

Why Focus on Underrepresented Students?

IT WAS 1985, AND STUMBLING OUT OF BED, DISHEVELED AND GROGGY FROM THE RAVAGES OF THE CAREFREE NIGHT BEFORE AND ITS EFFECTS ON MY TWENTY-YEAR-OLD BODY, I ANSWERED THE DOOR, SQUINTING AGAINST THE BRIGHT LIGHT OUTSIDE. STANDING THERE WAS MY BEST FRIEND, MARK. WE WERE THREE YEARS OUT OF HIGH SCHOOL AND BOTH OF US HAD COMPLETED OUR LOWER DIVISION WORK AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE THAT MAY. TODAY MARK WAS SUPPOSED TO START CLASSES AT CAL STATE FULLERTON; I, HOWEVER, HAD NOT EVEN GOTTEN AROUND TO REGISTERING FOR A SINGLE COURSE.

Mark told me that I *had* to register, and after I got cleaned up, he drove me to CSU at Fullerton and walked me to the admissions office. I paid the fee, which in 1985 wasn't nearly what it is today, and then he walked me to the last-minute registration area. Within a few hours, I was enrolled and registered for classes, and that night, I walked into my very first university classroom.

My life changed that day. My college education has enabled me to work at a job I love, earn a stable living, and more important, to better understand the complexities of life and possess the tools to solve the challenges that have come my way. That day was a significant turning point in my entire life, and it would

not have happened had Mark not taken time out of his schedule to physically take me through the steps necessary for me to achieve my dream of a college education.

Such a small thing, really, not knowing how to apply for admission or how to register, and yet it very nearly kept me from getting my college degree. Coming from a family in which not one aunt, uncle, parent, or grandparent had ever attended a day of college, and no cousin had graduated high school, I was lucky to find guidance and direction from my friends regarding college; looking back, statistics show that for a kid like me, the chances of graduating from college were slim. Yet today my students overcome much greater obstacles than I ever did; my story pales greatly in comparison to the challenges placed before students of color in a working-class neighborhood today. I've never forgotten the day I was given assistance getting into college, and as a teacher, it still fuels me to work passionately toward enabling students to achieve their own goals.

When I first began teaching remedial English, I saw that my struggling students had dreams as well: some wanted to be able to get good jobs after high school, some wanted just to graduate, others wanted to go on to college. However, few of them really knew how to overcome the obstacles in their way, obstacles such as poverty, poor reading and writing skills, peer pressure on teenagers to not succeed in school, and an unfamiliarity with how to do well academically. Unfortunately, these obstacles often included the school system itself, which subtly pressured such students to substitute their dreams with much less lofty goals. The low expectations of school personnel, deficit-based school policies, and pedagogy that failed to address the background of non-white students often combined to create an insurmountable challenge for these students.

For instance, the counselors at registration treated some students differently from others. Students who "looked" collegiate had easy access to honors classes and college outreach programs like EAOP (Early Academic Outreach Program); students who wore baggy pants and oversized shirts were encouraged by counselors to take the easiest possible classes and were steered toward career programs such as Regional Occupational Program (ROP). Too often, the difference in treatment seemed to be based on ethnicity. Whites and Asians

were treated with favor; Latinos and African Americans were assumed to be “at risk.” To make matters worse, too many of my colleagues viewed the lack of success of African American and Latino students as a reflection of some cultural shortcoming rather than a problem inherent in the educational system or the individual educator. As a result, I witnessed too many students who remained poorly prepared for the future.

Veronica, a Latina freshman, was one such student. She was docile and quietly went along with her placement in remedial English and other lower-level classes, even though these classes did not fit in with her plans for college. She worked hard and was a good reader, but she struggled with writing; as a teacher, I was too young and inexperienced to really question why she was in my class. Both she and her mother treated educators with great respect and were reluctant to challenge the system. To be honest, I didn’t provide her with as much academic rigor as a future college student would need. Although she did end up attending a community college and eventually got her B.A., she struggled greatly with the skills deficit that my school and I left her with.

Veronica belonged to a growing community of students, usually either African American or Latino, whose ethnicities were underrepresented at the university level. At the time, I began to notice the division at my school between the honors students—mostly white and Asian—and the students enrolled in my at-risk English class, nearly all of whom were Latino or African American. These students knew where they wanted to go, but didn’t know how to get there.

