

USC Race and
Equity Center

**HOW CAN WE USE
TESTIMONIOS TO
UNDERSTAND AND
SUPPORT THE
CULTURAL ASSETS OF
STUDENTS OF COLOR?**

Llanet Martín

***Moving from Racelessness
to Race-Conscious
Approaches***

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BIOGRAPHY



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Dr. Llanet Martín has more than fifteen years of experience in higher education. Currently, she serves as an administrator for the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD). As a thought leader in diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, she focuses on removing barriers and shaping conditions for institutional reform that chip away at historical injustice. Additionally, she serves an appointed role on the City of Los Angeles, Workforce Development Board.

She received a Ph.D. in Higher Education and Organizational Change from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), a Master of Education Policy and Management from Harvard, and a Bachelor's degree in Communication Studies from UCLA. She is also a proud product of the community college system, having completed her transfer requirements at Los Angeles City College. Beyond working to promote equitable opportunities to access quality education and careers, she enjoys nutrition, meditation, and fitness as a means to stay whole. She lives in Los Angeles with her partner Jesse, their son Emilio, and their dog Nacho.

A testimonio, or first-person narration, is an oral accounting of one's truth and significant experiences that emphasize one's agency within the context of injustice or systems of oppression. In this brief I will share my experience using testimonios to support community college students, along with my own testimonio, in order to show the various forms of cultural capital first-generation students of color possess that often go unrecognized or devalued by our education system. As we support students on their pathways, I will explain the importance of getting to know the whole human through testimonio to avoid deficit-minded generalizations that create mismatched expectations of students' potential for success.

TESTIMONIO

Earlier this year, I lost my lifelong mentor—the community college counselor who changed my life. He changed my college trajectory by seeing me for who I am. As a first-generation college student, the daughter of immigrants, and someone who wanted something more from life, but had absolutely no idea how to get there, this counselor served as a bright and guiding light. I took the grief from his passing and reflected inward toward the many lessons he taught me, not only about myself, but about the power I have as a community college leader and educator.

20 years later, I still recall the day I first met Mr. Lucio. During my senior year in high school, my friends all seemed to know what they would do next, except for me. Upon graduation, some entered the workforce like their parents. Others went off to college, as first-generation college goers who had worked incredibly hard to earn their spot at some of the amazing public universities and colleges in California. I felt like such an outsider because I was not a “college track” student, but I was determined not to pursue a dead-end, backbreaking job. Baring my parent's wisdom to “work hard with my brain, not my back,” like they had done, I thought college would be the key.

Growing up my dad worked multiple jobs, seven days a week, as head of household. My mom stayed home and picked up babysitting gigs in the neighborhood to help make ends meet. By the time I was seventeen, they saved enough money to buy a modest duplex to live and rent out for additional income and an eventual retirement. My parents were, and are, amazing! I grew up having all my basic needs met but nothing more. I had a roof over my head. I ate three square meals, often comprised of rice and beans but never went hungry. My fun upbringing came from games conjured up with my imagination. I played with imaginary toys, hide and seek and freeze tag on the concrete backyard with other children from similar homes. My parents, on the other hand, never took a day off, not even for illness. We never went on vacation. They never complained. I was loved, fed, and housed and thus I did not know I was poor. Despite not thinking I was poor, I did feel out of place as I navigated the educational system, in particular postsecondary education.

COMMUNITY CULTURAL WEALTH

In retrospect, we were financially poor, but had cultural and familial wealth that many only dream of. In many ways, I recognize how privileged I was; however, the educational system did not readily appreciate this as capital. While in graduate school, I was introduced to Tara Yosso's (2005) framework on Community Cultural Wealth (CCW), which provided me the language and enabled me to see my own capital. Yosso's framework highlights the forms of cultural capital that students of color and other marginalized groups possess and bring to higher education. The model underlines the talents, strengths and experiences that we bring to the educational system and acknowledges them as assets, rather than deficits. Yosso clarifies that while many first-generation, low-income, students of color may not hold the dominant capital that is valued and exchangeable in schools, communities of color possess community cultural wealth, which is comprised of six forms of capital.

The six forms of capital include aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance capital.

Aspirational Capital

The ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future in the face of real and perceived barriers.

Linguistic Capital

The ability for students to develop communication skills through various experiences.

Familial Capital

The social and personal human resources students have in their precollege environment, drawn from their extended familial and community networks.

