In April 1975, a delegation of Raza Unida party activists from throughout the country made a visit to Cuba at the invitation of the Cuban government. The head of the delegation, José Ángel Gutiérrez, held a news conference . . . Gutiérrez declared that the problems of poverty and racism suffered by Chicanos in Texas were similar to those that the Cuban people have begun to overcome by taking socialist measures. One of the reporters then said to Gutiérrez, “You are going to be asked sometime that if you like socialism so much why don’t you and all the other Mexicans go to Cuba.” Gutiérrez replied, “Because we are going to make a Cuba over here” (Pendas, 1976).

INTRODUCTION

This exploratory paper examines educational and cultural developments in Cuba since the triumph of their revolution in 1959 and the potential application of those developments to increase educational achievement among Chicanos in the U.S. A fundamental premise of this paper is that the greatest challenge facing Chicano communities in the U.S., particularly in the southwest, is to deconstruct the colonial conditions and subsequent mentality among Chicanos that are created and maintained by class and racial hierarchies that continue to structure U.S. society and subsequently hinder Chicano students’ achievement. Thus, Cuba’s 55-year effort to resist U.S. colonialism and imperialism warrants the attention of those frustrated by the continued educational underachievement of Chicanos.

For the purposes of this paper, I define Chicanos as U.S. residents of Mexican heritage regardless of immigration status or “political” orientation. Admittedly, such a definition is highly contested. According to Gándara and Contreras, approximately sixty-five percent of U.S. Latinos, and eighty percent of Latinos in California, are of Mexican heritage (2009). I also find Delgado Bernal’s description of Chicanos instructive:

Chicana and Chicano are cultural and political identities that were popularized during the Chicano movement of the 1960’s. They are composed of multiple layers and are identities of resistance that are
often consciously adopted later in life. The term Chicana/Chicano is
gender inclusive and is used to discuss both women and men of
Mexican origin and/or other Latinas/Latinos who share a similar
political consciousness. Because terms of identification vary according
to context and not all Mexican-origin people embrace the cultural and
political identity of Chicana/Chicano, it is sometimes used
interchangeably with Mexican (2010, p. 921).

As the paper will explain in more detail, Chicano underachievement in education
has become a national crisis that threatens the economic and sociocultural fabric of our
increasingly diverse nation. Gándara and Contreras detail the achievement gap between
Chicano and white students at virtually all levels of K-12 education. For example, their
data reveals that nationally, forty-one percent of white 4th graders score at the highest
level in reading compared to only sixteen percent of Latino (including Chicano) 4th
graders. By the time they reach 8th grade, the gap barely changes as thirty-nine percent of
white students score at the highest level in reading compared to fifteen percent of Latinos
(Gándara and Contreras, 2009).

In higher education, Bowen et al. report a considerable gap between the college
graduation rate of Chicanos and that of whites. Nationally, thirty-six percent of white
women have earned a bachelors’ degree by age twenty-six compared to thirteen percent
of Latina women. Likewise, thirty percent of white men have earned a bachelors’ degree
by age twenty-six compared to twelve percent of Latino men (Bowen et al., 2009).
Conversely, there exists considerable documentation of the success of Cuba’s educational
system (Lutjens, 1996). Carnoy’s comparative study found a significantly higher level of
both language and math scores for Cuban students compared to students in Argentina,
Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Columbia, and México (2007). Ludjens (2007, 1996) also found
large gains in educational achievement throughout Cuba since the triumph of their
revolution in 1959. A major difference also exists between the contemporary ethnic
identity development of Chicanos and the contemporary national identity development of
Cubans and subsequently, each group’s ability to create transformation of their social
conditions. Despite the major difference in the social context of U.S. Chicanos and
Cubans on the island, Cuba’s accomplishments in areas such as education and identity
development merit a comparison between the two groups.
The genesis of this exploratory paper occurred in the early 1970’s when I was a first-generation Chicano college student in the Midwestern U.S. Far from the U.S – Mexico border, my peers and I were student activists trying to improve educational, political, and socioeconomic conditions in our relatively small Chicano community. Later we sensed that our effort to recruit more Chicano students to the university necessitated a concurrent strategy to transform the university into an institution that reflected and validated our culture (e.g., a representative level of Chicano faculty, administrators, curriculum, and public art), ensuring supportive conditions for those Chicanos that matriculated to the university. After all, why recruit more Chicano students to an institution that neglected, excluded, and marginalized them?

Although we were geographically distant from visible Chicano movement activism in the Southwest, those movements informed our philosophy and strategies. We drew inspiration from the charismatic leadership of Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, José Angel Gutierrez, and Reis Lopez Tijerina. In particular, Corky’s strand of “cultural nationalism” appealed to our sense of isolation and marginalization as Chicanos in the Midwest. Largely cut off from the consistent cultural reinforcement of Mexico, we felt the need to educate ourselves about Mexican and U.S Chicano history and culture. Although inexperienced and largely lacking positive role models of Chicanos who were both professionals and activists, we somehow realized the need for praxis: community and institutional activism informed by theory, research, and history. In our early developmental stage of ideology and activism, we necessarily focused on Chicano communities and their seemingly inexhaustible range of needs.

However, contrary to popular and academic critiques of “Chicano nationalism,” (Mariscal, 2005) we also extended our analysis and activism to the social movements of other people of color in the U.S. (e.g., African Americans and Native Peoples) as well as movements for change in Latin America and throughout the so-called Third World.

Among these other emancipatory movements, we were most intrigued and inspired by the Cuban Revolution that seized power from a U.S.-backed dictatorship in 1959. The names and faces of Fidel Castro, Ernesto “Che” Guevara, Camilo Cienfuegos, Celia Sanchez, Juan Almeida and other participants in the Cuban Revolution adorned the walls of our Chicano community center and our small office of United Minority Students at the
university. Many of our community elders distained the Cuban revolutionaries because of those revolutionaries’ “communist” ideology. However, we were not yet engaging an analysis of the macro economic structure most conducive to community or national equity, so the socialist nature of Cuba’s revolution seemed largely irrelevant.

In our collective analysis, the local Chicano community needed to confront the dominant white society with an honest, unflinching assessment of racism in both its historic and present contexts. We were often frustrated by local Chicano “leaders” who shrunk with fear in meetings with white policy makers whose deliberate neglect of our community perpetuated long-standing structures of exclusion. We viewed the revolutionary leadership of Cuba as allies who dared to stand up to the racist imperialism of the U.S., the same basic structural forces that subjugated our own community. Our intuitive analysis reflected the feelings captured by Jorge Mariscal (2005) in his book about the Chicano Movement in the U.S. from 1965-1975:

For the vast majority of young Chicanas and Chicanos, however, the significance of (Che) Guevara and Cuba for the Chicano Movement had little to do with reproducing the revolutionary process inside the United States but rather with the indirect and immeasurable ways the man and the revolution inspired some Mexican Americans to shed decades of colonial inhibitions in order to struggle for dignity and self-determination (p. 106).

The Cuban struggle to build an open socialist society made ideological sense to many Chicano/a Movement activists who themselves were engaged in a political project for self-determination and the reimagining of relations of gender, “race,” class, and their own relationship to U.S. liberalism and capitalism (p. 113).

Chicanos who visited Cuba as part of the “Venceremos” brigades during the 1960’s and 70’s expressed much the same sentiment. Two such Chicano Movement activists, Luis Valdez and Roberto Rubalcava, wrote:

As sons of Mexican manual laborers in California, we have travelled to Revolutionary Cuba, in defiance of the travel ban, in order to emphasize the historical and cultural unanimity of all Latin American peoples, north or south of the border. Having no real leaders of our own, we accept Fidel Castro. . . After a two month visit to Cuba, we can now see why the U.S. government
has put a travel ban on the island. It is because the social problems characteristic of Latin America are being solved there. . . This is the first Latin American country whose leadership is solely dedicated to solving the social crimes committed by imperialism upon an underdeveloped country and at the same time, not interested in personal wealth (Valdez and Rubalcava, undated mimeograph, cited in Valdez and Steiner, 1972, p. 217).

Yet another “pillar” of the Chicano Movement, José Angel Gutierrez, also visited Cuba in 1975 with other national delegates of the Raza Unida Political party. In his biography, Gutierrez concludes:

It was not difficult to figure out why the rich left Cuba and why the poor were in total support for the Communist government. Poor people had access to all the essentials that make for a quality life. Everyone had a house, a job, health care, and paid annual vacations . . . we had a lot to learn from Cuba . . . My diary of that trip is replete with entries that address the various insights and experiences that made the Cuban model attractive to me (Gutierrez, 1998, p. 239).

Such early Chicano preoccupations with the construction of a new, decolonized identity and the collective struggle for Chicano empowerment led to my ongoing interest with the socialist “experiment” in Cuba. As I will discuss in subsequent sections, I have conducted research in Havana, Cuba on five separate occasions. This study seeks responses to the following research questions:

- What are the factors that contribute to Cuba’s high degree of educational success?
- Which of those educational variables can be applied to improve the educational success of Chicanos in the U.S.?
- How does the Cuban education system support a process of national identity development that features a strong degree of pride, solidarity, and commitment?
- How can Cuba’s national identity development inform the process of positive, ethnic identity formation among Chicano students?
• How do race relations and a strong African heritage complicate Cuban identity development?
• How can Cuba’s process of negotiating a mixed African-Spanish identity inform the development of an indigenous-Spanish identity among Chicanos?

For this study, I utilize a mixed research methods approach of ethnography, interviews, and literature analysis. For those unfamiliar with scholarship that explains Chicano underachievement in the U.S., I begin my analysis with brief exemplars of such scholarship. To avoid reductionism, I focus on theoretical frameworks that emphasize the role of racism in limiting Chicano student achievement. I then provide a historical context for such racism that establishes a link with Cuba’s colonial experience. This context explains the oppression of Chicano communities through a lens of “internal colonialism,” including the complementary contributions of Marxist theory to such an explanation. The next section includes contemporary scholarly frameworks that identify directions toward solutions to Chicano student underachievement. As a professional administrator, teacher, and researcher of higher education, my primary concern is the postsecondary level of structure, policies, and practices that impact Chicano students. However, some of the scholarship I review necessarily reflects the K-12 pipeline as well. Finally, by focusing on education and identity development, I identify directions from Cuba’s historic struggle and achievements that might be applied to efforts toward a substantive increase in Chicano educational achievement. I provide these directions from my own visits to Cuba, during which I spoke with a number of Cuban scholars, activists, students, workers, etc. I integrate their input with findings from scholarly literature on Cuban education and identity, respectively. I reiterate that this is an exploratory paper and that the research directions I identify are tentative.

CHICANO/LATINO EDUCATIONAL UNDERACHIEVEMENT

As a group, Latino students today perform academically at levels that will consign them to live as members of a permanent underclass in American society. Moreover, their situation is projected to worsen over time. But as alarming as this is for Latinos, it is equally so for the U.S. population as a whole; neither the economy nor the social fabric
can afford to relegate so many young people to the margins of society (Gándara and Contreras, 2009, p. 304).

Many years after my early experience as a student activist, I became a university educator struggling with others to create equitable institutional transformation at a historically white, selective institution in Southern California, which consistently failed to maintain a critical mass of Chicanos at all levels, systematically excluded Chicanos from decision making processes, and engineered lower educational outcomes for Chicano students. I wondered again how Cuba’s example might inform our efforts. The issue confronting many university educators is what Massey et al. (2003) terms “minority underachievement,” the historic and present gap in educational achievement between historically underrepresented students of color (i.e., African Americans, Chicanos, and Native Peoples) and white students. This persistent gap in achievement occurs at virtually every level in the educational pipeline (American Council on Education, 2007; Charles et al., 2009; Contreras, 2011; Solorzano et al., 2005). Even in the rarified air of selective universities, Massey et al. (2003) and Charles et al. (2009) find that Chicanos/Latinos and Blacks achieve at lower levels than whites even when controlling for socioeconomic background. Gándara and Contreras (2009) emphasize that for Chicanos, “Every measure, beginning with kindergarten readiness and extending through high school completion and postsecondary education shows a consistent pattern of underachievement, especially for males” (p. 27-28). As I will discuss later, the underachievement of Chicano students in the U.S. is an important manifestation of the colonial experience of Chicanos that established and maintains their subordinate position in the U.S. racial hierarchy.

As Massey et al. emphasize, there is no shortage of theoretical frameworks to explain the educational underachievement of Chicanos and other underrepresented students (2003). These include the “capital deficiency” theory that explains educational outcomes through differences in the resources necessary for academic achievement. Such sources of cumulative capital include financial resources, social networks with helpful “agents” (social capital), parents’ educational level (human capital), and knowledge of the norms and conventions valued at upper levels of the social hierarchy (cultural capital). Gándara and Contreras (2009) emphasize the importance of such capital:
An important aspect of formal education is the cultural capital (knowing how things work) and social capital (having access to important social networks) that are acquired while earning a diploma or a college degree; this knowledge and access help students succeed. Latino parents, with their relatively low levels of formal education, have far fewer of these important assets to assist—and pass on to—their children (p. 30).

While other scholars such as Delgado Bernal (2010), Solórzano (2012) and Yosso (2006) argue that Chicanos bring valuable “community cultural wealth” to their university experience, institutions of higher education do not reflect and value the cultural or social capital of Chicanos (Massey et al., 2003). As some proponents of capital deficiency theories argue, schools become involved in the accumulation of students’ capital by rewarding certain forms of cultural capital (Berger, 2000) and facilitating social capital networks among some students (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Massey et al. also describe another strand of theories called “critical schooling” that identify structural, discriminatory school policies and practices that contribute to lower outcomes for Chicanos and other historically underrepresented students of color.

Combining such theories, Persell (1977) provided an early example of a comprehensive theory that identifies the relationship between societal level hierarchies and the practices of educational institutions. She notes the persistence of both class and racial hierarchies in the U.S. that have a significant impact on school structures, policies, and practices. Thus, the quality of schooling experienced by students is largely affected by their position in those class and racial hierarchies. Charles et al. (2009), Kozol (2005), Massey et al. (2003), Sacks (2007), and Orfield and Gándara (2006) have documented the continued existence of segregated schools in the U.S., with Chicanos and African Americans likely to live in segregated neighborhoods with high incidences of violence and social disorder and attend segregated schools with fewer resources.

Persell described the negative impact of such segregated schools on teacher expectations for underrepresented and working class students. Such low expectations are often manifested in less challenge and support for students, who then internalize their teachers’ low expectations through reduced motivation and effort. The theory described by Persell represents a vicious circle that promotes the reproduction of educational inequality, although Persell does emphasize the dialectical conditions in which
oppression produces agency and resistance. I emphasize that segregation and the lack of resources that frequently marks schools with predominantly underrepresented students also characterize higher education. Mullen’s recent study documents the increasing inequality in college attendance among social classes, seen largely as differences in type of postsecondary institution attended by students from different ethnic communities and socioeconomic circumstances (Mullen, 2010).

More recent theoretical frameworks to explain educational inequality include Latino Critical Theory (Delgado Bernal, 2010; Fernandez, 2002; Solorzano et al., 2005; Yosso, 2006). This lens borrows from Critical Race Theory to demonstrate that the salience of race (and racism), as well as other variables that characterize the Chicano experience, continue to drive educational practices that disadvantage Chicanos/Latinos and other underrepresented students. In his research on racism in U.S. higher education, Feagin refers to systemic racism:

Today, as in the past, racism in the United States is systemic and, thus, a complex social reality with several major dimensions: (1) an array of discriminatory practices; (2) privileges and resources that accrue to whites from institutionalized discrimination over many generations; (3) racist ideologies, prejudices, and emotions that defend these unjustly gained privileges; and (4) an assortment of social institutions that generally embed and reproduce racial inequalities. Systemic racism is made up of everyday patterns of stereotyping and discrimination that are webbed throughout most major institutions (2002, p. 9).

Solorzano et al. (2005) also use critical race theory to identify a number of practices throughout the educational pipeline (including community colleges and four-year universities) that provide hindering conditions for Chicanos/Latinos and lower their achievement.

In her development of Critical Race Theory, Yosso (2006) offers this definition of racism:

The social meanings applied to race find their justification in an ideology of racial superiority and White privilege—an ideology of racism. I draw on the work of Audre Lorde, Chester Pierce, and Manning Marable to define racism as (1) a false belief in white supremacy that handicaps society, (2) a system that upholds whites as superior to all other groups, and (3) the structural subordination of multiple racial and ethnic groups. With its macro, micro, interpersonal,
institutional, overt, and subtle forms, racism entails institutional power. Communities of color in the United States have never possessed this form of power . . . Racism—the systemic oppression of people of color—privileges whites (p. 5).

Finally, Garcia et al. provide a definition of racism that effectively combines the societal and institutional levels:

Our use of the term racism is based on Bonilla-Silva’s (2001) theory of racialized social systems, which addresses some of the limitations of previous theories on race and racism. This theory contends that actors are placed in racial categories that produce inequitable hierarchies that persistently favor the dominant race. The hierarchies reward actors along racial lines, produce racial ideologies, and ultimately lead to racial conflict. Similar to previous theories, Bonilla-Silva argues that racism is organized and structural in nature, making it difficult to eliminate at the individual level. He suggests that racism in the post-civil rights era is persistent because it is covert, embedded within institutional practices, and invisible to most white people. The invisibility of racism, or what Bonilla-Silva calls “color-blind racism,” perpetuates stereotypes by minimizing the harmful effects of racism and fostering unrealistic beliefs in meritocracy. This has led to an increase in subtle, everyday forms of racism, or racial microaggressions (2011, p. 11).

