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## **Bridging Multiple Worlds: Building Pathways From Childhood to College**

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Students' pathways through school can be seen as moving through an academic pipeline to adulthood. As students move through primary and secondary school to college, large numbers of ethnic minority and low-income youth leave the pipeline prematurely. Recent census data show that low-income and ethnic minority youth—especially African-American, Native-American, and Latino youth—drop out of school at higher rates and attend college at lower rates, compared to their numbers in the general population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

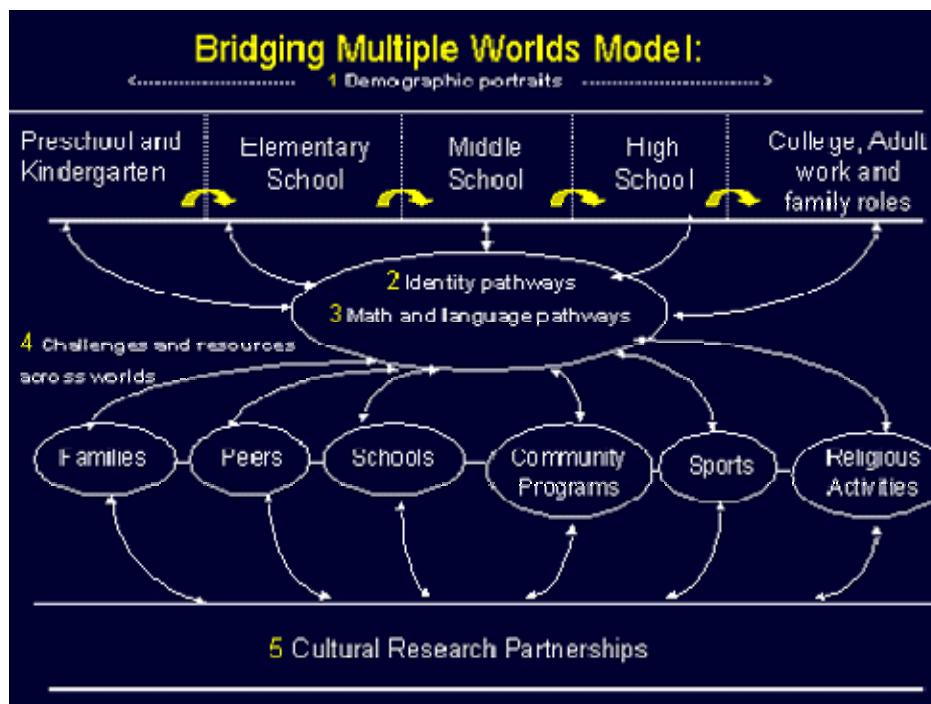
How do diverse youth beat these odds and build successful pathways from childhood to college? Rather than seeing diversity as a deficit from the mainstream, educators across the nation are mapping the supports, opportunities, and barriers that students meet along their route through the academic pipeline.

The Bridging Multiple Worlds model focuses on how diverse youth, beginning in their middle childhood years, navigate across their worlds of families, peers, schools, and communities as they move along their pathways to college, careers, and family roles in adulthood. The concept of *worlds* refers to the cultural knowledge and expectations held in each social context and *navigation* captures youth experiences as they move across the borders of family, school, and community (Phelan, Davidson & Yu, 1991). As Figure 1 illustrates, the Bridging Multiple Worlds model involves five dimensions:

1. *Demographic portraits* of families' national origin, ethnicity, languages, education, and occupation among youth moving through the academic pipeline
2. Youth *identity pathways* to college, careers, and family roles
3. Youth *math and English academic pathways* through school to work
4. *Challenges and resources* youth meet across their worlds of families, peers, schools, and communities

5. *Cultural research partnerships* that reach across lines of national origin, ethnicity, social class, and gender to build pathways to college, with youth, families, schools, community programs, and university staff all as researchers

**Figure 1. The Bridging Multiple Worlds Model**



Key transitions along the academic pipeline are shown in Figure 1 with arrows that bridge from preschool and kindergarten into first grade at about age 6, from elementary to middle school at about age 12, from middle to high school at about age 15, and from high school to college, work, and adult family roles at about age 18. It is during middle childhood that students begin to make choices that move them towards either “the good path of life,” what Latino families call *el buen camino de la vida* (Azmitia & Cooper, 2001), or pathways leading to high-risk behaviors involving drugs, aggression, and early sexual activity. Youth are particularly vulnerable as they move from elementary to middle school at about age 12. This is the time when youth navigate from relationships and responsibilities with families and school to the increasingly strong pull of the

world of peers. Families, schools, peers, and community programs each can serve as both resources and challenges as youth make this crucial transition.

