, the school principal, and a college counselor. The first year of the project was largely spent cultivating trust with the school and the partnering organizations and determining logistics with the participants. Semi-structured interviews ranged from one to two hours and were conducted either virtually or in person at the school site, depending on the participant's preference and availability. The data also included monthly informal observations, where we individually and collectively spent time observing the school day. These activities included visiting and observing school administrators' offices, various classrooms, lunch recess, after-school activities, and school board meetings. Additionally, we collected artifacts such as event flyers, meeting agendas, and photographs of the school, which included student projects that were visible around campus.

During our school visits, we asked probing and clarifying questions to give participants the ability to provide context and interpret our observations of events, situations, interactions, and behaviors. After each school visit, we discussed and recorded our ethnographic field notes in debriefing sessions. Our conversations included themes that emerged, from broad to specific, and repeated examples of practices of college worthiness, as well as the extent to which these patterns mapped onto the literature. These debriefings often led to additional questions and issues that remained ambiguous, which informed our approach to subsequent interviews and school visits.

4.4. Data Analysis

Our coding procedure started with each author listening to the interview recordings and transcripts and taking copious notes of noticeable patterns that spoke to the themes that we jointly identified over time. We then de-identified these individuals with participants' self-determined pseudonyms and discussed ways that the data were consistent or inconsistent with our post-visit debriefing sessions and the literature. Through this inductive examination of data, we applied our analytic framework of college worthiness in alignment with our data and definitions of key terms (such as college worthiness and

community coalition building) to assess how these research participants' expectations of college worthiness may or may not be operative in the school. In doing so, we addressed the issue of reliability by carefully documenting the various data-collection methods, continuously verifying our interpretations of the context and data with each other and research participants, and asking follow-up questions through follow-up emails and both formal and informal interactions (Yin, 2018). By collecting multiple forms of data and engaging in consensus building, we were able to achieve validity through a chain of evidence. We then utilized this body of evidence to theorize educators' expectations of worthiness to gain insight into what epistemic justice means for this community (Tisdell et al., 2025). The development of this paper did not involve generative artificial intelligence (GenAI).

4.5. Positionality Statements

As community-engaged researchers, both authors were active collaborators with the school community, which included the development and design of this study to understand the ways in which educators were advancing the school's college-going mission. The first author is an Asian American cisgender heterosexual male who is the first in his family to graduate from high school and attend college. While growing up in a low-income, immigrant, and single-parent household in a gentrifying city in California, the first author benefited from a federally funded TRIO Upward Bound program that supported his college-going aspirations. He later worked for three other TRIO programs, where he further gained insight into various norms and approaches to creating pathways to postsecondary excellence. As a first-generation faculty, the first author has a sustained record of impact in utilizing his research agenda to build multiracial coalitions and support racially minoritized students' advancement in the educational pipeline.

The second author is a Queer Chicana educator, is a first-generation college student, is a daughter of immigrants, and has been an educator in Southern California for more than 20 years. Having taught high school English for 10 years, which included Ethnic Studies courses, she prioritized college-going practices in her own classroom by supporting students in writing their college admissions essays, having them conduct research on four-year universities, and engaging in other practices to increase students' (and their families') access to college-going individuals and knowledge. At the time of the study, the second author was a community college professor working with predominantly Students of Color. Through her role at the college, the second author was able to design a preservice teacher internship program for community college students aspiring to become educators and partner with HGHS, placing two community college students to work with school leaders and students. The interns' primary responsibility was to support the development of the school's ethnic studies and student-wellness initiatives, with opportunities to design workshops and programs for HGHS students.

5. Results

In the following section, we present our findings to describe how HGHS prepares students for college through coalitional efforts. First, we highlight the school's collaborative model of college preparation that centers the whole person, helping students unlearn societal trauma such as racism and build self-confidence to opt into college-going activities. Second, our study shows how asset-based approaches create a climate of care, trust, and positive expectations to manifest students' college worthiness. These findings elucidate a multifaceted organizational strategy for preparing students for college, particularly those with adverse educational experiences in their prior schooling.

