Juntos Pa'lante / Together We Go Forward: *Familismo* and the Latinx College Process

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Latinxs[1] are one of the fastest growing demographics in the United States. Given that they now constitute approximately one-in-four K-12 students enrolled in America's public schools ("Poverty", 2016), the expectation would be that Latinx students are enrolling in and graduating from postsecondary institutions at increasing rates. Unfortunately, that has not been the case. Although their college enrollment has increased, Latinx students are still vastly underrepresented across all postsecondary education sectors, and many who do enroll do not end up graduating from college. While stereotypes often portray Latinx students as simply not wanting to go to college or being quick to drop out, these explanations ignore the many external and internal factors that affect a Latinx student's path to educational attainment. One central internal factor that affects Latinx students in the college process is the role of the family. The family can have both positive and negative effects on educational attainment, and those effects are dependent on socioeconomic, generational, and educational realities.

The Latinx community, like many other ethnic communities, is very collectivist in nature, and this is in contrast to the individualistic mindset of the American culture at large. This collectivist nature emphasizes the influential role of the family in an individual's life and decisions. The term for this phenomenon is "familism": familism, or *familismo,* is "the tendency to hold the wants and needs of family in higher regard than one's own[, and] has been considered a common trait of [Latinx] families" (Martínez, 2013, p. 21). Consequently, the concept of *familismo* is prominent in Latinx students' college processes[2]. From deciding whether or not they want to go to college, to finalizing their college choice, many Latinx students base their decisions on what they perceive to be most beneficial for the family.

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[1] "Latinx(s)" is used to reference all individuals within the Latino/a community; "Latino(s)" refers to Latinx men specifically, and "Latina(s)" refers to Latinx women specifically. When a source uses "Hispanic" and/or "Latino" to reference the community as a whole, I substitute the term "Latinx." "Latinx" refers to those who are descended from Latin American countries and is a gender inclusive term.

[2] The "college process" refers specifically to the process of high school students becoming prepared for, applying to, and making decisions about higher education.

The decisions of Latinx students are made within the context of their socioeconomic and opportunistic realities. Across the United States, Latinx students are concentrated in districts with high degrees of poverty and are consequently predominantly of low-socioeconomic status.[3] This reality means students have access to minimal physical and attentive educational resources. Latinx students are also often first-generation college going and/or first-generation American. With parents who are unfamiliar with the American education system, American universities, or both, these students have minimal resources at home as well as at school. The combination of these factors contributes to the discouraging educational attainment statistics for Latinx students. From being less likely to be enrolled in early childhood education, to having higher high school dropout rates and being less likely to graduate on time than other racial/ethnic groups (Azziz, 2015), Latinx students face a plethora of external societal factors that affect their ability to access, attend, and graduate from high school, let alone college.

Latinx students are not the only demographic that is predominantly of first-generation college-going and low-socioeconomic status. Across the United States and its college campuses, students from these backgrounds are referred to as being First-Gen, Low-Income (FLI). The recent *New York Times* article "'I Won't Give Up': How First-Generation Students See College" (Harris, 2017), which details the experiences of fifteen first-generation college going (and predominantly low-income) students, demonstrates the many hardships that FLI college students face. FLI students typically desire or are necessitated to support their family financially, which can elongate the time it takes to complete their degree, as students must manage both work and school at the same time. While student loans and other forms of external aid can alleviate this pressure, many FLI students are unaware of these opportunities.

In many ways, the emotional aspect of college is something FLI students have to face on their own, which conflicts internally with their collectivist upbringing. Even if a FLI student's parents research the college process and learn the mechanics of entering higher education, many parents do not understand the college experience or the emotional challenges that come with it, such as mental health issues.[4] This lack of understanding is especially true of students who have immigrant or foreign parents. "I Won't Give Up" touches on this challenge and shows how second-generation immigrant students may have hard time explaining to their parents the social and work-play balance at American universities (Harris, 2017). Such cultural and social differences may cause strife between FLI students and their parents, potentially creating further misunderstandings about college expectations for both the parents and younger generations.