I was only a few years into teaching, but I had stumbled onto a mission: to keep one eye on the future of my students, and find every resource possible that would help bridge the gap between where they were and where they wanted to be. I passionately wished to see the underrepresented students enrolled in my classes receive similar backing, but I wasn’t quite sure how to pull it all together.

And then Puente came along. Founded in 1981 at Chabot Community College in Hayward, California, the program was expanded to the high school level in 1992; it currently directly serves over 43,000 students in California. The program bears some similarities to college-preparatory programs

like Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), a national college preparation program aimed at students “in the middle” with GPAs of 2.5 to 3.5. The Puente program’s mission is “to increase the number of educationally disadvantaged students who enroll in four-year colleges and universities, earn degrees, and return to the community as leaders and mentors of future generations” (Puente Project 1). Underrepresented students are placed together in the same Puente English class for two years and then are dispersed into Advanced Placement and college prep classes for their junior and senior years; a Puente counselor monitors them closely through all four years of high school. In a nutshell, Puente, the Spanish word for “bridge,” provides accelerated reading and writing instruction, intensive counseling, and mentoring. As a result, “Puente high school students enroll at four-year colleges and universities at twice the rate of matched controls” (Puente Project 2).

Several years later, Veronica’s younger sister, Sandra, enrolled in the Puente program. Like her sister, she was a sweet kid who stayed out of trouble and did well academically. This time, however, she was in a program that worked in her favor rather than working against her, valued her cultural capital, allowed her to read and study Latino literature alongside the classics written in English, and treated her ethnic background as an asset rather than a disadvantage. Because of two years of excellent instruction in reading and writing, and powerful guidance from the Puente counselor, Sandra was accepted to UCLA. Puente made it possible for Sandra to achieve her dreams of college; this same story is common to many families at my school.

Today I am two days into the school year. I have just been introduced to my new Puente English class—the ninth graders are excited but nervous, anxious but already feeling at home. One kid in particular, Johnny, has already caught my attention. You know that mischievous nervous energy that kids get when they are really enjoying a lesson? Johnny wears that look from the moment the bell rings until class is over. Today, his expression changed as we looked at the chart in Figure 1.1 that depicts the college-going rates of various ethnicities.

Figure 1.1 College-Going Rates of Recent Public High School Graduates by Racial-Ethnic Group, Fall 1990 and Fall 2003

	California State University				University of California			
	1990		2003		1990		2003	
	Number	Entry Rate	Number	Entry Rate	Number	Entry Rate	Number	Entry Rate
Asian	5,520	16.8	6,300	13.0	5,020	15.3	9,580	19.8
African-American	1,660	9.6	2,160	9.0	690	4.0	820	3.4
Latino	3,930	7.2	8,030	7.0	2,050	3.7	3,720	3.3
White	10,230	8.0	12,180	8.5	7,110	5.5	8,150	5.7

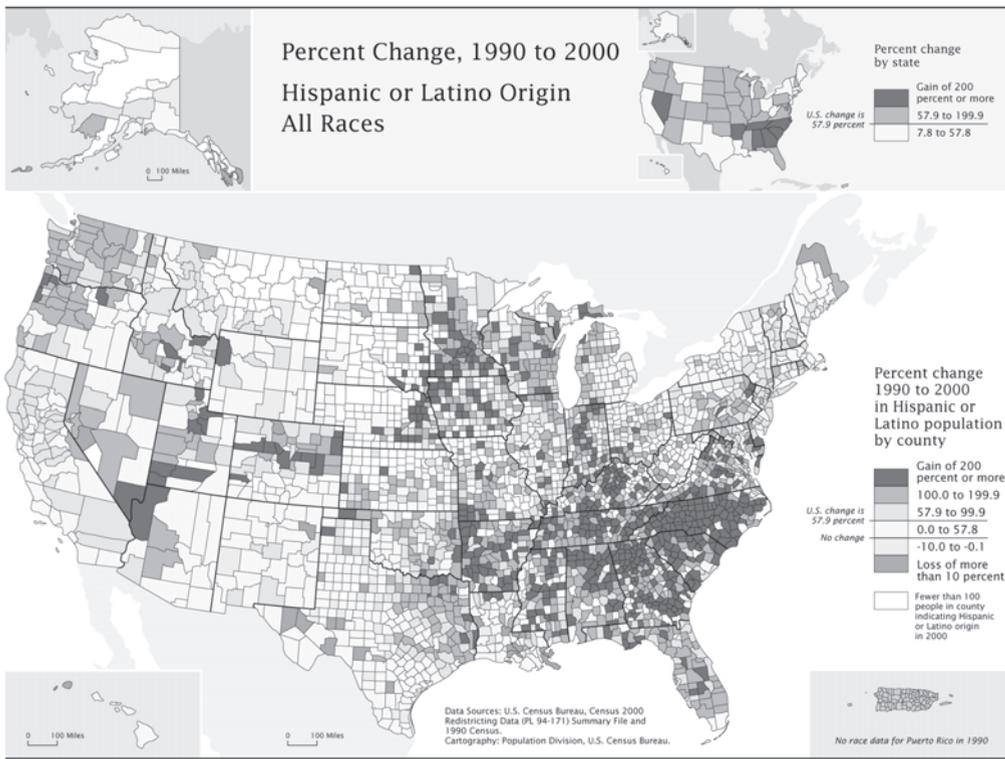
*Entry rate = number of entering freshmen from California public high schools as a percentage of the total number of graduates of California public high schools in that year.
(California Postsecondary Education Commission)

