

An Evaluation of Al Exito's Impact on
Participants in the Program's First Three Years
(2006-09)

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Research Director's Commentary

Since I began publicly archiving reports produced as part of my Practicing Anthropology course, I have found it useful to provide brief commentary on the strength of the research and data presentation. The reports produced as part of this course are first and foremost part of a learning experience, and often represent the first major research students have undertaken. As such, things don't always go as planned. Sometimes this is due to poor time management or planning, fear of talking to others, data mismanagement, or some other factor affecting the students' success. Just as often it is due to factors beyond the students' control. Key informants or clients don't return messages, it rains on the days when street intercept interviewing is planned, the IRB requires multiple revisions before approval, or the research population proves harder to reach than expected.

In this case, collecting data proved more difficult than we had anticipated. While the students had a clear population and were able to make a random sample from this, we found it very difficult to track down that sample and get interviews. In the end, we decided to revert to a snowball technique. As such, the sample size ended up being very small. It would have been good if we could have switched to a snowballing technique earlier on. But the student researchers did speak to a handful of people and appear to have well represented the views of the individuals they spoke with. As far as the report and presentation of the data goes, I think it would have been useful to see a bit more explanation of the data – for example the word clouds – leading into the discussion section. Some of the excellent context provided in the poster presentation was lost here. Overall, however, I think that there is some valuable information provided in the report.

Executive Summary:

Al Éxito is an Iowa-based non-profit organization striving to motivate and prepare middle-school Latinas and Latinos for post-high school education as well as enhance their chances of having economic stability and a stable family life. Al Éxito accomplishes this mission by working with school districts, college-experienced and professional Latina and Latino leaders, and families to support Iowa Latino students.

Our research project with Al Éxito focused on determining the impact of this youth Latina education program on its participants in its first three years (2006-09). In order to answer this research question, we conducted semi-structured interviews and administered written surveys to participants, madrinas, a founder and a school counselor. Also, the founder provided data sets on the attendance and grade point averages for the first two years of high school for the 2006 Al Éxito participants, and for the first year of high school for the Al Éxito 2007 participants.

Through these data collection methods, we concluded that all interviewed participants experienced a positive impact from the program and perceived their fellow peers as having a good experience in the program as well. Madrinas, the founder and the school counselor's responses also expressed positive effects from the program. The participants saw madrinas as role models who provided them inspiration during the crucial transition period from middle school to high school. However, the participants expressed an interest for a longer term support network and for more family support within their academics.

Currently, Al Éxito is moving in the right direction. They have addressed the issue of parent involvement and a longer term program through programming changes over the past few years since 2009. In addition to the family initiation celebration and día de la familia graduation ceremony, there is now specific parent programs focused on how to help their children succeed within the American education system. Al Éxito has also extended into high school years in certain program sites.

Our research also yielded information on the role of citizenship and other Iowa-based educational programs. As a result, we recommend Al Éxito to have additional support for its undocumented participants, so that they do not experience a decline in motivation during high school due to their lower post-high school education and financial aid opportunities in comparison to documented Latinos. Additionally, we suggest closer collaboration with other educational programs in Iowa, such as the Marshalltown Educational Partnership (MEP), since students involved in more than one educationally supportive program has proven to further enhance their academic performance.

Background and Purpose:

Al Éxito is an Iowa-based non-profit organization which provides programming and mentoring for middle and high school Latino students to motivate them to stay in school and continue their education beyond high school. In addition to mentoring students, Al Éxito creates opportunities for their members to meet Latino students on college campuses and provides family programming and events. These components of their program address obstacles that minority students face in the American education system. Overall, their goals include increased school attendance, academic achievement, parental involvement, graduation from high school, and enrollment in postsecondary education (website).

In 2006, Al Éxito was founded by Jan Mitchell and Pam Swartz as part of a project for the American Association for University Women (AAUW). The two women identified a need for programming which would provide academic and cultural support for Latino students to help them succeed academically and help them to pursue post-high-school education. Al Éxito's first site was established in Marshalltown, Iowa where Jan Mitchell and Pam Swartz first identified the need for programming to support the growing Latino population. At the beginning, Al Éxito consisted of one

program in which 8th grade girls, mentored by Latinas, learned about educational opportunities and were encouraged to set academic and personal goals for themselves. The program utilized several methods to attain these objectives, most notably was the college visits they organized and the introduction of participants to community members to teach them about what they did for a living and how they had achieved their position.