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[3] 21% of Latinxs in the US live below the poverty line ("Poverty by Rate/Ethnicity").
4 Data on how FLI students have more mental health issues

Nevertheless, a large motivating factor for many FLI students is the idea of utilizing one's college education to achieve upward mobility for both themselves and their families. This desire of collective upward mobility can manifest itself in many ways across a FLI student's college process. For example, FLI students may use their circumstance of not having resources as a source of motivation to do well in school. This motivation can be bolstered by the desires of defying stereotypes surrounding FLI students, making their families proud, and one day providing for their families in the future. In these ways, the concept of *familismo* is a tenet of FLI communities, where students weigh family obligations and considerations heavily. As Latinxs predominantly identify as FLI, *familismo* is a powerful framework to view the college processes of Latinx students.

The FLI identity does not portray the full picture, however, as many Latinxs are also predominantly first-generation *Americans*. Within the first-generation American community, the concept of striving to "do better" for one's family is very strong, both for those students who are preparing to go to college and those who are already in the system. Within their families and immigrant communities, these students are often seen as the proponents of the American Dream. These students are the children of immigrants, immigrants who have worked hard to provide "a better life" for their families—be that through working to support the family financially, through providing their children with information about and access to education, or through simply crossing the metaphorical and/or real border in pursuit of "opportunities."

Due to these beliefs surrounding the American Dream, first-generation American students often view their educational successes and downfalls as determinants of whether their family has "achieved" the American Dream. This view manifests within students as self-inflicted pressure to succeed academically, whose realization can vary subjectively from passing all of one's classes to graduating Valedictorian. When first-generation American students do succeed academically, there is an immense sense of pride and fulfillment for not the only the individual student, but for the whole family. Opposingly, when students do not succeed academically, there can be an overwhelming sense of failure: They feel they have failed their parents, and their parents' sacrifices—from crossing a dangerous border to working endless, underpaid hours—have thus been for naught. These intense fixations on realizing American Dream for their family make it clear that *familismo* is prominent within the experience of first-generation Americans.

Granted, the external realities of being a FLI and/or first-generation American student are not representative of every Latinx student. There are many Latinx students who are of high socioeconomic status, whose families have been in the US for generations, and/or whose parents have obtained college degrees. However, the unifying element of most Latinx families is this concept of *familismo*—of providing for, being loyal to, and

wanting the best for your family. *Familismo* is part of our cultural heritage, regardless of where on the socioeconomic, generational, and educational spectrums we fall. (I say "our" and "we" because I am a Latina, and specifically one who is of low-socioeconomic, first-generation college going, *and* first-generation American status.) I argue that *familismo* is an important lens to view the the Latinx college process because it pervades across socioeconomic, generational, and educational realities, although the nature and intersection of these realities contribute to varying effects.

For the remaining portion of this paper, I will primarily draw upon five external sources that focus specifically on the effects of *familismo* on the Latinx student college process. Two sources are from Melissa A. Martinez, who researches equity and access issues among underserved student communities, with a focus on the Latinx population. Martinez's ("Helping", 2013; "(Re)considering", 2013) two articles discuss how *familismo* affects Latinx students of predominantly low-socioeconomic status and how high school counselors can help Latinx students during the college process, respectively. Another source is from Ebelia Hernández (2015) whose research centers on the Latinx college student experience. Hernández examines the effect of *familismo* on high-achieving Latinas post-college process. Additionally, I conducted two personal interviews: the first interview was with Laura Yolo, a Program Coordinator for Yakima Valley Community College's Upward Bound Program, which serves predominantly FLI, Latinx students, and the second interview is with Karen Villanueva, my younger sister, who is high-achieving Latina and currently going through the college process as an upcoming high school senior. In this paper I have also incorporated my own experiences as an eldest child, FLI student, child of immigrants, and high-achieving Latina.