Such racism at both the societal and institutional levels clearly constitutes the underlying foundation of Chicano student underachievement. As Gándara and Contreras (2009) conclude:

And when all is said and done, racial and ethnic discrimination—not just by teachers in the classroom, but in the culture at large—still negatively influence the development of Latino youth and their perceptions of themselves and their abilities (p. 84).

Contemporary institutional racism continues to deny equity in both conditions and outcomes for Chicanos at all educational levels, including higher education (Feagin, 2002; Solorzano et al., 2005). While largely structural in nature (Feagin, 2002), such racism includes microaggressions with varying degrees of direct discrimination against Chicanos and other historically underrepresented students (Dyer-Barr, 2010; Sue, 2010; Yosso et al., 2009). The institutional racism that disadvantages Chicanos results from a societal level racial hierarchy that situates Chicanos in a subordinate position (Bonilla-
Silva, 2006; Darder, 2011; Persell, 1977). A critical point in my analysis is the parallel between such societal level racism and the colonialism suffered by Cuba for more than a century. To illuminate that parallel, I will now address the scholarly treatment of the racism suffered by Chicanos that is often described as “internal colonialism.”

CHICANOS’ SUBORDINATE STATUS IN U.S. RACIAL AND CLASS HIERARCHIES: INTERNAL COLONIALISM

[T]he conquest of the southwest created a colonial situation in the traditional sense— with the Mexican land and population being controlled by an imperialistic United States. Further, I contend that this colonization—with variations—is still with us today. Thus, I refer to the colony, initially, in the traditional definition of the term, and later as an internal colony . . . The parallel is between Chicanos’ experience in the United States and the colonization of other third world peoples too similar to dismiss (Acuña, 1972; cited in Navarro, 2005).

In his comprehensive history of the political experience of Chicanos in the U.S., Navarro (2005) frames his analysis through the theory of internal colonialism. In so doing, he expresses his alignment with the Chicano historian Rodolfo Acuña, whose quote above describes the logic inherent in such a theoretical construct. Navarro unabashedly emphasizes the current explanatory power of the internal colony model, particularly as contextualized within a critique of U.S. capitalism:

A fundamental argument of this work is that the barrios and colonias of Aztlán, since the genesis of the “Mexican political experience” in 1848, have and continue to be internal colonies . . . today little has changed, even though the barrios and colonias are becoming bigger and more plentiful. The barrios and colonias of Aztlán today exist under the specter of “neocolonialism,” which in turn continues to be fed by the exploitative nature of liberal capitalism . . . I challenge readers to explain why is it that the country’s barrios and colonias are underdeveloped, impoverished, and relegated to what appropriately can be described as a third world status within the geographical context of the richest country in the world (p. 4-5).

After the development of the internal colony model among Chicano scholars during the 1970’s, other Chicano scholars offered a strong critique of the model and its efficacy in explaining the Chicano experience. Such scholars as Almaguer, Flores, and Cervantes largely utilized a Marxist, class analysis to argue that the internal colony model placed
too much emphasis on racism and too little on social class hierarchies in the U.S. (Navarro, 2005). For them, the internal colony model reflected excessive nationalism. Some scholars of the time integrated the internal model with a class and/or explicit Marxist analysis. According to Munoz, “the colonial model can be a transition from a cultural-racial interpretation of the problems of the Chicano to a class analysis of the Chicano experience” (1983, p. 448).

In his extensive history of the U.S. Southwest, Barrera asserted the efficacy of the internal colony model while integrating it with a class analysis (1979; cited in Darder et al., 1997). Barrera’s definitions of these concepts are useful for clarifying the scholarly thinking during that era of analysis:

Colonialism is a structured relationship of domination and subordination, where the dominant and subordinate groups are defined along ethnic and/or racial lines, and where the relationship is established and maintained to serve the interests of all or part of the dominant group . . . Internal colonialism is a form of colonialism in which the dominant and subordinate populations are intermingled, so that there is no geographically distinct “metropolis” separate from the “colony” (p. 20).

Having considered the critiques of the internal colony model, Barrera subscribed to its explanatory power when integrated with a class analysis:

Of the various theoretical models that have been set forth to explain the persistence of racial inequality in the United States, the internal colonial model is the most comprehensive and the one that most accurately reflects empirical reality. The particular variation that I favor is the class differentiated or “left” version of that model. On the one hand, it is consistent with a view of capitalist society as class society, in which the dominant class exercises disproportionate influence on all aspects of the system. Colonialism historically has been established to serve the interests of merchants, industrialists, and would-be landowners, or of the state, which ultimately safeguards the interests of the dominant classes. Internal colonialism is no exception to this rule (p. 36).

With the benefit of historical hindsight, one might see that the two theories, internal colonialism and Marxism, are both helpful lenses to understand the intersection of racism and classism in maintaining the oppression of Chicanos.
It is reasonable to raise the question of the internal colony model’s efficacy in explaining what is now a national population of Chicanos. During the model’s initial development, Chicanos were largely a regional population with the great majority located in the Southwestern U.S., those states described by Navarro as “Aztlán.” However, Chicanos have since spread throughout the U.S. and their historical development in many areas is quite different from the experiences of Chicanos in the Southwest, where they lived well before the presence of whites. As a Chicano born and raised in the Midwest, my interpretation is that the positioning of Chicanos in class and racial hierarchies in the Southwest was simply extended to other geographic areas, with subsequent hindering conditions in educational institutions for Chicano students.

Navarro concludes his contemporary analysis of the internal colony model utilizing race and social class variables:

In sum, internal colonialism entails two inherent characteristics that stem from liberal capitalism. The first is economic, which focuses on the extraction of labor, wealth, and resources from the colonized peoples. This creates a colonized economy within the liberal capitalist economy that is underdeveloped, impoverished, and dependent, which as a result produces a stratified social structure. The second is cultural, requiring a close regulation of the colonized peoples’ lives and dominance over their culture. The net effect is the prevalence of institutional racism or even outright racism expressed as bigotry, prejudice, and discrimination against the colonized. Lastly, it is political in that the colonized are powerless, subordinated, and dependent on the metropolis, which means in effect the colonized had no real viable voice in their governance or access to power sharing (1995, p. 10-11).

I suggest a parallel between the internal colonialism experienced historically by Chicanos and the “classic” colonialism imposed upon Cuba. Perez’ (2013; 1999) comprehensive historical analyses of Cuba document a very long, protracted experience with colonialism. For decades, Cuba was occupied by Spain culminating with a debilitating thirty-year war for independence:

The Cuban struggle for independence from Spain spanned the entire second half of the nineteenth century . . . No Latin American country in the nineteenth century experienced wars of independence of longer duration or greater destruction than Cuba. Three successive generations of Cubans endured recurring cycles
of privation and impoverishment; incalculable material losses were surpassed only by incomprehensible personal ones (Perez, 2013; p. 3).

At virtually the same time that Cuba finally expelled Spanish rule in 1899, the U.S. moved in to establish its own colonial dominance of Cuba (de la Fuente, 2001). That colonial situation did not end until the triumph of the Cuban revolution in 1959.

Education Under Colonial Conditions

A number of scholars (Fanon, 1963; Freire, 1970; Memmi, 1965) have documented the cognitive, psychological, and emotional effects of colonialism on populations similar to Chicanos and Cubans. Barrera summarized the broad impact of colonial relations, including their effect on education: “The system of structural discrimination that forms the essence of the colonial relationship exists first of all in the economic realm, but extends into political institutions, the educational system, and all forms of social structures” (1979, cited in Darder et al., 1997). Freire in particular described the dysfunctional manner in which colonial effects impede the educational process for colonized peoples. Such effects include a fear of freedom (i.e., dependency), a desire to invert the oppressor/oppressed relationship, a lack of consciousness of one’s subordinate status (including its historic causes), and perhaps most seriously, the inability to conceptualize strategies and solutions not based on the structures and models of the colonizer (Darder, 2005; Freire, 1970).

Freire emphasized the colonizer’s use of education to prevent colonized peoples from becoming conscious of their subordinate status, a point also emphasized by Persell in her comprehensive theory of educational inequality (1977). Bourdieu also described this reproductive function of education (1986, 1977). Freire detailed the need for a de-colonizing education that creates a consciousness among the colonized of their own oppression (and their internalization of that oppression), enables them to trust themselves and their own strategies, and rejects their subordinate position(s) in societal hierarchies, i.e., race and social class. Because oppression “absorbs” and “domesticates” the colonized, they require an educational process of praxis—reflection that develops a broad consciousness accompanied by action to create change.
Despite scholarly refutations of the internal colony model, contemporary Chicano scholars continue to reference the effects of colonialism on Chicanos, particularly in terms of its effects on the educational status of Chicano students. Delgado Bernal cites Villenas and Deyhle (1999; cited in Delgado Bernal, 2010) to describe the manifestation of such colonialism in school practices that undermine the success of Chicano students:

In the schools, the colonization of the mind is continued through the instilling of a historical amnesia that renders Latino/indigenous peoples as “immigrants,” foreigners who have no claim to the Americas, while European Americans are constructed as the natural owners and inheritors of these lands. The rich knowledge, beliefs, and worldviews of Latino and Mexican/Chicano communities are not validated, let alone taught (p. 916).

In their analysis of retention programs implemented by students of color in contemporary U.S. higher education, Maldonado et al. note the continued effects of such colonialism on Chicanos in the U.S.:

Present-day colonialism, or neo-colonialism, becomes translated into contemporary forms and is manifested through racial and ethnic oppression, social and economic inequality, and cultural marginality in general. And so contemporary students of color continue to be confronted by the remnants of European colonialism through the ongoing dominance of whiteness (Roediger, 1994; cited in Maldonado et al., 2005, p. 612).

Scholars continue to refer to “colonialism” in their analysis of the conditions that oppress Chicanos and other historically underrepresented communities of color in the U.S. The native scholar Vine DeLoria in his epic book “God is Red,” describes contemporary colonialism in the U.S.:

Colonialism has still not vanished. It now shows itself as the American political crusade for a new world order or as the operational results of the giant supranational corporations of Western peoples (2003, p. 262).

Villanueva cites Grosfoguel et al. when discussing the continuing need for emancipation of Chicano communities: “decolonization of the U.S. empire is at the center of the agenda for the twenty-first century” (Grosfoguel et al., cited in Villanueva, 2013, p. 25). Rodriguez cites Gonzalez in characterizing the indigenous dimension of the Tucson Unified School District’s Mexican American Studies program as “a form of
decolonization of Chicano Studies” (Rodriguez, 2012). Tintiangco-Cubales et al. describe “decolonization” as central to the purpose of ethnic studies in the U.S. (2014). They describe ethnic studies pedagogy and curriculum as part of a broad struggle for social justice “that sees dismantling our internal neocolonial condition and abolishing its multiple forms of violence as preconditions to the existence of justice between all peoples that inhabit the contemporary United States” (Tejeda et al., 2002; cited in Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014, p. 112, emphasis added).

The internal colony model and its Marxist critiques offer critical directions toward the analysis of the root causes of socioeconomic depression and educational underachievement in Chicano communities. The intersection of racial and class hierarchies in the U.S. have important implications for the degree to which public education institutions at all levels are responsive to the needs of Chicano communities. As the subsequent discussion will indicate, hierarchical structures and the ideologies that legitimate them at the level of society are strongly reflected in educational institutions, with significant effects on student outcomes.

Thus, it appears that the most fundamental challenge to the emancipation and educational achievement of Chicanos is the process of de-colonizing. In the search for a model of Chicanos or similarly situated groups that have effectively undertaken such a process, the direction might well include Cuba. Unlike virtually any other Latino group inside or outside the U.S., Cuba has consciously engaged such a de-colonizing process for over fifty-five years. In fact, Cuba has in many ways sought to develop a social structure and identity in direct opposition to the U.S. My speculation is that within Cuba’s example, there surely must be directions helpful to the conceptualization and/or refinement of alternative solutions to the crisis in Chicano educational achievement, including higher education. At the same time, I acknowledge the considerable differences in circumstances between Cuba and the U.S. Chicano community. To state the obvious, Cubans occupy a sovereign nation while Chicanos represent an “ethnic minority” (Barrera, 1990) population within the U.S. borders. In some respects, Cubans are more homogenous in terms of the socioeconomic and educational conditions they face throughout the island. While occupying a generally uniform subordinate status throughout the U.S., Chicanos encounter different circumstances based on variables such
as their length of time as a settled community, immigration status, social class, numerical representation in the larger population, etc.

Before I identify directions from Cuba’s experience that might prove useful for increasing Chicano student achievement, I will review a small sample of the scholarly literature on alternative solutions to Chicano underachievement. As a higher education professional and scholar, I focus on the postsecondary level.

SOLUTIONS TO CHICANO UNDERACHIEVEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A number of scholars, many of them Chicanos, have identified directions toward solutions to the underachievement of Chicano students, including postsecondary levels. These directions include theoretical models as well as empirically grounded principles and strategies.

Darder (2011, 1992) proposes the construct of cultural democracy as a principle of institutional inclusion meant to provide supportive conditions to all students regardless of their position in the U.S. racial hierarchy, i.e., dominant or subordinate. It provides specific direction as to the many dimensions of institutional structure, policies, and practices that face the imperative to change in the interest of diversity and equity. Rendon et al. (2000) emphasizes the need for such institutional transformation in their critique of “traditional” theories of postsecondary student persistence. Rendon et al. believe such transformation is necessary to provide validation to Chicanos and underrepresented students of color rather than coercion to assimilate such students into a dominant, individualistic cultural norm.

Rendón and Muñoz’ theory of validation (2011) represents another institutional strategy found to support the success of Chicano students. They define validation as:

As originally conceived, validation refers to the intentional, proactive affirmation of students by in- and out-of-class agents (e.g., faculty, student, and academic affairs staff, family members, peers) in order to: 1) validate students as creators of knowledge and as valuable members of the college learning community and 2) foster personal development and social adjustment (p. 12).

Rendón and Muñoz argue that both academic and interpersonal validation can improve institutional conditions, pedagogic practice, and the holistic development of Chicano
students. Their description of validation is underscored by Gándara and Contreras: “But if there is any common denominator among virtually all Latino students whom we have known to beat the odds, it is that some adult steps forward in their lives to encourage them—tell them they are smart and ‘can do it’—and provides guidance for how that might happen” (2009, p. 232).

Strayhorn (2012, 2011) focuses on the construct “sense of belonging” developed by Hurtado and Carter (1997; cited in Strayhorn, 2012). According to Strayhorn, “sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group or others on campus” (2012, p. 3). Strayhorn’s review of research on sense of belonging finds it to be a positive influence on student retention and achievement in higher education, and that it is associated with a number of learning outcomes (Strayhorn, 2012). He concludes that college students seldom excel without a sense of belonging and that higher education faculty and staff must create conditions that foster a sense of belonging. Situated within the retention theory and research of Tinto (1993) and others, Strayhorn asserts that sense of belonging “is a critical aspect in retaining all students and particularly students of color” (2012, p. 9).

Nora et al. (2006) build on the work of student persistence scholar Vincent Tinto (2012, 1993) to develop a “Student/Institution Engagement Model.” Their theoretical model includes students’ human capital and academic preparation prior to college, academic and social experiences while in college, and cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes that shape a student’s commitment to remain enrolled and engaged in their institution. Similarly, Hernandez and Lopez (2007) explain the retention of Chicano/Latino students in higher education through a range of demographic factors, personal factors (pre-college achievement, academic self-concept, family, and finances), environmental factors (racial climate, presence of an ethnic community, and working and living off campus), involvement factors (faculty-student interaction, mentorship, and participation in student organizations), and socio-cultural factors (immigrant status, ethnic identity, gender roles, community orientation, and the role of religion).
Contreras (2011) proposes a theory to explain Chicanos’ and other Latinos’ “Achievement, College Transition, and Persistence” from pre-school through higher education. Her model includes student and parent characteristics, community and school resources, and academic achievement indicators that all contribute to postsecondary outcomes.

Smith provides a recent, helpful review of diversity literature in higher education (2015). In her analysis of “research on institutional qualities that foster student success” (p. 218), Smith identifies several elements that characterize institutions that contribute to positive outcomes among diverse students:

- A mission and philosophy focused on student learning and success closely connected to the institutional culture (p. 220).
- A campus environment focused on learning (p. 221).
- An orientation toward cooperative learning as a central pedagogical strategy (p. 221).
- Clearly marked pathways that inform students how to negotiate the institution for learning and success (p. 222).
- The use of data to make decisions toward serving and teaching students (p. 222).
- A high level of faculty-student engagement in educationally purposeful activities inside and outside classrooms (p. 223).
- Shared responsibility for educational quality and student success that creates “robust and strong webs” of support (p. 224).

The Diverse Learning Environments Model: The Contribution of Hurtado et al.

Sylvia Hurtado is perhaps the nation’s foremost Chicana or Chicano scholar of diversity and equity in higher education. As Director of UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute, she has access to years of national data on student perceptions, experiences, and outcomes. Hurtado et al. (2013) have developed what is arguably the most comprehensive framework of higher education structures, processes, and outcomes supported by theory and empirical data. Their “multicontextual model for diverse learning environments” includes multiple variables and structural contexts to explain how higher education institutions can facilitate the success of diverse students, including their development and acquisition of important outcomes for a pluralistic society. Although it does not focus on Chicano students, it provides
considerable direction toward identifying institutional strategies for success with Chicanos and other historically underrepresented students.