After the girls participated during their 8th grade year, Al Éxito kept track of their attendance and grade point averages for the first two years of high school, but did not formally follow-up with the girls to assess how the program impacted them past their second year of high school. The current executive director, Dawn Martinez Oropeza, wanted to address this lack of data. In order to assess Al Éxito's impact on its participants in the program's first three years (2006-09), we investigated their academic and professional success and satisfaction in the years following their participation. By researching the original program's impact we endeavored to provide a baseline from which the effect of the changes which have been made to the program can be evaluated.

Methods:

Our research population included the young women who had participated in first three years of Al Éxito's program, the madrinas who served as their, an Al Éxito founder, and a Marshalltown High School counselor. The participants were the focus of our research while the madrinas, the founder, and the counselor served as key informants to help us gain a holistic view of the program's objectives and results.

We conducted a simple random sample on the Al Éxito's 2006-07, 2007-08, and 2008-09 rosters which produced a sample of 23 participants. The integrity of our random sample was not maintained as only two participants responded to our initial requests for an interview. In order to increase our sample size, we began using a snowballing technique during our interviews. While we recognize the response-bias in our sample, it was necessary in order to gain maximum participation and get a broader perspective. In the end we ended up with a sample size of nine (5 participants, 2 madrinas, 1 founder, and 1 high school counselor).

In order to answer our research question, we utilized several methodological approaches. Methodologies included semi-structured interviews, written surveys, and participant observation. Nine semi-structured interviews (See Appendix A), lasting between 30 minutes and 1 hour, were conducted either in-person, over the phone, or with Skype. Eight of the nine interviews were recorded; one interview was not recorded due to technical problems. Before each interview started, the interviewee was given an informed consent to read over and sign, and at the end, they were given a written survey to complete. The survey was comprised of Likert scale questions and two ranking questions (See Appendix B).

Informed consent forms and written surveys were emailed to those who we interviewed over the phone or with Skype to complete and return to us. Because the majority of our interviews we conducted were over the phone or through Skype, we were not able to get consistent responses for the written survey data. Initially, our intention was to ask follow-up questions to the ranking questions; however, we were unable to do this as many returned the surveys at a later date, filled them out incorrectly, or did not fill out the ranking section at all. We decided that due to these inconsistencies the written survey results would be excluded from our results section.

In addition to interviews, we both completed several hours of participant observation. Taylor Watts attended Al Éxito's beginning of the year leadership training in order to better understand how the program currently runs and what resources/training the madrinas have access to. Carlina Arango visited Al Éxito's program in Tama, Iowa to observe a cultural workshop between the participants and the madrinas. The Tama site is the closest existing program to the original program in Marshalltown because

it remains focused on Latina 8th graders. Both opportunities allowed us to better understand the program and reaffirm much of what we had discussed in our interviews.

Additionally, the interviewed Al Éxito founder provided attendance and grade point average (GPA) high school data sets. One of the data sets was on the first two years of high school for the 2006 Al Éxito participants and the second data set was on the first year of high school for 2007 Al Éxito participants. This data was already in presented in the format we needed and allowed us to make conclusions without having to do any analysis on our part.

After all data collection was completed, interviews were coded according to relevant themes (See Appendix C). Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis tool, was used to generate word frequency of the madrinas' and of the participants' interviews so that we could compare them. Interviews with the founder and with the Marshalltown High School counselor were analyzed qualitatively for their insight into the program and to into their perception of the programs impact. The responses to the written surveys were not quantitatively or qualitatively analyzed for the reasons described above.

Results:

Coding

The nine interviews we conducted were coded to reflect common themes that we then used to generate Chart 1 (see below). The frequency reflects the number of time that these themes were mentioned; if themes were mentioned more than once by a single interviewee we counted them every time. The 'who said it' column represents the interviewee subtype: participant (P), madrina (M), founder (F), or counselor (C). The themes were organized by how many of the subtypes mentioned them, from greatest (all four represented) to the least (only one).

Only two themes were mentioned by all nine interviewees; that participants were positively impacted by their participation in Al Éxito and that Al Éxito created a support network for its participants. Six themes were brought up by all five participants, illustrated by the first six rows of the chart.