5.1. Cultivating College Worthiness Through Wellness and Interpersonal Connections

Our first finding demonstrates that HGHS' school leaders and community partners took concrete action to educate the whole person and enacted a vision that attended to students' lived experiences, knowledge, and well-being as entry points into preparing them for college. Given HGHS' budget constraints, school personnel recognized the value of drawing on community resources to systematically support students' development of their self-worth and goals for higher education. HGHS strategically worked with local youth-development organizations that were like-minded in their commitment to serve the whole child and center wellness through caring practices, mental health, and interpersonal connections. When asked to speak about what made HGHS unique in how they served students, Lupe, the school principal, shared the following:

The approach. This idea of really focusing on well-being. . . here it's different. . . It is really community-oriented, which is the biggest difference between this place and where I have been in the past. . . I really feel like, here, we are serving beyond the student. How do we leverage community partners? How do we bring in parents? At [school] events, it's open to anyone in the community. We have had parents come and do workshops. It goes deeper than the humans we serve here. It goes deeper, and I think it's beautiful.

Lupe spoke about the intentionality and inclusivity in working with communities and families in ways that affirmed Latiné students' experiences and cultures. This strategy influenced who the school partnered with to build students' capacity, and as a result, the administration collaborated with the school board to identify three local organizations to advance HGHS' vision, as demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2. HGHS coalition partnerships.

Organization (Pseudonym)	Program Vision/Mission	Key Offerings at HGHS
Empowering Communities for Health Organization (ECHO)	Empowering students and their communities through an emphasis on indigenous values, students' health and wellbeing, and culturally relevant practices.	Provided mental health, life skills, and counseling workshops for students and families
Partnership for Education and College Success (PECS)	Partnering with schools to provide programming and learning opportunities for college and career readiness.	Provided academic enrichment services before and after school focusing on college access and academic success
Community College Teacher Preparation Program (CCTPP)	Working with community college students to provide preservice teaching opportunities, mentorship, financial assistance, and additional support through an equity focus.	Provided two community college student interns to support the school's wellness and academic enrichment initiatives, integrating these efforts in the classrooms

By co-locating on the HGHS campus, these three organizations composed the infrastructure for which educators and community members provided integrative services to foster positive interpersonal connections and educational expectations (Schneider, 2007). In doing so, they were able to increase students' exposure to college-educated adults and prepare students for college through wellness. One of these organizations, Partnership for Education and College Success (PECS), worked with schools and additional sectors of the community to consider fostering students' psychological, emotional, and intellectual safety as an imperative to their worthiness as epistemic agents.

As the lead staff member for PECS, Adriana talked about her role and responsibilities for HGHS students:

Students can be very guarded because of their circumstances. They are looking for people who believe in them... They want someone that cares for them and roots for them. We have been able to build long-lasting friendships with the students. And we noticed that, once we cater to those needs, the academic side is much easier. Once they feel safe, this is a safe space, they feel like 'Now we can actually pay attention, and we can focus.'

Instead of seeing these students from the lens of deficiency, educators such as Adriana maintained their belief in helping them reclaim agency as knowledge producers. It is worth noting that these educators were using students' contexts as a starting point for learning and not as excuses to lowering their college-going expectations. As a member of a partnering organization, Adriana prioritized caring and safety as strategies for instilling a sense of belief in students' intellectual capacity. Our finding is consistent with research suggesting that many students who have negative experiences with schooling are actually looking for educators to believe in them and care for them in ways that help them navigate and overcome obstacles (Liou et al., 2016; Valenzuela, 2010).