Hurtado et al. underscore the urgency for such outcomes expressed earlier by Gándara and Contreras: “As a consequence of the growing demographic of historically underrepresented groups, perhaps for the first time in history, we are at a critical crossroad—the success of diverse college students is tied to our collective social and economic success” (Hurtado et al., 2013, p. 42). The “DLE” model places diverse students at its center and diversity as a critical responsibility of all educators. The DLE model reflects the much earlier explanatory framework of Persell (1977) by incorporating multiple levels of analysis: “the pervasiveness of the climate, the contextual nature of the position of institutions (macrolevel), the individual-level dynamics within institutions (mesolevel), and outcomes for individuals and society, combining the micro and macrolevels” (Hurtado et al., 2013, p. 47).

At its broadest levels, the DLE model describes sociohistorical and policy contexts, respectively. The sociohistorical context includes legal precedents that define diversity and its role in higher education, an accountability movement (with pressure for budgetary constraint) that extended from the K-12 system to higher education, a movement toward the privatization of higher education that converts students into consumers, and changing ethnic demographics across the nation. The policy context features local, state, and federal levels that impinge upon higher education institutions, such as race-conscious affirmative action’s impact on college access, financial aid policies, and government policies meant to increase degree completion.

The DLE model’s macrolevel context addresses the relationships between higher education institutions and communities, both broad local communities and “subcommunities.” Community engagement by students is a dimension of this level, as are the “external commitments” of individual students such as finances and family responsibilities.

Hurtado et al. incorporate an updated, comprehensive framework of the campus climate for diversity. It includes a historical dimension that
“emphasizes how the historical vestiges of exclusion affect the current campus climate and practices that, indeed, were part of a larger sociohistorical and policy context or race and gender segregation” (Hurtado et al., p. 58-59). The organizational/structural dimension “identifies structures and processes that embed group-based privilege and oppression or confer resources that often go unquestioned, such as tenure processes, decision-making processes regarding recruitment and hiring, budget allocations, curriculum, and other institutional practices and policies” (p. 60). This organizational/structural dimension also includes the critical variable of institutional commitment to diversity, which should be clearly visible, articulated in an institution’s mission, and easily perceived by students. Diversity of curriculum and scholarship are also part of this dimension.

Perhaps the most important dimension of campus climate in the DLE model is called compositional diversity, which refers to “the numerical representation of individuals from diverse social identities among students, faculty, staff, and administrators” (p. 64). In turn, this compositional dimension has considerable impact on subsequent dimensions, including the psychological dimension (students’ perceptions of intergroup relations, discrimination, and racial conflicts) and the behavioral dimension, which refers to the quantity and quality of student interactions across diverse ethnic backgrounds. The interaction of these variables is crucial, as the contribution of diversity to educational outcomes is strongly linked to such cross-ethnic interactions that are in turn conditioned by the degree of compositional diversity.

This multilayered context forms the perimeter of the DLE. At its center are student identities, educational contexts, and processes that shape student outcomes. The model emphasizes students’ social identity, e.g., ethnic identity, and their formation through developmental processes. Hurtado et al. state that their research probes the relationship between students’ social identity and their retention and achievement in higher education: “The centrality of students’ racial identity has ben linked to higher academic performance in college . . . These studies suggest that racial and ethnic identity and development may
potentially be related to retention via academic performance and social fit” (p. 75).

Student identity in the DLE model interacts with both curricular and co-curricular contexts. The curricular context includes three dimensions that will be critical to this paper: instructor’s identity, pedagogy (teaching methods), and inclusive curriculum. Given the increasing diversity of college students, the social (including ethnic) identity of instructors, and the degree to which their pedagogy and course content are culturally inclusive, becomes more important as well. Hurtado et al. cite Tuitt (2003; cited in Hurtado et al., 2013) to describe inclusive pedagogy as a practice that provides “insight into how college educators can create classrooms in which diversity is valued as a central component of the process” (p. 78). Such inclusive instruction includes “critical pedagogy” rooted in the scholarship of Paulo Freire (1971). They also cite Rendon’s analysis of the need to combine both intellectual/cognitive and affective dimensions of instruction, which she calls “sentipensante pedagogy” (Rendon, 2009). The DLE model acknowledges the educational benefits of diverse curriculum: “Consistent evidence has also been affirmed through meta-analytic studies linking diversity coursework and students’ cognitive development and civic behaviors and dispositions” (p. 80).

In addition to these curricular processes, the model’s cocurricular context includes the importance of staff’s social identities, who often take on the role of “institutional agents” (Stanton-Salazar, 2010), and institutional practices that contribute to student success, such as diverse programming. The interaction of students’ social identities with both curricular and cocurricular contexts results in processes such as students’ socialization, a sense of belonging (or community) among students, and the validation of students both inside and outside of classes.

Finally, the DLE model identifies three critical clusters of educational outcomes to which all these variables contribute. “Habits of mind” refer to “how individuals merge their ability to think and solve problems, and have the skills to effectively react to new challenges and situations” (p. 51). These habits
of mind enable students to actively construct their own knowledge, a process that is ultimately empowering for students (Hurtado et al., 2013). A second outcome is “competencies for a multicultural world,” or “a set of skills and abilities needed to interact with individuals from different social identity groups, and to make ethical decisions in a society marked by inequality and conflict” (p. 53). These competencies enjoy a strong relationship with students’ commitment to civic engagement, social justice, and political involvement. The third outcome is “achievement, retention, and degree attainment,” the equity dimension of which Hurtado et al. describe as a social justice issue (p. 54). As identified previously, “Overall, the emerging research begins to identify a relationship between the campus climate for diversity and retention” (p. 57).

The theoretical and empirical principles and frameworks reviewed in this section feature the identification of student characteristics that contribute to their educational success. However, they largely avoid the reductionism of many prior explanations by focusing on the responsibility of higher education institutions to provide supportive conditions for Chicano students. The Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) model developed by Hurtado et al. provides an unprecedented level of analysis in identifying the interaction of multiple contexts and variables that impact the success of students such as Chicanos in higher education. In consideration of the potential contribution of the Cuban experience to Chicano educational success, I focus on both student characteristics and institutional processes that construct supportive or hindering conditions for Chicano students.

DIRECTIONS TOWARD DE-COLONIZING CHICANO COMMUNITIES: LESSONS FROM THE CUBAN EXPERIENCE

We emphasize the need to keep in mind that Cuba is an example to many African peoples and 150 million of their descendants, the indigenous peoples, many African Americans, and in general, white and non-white individuals who consider the island a model of economic, political, social, and cultural emancipation (Morales, 2013, p. 127).
I had the opportunity to conduct research in Havana, Cuba on five separate occasions from 2007 to 2015 with each visit a one-week stay. These visits included symposia in 2007 and 2008 at the Centro de Estudios Sobre Los Estados Unidos (Center for the Study of the United States) with Cuban scholars at which we exchanged information and analysis regarding Chicanos and Cuba, respectively. In 2009 I attended an international social justice and education conference (“Paradigmas Emancipatorias”) with Cuban scholars, teachers, social workers, students, and representatives from numerous Latin American countries. During these symposia and conference, I was able to speak extensively with Cuban scholars, students, and community workers regarding various aspects of the Cuban experience. I shared research, theory, and policy, both formally and informally, about Chicanos in the U.S. The Cuban scholars, particularly those at the Center for the Study of the United States, were very interested in the position of Chicanos in U.S. society. In addition, these scholars provided me considerable information about Cuba’s educational system and its contribution to the development of a national Cuban identity.

In 2011, I presented at a symposium of Cuban historians and pedagogists regarding the crisis in Chicano educational achievement and directions toward solutions from the Cuban experience. During each of my first four visits I also conducted and recorded formal, semi-structured interviews (Maramba and Velásquez, 2010) with scholars, teachers, community workers in social services and health care, and musicians. As I’m sure most researchers who visit Cuba would attest, beyond my formal research activities, my knowledge and understanding of all aspects of Cuban life was supplemented tremendously by daily conversations with taxi drivers, hotel security guards, waitresses and waiters, store clerks, hotel staff, vendors, and students.

My interviewees included (1) Dr. Lino Neira, a music professor at a national arts school and an ethnomusicologist whose doctoral dissertation focused on Afro Cuban culture, (2) Oscar Valdes, a Grammy Award winning musician and founding member of Irakere, Cuba’s seminal Afro Cuban jazz group whose musical training began through his immersion in Afro Cuban religion, (3) Maria Isabel Romero, a social worker and coordinator of the Martin Luther King Community Center in Havana’s working class barrio called Pogoloti, (4) Elba Capote, a community health care worker, (5) Dr. Juan
Nicolás Padrón, a professor at Havana’s Casa Las Americas that provides academic courses for visiting international students (including those from the U.S.), (6) Jorge Hernandez, a professor at the Center for the Study of the United States, and (7) Felipe Pérez, a professor of history and pedagogy at the University of Havana. My research assistants transcribed each of the interviews (all conducted in Spanish) and translated most into English as well. My interviews reflect the field-based, ethnographic tradition (Merriam, 1998). Such interviews and observations often yield “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973; cited in Maldonado et al., 2005), in this case of education and identity development in Cuba.

Finally, in 2015 I participated in an exchange between U.S. and Cuban educators called “Búsqueda Investigativas” (Research Explorations) in Havana organized by Dr. Sheryl Lutjens of the California State University in San Marcos and the Asociación de Pedagogos Cubanos (Association of Cuban Educators). Our group of over thirty professional educators and graduate students spent a week visiting Cuban schools, universities, education centers, and cultural centers. This was by far the most structured and informative of my visits to Cuba. We were able to visit classrooms, participate in symposia with university faculty and students, and attend information sessions with educators at all levels. My own visits included the Tomás David Rayo Pre-University in Havana (the equivalent of a U.S. high school), the University of Havana in a historic section of Vedado neighborhood, the Eduardo Solís Renté Polytechnic School in the province of Mayabeque, the Havana Agrarian University, San Gerónimo University in Havana Vieja, and the Enrique José Varona University of Pedagogical Sciences in Havana. In addition, I visited the national headquarters of the Association of Cuban Educators in Havana and two cultural centers, Muraleando and Casa de Africa. The information I obtained from dialogues with Cuban educators in these institutions was invaluable in furthering my knowledge of and understanding of Cuban education and identity development.

Collectively, my five research visits to Cuba have greatly informed my perspective on the Cuban experience since the triumph of the revolution in 1959. The fact that I was able to visit Cuba over a eight-year period that featured important developments in both Cuban and U.S. policies was especially valuable. I reiterate that my
intention of this analysis is to identify directions toward the de-colonizing of Chicanos in the U.S. and a subsequent increase in their educational attainment and achievement. My purpose is not to debate the merits of socialism versus capitalism (except as they impact education, admittedly a potentially significant impact) or to compare the degree of individual freedoms granted to residents of Cuba and the U.S., respectively. Those are compelling topics that I discussed frequently with Cubans on the island but are beyond the scope of this paper. For the purposes of this discussion, suffice it to say that many Cubans argue that perhaps the most fundamental freedom enjoyed in Cuba is one largely denied to Chicanos in the U.S.: an equitable, challenging, high quality education.

I now present a description of directions identified through my research in Cuba integrated with analysis of scholarly texts on the Cuban experience that offer possibilities for effective interventions in the education of U.S. Chicanos. I will focus on education at macro and micro levels and identify development.

Insights from Cuba’s Educational Success

A major focus of my dialogues with Cubans on the island was the educational success of Cuba. Scholarly sources such as Carnoy (2007) and Lutjens (2007, 1996) document the considerable success of Cuba’s educational system even in the context of severe material deprivation. Lutjens (2007) describes several educational accomplishments of Cuban education, including a 100% primary school enrollment rate and a higher ratio of teachers to population than that of Canada, the U.S., Spain, and Sweden. She notes that nearly 750,000 Cubans have earned university degrees, double the number of Cubans who had only a sixth-grade education at the time of the Cuban revolution in 1959. Women in particular have made impressive gains, representing more than 60% of university students and graduates and over 66% of Cuba’s technical and professional work force (Álvarez Suárez, 2004; cited in Lutjens, 2007).

Whereas the educational achievement of Chicano students is among the lowest of ethnic groups in the U.S. (Gándara and Contreras, 2009; Solorzano et al., 2005), Cuba’s educational achievement surpasses that of virtually every other Latin American country including México (Carnoy, 2007). A close examination identifies elements of Cuba’s educational success that might be applied to Chicanos in the U.S. Some of these elements may already be applied in educational settings in the U.S. with various populations.
While some of these elements might be applied in the early stages of Chicano education, they have implications for policies and practices that promote Chicano success in higher education as well.

Cuban scholars spoke often to me about the strong emphasis on educational achievement throughout Cuba. This collective consensus links academic achievement with service to community and society, with the very essence of being a proud Cuban citizen. During my 2015 visit, several Cuban scholars spoke about the influence of Jose Martí, one of Cuba’s greatest advocates for independence from Spain, on the philosophical foundation of Cuban education. This national priority on education is reflected in access to higher levels of education. In 2015, Cuban educators told me that approximately ninety percent of Cuban children attend preschool. Approximately forty percent of students completing primary and secondary school matriculate to the “pre-university.” Another sixty percent move on to a polytechnical school (I was able to visit each type of institution in Havana and Mayabeque, respectively).

The emphasis on national pride through academic achievement occurs at all levels of education, both pre-university and university. It is driven by the highest levels through lower levels of government and continues strongly in communities, schools, and universities. Lutjens (2007) describes this educational emphasis as a reflection of Cuban society, which she calls a “Caring State:”

> The Cuban state has been a “Caring State,” one that launched educational reforms immediately after the 1959 revolution and has continued to support and perfect educational policies through more than four decades—and nearly fifteen years of economic crisis. Education is considered a right and a duty, in constitutional terms. The revolution thus opened access to rural and urban children and adults throughout the island and regardless of gender, race, or abilities. Education is considered to be a responsibility of everyone (tarea de todos), while the state guarantees conditions for equality in education through centralization of policy making and welfare functions (p. 1-2).

Since the triumph of the 1959 Cuban revolution, Cuban education has been transformed from a passive process to a student-centered, active process. At a 2015 symposium at the University of Havana, Cuban educators described the considerable
influence of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire on Cuban pedagogy. They also described an ongoing focus on continued reform of Cuban education for the period of 2014-2030. The entire Cuban curriculum is being reviewed to determine its contemporary relevance and closer relationships will be developed between schools and communities. A progress report will be published in 2018.

Our 2015 presentations on Cuban education included a number of vital facts about the higher education system in Cuba:

- The University of Havana includes five campuses and twenty research centers.
- Cuban universities explicitly prepare students for life as engaged Cuban citizens so they can maximize their contribution to society. They address the development of both cognition and ethical values.
- Cuba’s awareness and recognition of both national and international standards drives a constant effort to improve university education and to keep higher education institutions integrated with surrounding communities.
- An important role of the university in Cuba is to teach students history as a means to preserve and strengthen Cuban culture and identity.
- Through the directives and support of the Ministry of Education and the Communist Party, there is a high level of integration of resources among higher education institutions and collaborations between universities across Cuban provinces.
- The “Agrarian University” in Mayabeque Province (which we visited for a symposium with administrators, teachers, and students) serves over 3,000 students with majors in technical fields as well as social sciences and humanities, respectively. It also grants Masters and Doctoral degrees.
- At Cuban universities, there is a strong emphasis on building positive working relationships between professors and students. At a university campus in Havana that I visited in 2015, all classes were
suspended for a week of athletic competition between faculty and students as a means of team-building and mutual respect.

These descriptions by Cuban scholars and educators reflect the concept identified by Carnoy as “state-driven social capital” as a means to maximize educational access and achievement. In his comparative study of Cuban schools (2007), Carnoy utilizes a comprehensive model to demonstrate how family resources, schooling, and the social context shape educational outcomes. Much like Persell (1977), Carnoy emphasizes how values and policies at the societal level play a large part in determining the quality of students’ education. Thus, Carnoy’s notion of social capital (Coleman, 1966; cited in Carnoy, 2007; Stanton-Salazar, 2001) connects students in supportive networks that both emphasize the importance of academic achievement and transmit information on how to achieve educational success. According to Carnoy, social capital is usually described as a resource generated at the level of families and schools. However, Carnoy argues that social capital can be generated at broader levels such as communities, regions, and even the nation state. Clearly, this “state-generated social capital” is a critical element in the educational success of Cuban schools. Since the triumph of the Cuban revolution in 1959, Cuba has created and maintained a social context supportive of academic achievement through its “hierarchical centralized government bureaucracy” (Carnoy, p.2). As Carnoy’s model indicates, Cuba’s state-generated social capital has a major influence on the state’s regulation and organization of schools.

Stanton-Salazar (2001) describes the great challenge faced by working class Chicano students whose parents lack the education and professional status to transmit social capital and whose subordinate racial status makes school personnel reluctant to facilitate their accumulation of social capital networks. Carnoy’s conceptualization of social capital as a resource that can be cultivated and transmitted by the “state,” as opposed to families or schools, raises the question of how large government levels might create the consciousness of educational success that would facilitate social capital development among working class Chicanos. Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi’s (1986) analysis of Black and Chicano student underachievement emphasizes the lack of role models in such communities whose educational success might inspire those students. Such lack of professional role models living and working in communities of color is one serious,
negative consequence of the racial hierarchy in the U.S. (Feagin, 2001). Thus, Chicano students in working class communities often struggle to connect their efforts in school to subsequent socioeconomic mobility (Massey et al, 2003).

One might speculate that governments at the state and/or local level can implement visible campaigns to raise such consciousness. In Cuba, the highest levels of government are committed to maintain a visible, constant awareness throughout communities that education is valued and that educational success is generally rewarded by professional and personal fulfillment. Such a message is largely absent in Chicano communities both physically (signage, billboards, etc.) and in media (broadcast and print). If future government entities in states such as California elect socially conscious Chicano legislators, they might work to develop strategies through which the “state” can help working class Chicano families acquire the social (and cultural) capital that contributes to educational success. Likewise, the leadership of higher education institutions can leverage their partnerships with private industry and their professional standing as educators to develop and implement campaigns that increase state-driven social capital throughout Chicano communities.