It was almost heartbreaking to see Johnny and his classmates tear apart the information here: only 3.3 percent of Latinos graduate from high school and go on to attend a UC school. Johnny admitted being “embarrassed by the numbers,” and I could see his mischievous energy dim a bit. There’s no way to sugarcoat this—our nation is doing a poor job of getting underrepresented students to the finish line, and that failure is going to have dire consequences for our society when those students graduate and enter the workforce. Johnny’s eyes widened, his jaw dropped, and his head fell back as he absorbed the reality that if his classmates were to succeed, they would be defying the odds. At that moment, Johnny, the fourteen-year-old, one-hundred-pound freshman, had discovered that he had a passion to work toward improving the odds of success for underrepresented students.

Unfortunately, too many of our underrepresented students lack the assistance they need to cross the bridge from high school to university, and as a result, our workforce will surely suffer. From 1970 to 2000, the combined

population of underrepresented students exploded, increasing from 43 million to 72 million. This population grew at nearly double the rate of the general population (U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates). By 2025, one in four people of high school age in the United States will be Hispanic/Latino, but unfortunately, too many decision-makers in education are ignoring how quickly our nation is changing. Consider the charts in Figure 1.2a and 1.2b, taken from the U.S. Census. Figure 1.2a shows the rate of increase in the population of Latinos in the United States; Figure 1.2b shows the density of the Latino population in the United States.