Similarly, Lupe shared, during our observations, that the students who initially transferred into the school could be "very quiet" and that the school tried very hard to foster deep interpersonal connections for them that centered on care, well-being, and the removal of structural inequities. To help the school accomplish this goal, HGHS partnered with ECHO to facilitate wellness workshops that included topics such as intergenerational trauma, naming and confronting racism, and developing coping and other problem-solving skills. The organization provided free therapy in the form of group and one-on-one counseling, as well as connecting students to mental health interns and professionals, spaces, resources, and events that were open to the public. Ken, ECHO's manager who led these group counseling sessions, shared that the sessions were quite popular with the students, providing them with an accessible and consistent safe space to discuss the challenges that they were having in life and develop strategies to respond to these stressors:

Our [services] are not a strict regimen, such as behavioral therapy, week by week. It's about an individualized treatment plan, and we do have a curriculum that we use for 9th-grade transition. We use it as a template for the students, going into issues such as peer relationships, how to ask for help, cliques in the school, and other skills to [strengthen their sense of belonging in school].

At HGHS, these trained mental health professionals worked with students to gradually shift the ways in which they identified with schooling, especially for those who had negative experiences in their prior education.

Ken also spoke at length about the importance of using wellness as a platform to help students reenvision their academic trajectory from a state of self-worth. We asked Ken to characterize his expectations of students during these counseling sessions. He explained the following:

We look at intergenerational trauma and colonial mentality, so when we ask trauma-informed questions, we take into account family history, context in education when it comes to colonization, racism, and colorism. So when it comes to socio-emotional learning, more so the self-regulating practices and how it affects one's ability to learn and stay focused in school, there can be certain triggers which may impact motivation for studying or wanting to graduate. So as mental health professionals, we are there to help with the self-regulation of it all and build the coping skills, so they are independent and able to function and meet

their daily responsibilities, like going to school, taking care of siblings, going to soccer practices, things like that.

Through these practices, Ken supported students with a range of academic topics, from attending school, to doing homework, to developing the language to make sense of experiences that are impacting their mental health. With these practices, students were given the tools to confront their internalized trauma and colonial mentality, which often discredit their knowledge and sense of self-worth. Yousuf and Khalifa (2026) remind us that these harmful experiences are often the results of educators' negative expectations of students, which trigger students' emotional pain and heightened awareness of their racialization in school. Our findings expand on Yousuf and Khalifa's (2026) work by illuminating concrete strategies for addressing these negative experiences.

Ken further added that he believed these services helped "students feel more supported, more confident in themselves. They improved their grades, and some students ended up graduating and that was beautiful. For some, attendance improved." Through these strategic partnerships, then, HGHS was able to create the conditions for students to critically examine and name their own experiences and behaviors, as well as recognize their own self-worth, rather than overly rely on external validation from the adults at the school. This is consistent with the literature on how students' well-being and sense of worth are improved by their access to caring adults who hold positive expectations of them (Kapke et al., 2017; Novak & Mihić, 2018). The findings also move beyond the traditional metrics of college readiness (grades, test results, etc.) that view working-class Latiné students through a deficit, 'at-risk' lens. Instead, the educators in this study utilized their knowledge of students' experiences and backgrounds to engage in antiracist practices as a means to instill students' sense of self-worth.

5.2. Enacting Positive Expectations as an Inclusive Practice of College Worthiness

Our second thematic analysis shows that the school's focus on educating the whole person also included enacting positive academic expectations as an inclusive practice of college worthiness (Martinez et al., 2024). According to our informal conversations with many school personnel, earning students' trust and having them unlearn dominant perceptions of their worth were important, especially for those students who had, in one way or another, experienced doubts and stigma at their prior schools that had diminished their sense of academic potential. During our observation of one of the school board meetings, Miss, the school's executive director, emphasized the importance of centering an asset-based education as the basis of the school's expectations for students' academic success. She shared with the school board, "We need to build up our students' confidence in their ability to succeed, because making them feel bad about not doing well in school won't help them. It will only make them more anxious." Miss and several school board members proceeded to talk about the need to eliminate stereotype threat, where students' anxiety about failing classes led them to feelings of paralysis and incompetence in ways that made those predictions come true (Murphy et al., 2024).

