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The benefits of investing in high quality professional development for community college faculty in Texas

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Disciplines

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Comments

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BY: ERIN DORAN

Abstract

This study is drawn from data collected for a larger study on the implementation of integrated reading and writing at the developmental level at one Texas community college. To protect sources, the name of the targeted college has been changed, and a pseudonym has been substituted. Three faculty members interviewed for this study were trained and taught within the Dream Catchers program at Adelante College, one of the first colleges to adopt the Dream Catchers Program, which bases its pedagogy and professional development practices on the model of the Puente Project, a national model for student success housed at the University of California, Berkeley. What the data revealed was the strength of the professional development Dream Catchers faculty received to prepare them for teaching students, and part of that training was a more validating approach to teaching students in developmental courses. This study examines how the Puente model can inform colleges' approach to training their faculty and how the Dream Catchers approach can lend itself to best practices for teaching Latinx college students in Texas.

Introduction

In 2012, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board released an update to its statewide developmental education plan (THECB 2012). Aside from changing policy around items such as placement scores, Texas has introduced initiatives and curriculum changes to help make institutions more responsive to the needs of students deemed underprepared for college level work. The fall 2014 headcount of Texas community college students revealed that Latinx¹ enrollment numbers were larger than white enrollment numbers, at 39.8 percent Latinx versus 35.7 percent white, respectively (THECB 2015). Moreover, Complete College America (2012) offers some troubling statistics for Hispanic student success in

developmental courses in Texas. Out of the nearly 54,000 students in Texas enrolled in a 2-year college, nearly 38.4% of these students were Hispanic and labeled as "remedial" (Complete College America 2012). Therefore, finding ways to improve developmental education outcomes for students' long-term success is a pressing issue in Texas and nationwide, particularly as the Latinx student demographic continues to grow.

One of the developmental education reforms introduced in 2012 was the integration of developmental reading and writing. Several justifications for integrating reading and writing were noted by the Coordinating Board. First, integration decreases the time students spend in developmental activities. Second, the Coordinating Board writes that reading and writing integration better aligns developmental coursework with the type of work and expectations found in college-level courses (THECB 2012). Indeed, one major problem identified in the developmental education literature is a misalignment between remedial and college level courses because students may still leave developmental courses unprepared for college-level work if the institution has not aligned its curriculum and expectations well (Grubb and Cox 2005; Jenkins 2011).

At almost the same time, a new initiative was introduced in Texas: the Puente Project, a program that began in California in the 1980s, focused on increasing the enrollment, retention, and transfer rates of underrepresented students in community colleges through reading- and writing-intensive coursework, counseling, and mentorship (Rendón 2002). The Puente model was the creation of Felix Galaviz and Patricia McGrath who analyzed two thousand Latinx students' transcripts and identified three key patterns: Latinx students entered college needing remediation in English courses, appeared to avoid academic advising, and were largely first-generation college students (Torres & Hernandez 2009). As a result, in 1981, the founders created a program fusing these three components—English, counseling, and mentorship—to help support students through their first year of college (Our Program n.d.). The program expanded throughout California in the 1980s and 1990s, and, by 2001, regional offices were established in both northern and southern California (Puente History n.d.). In 2012, the Puente model expanded to Texas through a partnership with Catch the Next, Inc. (Puente History n.d.), and to date has six participating community colleges and one school district in its partnership with five more being added (Our Partners n.d.).

The expansion of the Puente model to Texas offered some overlap with the state's developmental education policies, specifically the rollout of INRW. For instance, at Adelante College, the focus of the present study, the Puente program provided these courses even before the mainstream developmental program was implemented throughout the state. One

notable aspect of Puente is the way it helps students build their skills and knowledge about college faster through a specialized curriculum that includes the use of reading and writing materials that reflect students' communities. The purpose of this article is to present some of the findings from Adelante College that specifically highlight the Puente program and its usefulness to all colleges.

