

# Community College Puente: A Validating Model of Education

LAURA I. RENDÓN

*Employing Rendón's theory of validation, the validating elements in Community College Puente are identified. Implications for promoting access, use of involvement and validation theory, and employment of learning theory for non-traditional student populations are presented.*

ALTHOUGH LATINO STUDENTS have made important gains relative to high school graduation and access to college, this cohort continues to be underrepresented in terms of college participation and degree attainment (Harvey, 2001). In 1999, about 60% of all Latino college students were enrolled in the 2-year college sector, where retention and transfer rates to 4-year institutions remain low ("Almanac Issue, 2001-2", 2001). The past 25 years have witnessed a proliferation of early outreach programs designed to expand the pool of college-ready students, such as MESA (Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement), AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination), Project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams), GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs), and High School Puente, among others. These programs work with middle and high school students and their families to get students ready for college and to ensure they enroll in college. But gearing students up for college is only a part of what it takes to promote access to college. Once students enroll in college, they need progressive and sustained assistance to ensure that they stay enrolled and graduate from college. Institutions of higher education have responded to the need to enhance student retention, transfer, and

EDUCATIONAL POLICY, Vol. 16 No. 4, September 2002 642-667  
© 2002 Corwin Press

college completion rates with academic and student support programs of their own, such as Freshman Year Experience initiatives, bridge programs, mentoring, and tutoring. Community College Puente is one such program.

In 1981, the Puente Project was initiated as a Latino-specific program at Chabot College in Hayward, California, and is now in place at some 38 two-year colleges in California. The original emphasis of Community College Puente was to enlarge the pool of Latino students who transferred from 2- to 4-year colleges and universities in California. In the fall of 1993, Puente began a high school pilot program which grew to 18 schools in 11 districts by 1995 (Gándara et al., 1998). Thus, High School Puente evolved from Community College Puente, and the high school program imported key components from its 2-year college counterpart, such as writing, counseling, and mentoring. However, High School Puente aims to send students directly to 4-year colleges and universities, though some students will enroll in community colleges. Like its high school counterpart, Community College Puente has a team of three individuals working with students: an English faculty member, a counselor, and a mentor. In the community college, students are asked to commit to a yearlong writing program which includes both a pre-English 100 (Freshman English) and the standard transferable English course. The role of the English faculty member is to enhance the writing and reading skills of the students. Counselors work with students to provide them with the information they need to transfer and become successful college students. Mentors represent the community and work with students to expose them to professional opportunities.

What accounts for the success of Community College Puente, a 1998 national winner of Innovations in American Government? This is a program that touts impressive results. Roughly 48% of Puente Program completers successfully transfer to a 4-year college or university. Higher-than-average passing rates in developmental writing have been noted for Puente students. These students are enthusiastic about Puente. In a 1996 survey, about 95% of all Puente students would have recommended the program to their friends. Some 90% of transfer students believed Puente prepared them for university-level reading and writing, and about 82% believed their Puente counselor did a "great job" in preparing them for transfer (Puente Project, 1997). Interestingly, High School Puente has been evaluated with more rigor than Community College Puente (Gándara et al., 1998). In this study, I attempt to address this research gap by analyzing how validation (Rendón, 1994), a concept that has been found to have a positive impact on the academic and personal growth of nontraditional students, is employed in Community College Puente.

## THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Research indicates that validating experiences such as encouragement, affirmation, and support have a significant impact on student development in and out of college (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; California Tomorrow, in press; Rendón, 1994; Terenzini et al., 1994;). In- and out-of-class validating experiences are especially important with nontraditional student populations such as returning adults, low-income students, first-generation students, and many women and minority students from working-class backgrounds. Many nontraditional students come to college needing a sense of direction and wanting guidance but not in a patronizing way. They do not succeed well in an invalidating, sterile, fiercely competitive context for learning that is still present in many college classrooms today. For example, some faculty and staff view certain kinds of students as incapable of learning, assault students with information and/or withhold information, instill doubt and fear in students, distance themselves from students, silence and oppress students, and/or create fiercely competitive learning environments that pit students against each other. This kind of “no pain, no gain” learning context greatly disadvantages nontraditional student populations such as working-class women and minorities (Rendón, 1994; Belenky et al., 1986). Some of these students may also be experiencing invalidation from their friends and families, such as being told they are not going to amount to anything or being teased for attending college. Some students have a memory of being invalidated in the past and yearn for acceptance and confirmation, especially in the first semester of college (Jalomo, 1995).

*Validation Theory*

The theory of validation (Rendón, 1994) has six elements that lend themselves well to the study of Latino students in community colleges. “Validation is an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development” (Rendón, 1994, p. 44). This first element is important because it places the responsibility for initiating contact with students on institutional agents such as faculty and counselors. Many times, low-income students are reluctant to ask questions because they have been treated as incompetent in the past and because they are unfamiliar with how the higher education system works. They cannot ask what they do not know. Second is the notion that when validation is present, students feel capable of learning as well as a sense of self worth. This is absolutely essential for students who lack self-confidence in

their ability to be successful college students. Third is that, like involvement theory (Astin, 1985), validation is a prerequisite to student development. In other words, students are more likely to get involved and feel confident after they experience academic and/or interpersonal validation on a consistent basis. Fourth is that validation can occur in and out of class with multiple agents such as faculty, classmates, family members, spouses, children, partners, tutors, teaching assistants, coaches, advisers, and so on actively affirming and supporting students and/or designing activities that promote academic excellence and personal growth. Fifth is that validation is a developmental process as opposed to an end in itself. Numerous instances of validation throughout the college over the course of time can result in a richer academic and personal experience. Finally, validation is especially needed early in the student's college experience, especially the first year of college and the first few weeks of class (Rendón, 1994).