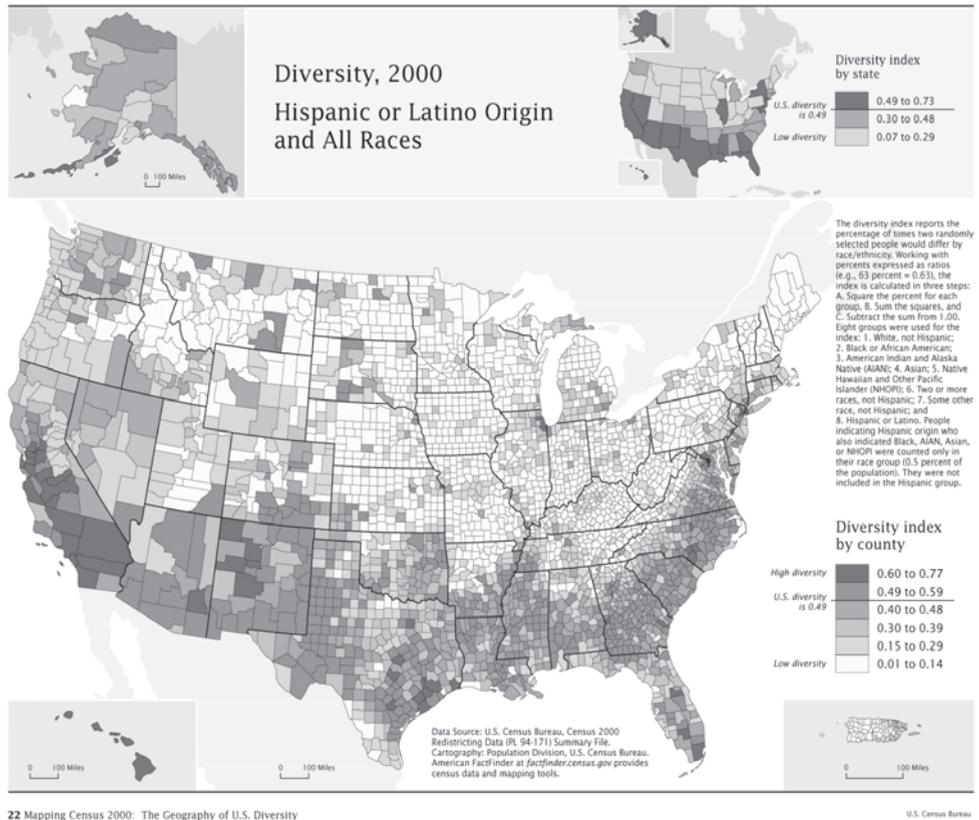
Figure 1.2a



92 Mapping Census 2000: The Geography of U.S. Diversity

U.S. Census Bureau

Figure 1.2b



(U.S. Census Bureau 2000b)

These two charts reveal that almost every community in the United States either has a large Latino population or is experiencing a substantial increase of Latinos, which highlights just how important it is to close the educational gap. Over the course of the next fifty years, the total population that is white will have shrunk by more than 10 percent, while the Hispanic population will *double* (U.S. Census Bureau 2004). When you add the numbers of other underrepresented students, it becomes clear that we as a nation can no longer ignore the staggering failures of our educational system; we have to turn these numbers around.

Also, Latinos are four times as likely to drop out of high school as white students (U.S. Senate 2002). Even more troubling, while 33 percent of white students and 44 percent of Asian students will eventually earn a bachelor's degree, only 7 percent of Latinos will do so (National Education Association 2001). This means that if we don't begin to turn this trend around, we will be in deep trouble.

Every morning, I am reminded of the urgency of this situation when I drive to work. I don't like to drive slowly so I have a transponder, or a Fast-Trak, that allows me to drive through a tollbooth under a device that reads my credit card information and charges my account. Even people without these transponders can drive through a separate lane that has an automated payment method; no service workers are involved in this.

My point is that the unskilled jobs and careers that require little or no education are disappearing fast and are being replaced with more technical, mentally demanding ones. At the same time, the fastest growing segment of our society is not attaining the education necessary to meet the changing needs of the American workplace.

In fact, according to the President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans,

By the year 2000, up to 80 percent of jobs in the United States are expected to require cognitive, rather than manual, skills, and 52 percent of jobs are expected to require at least some postsecondary education. The shortage of workers with high levels of communication, mathematics, computer and other technological skills—already a problem for employers—will become more severe, if the Hispanic population continues to be deprived of a quality education. (1996)

I feel the impact of these statistics every day and am aware that it is an awesome responsibility to assist my students in achieving their dreams. The concept of being a bridge between their present lives and the ones they wish to live in the future is what drives my teaching. However, when I first started teaching rigorously, I was unaware of this data. I simply did it because the thirty-odd kids sitting in my room every day trusted me. Now, when I consider that less than 10 percent of the Latino population finishes college, and only 54

percent even finish high school (Bowman 2005), I realize that I am part of a much bigger struggle.

If our workforce is not educationally equipped to meet the demands of the twenty-first century workplace, the cost of social programs and public-sponsored health care will skyrocket. Several states will experience a shrinking tax base, and the pressure to outsource skilled jobs will increase beyond resistance. This is a problem that affects all of us, no matter what part of the country we reside in.

Two days ago I looked out at my new Puente class, full of little ninth graders absurdly small and gangly for high school: Brenda nervously peeked out at the world from under the protective curtain of her carefully draped hair; Tony, with his crazy grin, flashed teeth, a bit too big for his face; Maggie, with her athletic, panther-like stride, entered the room ready for whatever came her way, but was nervous on the inside at the same time. These kids have been entrusted to me by society and by their parents. I cannot change the educational system, but I can change what happens to these kids who are my responsibility.

Thanks to the Puente program, I feel as if I have earned that trust. Since we introduced Puente to my high school, the rates of students eligible for the UC system have increased steadily. In 1999, only 12.5 percent of Puente graduates were UC eligible (Puente Project 2). By 2004, 43 percent of Puente graduates went on to actually attend a UC school, and 83 percent of the Puente graduates ended up at a four-year university (Magnolia High School WASC Accreditation Committee 2006). Also in 1999, for the very first time in Magnolia High School's forty-year history, a student was accepted to Harvard University: that student was a Puente graduate.