Social Capital

The students' peers and other social contacts that student utilize to gain access to college and navigate other social institutions.

Navigational Capital

The students' skills and abilities to navigate "social institutions," including educational spaces.

Resistant Capital

has its foundations in the experiences of communities of color in securing equal rights and collective freedom.

The resilience, the aspirations, and the unwavering belief that life has more to offer, is not considered “exchangeable goods” within our educational system, but these are quintessential forms of community cultural wealth. Because I was not placed into a “college track” curriculum, I didn’t know the first thing about going to college. My Social Capital, or the power of my peers surfaced when one of my friends said, I’m going to community college and try to “figure it out”. This is quite literally what we do as first-generation, low-income community college students. My Aspirational Capital gave me a sense of belief in this notion that a community college could help me “figure it out,” and knowing that they offered courses that would lead me into any multitude of career paths, it seemed like the right choice for me. Hence, my entry into the community college system. It was that simple, I didn’t know much about different educational, transfer, or career pathways. I didn’t know about financing an education, and I certainly didn’t know that counselors were there to guide me and support me through the exploration. I went in blind, like many of our community college students do today.

To my surprise, Mr. Lucio knew all about students like me. In fact, this is a common profile—a first-generation college student with high hopes, but little insider knowledge of the system. We bring with us a hunger to search, aspirations to thrive, and a resilience that can endure the ups and downs that come with navigating college. We don’t always understand the cultural incongruencies between our social capital and that of the education schooling system. My culturally conscious counselor knew very well that the K-12 system can ill-prepare students like me to know our options and embrace our cultural capital as assets.

Given this context, Mr. Lucio saw what I did not and could not see for myself. He helped me see who I was and encouraged me not to be ashamed of that. He did so by sharing his testimonio. He told me he was the child of a single mother who migrated to this country. She carried out backbreaking labor cleaning houses to give him a better life. He was the first in his family to attend college, worked multiple jobs, took out loans, and relied on financial aid to earn a bachelor's and master's degree. He broke open his testimonio, and made it abundantly clear that he knew me and what my trajectory would be, if I went on this journey. He then shed light on the college going process, my career options, and most importantly, the financial aid resources. Finally, he encouraged me to think beyond my own perceived limitations, by shedding light on the college and career options out there, assuring me he would be there to guide me along the way. This all took place in a single initial counseling session. That session validated my unique cultural capital and established a trust that allowed me to accept his guidance, which has led me to where I am today.

After working closely with Mr. Lucio for two years, I transferred to University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Completion of a bachelor's degree gave me the confidence to continue to dream big. I later earned a master's degree from Harvard's School of Education, and finally a terminal degree in Higher Education administration at UCLA. He planted the seed, expanded my network of mentors and allies who guided me, and challenged me each step of the way.

STUDENT CULTURAL WEALTH TESTIMONIOS

My decision to pursue a career in community college was directly linked to the experience I had early on sharing my testimonio with Mr. Lucio. Below I introduce three student narratives to highlight how the power of their testimonios allowed me to support, guide, and empower them to challenge themselves and others who at first did not recognize their cultural wealth.

Marina – INSTITUTIONAL CAPITAL INCONGRUENCE

She introduced herself after I guest lectured in her Chicana/o studies class. During this lecture, I shared my testimonio and journey to becoming an academic administrator. After the lecture, she introduced herself and told me that her dream was to transfer to UCLA. Unfortunately, a counselor and some professors had discouraged her from following this path because she was a single mom. I didn't know anything else about her, but asked her to meet me in my office later that week. I learned more about her aspirations, we reviewed her transcripts, and coursework. While I was not her academic counselor, I could see this student was excelling in college. I learned that she was excelling because she wanted something more for herself and for her young son. I asked her if she was willing to work with me and my network of institutional agents to support her in reaching her goal. Given her academic performance, I didn't see any reason why she couldn't get into UCLA, if that was her goal. I connected her with an equity-minded counselor who shared my philosophy. As a former admissions officer, I guided her through the application process. I encouraged her to apply broadly, like I tell all students. And when admissions decisions were in, including an acceptance from UCLA, I helped her lay out her financial aid packages, her housing options, daycare options, and all the pieces that would make it possible for her to continue being an excellent student and mother. While being on the fence about her ability to balance the high expectations of being a UCLA student, I assured her she had excelled at community college because she had what it takes. Fast forward several years, she not only graduated UCLA with the highest honors, she is also in a fully paid Ph.D. program at an elite University in Texas. She is living her dream and providing the best role model for her son. This is one example of what it looks like to be seen for who you are, and being supported in living out your true calling and dream. She did all the work. I only helped her see her for who she always was.

