



Association of Mexican American Educators Journal

A peer-reviewed, open access journal

Volume 11 Issue 2

2017

AMAE Special Issue

Latinx and the Community College: Promoting Pathways to Postsecondary Degrees

Guest Editors

Edna Martinez, Nancy Acevedo-Gil, and Enrique G. Murillo, Jr.
California State University, San Bernardino

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The University of Texas at San Antonio

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AMAE, Inc.

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Hanging Out and Hanging On: From the Projects to the Campus.
Núñez, Elsa. (2014). Landham, MA: Roman & Littlefield. 160 pp.
ISSBN: 978-1475802436. \$36.00 (Paperback)

Madeline Pérez De Jesús

The University of Saint Joseph

In 2012, I attended a fundraising gala for a community organization that serves families in Hartford. The gala's speaker was Dr. Elsa Núñez, the President of Eastern Connecticut State University. Her talk was an early draft of what later became her book, *Hanging Out and Hanging On: From the Projects to the Campus*. In this text, Núñez documents the six-year history of the Dual College Enrollment Program (DCEP), which was an innovative partnership between her university, Quinebaug Valley Community College (QVCC), and Hartford High School. It served as a college recruitment and retention program for first-generation, immigrant, and low-income youth.

Núñez argues, in *Hanging Out*, that through the use of institutional partnerships, college access and affordability can improve for underrepresented students. The central idea of DCEP was to identify high school youth who have what Núñez and her colleagues refer to as a "spark" (2014, p. viii). That is, not-yet-achieving youth who express a drive to obtain a college degree and contribute to their communities. Those students would then start taking college classes at QVCC but be housed on the campus at Eastern (which is a short walk away). Núñez explains that the housing arrangement fulfilled two purposes: it minimized the stigma associated with attending community college and it supported students by providing a temporary respite from their (often dangerous) neighborhoods. DCEP's goal was to address the achievement gap. Its establishment here in Connecticut met a dire need. The state of Connecticut has the widest achievement gap in the country. Using National Center for Education Statistics, Núñez (2014) highlights that "as Latinos and African American students in Connecticut move through the school system, the gap between their test scores and those of Connecticut's white students actually worsens" (p. 43).

Núñez organized the book into four parts. First, she grounds the reader in sharing her personal and professional background. The second section defines the need for and history of

the DCEP program. The third section includes stories from six alumni of DCEP. The book's last segment shares some lessons learned. The integration of a multi-faceted understanding of the program—from Núñez to her colleagues to the students themselves—is a major contribution of this volume. For example, one of Núñez's colleagues from Eastern contributed a chapter. Some authors might shy away from such a structure, as it takes more time and patience to write with co-authors, especially first-time authors, such as the DCEP alums. Núñez's decision to do this speaks to her firm commitment in the leadership of her students and her stance on viewing her colleagues as true partners in this endeavor.

The fundamental argument of *Hanging Out* is that societal inequities—such as the education achievement gap—do not operate in isolation. They are the result of economic, social, political and cultural forces that impact the lives of students. Núñez provides a macro perspective in using archival data to showcase how Puerto Rican migrants were treated in the 1950s and how this history leaves a residue in the current decline of inner city communities. (“If you couldn't speak English, they would just put you in special ed” (Núñez, 2014, p. 29)—recounted a Connecticut Latino.) Núñez effectively immerses us in the present-day situation in Connecticut and illustrates the sociohistorical perspective from Connecticut and Puerto Rico. This stylistic approach in writing reminds me of Jean Anyon's (1997) *Ghetto Schooling* where she argues in a similar vein, that “schools—like people—are products of their past, as well as of the present” (p. xv). A micro perspective is showcased through the voices of the students and Núñez's own life story. Her memoir chapters are reminiscent of two other Latina educational leaders, Antonia Pantoja's (2002) *Memoir of a Visionary* and the more recent *Brooklyn Dreams* by Multicultural educator, Sonia Nieto (2015), where they all marry the personal, the professional, and the political.

The author's writing style is engaging and vivid. For instance, in painting a picture of her childhood in a poor town in Puerto Rico, she describes her terror in seeing her grandmother killing a chicken to make soup. (This made me smile, as it is a popular shared memory of many of us who traveled to Puerto Rico as children to spend time with our relatives on the farm.)

Hanging Out would benefit from more details about what occurred when the DCEP program ended. Knowing that such programs are meant to function as pilots of innovation, in what ways did the program influence any of the policies and procedures at the three partner institutions? Moreover, a Methodological Appendix that speaks to how field notes, interviews,

and student outcome data were used would encourage readers who are engaged in similar initiatives, and are so involved in the never-ending work of battling oppression, to carve out time to document and analyze the work.

I see two audiences for *Hanging Out*. One audience is folks like me—faculty members and others who work in the higher education system and seek to explore ways that they can establish pipelines of progress for inner-city students who arrive to college already impacted by the achievement gap in their K-12 education. The other audience is college students themselves who seek affirmation about their attempts to go into the unknown land of college. After reviewing the book, I adopted it as the main text for the Latino diversity class that I teach.

In addition to my faculty role, I also direct an Institute for Latino Community Practice (I-LCP) at my home institution, which is committed to supporting college completion of Latino/as and others who are committed to serving Latino communities. There are two important take-away from this text that influence my work with I-LCP: (1) No matter how passionate one is about influencing social justice, it simply is *not enough* to be a lone institutional change agent. Initiatives such as DCEP need to be a team effort and commitment has to come from the highest-ranking decision-makers at a multitude of institutions; (2) Those of us involved in social change work must document these initiatives and contribute this to our collective knowledge-base from which to inform and re-inspire ourselves to combat oppression. Both educators and students in the classroom will appreciate how this text not only aids them in understanding the larger structures that impact inequity, but also provides a model for how to interrupt that inequity. I did. And my students did.

References

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