There are two types of validation. Academic validation occurs when in- and out-of-class agents take action to assist students to "trust their innate capacity to learn and to acquire confidence in being a college student" (Rendón, 1994, p. 40). Interpersonal validation occurs when in- and out-of-class agents take action to foster students' personal development and social adjustment (Rendón, 1994). It should be noted that there are some qualitative differences between validation and involvement theory. Astin's (1985) theory of involvement poses that highly involved students are likely to devote considerable energy to studying, working on campus, participating in student organizations, and interacting with faculty and peers. Although getting involved in the social and academic life of the college is important for persistence and academic growth, students from low-income backgrounds and who are the first in their family to attend college usually find it difficult to get involved on their own. These students want to get involved but often do not know what questions to ask and may be reluctant to ask questions that make them appear stupid or lazy. Validation theory (Rendón, 1994) recognizes the limitations of expecting all students, regardless of backgrounds, to get involved in institutional life. In a validation model, institutional agents, not students, are expected to take the first step to not only promote involvement but to affirm students as knowers and valuable members of the college learning community. Validation theory poses that college faculty, counselors, and administrative staff take a proactive role in reaching out to students to affirm them as being capable of doing academic work and to support them in their academic endeavors and social adjustment. Because there are stark differences between traditional and nontraditional students, it is important to distinguish between the two groups.

*Profile of Traditional Students*

Most traditional students come from middle- and upper-class backgrounds and are predominantly white, though some minority students fit this category. Many traditional students have experienced a significant amount of academic and personal validation in their lives and have had early access to cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), such as being taken on trips to museums, art galleries, trips abroad, and so on. They come from families in which one or more of their parents and siblings have attended college. Many of these students are supported and encouraged to attend college, and view college attendance as a normal and expected part of their family traditions. Traditional students have several privileges and academic advantages that nontraditional students do not have. These students normally do not have to work to help with family finances. Many have attended resource-rich schools and have been taught by well-educated teachers who have validated them as college-eligible students. Parents, siblings, and teachers see these students as smart and on their way to being the next generation of leaders.

For many traditional students, the transition to college is not a disjunctive process but a normal rite of passage. Once in college, the curriculum and social structures validate and privilege the backgrounds of most traditional students. Most of these students are more likely to understand and manipulate the values, traditions, and practices of college academic and social life because these college aspects reflect them. College social life, such as fraternities and sororities, tends to reflect middle- and upper-class values and traditions. In many cases, faculty and administrators are predominantly White. When the college world reflects and affirms the world of the student, it is easier for students to get involved in the academic and social life of the institution (Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000).

*Profile of Nontraditional Students*

Nontraditional students come from low-income, working-class backgrounds and are often the first in their family to attend college. Many are students of color, although a high number of white students can be considered nontraditional. Although teachers and families have validated some of these students, many of them have doubts about their ability to succeed in college and have experienced invalidation. Some have never made an *A* in their lives. Others have a history of dropout behavior and trauma in their home life. Some have been told they will never amount to anything. Clark (1960) has argued that community colleges actually “cool out” nontraditional students, lowering their aspirations to obtain a bachelor’s degree. For example, counselors might subject students to counseling and testing that force students

toward other alternatives, such as taking courses that lead to dead ends and considering more “realistic” occupational choices. For nontraditional students, college is not a natural process. Even when they manage to enroll in college, nontraditional students find the transition to be a disjunctive process. When nontraditional students step onto a college campus, they find a brand new world with little that validates their backgrounds and ways of knowing. They rarely see themselves in the curriculum and are unfamiliar with the traditions of college clubs and organizations. On predominantly White campuses, they have few faculty and staff role models they can turn to for assistance. When the college world is in stark opposition to the world of the student, it is difficult for students to get involved and take full advantage of all academic and student support services. Nontraditional students have little, if any, of the traditional students’ privileges and advantages. They normally have to work to help their family survive. They grow up in communities such as the barrio, ghetto, and reservation, where oftentimes no one they know has ever attended college. They have typically attended resource-poor schools, getting the least of the best that the K-12 system has to offer. Because they are first-generation students, no one in their family can help them to understand and take full advantage of the world of college. These students are often labeled “remedial” or “poor college material” (Rendón, 1994; Jalomo, 1995; Orfield & Ashkinaze, 1991).

### *Learning Theories*

What considerations do educators give when designing teaching and learning environments for nontraditional student populations? Learning theories developed by critical feminist researchers such as Gilligan (1982), Belenky et al. (1986), hooks (1994), and Hurtado (1996) offer some important insights about how race, gender, class, and culture are related to the construction of knowledge and the dynamics of teaching and learning in the classroom. Educators setting up teaching and learning programs for low-income minority students must consider epistemological issues such as who can teach, what gets taught, how content gets taught, and how students are assessed, keeping in mind that being poor and of color results in a systematically different relationship to producing, understanding, and using knowledge (Hurtado, 1996). Like Freire (2000), feminist researchers argue that traditional teaching and learning paradigms that place professors in power and authority, situate students in passive learning activities, exclude diverse perspectives, and privilege detachment and objectivity result in oppressive learning conditions. For example, the authors of *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Belenky et al., 1986) point out that knowledge identified as historically

feminine, such as intuition and personal experience (subjective knowing) has been devalued and discouraged in American higher education. What is privileged is what feminists call "separate knowing," stressing impartiality and detachment. Goldberg (1996) notes that separate knowing "effectively ignores (renders invisible) the self-evaluations and ways of knowing of people of color, many of whom have assertive voices and positive self-regard and do not accommodate white norms and white sex role stereotypes" (p. 9).