Literature Review

It is well-documented in the literature that Latinx students are more likely to enroll in community colleges nationwide (Crisp and Nora 2010; Martinez and Fernández 2004; Núñez, Sparks, and Hernández 2011) and that Latinx students, as well as other students of color, are overrepresented in developmental education (Bahr 2010; Melguizo, Hagedorn, and Cypers 2008; Solórzano, Acevedo-Gil, and Santos 2013). Much of the work on Latinx students in developmental education has focused on preparing students for college-level mathematics (Bahr 2010; Crisp, Reyes, and Doran 2016) or on improving college readiness more broadly (Crisp and Nora 2010; Solórzano, Acevedo-Gil, and Santos 2013; Stein 2005); there is a dearth of literature on Latinx students' experiences in developmental reading and writing courses.

Bernstein (2004) recalls working with Latinx students in Texas and how their context and previous literacy helped them build their skills in developmental writing. The readings in her class resonated with her students' contexts, as she had them read about the same educational inequalities they had likely experienced. Through reading and writing on the topic, they acquired a way to use writing to reflect on their experiences, to combine their anecdotes with academic sources, and to empower themselves as students and change agents. The optimism that comes through Bernstein's case study shows great promise for an awareness of culturally relevant pedagogy in the developmental reading and writing classroom.

Unfortunately, one drawback of the extant literature on Latinx students in developmental reading and writing contexts is that much of it consists of non-empirical, anecdotal pieces. In one recent empirical piece, Ruecker (2014) followed seven students in El Paso, Texas, over an eighteen-month period as they made their transitions from high school to college, either at a community college or university. Three students began in community college and four at a university. What Ruecker finds is that the transition from high school writing to postsecondary writing was difficult for all the students, especially when they felt deficient in MLA citation conventions vital in the majority of college coursework. Among other findings, Ruecker writes, "the power of individual instructors to shape dispositions for better or worse remained a defining factor across the two postsecondary institutions" (111).

In another study, Acevedo-Gil, Santos, Alonso, and Solórzano (2015) find that developmental faculty in English play key roles in helping students see themselves as college students. Students with instructors who spent time focusing on building academic skill sets along with validating students' experiences reported feeling more confidence in their abilities to fulfill their academic aspirations. In short, instructors play a part in helping students move through developmental coursework and into college-level work. Put another way, instructors and their awareness of their students matter in terms of their teaching and learning effectiveness. Indeed, using quantitative methods, Barnett (2011) finds that faculty validation, such as positive engagement with students, was highly correlated with students' sense of belonging to their community college campus.

Preparing Faculty to Work with Latinx Students

Given that previous work affirms the potential for faculty members to enact positive change, especially for developmental students, there is a dearth of literature on how to prepare faculty to meet their needs. For instance, graduate programs often do not adequately train college instructors to teach (Grubb, et al. 1999), thereby making supplementary training through professional development necessary. The issue of professional development is a complex one with one study reporting that institution-mandated professional development activities tend to focus on institutional priorities rather than the desires and needs of individual faculty (Hardré 2012). Other work finds that professional development is often limited in time and scope, which often limits its ability to inform long-term change to teaching and learning practices (Goldrick-Rab 2010; Murray 2002).

Research indicates that faculty development requires a significant investment in time and energy, both before a curriculum is implemented and after (Bickerstaff and Cormier 2014). In a qualitative study, Bickerstaff and Cormier (2014) note that

when faculty undergo training for a new pedagogical or curricular model, they do not often know what questions to ask before they begin. Through experience they may encounter unforeseen challenges that require post-training time for questions and reflection.

One way that the Catch the Next Dream Catchers program, based on the Puente model, differentiates itself from other programs is its investment in professional development, particularly in fostering a validating approach to students.² Over the course of ongoing, in-depth professional development that takes place both before and after the faculty begins teaching the program, the faculty is provided with resources and knowledge on their students, especially Latinx students, as well as the communities they come from, and their specific needs. Through a strong focus on validation theory (Rendón 1994), which is discussed in more detail below, the faculty learns how to intentionally approach their students with *cariño* (affection and kindness) and foster a sense of *familia* (family) within the classroom.

Theoretical Framework

This study looks at the Dream Catchers program at Adelante College through the lens of validation theory (Rendón 1994). Validation theory focuses on the experiences of non-traditional students, who Rendón operationalizes as students from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, including Latinx, and the ways campus agents such as faculty and staff create experiences that honor students' cultural heritages. This theory contends that these students, many of whom are increasingly becoming the norm on college campuses, have different experiences and backgrounds that may keep them from feeling they are a part of their campuses (Rendón 1994). Validating experiences such as meaningful interactions with faculty who share their cultural or racial/ethnic backgrounds or seeing their backgrounds reflected in the curriculum, have positive effects on students' confidence and, ultimately, on their chances of persisting and succeeding in college (Rendón 1994).

