

April 2023

Los Nava: Testimonios of three first-generation siblings and their college going decisions

Maria Del S. Nava
University of Vermont

Lucero Del-Rayó Nava

Arturo Nava

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nava, M. S., Del-Rayó Nava, L., & Nava, A. (2023). Los Nava: Testimonios of three first-generation siblings and their college going decisions. *The Vermont Connection*, 44(1). <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol44/iss1/24>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Education and Social Services at UVM ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Vermont Connection by an authorized editor of UVM ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact schwrrks@uvm.edu.

Los Nava: Testimonios of three first-generation siblings and their college-going decisions

Maria Nava

La familia Nava originates with two hard working immigrant parents that came to the United States seeking educational opportunities for their children. This is the testimony of the three eldest siblings, Arturo, Maria, and Lucero, and their college search and application process. We follow them and the challenges they face as first-generation college students from low-income backgrounds. Using Yosso's theory of Community Cultural Wealth and Iloh's Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories as the frameworks, one can investigate the ways in which first-generation college students navigate this process and expose real barriers on their paths towards higher education.

La familia Nava se originó con dos padres inmigrantes y trabajadores que llegaron a los Estados Unidos en busca de oportunidades educativas para sus hijos. Este texto cuenta los testimonios de tres hermanos, Arturo, María y Lucero, y sus procesos de solicitud a las universidades como estudiantes de primera generación, de bajos ingresos, y de origen mexicano. Las formas en las cuales los estudiantes universitarios de primera generación navegan este proceso se pueden investigar usando la teoría de la riqueza cultural comunitaria de Yosso y el modelo de decisiones y trayectorias de ir a la universidad de Iloh como marcos teóricos. Con estas historias se exponen las barreras y los desafíos reales que enfrentan los estudiantes de primera generación en su camino hacia la educación universitaria.

Maria Del Sol Nava (she/her) graduated from Middlebury College in 2018 with a degree in Mathematics and Italian. She is a second-year graduate student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Program at the University of Vermont where she works to support students of color in STEM. Her passion for supporting students stems from her own experiences and identities as a first-generation Latina from a low-income background.

Lucero Del Rayo Nava (she/her) graduated from Chico State with a BA in Communications and a minor in Journalism. She currently works as a Community Support Specialist for Uber. In her free time, she is an active long-distance runner and loves to spend time with her cats.

Arturo Nava (he/him) studied Computer Science at Santa Monica College. He is currently working on a cattle ranch in Kansas.

Los Nava: Testimonios of three first-generation siblings and their college-going decisions

My parents moved to Los Angeles, CA from their hometown of Durango, México intending to start a family that would have access to more educational resources than they had in their home country. Neither of my parents finished high school, but they always saw the value of an education. From an early age, our parents emphasized that education was the way to be successful and that working hard in school would lead us to more opportunities. My three siblings and I are all first-generation U.S. born and first-generation college students and with undocumented immigrant parents and strong Mexican family values, we did just that: we went to school and we worked hard. Three of us (Arturo, Maria, and Lucero) grew up closer in age and had college search and going experiences.¹ My siblings and I are here to share our stories on how we navigated our college-going decisions with the support of school counselors, community-based organizations, and each other. Our college-going decisions have continued to impact the rest of our lives beyond the choice.

Who can claim a first-generation college student identity? There is deliberation around the definition of first-generation college students. Higher education institutions and organizations have varying definitions for first-generation college students. Students may often not be aware of their first-generation status, which can make it difficult for them to access resources tailored toward that experience (naspa.org). According to NASPA's Center for First-Generation Student Success, being first-generation means that your parents have not completed a bachelor's degree at a college or university (firstgen.naspa.org). Some institutions might even go as far as to say that the parents have not received a degree from the United States. Students may also reject the label of a first-generation college student given the negative stereotypes associated and the deficit-based approach to support (Young, 2016). In the academic year 2015-2016, 56% of undergraduate students had parents who did not have a bachelor's degree (RTI International, 2019a). First-generation college students are a growing population in the United States, but it is often hard for first-generation college students to find each other because it is such an invisible identity. Being a first-generation college student can feel completely isolating; it is a singular experience. My parents were not first-generation and my kids will also not be first-generation; this identity starts and ends with me, my siblings, and my peers who hold it.

In this paper, I will start by introducing Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth and Iloh's Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories as frameworks. The purpose of this paper is to narrate the stories of three siblings who had similar upbringings but had completely different experiences and outcomes when it came to the college application process, enrollment, and experience. Sharing these counterstories in academia is necessary to demonstrate the challenges that first-generation students face as they navigate this process independently. Additionally, it is important to share the beauty and

¹ The youngest of the Nava siblings, Jose Miguel, is currently in high school and has not had a college search and going experience, which is why his story is not included here.

difficulties of family, community, and culture of first-generation college students entering higher education. I will detail how the hardships of being a first-generation college student do not end in making a college decision. My siblings and I share our stories in the hopes of creating space and reflection for fellow first-generation college students who had to navigate the same process. Our stories hold value and provide insight into ways to better support first-generation college students in their college-going decisions.

Epistemology and Guiding Theoretical Framework

Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework is critical when thinking about first-generation college students and their college-going decisions because it is an asset-based approach that highlights the forms of cultural capital that exist within minoritized communities. Yosso outlines aspirational, familial, linguistic, social, navigational, and resistant capital as the six pillars that build community cultural wealth and as strengths for minoritized identities. Aspirational capital is the ability to dream of possibilities beyond the perceived and real barriers or circumstances. Familial capital refers to the commitment to community and *familia* nurtured through cultural knowledge and tradition. Linguistic capital includes the communication and social skills attained through various language(s) and style(s). Social capital is the resources, contacts, and networks that provide instrumental support in uplifting others. Navigational capital refers to the skills used to navigate different structures and institutions. Lastly, resistant capital is the fostered skills and knowledge that come with challenging inequality and inequity (Yosso, 2005). For this paper, I will focus on how familial, social, and aspirational capital plays a significant role in the three siblings' college-going decisions.