In our observations, we also heard school board members and leaders challenge traditional models of education wherein students often have to shoulder the blame when they do not meet schools' expectations. Instead, by prioritizing trusting and caring relationships, HGHS educators were able to pursue epistemic justice by focusing on students' academics and creating the necessary conditions to convince students of their own capability and rights to self-determination.

For example, throughout our visits, Miss continuously reminded us that "students need a different approach to schooling that goes against the grain," rejecting the dominant approaches to accountability that often impose shame and blame when students do

not succeed academically. Miss pointed to loving and caring relationships as essential prerequisites to steering students to perform to higher levels of academic expectations:

The goal is to create a culture of love and care so that we can push hard. It's that simple and hard at the same time. The goal is to create such relationships that I can go, 'No. Go back.' And for the student to know that Miss is expecting more and I have the skills, knowledge, and resources to get better and I understand what to do when she says go back. Which is a lot of academic work, like, how are we teaching, what resources are available to our students?

To challenge the perceived value and worth of students' college readiness as an acquired social status, HGHS rearticulated the social ties and networks within a community that historically has been perceived to lack such "high-status" capital (see [Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2011](#)). Miss was unwilling to accept the divergent expectations that some students brought to HGHS, which is the status quo in some schools where little to no learning is permissible ([Liou et al., 2016](#)). To reenvision education as a counterweight to these deficit ideologies, Miss was adamant about assisting students in fostering higher forms of expectations through the trust and caring relationships that they have worked hard to cultivate as a community ([Gonzales, 2019](#); [Tschannen-Moran, 2014](#)).

HGHS educators and partners were also able to develop several strategies to help students unlearn their skepticism and prior beliefs about their potential for academic success. According to Lupe, one of the strategies to ignite students' sense of epistemic agency was for them to understand how much they were seen and heard, especially by the educators who believed in them. One activity that the school community engaged in was "shout-outs," wherein students were publicly recognized for doing something positive or making improvements. Lupe stated the following:

Something as simple as shout-outs, where we pass out shout-outs cards to students... We are really big on positive framing and seeing the good. And seeing the good doesn't mean you don't see the struggles. I just think we are a team that prioritizes speaking life into our students. And if they feel love, and they feel heard, they will want to rise to the expectations and see that the world is literally in their hands.

These activities were designed to reaffirm students' contributions to the classroom and the school community in ways that were not overly exaggerated to give them a false sense of accomplishment. Instead, the educators expected their students to develop a positive framing of themselves, understand the areas that they still needed to work on, and use humanizing affirmations to unlock their agency for higher forms of learning.

Consistent with the literature on community coalitions as effective schooling practices for Latiné students ([Hendrickson et al., 2025](#)), the community partners in this study were central to HGHS' integrative approach to caring, wellness, and positive academic expectations. Vickie, a classroom intern and college student who was hired by HGHS through its partnership with the Community College Teacher Preparation Program (CCTPP), shared that the school's humanizing approach to students' socio-emotional needs had been evident to her from her first day on campus:

They want to incorporate wellness into every aspect of academics and student life at the [school]... In order to have rigor, you need to have wellness first. In order for students to be fully focused on their work and interested in the coursework or succeeding in the classroom, they need to be taken care of. And at a certain level, that happens.

The repeated association of well-being with educators' belief in students' academic potential demonstrated an intentional, coordinated, and community-based effort to instill confidence

and self-worth in students. To add to this intentionality, Lupe frequently led breathing and meditation exercises for both school staff and students, demonstrating the school administrations' own commitment to wellness, reaffirming the curricular activities that were taking place within and across ECHO, PECS, CCTPP, and the classroom.