One way institutions can promote validating experiences is through the use of culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally relevant pedagogy, a term defined by Ladson-Billings (1995), is an approach to teaching with students' cultural contexts in mind. Pappamihel and Moreno (2011) make the case for culturally responsive instruction in colleges and universities with the purpose of boosting educational attainment for Latinx students specifically. Culturally responsive instruction has six attributes: it is validating, multidimensional, comprehensive, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory (Gay 2000). The incorporation of culturally relevant teaching allows students to draw on their own experiences and cultural backgrounds in order to connect with course content (Pappamihel and Moreno 2011). Perhaps most importantly, this type of pedagogical approach affirms students' identities and shows that their backgrounds matter to the broader campus community. Pappamihel and Moreno point out that faculty who embrace this approach are not expected to be cultural experts; instead, they demonstrate a respect for diversity and an awareness that students learn in different ways.

Ruecker (2014) expands the content of what it means to be culturally aware beyond course content and recommends that graduate programs teach their students about the equality disparities across the educational systems and to come to know more about the students they serve. More than throwing in a Latinx writer to read for a class assignment, this means understanding the issues that may encourage or hinder student success.

Because those in the academy often come from privileged backgrounds, they may lack the dispositions to fully understand how to respond to students who have accumulated a number of absences due to challenges like a delayed bus, having to take grandmother to the doctor, or an abnormally long line at a border crossing. In educating current and future composition teachers and scholars, graduate programs need to provide opportunities to work with students from linguistically, culturally, and economically diverse backgrounds. This means familiarizing graduate students not only with second language writing scholarship, but also with work exploring issues surrounding social disparities and college access. (Ruecker 2014, 113-14)

To that end, developmental instructors should have knowledge and understanding in a number of areas including content knowledge, effective teaching strategies for preparing students for college-level work, an awareness of students' cultural

backgrounds to help them connect to the material, and an awareness of students' contexts and what they bring with them to the developmental classroom.

Method

This case study focuses on the findings from an institutional case study done at Adelante College, a community college located in an urban area in South Texas, which specifically related to the implementation of the Dream Catchers program on that campus. The research questions for this study are:

1. How does the Dream Catchers program prepare its faculty for incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy?
2. How does a culturally relevant curriculum influence the delivery of a developmental education program?

Considering the aforementioned issues with the professional development of postsecondary faculty, the focus here is on describing what rigorous, ongoing professional development provides to faculty and how this directly informs classroom practice.

Case studies identify a "case," or an individual, context, phenomenon, or problem in a real-life context that forms a bounded system for analysis (Hays and Singh 2012). Yin (2009) contends that case study is an appropriate method for researchers asking "how" and "why" questions, but have no control over behavioral events in a contemporary setting. This study hones in on one intervention, the Dream Catchers Program, that has been implemented at a Latinx-majority community college campus in Texas and how this program incorporates a culturally relevant approach to helping developmental students reach college readiness by the end of their second semester of enrollment. The program can serve as a model for many campuses across Texas and the United States that enroll a large proportion of racial/ethnic minority students, especially Latinx students.

Participants

Once this study received IRB approval, recruitment emails were sent to faculty teaching Integrated Reading and Writing (INRW) courses at Adelante College in the fall 2014 and spring 2015 semesters. Three Dream Catchers faculty members participated in this study: Linda, Suzanne, and Jorge (all pseudonyms).

Data Collection and Analysis

After obtaining informed consent, participants were interviewed about their experiences teaching INRW courses in a semistructured format. The interviews utilized an interview protocol that included questions about professional development and how their students reacted to assignments in the classroom. Some interviews took place in faculty offices; others were held off-campus in a place of the participants' choosing. Interviews ranged from one to two hours in duration and were tape-recorded. The researcher transcribed each interview and asked each participant to review their respective transcript for accuracy. Transcripts constituted the bulk of the data for this study and were coded in two rounds. The first round used an a priori approach in order to see what emerged from the data; a second round refined codes, combined codes that were similar in nature, and looked for patterns in the data.