More immediately, at the institutional level, colleges and universities can expand efforts to develop social and cultural capital and focus them on Chicanos and other underrepresented students. Such efforts aimed at “acculturation” of working class Chicanos in higher education can contribute significantly to their persistence, achievement, and graduation (Berger, 2000; Kuh et al., 2010).

In their explanation for Cuba’s educational success, Cuban scholars and social workers emphasized to me the critical role of teachers. They noted both the technical, instructional competence of Cuban teachers as well as their genuine concern for the welfare of their students. In Cuba, it appears that this genuine concern for students and their achievement moves from high levels of government to mid-levels (e.g., ministries of education) that focus on educational policy. It also carries on to school principals and especially to classroom teachers. Lutjens (2007) quotes from a number of her Cuban interview subjects who work directly in education regarding the deep concern for students among Cuban teachers. Likewise, I interviewed Elba Capote, a Cuban health care practitioner (and graduate of Cuba’s higher education system) in 2011, who attested
that the caring attitude of Cuban teachers is the most important variable of Cuban national success in education. In our interview, she told me:

There are objective factors in the success of Cuban education but there are also subjective factors. One subjective factor is the dedication of Cuban teachers. It is the love they have for their students and their profession. To carry out an educational occupation in Cuba, one must have love for that occupation. One must be dedicated to education. This country has many difficulties but its teachers are incredible (Elba Capote, Havana, Cuba, 2011).

During my 2015 dialogues with Cuban educators, they often discussed the importance of recruiting and training such caring, effective Cuban teachers at all levels. We were told of reforms since 2009 to include more teacher training at both the pre-service and in-service levels. Such preparation includes three dimensions—academic, research, and community relations. Teacher trainees are placed in schools during their first year of training to observe instruction. Their second year focuses on research including interviews with teachers in their placement school. During the third year, trainees design a theoretical framework for their research and teaching. In the fourth year, teachers work full-time in their own classroom while returning to the university for classes in which they discuss their instructional challenges. Another result of recent reforms allows for more autonomy in school organization and the distribution of teacher workload.

The in-service development of teachers remains a strong national priority. Instructors from pedagogical universities such as the one we visited in 2015 in the Havana barrio of Marianao provide such training for teachers on a regular basis. I was able to teach a “short course” to Cuban teachers on the academic experiences of Chicano students in the U.S. It was clear that the teachers were very focused on effective pedagogy. This emphasis on teaching carries over to the level of higher education as well. One scholar at the University of Havana told us that new university professors start at the bottom of the rank and salary levels and that they cannot progress until they complete a course in pedagogy. One of the highlights of our 2015 visit was a dialogue with Lydia Turner Martí, the renowned Cuban author of “Pedagogía de la Ternura” (Pedagogy of Tenderness), whose work exemplifies Cuba’s “caring teachers.”
This analysis of the role of Cuban teachers reflects the findings of Bain’s (2004) qualitative study of effective instructors in higher education. He found that one of the most significant factors in effective teaching is “intentions,” the conscious attitude among instructors that makes them determined and focused on contributing to their students’ learning.

Gándara and Contreras also document the importance of teacher quality in Chicano students’ education: “Numerous studies have shown a clear relationship between the quality of teachers and the achievement of their students, and the quality of instruction has also been shown to have the greatest impact on the academic achievement of students of color” (p. 103). I suggest that an infusion of more “caring,” effective teachers and professors in schools and colleges attended by Chicano students is directly related to the need for more Chicano teachers in education institutions at all levels (Darder, 2011; Gándara and Contreras, 2009). A 2004 study found that almost nineteen percent of all U.S. students were Latino, yet only six percent of teachers were Latino; on the other hand, whites made up only fifty-eight percent of students nationally and eighty-three percent of teachers (Gándara and Contreras, 2009).

Chicano teachers, if educated in credential programs that help develop their ethnic identity and commitment to social justice, might well be more inclined to hold positive expectations for Chicano students (Persell, 1977; Sleeter, 2011), to understand their culture and its impact on learning styles (Buriel, 1994; Ramirez, 1984), to appreciate the complexities of Chicano students’ and parents’ subordinate position in the U.S. racial hierarchy (hooks, 1994), and to serve as an ethnic role model for Chicano students (Darder, 2011). In their review of literature on effective ethnic studies pedagogy, Tintiangco-Cubales et al. emphasize the efficacy of teachers of color in such instructional strategy: “... while there were strong white and non-white ethnic studies teachers, being a person of color was a distinct asset” (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). Smith examined the literature on Hispanic Serving Institutions in higher education and concluded: “recent findings suggest that success varies among HSI institutions, with some of the difference being accounted for by the presence of Latino faculty” (2015, p. 217). Gándara and Contreras note that: “Recent research on teachers’ beliefs about their ethnic minority students has found that cultural differences between students and teachers also contribute
to teachers’ unfairly low opinion of these students’ academic abilities” (p. 104). They add:

There are solutions to the problem of teacher quality and stability for Latino students, and they involve more than just increased salaries. First, teachers must be recruited from the students’ own communities. These would-be teachers already have a unique knowledge of and sensitivity to the culture and language of this group; training them as teachers is the easier task. Teachers from these communities are also much more likely to remain in those communities as teachers (p. 319).

Citing the work of Lilia Bartolomé, Szecsi emphasizes the problematic nature of an educational experience for Chicanos and other underrepresented students of color whose teachers are overwhelmingly white:

When teacher candidates, who are largely white middle class women, unconsciously hold and/or uncover dominant discriminatory ideologies, such as meritocracy, assimilation, and deficit views of students that are oppressed, they are also likely to accept the unequal power distribution in schools and society as natural and unchangeable. This lack of ideological clarity, that is the inability to recognize the historical, economic, and social conditions that mold our lives, might lead (white) teachers to exhibit disrespect, unfair treatment, and ‘miseducation’ toward students that have been historically disenfranchised, ultimately causing harm to their intellectual pursuits and emotional well-being (Szecsi, 2013, p. 11).

Chicano teachers and professors are clearly more likely to serve as what Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) describe as “transformational role models and mentors:”

. . . transformational role models are visible members of one’s own racial/ethnic and/or gender group who actively demonstrate a commitment to social justice, whereas transformational mentors use the aforementioned traits and their own experiences and expertise to help guide the development of others (p.322).

In turn, these role models and mentors help Chicano students develop a positive “transformational resistance” that combines the intersecting dimensions of a commitment to social justice and a critique of racism and other forms of oppression (Solorzano and Delgado Bernal, 2001). Gándara and Contreras found such mentoring especially important:

Nothing appears to be more important for helping underrepresented students navigate successfully through high school and into college
than the formation of a strong relationship with a caring adult who truly knows the student. Mentoring, defined in this way, is the single most common characteristic of all of the successful intervention programs we assessed, and it seems crucial . . . (2009, p. 292-293).

In her recent book, Valenzuela analyzes the research of the National Latino/a Education Research and Policy Project (NLERAP) as well as its national Grow Your Own Teacher Education Institutes (GYO-TEI) initiative (2016). Valenzuela concludes that teachers’ dispositions is a critical capacity that extends beyond teachers’ knowledge and skills: “Even if they are frequently overlooked in conventional treatments of teacher capacities, dispositions are essential to both community-oriented teaching and student success” (p. xvii).

According to Valenzuela, the NLERAP’s Council outlined a number of research concerns that include “The shortcomings of the (overwhelmingly non-Latino) teachers instructing Latino students (these teachers were viewed as showing a systemic lack of sensitivity toward Latino children and youth and providing them with an ineffective education)” (p. 13). Valenzuela cites the research conclusions regarding the potential benefits of skilled, committed, well-trained Chicano/Latino teachers:

- High quality teachers are the single most determining school-based factor that correlates with student achievement, graduation rates, and college eligibility among Chicano/Latino youth.
- A lack of Chicano/Latino teachers translates into a powerful disequilibrium between the culture of Chicano/Latino students and that of the school.
- Chicano/Latino teachers are more likely to teach in hard-to-staff schools and to have higher retention rates than their white peers in the same schools.
- Research on racial congruence finds that relative to their white counterparts, the students of Chicano/Latino teachers register higher test scores, as well as better attendance, retention, and college-going rates for students of color.
- Chicano/Latino teachers’ knowledge of their students cultures and languages is helpful to the development of constructive relationships between themselves and their students, as well as with students’ parents (p. 20-22).

These references reflect Lutjen’s (2007) extensive comments on the role of Cuban teachers that goes far beyond the mere transfer of knowledge. She describes the Cuban
teacher as “caregiver, model, and ethical mentor” (p. 9). As models, such teachers provide direction in students’ internalization of respect, responsibility, social justice, work ethic, and other ethical dimensions. Lutjens describes recent pedagogical developments in Cuba that emphasize teachers’ expression of caring and tenderness toward their students. She quotes a Cuban teacher who wrote:

> Knowledge is very important but it has to be knitted together with feelings, with emotions; and it is in this unity of the affective and the cognitive where the full development of our children is accomplished” (p. 15).

The same imperative for such transformational Chicano mentors exists in higher education where Chicano faculty are drastically underrepresented in post-secondary institutions (Ibarra, 2001). The Chicano presence among graduate students, the pipeline to the professoriate, is also weak (Castellanos et al., 2006; Castellanos and Jones, 2003; Ibarra, 2001). Considerable policy initiatives that place more Chicanos in the pipeline to develop them as teachers or college professors is essential to raising Chicano student success at all levels. In addition, Ibarra (2001) documents the need for higher education to transform its institutional culture to reflect the “high context culture” of Chicanos and other underrepresented students in order to provide equitable, supportive conditions. A faculty that understands the needs of such students and provides a “culturally sustaining” pedagogy (Paris, 2012) exemplifies the concept of “caring teachers” in higher education. Higher education institutions can provide clear incentives and professional development to cultivate such faculty (Kuh et al., 2010).

My Cuban contacts identified additional features of the Cuban educational system that, if replicated in U.S. schools at all levels, could contribute to the success of Chicano students. Some of these features facilitate the development of more democratic, “caring” schools and classrooms. These positive instructional environments are reflected in a comparative study by UNESCO in 1998 that included a substantive follow-up in 2002:

> In the 2002 report on the qualitative dimensions of the regional comparison, the Cuban schools studied were characterized by dynamics that would seem to contradict the clear centralization—verticality—enforced by the Cuban state system and its ideological foundations. Instead of hierarchy, the study emphasized that management within the schools was “horizontal;” “in all schools a democratic style prevails, with
very active participation of all workers, whose opinion are listened to” (UNESCO, 2002, cited in Lutjens, 2007). In terms of classrooms and teaching practices, in 75% of the classrooms observed, a heuristic dialogue method was used, in which knowledge was constructed with active participation of the students... As the Cuban official responsible for the Cuban portion of the study explained in 2003, 97% of the Cuban students reported a positive classroom environment in contrast to 51% of the students in other countries. And it was the classroom climate that was judged to be the most significant factor in explaining the differential performance of Latin American children (UNESCO, 2002, cited in Lutjens, 2007, p. 5).

One feature of such classroom environments is the explicit role of school principals as instructional leaders rather than bureaucrats or administrators of student discipline (Carnoy, 2007). This critical role sends a message about the importance of staff development for better teaching and concretely helps to improve the instructional effectiveness of Cuban teachers. Increasing this role of instructional leader for administrators in schools with Chicanos is a realistic goal, particularly in charter schools that have less need for compliance with state-level, bureaucratic requirements. This shift in policy and practice underscores the need for Chicanos as well. In addition to serving as instructional leaders, well-trained Chicanos can also serve a leadership role in maximizing teachers’ knowledge of Chicanos’ culture and sociopolitical position that impact students’ engagement with school. They can provide the leadership for a culturally compatible, collective approach to education.

Likewise, having Chicanos that provide leadership in effective teaching and culturally inclusive student services would be a transformative policy shift for higher education. They would be well positioned to provide the forms of validation found effective in facilitating academic success and satisfaction among Chicanos in higher education (Rendon and Muñoz, 2011) and equally adept at structuring mechanisms for involvement that contribute to Chicanos’ sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012). Unfortunately, scholars such as Hurtado and Ruiz document the relative absence of such administrators and faculty in higher education:

In terms of instructor and staff identities, Latina/o faculty, administrative/managerial, and other professional staff are all alarmingly underrepresented at the national level (p. 21)...
leadership and decision-making bodies in the administration are largely predominantly white, raising questions regarding the responsiveness of an institution to the rapidly changing student population. Diversification of the faculty at all ranks is the single most important long term, structural change in institutional transformation because faculty may be employed for up to 30 years at a single institution (with adequate support and promotion) and it becomes the most effective way to diversify the curriculum, broaden research foci, and increase connections with minority communities (2012, p. 23-24).

As another strategy, Lutjens (2007) describes the practice in Cuban schools of primary teachers who remain with the same cohort of students throughout primary school rather than changing cohorts each school year. Such a practice would seem very compatible with Chicano students whose culture emphasizes social connections and personalization (Buriel, 1994; Canul, 2003; Garcia, 2001; Ortiz and Santos, 2009; Ramirez, 1984; Ramirez and Castañeda, 1974). It offers the obvious advantage of teachers who increasingly know the needs of their students and know the students’ parents as well. A more familial relationship is constructed between families and schools, and as Ortiz and Santos observed in their study of Latino students’ ethnic identity: “Family as a collectivistic entity was a defining and fundamental aspect of (Latino) students’ ethnic self-concept” (p. 313). It is worth noting that one reason Cuba can operationalize this practice (which requires broad and deep content knowledge) effectively is that teaching is a respected profession in their country and as a result, teacher training programs can recruit among the best students with considerable content knowledge (Carnoy, 2007). Again, such an innovation might be more easily implemented in charter schools in Chicano communities.

My Cuban informants described an additional Cuban practice that could be replicated with Chicano students: Cuba’s national curriculum (Carnoy, 2007). Rather than using suspect testing mechanisms to sort and track students into different levels of academic challenge and support (Darder, 2011; Oakes, 1985; Persell, 1977), Cuba applies a standard, rigorous national curriculum for all students. Clearly, this policy contributes to Cuba’s academic success (Carnoy, 2007). Some California schools have sought to increase equity in educational outcomes by such standardization of curriculum with high expectations (Sacks, 2007), such as requiring courses that lead directly to public higher
education eligibility. Given the historic pattern of tracking Chicano students into lower-level classes and their underrepresentation in gifted programs (Oakes, 1985; Solorzano et al., 2005), standardizing a high-challenge curriculum for Chicano students could make a considerable contribution to raising their achievement levels.

As Solórzano and his colleagues have identified (2005), similar barriers (e.g., placement of Chicanos in remedial courses) exist in higher education. Rather than tracking Chicanos in such remedial courses (often in math and writing), more innovative practices to place relatively underprepared Chicano college students in mainstream courses with access to academic support should facilitate their higher academic achievement. The principle of standardized curriculum has other applications in higher education. Providing students with a significant degree of choice in their course enrollments is a feature of many higher education institutions. However, Astin’s important study found that more uniform general education requirements contribute to a higher level of learning outcomes than a smorgasbord approach (Astin, 1993). Such uniformity in course enrollments helps to maximize the positive effects of peer-to-peer learning in higher education (Astin, 1993; Hurtado, 2012).

As I reflect on the values, structures, policies, and practices of Cuban schools and universities, I am reminded of higher education scholar Daryl Smith’s review and analysis of the achievement and learning of historically underrepresented and underserved students in postsecondary institutions (2015). In reviewing over forty years of research, Smith consciously begins with a focus on “special-purpose institutions,” i.e., Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s) and women’s colleges. She notes that the research on so-called “baccalaureate-origin studies” documents the great impact of such special-purpose institutions in producing Black and woman graduates, respectively. This success occurs in spite of the fact that many of these institutions are not rich in resources or prestige. Smith’s analysis of the scholarly literature on special-purpose institutions identifies a number of elements that contribute to their success. These include, along with quotes from Smith (2015):

- High expectations, belief, and support

If I were to describe a pattern that emerges in special-purpose institutions concerning student success, it is that faculty, staff, and the
institutional ethos convey a belief in students’ ability to succeed and excel, regardless of their background (p. 213).

- Education for a larger purpose

One of the findings about special-purpose institutions that relates to their success is that they convey a common message to graduates that education is for a purpose beyond themselves—for their families, for their communities, or to give back on behalf of the institution (p. 214).

- Institutional purpose and mission

In each of these institutions, there is a fundamental purpose embodied in the work of the campus, one that is devoted to student success and student education. Not only do these institutions have more diversity represented in the leadership and the faculty, but research suggests that the commitment to the mission and to student success is deeply held throughout (p. 215).

- Critical mass at all levels

Having a critical mass means that there is no sense of being a token or being marginalized in the institution (p. 216).

- Spaces and places for voices to be heard

In most special-purpose institutions, there are locations and places where issues are voiced and are heard. There is no concern about self-segregation of women on a campus that serves primarily women students. There is no sense of apology for meeting to discuss concerns, and in the best of these institutions, the campus leadership encourages student voices and perspectives (p. 216).

- Acknowledging the history

Because special-purpose institutions grew out of a society that closed doors to certain students and that still does not allow them full engagement and participation, students and others at these institutions are usually more fully conscious of the contexts of race, ethnicity, and gender. Special-purpose institutions today engage the histories of race and gender and build these topics into the curriculum (p. 217).