The Bridging Multiple Worlds model has been used across diverse cultural and ethnic communities, including U.S. youth of African, Chinese, European, Filipino, Latino, Native-American, Japanese, and Vietnamese descent, Japanese youth, and multiple-heritage youth. To illustrate the application of this model, we draw from one cultural research partnership (Cooper, Dominguez & Rosas, in press). Since 1995, this partnership between the University of California Santa Cruz (UCSC) and the Cabrillo Advancement Program (CAP) has involved over 500 youth. CAP awards scholarships and offers supports to help students from low-income, mostly Mexican-descent families, stay on track to college. Over the years, the partnership has collected long-term data from 147 students, beginning with their entry into the program at age 12 through their high school graduation at age 18. Other data sources include parents, school transcripts, and observations at program events. Using these data, we illustrate the Bridging Multiple Worlds model for Latino students in the late middle childhood years, with an emphasis on their challenges and resources navigating from childhood to college.

### **Demographic Portraits**

Many of the Mexican immigrant parents whose children entered the program received their formal education in Mexico, typically less than a high school degree, and for many, only elementary level education. Nonetheless, parents who worked in strawberry fields, hotel kitchens, and factories dreamt that their children would become doctors, teachers, and lawyers. As one parent said, “The program will give my daughter wings to attain her dream.”

### **Youth Identity Pathways to College and Careers**

In children's application essays to the program, the sixth graders described their career dreams in the same manner as their parents. They too wanted careers as doctors, lawyers, teachers, and technically skilled workers—mostly careers requiring a college degree. For these dreams, children found their greatest resources in their families—including parents, siblings, and cousins—and also cited their school teachers, counselors, coaches, friends, and themselves—through their own hard work. The challenges to achieving their dreams came from low family financial resources as well as from expectations of key people in their lives. For example, sometimes parents expected them to work in the fields

to increase household income, and some peers pressured them to cut school, take drugs, and engage in other risky behaviors.

### **Math and English Academic Pathways**

Students navigated distinctive academic pathways of math and English classes and grades through school. These can be described as consistently *high*, *declining*, *increasing* from remedial to college-prep math, “*back on track*” (declining then increasing), and consistently *low*. Passing algebra at ninth grade is a leading indicator of eligibility for four-year universities. For example, among 30 students who were followed from sixth to ninth grades, their math pathways diverged early. Students who had higher math grades in sixth grade were more likely to pass algebra in ninth grade, moving along high pathways. Still, some students who failed algebra moved back on track after challenging personal events and others moved up, increasing from remedial math to algebra.

### **Challenges and Resources Across Worlds**

In the transition from childhood to adolescence, factors in the worlds of families, schools, peers, and communities help some youth move along their academic pathways while others let them slip.

*In the family world*, parents considered moral guidance of their children as their primary role. They were responsible for inculcating in their children respect, honesty, and responsibility. Although these values constituted important resources, many parents lacked the knowledge of educational institutions and academic subjects to guide their children through the school years to college. They used indirect supports such as making homework a priority over chores, reminding them to think of their future, and encouraging them to stay in school. Students in middle childhood and continuing through adolescence consistently reported that their parents, especially mothers, remained central to their staying on track to college (Azmitia & Cooper, 2001).

In many Latino families, *older siblings* act as mentors. They may be more able than parents to help their younger siblings with homework and model positive school behavior. They provide companionship and emotional support at school that can enhance student motivation and achievement. However, as students reach junior high school, a number of older siblings no longer perform a

mentoring role because they are not doing well in school or have dropped out (Azmitia & Cooper, 2001).

*In the school world, teachers and counselors* function as brokers and gatekeepers. As cultural brokers they are resources for children and families by helping children succeed in school by providing the academic assistance that parents with limited formal education cannot offer their children. Teachers collaborate with community organizations like the CAP program to identify students in middle childhood for summer and enrichment programs that move them along the academic pipeline. Teachers can also be institutional gatekeepers when they assess students against standardized benchmarks of achievement that determine eligibility for future college-prep classes or placement in remedial classes. Although some children benefit from special education, when teachers recommend children for special education classes (where African-American and Latino children have been found to be overrepresented), teachers send students toward remedial tracks in middle and high school and away from college-prep pathways.