To further illustrate the role a low-socioeconomic status can have in Latinx students' college process, I examined Martinez's 2013 study "(Re)considering the Role Familismo Plays in Latina/o High Schools Students' College Choices," which was published in the *High School Journal.* In this study, Martínez examined the college choice process of twenty Latinx seniors in South Texas. Each of these students was of low socioeconomic status and attended public, predominantly Latinx high schools, but they varied in their generational statuses.

Martínez makes three generalizations that demonstrate the family's role in shaping Latinx students' college aspirations and decisions. First, many students chose to attend a specific college based on the proximity of the institution to home. Students who attend college close to home are able to visit their families often, and consequently benefit from strong familial ties and emotional support. However, this choice can often be due to renegotiation: students may have originally planned to leave the home region, but after considering their families' preferences, compromised by agreeing to start college at a local institution and later transfer to another

university outside of the region. Martínez argues this negotiation and compromise reflects a student's sense of loyalty to the family and/or a sense of reciprocity and responsibility for those students who feel they must financially contribute to the family income. Since "local institutions" often refer to two-year community colleges—community colleges' tuitions are comparatively cheap and their proximity to home allows for financial contribution to the family, so this may indeed the best economic choice for students. By contrast, some students negotiated the notions of proximity to and providing financially for the family in a utilitarian way. For these students, leaving the region for college was viewed as a necessary sacrifice. The students wanted to remain close to their families, but they believed attending a better institution outside of the region would ultimately allow them to more significantly move up socioeconomically and, consequently, allow them to better provide for their families in the future. Through this framework, Martínez shows that proximity to and the ability to provide financially for the family are important factors in Latinx student's college decisions.

This begs the question, however, of what holds greater significance in the Latinx student's college process: the reality of one's socioeconomic status or the perceived family means. According to Ebelia Hernández, the perception of the family financial means, coupled with a cultural conflict, greatly affect a Latinx student's college process. For her 2015 *Journal of Latinos and Education* study, "Balancing Dreams and Realities: The College Choice Process for High-Achieving Latinas", Hernández interviewed high-achieving[5], first- year college Latinas, all of whom attended the same university, and asked them to recount their college choice process. A common component of their narratives was attempting to balance between wanting a "full college experience" at a reputable school and the realities of family distance, expectations, and finances. This leads Hernández to argue that high-achieving Latinas must balance their dreams (and those of their families) with cultural expectations and perceived financial means.

The idea of a "full college experience" refers to the quintessential American college experience: Students physically leave the home and become independent from the family. This is in stark contrast to the Latin American expectation of remaining close to the home and the family during college. The resulting cultural conflict is highlighted in Hernández's study: Latinx students may desire to be close to home, but they ultimately decide to move away like their white American counterparts. This conflict then manifests itself through the idea of choosing a school that is "close, but far away enough." While the parents of the Latinas in Hernández's study did not actively push them to remain close to home, the women still felt they needed to be close enough to stay connected to the family and travel home every few weekends. In this way,

[5] The women were considered to be high-achieving because, during the college process, they had been admitted to an institution that is considered to be selective.

they are engaging in compromise and renegotiation practices similar to those mentioned in "(Re)considering" (2013).

The Latina students in "Balancing" (Hernández, 2015) must compromise between their preferred schools and their economic realities, just as they compromise on their distance from home. The women tried to find and select institutions with the best reputation, academics, and affordability. Such an institution would allow the Latinas to make their family proud, while also accounting for their families' financial means. As a result, Latina students did not seriously consider community colleges, even though they are the most affordable option. Although this is in contrast to the students in "(Re)considering"—who were encouraged by family members to first attend local and/or community colleges—both sets of students were consistently conscious of their families' incomes. For this reason, many of the Latinas did not consider applying to certain private and/or out-of-state institutions because the costs were considered beyond their perceived family means. Students who did apply and were admitted to such schools chose not to attend due to the familial financial considerations, even after they factored in scholarships and grants. Thus, the Latina students compromised within their financial, familial, and cultural realities, and consequently they often chose to attend the closest, most reputable school with the best financial aid package.