The Nava sibling narratives are also grounded in Iloh's Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories. The framework was designed by Constance Iloh (2018) to modernize college choice theory and move away from the concept of "choice" to be more inclusive of nontraditional pathways and the barriers to college access. In this model, there are three interconnected dimensions which are information, time, and opportunity. Each dimension contributes to and contextualizes the ways students come to their college decision (Iloh, 2018). In the dimension of information, the focus is on the amount, access, and delivery of college knowledge that shapes college-going decisions; the more access to information and points of contact with information, the more a student feels like they are making an informed decision. In the dimension of time, one considers how events in the past and present impact a person's life. Lastly, in the dimension of opportunity, the focus is on what realities and possibilities are available in the postsecondary landscape based on "financial, geographical, technological, political, and family/community contexts" or factors (Iloh, 2018, pp. 7). Iloh's model (2018) explores beyond the conventional and criticizes the privilege that comes with college choice because, for many students, the college-going process is nonlinear and complex.

Yosso's framework on community cultural wealth and Iloh's model on College Going Decisions and Trajectories allow a deeper dive into the cultural values, complexities of identity, and exterior circumstances that each student faces. Through the student narratives, we can see how familial, social, and aspirational capital interconnect with the dimensions of time, information, and opportunity. Additionally, the frameworks allow us to look at the intersections of the siblings' identities and stories that lead to the final college decisions.

Testimonios

In this section, each sibling will recount their college search and decision-making process in the first person and in chronological order. Each sibling reveals the distinct factors, identities, and truths that impacted the ways they navigated every step of the way. The Nava testimonios are factual and emotive stories that must be shared in academia.

The Money Will Come, But Nothing Is Free – Arturo

I cannot remember when exactly the idea of going to college was instilled in me; it was just always the goal. I never investigated any other options or even contemplated the idea of doing anything else. College was the end-all answer for what direction my life would take, and I strongly believed it was the only way to be successful. I began to actively prepare for college when I was in sixth grade and my parents enrolled me in a college prep middle school. That is when I started to actively visit colleges on school field trips and read about what it took to get into different college programs. It was from this moment forward that I did everything I could to make myself competitive in the application process. I took advanced math classes in middle school to be able to take more Advanced Placement (AP) math courses in high school. I started doing extracurricular activities and was often at school from before the beginning of the school day until late in the afternoon. The pattern continued into high school where I joined as many extracurricular activities as I could, where sometimes I would go to school at 5 a.m. for marathon training and leave school at 6 p.m. after soccer practice. All of this just seemed like it was what I had to do.

What you may be wondering is where I got the brilliant idea that being this involved with school was the answer. As the first-born of my family and first-generation US-born, I did not know anything about college, so I took advice from anyone who seemed to know what they were talking about. From the time I was in middle school to the end of high school, all my teachers and counselors would tell me the same information. To be involved in school as much as I could because colleges liked to see you have a life outside of academics. To take as many classes as possible that were AP classes because colleges liked to see you challenge yourself. Our high school even had an outside counselors program come to speak to us about the college process, and they would relay similar information.

More importantly, they told me not to worry about anything outside of being the best student I could be and getting the most involved. Their exact words were always “the money will come” when you get into school and I should not worry about the finances. I took their advice.

At the start of 12th grade, the time had come to make a list of colleges I would want to apply to. I took this college search very seriously and did endless amounts of reading and research on so many institutions. Spending many hours looking into the average GPA of students accepted into universities, what programs or majors they offered, and how helpful they were with providing financial aid. After my deep dive, I came up with a list of 25 schools that I as an applicant fit the requirements for admission and would provide generous financial aid. Before applying to these schools, I needed to get my list approved by the partnered college counselors. I was proud of my list given that I had created the best options for me. But when they looked at the schools I listed, they seemed confused and maybe disappointed. After anxiously waiting for a response for what seemed to be an eternity, they confidently told me that I should aim higher because I could do much better than the schools on that list. It made me nervous as I sat there and watched them take schools off my list that I felt good about and add schools that I knew I probably would not get into. I brought to their attention that my GPA was barely good enough to get into some of these schools and that other schools were not helpful with financial aid. Their response, which I should have seen coming, was that I should be confident in myself and that “the money will come.” Even though I was hesitant and did not agree with this decision, I took their advice. I thought to myself, *I am a first-generation college student; I am the first in my immediate family and maybe the first in my extended family to attend a four-year institution so I should probably take the advice of the experts.*

The first semester of my senior year ended, therefore I had submitted all college applications and major scholarship applications, so all there was to do was wait and finish the year strong. The spring semester started and so did the anxiety of hearing back from colleges. Letters started coming in and I knew I should not have been surprised that the responses came in smaller envelopes: rejection letters. For the next few weeks, I dreaded coming home to find a new rejection letter from one of the many schools I had applied to. It blew my mind because deep down I knew that this would happen, but I had tried being more optimistic. I had listened to the advice of people who seemed to know more about the college application process than I did.