Several learning theories offer alternatives to traditional paradigms that silence and ignore the ways of knowing of low-income students, women, and people of color. These include Friere's (2000) liberatory pedagogy, which poses that the teaching and learning process can be democratic, participatory and relational, allowing both teachers and students to be holders and beneficiaries of knowledge. Freire asks educators to transform oppressive structures to liberate oppressed students. This is opposed to what Freire calls the "banking model," in which the teacher's role is merely to "deposit" information in the students' minds. A key starting point for change is knowing and reflecting the aspirations of the students. Belenky et al. (1986) describe "connected teaching" as providing a space for growth, allowing the expression of uncertainty, fostering community, honoring diversity of perspectives, and viewing teaching as simultaneously objective and personal. Other theories stress the development of the whole person. For example, hooks (1994) speaks to "engaged pedagogy," in which teaching and learning emphasize a union of mind, body, and spirit; the inner life of students and teachers; a connection between learning in the classroom and life experiences; and the empowerment of teachers and students. Similarly, Palmer (1998) advocates that good teaching delves into three important paths that address the development of the whole person: intellectual, emotional and spiritual. If nontraditional students are to find academic success in higher education, it is important to advance teaching and learning theories to assist educators with models that are effective for working with these kinds of students. Because Puente works primarily with Latino students who have a history of oppression and who have been the victims of negative stereotypes (i.e., viewed as having limited intelligence and potential for college), it becomes important to learn how Puente's teaching and learning component is designed to validate these students as fully capable of engaging in college-level work.

#### PURPOSE AND METHOD

Employing Rendón's (1994) theory of validation, the purpose of the study was to identify the validating elements in Community College Puente. Who are the validating agents in Puente? What are examples of in- and out-of-class

academic and interpersonal validation? How is validation employed in the Puente English classroom? What is the impact of validation on Latino students and on Puente faculty and staff? To conduct this analysis, I spent roughly 6 hours doing face-to-face interviews with the Puente Project's staff in the main office located in Oakland, California. Interviews were conducted with Puente's codirectors, Patricia McGrath and Felix Galaviz; Sallie Brown, English instructor and trainer; Ramon Parada, director of counselor training; Jane Pieri, high school training coordinator; and Luis Chavez, director of mentoring training. I also conducted a focus group interview with 15 high school and community college Puente Project counselors. In addition, I spent a half day visiting a Puente Project English class as a participant/observer at El Camino College in Torrance, California. Moreover, I reviewed 22 written El Camino College student narratives about what the Puente Project meant to them.

Interviews followed a narrative approach, which has the following features: (a) The questions, agenda and structure are open to development and change. (b) Narrative studies are conducted with small groups of individuals, as opposed to large sample sizes, knowing that a single case study yields extremely rich data. (c) The interaction of the interviewer and interviewee influence the data, as do additional contextual factors. (d) There are usually no a priori hypotheses. (e) The research work is interpretive, a process that is personal, partial, and dynamic. (f) The work requires dialogical listening, and individuals are treated as storytellers rather than as respondents. (g) The research does not require replication of results as a criterion for its evaluation but does require self-awareness and self-discipline in the overall data analysis and interpretation (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998).

All interview sessions, as well as the class visit, were tape-recorded. Audio recordings and written narratives were analyzed and sorted into themes such as academic validation, interpersonal validation, validating agents, impact of validation, and reciprocal nature of validation. Exemplars for each theme were identified and categorized. Findings were compared with validation theory as a means to assess the extent and nature of validation present in Puente, as well as the impact of validation. Member checking (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) was employed by sharing earlier drafts of the study narrative with Puente's codirectors, as well as with El Camino College English instructor Barbara Jaffe and counselor Stephanie Rodriguez. These individuals were asked to review the drafts for validity—to ascertain whether or not the explanation and description of the study were credible. The study is limited in the sense that only one Puente English classroom (El Camino College) was analyzed. Interviews were conducted with only a small sample of



Puente faculty and staff. Although generalizations beyond the sample cannot be made, it is possible to use the findings to provide depth of understanding about how Puente works in community colleges and to use the study as a guide for future research and better practice in 2-year college settings.

I include a first-person, subjective experience as an explicit and active component of the analysis of the diverse body of information I acquired about the Puente Project. I found this approach useful and necessary, given my positionality in relationship to Puente. At one level, researching and writing about Puente is like writing about myself. To write authentically about Puente, I find I must connect to my own history as a low-income, first-generation, Chicana student. My path to college began in resource-poor schools in the predominantly Mexican American community of Laredo, Texas. I attended two community colleges in Laredo and San Antonio, Texas, before transferring to the University of Houston to earn a bachelor's degree. Consequently, my sociocultural history and educational path are much like that of Puente students. Thus, I chose to reject a positivist approach that is based in part on what critical theorists, as well as feminist scholars and first-person methodologists (Held, 1980; Lather, 1991; Varela & Shear, 1999), would consider questionable, erroneous assumptions of objectivity and detachment. Thus, my analyses include personal experience, which in itself is a valuable source of "narrative truth" (Spence, 1982; 1986).

#### VALIDATION IN A PUENTE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

A great deal of academic and interpersonal validation takes place in Puente's English class with faculty, counselors, and students acting as validating agents. The following case study illuminates how validation is employed in the classroom.

I walk into the Puente English classroom led by Professor Barbara Jaffe and Counselor Stephanie Rodriguez at El Camino College in Torrance, California. I am joined by my California State University–Long Beach graduate student research assistant, Renita, and my mentee, Gabby. Renita is African American, born in the deep South, has three children, and is making ends meet while she completes her master's degree in student development in higher education. Gabby is a Latina first-year student from a migrant family background. She is enrolled in the Educational Opportunity and College Assistance Migrant programs, both designed for working class, first-generation college students. I too have a similar background. I was born to parents who completed only the second and third grades, grew up in poverty in a barrio where no one I knew had attended college, attended schools with few

resources, and received little encouragement to get a college degree. The three of us form quite the triangle, one just starting her college career, another nearly finished with her advanced degree, and the third being what could be considered the highly successful role model—a Latina professor who has successfully navigated the elementary through graduate school educational system. Instead of focusing on our obvious differences, we became a unified whole, connected by similar sociocultural histories and kept alive by our passion to grow and keep learning.

I look around the classroom and see some 20 students. When these students see us, their life experiences are instantly affirmed. The first half of this class is structured to focus on the inner worlds of these students. To do so, students have been assigned to read my essays, “From the Barrio to the Academy: Revelations of a Mexican American Scholarship Girl” (Rendón, 1992) and “Life on the Border” (Rendón, 1996). Students are eager to share their reflections about these essays, which basically capture my experiences as I made the transition to a community college and wound up at the University of Michigan to earn my doctorate. The students and I know that much of my story is basically their story. I cannot help but be very moved by what these students say about my work.