These institutional values and strategies are very similar to those embedded in the Cuban educational system at all levels, including the university. High expectations and strong support epitomize Cuban schools and universities. Cuban students pursue educational achievement and credentials for a “larger purpose,” that of contributing to a
stronger, more positive Cuban society. Compared to education in the U.S., students’ educational opportunities in Cuba are not significantly altered because of their race or gender (Morales, 2013). Thus, all students’ voices are heard. In my conversations with Cuban scholars, they reported that in a nation historically and currently subjected to hostile treatment by the most powerful country in the world, Cuban schools and universities are very conscious of the imperialistic tendencies found in contemporary globalization, and this consciousness is built into the national curriculum. It is no accident that both Cuban schools and special-purpose institutions in U.S. higher education generate high rates of success for their students. It is incumbent on schools and higher education institutions that enroll Chicano students to operationalize these principles and deploy these strategies.

As documented by Hurtado and Ruíz (2012), the potential of so-called “Hispanic-Serving Institutions” to replicate such strategies is still largely unfulfilled. Such institutions have generally been defined almost exclusively by the percentage of their undergraduate enrollment that is “Hispanic” (and in some cases by the percentage of enrolled students classified as low-income). Hurtado and Ruiz note that unlike Historically Black Colleges and Universities and other special-purpose institutions, HSI’s did not begin with the explicit purpose of serving Latino students. Instead, they often evolve into an HSI as a result of significant demographic changes in their service area. Despite this difference, some HSI’ contributions are impressive: “HSI’s top the list of institutions for the production of Hispanic associate and baccalaureate degrees in a number of fields each year and about a quarter of Hispanic doctoral degree recipients have earned their degree at HSI’s in spite of the small proportion of these institutions that offer doctoral programs” (Hurtado and Ruíz, 2012, p. 5).

Still, the commitment of these HSI’s to transformation that results in more supportive institutional conditions for Chicanos is uneven. In their study of HSI’s, Contreras et al. (2008) conclude that some such institutions have not made the necessary commitment to enact such changes in their culture, and that for them the HSI designation is no more than a “manufactured identity.” Hurtado and Ruiz also conclude that more focused institutional energy is necessary in order to construct greater equity in conditions and outcomes: “A talent development approach toward institutional excellence will
require greater attention to regular assessment of Latina/o students along many dimensions beyond raw numbers of degrees and graduation rates” (p. 15).

Cuban Society: The Social Context of Education

Persell’s theory (1977) emphasizes the strong impact of societal structures and policies on educational institutions. Likewise, the Diverse Learning Environments model of Hurtado et al. acknowledges the role of societal forces on education. Thus, somewhat broader, societal level aspects of the Cuban experience that occur outside of classrooms can also be applied to a resolution of the Chicano educational crisis. Certainly, the interviews and seminars I experienced in Cuba along with the scholarly contributions that analyze Cuba’s educational success (Carnoy, 2007; Lutjens, 2007) point to a strong connection between the nation’s collective motivation for educational success and the perception of a national project to construct a society that minimizes inequality. At a seminar I led with Cuban scholars in Havana in 2011, participants repeatedly emphasized that most students in Cuba (at all levels including higher education) are not socialized to pursue educational success based on a motivation for individual socioeconomic mobility, clearly the case in the U.S. (Johnson, 2006). Instead, they work for academic achievement and matriculate to higher education through their drive to contribute to a stronger Cuba that facilitates prosperity for all.

According to Juan Nicolas Padrón, an instructor I interviewed (2011) at Casa Las Americas in Havana, even the structure and curriculum of higher education reflects this collective sense of motivation. Whereas many research institutions of higher education in the U.S. implement a curriculum heavy on theory and weak on applications (Ibarra, 2001), Cuba’s higher education system emphasizes a praxis that combines theory with applications designed to improve Cuban society. Even students’ ability to choose a major in Cuban universities is driven by national labor needs more than individual choice or the need of private enterprise to maximize profit.

Such an approach is compatible with a strategy that seeks collective achievement and emancipation for Chicano students and their communities. As a result of decades of systemic racism and colonial conditions, a major problem in Chicano communities is convincing young Chicano students to enroll in a rigorous curriculum that prepares them for college (Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi, 1986). Appeals to individualistic and instrumental
motives are unlikely to succeed because they are largely incompatible with the culture and socialization of Chicanos (Canul, 2003; Darder, 2011; Garcia, 2001; Ibarra, 2001; Ramirez, 1984; Wlodkowski and Ginsberg, 2010). Maldonado et al. underscore this principle, using Fanon’s concept of “collective catharsis” (Fanon, 1967; cited in Maldonato et al., 2005) to describe “the benefits of oppressed groups collectively acting to end their marginality” (p. 626). As Cuba’s example demonstrates, cultivating and capitalizing on a more collective motivation that encourages Chicano students to connect their own success with increased opportunities for their community has much more potential for success.

In Cuba, what might be a cultural and political inclination to experience motivation through a more collective lens is cultivated by an educational system that encourages and enacts community service by students at all levels. At a seminar with Cuban scholars in 2007, participants described to me the “homework circles” held for elementary students in the homes of parents as well as middle school students organizing to tutor elementary students. This community service model is enacted in higher education as well. In my interview with Maria Isabel Romero in the municipality of Marianao in Havana in 2009, she told me that university students in Cuba are automatically members of a student organization dedicated largely to national service. This organization, the University Student Federation, supports educational and community activities throughout Cuba. My informants from the University of Havana reinforced the importance of this organization in my 2015 visit. On Walter Lippmann’s CubaNews internet site in June, 2013, Lippmann described the 8th Congress of the University Student Federation taking place that month. He reported that student delegates would work in commissions to address a number of issues related to the daily lives of Cuban university students as well as issues related to the Cuban economy. The issues addressed by those student commissions included “the performance of the federation, ideological work, teaching and research activity, and international relations,” testifying to the seriousness of this University Student Federation (CubaNews posting, June 11, 2013).

Lutjens (2007) also described the proliferation of student organizations dedicated to community service in Cuba. Even elementary school students are organized (the José Martí Pioneers Organization for students in grades 1-8) as well as secondary students (the
Federation of Secondary Students in grades 9-12). An additional layer of involvement lies in school councils made up of parents, students, and community organizations. Both student organizations and school councils feature elections as part of what Lutjens calls Cuban-style democracy. She adds:

> Just as the caring classroom is an integral part of the socialist educational system in Cuba, so, too, are these school wide strategies. Planning, a strong national identity, and the commitment to social justice for all Cubans underscore the collectivist logic of state policies and schooling. In other words, morality and such values as responsibility, tolerance, courage, diligence, honesty and respect are a fundamental part of the collective project in Cuba . . . In Cuba, education is defined by the constitution as a responsibility of all of society, and the “partnering” of families and communities is assumed in the making and implementation of policies (p. 9, emphasis added).

When I visited the Tomas David Rayo school in Havana in 2015, we learned from administrators and students that these pre-university students belonged to a school club dedicated to community service. This strong practice in Cuba dedicated to linking education and community service is part of a larger national landscape that increasingly encourages active civic involvement. As the Cuban social worker María Isabel Romero related to me in our interview in 2009, and amplified in the work of Cuban scholar Rafael Hernandez (2003), one positive development from the incredibly difficult “Special Period” in the mid-90’s is less reliance on “top down” solutions to societal problems. Instead, civic society in general (including community organizations) is increasingly taking the initiative to conceptualize and implement grass roots solutions. At the Paradigmas Emancipatorios conference in Havana in 2009, we heard presentations on such organized efforts from Cubans that represented a number of community projects in various Cuban provinces. One can also view the vibrancy of civic discussion and debate in Cuba through a cursory examination of Cuban internet news sources available in and outside Cuba. One such example is “Caminos,” a web site sponsored by the Martin Luther King Memorial Center in Havana, that addresses a number of complex social issues in Cuba. In 2009, María Isabel Romero from the MLK Memorial Center in Havana spoke to me about the center’s work in organizing community solutions in Cuba’s oldest working-class neighborhood, Pogoloti:
With the intention to improve life in these communities, we started popular education programs. The idea was to intentionally build the capacity of individuals to facilitate their participation in their community and involve them in solutions to their own community’s problems. Because Cuba was used to having the state resolve all their problems. Until the 1990’s (the Special Period), the Cuban state was in charge of every matter. From the largest to the smallest. And since the 1990’s, the state had to concentrate on a series of critical issues and then community life was in the hands of the community itself. We organized a group of people from many areas—from the church, academics, people from the university. We made a big impact on the lives of the community.

Ms. Romero also told me about a project in a physically deteriorating neighborhood in the province of Matanzas. Even without the means to restore the material conditions of the community, people worked together to reinvigorate the community’s cultural and spiritual traditions. She concluded, “this strategy had a very positive effect on the community, raising peoples’ self-esteem and helping them to feel better about the community because the people themselves were involved.”

The strategy of collectively minded student organizations dedicated to service should resonate among Chicanos in the U.S. Despite the relatively low numbers of Chicano students in higher education, the student organization MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano/a de Aztlan, or Chicano Student Movement of Aztlán) has existed for decades. Currently its structure includes national, regional, state, local, and institutional levels. Numerous scholars have documented the effectiveness of MEChA and other Chicano student organizations in contributing to a sense of belonging among Chicano students at often elitist or exclusionary college campuses (Maramba and Velásquez, 2010; Santos and Ortiz, 2009; Smith, 2015; Treviño, 1994). Ortiz and Santos described such a finding: “As Saylor and Aries (1999; cited in Ortiz and Santos, 2009) note, many students of color actively seek new means of supporting their ethnic identities when transitioning to the university by joining ethnic clubs and organizations” (p. 302). Likewise, Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that the “sense of belonging” nurtured by Chicano student organizations makes a significant contribution to the persistence of Chicano students in higher education. Maldonado et al. emphasize the multiple benefits of college students’ engagement with such organizations led by students themselves:
They define successful students as those students who work for the greater social good and, in particular, help racial and ethnic communities achieve equality in higher education. An emphasis on social praxis encourages students to engage collectively in changing colleges and universities so that they better meet the needs of students of color. Their engagement as agents of social change is believed to be self-empowering and beneficial to their academic careers, while the outcomes of their agency are seen to benefit the broader communities of color from which they come (2005, p. 629).

Smith (2015) also identifies such ethnic student organizations in her review of institutional strategies that facilitate success among diverse students:

Numerous reviews of the literature have suggested that for underrepresented students of color in particular and students of color in general, support groups and experiences in racial or ethnic groups have contributed to student satisfaction, retention, and less alienation (p. 227) . . . My own perception is that it is in racial or ethnic support groups . . . where students feel that they matter, and that it is in more generic activities where students from particular identities too often feel they don’t matter (p. 235).

While MEChA also exists at the high school level, my observation is that its effectiveness often depends on teacher sponsors who are largely unsupported by their school’s administration. At the university level, the relative lack of Chicano administrators, faculty, and staff and insufficient institutional commitment undermine MEChA’s ability to construct strategies through which the university can support Chicano community efforts to increase empowerment. Except for dysfunctional missionary efforts that actually exacerbate the effects of colonialism, even top-notch research institutions largely lack a research agenda that supports the collective progress of Chicano communities.

The diminishing reliance of top down approaches in Cuba also reflects the seeming paradox in Cuban schools described by Lutjens (2007). Even though education in Cuba is highly centralized and largely uniform (Carnoy, 2007), my informants in Cuba told me that at the level of schools, there is a high degree of democratic participation among teachers, parents, and students. At the Tomas David Rayo pre-university in 2015, I learned that such pre-universities have a school council with a high degree of parent participation. Again, this is clearly connected to the collective sense of national interest
among Cuban stakeholders in the education process. Centralized strategies, e.g., from the state-wide level, to increase the involvement of Chicano teachers, students, and parents in school governance and operations may well yield success in raising outcomes. Approaches such as the Parent Institute for Quality Education in California have experienced success in increasing parent involvement in a collective sense (Gándara and Contreras, 2009). The sense of mutual support and responsibility instilled by more democratic schools is another culturally compatible strategy for Chicanos (Bartolomé, 1999).

Yet another societal level condition in Cuba that enhances educational achievement is the relative lack of violent crime and social disorder in Cuba. Although I have not seen sources that document the level of such crime and disorder on the island, Cubans at many levels from university professors to taxi drivers and restaurant waitresses related this observation during each of my visits to Cuba. Perhaps the most frequent description I have heard by Cubans about their country is, “Es muy tranquilo” (“It’s very tranquil”). Several told me very empathetically that they were aware of the high crime and violence levels in both México and the U.S. and they contrasted it with a low rate of such crime in Cuba. A representative quote from Carnoy’s study describes the role of public safety in the success of Cuban schools compared to the other nations in his case study, Brazil and Chile:

The contrast in social contexts between Brazil and Chile on the one hand, and Cuba, on the other, points to the advantages teachers and schools have in a social-structural context that enforces a moral imperative protecting children against the excesses of economic inequality and the possibility of negative choices. Cuban families and children are assured a degree of social safety that is far greater than in either Brazil or Chile, and this is reflected in the way children behave in school, their overall health, their incorporation of high academic expectations, and their desire to succeed academically. Because the Cuban state combines this enforced “child protection” with a sustained emphasis on educational quality and high academic achievement, Cuban children from less-educated families have much greater opportunity to succeed academically than their counterparts in Brazil or Chile. Cubans have far fewer social and economic choices and far less political and individual
freedom, but they have a far more broad-based opportunity to be highly educated. In Cuban political interpretation, this right to health, security, and knowledge represents what they would call the “true” definition of human freedom (p. 42-43).

In contrast, the conditions in U.S. Chicano communities are reflected in a study by Charles et al. (2009) that documents the high propensity for Chicanos and other historically underrepresented students of color who attend selective higher education institutions to have experienced high levels of violence and social disorder in their communities. Charles et al. also find that those students’ exposure to such dysfunctional community conditions has a negative impact on their cognitive development and their ability to focus on their academic achievement while family members remain living in those communities.

Likewise, Gándara and Contreras cite research documenting that Latinos report significantly more perceptions of being unsafe at school or even traveling to school, and that “poverty and neighborhood disorganization are also correlated both with race and ethnicity and with higher incidences of violence on school campuses” (p. 110). While racial segregation does not proliferate in the same manner in Cuba, the segregation and marginalization of Chicanos and other historically underrepresented students in the U.S. continues to increase as disparities in wealth, including the distribution of wealth by ethnicity, continue to grow (Charles et al., 2009; Gandara and Orfield, 2010; Johnson, 2006; Massey et al, 2003; Keefe and Padilla, 1987; Stiglitz, 2012). Such segregated communities are often marked by the degree of violence and social disorder described by Charles et al. (2009).

Clearly, comprehensive strategies to increase Chicano educational achievement must include components that address such community conditions. A major challenge to achieving positive community change is the complicity of many law enforcement agencies in perpetuating police brutality, racial profiling, and other dimensions of racism against Chicano communities (Acuña, 2011; Mirandé, 1985; National Council of La Raza, 1999; Navarro, 2005). Likewise, colleges and universities must provide effective, culturally relevant support systems for their Chicano students whose academic focus is often undermined by the dysfunctional social circumstances of their communities.
Another factor outside of educational institutions that supports achievement and learning in Cuba is its media. Of course, in its socialist economy, all Cuban media sources are operated by the state. While outside the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that Cuban media, not driven by a corporate profit motive, provides a high degree of educational programming that is accessible to all residents who own a radio or television. As Elba Capote told me, “Cuban educational success is connected to everything—the schooling system, television, all the domestic policies of the country, everything” (Elba Capote, Havana, Cuba, 2011).

This impact of larger societal conditions on educational achievement is of course part of the larger relationship between societal level hierarchies and educational inequality described by Persell (1977). Despite the directions for Chicano educational success that are found in Cuba’s model, as long as Chicanos face a strong degree of systemic racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Feagin, 2001) and occupy a subordinate position in the U.S. racial hierarchy (Darder, 2011), strategies to raise educational success for Chicano students will operate in an unsupportive context. Time will tell if the inevitable increases in Chicano legislators and other policy makers in states such as California can reduce such societal level racism. Thus far, I would opine that results of the modest increase in such Chicano representation have not been especially positive, in part because of the cooptation of “Chicano leaders” described in early theories of internal colonialism in Chicano communities (Barrera et al., 1971; Navarro, 1995).

Clearly, Cuba’s educational system has been studied extensively and systematically by such U.S. scholars as Carnoy and Lutjens. Lutjens and others routinely take U.S. educators to Cuba to meet with officials of the Cuban educational system. Our 2015 visit was one of those encounters among educators from both countries. Cuba’s educational success has encouraged such scholarly and professional examinations. My own visits to Cuba also demonstrated that along with health care, education is the area of accomplishment of which Cubans are most proud. In addition to such understandable intellectual curiosity about Cuban education, the entrenched pattern of underachievement among Chicanos (and other historically underrepresented students in the U.S.) should welcome the possibility of directions toward solutions that might be grounded in another population that has experienced systemic oppression, albeit in a much different context.
Directions from Cuban Identity Development

Cuba had to fight for many years on end and against many “demons” before it could rise as a nation. This long process has been the glue that keeps the vast majority of Cubans together, regardless of their skin color. The greatest outcome of a revolutionary work started more than fifty years ago, as a continuation of multiple wars for national independence and sovereignty, is the real unity of the Cuban people around our socialist project (Morales, 2013, p. 109).