Our implementation of the Puente program has brought about other changes as well: 100 percent of my Puente students have passed our state's exit exam and the numbers of students in AP and Honors classes have swelled, as have the numbers of underrepresented students taking the SAT. More important, because of the changes Puente has effected on my campus, success is no longer the domain of the white and Asian kids; the overall culture of the school has changed.

Puente is an academic preparation or outreach program that is funded through the University of California. Although not limited to any one demo-

graphic, the class includes Latino literature and culture because the bulk of students tend to be Latino. The program operates in thirty-three high schools throughout California, and is headquartered in Oakland at the Office of the President for the UC system.

The program has no minimum GPA cutoff requirement and aims for a heterogeneous classroom with a wide range of student ability, motivation, and background. We incorporate a culturally responsive pedagogy into a rigorous curriculum aimed at preparing students for entrance to and success in a four-year university.

There are three main components to the Puente program at each high school. They include counseling, writing, and mentoring.

The first of these, counseling, is in place for all four years. Steve Gonzales, probably the hardest-working high school counselor I've ever met, works very closely with students through their high school career and is hugely responsible for the success of the program at Magnolia High School. As the Puente counselor, Steve oversees all the facets of student preparation for college—field trips to universities, PSAT and SAT registration, scholarship opportunities, leadership development, community service, and college applications. His work is never-ending. Seriously, someone needs to make a movie about this guy.

The second of these, writing, is in place for two years. At my site, Kelly Gallagher, author of *Reading Reasons* (2003), *Deeper Reading* (2004), and *Teaching Adolescent Writers* (2006), teaches one Puente class and I teach the other. The Puente students are enrolled in our Puente classes for their freshman and sophomore years and engage in a rigorous curriculum that highlights the various students' cultures. From there, about a fourth go on to Advanced Placement while the rest move on to regular English classes. However, our jobs with these students often extend beyond the first two years. Along with helping to plan field trips to universities, I also teach SAT preparation, work with students on scholarship essays, and offer guidance on the personal essay for the UC system. Although students are often out of my classroom after the second year, I am rarely out of their lives.

The third component of Puente is mentoring, which is arguably the most

difficult to put into place. On our campus, ninth-grade students are paired up with eleventh-grade students and offered support with writing and study habits. This program sounds great in theory, but honestly works only sometimes. Also, the counselor and I make a concerted effort to bring back past students to share their college experiences with new students and to serve as role models for our students. This component has suffered the most, but it remains a part of the vision.

Statewide, Puente has much to be proud of, having benefited thousands of students. Of all the Latino students statewide who begin ninth grade, only a little over 3 percent of them will attend a UC (California Postsecondary Education Commission 2005). Yet, 23 percent of Puente students are UC eligible, making them twice as likely to be UC eligible as all non-Puente graduates of all backgrounds, and almost three times as likely to be UC eligible as other educationally disadvantaged graduates (23 percent versus 9 percent). Further, while only 49 percent of all California graduating high school seniors enter college, Puente students enter college at a rate of 79 percent (Puente Project 2007). Unlike some college preparation programs, Puente tracks its students beginning in the freshman year. If a student drops out of the program in the tenth grade, he or she is still counted in the data rather than being dropped. Therefore, these numbers are indicative of where our original thirty-odd students end up.

So, in a state where only 55 percent of Latinos and 66 percent of Latinas even graduate high school, how did Magnolia High School end up with a college-going rate of 83 percent? As Brenda Barajas, class of 2004, puts it,

The structure of the Puente program was important, but the people working in the program had the biggest impact on me. Having a teacher and a counselor who really took the time to get to know my family and me, who were seriously devoted to the program's curriculum (and beyond it), and who were always seeking creative ways to reach out to students—that is what made Puente worthwhile for me. In the classroom, my teacher dared to challenge our class with AP level material and helped us with a SAT preparation course as well. He helped us to work together in groups, and to think as individuals. He even stayed after school to talk about intellectual ideas, things going on in our per-

sonal lives, or to watch a basketball game and thus put in the time to really get to know students. Similarly, my counselor's office was sort of like the "safe-haven" from the whirlwind of high school. Everyone sort of had like a daily check-in with him; we were always in his office. I remember spilling my heart to him on those stiff chairs, eating chocolates out of his candy bowl, and then receiving some announcement about an upcoming scholarship deadline. He would open his office before school, let us visit him between periods, and would stay there after-school often letting us use his computer to print out assignments or applications. I think I even had my own folder on both of their computers! Both my counselor and teacher were dedicated to us as people, and professionally as students. I believe it was this combination that made the program one of my best experiences at Magnolia high school.