The cultural conflict experienced by the Latinas in Hernández's study is also noted in Martinez' second study, "Helping Latina/o Students Navigate the College Choice Process: Considerations for Secondary School Counselors." Deviating slightly from "(Re)considering," this article, which was published in 2013 in the *Journal of School Counseling*, utilizes Martinez's same concepts, but instead focuses on how high school counselors assist Latinx students choosing a college. In "Helping," Martínez argues that counselors are integral to Latinx students' college processes, primarily by providing access to information. However, the degree to which counselors could assist with individual planning was limited because of the large number of students each counselor served and their multiple roles within the school—this, of course, highlights just how overworked and understaffed guidance offices are at public schools with large low-socioeconomic district populations. Counselors also noted several challenges when assisting Latinx students, such as gender role expectations, *familismo*, financial need, and being of first-generation college status.

In relation to *familismo*, counselors noted similar findings to Martínez's examination of student responses in "(Re)considering." Parents preferred that their children attend local institutions so they could work and contribute to the family income or maintain close bonds. Students who desired to leave the area often compromised with their parents, agreeing to transfer only if "[they] do well the first year" (18). However, Martínez then begins focusing on the conflict of *familismo*. Here, Martínez argues *familismo* causes Latinx students to "[straddle] conflicting cultural norms

in the midst of the college going process" (19); Students respected their parents' wishes and honored the Latinx value of being physically close to home, but they also sought to become more independent by physically leaving home to attend college. Through Martinez's and Hernández's discussion of this particular conflict, we can see how cultural differences between *familismo* and American norms can produce tension during Latinx students' college processes.

Furthermore, this particular cultural conflict is most prominent in Latinx students who are first-generation Americans. As previously stated, students who attend college in Latin America are typically expected to live at home during their undergraduate career (if possible). This practice and expectation are inherently rooted in *familismo*, as Latin American college students are thus able to remain close and contribute to the family, while also saving money on college costs. In the US, there exists the opposing expectation that a student must exit the family and community to attend college. This conflict can be diluted over generations of assimilation to American norms and ideals; however, the sense of generational obligation still stands.

A generational obligation, in its simplest form, is the idea of working to provide for the family, whether that be to provide opportunities, financial assistance, or emotional support. However, generational obligations typically extend to include working both towards "repaying" the generations before you and towards the betterment of generations to come. This is clearly seen in first-generation American, Latinx students who attribute their graduation and educational successes to their immigrant parents and the accomplishment of the American Dream, and in students who desire to return and give back to their communities post-college. *Familismo* is an inherent component of the generational obligation, both of which are also seen in "(Re)considering" and "Balancing" (Hernández, 2015) through the Latinx students who viewed leaving the region for college as a necessary sacrifice for their families' future upward mobility and also through the Latinas who applied to top-tier college with hope to make their families proud and to provide for them during college and in the future.

Generational and familial obligations can be a source of great pressure and stress for Latinx students. Latinx students who are the oldest in their families often feel that they must assist their parents financially and provide information and pathways for their younger siblings. Among FLI students, the oldest siblings are the ones who are truly "first-generation college-going" as they must learn to navigate the college process primarily on their own; yes, these students have some access to counselors, mentors, friends, and perhaps even to college preparation programs, but they must learn the rules and nuances largely on their own, while also keeping count of what to do and not do in order to best assist both themselves *and* their younger siblings.

Adding on to the aforementioned drives to disprove stereotypes and make their families proud, the eldest sibling's sense of responsibility to younger siblings may also inspire their effort to perform well in school. As the eldest of nine children, I have always tried my hardest in school to both realize the dreams of parents and to be an example and resource for my younger siblings. Since middle school, I have hoped to alleviate my siblings' future educational struggles by marking a path for them and making it known that they need not limit their options based on our socioeconomic and generational statuses. I now recognize this behavior to be very similar to parents who work hard and push their children to succeed academically in order to realize the American Dream, which, in its Latinx form, is simply the dream to provide opportunities for your loved ones.