Around the classroom, students connect to the notions of adjusting to college, not being prepared for college, feeling lost and needing a sense of direction, and separating from their culture to find success in college. One student says:

For me it was very hard to relate to school . . . because of my background and culture, it is very different. I want to adjust to the academic world. . . . It’s hard to let go of my culture. . . . It feels like you’re leaving your culture behind . . . like family, that’s where culture begins. When you start to be successful, something isn’t meshing. Something is out of place. Family constantly asks questions: Why are you going out of town? Why are you leaving for the weekend?

Family issues surface repeatedly with these students. They talk about how they can’t have a normal dinner with their family because they have to do schoolwork, how family members think college is only for rich people, how difficult it is to explain what they are doing in college to their family members. Some family members worry about their children becoming different. One woman expresses this by saying: “My mom has always told me that education should not change me. Bringing up college work, you can’t have a normal conversation with your family.” Students also connect to their memories of being invalidated, and to the notion that many educators do not expect students like them to succeed. A woman says,

To me it's so true. Educators look at you and judge you for how you look. And I've had that a lot. Teachers pick on me or they try to make me look dumb in front of the rest of the class. But I prove them wrong. I pass their class with As.

The second half of the class is when students present their "I-Search" papers. English professor Barbara Jaffe explains that an I-Search paper is different from a research paper. In a research paper, students search for what someone else has already researched, mostly in the library. An I-Search paper is an original search that tells the story of a student's quest for information about a topic they (not the teacher) care about. This kind of paper includes both information about the student's chosen topic and how the student conducted the search for information—interviews, phone conversations, feelings as student searched, and so on.

The I-Search paper requirements are academically rigorous. The paper must include primary resources such as observation, personal interview, or letters. The paper also includes secondary sources such as a nonfiction book, a chapter in a longer book, and two magazine articles related to the topic. Each report also must have a form of the following creative sources: short story, poem, movie, play, work of art, or musical composition related to the topic. Besides a written paper, students are responsible for a 5- to 10-minute oral presentation using a visual aid. Students have been given an extensive set of guidelines to be used in conducting their I-Search papers, including how to select a topic, how to cluster ideas, how to develop paragraphs, how to write a letter of intent to interview someone, steps to conduct the I-Search process, timeline, interviewing tips, note taking techniques, and how to document sources.

Today, four students are presenting their I-Search papers to the Puente English class. They look excited, eager to share what they have found. The instructor hands out forms for students to provide feedback on the papers to be presented. The first presenter begins by putting up a poster about his I-Search and talking about his investigation into drugs and the juvenile justice system. A second student discusses the information he got about one of his joys, snowboarding, and brings a film on this topic for the class to watch. The third student puts up another poster to discuss teen pregnancy with candor, explaining some of the reasons teens get pregnant and the myths about sexual activity that get teens into trouble. A fourth student explains her poster on immigration research. She relates a poignant story about a woman who fled from El Salvador only to be raped by the very soldiers who were supposed to help her come into this country. She explains that she is interested in this topic because her parents also fled Central America and took dangerous risks so that their children could have a better life in America. After each

presentation, the class has an opportunity to ask questions and to engage in a critical dialogue about the information students have presented.

Professor Jaffe asks, “What was this process like for you?” The students respond by articulating how it is difficult to research topics that are painful to them. At the same time, caring passionately about a topic makes it easier to find information. They explain that they found the process of researching to be educational. Other students relate how proud they are of their colleagues and the work that they have presented. These are students who, according to Professor Jaffe, did not want to talk when the class first began. Now these students are doing critical thinking, they feel comfortable doing research and presenting in front of class. As students get ready to leave, Professor Jaffe reminds them that if they need help with their assignment, they can call her, and she gives students her pager number.

*Analysis of Academic Validation  
in the English Classroom*

This brief case study provides ample examples of academic validation. It should be noted that the role of the instructor is critical, for it is the teacher who sets up the classroom in a way in which validation can take place. Below are examples of academic validation.

*Affirming the real possibility that students can be successful college students.* When the English instructor invites Latino role models and experts to the classroom, Puente students are exposed to individuals who come from similar backgrounds. These individuals make it possible for students to see that they too can be successful college students and community leaders. As one student noted, speakers who come to class “inspire us to continue toward our goals. They, like us, grew up in humble homes and families that require them to never lose their roots.” When my students and I visit the classroom, we help to affirm students’ life experiences, and we serve as examples of individuals who overcame formidable odds to attain academic success.

*Validating the notion that Latinos can be valuable contributors to the body of knowledge that is studied in the classroom.* In this class, the English instructor gave students the opportunity to read and discuss essays reflecting the experiences of a Latina’s journey in higher education. Indeed, all Puente English classrooms are infused with Latino literature, including writers such as Sandra Cisneros and Richard Rodriguez, among others. Puente staff understand that students need to see themselves in what they are reading. Many students are awed that there is a large base of Latino literature.

*Providing the opportunity for students to witness themselves as capable learners.* The requirements of the I-Search paper call for high levels of critical thinking skills and writing abilities. Students engage in synthesis, analysis, research, writing, and speaking. The fact that students are able to meet these requirements by presenting their papers to class confirms that they are able to engage in college-level academic work.

*Affirming the value of students' personal voice.* In this class, the English instructor allows students to bring who they are and what they represent to the classroom's discussions. The personal voice of the students is invited and given an equal privilege with the voice of the writers they are studying. For example, students express the angst related to making the transition to college (i.e., leaving their culture behind, negotiating tensions with their family, being stereotyped as dumb, etc.). Giving students personal and intellectual voice in the classroom allows students to know that the knowledge and experiences that they bring to the college classroom are just as important as what others represent and know. Moreover, in this class the faculty member communicates that knowledge can initiate from the students' personal experience. In the I-Search paper, students are allowed to select topics of interest to them, which often translates into selecting a topic rooted in a student's personal history. Here, what a student knows, understands, and cares about are validated and privileged as valuable knowing.