I clearly remember getting sixteen rejection letters, and the schools that I did get into did not provide the best financial aid packages. I then went to consult with the outside counselors and there was a long line of students waiting for advice about their options. As students went in, I could hear them tell students, “Well, how are you going to pay for this?” I heard this multiple times and saw students leave more perplexed than when they went in. It was confusing to me because all this time we had been told that “the money will come.” I then thought to myself: if they knew it would be hard to

pay for these institutions and financial aid would not cover it all, then why did they not have us focus more on places they knew we could afford or would give us more financial aid?

Knowing now how that program of outside counselors works, we were just numbers to them more than we were students who were making important life decisions. Even if they tried to keep our best interests in mind, they were a nonprofit organization trying to help students of low-income backgrounds get into college, and the numbers mattered. Having a few students get into more prestigious schools was better than having many students get into lesser-known schools, even if they did not end up enrolling in those colleges.

I have concluded that nothing is free. College was not free. And the advice that the outside counselors gave us was also not free. Some students paid by being the poster students and having their stories of success used to brag to donors; some of us paid with not having many viable options after the college application process and with the life outcomes that came with making these decisions. That day I knew I had no answer to the question of how I would pay for college, so I left the line and went home. I tried to talk to my parents about what options we had, and it did not seem like I would get much support from them financially. I knew their support would be limited; I was very aware of our low-income status. Knowing there was no other option, I decided to go to a local community college. I did not want to be a financial burden to my family and get into thousands of dollars worth of debt to attend a four-year college. And as a 17-year-old who focused only on school and extracurriculars, I did not have any money of my own. What else was I going to do if college was all I ever considered as an option after high school? The decision was already made for me.

Living my Parents' Dream – Maria

My father always told me that I could be anything I wanted to be, if I worked hard, never quit my dreams, and focused on my education. My parents believed so much in education they enrolled us in college prep middle school and high school. I saw the sacrifices they made, and their persistence motivated me to focus on the one thing that would help our family advance.

When I was in the ninth grade, I had to have gallbladder removal surgery due to stones. Given my surgery, I was not allowed to participate in sports, which made up most of my extracurricular activities, so I threw myself into school. That semester I earned, for the first time, straight A's in all my classes which gave me the confidence boost that I needed to perform well for the rest of my time in high school. Counselors and teachers highly encouraged me to take all the AP classes available, which would boost my GPA and make me much more competitive in the college application process.

My schedule in high school was unforgiving. Leaving for school super early and getting home late after practice. On the weekends, I had to help my parents with the small family business they were starting, which meant my homework had to be done in the evenings on the weekdays. I stayed up late

just to finish assignments. There was a week when I was extremely sleep deprived and when my dad saw me studying at 2 a.m., he angrily demanded I go to bed. I responded half asleep, that I was doing this because I wanted to make him proud, and that I was working hard so that I could earn scholarships to the best colleges in the country so he would not have to worry about paying for my education. This was the year after seeing my older brother completely devastated that he could not attend a four-year college due to finances. I made my parents a promise: I would figure it out and they would not have to worry about me.

During my junior year, I was pulled out of one of my classes so that I could speak to a recruiter, Mr. Winston, for a program called South Central Scholars. I remember the way that Mr. Winston spoke about how this program helped underrepresented students get admitted to the best colleges and universities in the country, provided scholarships, and through their Summer Academy gave students the skills and resources to succeed academically and interpersonally. This was it; this program would help me achieve my parents' biggest dream, and I could have a chance of attending one of the best schools in the country.

In my interview for this program, I spoke about my journey as a first-generation college student, my dreams of supporting my family, and about my love of school and learning, specifically STEM. When they asked me about what colleges I was considering, I mentioned wanting to stay close to home because I could not imagine myself being far away from my family. They saw potential in me, and I was admitted to the program. That summer I enrolled to be a part of their Summer Academy program, which ran from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., every day for eight weeks, where I took a college-level English course and a Calculus course with a group of forty other students from all over Los Angeles. This program pushed me academically and taught me valuable skills that I would then take with me. It was the hardest I had ever worked, and I knew I was that much closer to achieving my promise.

During my senior year of high school, I received a lot of support from my guidance counseling office to craft my college list which included sixteen different schools, among them four California State Schools, four University of California Schools, and eight private colleges. One day, I received an email from the founder of South Central Scholars, Dr. London. I was shocked that the founder of this program had time to reach out and let me know that I had been one of the best-performing students at the Summer Academy. He asked me to send him my college list so that he could send an additional letter of recommendation to these admissions offices. Still shocked, I thanked him for his generosity and sent him my list. He responded with four additional schools to add to my list because he thought that I “deserved a spot at a top liberal arts college in the country.” Dr. London and the program believed in me and my potential and knew more about the college application process than my family and I did. So, I trusted him and his advice and added the four schools to my list without question.

While applying to schools was the main part of the application process, I knew I would not be able to go if I did not receive substantial financial aid. I knew we did not have much, but we somehow always had enough. However, paying for school was not something that my low-income family could afford. So, I spent much of my winter break writing essays for the prestigious Gates Millennium Scholarship, which would cover any gaps in my financial aid packages and would allow me to attend any school I wished without thinking of the financial burdens and implications it would have on my family.

Once all the applications for colleges and scholarships were in, all I had to do now was desperately wait for the decisions to come back. I received mostly acceptances from the schools I applied to, some waitlists, and some rejections as well. The admission decision that surprised me the most was one of the schools that Dr. London recommended to me, Middlebury College. When I applied there, I had no idea where it was even located. A few days later I got a letter in the mail with a handwritten note from my admissions counselor at Middlebury and it made all the difference. A few days after that, I received an email inviting me to visit Middlebury for admitted student days with all expenses paid by the school. I mostly agreed because it was a free trip, and I wanted to make sure I explored all my options, but I knew I was going to enroll in a school that was closer to home so I could be near family.