Site

Adelante College was approved by the Texas legislature on March 19, 1983, and was the third college created under the River City Colleges (Adelante College Timeline Press Releases and News Clippings, n.d.).³ Adelante College was created through a community-driven initiative to bring postsecondary education to the historically underserved south side of the urban area. Adelante enrolled its first students in 1985, using area high school facilities, a nearby military base, and community centers throughout the region (Adelante Timeline Press Releases and News Clippings n.d.). In 1986, its enrollment was supported by the COPS initiative once again when the organization worked to attract new students to the College by knocking on doors in the community (Adelante Timeline Press Releases and News Clippings n.d.). In addition to the establishment of articulation agreements and joint admissions agreements that partnered Adelante with four-year institutions around the city and throughout the state and country, the college also brought university programs to the area.

In 1994, the college adopted the slogan, "The heart of the community," and the history of the college reflects the constant awareness of Adelante's commitment to its surrounding area.

Students' Placement

Incoming students at Adelante College are typically required to take a placement exam to determine if they are collegeready. Students who test below the state-approved cutoff scores are placed into developmental coursework. At Adelante, students who place into INRW 0420, the level of developmental reading and writing just under college-level, are given the opportunity to participate in the Dream Catchers program. One key component of the program is an accelerated integrated reading and writing that bridges the gap between developmental courses and college-level freshman composition within students' first academic year (Our Program n.d.).

Findings

Preparing Faculty to Incorporate Culturally Relevant Pedagogy:

Dream Catchers faculty received professional development to help them with their teaching. Suzanne described how she went to training at the University of California at Berkeley for sessions that ran all day for five consecutive days. After that, the faculty was expected to attend conferences held in Texas every fall and spring semester. The faculty also participated in other conferences such as the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) annual conference. There are also regular conference calls with Catch the Next that faculty are encouraged to attend. As a result of this ongoing training, students in the Dream Catchers program at Adelante College received a culturally relevant curriculum.

For example, Jorge spoke to how the Puente model enabled him to build a syllabus rich with Latinx authors, allowing him to rigorously teach students about the writing process. He described,

I would say, "This is a story by Sandra Cisneros," and I show it to them. Now I ask my students, "We're going to imitate Sandra Cisneros's style. You notice her style." I ask students to count how many sentences, how many adjectives, how many periods, how many semicolons . . . I'm showing them grammar, and then they try to imitate and try it themselves . . . They do a formal paper. I want them to do five to six pages, and when I ask them for five or six pages, in my mind I'm thinking, "If they give me three, they're doing great." See, I always set the bar really high.

Jorge went on to say that he pushes students to do more than they believe they can do, and over the course of the semester, students continue to ramp up their own abilities to meet what seem like unattainable page counts at the beginning of the year.

Similarly, Linda recalled using a poem by Hopi Elders entitled "We Are the Ones We've Been Waiting For" as a piece of reading and as a prompt for writing. Using an exercise learned in the professional development, Linda and others described the lesson of having students read various pieces of writing and asking students to write about specific excerpts that spoke to them and why. After students read specific pieces of writing, Linda said, "[The students] were responsible for getting into a small group and discussing that section and discussing strong lines and what question would they ask the character in the book . . . it was some writing and [worked] like a book club." This type of exercise enabled faculty to tailor the readings to whatever the faculty deemed appropriate or useful in the classroom and encouraged interaction and a sense of community, or familia, by having students share their thoughts and reactions to pieces of writing.

By allowing creativity outside the mainstream curriculum and standardized textbooks, the Puente model, and the professional development that supports it, allowed the instructors to offer students the opportunity to develop themselves as thinkers, writers, and readers. Having students over two consecutive semesters gave Suzanne the chance to personalize her teaching for students as individuals and as a class:

You feel like you have some students that if they were just given a little more time [at the end of the semester in the developmental course], they would definitely get it. They would definitely be ready [for Composition I]. You know,

and that's what Puente does—it offers you and them the opportunity to stretch it out so that by the end of the spring 1301, they're 1301, and they're ready to go into 1302.

The Dream Catchers Program thus offers an alternative timetable for instructors to prepare their students for college-level writing that enables them to focus on the needs of their students, to get to know them, and to set the standards high with enough time for students to reach those standards.