*Actively reaching out to students to offer academic assistance.* At the end of the class, the professor does not wait for students to ask her for academic help. Instead, she takes the initiative to assist students with their assignments, offering her pager number. This is a critical validating action with nontraditional students who often feel unentitled to request academic assistance.

*Providing opportunities for students to validate each other.* After students present their I-Search paper, the professor gives students an opportunity to communicate how they feel about the academic work that their peers have presented in class. Students provide encouraging comments that validate the work of their peers.

*Honoring and validating subjective forms of knowledge.* The I-Search paper does something many other kinds of research assignments do not do. It connects an intellectual process (rigorous research) with emotions and feelings (use of art, poetry, music, etc.) and discussion of personal feelings as students engaged in their research.

*Affirming the culture of the students.* Students learn to read and write while developing cultural pride and examining the purpose and meaning of getting a college education. Students are given time to openly talk about their experiences as learners and what going to college means for them, their families, and the Latino community.

It is noteworthy to point out that my interviews with Puente's codirectors, Patricia McGrath and Felix Galaviz; Jane Pieri, English instructor and trainer; Barbara Jaffe, English instructor; and Stephanie Rodriguez, counselor, revealed additional examples of in-class academic validation that are used throughout Puente programs in different community colleges. These included the following.

*Stressing academic strengths to build self-confidence.* Puente treats its English class as "accelerated writing" and avoids working with students using a deficit model. In fact, many Puente students read and write more than students in a regular English class. Puente faculty and counselors understand that their students have been underserved and invalidated in the past. These types of students have not had the opportunity to have someone believe in them. They are missing self-confidence about expressing their ideas, asking questions, and engaging in class. For many, Puente is the first time they are allowed to experience their voice, thinking, and ideas. This builds self-esteem and confidence, which transfer to other classrooms.

*Affirming the value of personal experience as a reservoir of knowledge that can be used in the classroom.* Students initially enroll in a college-level writing class based on the Bay Area Writing Project that begins with a personal narrative. This is intended to give students confidence that they can write. Patricia McGrath explains how Puente works with students:

In the beginning all students were remedial. We created a community of writers. Students wrote about what was relevant and important to them. They wrote about their community experiences. They were writing for each other, not for me. I would not let them see their writing [mistakes] at first. There were too many mistakes. But if they read their paper to someone at first, it would sound good. The more they read to each other and got positive feedback, the more they wanted to learn to write correctly. I tried to facilitate the class so when students want to get it right, they ask. When they cared about what they were writing, then they were ready to learn the writing skill.

*Providing positive feedback.* The initial feedback students get about their writing is not about whether they used a good verb or pronoun. Students are

asked to say more about the person they are writing. Patricia McGrath explained that she had used yellow sticker paper to write comments such as, "Can you say more about your grandmother? Is she a *Virgen de Guadalupe* type?" "Tell me a little bit about your brother. How old is he? He sounds like a very interesting guy." McGrath elaborated:

Their papers have always been marked up. I'm not going to do that. If they want to take the sticker off to save face, they can do that. They've had marks all their lives. They don't know the kind of instruction that comes from the other way, from something positive.

Students also get feedback regarding their progress through journal writing, ongoing meetings with students in and out of class, and Puente team meetings with students. Portfolios are used to assess writing progress over the course of one academic year. An anthology of student writing is created at the end of the semester.

*Allowing students to work in teams to validate each other's work.* Writing is a community experience, not one that pits students against each other. In Puente, an authentic learning community is one in which students care about each other and assist each other to learn. Counselor Stephanie Rodriguez elaborates: "Teamwork is critical. Students need to know how to work with each other. This is a skill that is needed in the workplace . . . how to work with others, share information."

*Creating a familia learning atmosphere.* Puente staff recognize that the family is one of the most validating elements of the Latino community. Students are not told they are going to study English. Instead, they are told they are going to write about "*la familia*." Students organize into familias in class for essay or topic discussions. These evolve into study groups outside the classroom. The importance of familia is captured by a student who wrote, "Puente was not only a class, but a second family. Our familias helped students to be more expressive on essays as well as to feel comfortable when speaking in class."

*Validating the students' personal journeys to discover meaning and purpose.* Built into writing activities is journal writing, a contemplative practice activity that is designed for students to reflect on the larger meaning and purpose of what they are learning. Professor Jaffe elaborates:

Students write in their journals to both [the counselor] and me. We read their notes to us and each of us responds to them. They often disclose very essential information within these journals that helps us to understand what is going on with them, thus allowing us to be more aware of their academic and personal needs. This activity is absolutely essential to their development both in and out of the classroom.

*Providing a safe, affirming academic environment.* Puente students benefit from teaching and learning environments where they feel comfortable expressing and recognizing themselves as knowers. One student commented: “With the help and support of my professor through the last year I have been provided with a safe environment in which to speak and be heard.”

#### *Analysis of Interpersonal Validation in the English Classroom*

The English classroom I observed also exhibited examples of interpersonal validation. Examples include the following.

*Affirming students as persons, not just students.* The English classroom combines the expertise of two important validating agents, the faculty member and the counselor. Both are present in class and provide academic assistance as well as encouragement and support. One student expresses,

I find Barbara and Stephanie not only to be my teachers, but I consider them more like close friends or almost family due to their warm love and affection expressed throughout the year. Barbara would always spare her time in order to go over a paper for me and Stephanie never hesitated in helping me to plan my academics or sign my overload petition. . . . They encouraged me to give my best in all my classes even while going through struggles outside school such as work, girlfriend, church, and personal issues.

*Allowing students to validate each other and build a social network.* Two students commented on the sense of caring and support fostered in the Puente learning community: “Not only did we form study groups, but we went out as friends and had great times.” “We all have each other’s phone numbers so we always have someone to counsel us.”

#### *Impact of Validation*

A key finding is that validation helps students to gain confidence in their academic ability and to know that their newly acquired skills can transfer to other classes. The following student statements substantiate the impact of validation.