It was a snowy April week when I visited the Vermont campus. It was a gorgeous place and everyone I met was so nice. I was blown away that this was a college experience that I now had access to. It was like what you would picture in the movies; it felt unreal and fit into the mold of everything that my parents would want me to have. Was I now considering moving across the country? I was torn between the opportunities presented to me in this new place and the reality of attending school away from my family. During a lunch event, I sat next to a faculty member that reminded me how I did not have to have it all figured out just yet, and that here I would have people supporting me along the way. I was overwhelmed with so many emotions because everything my parents ever dreamed of for their children could be possible for me.

When I came home from my trip, there was a big envelope from the Gates Millennium Foundation waiting for me. My family and I screamed and jumped with excitement; I was part of the 2% of applicants to receive this award. With this scholarship, finances were no longer an issue, which meant I could attend any school. I talked to my parents about how much I enjoyed my experience at Middlebury. They said they would miss me if I chose to go, but that I was lucky to even have a choice. They were supportive and kind and understanding. I could not live with the ‘what if’ of such a unique opportunity, I could not say no, so I chose to go.

The Costs of Seeking Perfection – Lucero

Going into high school I was hopeful. My teachers and peers always told me how smart I was and that my academic abilities would lead me to college no matter my background. My first year of high school was one of the best school years academically and athletically. By my first semester, I had one of the top GPAs in my class and I was in three different sports teams at my school: varsity basketball, Students Run LA (marathon training), and junior varsity swimming team. Being a part of these sports boosted my confidence tremendously. I never doubted myself until my sophomore year when I decided to take an AP class. I took the class because it was the first time an AP class was offered to sophomores and my guidance counselors said it would look great on my transcript for college applications, although I did not want to take the course.

The class was AP European History and I performed quite terribly. I was struggling to balance the different aspects of my life that I thought was expected of me. I hardly slept because, on top of my academics, I was, once again, on three different sports teams that school year. This meant I was up at 4 a.m. and did not get back home until 7 p.m. because of morning and afternoon practice. It's what my siblings had done and I thought this was what school was supposed to be like, that I had to work myself to an extreme and make the most of every opportunity. I remember after my first semester of sophomore year ended, I told my mom, "School is stressful, I do not know if I'll make it to college." She was shocked, because, to her, college was the only option for success. I was already discouraged by the challenges that I was facing. My sophomore year was one of the first times I struggled academically and getting through that year is still something that I remember vividly. After that, I was extremely self-conscious for my junior year, especially since college applications would now be the focus.

Junior year was not an easy year either, but I was finally feeling like myself again because I worked hard to bump my GPA up a few points, I was thriving in my extracurriculars, and I was learning from the mistakes I made the year before. However, suddenly, I could no longer walk into school without sweating or losing my vision. My life stopped abruptly, my heart was racing all the time, and I was sad and confused. I yearned to go back to school but I physically could not do it. I was diagnosed with anxiety and depression and was enrolled in individual and group therapy to help. I felt lost, I had no confidence. I had to finish the second semester of my junior year from home. When my report card came in the mail, I was expecting failure and disappointment. But then my mom opened the report card and she smiled, which was not the reaction I was expecting. To my surprise, my GPA was the highest that it had ever been. After that moment, I realized how fixated I was on my faults and struggles and that I never gave myself credit for all the good grades that existed on my transcript and everything else I was able to accomplish.

I had worked so hard that I applied and was admitted to a competitive summer program, like my older sister, because I thought it was something I was supposed to be doing to get into college. That

summer I attended South Central Scholars summer bridge which was intended to give first-generation students tools to succeed. Current USC professors taught the classes and structured them to mimic a college class. It was the first time in my academic career that like-minded individuals surrounded me. That summer I made unforgettable friends, many of us agreed we were going to reapply for the following summer, and I was excited to get through senior year to be a part of the program once more. The summer bridge opened my college list to schools I was not aware of and others I thought I would never apply to.

When senior year started, it felt like I was taking a step back after such a great summer. I only looked forward to my elective class because college counselors from the Fulfillment Fund organization, a nonprofit that provides high school students college access services, would help me and my peers apply for college and scholarships. Luckily, I also attended a public charter school where the guidance counselors were kind, supportive, and extremely involved. They gave us essential information about applying to schools and financial resources that as a first-generation college student, I would not have had access to otherwise.

I was nervous about applying to colleges because of the overwhelming expectation to know what I wanted to do with my career at seventeen, and I thought, “what if I change my mind.” My strong GPA placed me at the top of my class, so my counselors strongly encouraged me to apply to several of the California State Universities (CSUs), the University of California (UCs), and a few private schools. Since I am from a low-income household, I received a fee waiver that covered my application fees to four CSUs and four UCs, which reduced the burden of application fees. Additionally, I was able to apply to private colleges through the common application fee waiver.

When it came to choosing which schools in the California school systems I would apply to, I took the advice of my counselors because they knew best about that process. I had originally intended to apply to schools closer to home, but one of my counselors strongly encouraged me to change them for schools that were a “better fit” for me. With my UC application process, I wanted to focus on finding a school that offered the major that I was interested in: Communication. I spent hours looking at each of the schools’ websites and felt discouraged when I realized a few schools in the UC system did not offer communication studies as a major. I went to talk privately with one of my counselors. He told me that I could still apply to the schools under an alternative major like Sociology, which was similar to communications. And if once I got to college, I did not like it, I could change it again. And again, I was advised to apply to schools of a higher caliber that were a “better fit” according to my counselors.