The five themes mentioned most frequently were the madrinas showing cultural knowledge of the participants' backgrounds (frequency=23), Al Éxito creating a support network for its participants (frequency=21), parents having difficulties understanding how the American education system works (frequency=18), Madrinas being beneficial to the program (frequency=18), and Al Éxito positively affecting participants' motivation towards school (frequency=17).

Word Frequency

Using Nvivo, a qualitative analysis software, we generated four word clouds to represent the four subtypes of interviewees. In order to determine how many times a word was said per person, the total word count was divided by how many interviewees made up each word cloud. The four figures illustrate the word clouds generated and its accompanying chart with the top ten most generated words by each subtype of interviewee.

School, program, and college show up in all four word clouds. It is important to note that 'culture' only shows up in the participants top 10 used words and 'support' is only found in the high school counselor's chart. This shows that participants are more interested and aware of the cultural focus the Al Éxito program had on their lives, whereas the key informants did not see this as much of a highlight. The school counselor's high use of the word 'support' represents the kind connotation he gave to the program. These word clouds were able to show us repeated themes within our interviews, and more importantly,

allowed us to compare and contrast among the different kinds of conducted interviews (i.e. participant vs. key informant).

Chart 1. : Themes by frequency mentioned and interviewee subtype

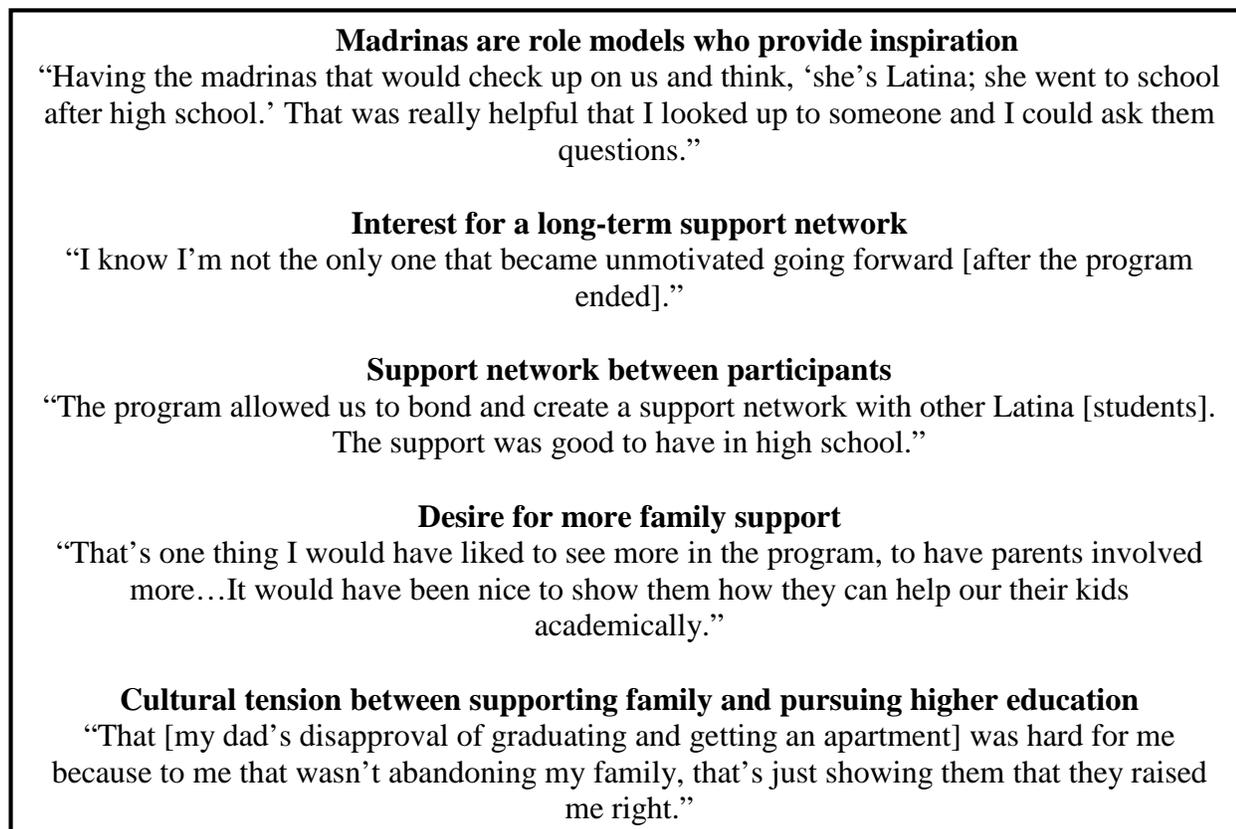
Theme	Frequency	Who said it*
Participants were positively impacted by their participation in Al Éxito.	9	5P, 2M, 1F, IC
Al Éxito created a support network for participants.	21	5P, 2M, 1F, IC
The madrinas showed cultural knowledge of the participants' backgrounds.	23	5P, 2M, 1F
Al Éxito inspired participants to create future goals for themselves	13	5P, 2M, 1F
Al Éxito showed participants the value of education.	12	5P, 2M, 1F
Participants currently hold a stable job.	5	5P
Madrinas were beneficial to the program.	18	4P, 2M, 1F
Participants viewed madrinas as role models.	13	4P, 2M, 1F
Al Éxito positively affected participants' motivation towards school.	17	4P, 2M, 1C
Participants still keep in contact with people they met from the program.	6	4P, 2M
Al Éxito enhanced participants pride in their culture.	7	4P, 1M, 1C
Participants went on to college.	5	4P, 1C
Participants did well in high school.	5	4P, 1C
Participants graduated from high school.	4	4P
Parents had difficulties understanding how the American education system works.	18	3P, 2M, 1F, 1C
There was a disconnect between the participants' and parents' priorities.	5	2P, 1M
DACA participants face additional obstacles.	8	2P, 1M
Participants are currently in college/have graduated from college.	4	2P
Participants remembered positively interacting with community members.	6	1P, 2M
Participants were involved in the Marshalltown Education Partnership (MEP).	4	1P, 2M
Parents were involved in their child's academics.	1	1M