My new skills have simultaneously merged into my other classes, and for the first time I feel confident in the pursuit of my future educational goals in any classroom environment.

I know that if I survived Puente, I can survive any other class that I take here [at the community college] or at the university.

My writing skills have gone up tremendously. I remember coming from high school hating English class. It was never my best subject. . . . In fact, my English teacher in high school told me I was never going to do well in English. I guess I proved her wrong.

We do a tremendous amount of writing and it really helps us improve with grammar and the organization of our work. I especially like that we get to be in the class for the whole year; this way we get to develop better relationships with our classmates and our teachers.

I have learned both academically and personally. . . . I believe in this because I created inner motivation. . . . I have improved my writing skills; I also learned to take notes when it wasn't required to do so. I learned to seek help from instructors . . . I have developed the skill of listening.

#### COUNSELORS AS VALIDATING AGENTS

Traditionally, a counselor's role has been confined to being in an office, taking appointments, and meeting with students to assist them with course scheduling and issues that affect their education. Felix Galaviz explains this traditional role:

Counselors wait for students to come see them. They ask for their name and major. They don't spend time trying to get behind the student. Where are you from? What are you doing in this community? They never ask personal questions. They cooled students out. That was the worst thing they could have done. This was the student's first attempt to make a connection.

Traditional counseling practices do not work well with nontraditional students. "Cooling students out" is inherently invalidating and harmful. Many Puente students are students who feel lost and need a sense of direction. They do not understand higher education—its traditions, terminology, or offerings. Their parents, many who have never attended college, are not sure that college is good for their children, and they are unable to help their children to navigate the world of college. Parents have concerns about the costs of

college and often believe that higher education is only for affluent families. The following students elaborate on these points:

Before Puente I did not know how my life was going. I had no sense of direction.

Before Puente I took one class my first semester and four classes my second semester at El Camino. The reason was that I did not know who to go for help.

I came to college as a lost puppy. I had no one to turn to with my questions and no direction with my life. I was very scared when I came straight from my high school into a completely new environment.

To assist these kinds of students, Puente Project counselors engage in both academic and interpersonal validation.

#### *Academic and Interpersonal Validation From Counselors*

Puente counselors affirm the importance of academics to all students and become their cheerleaders. Counselors become actively involved in the students' academic growth. As noted earlier, a team of three people supports students: an English instructor, a counselor, and a mentor. Counselors work very closely with the English instructor to validate students as capable learners. They attend English classes and monitor academic progress. Counselors and instructors always strive to make students feel important enough to understand they can return to Puente even when they succumb to the temptation to drop out of college. They tell students, "If you leave, please know you can always come back."

Counselors consistently affirm that transferring to a 4-year college is a real possibility. They guide students with an education plan. This plan details the courses students need to get degrees and to be able to transfer. Counselors explain the academic system and its terminology, including the different (a) types of college degrees and what it takes to earn them, (b) range of institutions and their admissions requirements, (c) kinds of college programs of study, and (d) types of financial aid. Students go on field trips to visit potential 4-year colleges and universities. Counselors constantly remind students that they will be transferring. They help make college a natural process, as opposed to one that is disjunctive in nature. Counselors educate admissions officers about the issues related to nontraditional students, which can help student affairs personnel to design interventions that will facilitate the transition to college. Counselors validate students as capable of setting and meeting high expectations. Counselors help shape high aspirations to go beyond

study at the community college. They arrange for students to attend the Puente Motivational/Transfer Student Conference held each fall in the north and south at a University of California campus. Counselors also let students see the difference between long- and short-term gratifications and inform students that they need to be ready to make some sacrifices.

Counselors also engage in interpersonal validation, providing encouragement and support to students and their families. Counselors establish a supportive relationship with parents. They facilitate parent-to-parent family discussions about their children going to college. Counselors explain the world of college and help parents through their children's transition to college. Counselors establish a personal, caring relationship with students. Puente counselors are trained to work with nontraditional student populations. Rather than developing an impersonal connection, counselors hook students on a personal level by sharing their own stories. They build a sense of pride in students. Felix Galaviz explains what counselors are trained to tell students: "You know what, you're going to be the first in your family to go to college and you are going to share this with your little sister. . . . You are going to make so many people proud." Galaviz explains that it is this validating, personal connection that builds a relationship between students and Puente staff. The end result is a commitment on the part of the student to stay in college. Once students make the commitment, it is harder for them to break their pledge.

#### *Impact of Validation From Counselors*

Engaging in academic and interpersonal validation makes Puente counselors different from counselors who employ traditional counseling approaches. In the Puente counseling model, counselors frequently interact with faculty and students in and out of class, know every student's grades, keep teachers informed, stay in touch with parents, and provide students with baseline information to get them ready to transfer to a 4-year institution. A Puente student sums up the impact of this kind of validation:

These caring and knowledgeable educators really and genuinely care about their students. The caring shows in everything they have done for us on a daily basis. They have provided me with information, advice, one-on-one help, emotional support, understanding, jobs, etc., that I would have otherwise found it difficult, if not impossible, to gather on my own.

## MENTORS AS VALIDATING AGENTS

Mentoring in Community College Puente is not simply about connecting a student with a personal guide to careers and future possibilities. Puente's mentors actively engage in academic and interpersonal validation.

*Academic and Interpersonal  
Validation From Mentors*

Mentors validate the notion that academic achievement is an individual as well as a collective success for the Latino community. Mentors represent the community and tell students that education is more than getting a degree. Mentors emphasize that students are expected to give something back to their communities because someone helped them to succeed. Mentors also affirm the notion that students can be a part of a successful professional class. As such, mentors provide professional role modeling. They take students to their work sites and visit students in their classrooms.