Applying to private schools was a faster process for me because South Central Scholars and Fulfillment Fund held many college fairs with a large attendance of school representatives. During the events, I was able to talk to admissions representatives from nationally top-ranked schools. Because I interacted with more private schools, and I was excited to apply. That was until I realized how much it

would cost to attend, which was overwhelming. I felt that my chances of getting admission were slim based on the numbers. And even if I did get in, it felt it would be impossible to pay that much money for college. I decided to look to my older sister for advice since she had done the application process two years prior and was currently in college. She reassured me that the numbers were intimidating but that I would never know what a school had to offer until I applied, heard back, and saw the financial aid packages. After our conversation and taking her perspective into account, I felt much more at ease.

I received acceptance letters from all four of my CSU schools, two UCs, and one private school. Although I received a lot of good news, I was upset that I did not get into the higher-caliber private schools. I knew I was not the perfect student, but I had a high-ranking GPA and a lot of extracurriculars-- is that not what colleges and universities wanted? I spent weeks overthinking what I could have done better to get more acceptances, and because of my anxiety, I felt that all the hard work I had put in was for nothing. I did not realize until later that all that hard work and sleepless nights did not define how intelligent I was and the colleges that offered me a spot in their school saw potential in me.

I was excited that I was awarded three scholarships from South Central Scholars, Fulfillment Fund, and Students Run LA which filled a big chunk of the gaps in my financial aid packages. Although I did receive scholarships and financial aid through the universities, it was not enough to afford the full cost of attending. I ended up choosing Chico State because the financial aid package was much better in comparison to other schools, and they had the major I wanted to study. I could always get a part-time job to cover my cost of living. If the offer only covered tuition I do not think I could have gone to a four-year institution.

I know my parents would have supported me financially regardless of what school I wanted to attend and what the cost was. They always encouraged me to follow my dreams, but I could not imagine putting my parents through more financial hardship. They both worked extremely hard to provide for my siblings and me and I felt a sense of obligation not to rely on them as soon as I left for college. Growing up they always taught me to work for everything I had because nothing in life was ever handed to us, which affected my mental health, but I was too prideful to accept additional help from my parents.

Discussion

While there is significant hardship in each of these stories, it is also important to acknowledge the privileges that exist. The Nava siblings all applied to college in the “traditional” pathway which happens in high school with the support of counselors. Attending a college preparatory high school allowed them to have easier access to information and more tools to apply to college than their public-school peers who grew up in similar areas. It is also crucial to acknowledge that all siblings were

born in the US and therefore are US citizens, meaning that they are eligible for federal financial aid, which is different for their first-generation undocumented peers. It is important to name the privileges in the stories because the first-generation experience is not a monolith, and while these privileges hold for *los Nava*, they may not hold for others.

Arturo, Maria, and Lucero all had vastly different college-going trajectories, and it is evident that community cultural wealth was a crucial factor in the decision-making process. Three main themes came up in the *testimonios*: family dynamics and values, trust in the guidance and access to information, and affordability and opportunity. Below I outline how the dimensions of time, information, and opportunity in Iloh's Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories (2018) impacted the Nava siblings' college decisions using the lens of Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth (2005), specifically familial, social, and aspirational capital.

Family Dynamics and Values

As children of immigrants from Mexico, the Nava siblings were socialized to believe that education was the only way to climb the social ladder and reach success. The entire family held education as a family value, which meant attaining higher education became the expectation for the Nava siblings. Similarly, it has become more common to expect higher education from younger generations (Langenkamp & Shifrer, 2018). Latine families hold value in their familial capital. First-generation Latine students believe that family comes first in many cases, meaning you make decisions with family in mind (Moreno, 2021). I argue that Yosso's familial capital and Iloh's dimension of time are directly correlated in the Nava siblings' stories.

Using Iloh's dimension of time one can analyze that things were going on in each of the siblings' lives that impacted their college process. For example, Arturo, as the firstborn in the family, had the unfortunate luck to go through this process first and navigate this experience through trial and error. Both Maria and Lucero were able to benefit from having an older sibling who had gone through the process. For Maria, it was recognizing the lack of financial aid as a barrier and doing everything in her power to avoid a comparable situation. For Lucero, it was calling her older sister for advice about private colleges. Older siblings play a crucial role in navigating education systems; additionally, when an older sibling goes through adversity, younger siblings learn from it (Delgado, 2020). There are other pieces related to the dimension of time that are important to note. Maria's medical procedure allowed her to focus on academics more, which in turn motivated her to do better in school because it would benefit her family. Lucero's mental health struggles had a significant impact on academics and social life while in high school and beyond, not to mention dealing with the stigma that comes with mental health within the Latine community. All the details regarding where the students were at the time also contributed to the family dynamics and, in the end, their college decisions.

Through the stories of college decisions, family dynamics begin to shift, specifically with the parents. There is growth in the Nava parents' reactions to college decision-making as each sibling goes through the process. In Arturo's case, the parents were clear in saying that they could not support him financially and even if they wanted to, there was no way. Maria earning a full scholarship was a huge opportunity and led the parents to openly support a move across the country. And lastly, with Lucero, there was a more open discussion about support, she states, "I know my parents would have supported me financially regardless of what school I wanted to attend and what the cost was." The more the Nava parents learned about the range of options for their children, the more open they became about supporting their college choices and trajectories.