To explore the consistencies of these expectations across multiple organizations, we asked Vickie about how these strategies were integrated into the classroom. She responded as follows:

I've seen that [humanizing approach to students' socio-emotional needs] in the classroom. The teachers don't act very big or authoritative in these classrooms. In that sense it's very different. If the students are ever doing something 'wrong,' they always use a certain type of language that I wasn't familiar with in my schooling. It goes back to language and certain expectations that teachers have of students, and vice versa. Their entire code of conduct is set up differently so that the student feels seen, heard, and always supported no matter what. That might be easier because of the small size of the school, but even without that size, it would still be very central to this school.

Vickie's observations were consistent with our school visits, where we observed students' interactions with their teachers. During one of our visits, for example, we saw the school having barbeque events during lunchtime and student-faculty volleyball games, where there was no assumption of hierarchy. We were invited to take part in these activities that are largely coed. The sporting events that we observed also did not focus on winning, nor did one team let the other team win out of pity. Rather, it was about having everyone participate, cheer, and uplift the next person, including those on the opposing team. Initially, we were unclear as to how these activities contributed to students' college worthiness, but over time and through our own reflections, we realized that these interpersonal connections were a significant pathway that gave rise to students' college worthiness (Schneider, 2007). By positioning students and teachers as partners through team sports, the school fostered a series of shared experiences to simulate what this collaborative relationship can look like in the classroom.

To support students in developing their sense of college worthiness, PECS played a significant role in these students' success in the classroom. One of their support staff, Marisol, was a graduate of HGHS who also spoke Spanish, grew up in the community, and had recently graduated from college. We often ran into Marisol and Adriana during our school visits and noticed how much the students gravitated toward them. There were times when we noticed PECS' after-school tutorial services operating late into the evenings as we were coming out of a school board meeting. As we walked by the bungalows, we observed students and PECS staff voluntarily staying late into the evening going over their homework. It was already pitch dark on our way to the parking lot, but the lights beaming from these classrooms told us about the importance of these services and students' willingness to engage academically beyond school hours. We also happened to cross paths with the school's janitor, who was also staying behind to perform his lockup duties.

From these observations, we began to believe that this was not a one-time event or activity, but a school norm. When we inquired about this, and Marisol noted the following:

Hey, we are always going to be here... They can always come back for support. We even have students from previous year, they ask for support in essays or they want to apply to college then. We advise them and give them support... 'Where do you want to apply? We can help you. You need a résumé; okay, let's work on it.'

We noticed that Marisol, as an HGHS graduate, came with a certain level of credibility with the students that enabled her to serve as a bridge and a role model between students and PECS. That is, Marisol's presence in and of itself was an expression of commitment to and affirmation of these students' college-going potential. She emphasized a scaffolded approach to positioning students for college:

Our expectations are that, freshman year, try to engage them in good habits. If they have a C, D, or F, why is that? Now is the time to fix that. As much as we like the credit-recovery program, we don't want students to take them because that means they are behind... Junior and senior year, we want them focused on applying to college academic-wise.

Once students recovered their credit, HGHS began to position these students for college. In between these curricular activities, the school also took students on long road trips to visit college campuses in California. The school also had recruiters from colleges and universities from various parts of the country discuss their admissions process, scholarship opportunities, and financial aid with students. No matter who we spoke with, it was clear that the goal of HGHS was not to impose postsecondary education but to build students' epistemic agency in ways that led them to actively pursue it.

To help students see college as a tangible and realistic goal, HGHS partnered with PECS and the local community college to provide students with opportunities to receive tutoring, earn additional high school and college credits, take college-level courses, and make up courses that they may have failed at their previous school. Their expectations were to help students unlearn deficit ideologies and other triggers that reminded them of their prior academic standing. HGHS leveraged their community coalitions to help students focus on success, regardless of how big or small they were. Ava, the college counselor, said the following:

College is the goal for all of them. Some might not think they can do it, but at the end, they see it's possible and it becomes more real. Like, for a couple, at the beginning, they didn't want to apply. And they saw everyone applying and the excitement of getting accepted. So one student came and asked, 'Is it too late to apply?' We tell them, 'No,' and we helped her apply.