*P = Past participants M = Madrina F = Founder C = Counselor

Interview Quotes

The word clouds, in conjunction with our coding notes, helped us envision and depict some recurring themes within our interviews. Having these recurring themes in mind, we extracted quotes from the five conducted participant interviews (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Broad themes found in Al Éxito participants' interviews



Discussion

Based on our interviews, all participants expressed having been positively impacted by the program, and observed their Al Éxito peers having a positive experience as well. Our key informants’ interview responses reinforced this idea further through their positive perspectives on the program, especially coming from the school counselor since he was not a part of the program’s creation. Therefore, he was able to provide a more objective perspective on the program.

The main beneficial component of the Al Éxito program was the madrinás. Throughout the majority of our interviews, they were described as a role model and source of inspiration for the participants. It is important for Al Éxito to take into account the participants’ recollection of the principal

beneficial part of the program in order to ensure that this component is not lost, but rather enhances as Al Éxito continues modifying their programming.

We identified several recommendations for Al Éxito's programming. However, many of the areas that needed improvement have been or have begun to be addressed since we evaluated the program in its beginning years, which is very different from Al Éxito's current programming.

The first area for change we noted was the length of the program. While the participants we talked to expressed that they were motivated to do well in school and go on to higher education during the program, several experienced a decline in motivation as they went through high school without the program's continued support. Al Éxito has already begun to address this need by expanding its programming from sixth to eighth grade, and in some cases, even into high school.

Secondly, the participants we interviewed expressed an interest in more parent involvement in the program. We found that the participants we interviewed experienced the additional challenge of overcoming the disconnect that existed between their parents' cultural values and American cultural values. Furthermore, the parents' relative lack of knowledge regarding the American education system posed logistical problems when participants were trying to apply to college and finance their college education. Al Éxito has also begun to address this problem by creating programming, offered in both Spanish and English, to inform parents of the necessary steps to help their children graduate high school and move onto higher education.

However, we still identified a couple of areas we believe Al Éxito can still improve on: their treatment of undocumented students versus documented Latino students and their lack of deep connection with other educational programs in Iowa. The importance of the concept of documentation was made clear through two DACA participants we interviewed. Because Al Éxito didn't address how their path would be different from American students, they became unmotivated and both ended up dropping out of college when they could not find the financial resources to fund their education. Yet, the resources available for DACA and undocumented students were made aware to us by one of the madrinas we interviewed. Therefore, having more of an emphasis in addressing and helping with undocumented Latinas and Latinos' additional barriers in their pursuit of higher education would enhance the positive impact of Al Éxito, especially during the latter high school years when applying for college becomes a reality for these students.