Ethnic identity represents a dimension of Chicano students’ broader social identity, an important developmental outcome among college students (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005, 1991). Smith (2015) provides the larger context for such identity issues in efforts to increase diversity and equity in higher education:

The concept of identity is core to the issues surrounding diversity . . . specific kinds of individual and group identity formed by race, ethnicity, gender, class, culture, religion, sexual orientation, and ability emerge as significant not only for individuals and groups, but for institutions and society as well. Questions about identity underlie virtually all diversity-related issues, and certain identities emerge as salient (p. 22).

Despite its importance, educational institutions in the U.S. have not made Chicano identity development a priority. As described previously, early theories that arose during the Chicano Movement identified elements of an “internal colony” that contributed to the subordinate status and subsequent educational underachievement of Chicanos in the U.S. (Barrera et al., 1971; Muñoz, 1983; Navarro, 2005). One such element of internal colonialism is referred to as “cultural genocide,” the systematic effort in U.S. educational policy and practice to undermine the maintenance of Chicano culture (Acuña, 2011; Barrera, 1988; Barrera et al., 1972). As Freire’s analysis of education in colonial structures (1970) would suggest, educational institutions that exercise a coercive policy of assimilation play an especially key role in such cultural genocide (Acuña, 2011; Bartolomé, 1999; Mirande, 1985; Rendon et al., 2000). While the cultural assimilation process is largely associated with language policy in elementary and secondary schools (Cummins, 1996; Darder, 2011), scholars describe the continuing effort to assimilate
Chicanos even in higher education (Darder, 1992; Rendon et al., 2000; Solorzano et al., 2005).

In much the same way that the U.S. racial hierarchy creates both material and cultural oppression of Chicanos and other people of color (Darder, 2011), the U.S. embargo against Cuba and its explicit government sponsored terrorism designed to overturn Cuba’s government and economic system create a material and cultural stress for Cuba’s people (Centro de Investigaciones Históricas de la Seguridad del Estado, 2010). Scholarly sources such as Perez (2013; 1999) and Ayorinde (2004) describe directly or indirectly the prominent role of Cuban culture and identity in providing its people the strength and determination to resist colonialism and imperialism:

A people formed under conditions of adversity could not do other than fashion a value system to meet the needs of their circumstances . . . A powerful sense of collective selfhood had formed around the conviction that Cubans had destiny to pursue, that they too had a right to national sovereignty and a claim to self-determination (Perez, 2013; p. 11, 13).

My interviews with Cuban scholars and workers describe a strong Cuban culture and identity and its prominent role in sustaining the gains of its socialist revolution, including education, despite U.S. efforts to marginalize Cuba in the international community. In their analysis of the cultural and political dimensions of identity among historically underrepresented students such as Chicanos, Ogbu and Matute-Bianchi (1986) found a strong relationship between “secondary” cultural characteristics, i.e., subordinate status, and student identity. One of my Cuban research subjects described a similar relationship in Cuba between identity and colonial status:

When you analyze the history of Cuba, you will realize that the history of Cuba is an example of how a cultural identity was built first until the 18th century, and when the 19th century begins, Cuba has a very strong cultural identity. From a strong cultural identity, a national identity is built. . . Cuba is sustained by Cuban revolutionary projects sitting on the cultural base (interview with professor Juan Nicolas Padrón, Casa las Americas, Havana, Cuba, 2011).

If Cuban culture and national identity serve as a resource to enable Cuba to resist such conditions, we might ask how the construction and development of such culture and
identity might play a more empowering role in the Chicano struggle for equity, particularly in the educational arena.

While higher education scholars have documented the critical role of identity development among college students in general, researchers largely ignored such processes and their impact on educational outcomes among underrepresented students of color. In their synthesis of over twenty-five years of research on college students, Pascarella and Terenzini describe this omission as “virtually unknown territory . . . a glaring and embarrassing gap in our theoretical knowledge” (1991, p. 59). However, in the past twenty years a developing body of scholarly work focused on the bicultural development of Chicano students has described a strong ethnic identity as a positive asset for Chicano students in their quest for academic achievement (Arrellano and Padilla, 1996; Darder, 2011; Hurtado and Gurin, 2004; Maramba and Velásquez, 2010; Mooney and Rivas-Drake, 2008; Ortiz and Santos, 2009; Oyserman et al., 2002; Pendakur, 2016; Phinney, 1993, 1990; Rendon et al., 2000; Tatum, 1999; Velasquez, 2000).

Amado Padilla, one of the founders and principle scholars of “Chicano Psychology,” conducted an early study of ethnic identity among Chicano college students. Along with Adele Arrellano, Padilla published a qualitative study of “highly successful” Chicano/Latino students who attended a “private and highly selective university” (Arrellano and Padilla, 1996). Their study sought to identify the characteristics of those students that contributed to their success. One such positive factor was the students’ strong ethnic identity, which provided students a social consciousness and resistance against racist policies and practices along with a sense of determination that contributed to their academic success.

Arellano and Padilla concluded their perspective on ethnic identity among Chicanos/Latinos:

Responses of this type support the notion of positive acculturation or biculturalism, which is the ability to access and function in mainstream society without relinquishing cultural heritage and ethnic identity . . . These students found strength in “additive acculturation” which means that immigrant students need not relinquish their home culture and language because they acquire English and the school-related skills for doing well academically. Such students can draw strength from their home cultures and a
positive sense of their ethnic identity while also gaining proficiency in the ways of the mainstream (p. 499, 504).

More recently, Ortiz and Santos (2009) conducted a large, qualitative study of ethnic identity among college students in Southern California. Their research identifies a number of positive outcomes among Latinos and other students of color that are associated with the development of their ethnic identity, as shown in the following quotes from Ortiz and Santos:

Ultimately, Latino/a students associated a strong ethnic identity with having a sense of confidence that enabled them to tackle life’s challenges and struggles. Many Latino/a students also spoke of developing greater political consciousness and awareness that was collectivistic in nature. As such, an emerging and developing political consciousness prompted students to see their actions and future plans as important to improving the status and power of their ethnic group (p. 314).

When students understand how the educational system has served them badly, and when they can connect their own experiences to an overlying system of oppression, the resultant change of consciousness transforms how they view themselves and their group. Much like Freire’s concept of conscientizacao (1993; cited in Ortiz and Santos, 2009), where critical reflection on social forces transforms the oppressed, the cognitive shift students made through their own critical reflection caused them to consider themselves and the experiences of their groups in a different light (p. 328).

These findings by Ortiz and Santos document that ethnic identity development among Chicano students contributes to their retention, a critical issue on most college campuses that enroll Chicano students, as well as learning outcomes such as critical thinking and “democracy” outcomes such as perspective taking (Hurtado et al., 2013; Milem et al., 2005). Much the same findings occurred in the study I co-authored (2010) of Chicano, African American, and Pilipino students at a selective, historically white, research university. We found that underrepresented students who develop a strong ethnic identity also develop a higher degree of critical thinking, problem analysis, communication, sense of competence, collaboration skills, sense of belonging, and biculturalism (Maramba and Velasquez, 2010). Such an ethnic identity generally includes knowledge of one’s ethnic community (e.g., culture and history), a critical consciousness
that recognizes the class and racial hierarchies that oppress Chicanos, and a commitment to engage with the struggle to improve conditions and opportunities for Chicanos. Thus, ethnic identity appears to represent an important outcome that contributes to both educational success among Chicanos and the development of a social consciousness that maintains their connection to the collective needs of Chicanos.

My interviews and seminars with Cuban scholars offer clear evidence that Cuban schools provide a critical, historical consciousness that helps construct a strong Cuban identity for its students. This occurs consciously at all levels of the Cuban educational experience. Cuba’s educational system features curriculum content that includes the history of Cuba’s struggles against European and United States colonialism as well as post revolutionary U.S. policies that attempted to overthrow the Cuban government (interview with Felipe Pérez, Havana, 2011). Such a focus helps students to develop a historical, social, and critical consciousness that is essential for empowerment and a commitment to social transformation (Freire, 1970). As I learned during my 2015 visits to Cuban universities, History is one of the subtests that determine prospective students’ university admission, a testament to its importance. One of my interview subjects, professor Juan Nicolas Padrón, stated it this way:

In Cuban schools, cultural identity is developed from dialogue and participation. You have to teach students to reason, to think, to have their own dilemmas and projects (Havana, Cuba, 2011).

During a visit to the Enrique José Varona University of Pedagogical Sciences in the municipality of Marianao in Havana in 2015, I learned that Cuba’s teacher training emphasizes the development of Cuban national identity. The goal of such training is to develop citizens that can transmit a positive culture and improve Cuban society. Both faculty and student leaders of Cuba’s Communist Party are active at all universities to ensure a focus on Cuban identity and cultural development.

Thus, Cuban identity is constructed largely through a de-colonizing process that challenges the lack of social consciousness fostered by educational systems in a colonial situation (Freire, 1970; Souto-Manning, 2010). My conversations with Cubans as well as U.S. scholars doing work in Cuba (Casavantes-Bradford, 2009; Lutjens, 2011) reveal that a particular facet of such Cuban educational emphasis results in students’ perception that their educational achievement is associated with their identity as a Cuban citizen.
Chicanos might emulate this strategy through a focused, systematic campaign to link students’ educational achievement with a strong Chicano identity and commitment to Chicano community service. Such a campaign might make good use of research that documents the positive attributes of Chicano/Mexicano culture (e.g., “funds of knowledge” or “community wealth”) that serve as assets to Chicanos in educational institutions at all levels (Bernal, 2010; Moll et al., 1992; Ramirez, 1984; Solorzano, 2012). Efforts to increase this type of consciousness can and should be implemented in schools and colleges and throughout the Chicano community itself. Likewise, given the documented, positive benefits of diversity to educational excellence (Clayton Pederson, 2009; Milem et al., 2005), selective universities should utilize such specific Chicano community service as admission criteria.

Another element of the Cuban experience that contributes greatly to national identity is its internationally renowned music. Indeed, it is difficult to provide a substantive treatment of Cuban culture and/or identity without addressing the contribution of Cuban music. In my interviews with Grammy Award winning percussionist Oscar Valdez in 2009 and 2011, he spoke about the historic role of Cuban music in developing both national identity and Cuban culture. Efforts to define Cuban music seem to mirror the larger, complex process of Cuban identity development.

Guevara (2010) describes the historic process in which music becomes an important dimension of the debate to identify an “authentic” Cuban identity. The contemporary ethnomusicologist Raul Fernandez (2006) provides a perspective on the link between Cuban music and identity in his historical treatment of the evolution of Cuban music. Fernandez emphasizes the theme of music contributing to Cuban identity as it both reflects and shapes daily Cuban life:

Certainly more than any other cultural form, music has been constructed as a synonym for Cuban national identity by Cubans and non-Cubans alike. Cuban musicians in the twentieth century developed and continue to develop today a unique aesthetic, a musicalia not based on fantasies but rather grounded in the quotidian, particular Cuban reality (p. 42).

There is considerable potential for Chicano/Mexicano music to contribute to efforts to develop ethnic identity among Chicano students. These efforts can be embedded in
curriculum in schools, colleges, and universities as well as community organizations and even churches.

As described previously, research indicates that the maintenance of Chicano culture and identity plays a strong, adaptive role in the positive adjustment and achievement of Chicano students in higher education. It appears that the continued existence of a racial hierarchy in the U.S. (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Feagin, 2001), with Chicanos occupying a subordinate position, increases the need for a strong Chicano identity that is grounded in students’ consciousness of their community’s historic and contemporary struggles against racism. It is imperative that Chicano communities insist on such a de-colonizing role for the schools, colleges, and universities in which their children are enrolled. Historic and cultural consciousness is an essential element of a positive ethnic identity for Chicano students, and curriculum that emphasizes Chicano Studies (and other ethnic studies) has proven its effectiveness in contributing to such outcomes (Hu-Dehart, 2001; Ortiz and Santos, 2009; Slater, 2011). As found in Ortiz and Santos:

Matriculation in ethnic studies courses was an important vehicle by which students explored their ethnic identity. Such courses were instrumental in helping students to recognize internalized racism and to acknowledge the cost of assimilation. Students were challenged to reexamine their views on race and ethnicity by having access to accurate knowledge of group history. Furthermore, through such courses, students attained the tools to evaluate critically the systems that maintain racial stratification in American society (p. 321).

Sleeter’s research on ethnic studies echoed those conclusions:

Ethnic studies curricula are supported by research documenting a positive relationship between the racial/ethnic identity of students of color and academic achievement, as well as research on their impact . . . there is considerable research evidence that well-designed and well-taught ethnic studies curricula have positive academic and social outcomes for students (2011, p. vii-viii).

Such a consciousness-raising curriculum is linked to what Ladson-Billings (1995) describes as culturally relevant teaching: “a pedagogy of opposition not unlike critical
pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment,” (p. 488) an essential element of a truly emancipatory education for Chicano students.

I emphasize that Cuba’s strong, positive national identity development does not imply the existence of a one-dimensional identity among Cubans. In my interview with Dr. Lino Neira, a Cuban teacher and ethnomusicologist in 2009, he emphasized that “there is no single Cuban identity; there are many.” When I presented to a group of Cuban historians and pedagogists at the University of Havana in 2011, their subsequent comments emphasized the diversity within Cuban national identity. From their perspective, it seems that much of Cuban identity rests on a foundation of collective pride in Cuba’s historic and contemporary resistance to colonialism and imperialism (Morales, 2013). Ayorinde (2004) describes an “ideological continuity” along several dimensions of “Cubanidad” (Cuban national identity). These dimensions include a sense of struggle (“lucha”) and political activism for change as well as a value on Cuban solidarity and collectivism. These aspects of a developing Cuban identity were forged through almost one hundred years of revolutionary struggle for national sovereignty in the face of continued foreign attempts to colonize Cuba (Morales, 2013).

U.S. scholars such as Hernandez-Reguant (2009) also emphasize the diversity within Cuban identity. Hernandez-Reguant quotes Martínez-Furé:

There is, of course, no homogeneous Cuban culture, which is why I also think it’s a mistake to speak of a national cultural identity. There is no one national cultural identity . . . there are diverse national cultural identities, or to simplify, there is a multiethnic, pluricultural identity (p. 83).

Likewise, Bodenheimer’s dissertation (2010) on Cuban folkloric music described the regional dimension of Cuban identity (e.g., the province of Havana versus that of Matanzas) that exists alongside their national identity and in some contexts is more salient.

Chicanos’ ethnic identity also has such diverse dimensions. We share with Cubans the heritage of a multiracial people (largely indigenous and European but also African). As an ethnic group that occupies a subordinate position in class and racial hierarchies in the U.S., Chicanos also experience various dimensions of intersectionality that include gender, culture, generational status, immigration history, social class, and
race. Such intersectionality is increasingly recognized and analyzed in such academic areas as Latino Critical Theory (Delgado Bernal, 2010; Fernandez, 2002; Solorzano et al., 2005; Yosso, 2006). We also inherit regional elements of our heritage from the many Mexican states from which our families emigrate (e.g., Michoacan, Guanajuato, Jalisco). I will address in more detail a particularly salient dimension of identity that Chicanos share with Cubans, one that presents considerable complexity in terms of race, culture, history, and opportunity structures.

The Afro Cuban Dimension of Identity in Cuba and Indigenous Chicano Identity

I am not claiming that our country is a perfect model of equality and justice. We believed at the beginning that when we established the fullest equality before the law and complete intolerance for any demonstration of sexual discrimination in the case of women, or racial discrimination in the case of ethnic minorities, these phenomena would vanish from our society. It was some time before we discovered that marginality and racial discrimination with it are not something that one gets rid of with a law or even with ten laws, and we have not managed to eliminate them completely in forty years (Fidel Castro, quoted in Morales, 2013, p. 8).

With isolation and defiance, the Afro-Cuban heritage appears to have asserted its central place in a new definition of national politics and culture . . . It is our contention that few countries can boast the advances made in Cuba since the Cuban Revolution in breaking down institutional racism (p. 4-5) . . . Today Cuba has a blacker population than it had in 1959, a more educated black population, and one with a growing sense of pride in being black as well as being Cuban (Sarduy and Stubbs, 1993, p. 22).

We are Indian, blood and soul; the language and civilization are Spanish (Jose Vasconcelos, undated, cited in Valdez and Steiner, 1972, p. xvi).

A major area of complexity in Cuban identity development lies in the treatment of African heritage in such identity constructions. I will discuss this in connection with a similar complexity in Chicano identity—our indigenous heritage. The African presence in Cuba is profound in terms of both the number of African slaves brought to the island
and their deep participation in the unfolding of Cuban history. According to the historian Henry Louis Gates, “Between 1651 and 1866, Cuba received about 779,000 slaves from Africa—329,000 more than the total number that arrived in the United States—and most of these arrived after 1801” (Gates, 2011). My informants in Cuba spoke extensively about the prominent place of African Heritage in Cuban identity. Numerous scholars also describe the Afro Cuban dimension of Cuba’s identity development, including cultural, religious, and political dimensions (Bodenheimer, 2010; Fernandez, 2006; Gonzalez, 2006; Guevara, 2010; Hernandez-Ruguant, 2009; Morales Dominguez, 2013; Robaina, 2007; Sandoval, 2006). As described in Ayorinde’s (2004) history of Afro Cuban religion and identity, Cuba’s “official” response to its African heritage population has reflected the various epochs in Cuban history.

Ayorinde (2004) focuses on the tension between “dominant” notions of Cuban identity and the Afro Cuban influence on Cuban identity. According to Ayorinde and other scholars, during the early Spanish colonial period, the Spanish allowed Afro Cubans to remain in their own ethnic enclaves, facilitating the maintenance of their culture and religion (Gonzalez, 2006). By 1810, a cross-racial nationalism began to emerge in Cuba, united against Spanish rule. Cuban leaders such as José Antonio Maceo, an Afro Cuban, and José Martí supported such a cross-racial identity:

Together, Maceo and Martí argued that Cubans had a right to their own culture, one that they’d created and should share together—whether they were black, brown, or white. Spain was the enemy, they said, and racism was not the answer. As leaders, they were generations ahead of their time (Gates, 2011, p. 185).