Luis Chavez, director of mentor training, explained that mentoring is the way to involve parents, family, and community in a student's educational progress. These are the groups that will make students accountable and fulfill the promise to return as mentors and leaders in the community. Mentoring is also interfaced with Puente's teaching and counseling component. Sallie Brown explained:

Success in fostering and sustaining community links with students and staff depend upon both the Puente counselor and instructor recruiting, training, and maintaining a mentoring component. This process requires constant communication with the community: asking mentors to come to the classroom to talk to a class, sponsoring social events for students to meet mentors and pair off one-on-one, monitoring mentor-student relationships, presenting at community-based organizations, and keeping a high profile of the mentoring component.

Mentors also engage in interpersonal validation, providing care, support, and encouragement both in and out of class. Mentors assist students in making career choices and take students to community activities such as ball games and barbeques. Mentors also talk with students about issues such as handling parents, leaving home, and feeling isolated in college.

*Impact of Validation From Mentors*

Many students speak highly of their Puente mentors as role models and encouragement agents:

It never crossed my mind that I would have a mentor. My mentor . . . is an excellent example of a person that has pursued many goals in life. . . . I look up to her because . . . she has demonstrated that there's nothing stopping her to reach her goals.

My mentor . . . has encouraged me to follow my dreams and not to stop until I get to where I want to be.

### IMPLICATIONS

Community College Puente has much to offer in terms of what it takes to promote access and academic success for Latino students.

#### *Implications for Access*

Access is not merely getting students to graduate from high school and enroll in college. It is well substantiated that even when Latino students enroll in college, their retention rates and transfer rates from 2- to 4-year colleges and universities leave much to be desired (Garza, 1997; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). Getting into college does not guarantee that a student will stay enrolled long enough to earn a college degree. Educators wishing to promote access for Latinos and nontraditional students should know that once a student enrolls in college, active and sustained intervention is needed to ensure that students do not leave. To this end, Puente's validating team of instructors, counselors, and mentors plays a very important role in promoting college access. In a sense, these validating agents may also be viewed as an access team, because together these individuals take on the responsibility for moving students through the educational pathway, finding, as Cooper (2002 [this issue]) suggests, "*el buen camino*."

This validating team provides students with (a) information and an education plan about what it takes to transfer and earn a degree from 4-year institutions—addressed through the counseling component; (b) a solid academic preparation, especially literacy skills—addressed through the writing component; and (c) knowledge about the pay-offs of getting a college education, including knowing what it takes to secure a high-income career, as well as how to put student talents to work in their communities to nurture the next generation of leaders—addressed through the mentoring component. In Community College Puente, promoting access is a comprehensive undertaking that includes Puente faculty, counselors, and mentors taking an active role in providing validation-rich in- and out-of-class experiences, demystifying the college participation and degree attainment process, and providing ample experiences for students to witness themselves and other Latinos as capable of academic success. Students are also assisted in developing a sense of

professional identity and in understanding that being a college student is not just about taking courses, it is about developing a professional orientation to life and work. This comprehensive approach can ensure greater opportunities for Latinos to persist beyond the 1st year of college, make satisfactory progress toward transferring and earning bachelor's degrees, and assume leadership roles in their communities.

*Implications for Validation  
and Involvement Theory*

No one can deny the importance of getting students engaged in the social and academic life of a college. However, Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) indicate that practioners have tended to concentrate on having students (regardless of background and preparation for college) take the primary responsibility for getting involved in institutional life. Yet Rendón (1994) argues: "It appears that nontraditional students do not perceive involvement as *them* taking the initiative. They perceive it when someone takes an active role in assisting them" (p. 44). This is a critical point that is often missed or disregarded by student retention theorists as well as faculty and staff who erroneously assume that traditional and nontraditional students have similar ways of getting engaged and that all the institution has to do to promote involvement is to offer the opportunity to get involved. This study shows that Puente students benefit substantially from direct, sustained, and genuinely supportive (not patronizing) academic and interpersonal validation. Puente staff have internalized the notion that they must take an active role to reach out to students and to help these students to believe that they can be valuable members of the college community of knowers. Rather than "cooling out" (Clark, 1960) students by diverting them away from high aspirations, Puente faculty and staff encourage and guide students toward furthering their education and setting their goals higher than what they think they should be. English instructor and trainer Sallie Brown summarizes a Puente guiding principle: "Teachers and counselors need to believe in students more than students believe in themselves."

A good example of this is how Puente counselors work with students. Puente counselors do not wait for students to ask for help. They get to know the stories of their students, their family background, and their goals and aspirations. Similarly, the Puente English teacher takes the initiative to validate students academically, socially, and emotionally. She actively affirms the personal experience of the students, communicates that they are capable learners, and allows students to validate each other's work. The lesson learned here is that validation should be intentional, proactive, and systematic, not an afterthought or byproduct of whatever program is developed for

these students. Puente staff verify that creating personal, caring relationships is central to building a commitment from students to stay in college. The effect of validation does not appear to coddle students or make them weak. Rather, student narratives indicate a transformative effect of validation. As one student indicates, "Puente has changed this student into a butterfly." Validation also offers real hope for working with students who are often viewed as "noncollege material." An analysis of Community College Puente provides ample evidence that academic and interpersonal validation can be a powerful mechanism that can turn even some of the most at-risk students into capable learners who can become involved in college-level learning. Consequently, validation theory (Rendón, 1994) should be considered side by side with involvement theory (Astin, 1985) when working with nontraditional student populations. Moreover, future research should explore the extent that validation is a prerequisite to student involvement in college.

#### *Implications for Teaching and Learning Theory*

In both high school and college, Puente has learned that low-income, first-generation students simply do not fare well in highly competitive, invalidating learning contexts. In essence, a model that distances teachers and learners, excludes the culture of the student, views students as deficient, is invalidating in nature, and designates teachers as the sole experts in the classroom will simply not work for students like those in the Puente program. The authors who address the components of High School Puente in this issue, notably Cazden (2002), González and Moll (2002), Pradl (2002), and Grubb, Lara, and Valdez (2002), point to many of the key elements that contribute to student learning and personal development. These include creating validating learning environments and family-like learning atmospheres, linking instruction to student lives, incorporating the students' culture into what they are learning, linking faculty and counselors in the classroom, and viewing students as competent learners who bring a foundation of knowledge to the classroom.