Familial capital made *los Nava* put their family first, which is the case for many Latine and first-generation college students (Ballysingh, 2021; Moreno, 2021). Arturo deliberately chose not to put himself in debt for school because being in debt meant the family would be in debt and would limit them as a unit from further opportunities. Maria made it clear to her father that she was working hard to make him proud because her success meant the success of the family. Lucero needed to fully sustain herself financially once she made a college decision because it would alleviate her parents' finances, if she could become financially independent then her parents would be too. The Nava siblings' *testimonios* confirm that as first-generation college students, familial capital is one of the main components in their college decision-making process.

Trust in Guidance and Access to Information

The dimension of time and the life experiences of each sibling also contribute to the dimension of information. I argue that Iloh's dimension of information is directly correlated to social capital. Iloh (2018, 2019) outlines how access to information related to the college-going process is an issue of equity. In the case of *Los Nava*, the information they were receiving came from their social capital, which are the contacts and networks that provided instrumental support. The Nava siblings placed an immense amount of trust in the people guiding them given their first-generation status. In each of the *testimonios* we hear an iteration of, *they knew more than I did, so I took their advice*. Teachers, counselors, and other adults with knowledge about the college application process have a significant role as the primary information and knowledge providers to first-generation students (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013), as one witness in the case of the Nava siblings.

Iloh (2018) highlights an observation that K-12 education is the only space where students receive standard college information (if any). Again, it is important to name the privilege that the Nava siblings were in "traditional" K-12 settings and more so in a college-ready school. However, the spreading of misinformation could be detrimental to the college-going trajectory for first-generation students. In Arturo's case, he was receiving college information starting in the sixth grade, which is

typically early for a first-generation college student. He was also working with a local non-profit affiliated with his school that supported and aided this process. Access to information at an earlier age and social capital should have been advantages in the college search and application process. However, there was poor advising and a lack of information regarding financial aid, which severely impacted the outcome of his process. Although Arturo had also done an extensive amount of research on colleges and the requirements for admissions, he chose to trust the people he had closer relationships with – his social capital – instead of trusting his ability to gather that information.

As mentioned previously, Maria and Lucero had the option to look for support and information from their older sibling, but Arturo did not have that luxury as the firstborn. Older siblings are key sources of information to their younger siblings through every aspect of their educational journey, from elementary education to college enrollment, and even career search (Delgado, 2020). Additionally, Maria and Lucero also had an additional source of information from community-based organizations outside of school, South Central Scholars. Maria gained access to this program as a top student, which then provided additional access for Lucero to apply. It was this connection to this organization that led Maria to apply to small liberal arts colleges. And for Lucero, it opened her options to private schools entirely. The circumstances demonstrate the importance of multiple sources of information and relationships when it comes to the college search. Even with access to some information, there are lots of gaps and there could also be the spreading of misinformation.

Something to note about the dimension of information is how often students may receive the information, but it takes additional time for them to fully understand it. For example, Lucero continued to hear that colleges would be a “good fit” for her, even though she had no idea what that meant. Similarly, Maria’s message from the founder of South Central Scholars gave her liberal arts colleges to apply to, but not enough information about what liberal arts colleges were and how that experience looked different than other options. For all three siblings, college was the goal, and they had no concrete ways to distinguish the types of colleges or pathways that would work for them. Folks, who support first-generation students may often ask, “what does your ideal college look like?” And while there may be an answer to that question based on the dimensions of time and opportunity, first-generation college students do not have an ideal school in mind because for them the goal is simply to make it to any school.

“Family pioneers” or first-generation college students typically name general college ambitions as opposed to specific college goals named by their non-first-generation peers (Lagenkamp & Shifrer, 2018). Students may also not know how to tell the difference between higher education institutions, even though they have vastly different components like “academic rankings, their graduation rates, their class size, their general education curriculum, their extracurricular offerings, their rate of job placement after graduation and their overall reputation” (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013, pp. 351). The

different components that make up the higher education experience are not taken into consideration by students and families of first-generation backgrounds. Lack of information on the different components and characteristics that make up the college experience once students have their “options” could lead to uninformed decision-making and not allow students to fully consider their range of possibilities. First-generation college students are left not knowing what the crucial factors there are to consider when making a college decision that would then also impact their enrollment and quality of experience (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013). In Maria’s case, she applied to schools with little knowledge of them, and it was not until after she received admissions decisions that she began to learn what those different components entailed.

Affordability and Opportunity

All three siblings successfully applied and received admission to a few college options, which falls under opportunities as the final dimension in Iloh’s theory. The biggest opportunity that the Nava siblings were working towards was to have access to higher education and they achieved it. Each sibling recounts how they did everything in their power to be competitive in the college admissions process such as taking competitive classes and being heavily involved in extracurriculars so that they could attain better options. Arturo mentions, “All of this just seemed like it was what had to be done.” And Lucero thought, “this was what school was supposed to be like, that I had to work myself to an extreme and make the most of every opportunity.” How Maria describes their schedules as “unforgiving” gives a glimpse into the habit of overworking and exceptionalism that they perceived was required to gain admission. Overworking yourself beyond the limit is a harmful habit among first-generation college students that can perpetuate burnout. However, this all relates to aspirational capital, first-generation students must move beyond the obstacles and the exhaustion to hopefully reach success. I argue that the dimension of opportunity and aspirational capital are linked in the Nava sibling’s story.

While the siblings had multiple “options,” all the final decisions kept finances and affordability in mind. Arturo’s decision to attend community college was due to a lack of financial aid from other institutions and to avoid student debt. Maria’s decision was based on a generous financial aid package provided by an elite college in combination with a prestigious scholarship that allowed her to choose any school. Lucero’s decision was based on what would be the most affordable and allow her to relieve some financial burden off her parents. While it is harmful to associate first-generation college students with those who are from poor and low-income backgrounds (Young, 2016), it is important to note that the Nava siblings are from a low-income background and finances were a huge determinant of what opportunities were available to them, not only based on the admissions decisions. The financial realities of the Nava family limited the high aspirational capital that the siblings held.