The people who were guiding her community college pathway, likely thought they were helping this student by “cooling-out” her expectations. They probably thought that being a single mom and student would be too much for her to handle, and they wanted her to be successful. I recognize that perspective. However, the challenge with this perspective is that it ignored her capital and removed her agency.

By centering the student’s aspiration capital, I focused on the student’s ability to maintain her dreams alive in the face of a perceived barrier. Who was I to limit her personal dreams and goals? Who was I to set her bar low? I saw her. I guided her and I helped her believe in herself. Along with her family support and her social network, she was able to do the work, and excel to reach her dreams, despite the institutional perceived abilities. Without hearing her testimonio, I would not have known about her strong network—her familial and social capital. Together, her aspirational, familial, and social capital helped to support her through accessing and reaching her dreams. My only role was in helping her see these assets.

Roberto – RECOGNIZING CULTURAL CAPITAL

This student was a high school dropout. He grew up in an immigrant household where, given the surrounding community and schools, his siblings had also been high school dropouts. His parents were immigrants and worked multiple jobs to provide for him and his seven siblings. As the youngest in the family, his siblings and parents wanted something different for him, but he couldn’t imagine what that path could be. This student had fallen through the cracks in k-12. We exchanged testimonios and I learned that very much like the many community college students, he was hopeful but insecure about asserting his goals for fear or failure.

In partnership with the student, I mapped out a possible pathway for his potential career in arts and photography—given his passion. I helped him envision the academic components, and the future career options. After seeing his photography, I encouraged him to take on freelance photography to help with financing his education. That summer, I left a young man with the same type of plan I give many students. A plan that centers them as a human and leaves room for exploration and even a level of deviation from the plan. I didn’t see or hear from this student for two years, until one day he emailed me. He said he had taken my advice, completed his transfer curriculum (IGETC) and was ready to apply to transfer. He enlisted my help in guiding him through the next phase—applying to transfer.

Fast forward several years, this student was admitted and graduated from a UC. I was able to meet his entire family and learn about not only his successes, but also how he inspired his siblings to complete high school diplomas and even start community college. I learned about how they encouraged him and supported him, despite not knowing about the college process. His siblings helped him start his freelance photography by being his first customers. Once he had a portfolio of his family pictures, he was able to reach a broader clientele, which eventually included his college friends and network. They knew he would be the game changer for his family, but they couldn't imagine that it would be like this. This student also completed a master's degree in counseling, indicating that he wants to support college students reach their dreams.

This example highlights the power of his familial capital. His family, despite not knowing how to guide him with his education, they knew how to support him, encourage and uplift him along the way.

Because someone believed in him and made him feel like he could in fact reach his dreams, he was able to navigate the community college. My initial conversation allowed him to see his potential and beyond the encounter, he used navigational capital to move through the institution.

Undocumented Students – TESTIMONIO AS ADVOCACY

Several years ago, in the role of Associate Dean of Student Equity, I was charged with the responsibility of establishing programs that supported first generation, low-income, students of color and work toward improving the Student Equity Gaps. This was my dream job! I loved the idea of working within the institution to remove barriers, and create new opportunities to support the most disenfranchised student groups.

As part of this effort, I establish a space that provided targeted services for these student groups. While this was a great opportunity for the institution, and there was some financial backing for the effort, the students did not think this was sufficient. In fact, our undocumented student population, many whom fit the profile above, did not see the space meeting their needs. I agreed. They took it upon themselves to make sure the entire administration knew of their discontent, and they requested to be heard. They organized and established a cohesive message and list of demands, attended participatory governance and board meetings. They held us accountable and worked with us to establish a Dream Resource Center. They organized and drafted a uniform proposal for the services that met the needs of the community. This all came from a group that many wrote off as marginal. While society does marginalize our undocumented communities, in this context, the students did not allow this.

These students used their collective strength, their resilience, and their courage to make their voices heard—the demonstrated **resistant capital**. They helped design the space, the services, and the resources. In one of the many planning meetings, students shared that despite not having legal standing in this country, they knew they had rights. They knew they could advocate for resources and policies to change. They sadly also knew not to expect any one organization to know their needs, so they were comfortable working with our leadership to establish an inaugural center that supported them in ways that respected and met the needs of their identity.