The war against Spain ended in 1899 and was followed almost immediately by U.S. intervention (de la Fuente, 2001). Said Gates: “Cuba simply traded one form of colonialism for another” (2011, p. 189). The new constitution provided Cuban citizenship to all African born Cubans. Still they were denied fundamental economic and political power (Ayorinde, 2004). Clearly, U.S. colonialism created a severe setback in Cuba’s race relations. According to Gates, the “Americans” who invaded Cuba were upset to find Cuba’s integrated military: “So the Americans began reordering and resegregating Cuban society” (2011, p. 186). Racial discrimination became more blatant (Pérez, 1999). Morales summarizes the negative impact of this protracted racism on Cuba: “Much as it
was met with resistance, reinforced by the U.S. intervention and a period of neocolonial policy up to 1958, took racism, discrimination, and social exclusion to unfathomable depths, to the detriment not only of Cuban Blacks and mestizos but also to the vast mass of poor people” (2013, p. 114-115).

In 1959, Fidel Castro led a successful revolution against the U.S.-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. Most Cubans perceived the Cuban Revolution as a mandate for change and Cubans viewed themselves more willingly as change agents (Pérez, 1999). Gates summarized the new government’s first policies:

> Castro declared racism illegal, and he eliminated the many informal policies that discriminated against Afro Cubans. He desegregated social clubs, public parks, and beaches. He founded a new government agency to eliminate race discrimination in hiring. The government took over abandoned properties and homes, and it redistributed them to poor families—both white and black. Perhaps most significantly, Castro started providing education and health care to everyone in the country. This had a dramatic effect on the poorest people in Cuba—most of whom were black. He cast off elitist access to education, he made medical care free to everyone, and he seemed to be ushering in a promised era of Cubanidad (2011, p. 207).

A new notion of “patria” was of an all-inclusive community that would shape an emerging national identity. The new government wanted to maintain the positive elements of Cuban culture within the new national identity. Their discussions included race and racism but no new, specific legislation was constructed to address it. In 1975, the Communist Party Congress described what would be a continuing, official theme in the treatment of Afro Cuban culture, that its “folkloric” elements could be assimilated into national Cuban culture without the “mysticism” of religion. Ultimately the Cuban government wanted to assimilate Afro Cuban culture by secularizing it and making it part of the national folklore (Ayorinde, 2004). It was not until 1991 that the Communist Party Congress decided to open the party to religious believers, partly as a recognition of the increase in Afro Cuban religious practitioners (Sarduy and Stubbs, 1993).

Ayorinde believes that there has been a significant increase in Afro Cuban religious practice throughout Cuba during the 1990’s and beyond. She attributes some of this growth to the limited ability of the restructured revolutionary government to meet the
economic needs of its people, a situation exacerbated during the “Special Period” after the fall of the Soviet Union severely impacted the Cuban economy. For some, Afro Cuban religion provides answers to both material deprivation and social disorientation. According to Ayorinde, the government still rejects the idea of Afro Cuban culture belonging to blacks, favoring instead the treatment of Afro Cuban culture as a component of the national Cuban culture and identity.

The tension surrounding Afro Cuban religious practice is more complex than simply a dichotomy between African and European cultural paradigms. The Cuban revolution sought not only a change in power and resource allocation but a new way of thinking that de-constructed the effects of colonialism. To some, Afro Cuban culture seemed like the remnant of such colonial thinking and its religious elements smacked of the dogma that Cuban revolutionary thinking sought to transform in the interests of innovation and a re-constructed Cuban identity. In concluding her history of Afro Cuban culture, Ayorinde emphasizes the exceptional vitality and longevity of Afro Cuban culture and religion against formidable odds, testament to its relevance in modern Cuban society.

Clearly such scholarly treatments as well as numerous testimonials I received in my travels to Cuba attest to the continued dynamic nature of policy toward Afro Cuban culture and Afro Cubans themselves. While in Cuba, none of the scholars or non-scholars I spoke with ever denied the ongoing manifestations of racism that still exist in Cuba. From sources such as Juan Nícolas Padrón, a professor at Casa Las Americas, Lino Niera, an ethnomusicologist, and Maria Isabel Romero, a social worker, I was told that Cuba has made great strides in eradicating structural racism. To a great degree, race no longer plays a major role in structuring educational opportunity or occupational mobility in Cuba. There was some disagreement among my sources about the degree to which race affects Cubans’ participation in the increasingly lucrative tourist industry. From my everyday observations, it seemed that a large percentage of the Cubans I saw working in various aspects of tourism would be considered Black or mulatto. My sources generally related that much of Cuba’s racism exists at the social and interpersonal level although no racial segregation that could be likened to that found in the U.S. seems to proliferate in Cuba (Morales, 2013). As Juan Nicolas told me:
I invite you to go to the mountains in rural Cuba. Here everyone has the same rights. The workers, the people of the fields have same rights as everyone else. Blacks, the same. Is there racism here? There is. It has existed for centuries and it would be hypocritical on my part to say that racism is over. No, we are fighting to banish racism (Juan Nicolas Padrón, Casa las Americas, Havana, Cuba, 2011).

I heard disagreements among Cubans regarding the official treatment of Afro Cuban history and culture in contemporary Cuban schools. A Cuban woman who attended the Paradigmas Emancipatorias conference in Havana in 2009 told me that, “Thank God we are finally teaching Cuban students about our African heritage in schools.” However, Lino Neira told me that such content is still largely absent from the curriculum in Cuban schools. One of Gates’ research subjects told him: “We have to introduce more of the African mythology and African history in our schools” (Gates, 2011, p. 220). Perhaps at this historical point, such curriculum content is more present at the university level in Cuba. A 2012 posting in the on-line newspaper, “Havana Times” features a Cuban graduate student describing her course on race relations:

I’ve been attending a graduate level course every Thursday on “Notions of Race in Cuba.” . . . I’ve received a rich body of information, ranging from the origins of humankind, tracing the most significant expressions of racism in world history, to the particularities of race conflict in Cuba. According to the organizers (scholars Antonio J. Martinez and Esteban Morales, acting in conjunction with the School of Biology of the University of Havana), this is the first time a course of this nature has been offered, so being a part of this experience makes me very proud (Leyva, December 1, 2012).

At a 2007 symposium at Havana’s Center for the Study of the United States (Centro de Estudios Sobre los Estados Unidos), I spoke with Esteban Morales Dominguez, the instructor referenced above who is one of Cuba’s most prolific scholars on the issue of race on the island. He writes frequently on the need for more thorough discussion of race throughout Cuba and his recent publication chronicles Cuba’s inadequate effort to combat racism (Morales, 2013). In his analysis, Morales asserts that in the early days of the revolutionary Cuban government after 1959, little attention was given to racial equality despite the history of racism as a dimension of Cuba’s colonialism. As a national priority, resistance to U.S. imperialism overshadowed Cuban
concerns about racial equality. However, historic racism dictated that white and black Cubans did not start at the same place in 1959 in areas such as education (including the quality of schools), employment, and housing. Therefore, even Cuba’s herculean effort to enact economic equality could not by itself eradicate all vestiges of racism: “We should not confuse the degree of social justice achieved by the many racial groups that make up our society today with the disappearance of racism, because racism is a complex multidimensional and multi-causal matter that does not disappear solely through achievement of higher levels of social justice” (Morales, 2013, p. 21). Sarduy and Stubbs reached the same conclusion: “In striving for the unity of a people in revolution, no race-specific, affirmative action policy was implemented, with the exception of the mid-1980’s, when the Party stipulated that its leadership should reflect proportionally the rank-and-file membership of blacks and women” (1993, p. 9).

According to Morales, much of Cuba’s racism operated below the surface in non-institutional forms until the Special Period in the early 1990’s. The drastic decrease in resources during that period made Cubans feel more vulnerable to U.S. imperialism. As racism became more apparent, creeping into institutional life, the Cuban government seemed to perceive dialogue about Cuban racism as divisive and a threat to national unity. Morales asserts that Cuba’s failure to address race, including in school curriculum, undermines Afro Cuban identity, which he believes cannot be simply subsumed into Cuban national identity.

Despite an often-scathing critique of Cuba’s inadequate, official engagement with racism, Morales offers a number of comments that provide a broader, more informed context for his analysis:

As far as we can tell, Cuba surpasses any country of the hemisphere in meeting the challenge of racial discrimination (p. 70) . . . It is possible to affirm that institutionalized racism does not exist in Cuba (p. 71) . . . Racial hatred does not exist in Cuba. At each step of the way, we have experienced the unity of a common history that has been solidified in the years of revolutionary endeavors (p. 79) . . . Despite the racism that still exists in Cuban society, we can state that the black and mestizo population on the island is the healthiest and best educated mass of Afro-descendants in this hemisphere, and that no other country has done as much as Cuba to eliminate racial
discrimination and injustice (p. 97) . . . In Cuba today we are all ruled by a government, a state and a political leadership, that make our needs their own—particularly for the good of the poorest and formerly discriminated against strata (p. 124, Morales, 2013).

During my fifth visit to Cuba in 2015, I had a rare opportunity to hear an intergenerational discussion of race relations in Cuba at a visit to the Casa de Africa, a cultural center in Old Havana. The dialogue included Lydia Turner Martí, author of “Una Pedagogía de Ternura,” who grew up and attended schools in Cuba during the pre-Revolution era. It also included Gisela Morales Arandía, a younger woman educated in post-Revolutionary Cuba who was president of the “Articulación Regional Afrodescendiente para las Americas y el Caribe.” Dr. Turner Martí testified to the internalization of colonialism among many Afro Cubans before the Triumph of the Revolution in 1959, which contributed to low expectations by parents for the education of their children. She also cited studies in Cuba that document a decline in racial prejudice over generations since the Revolution. Dr. Turner Martí emphasized the degree to which Cuban schools have facilitated racial equity through teacher training and curricular reform, with recent changes in curriculum providing more documentation of the critical role of Afro Cuban culture throughout Cuban history. Such reform has impacted higher education in Cuba as well, with all major fields of study incorporating historical accounts that place increased emphasis on the Afro Cuban experience. According to Dr. Turner Martí, the African dimension is the strongest aspect of Cuban identity.

Ms. Morales Arandía was somewhat less effusive in describing Cuban efforts since 1959 to eradicate racial discrimination and prejudice. While noting the pattern of progress, she also discussed the increase in such negative racial dynamics after the advent of the “Special Period” in the early 1990’s. She stated that Cubans must remain vigilant to ensure that such problems do not become exacerbated. Thus, Ms. Morales Arandía’s organization advocates for continued efforts in Cuba to eradicate racial prejudice and disparities in opportunities. She emphasized Cuba’s unique ability to address directly such racial issues through research and advocacy.

While a more thorough analysis of race in Cuba is beyond the scope of this paper, I address the Afro Cuban dimension of identity because it seems that Chicanos face a
similar challenge in the construction of our own ethnic identity. Like Cubans, Chicanos represent a mixed-race people. The Spanish invasion and colonization of México’s indigenous residents (Acuña, 2011) resulted in a largely mestizo population. At least, such is the popular perception. Native American scholar Jack Forbes challenged the notion of Mexicanos as mestizos (1973). He emphasized that despite the decimation of indigenous peoples in México by Spanish brutality and disease, the number of Spanish settlers in México, compared to that of indigenous peoples, was never sufficient to enact a process of “mestizaje” (racial mixture) such that today’s Mexicanos are actually mestizo. The Mexican anthropologist Gonzalo Bonfil Batalla, in México Profundo (1996), also challenged the notion that Mexicanos are a mestizo race. He emphasized the dominance of the indigenous in Mexican race and culture, referring to Mexicanos as de-Indianized Indians. The term was reinforced almost twenty years later by Gonzalez who used the term “de-Indigenized” to explain how Mexicanos and Chicanos are “disallowed to connect to what helped their ancestors make sense of their place in the world, their specific spiritual teachings that help them know themselves” (Gonzales, 2012, p. 222). Likewise, Chicano playwright Luis Valdez described the historical process that resulted in a largely indigenous Mexican population:

> During the three hundred years of Nueva España, only 300,000 gachupines (Spaniards) settled in the New World. . . There were so few white people at first, that ten years after the Conquest in 1531, there were more black men in Mexico than white. . . Miscegenation went joyously wild, creating the many shapes, sizes, and hues of La Raza. But the predominant strain of the mestizaje remained Indio. By the turn of the nineteenth century, most of the people in Mexico were mestizos with a great deal of Indian blood (Valdez and Steiner, 1972, p. xv).

Clearly, any systematic effort by communities and/or educational institutions to facilitate a positive ethnic identity construction among Chicano youth must attend to the indigenous dimension of such identity. An application of Freire’s description of the effects of colonialism would recognize that among Chicanos, the Spanish/European dimension of our identity is often perceived more positively than our indigenous roots. One only need watch a few “novelas” (Spanish language television soap operas) to
witness the privileging of Spanish physical features—light skin, hair, and eyes—at the expense of an indigenous appearance. The use of the term “Hispanic,” largely promoted by the U.S. federal government, also glorifies Latinos’ Spanish heritage at the expense of either African or indigenous heritage (Smith, 2015). I argue that a process of de-colonizing education for Chicanos must deconstruct such embedded notions of the superiority of European race and culture while recognizing the historic contribution and present relevance of our indigenous heritage to Mexicano/Chicano history and culture. If, as Ayorinde states, African heritage is the core of Afro Cuban, or perhaps all Cubans’ identity, then indigenous heritage is equally central to the identity of Chicanos (Batalla, 1996; Carrasco, 2008; Forbes, 1973).

Such a process of de-colonizing identity construction among Chicanos can build on the lessons learned from the strategies utilized by Cubans to preserve and make visible their Afro Cuban heritage. I emphasize that Afro Cuban culture, including and perhaps in particular, religion, is not practiced only by “Black” Cubans. Lino Neira, the light skinned, green-eyed Cuban ethnomusicologist who describes himself as “white,” told me that he practiced the Afro Cuban religion called “regla de ocha” (or popularly as Santería). Likewise, a Cuban taxi driver who would be classified as “white” within the U.S. racial hierarchy, also told me that he was a practitioner of Afro Cuban religion. According to Lino (and Ayorinde, 2004), such practice is common among “white” Cubans as is a hybrid (or syncretized) religious practice that combines Catholicism and Afro Cuban religion (Gonzales, 2006). The Harvard scholar, Henry Louis Gates, who likely visited Cuba at the same time period as I did, made the same observation: “modern-day Cuba embraces Santería as a uniquely Cuban creation. Whites are even joining the faith in great numbers . . . for every Afro Cuban who is initiated today, there are four whites” (2011, p. 192).

Certainly, acknowledging the importance of indigenous culture, from which religion is inseparable, among Chicanos is neither simple nor a new idea. An obvious area of complexity lies in the reality that as a result of colonialism, the great majority of Chicanos affiliate with the Catholic religion (Gonzalez, 2006). However, as described by religious scholars such as Elizondo (1988), the Catholic religion has largely failed Chicanos in their struggle for empowerment and de-colonization. Even the National

Although religious preferences are not generally the focus of academic papers on education, any work that addresses the needs of a subordinate community must acknowledge the elements that contribute to its oppression. Some scholars have acknowledged the role of religion in the educational achievement of Chicanos and other Latinos (Canul, 2003). Hernandez and Lopez (2007) identify religion as a variable that can impact the postsecondary retention of Chicanos/Latinos. They conclude:

The significance of religion to the Latino community cannot be overlooked when examining their participation in academe . . . As such spiritual matters often weave themselves into the daily lives and decisions made by Latino college students . . . The role of religion and spirituality is an area that needs further research in order to understand how spiritual matters are utilized to make meaning of the collegiate experience and whether spirituality and religion impact Latino student success or hinder the retention of this community (p. 116-117).

In addition to identifying oppressive structural barriers present in Chicano communities, directions toward more emancipatory strategies must be identified and discussed. In this case, one must recognize that despite its seeming impracticality, the practice of indigenous religion and culture may be a more liberating strategy than the practice of religious denominations the hierarchies of which are controlled by whites, e.g., Catholicism. Such de-colonizing religious strategies are clearly present among some Mexicans in both México and the U.S. In Mexico City, there are Mexicanos that openly practice a religion that they believe represents indigenous groups such as the Aztecs (Moctezuma, 2008).

In the spirit of phenomenology (Merriam, 1998), one might assume that such practices have real meaning for the practitioners themselves. Carrasco (2008), from the Harvard Divinity School, offers a theological and historic analysis of how Aztec and other indigenous imagery shaped early notions of a Chicano identity in the U.S.:

I want to reflect on the ways that Mexican American artists and intellectuals have imagined a place for Aztlan, the symbolic homeland of the ancient Aztecs, in their constructions of a Chicano identity in the
United States. Remembering the deep power that symbols of space and time have had in human culture, I want to illustrate how the indigenous, mythic place of Aztlan has been recalled to life through Chicano arts, politics and imaginations. We will see that Moctezuma’s México of the early sixteenth century continues to have a strong hold in the art and imagery of Mexican Americans in the contemporary United States. As Chicano author Rafael Pérez-Torres (1995; 5) writes, Aztlan has been “a central image in the intellectual and social thought of Chicanos/as” (p. 225).