My analysis of Community College Puente verifies these high school findings and substantiates the perspectives taken by feminist teaching and learning theorists such as Belenky et al. (1986), Gilligan (1982) and hooks (1994). Moreover, although this study did not delve into holistic learning theory, it is apparent that Puente employed strategies that went beyond intellectual development to attend to social, emotional, and inner life skills. These included attention to personal development (i.e., giving students voice, honoring diverse perspectives, etc.) and social and emotional development (i.e., building student self-confidence, creating a social network of support, etc.).

Moreover, engaging students in contemplative practice such as journaling and personal reflection allowed students to engage in the larger questions of what it means to get a college education for them, their families, and their communities. Current research is addressing the development of the whole person in the classroom and includes the work of Palmer (1998), Burgis (2000) and Rendón (2000), among others. These holistic learning perspectives, which merit further study, offer complimentary insights to feminist learning theories and hold promise for the education of both traditional and nontraditional students.

### CONCLUSION

High School and Community College Puente have much to offer the school and college reform movement in terms of what it takes to promote access, transform nontraditional students into powerful learners, promote learning communities, and create validating in- and out-of-class learning environments that foster academic success and personal growth. In its quiet yet powerful way, Puente continues to overturn years of educational neglect and to eradicate exclusionary practices and policies that have restricted access for working-class students. For all who seek examples of equity and liberation in education, the Puente Project is an example of the mantra that many Puentistas refer to: “¡Si se Puede!” Yes, it can be done.

### REFERENCES

- Almanac Issue 2001-2 [Special issue]. (2001). *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 31.
- Astin, A. (1985). *Achieving educational excellence: A critical assessment of priorities and practices in higher education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Belenky, M., Clinchy, B., Goldberger, N., & Tarule, J. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research in the sociology of education* (pp. 241-258). New York: Greenwood Press.
- Burgis, L. (2000). *How learning communities foster intellectual, social and spiritual growth in students*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Arizona State University, Tempe.
- California Tomorrow (in press). *A new look at the California community colleges: Keeping the promise alive for students of color and immigrants*. Oakland, CA: Author.
- Cazden, C. B. (2002). A descriptive study of six High School Puente classrooms. *Educational Policy, 16*, 496-521.
- Clark, B. R. (1960). *The open door college: A case study*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Cooper, C. R. (2002). Five bridges along students' pathways to college: A developmental blueprint of families, teachers, counselors, mentors, and peers in the Puente project. *Educational Policy, 16*, 607-622.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. (30th-anniversary ed.). New York: Continuum.



- Gándara, P., Mejorado, M., Gutiérrez, D., & Molina, M. (1998). *Final report of the evaluation of High School Puente, 1994-1998*. Unpublished manuscript, University of California, Davis.
- Garza, H. (1997). *An examination of institution-related factors and their effect on student transfer*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
- Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Goldberg, N. R. (1996). Looking backward, looking forward. In N. Goldberger, J. Tarule, C. Blythe, & M. Belenky (Eds.), *Knowledge, difference and power* (pp. 1-21). New York: Basics Books.
- González, N., & Moll, L. (2002). *Cruzando el Puente: Building bridges to funds of knowledge*. *Educational Policy*, 16, 623-641.
- Grubb, W. N., Lara, C. M., & Valdez, S. (2002). Counselor, coordinator, monitor, mom: The roles of counselors in the Puente program. *Educational Policy*, 16, 547-571.
- Harvey, W. (2001). *Minorities in higher education, 2000-2001*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.
- Held, D. (1980). *Introduction to critical theory*. Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Holloway, W., & Jefferson, T. (2000). *Doing qualitative research differently*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress*. New York: Routledge.
- Hurtado, A. (1996). Strategic suspensions: Feminists of color theorize the production of knowledge. In N. Goldberger, J. Tarule, C. Blythe, & M. Belenky (Eds.), *Knowledge, difference and power* (pp. 372-388). New York: Basic Books.
- Jalomo, R. E. (1995). *Latino students in transition: An analysis of the first-year experience in community college*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Arizona State University, Tempe.
- Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*. New York: Routledge.
- Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research* (Applied Social Research Methods Series, Vol. 47). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Orfield, G., & Ashkinaze, C. (1991). *The closing door: Conservative policy and Black opportunity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Palmer, P. J. (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pradl, G. M. (2002). Linking instructional intervention and professional development: Using the ideas behind Puente high school English to inform educational policy. *Educational Policy*, 16, 522-546.
- Puente Project (1997). *Puente community college program by the numbers*. Oakland, CA: Author.
- Rendón, L. I. (1992). From the barrio to the academy: Revelations of a Mexican American scholarship girl. In S. Zwerling & H. London (Eds.), *First-generation students: Confronting the cultural issues*. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 80, 55-64.
- Rendón, L. I. (1994). Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development. *Innovative Higher Education*, 19(1), 33-50.
- Rendón, L. I. (1996, November/December). Life on the border. *About Campus*, 1, 14-19.
- Rendón, L. I. (2000). Academics of the heart. *About Campus*, 5(3), 3-5.
- Rendón, L. I., Jalomo, R. E., & Nora, A. (2000). Theoretical considerations in the study of minority student retention. In J. Braxton (Ed.), *Rethinking the departure puzzle: New theory and research on college student retention* (pp. 127-156). Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.

- Spence, D. P. (1982). *Narrative truth and historical truth: Meaning and interpretation in psychoanalysis*. New York: Norton.
- Spence, D. P. (1986). Narrative smoothing and clinical wisdom. In T. R. Sarbin (Ed.), *Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct* (pp. 211-232). New York: Praeger.
- Terenzini, P., Rendón, L. I., Upcraft, L., Millar, S., Allison, K., Gregg, P., et al. (1994). The transition to college: Diverse students, diverse stories. *Research in Higher Education*, 35(1), 57-73.
- Varela, F., & Shear, J. (Eds.). (1999). *The view from within. First-person approaches to the study of consciousness*. Bowling Green, OH: Imprint Academic Philosophy Documentation Center.