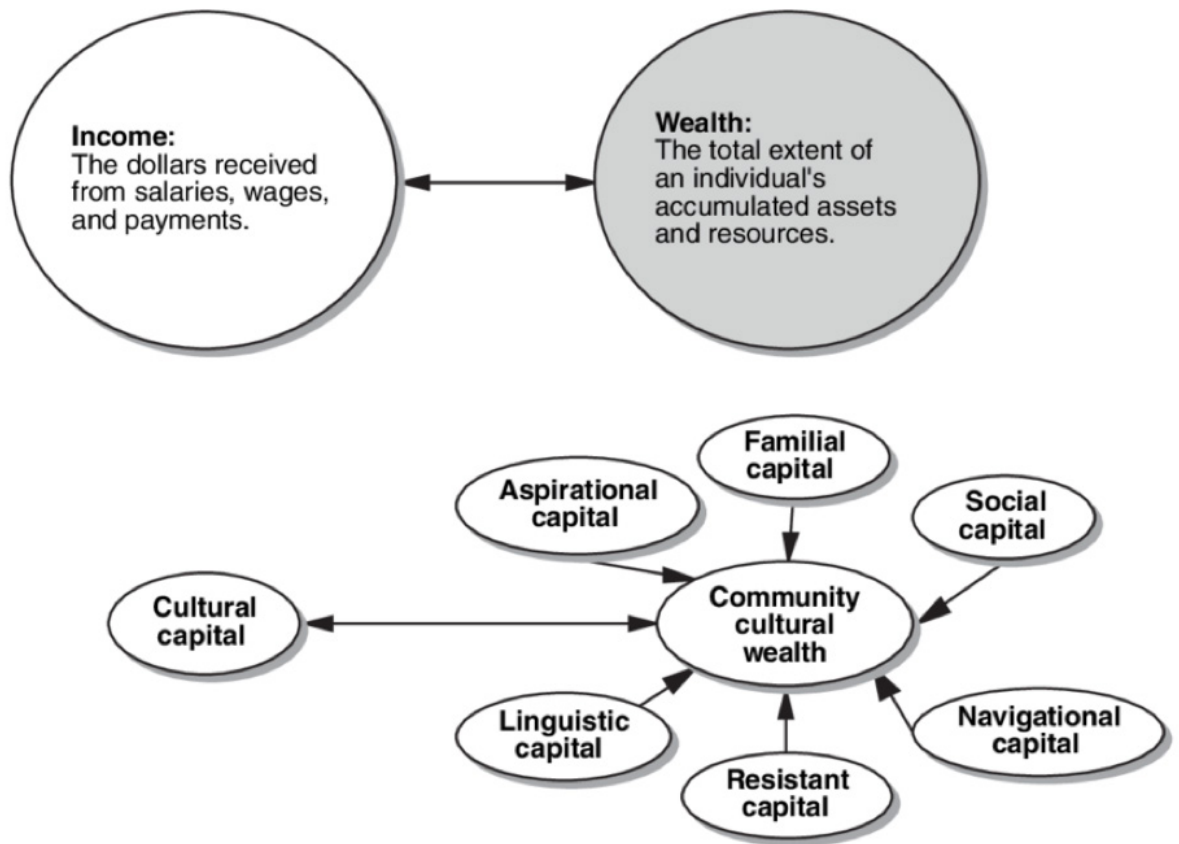
CLOSING – TESTIMONIO AS A TOOL

My recommendation to employ *testimonio* as a tool to support students along their journey aligns with a quote by Maya Angelou, “*I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.*” My personal and professional experiences lead me to believe that students remember how I made them feel, just like I still remember how Mr. Lucio made me feel. It is my sincere intention that the recommendations serve to empower all practitioners learn each student’s *testimonio* and to use their own *testimonio* to reach students and help support them along the journey. I do not believe you need to be a counselor to see a student’s community cultural wealth and support them.

Countless policy efforts have surfaced in the past few years seeking to improve educational outcomes for the most disenfranchised students, but none have focused on the power of narrative—*testimonio*. It is critical that our lens in approaching this work acknowledges the cultural capital and wealth that these students bring with them to college.

APPENDIX

Yosso, T.J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), pp. 69–91



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