Through data records on 9th and 10th grade GPAs and attendance rates for the 2006 participants, the strength of being part of more than one educational program was clearly shown. In these data sets, the students who were simultaneously a part of Al Éxito and Marshalltown Educational Partnership had higher GPAs and attendance rates than those who were only a part of Al Éxito or not a part of any program. The higher academic performance in these students shows the benefits of close teamwork among educational programs within the same community.

Recommendations

- Al Éxito should continue to increase parent participation in the program through expanded parent programming.
- Al Éxito should work on extending the Al Éxito programming into high school years for all program sites, or as many as possible.

- An additional support network that focuses on available financial and educational resources for undocumented Latino students.
- Close collaboration with other Iowan educational programs, such as Marshalltown Educational Partnership.

References

¡Latinos Al Éxito! Programs. <https://alexitoiowa.org/>

APPENDIX A

Interview Guide for Participants

Introductory Statement: As part of our Practicing Anthropology course at Grinnell College, we are conducting a research project with Al Éxito on its original program's impact, looking specifically from 2006 to 2009. We want to know about your experiences as well as any relevant experiences that other participants had. Let's begin.

[Complete consent forms]

Grand tour question

How did Al Éxito impact you? (What was Al Éxito's impact on you?)

1. Involvement

- a. How did you become involved with Al Éxito?
- b. Was your family involved in your decision to join the program?
- c. Do you still keep in contact with any people from the program?

2. Community members

- a. How were the madrinas involved in the Al Éxito program?
 - i. What parts were beneficial?
 - ii. What parts were detrimental or that could have been better?
 - iii. How much cultural knowledge did the madrinas have on your family's culture? Was this helpful?

- b. Did you feel that your opinions were taken into account by the madrinas in deciding which community members were brought in by the program?

- i. How did it feel to have these community members come in to talk to you?
- ii. Did it help you to create goals for yourself?
- iii. How much cultural knowledge did the community members have on your family's

culture? Was this helpful?

1. Why or why not?

- c. How do you feel that the other participants felt in regards to the madrinas and the community members?
 - i. Was there any participant in the program that had a different experience than you?

1. If so, what was this experience like for her?

- d. Did Al Éxito enhance your pride in your culture?

3. School Performance/Academic achievement

- a. How did Al Éxito affect your motivation towards school?
 - i. How was your school performance before you joined the program?
 - ii. How was it during the program?
 - iii. How was it after the program?
 - iv. Did Al Éxito help you understand the importance of education?

- b. Do you feel that Al Éxito better prepared you for high school?

- i. How was your school attendance in high school?
- ii. Did you graduate from high school?
- iii. What was your GPA?

- c. Did the program encourage you to apply for college?

- i. Did you go to college?
- ii. How was your academic performance in college?

1. GPA

2. Class attendance

- iii. Did you graduate from college?

- d. Throughout your academic career, how involved was your family in this realm of your life?
 - i. Was this beneficial or detrimental?
 - ii. Did your family's involvement level in your academics change throughout the program?
 - 1. How or how did it not change?
 - e. Do you feel that your academic experience was similar or different to other participants in the program?
 - i. Did many of them graduate high school?
 - ii. Did many go to college?
 - iii. Did many of them graduate from college?
 - f. Do you feel your academic experience was similar or different from peers who didn't participate in the program?
 - i. Why?
 - g. Did you create a support network with the other participants through Al Éxito?
4. Current life
- a. How would you say your life is right now?
 - i. Professionally?
 - 1. What job do you have right now?
 - 2. What jobs have you had?
 - ii. Academically?
 - iii. Economically?
 - b. Do you feel connected with your family?
 - i. Why or why not?
 - c. Do you feel connected to your culture?
 - i. Why or why not?

Interview Guide for Key Informants

Introductory Statement: As part of our Practicing Anthropology course at Grinnell College, we are conducting a research project with Al Éxito on its original program's impact, looking specifically from 2006 to 2009. We want to know about your experiences as well as any relevant experiences that the participants had. Let's begin. [Complete consent forms]

Grand Tour Question:

How did Al Éxito impact ____?