The pressure to succeed academically for siblings is not exclusive to the eldest children, however. While younger siblings do not need to figure out the ropes and tricks of the college process on their own and can rely heavily on the experiences of older siblings as a resource (a resource that Martinez highlights in "(Re)considering"), younger Latinx siblings face their own pressures. Of course, there exists the same pressure to achieve educational success and contribute to generational goals and the American Dream, especially among high-achieving Latinx students. But additionally, there is the near universal pressure to live up to the accomplishments of older siblings and to balance that with their shared role as an older sibling if they are not the youngest child. Karen Villanueva, who is also a high-achieving Latina and the second-eldest in our family, described to me the role of our family in her educational goals and current college process and emphasized her role as a mostly older, but also younger, sibling.

Karen's responses were similar to what many of the students in Martinez's and Hernández's studies described, as well as to my own experience with *familismo*. Karen pushes herself academically with the hope that she will get into a "good school" to make her family proud—much like the Latinas in "Balancing"—and to earn scholarships so that "[her] parents don't have to pay [for college]." She makes sure she is responsible for her own education, utilizes all of her available resources, and makes school her top priority. Prioritizing school often means putting aside activities and social events that are "fun" in order to ensure that her parents do not have to "worry about her" financially once she graduates. A big influence in her decisions surrounding school and how she approaches the college process is me—her older, similarly high-achieving sister who goes to Stanford on a full scholarship. Karen describes how I am both an amazing resource and a source of immense pressure to contribute to the family in the same ways I have, which includes securing our family's upward mobility by being a future Stanford graduate. Karen's experiences highlight how younger Latinx siblings must grapple with meeting expectations set by older siblings, themselves setting an example for

younger siblings, making decisions that will benefit them, and working towards the current and future betterment of the family at large (K. Villanueva, personal communication, May 17, 2017).

Having to make a decision that is best for both a student and their family is something Laura Yolo is extremely familiar with. Yolo, a low-income, first-generation college graduate, is a Program Coordinator for my region's Upward Bound Program. Upward Bound is a pre-college program that serves predominantly FLI, Latinx students at four public high schools in my region. As her former student, I asked Yolo what she perceives the effect of *familismo* to be on her students' college processes. While Martínez (2013) and Hernández (2015) simply commented on the observed effects, Yolo explicitly details the positive and negative influences of *familismo*.

For the most part, Yolo views *familismo* as a positive influence in her students' college processes. The family can be a big motivator for Latinx students to pursue higher education. Among her students, Yolo has observed, there is a deep sense of "doing things" for the betterment of their families and not just themselves. These include striving to perform well in high school and applying to "good" colleges that will allow the students to receive a well-paying job. Receiving a college degree gives students the opportunity to rise socioeconomically. Then, these students can give back to their families. This notion is similar to the final group of students in "(Re)considering," who viewed their college decision as a "necessary sacrifice" in order to provide for their families in the future, as well as the more general goal of collective upward mobility.

At the same time, both Yolo and I recognize that proximity to home can have a negative effect on students. Similarly to the students in "(Re)considering" and "Helping," Yolo has often seen parents, "especially traditional ones," who do not like the idea of their children going far away. Latinx students then struggle to make the best academic choice for themselves because they do not want to go against their parents' wishes. The best choice can often mean attending a college outside of the home region. According to Yolo, sometimes there are practical reasons for why parents want their children to remain close to home: Students may have responsibilities, such as helping to raise younger siblings or contributing financially to a single parent household, as mentioned in both of Martínez's articles. When students have these responsibilities, it is difficult to make a decision that is in their personal interest and not necessarily their families'.