We asked about how HGHS supports students with their college-going expectations. Raquel, an intern from CCTPP, shared the following:

Our counselor is amazing. Every FAFSA workshop, she's there. She's making sure they apply. I believe all the seniors apply whether they want to go to college or not. Like this one senior who didn't even want to go college, but when he got his acceptance, he was excited.

Raquel's observation tells us that sometimes students may make postsecondary decisions based on whether they can gain admission, which further demonstrates that students' choices regarding going to college can be a question of access and affordability and not a reliable indicator of their actual interest in postsecondary education.

As a result of helping students see college as a tangible and realistic goal, Miss reported at one school board meeting that most students recently enrolled in math and science courses at the local community college had received an "A" grade. Miss said, "these students were very reluctant in the beginning, but now they want to keep taking these classes after realizing they are just as capable as their older peers [in the community college]." Initially, these students were reluctant to take these classes, fearing that they were destined to fail. By the end of the semester, they were surprised at their own ability to succeed, which gave them a strong boost of confidence about their eventual transition into college. Furthermore, Miss arranged for college-entrance and advanced-placement

exams to be held on campus, so that all juniors and seniors could have the opportunity to take them.

To learn about how these efforts have made a difference in students' sense of college worthiness, we interviewed Vickie for an example that set HGHS apart from other schools. Vickie shared the following:

The first day that I went to interview to find out if it would be a good fit for me to work there, there was a field trip happening to an arboretum to learn about plants. But a lot of seniors who were supposed to go on the field trip didn't think it was a good use of their time since their college applications were due in a couple of days. So, they stayed behind and that was not looked down upon at all. There were even teachers who stayed behind who set up a nice classroom and helped them with final touches and proofread their essays...that was a nice blending of wellness and college.

Through these multiorganizational efforts, we began to see students joining HGHS leaders in the collective pursuit of epistemic justice through the framework of college worthiness. Given the numerous negative experiences that these students had with schooling in the past, the ways that they prioritized college applications over the field trip represented a significant shift in their perceptions of and engagement with their learning environment. In this case, Vickie perceived HGHS students developing a self-concept of worthiness, accumulating the language to name and process their lived experiences, and making informed decisions for their long-term goals. Consistent with the research, once students see the adults around them doing everything to connect them to college-going opportunities, they start to adopt higher forms of expectations for themselves as well (Liou et al., 2016; Witter & Hattie, 2026).

6. Discussion

Given the depth and intensity of the current anti-Latiné political climate, the use of college worthiness as an analytic framework can tell a different story and reposition Latiné high school students as knowledge creators. This work is especially important in learning how school leaders, community partners, and students can jointly respond to societal forces by creating alternative modes of power to reframe the discourse of deservingness into an antiracist understanding of worthiness. Beyond the numbers and percentages of those navigating the Latiné educational pipeline, HGHS highlights the work that creates college access points for this population. Through asset-based approaches (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015; E. Hernandez & Ortiz, 2022; Linares & Muñoz, 2011; López, 2017), our concept of college worthiness offers an analytic tool with concrete examples of what a communal approach to college preparation can look like (Schneider, 2007).

In this study, supporting students for college took coalitional efforts, positive expectations, and scaffolded approaches to position and reposition them for college-going futures (Schneider, 2007). HGHS' collaborative model centers on the whole person, helping students unlearn trauma and racism and build self-confidence to opt into activities that prepare them for college. For educators aspiring to establish comparable support systems, it is paramount to enact leadership in ways that are profoundly collaborative. Gay (2023) inspires us to consider how organizational and coalitional "competence in equity and excellence is not achieved instantaneously or intuitively; it requires time, effort, and intentionality" (p. 5). The story of HGHS suggests that eliminating geographic and organizational siloes among schools, community agencies, and other service providers can be a powerful way of advancing students' trajectories within the educational pipeline.