One of the marked differences between Dream Catchers and non-Dream Catchers faculty members was their description of the professional development they received for INRW courses. Of the seven participants who were interviewed for the larger study, five participated in the INRW training provided by River City Colleges, including Linda who participated in both Puente training and the nine hours of River City Colleges' professional development. Suzanne and Jorge were exempt from this training because their Puente training was considered sufficient. The Puente training at UC Berkeley offered its faculty clear examples of the types of lessons and essays that could be used in INRW and Composition I courses, and in the case of difficulties or unforeseen challenges, routine conferences and meetings with the network of Dream Catchers programs around the state enabled these faculty members to talk through challenges. Non-Dream Catchers faculty, by and large, could not name a single aspect of their nine hours of INRW workshops that they implemented in their courses. Further, conversations with non-Dream Catchers faculty revealed that most faculty members carried on with their previous teaching practices rather than attempting to meaningfully integrate reading and writing instruction into their developmental courses.

Teaching with Validating Approaches to Students:

The developmental component of the Dream Catchers program that students take in the fall semester is a special section of INRW 0420. Dream Catchers students pass to ENGL 1301 provided they finish the INRW course with a "C" or higher. However, in the fall 2014 semester, the department tried to mandate the same exit exam used in mainstream INRW classes, and it was reported that the instructors were notified of this mandate more than halfway through the fall semester. Dream Catchers sections, it turned out, were exempted from the fall 2014 exit exam.

The concern about the high-stakes nature of the exit exam also had ramifications for the Dream Catchers Program and the Puente model. As was described by two Dream Catchers instructors, one of the key functions of the program, especially in the first semester, is to build students' confidence and to convince them that they are writers with the potential to be successful. High-stakes writing exams that could negate the work the students were doing throughout the semester were considered antithetical to the approach that the Dream Catchers Program instilled in its curriculum. Suzanne explained that the Dream Catchers approach builds students' confidence over the course of the first semester, and a high-stakes exam, with the stress and anxiety it produced for other faculty members (and, in theory, their students), would essentially undermine that approach.

Suzanne noted that part of the success of the Puente model was the fact that students spent two semesters with her—in the fall they were in INRW 0420, and in the spring they took Composition I with her as the instructor. Without the pressure of the exit exam, students with a "C" or better progressed into the Composition I course in the spring semester. What Suzanne noted was that this way of grouping students together with the same instructor gave her more time and opportunities to address students' challenges without hindering their progress into Composition I. Suzanne felt confident that the Dream Catchers program was successfully preparing students for Composition I and Composition II in a way that took the exam pressure off the students and their instructor.

Nearly all seven faculty members included in the larger study spoke to the negativity about student placement in INRW and a lack of confidence college students often felt. Linda, for instance, described her developmental students both in and out of the Dream Catchers Program as "crushed spirits" who have been repeatedly told that they are not good readers or writers. The most important job for Linda was to try to reverse students' beliefs about themselves and messages they internalized from previous educators. This job was in addition to the pressure to adhere to the standard learning outcomes set forth for the course and the pressure to prepare students for Composition I. Linda showed an understanding of how

multiple semesters of remediation can negatively impact students' persistence from semester to semester and the role of that exit exam in particular:

If you finish my class this semester in [INRW] 0420 and you were my student, and I have to give you an IP [in progress] because you didn't pass the exit essay even though you may have earned an A, B, or C, and you get an IP, I wonder if you would even come back next spring [because] it's such a blow.

Linda's fears are substantiated in the developmental education literature. Adelman (1996) is clear: the longer a student spends in developmental education, the less likely they are to continue their studies. However, as long as Dream Catchers students adequately fulfill INRW course requirements, the exit exam that could create a barrier to college-level work and more long-term progress in their coursework is no longer a threat.

Discussion

The extant research says that culturally relevant teaching (Acevedo-Gil, Santos, Alonso, and Solórzano 2015) and faculty validation (Barnett 2011) support students' persistence. What the Dream Catchers Program did, and continues to do on the Adelante campus with specific regard to INRW and teaching Latinx students, is to provide faculty members with specialized and ongoing professional development. The Dream Catchers faculty is given the opportunity to continually reflect and refine their practice in ways that Bickerstaff and Cormier (2014) identify as important to program implementation and improvement. While the research on the Puente Project in California typically focuses on the positive outcomes this program has on students (Rendón 2002), it has left out the continual support the program provides for its faculty members. When advocating for specific reforms, policy makers should be aware of the mechanisms for training and supporting high-quality faculty members and be willing to invest in their development as well as programs that support students.