All three siblings had the perception that the constant need for overwork and exceptionalism was the only way to reach success. The information students attain in the application process impacts the opportunities and options for higher education. But once students hear back from schools, they also must consider the cost, location, and what they would gain from attending, for example, career options that could support the family (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013). For Arturo, staying home was the financially sound decision, while for Maria and Lucero, leaving made the most sense. Even within the same family, the opportunities were not the same for each sibling, but it was their aspirational capital that kept them going despite the intense demands of the process.

After the decisions

For first-generation college students, making the final decision on where to attend is not where it all ends. Iloh's (2018) model accounts for the reality of how that also continues to impact students' trajectory beyond arriving at college. The identity of a first-generation college student does not stop once students get to college; upon starting college, students will come across a myriad of things that they will learn for the first time, including academic expectations, the hidden curriculum, building networks, and more.

Arturo experienced a phenomenon called undermatching, where he attended a school that did not match his intellectual abilities. He put his family first, even as he was attending college, which forced him to negotiate his schoolwork and commitments. The collective and family mentality is common among first-generation college students, specifically those who are first-born, who remain close to home for school and must navigate student demands and family obligations (Hébert, 2018; Moreno, 2021). It was so difficult to balance, that Arturo's plans of transferring from community college to a four-year institution never came to fruition, which is also common for other first-generation peers.

Even though Maria received a prestigious scholarship to attend a top liberal arts school in the country, transitioning to a historically white institution where everyone seemed to know what they were doing proved very difficult. Feelings of imposter syndrome and survivor's guilt are common among first-generation college students who leave home for college (Moreno, 2021). While the stars aligned for Maria in the college search and application process where she did not face many roadblocks, there were plenty of struggles faced in college related to finding a sense of belonging. She held the burden of becoming the family pioneer (Langenkamp & Shifrer, 2018) and being the first to leave her family's home, the feelings of exceptionalism and expectations continued (Nava, 2022). In college Maria found support through other first-generation students who had similar lived experiences, finding community and validation in her experiences was the reason she made it through graduation.

Arriving at college is only part of the battle, many students, like Lucero, had to have full-time jobs in food service to be able to afford their education. Working a job takes time away from academics, and in Lucero's case left her exhausted at the end of the day with not enough time to focus on her coursework. In the academic year 2015-2016, 66% of first-generation college students were employed through work-study, internship, or paid job and worked a median of 20 hours a week; only 35% of those that were employed had jobs related to their majors (RTI International, 2019b). While having a job, in general, may be common among all college students, first-generation and low-income students work out of necessity.

There are many other challenges that first-generation college students face when they arrive at college campuses. And it comes with feelings of guilt and disappointment because getting to college was supposed to be "success" itself. Each sibling attended a different type of institution: Arturo attended community college, Maria attended a small private liberal arts college, and Lucero attended a large public state university. Where first-generation college students decide to attend is important because each option has different and unequal outcomes. Additionally, attending college alone has not filled the gap in racial disparities in wealth in this country (Iloh, 2019). The college-going and "choice" process is an issue of equity.

Implications for Practice

We learn something important from each of the Nava siblings' stories that we can put into practice. Practitioners should recognize the resourcefulness of first-generation college students and empower them in this process. They should also fight the embedded elitism in the college search and going process. Admissions offices should stop glorifying burnout and emphasize that college decisions are not a reflection of a student's value.

These stories emphasize how first-generation students rely heavily on sources of information to make their college decisions. Simultaneously, first-generation college students are resourceful enough to figure things out. For example, Arturo should have trusted his innate ability and resourcefulness to find information on his own and stick with that intuition despite the advice. While there are lots of things first-gen students don't know and do rely on support in instances when important decisions need to be made, it does not mean they are incapable of doing it on their own. Many first-generation students can figure it out on their own because it is what we have always done. Of course, guidance and programs that support first-generation students are critical and essential for their advancement and to fill the gaps in knowledge, but there is no reason to assume that students would not understand the entirety of a process. There is a need to embrace the first-generation identity and look at it, not as a deficit, but as an asset that holds Community Cultural Wealth, specifically the aspirational and navigational capital necessary to figure it out.

Another key takeaway from these stories is that even those trying to support marginalized students who get to higher education can make mistakes. There are high levels of elitism ingrained and embedded in our education system. The Nava siblings also fall under the “talented and gifted” category of students that are usually pushed to “get out” or “make it” by attending elite institutions. Arturo mentions it when talking about the nonprofit that supported him and the importance of the number of students getting into elite institutions despite a student’s ability to afford it. Maria had access to everything her parents ever dreamed of when Middlebury became an option. It was the best school that Maria was admitted to and had the best financial aid package, but the support at the institution was not comprehensive enough for first-generation college students. While the school itself may be among one of the best for different factors, it does not mean that that student will have the best experience or be fully supported while there. It is easy to fall trap and advise students to take advantage of the best opportunities provided, but in what ways is that advice causing additional harm by placing students in environments that are not equipped to support them? Many higher education institutions are not well equipped to support students of first-generation backgrounds. Lucero also experienced some feedback regarding applying to “higher caliber schools” but ultimately the decision came down to finances and what would best benefit the family. The college search and going process has significant layers of elitism, and practitioners advising students can start to break these down by really listening to students and their needs.