It is this approach to teaching and counseling that prompted researcher Helen Duffy to write, "Puente did more than simply tack on an additional literature in the way that some schools take on holiday and food celebrations in their attempts to acknowledge campus diversity. Puente altered the teacher-student relationship as a bridge to the acquisition of powerful academic discourse" (Duffy 2002). As mentioned before, the counseling component cannot be underemphasized when discussing the success of the Puente program at Magnolia High School. But this is a book about what happens in English class so in the chapters that follow, I'll deal with specific approaches to teaching literature and composition to students who traditionally have been underprepared for university success.

Interwoven through all these approaches is the belief that the student's background matters and that no two students come from the same place.

The current avalanche of test prep materials foisted upon an educational system saturated with the machinery of No Child Left Behind almost deliberately sidesteps an important fact: every day in our classrooms we are graced with thirty human beings, all of whom are much more complicated than we think, who often will not or cannot begin learning until we take the first step toward them. Students need to see teachers and counselors as willing participants in their lives rather than as automatons forcing them to participate while in our institutions.

For underrepresented students, this issue is critical because many of them start high school without the knowledge or skill base necessary for academic success. Also, because of subtractive educational policies and the view that cultural diversity is a handicap rather than an asset, the school system stamps out students' desire to change and engage in a rigorous education. Like any salesperson, we educators must connect to who our students are before they will "buy" our product; to do this, we must become students of their culture.

The second principle is that no two students come from the same place. Just because a student is from a particular ethnic group does not mean that he or she will be like other students from that group. Culture does not work like that—we are all invested in dozens of subcultures that work together to shape our behavior. A student may be more influenced by his membership in the surfing subculture than his Mexican heritage, for instance. As a result, there is no one approach that will work with any one ethnic background.

However, there are ways that educators can adjust their practices so that students of all backgrounds can succeed and go on to higher education. The remaining chapters of this book aim to weave sound pedagogical practices with the attention that culture needs to receive in a classroom full of underrepresented students. By doing so, the education a student receives improves. As Italia Lima, a former Puente student who is now at UC Davis, puts it,

Puente opened my eyes to my cultural roots, allowed me to bridge relationships with instructors and peers, and unlocked the fascinating world of college life. My studies at UC Davis have opened my eyes to the inequalities low-resource youths have when applying to a four-year institution. For some, the admission process serves as a barrier for success, sending them into the abyss of menial employment. Luckily for some, acceptance to a university hides behind a devoted counselor, supporting teacher, and a successful program that still believes in the power of education. Now two years into my college career, I have grown into an individual that wouldn't have existed if it weren't for Puente. I'm fully devoted to my passions: my studies, serving the greater good in my communities, and most importantly, the ability to believe that anything can be conquered.

When my time with my freshmen is over, I want them to have experienced so much more than just an increase in their test scores. Scores need to improve

of course, but education is so much deeper than that. By beginning with the student and his or her culture, I can reach much further into my students' lives and help them see *why* they want to continue their education. As a result, my classroom becomes a place where lives are changed and dreams are pursued and where I get the fulfillment of being part of a team that operates as a bridge between where the students are and where they wish to end up; that's the reason why I chose this profession to begin with.

This book draws greatly from my experience in the Puente classroom, but its applications are not limited to the program. Everything that I have learned has spilled over into my other classes—I am a better instructor overall because of my Puente training. As educational researcher G. M. Pradl writes, “The rigorous college preparatory English curriculum that anchors High School Puente merits serious attention by education policy makers because its core principles . . . apply beyond the Mexican American/Latino student population for which it was originally designed . . . Puente offers an encouraging model for working with underserved students whatever their ethnic, cultural, or socio-economic origins” (Pradl 2002). In other words, although Puente emphasizes Latino literature and culture, the principle of acknowledging the cultural capital that underrepresented students possess rather than treating it as an obstacle to be overcome can be applied to any ethnic group or other subculture within a school. Puente pedagogy—emphasizing a student's culture—works beyond solely Latino populations, a necessary focus if we want our future workforce to sustain its competitiveness and achieve its dreams.