What this professional development provides to Dream Catchers faculty is the knowledge, the skills, and the confidence to provide students with a curriculum representative of the population of the college that adheres to the expected rigor and student outcomes set forth by the program. The flexibility that the two-semester model gives faculty is more time to work with students as a group and as individuals to address their needs more holistically and without the pressure of a standardized exit exam. What the early numbers have shown is that students in this program are faring better than state averages (Our Program n.d.) and getting students out of developmental classes faster. As colleges in Texas further implement the integrated reading and writing format for developmental students, they can also assess the curriculum they use to work with students who are deemed underprepared for college-level work and how they can incorporate additive practices in their classroom and institutional policies that create opportunities for students to move forward rather than instill barriers.

Limitations

As with any research, this study has limitations. First, it only focuses on one site in Texas and had a limited number of participants. Second, the original purpose of the data collection was to more broadly investigate the changes brought about by the integration of reading and writing at the developmental level. The bulk of the data collection came from interviews from faculty members, so future research should consider data collection inside classrooms and data from students. At the same time, this study also offers insight into some of the differences between how Dream Catchers and non-Dream Catchers programs serve developmental students, particularly Latinx students.

Recommendations

Catch the Next was formed as a non-profit organization, which partners with the Puente Project housed at UC Berkeley to expand the program outside of California, starting first in Texas. In order to scale up the program in Texas and uniquely situate it within the state, the Puente program in Texas is now referred to as the Dream Catchers program. Since 2012, the program has grown from three colleges to eight colleges and fifteen campuses throughout Texas, including one university campus.

One of the challenges to the Dream Catchers Program's growth in Texas is the fact that it is funded very differently in Texas than is the Puente Project in California. Puente in California receives state funding from the California Community Chancellor's Office (Rondini 2012) and therefore cannot operate outside the state. The Dream Catchers Program is not state-funded in Texas; instead, colleges that want to start a Dream Catchers Program on their campuses must either incur the costs or pursue public or private funds that will cover the costs. If the program is to continue scaling up into every community college in Texas as it exists in California, the establishment of reliable sources of revenue for the program is crucial.

In terms of future research, the field for studying Puente in Texas is wide open. As previously noted, future research should include data from students as well as classroom observation data. Quantitative researchers might look to compare retention, transfer, and graduation rates of Puente and non-Puente students now that more longitudinal data may be available. This research can be used to inform researchers and policy makers, especially those from the latter group who may be able to advocate for state-level expansion and funding at all community colleges in Texas.

Conclusions

A relatively small number of colleges in Texas have adopted the Dream Catchers program on their campuses. However, in respect to the delivery and approach of developmental coursework, the data drawn from this study indicates that rigorous and ongoing professional development, and an approach to students that emphasizes a culturally relevant curriculum and additive practices, are successful for at-risk Latinx students at the participating community colleges. Unless state investment increases, the Dream Catchers Program may not expand fully across Texas. Despite this, non-Dream Catchers colleges and faculty who work with Latinx students and developmental students should look to the Puente model to see what practices can be implemented on their campuses and in their classrooms to better serve all students across the state.

Notes

1. The term "Latinx" is an emerging term used to replace "Hispanic," "Latina/o," and other terms and is considered more gender inclusive. For a discussion of this term, refer to Logue (2015).
2. Catch the Next's expansion of the Puente model of pedagogy and professional development in Texas included a Puente Fellows component, designed to cultivate a cohort of Texas faculty trainers to create a sustainable professional development model for what eventually became the Dream Catchers Program, the name given to Texas's scaling up of the Puente Project. Catch the Next's continued partnership with the Puente Project includes sustained professional development for Dream Catchers faculty. Hereafter, references to the Texas program will use the name "Dream Catchers," while references to the Puente model and framework will use the name "Puente."
3. Again, for purposes of confidentiality, both "Adelante College" and "River City Colleges" are pseudonyms for the college name and the college system of which it is a part, respectively.

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