*In the world of peers,* youth find both positive and negative influences. On the positive side, peers can provide each other with help with schoolwork, and thus serve as a resource for school. Youth who share similar educational and career goals also become resources for each other's developing college plans. Peers, however, also can exercise a negative influence, as when they socialize other youth about sex, drugs, and aggressive behaviors. And as youth, especially boys, move through high school, they are also less likely to remain in community and college outreach programs, either through peer pressure or the need to work.

*Community program staff* also serve as culture brokers by providing resources beyond those families and schools can offer. The young adults who staff programs help Latino youth feel confident and safe in their neighborhoods, learn about alternatives to violence, and gain the bicultural skills needed to succeed in school. For example, these staff members build on Latino traditions of godparents (*compadres*) who help parents in guiding their children along "the good path of life." Like Latino parents, these staff members define success in life in moral and academic terms. However, they also offer youth a broader view of

schools, colleges, and other mainstream institutions. They help youth link their worlds of family, school, street, and community with their dreams for the future.

### **Cultural Research Partnerships**

Cultural research partnerships are collaborations among youth, families, schools, programs, and universities that reach across lines of ethnicity, social class, and gender to build pathways to college. When all partners are researchers, they can track the five dimensions of the Bridging Multiple Worlds model over time, both to boost resources that children can draw from each of their worlds and to keep academic pipelines open for the whole community. The UCSC-CAP partnership has traced students' demographic portraits, college and career identity pathways, math and English pathways, and challenges and resources over the years from 12 to 18 for the students as a group. The partnership also developed longitudinal case studies of individual students, both to help improve the program and to help students and people in their lives map their resources or assets as well as challenges for college pathways. And the partnership has used tools for reviewing and planning collaborations to strengthen educational practice in schools and community programs with local, state, national, and international partners.

These partnerships deepen the understanding of all youth pathways through the academic pipeline to college. By linking research and community-based programs, the Bridging Multiple Worlds partnerships have identified the evolving resources and challenges of youth as they navigate multiple social worlds. The research affirms the crucial role of parents and extended family members as resources in the school engagement and college pathways of youth. It highlights the important role of community-based programs in providing opportunities for students, beginning in the sixth grade, to stay on track in the academic pipeline through experiences in a college setting, scholarship incentives, and networks of peers with similar college plans.

Students in late middle childhood are more likely than older youth to participate in a community-based program. This suggests that early outreach to college and college-based careers to Latino youth can be a fruitful strategy to keep them on the path to a college education. Because the pathways of Latino youth are fragile, there is a need for sustained family, school, and community engagement on their behalf.

## References

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## Related Resources

**The Bridging Worlds Toolkit** includes a brief overview of the Bridging Multiple Worlds model, a presentation illustrating how the model was applied to policy decisions in one community program, and activities to use with youth to build identity pathways to college and careers. The toolkit is available free, with prototypes in English and Spanish, on our website at [www.bridgingworlds.org/toolkit.html](http://www.bridgingworlds.org/toolkit.html).

The toolkit is designed to help youth, families, schools, and community programs form partnerships to ask and answer questions for working towards student success. Different partners and partnerships have different questions yet share the goal of student success. Principals may ask how many of their students went from elementary to high school to college. Teachers may want to know what languages are spoken by families of children in their classrooms. Parents ask how they can help their children achieve their dreams and goals. Youth want to

know what classes and grades are important for university admissions and career dreams. Program directors ask where their programs are most needed and most effective, and funders ask if goals are being met and students are gaining from programs they support.

The toolkit includes questions in survey, interview, and activity formats, in English and Spanish, for schools and programs called “It's All About Choices/Se trata de todas las decisiones,” as well as code books and templates for analysis, graphing, and presentations that align case studies with variable-based and statistical analyses.

Partnerships have found these tools easy to adapt to many settings. A community program/university partnership in Providence, Rhode Island, used the longitudinal case study template to trace pathways of students participating in the Summer Academy of the Southeast Asian Development Center for youth and community leaders. According to teachers in Watsonville, California, “It's All About Choices/Se trata de todas las decisiones” activities are effective with students and also help teachers understand the realities of students' and families' lives.