Our study also shows that building coalitions must have a greater purpose than sharing facilities and human resources. More than ever, school leaders must take the

sociopolitical context of education into account, as well as the macro-level policies that have severe consequences for their school community. These organizational conditions must accompany interpersonal connections grounded in equitable relationships in honor of students' human agency and future capacity for political self-determination. To establish a climate of college worthiness, school leaders must be aware of and respond to students' needs and developmental stages to create runways for them to ultimately become academically successful. In this scaffolded process, our study points to wellness and students' sense of renewal as integral components to advancing social justice through education.

From a social network perspective (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2011), our study demonstrates that preparing students for postsecondary futures is a series of knowledge-building interactions (Bernal, 2002; Krist, 2024). Since establishing a climate of positive expectations requires treating students equitably as knowledge creators (Rojas & Liou, 2017; Osei-Kofi, 2011), this work must coalesce with epistemic justice by affirming the integrity of students' credibility as knowers without reproducing another series of hierarchical power relations (Fricker, 2007). Therefore, asset-based practices oppose the one-directional, adults-to-students transmissions of social capital to decode the system or the superficial acknowledgment, celebration, or validation of diversity (see Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2011). Instead of educators imposing their expectations and treating students as empty vessels, our findings show a collaborative approach to eliciting students' positive expectations based on anti-deficit beliefs of relational equity to be a far more effective strategy (López, 2017).

To reject the whiteness embedded within the college-readiness opportunity structures, school and community leaders must come together to reposition Latiné and other racialized populations as determiners of their own college pathways. A critical starting point to developing a more inclusive and just school is to establish trust in communities where trust for public institutions is either historically nonexistent or quickly eroding based on the current government. Because the school established a climate of trust, HGHS students were able to leverage the opportunities created to recognize their postsecondary potentials. Prior literature suggests that Latiné students who experience negative expectations in schools often turn to family and community members to develop college-going information networks (E. Hernandez & Ortez, 2022; Liou et al., 2018). Our findings suggest that school leaders' efforts to develop a climate of trust and caring must go beyond giving students a vague sense of inclusion in the educational process. Rather, these organizational conditions must meaningfully assist students in recognizing their active role in education (Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Valenzuela, 2010).

From climate to practice, our findings further suggest that college worthiness is not simply a feeling of being validated by others but a set of actions that manifest into a state of knowing. Delpit (2026) shares an excerpt from a bilingual administrator about the power of positive expectations:

You have to have high expectations. If you challenge kids, they will do what you want. Tell them they can all get As, then tell them how to do it. They'll work for you if you challenge them and help them get there (p. 121).

Our findings extend Delpit's (2026) work by illuminating the influence of a multi-organizational approach to asset-based education. To this end, when students are fully aware of their educators' positive expectations, they begin to see themselves from the lens of worthiness. When educators' and students' positive expectations are congruent, it can shift mindsets and elicit students' agency for higher forms of learning (Rubie-Davies & Hattie, 2025). To do this work effectively, school leaders must establish norms wherein students' college worthiness is reinforced through the simultaneity of caring and positive expectations.