1. Involvement

- a. How did you become involved with Al Éxito?
- b. Do you still keep in contact with any people from the program?

2. Community members

- a. Do you think the madrinas were an important part of the Al Exito program? (question for counselors)
 - i. Why or why not?
- b. How did you choose which community members to bring in to talk to the students? (question for the Madrinass)
 - i. What were your goals in bringing them in?
 - ii. How much knowledge did the community members have on the participants' families' cultures?

- c. Did Al Éxito enhance the participants' pride in their culture?

3. School Performance/Academic achievement

- a. How did Al Éxito seem to affect students' motivation towards school?
- i. How was their school performance before they joined the program?
 - ii. How was it during the program?
 - iii. How was it after the program?
 - iv. Did Al Éxito
- b. Do you feel that Al Éxito better prepared students for high school?
- c. How was participants' school attendance in high school?
 - i. Did they often graduate from high school?
 - ii. What were their GPAs like?
- d. Did the program encourage participants to apply for college?
- e. Did many participants go to college?
 - i. Do you know how their academic performance was in college?
- f. Throughout participants' academic career, how involved was their family in this realm of their life?
 - i. Do you think this was this beneficial or detrimental?
 - ii. Did their family's involvement level in their academics change throughout the program?
 - 1. How or how did it not change?
- g. Did Al Éxito create a support network between the participants?

APPENDIX B

Written Survey – Participant

Please state your stance on each of the following statements.

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Al Éxito increased your motivation to succeed.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Al Éxito enhanced your pride in your culture.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Al Éxito created a support network between the participants.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Al Éxito helped you to understand the importance of education.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Al Éxito helped your family to understand the importance of education.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Al Éxito enhanced the support of your family towards your education.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Overall, Al Éxito led you to do better in school.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Overall, Al Éxito motivated you to continue your education.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

The following is a list of Al Éxito's Goals. Please rank the following statements in order of importance (1 being the most important, five the least).	
Motivation to succeed academically	
Build pride in participants' culture	
Build a support network between the participants	
Help participants to realize the importance of education	
Enhance family support in participants' education.	

The following is a list of the tools Al Éxito used to accomplish their goals. Please rank the following statements in order of importance (1 being the most important, five the least).	
Introducing participants to successful Latino/Latinas from their community.	
Introducing participants to successful non-Latino/Latinas from their community.	
Discussing obstacles/barriers Latinas face in education.	
Fostering family relationships.	
Stressing the importance of participants' culture.	

Please state your stance on each of the following statements.

Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Al Éxito increased participants' motivation to succeed.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Al Éxito enhanced participants' pride in their culture.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Al Éxito created a support network between the participants.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Al Éxito helped participants to understand the importance of education.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Al Éxito helped participants' family to understand the importance of education.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Al Éxito enhanced the support of participants' family towards their education.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Overall, Al Éxito led participants' to do better in school.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Overall, Al Éxito motivated participants' to continue their education.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

The following is a list of Al Éxito's Goals. Please rank the following statements in order of importance (1 being the most important, five the least).

Motivation to succeed academically	
Build pride in participants' culture	
Build a support network between the participants	
Help participants to realize the importance of education	
Enhance family support in participants' education.	

The following is a list of the tools Al Éxito used to accomplish their goals.

Please rank the following statements in order of importance (1 being the most important, five the least).

Introducing participants to successful Latino/Latinas from their community.	
Introducing participants to successful non-Latino/Latinas from their community.	
Discussing obstacles/barriers Latinas face in education.	
Fostering family relationships.	
Stressing the importance of participants' culture.	

Appendix C

Interview Codes	
Role Models	RM
Parents	P
Family	F
Support Network	SN
Contact after Program	CAP
Future Goals	FG
Community Members	CM
Cultural Connection	CC
Cultural Pride	CP
Academic Motivation	AM
Value of Education	VE
College	C
\Grades	G
Attendance	AM
High School graduation	HSG
College graduation	CG
How they became involved in the program	I
Job/Work	JW
DACA	DACA
MEP	MEP
Cultural differences between family and the American education system	CDFA
Cultural differences between family and participants	CDFP