From an Admissions perspective, offices around the country should also stop glorifying burnout for exceptional students from first-generation backgrounds. Students push themselves to the point of burnout in many ways due to the aspirational capital that they hold to get beyond the spaces and places that they inhabit now. It is about survival and moving beyond reality and circumstance to something better, this thing called success that seems unattainable unless you do the most. It is damaging for many first-generation students to live their lives consistently burned out, which is something we see happening in the Nava stories. It is also damaging for the students because if a student is rejected and they have done everything in their power to be a competitive applicant, it could create feelings of invalidation and failure. Counselors and people supporting first-generation students should continuously remind students that the decisions are not a reflection of who they are as students, their intelligence or capabilities, or if they are “good enough.” For example, Lucero’s story outlines focusing on the failures and letting those define her whole experience despite the successes. Which brings us to the question, who is allowed to fail? Failure weighs more when there is more on the line, which is often the case for first-generation college students. Additionally, it is important to give special attention to the eldest of the family who may be holding and carrying a lot of familial weight and responsibilities, making perceived failure that much more damaging.

As someone who worked in Admissions for three years, I understand the complexity that comes with an admissions decision. The Nava *testimonios*, and the applications that I have had the privilege of reading, emphasize a need for racially conscious and responsible guidance counselors, advisors, and admissions counselors in the field supporting first-generation college students in their college search and going decisions. There is harm created usually by agents out of students' control when one does not put in the work to learn about this lived experience. Additionally, post-secondary education is not for everyone, and folks advising students should give folks more options than just attending higher education. How do we have the knowledge to advise students correctly regarding their life after high school, even if that means they are not attending college?

Conclusion

When you put the stories together, there is heartbreak and triumph in each of the Nava siblings' stories. Arturo, Maria, and Lucero's *testimonios* include struggling with being the eldest, misinformation, leaving home, high financial need, mental health, and exceptional standards. And yet, we can also celebrate how they supported each other and used familial, social, and aspirational capital to get to college and where they are. Additionally, we can follow the different dimensions of time, opportunity, and information as they navigate their college "choice." Iloh challenges the idea of choice and states that choice is a privilege, not a right that continues to shape the college decision process. One cannot oversimplify the experience of a first-generation college student and their college decision-making process.

For *los Nava*, the choices were predetermined for them based on financial circumstance, which was the most salient in their decision-making trajectory. Even with all of them attending college, which seems like success within itself, it was only the beginning of their first-generation journeys. This brings to light the reality of college access for first-generation college students and their intersecting identities, specifically those from low-income and Latine backgrounds. The present telling of stories gave a small sample of three siblings, who despite growing up in similar circumstances had varying college outcomes. Future *testimonios* could focus on first-generation students that have other intersecting identities.

References

- Ballysingh, T. A. (2021). Aspirational and High-Achieving Latino College Men Who Strive “Por Mi Madre”: Toward a Proposed Model of Maternal Cultural Wealth. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 20(4), 347–364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192719870925>
- Carolan-Silva, A., & Reyes, J. R. (2013). Navigating the path to college: Latino students’ social networks and access to college. *Educational Studies*, 49(4), 334–359. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2013.808199>
- Covarrubias, R., Valle, I., Laiduc, G., & Azmitia, M. (2019). “You Never Become Fully Independent”: Family Roles and Independence in First-Generation College Students. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 34(4), 381–410. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558418788402>
- Delgado, V. (2020). Decoding the Hidden Curriculum: Latino/a First-Generation College Students’ Influence on Younger Siblings’ Educational Trajectory. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, DOI: 10.1080/15348431.2020.1801439
- Hébert, T. P. (2018). An Examination of High-Achieving First-Generation College Students From Low-Income Backgrounds. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 62(1), 96–110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0016986217738051>
- Iloh, C. (2019). An Alternative to College “Choice” Models and Frameworks: The Iloh Model of College-Going Decisions and Trajectories. *College and University*, 94(4), 2-9.
- Iloh, C. (2018). Toward a new model of college “choice” for a twenty-first-century context. *Harvard Educational Review*. 88(2): 227–244. doi:[10.1177/1943-5045-88.2.227](https://doi.org/10.1177/1943-5045-88.2.227)
- Langenkamp, A. G., & Shifrer, D. (2018). Family Legacy or Family Pioneer? Social Class Differences in the Way Adolescents Construct College-Going. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 33(1), 58–89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558416684951>
- Moreno, R. (2021). The Guilt of Success: Looking at Latino First-Generation College Students’ Experience of Leaving Home. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 20(2), 213–231. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192719849756>
- NASPA. (n.d.). Are you a first-generation student? Center for First-generation Student Success. Retrieved March 25, 2022, from <https://firstgen.naspa.org/why-first-gen/students/are-you-a-first-generation-student>
- Nava, M. S. (2022). Exceptionally Flawed: A story about expectations and truth. *The Vermont Connection*, 43(1). <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol43/iss1/7>
- RTI International. (2019a). First-generation College Students: Demographic Characteristics and Postsecondary Enrollment. Washington, DC: NASPA. Retrieved from <https://firstgen.naspa.org/files/dmfile/FactSheet-01.pdf>
- RTI International. (2019b). First-generation College Students’ Employment. Washington, DC:

- NASPA. Retrieved from <https://firstgen.naspa.org/files/dmfile/FactSheet-04.pdf>
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity & Education*, 8(1), 69-91.
- Young, M. S. (2016, October 16). *The Cost of Being First: Conflating “first-generation” and “low-income” students is inaccurate and isolating*. The Atlantic. Retrieved March 24, 2022, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/10/the-cost-of-being-first/504155/>