As such, the story of HGHS educators and community partners shows us that understanding students' contexts does not have to result in pity and the lowering of academic expectations (Delpit, 2026; Gay, 2023). Caring for students means to care for their ability to be successful in the future (Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006; Rivera-McCutchen, 2012; Valenzuela, 2010). Our findings reinforce Wandix-White's (2023) conceptualization of caring as a central element in educators' practices of positive expectations. According to her work, caring practices consist of building authentic relationships, demonstrating respect, taking students' journeys seriously, and providing social and academic support (Wandix-White, 2023). In our study, these interpersonal connections positioned students to take big and small steps to recast themselves as college worthy (Curry & Athanases, 2020; Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Within this process, learning requires the unlearning of one's negative internalization of narrow stereotypes and other harmful societal influences, which has direct implications for school leaders who may be looking to make their schools more inclusive and just during the anti-Latiné political era. For future research, more evidence is needed to specify ways that wellness education (or other health-related, decolonial models of education) can serve as a vehicle to break the cycles of residual emotional harms and reenvision more liberatory educational trajectories. Furthermore, O'Brien's (2021) emphasis on the relationality of teachers' and students' well-being suggests that additional research is needed to attend to the well-being of school leaders and other service providers, especially when their emotional labor consistently collides with social and economic injustices in society. Finally, there is a pressing need to examine issues of college worthiness for Latiné students who are also bilingual or multilingual and those who come to school with a disability.

7. Conclusions

Rubie-Davies and Hattie (2025) remind us to consider educators' positive expectations of students as an organizational mandate, where educators and students jointly pursue higher forms of learning as worthwhile endeavors. Using worthiness as the centerpiece for preparing students for college, educational institutions must assume responsibility for dedicating spaces, resources, and relationships to help students chase their dreams (McNair et al., 2022). Although college information has become increasingly accessible through technology, there remains a significant number of schools that fail to offer any forms of human guidance or support (Shamsuddin, 2024). Our study shows that affirming Latiné students' college worthiness through community coalition building requires systemic, relational, and collaborative practices of positive expectations. To create expectations that students can believe in, educators must work with students to narrow the gaps between their academic standing, their future aspirations, and the reality of achieving larger goals.

To counter competition-driven notions of college readiness, equitable and justice-oriented leadership are crucial to leveling the playing field. Our study disputes widely held assumptions that compliance with the current anti-Latiné policies and practices is the only avenue for school leaders to survive politically. Instead of feeling alone and isolated, we learn that communities can create spaces and capacities of resistance through like-minded professionals and neighborhood organizations. Through coordinated services, schools such as HGHS can function as a protective factor against societal forces, where community leaders work in concert to increase students' opportunities to learn (Acevedo-Gil & Solorzano, 2023). Additionally, as a paradigm shift in how college preparation is understood from the perspective of asset instead of deficit, it is imperative to consider every student's worthiness without bias and judgment.

In the case of HGHS, students' access to credit-recovery and college-level courses, extracurricular activities, and regular community-grounded counseling are some of the

concrete examples that open college access points at a time when these opportunities no longer seem possible. Creating such organizational capacity should be accompanied by the idea that some students may need longer runways to get to college. Rather than lowering expectations for this segment of the community, schools must be equipped and responsive so that all students are ultimately successful. In the current anti-Latiné political climate, these leadership practices must include students' access to safety, well-being, and caring adults (Liou & Liang, 2026).

In the face of the ongoing injustices against Latiné communities in the United States, all human life should be respected. Exemplifying Shyheim Woods' words about self-worth, this study shows educators working with like-minded organizations to create a community of love, care, and support in order to inspire students' hope for their futures (E. Hernandez & Orteiz, 2022). In our roles as researchers, HGHS' pursuits of epistemic justice have inspired us to utilize our writing to amplify our participants' voices at a time when free speech and academic freedom are surveilled and heavily regulated (Bryant & Appleby, 2025). HGHS serves as a beacon for greater solidarity among schools, community organizations, and researchers to jointly strengthen the Latiné educational pipeline. Collaboratively, our shared epistemic resources can serve as a platform for students to harness their inherent potential and construct more inclusive, dignified, and liberatory futures.

Author Contributions: Both authors equally contributed to the conceptualization of the study, research design, data collection, data analysis, and development of the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was approved by the Office of Research Integrity and Assurance (ORIA) (protocol code 31257931; 50943599, and date of approval 8 September 2021).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Note

- ¹ Hermila Galindo High School is a pseudonym for the participating high school.

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