Familismo can certainly create difficulty for Latinx students' during the college process. At the same time, however, Yolo describes how *familismo* "goes the other way." By this, Yolo refers to how parents, just like their children, are attempting to do what is best for the family. Although they may exhibit some resistance, parents ultimately want what is best for their children. It is important to note that much of parents' resistance stems from fear: fear of their child's financial instability, fear of

their child's safety in an unfamiliar community, and fear of their child's assimilation to white culture. Despite these fears, however, Yolo notes that parents, once they receive apt information and listen to their children's wishes, will support their children and become "their biggest champions" (L. Yolo, personal communication, May 17, 2017).

Both Hernández and Martínez would agree that parents are some of the biggest advocates for their children. In their descriptions of negotiations and sacrifices, Martínez and Hernández both addressed how, although parents had certain preferences, they were fundamentally supportive of their children's decisions. Hernández further discussed how parents relied on their daughters to make good, informed decisions because they themselves were unfamiliar with the college process. Similarly, Martínez described that because parents were unfamiliar with the college process, they primarily provided emotional support, rather than information, for the students—and this support was given to both those who stayed in the region and those who left.

As a student who is currently attending an institution over seven-hundred miles away from home and whose parents are unfamiliar with the college process, I can attest to many of the fears my parents held during my college process. Among financial and cultural concerns, my parents were primarily worried about the fact that I would not only be alone, but would also be so far away from home. It was not until after my parents had adequate access to information from my culturally-sensitive Upward Bound coordinators, that my parents were able to understand not only that I would be taken care of, but that leaving the state to attend Stanford was in *my* best interest, and the best they could do was support me emotionally. It was this access to information that allowed my parents to take the final step towards fully supporting my endeavors, and it is additionally through my continued efforts to educate my parents on the college process that they will be able to better assist my siblings in the future.

While not the overarching solution to the disparity in Latinx educational attainment, access to information for both Latinx students and their families can vastly improve Latinx access to higher education, especially when considering the many ways that *familismo* influences the college process. Families need access to information on what to expect from the college experience socially, culturally, and emotionally, and they also need information for how how parents and family members can best support Latinx students. Additionally, students and parents need access to adequate information about financial aid so as to dispel concerns about perceived family means and the actual cost of and help available for college, respectively. Granted, since Latinx students are of predominantly low socioeconomic status, there are, again, real limitations to Latinx students' college aspirations and choices—choices which are ultimately dependent on individual's academics, extracurriculars, outside scholarships, etc. At this point, families may feel justified in wanting their

students to remain close to home and first attend local community colleges.

Due to such limitations, it is important for students and parents to have access to information on the reality of students who attend community colleges. Many students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, do not finish their associate degrees, and if they do, many do not transfer to a four-year university to complete their bachelor's degrees.[7] Latinx students are disproportionately likely drop out of community college, which is in great part due to the many societal factors and familial obligations that Latinx students face (Chen, 2017). If this information is thoroughly explained, in conjunction with information about financial aid and dispelling myths about the college experience, parents may be more likely to support and encourage their children's educational goals, and much sooner.

If we prioritize access to information for Latinx families, the difficulties of the college process could be slightly alleviated for Latinx students. Such information would need to be given in a culturally-sensitive way that acknowledges the importance of familial and generational obligations, as well as cohesive financial opportunities and limitations. Again, access to information is not a final solution, but it could prove to be extremely helpful, particularly now that there is a better understanding of how *familismo* affects the Latinx student college process, especially within the context of each student's status within their families, educational aspirations, socioeconomic status, generational statuses and obligations, and the resources available in the community, such as available counselors and college preparatory programs. Such prioritization of information can allow Latinx students—as well as students from other marginalized backgrounds and immigrant communities—to be given their best chance at educational attainment within their external societal realities.

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[7] In California, only 22% of Latinx community college students earn a degree, certification or transfer to a four-year university within six years, compared to 26% of Black students, 35% of Asian and Pacific Islander students, and 37% of of Caucasian students (Chen, 2017).

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