From personal experience as a participant, I know that a large network connects practitioners of “Danza Azteca” from Mexico City to various states throughout the U.S. Southwest, including Arizona, California, and New México. Writing in the popular magazine “Latin Beat,” Varela (2005) describes a large, annual gathering of Danzas Aztecas in Oakland, California. He also describes a historic process of cultural survival for México’s indigenous religions that parallels that of Afro Cuban religions, with “secret societies” and “underground movements” that included the synchronization of Catholic saints such as the Virgen de Guadalupe with such indigenous deities as Tonantzin. In her article on “Chicano-Indigenous pedagogy,” Villanueva cites a number of scholarly analyses of Danza Azteca, e.g., Hernandez Guerrero (2010) and Valadez (2012), cited in Villanueva, 2012. She identifies the historic contribution of Andrés Segura Granados, a danzante who earned autonomy from the danzante structure in Mexico City and helped to bring danzante to the U.S. Southwest during the 1960’s.

In San Diego, California, the Mexica’yotl Indio Cultural Center works to preserve the culture, religion, and language of indigenous Mexicanos. According to their web site:

For nearly 31 years, the Mexi’cayotl Indio Cultural Center (MICC) has been dedicated to teaching and preserving the indigenous cultures of México and the Southwestern United States . . . Through its weekly classes in traditional Azteca dance and music; classes in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs; special events programming; and traditional dance celebrations MICC proudly shares these traditions with the San Diego region . . . Annually, MICC brings together over 200 dancers from throughout the United States and México to participate in dance ceremonials in the San Diego community (Pedro Anaya, personal correspondence, July 18, 2011).
This relatively small but dedicated network of Chicanos that practice the religion (and other elements of culture) of indigenous Mexicanos indicates the potential for a larger movement that might link such practices with larger concepts of identity and educational success. Such efforts might achieve the success of similar Cuban efforts to maintain the specificity of Afro Cuban religion as an element of national pride. Lino Neira told me that Afro Cuban religious practitioners are organized, with organizations such as the Sociedad Cultural Yoruba. Lino spoke about the La Casa de Africa museum in Old Havana (that I visited in 2015), founded in 1986, that showcases Cuba’s African roots through its vast collection of ethnography from Africa. He also emphasized the important role of national celebrations of Afro Cuban religion, often “syncretized” with Catholic celebrations, in maintaining such religious practices. While in Cuba, one of Gates subjects told him:

African roots in Cuba are not only rooted in religion. They can be seen not only in religious ceremonies but also in its festivities, dances, songs, in its way of thinking. Africa is present in Cuba’s daily life (Gates, 2011, p. 192).

_The Mexican American Studies Program in Tucson: A Case Study_

The association between indigenous heritage, Chicano identity, and educational success can be is seen in the highly successful “Mexican American Studies” program (MAS) often referred to as Raza Studies, implemented in the Tucson Unified School District (Cabrera et al., 2012). A description of TUSD’s Raza Studies is found on its web site. The model is clearly informed by theory and research on effective educational practices with Chicanos and other subordinate student groups. Its de-colonizing elements are obvious:

The objective of the Mexican American Studies Department is to create a truly equitable educational ecology. We offer our students:

- Academic rigor
- The opportunity to develop a critical consciousness
- Social and academic scaffolds to increase student success

Developed from research within the Social Justice Education Project, the model fosters Critically Compassionate Intellectualism. This model includes the following components:
A counter-hegemonic curriculum
A pedagogy based on the theories of Paolo Freire
Student interactions centered on authentic caring

A number of scholars have studied the MAS program and analyzed the elements that made it successful. Using a participant-observation methodology, Villanueva (2013) examined the program’s “critically compassionate intellectualism” and the role of indigenous Mexican heritage in the curriculum and pedagogy. According to Villanueva, the MAS curriculum is “culturally and historically relevant to students whose cultures and histories have been made to seem—by systematic hegemonic discourse—deficient, illegitimate, and at-risk for failure” (p. 24). Villanueva also uses the term “barrio pedagogy” in referring to the importance of indigenous knowledge in the MAS program, a dimension that decolonizes the curriculum and subsequently, the classroom.

Villanueva analyzes a specific application of such indigenous Mexican knowledge, the four manifestations of Tezcatlipoca found in The Codex Borgia (Diaz et al., 1993; cited in Villanueva, 2013), a Mesoamerican manuscript. These manifestations include Tezcatlipoca (self-reflection), Huitzilopochtli (the will to act), Quetzalcoatl (precious and beautiful knowledge), and Xipe Totec (transformation). In the MAS program, these indigenous citations are used as a sociohistorical lesson but are also analyzed for their applicability in contemporary Chicano life. Villanueva concludes, “These themes of community, respectful relationships, love, and self-responsibility have also been central to the MAS educators’ curriculum, which has not only emphasized critical thinking but a critical consciousness requiring accountability to self and others” (p. 35).

Paris (2012) analyzed the MAS program for its contribution to pedagogy that both honors and develops the cultural capital of Chicano students. In an earlier section of this paper, I referenced Ladson-Billings’ concept of “culturally relevant pedagogy” (1995). This conception of pedagogy is described as containing three major dimensions: “building upon students’ experiences and perspectives, developing students’ critical consciousness, and creating caring academic environments” (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014, p. 113).
Paris extends this principle by describing “culturally sustaining pedagogy,” instruction that explicitly aims to validate and strengthen the community culture of Chicanos and similarly situated groups:

The term *culturally sustaining* requires that our pedagogies be more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people—it requires that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence . . . That is, culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling (Paris, 2012, p. 95).

Paris reports his positive evaluation of the Tucson Raza Studies Program:

“. . . having met and presented with teachers and students in the program and having viewed and read interviews and presentations by teachers and students in the program, TUSD’s Mexican American Studies program represents, in my opinion, the enactment of robust culturally sustaining pedagogies” (p. 96).

Tintiангco-Cubales et al. underscore the MAS program’s strategy to conduct research on their own community, a project that facilitated the development of students’ “critical consciousness and agency” (2014, p. 116). Likewise, Cammarota (2010) describes the positive results of the MAS curriculum for Chicano students in Tucson:

The curriculum . . . requires students to adopt a serious academic subjectivity to analyze and address social conditions that may undermine their future opportunities . . . Many students in the first cohort to participate in the program were labeled “at risk” of dropping out. These students not only graduated but also excelled with the advanced-level course work. Their exposure to advanced-level work was the best measure for preventing their premature departure from high school as well as preparation for college (p. 87).

So successful was the model, and therefore threatening to conservative whites, that state lawmakers passed legislation, HB 2281, that eliminated virtually any form of Chicano Studies in Arizona. According to de los Ríos (2014), the MAS was described by its critics as “un-American,” “divisive,” promoting “sedition,” and encouraging students to “overthrow the government.” Such racist accusations were alleged despite empirical
evidence to the contrary, including a quantitative study commissioned by Arizona education officials that concluded, “These results (measuring the program’s effect on student achievement) suggest that there is a consistent, positive relationship between MAS participation and student academic performance” (Cabrera et al., 2012). The supporters of Tucson’s MAS program have challenged the Arizona law in court.

The MAS program developed and implemented in Tucson public schools has very important implications for educational strategies that seek to increase educational achievement among Chicano students, including an education that develops socially conscious students committed to improving their community. The dimension of “authentic caring” described in the MAS program (Villanueva, 2013) strongly echoes my Cuban informants’ descriptions of “caring” Cuban teachers. As noted previously, one of the presenters in my Búsquedas Investigativas program in Havana in 2015 was Lydia Turner Marti, author of Una Pedagogía de Ternura (A Pedagogy of Tenderness). The title evokes Cuba’s emphasis on teachers that have an authentic love and caring for their students and their families. The MAS model also describes a curriculum that is “culturally and historically relevant” and “social justice centered” (MAS web site). Such a curriculum combined with culturally appropriate pedagogy, holds potential to ensure that Chicano students at all levels receive an education that provides them knowledge of indigenous culture (e.g., values, family structure, music, art, religion). In turn, such knowledge could form a significant dimension of a positive Chicano ethnic identity that replicates the effects of Cuban national identity: a collective consciousness and commitment to community that is manifested in higher rates of educational achievement.

I emphasize that such critical curriculum and pedagogy for Chicanos should incorporate the indigenous dimensions of our community in a manner that, rather than relegate them to mere folklore, validates their relevance, utility, and intrinsic worth. This is a lesson learned from Cuba’s preservation of Afro Cuban culture and heritage. Villanueva emphasizes the eclectic nature of such an educational approach, citing Gonzalez and Gonzalez’ example of “harmonizing pedagogy centered on love and resistance,” a pedagogy that includes “intersected Maya and Nahua concepts, Paulo Friere’s humanizing education and levels of consciousness, Critical Race Theory, Native
American Studies, and Chicano Studies” (Gonzalez and Gonzalez, 2011; cited in Villanueva, 2013, p. 36).

The manner in which such an education is provided raises at least two questions. One concerns the feasibility of infusing something like Tucson’s “Raza Studies” model in public schools that serve other children as well and are likely to be governed by white school board members and administered by white school district administrators. Unfortunately, the opposition to Tucson’s program by conservative whites is likely to be the standard reaction. After-school and weekend education programs offered by non-profit community organizations such as San Diego’s Teatro Izcalli and Escuelita Aztlán, respectively, have greater promise for the autonomy necessary for the non-compromising implementation of such curriculum. However, their range and ability to access Chicano students is considerably less than that of public schools. Another alternative might be found in charter schools that enroll large populations of Chicano students in accredited institutions that have much greater autonomy to provide more innovative curriculum (and more autonomy to hire Chicano teachers) than standard public schools. Admittedly, the option of charter schools is not without controversy as corporate interests sometimes utilize charter schools to privatize education in a manner that is dysfunctional for Chicano communities (Zavala, 2015).

Given the importance of identity development in higher education scholarship, colleges and universities should also implement broad strategies to develop the ethnic identity of their Chicano students including its indigenous dimension. Such institutional strategies can include academic courses and departments (e.g., Chicano Studies), cultural centers, ethnic themed dormitories, speakers, workshops, symposia, support for ethnic student organizations, etc. (Ortiz and Santos, 2009; Smith, 2015). Fertile ground for such interventions might be found in Hispanic Serving Institutions that face an imperative to provide supportive institutional conditions that maximize outcomes for Chicano students (Hurtado and Ruíz, 2012).

As framed by Ayorinde (2004) and addressed by my interview subjects in Havana, this issue contains much the same question faced by Cuba in its policy toward Afro Cuban culture: is Mexican indigenous culture, including religion, merely folklore to be studied and appreciated as part of our rich history? Or should that same culture be
actively embraced and practiced by Chicanos as part of a larger community strategy for emancipation, de-colonization, and empowerment? According to my Cuban informants, there is no unanimity among Cubans regarding this question. While the Cuban government certainly provides no endorsement for an Afro Cuban or any other religion, it is clear that within Cuban civic life, the practice of Afro Cuban religion has not been slowed by the Cuban revolutionary government or devastating financial conditions. Such Afro Cuban religious practice is found among a range of occupational categories from teachers to taxi drivers and a range of racial phenotypes among Cubans that includes “Blacks,” “mulatos,” and “whites.” The awareness, and perhaps even the practice of Mexican indigenous culture might prove equally ubiquitous among Chicanos if catalysts such as Tucson’s Raza Studies establish wider awareness of its role in educational advancement and community empowerment.

Community and institutional efforts to facilitate the ethnic identity of Chicano students face the challenge of our community’s great diversity. Chicano students vary widely based on such variables as residence (barrio or non-barrio), historic development of state and regional communities, generational status, immigration status, etc. These variables impact the degree to which Chicano Studies and similar educational strategies resonate with both students and their parents. An analysis of Freire (1970; Darder, 2005) indicates that a population colonized in the manner of Chicanos would experience some degree of resistance to a de-colonizing educational strategy. Educators must be prepared to deal with resistance and provide historic, research, and theoretical justification for their empowering strategies.

Sleeter’s study (2011) documents the positive effects of a curriculum in which Chicanos and other underrepresented students see themselves in all their diversity and complexity. Such elements of a de-colonizing education can help Chicano students develop an ethnic identity that reflects Lutjens’ description of Cuban identity: “proud, reflective, and egalitarian” (2007, p. 17). A strong ethnic identity among Chicanos that recognizes and practices our indigenous heritage, and a critical analysis of U.S. racism, are not ends in themselves. Rather, they contribute to the necessary but insufficient condition for the development and implementation of economic, political, cultural, and
educational strategies that maximize the collective empowerment and self-determination of Chicano communities.

CONCLUSION

... reversing the under-education of Latino students will lead not only to increased tax revenues and decreased social service expenditures, but also to an economy that will continue to grow rather than stagnate or decline, and to the healthier social conditions fostered by a society that can gainfully employ its youth rather than leaving them to the streets to find less productive ways to sustain themselves. Moreover, it will prepare Latino youth to participate fully in American democracy, and increase the likelihood that they will vote and make meaningful contributions to their communities. Subsequent generations of all Americans stand to reap enormous benefits from these steps toward a healthier society and more robust economy (Gándara and Contreras, 2009, p. 330).

In her analysis of education policy and its failure to lift the achievement of Chicanos, Contreras (2011) describes a perplexing contradiction in the rapidly increasing size of this underachieving population and the distinct lack of public investment in the education of Chicanos. Contreras describes this policy inertia as “demographic denial.” The lack of public policy focus on Chicanos is especially perplexing when considering that virtually all indicators of socioeconomic progress for Chicanos remain low. Mariscal chastises many contemporary scholars of Chicano Studies who claim that current conditions in the Chicano community lack the urgency that existed during the Chicano Movement in the late 1960’s to early 1970’s (Mariscal, 2005). Mariscal points out:

Faced with a reinvigorated U.S. imperialism, the plight of indigenous people in Mexico, the situation of the Chicano/a working poor, the victims of police brutality and corruption, the thousands of incarcerated Chicano/a youth, the assault by military recruiters on Latino/a communities, the violence and death along the U.S./Mexico border, and the exclusion of Chicana/o students from prestigious universities and professional schools in Texas and California, the implication that at the beginning of the twenty-first century Chicano/a Studies scholars need not feel a sense of urgency can only be understood as denial or evasion (p. 272).
Bonilla-Silva adds that Chicanos and other underrepresented communities, particularly African Americans, continue to have poverty rates considerably higher than that of whites and have accumulated considerably less wealth and lower earnings than whites. Chicanos have less access to the housing market and suffer from a “highly racialized criminal court system” (2006, p. 2). Such stark, embedded indicators of inequality can only be attributed to racism (Darder, 2011; Navarro, 2005), perhaps a new form of “racism without racists” or “color blind racism” denied by most whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Indeed, it is a systemic racism embedded in all aspects of U.S. life, including its educational institutions at all levels (Feagin, 2002). In California, where over half of school age children are Latino and their educational achievement remains well below that of whites, the state now invests more public funds in prisons than in higher education (Weintraub, 2011). As Charles et al. (2009) and Bowen et al. (2010) describe, even in the rarefied air of selective institutions of higher education, Chicanos and other underrepresented students face barriers largely unknown to white students. The increasingly extensive literature on campus racial climate illuminates the struggle waged by people of color to desegregate such higher education institutions and ensure equitable conditions for historically underrepresented students (Dyer-Barr, 2010; Harper and Hurtado, 2010; Hernandez and Lopez, 2007; Hurtado et al., 2008; Milem et al., 2005; Ortiz and Santos, 2009).

In response to my research questions, my exploratory study of Cuba’s educational system and process of national identity development have confirmed a number of previously established directions toward solutions to the educational crisis among Chicanos. These include the important contribution of constructing a critical/analytical ethnic identity, a challenging and supportive curriculum at all educational levels, the effectiveness of institutional validation of Chicanos and their culture, the efficacy of Chicano Studies and caring Chicano educators that serve as transformational role models, etc. As a Chicano educator, I find significant value in the confirmation of these strategies within the context of Cuba’s struggle for sovereignty and empowerment, particularly since such strategies have not been applied broadly with Chicano students in the U.S.

In addition, the Cuban experience reveals other directions, sometimes counter-intuitive, that have not received the same degree of attention in U.S. scholarship on
Chicano education. These include the impact of state-driven social capital (and presumably cultural capital) that transcends the capacity of working-class Chicano families and inner-city schools to transmit such capital. It also includes the finding that an uncompromising “top down” policy on uniform standards, curriculum, and institutional administration need not result in a lack of democratic participation in the educational process among all stakeholders, e.g., parents, students, teachers/professors, and administrators. In the context of the United States’ racial hierarchy, such uniformity in institutional conditions may be necessary to avoid the hindering conditions, i.e., institutional racism, for Chicanos generally found in schools, colleges, and universities.

The long, complex struggle to achieve a full recognition of the African dimension of Cuban identity provides an especially important direction to the Chicano community’s need to acknowledge, reconcile, and foreground our indigenous heritage. In more general terms, the national identity achieved by Cubans has an important dimension of critical analysis that constantly examines Cuba’s place in the world within the context of global capitalism. In order to achieve the educational benefits of a strong ethnic identity, such an identity constructed by Chicanos must have a similar critical dimension that remains focused on the subject position of Chicanos within the class and racial hierarchies of U.S. society, and the subsequent need to create societal and institutional transformation.

After the triumph of the Cuban revolution in 1959, the new Cuban government recognized the necessity for an ongoing revolution that was economic, political, and cultural. As Fidel Castro described in his biography, education has to be a major part of that multi-dimensional process (Castro and Ramonet, 2006). As part of the same theme, Persell’s (1977) theory still maintains poignancy through its emphasis on a multi-level analysis of educational inequality that does not isolate institutions apart from the influence of their society. However, Persell also described the dialectical process in which oppressive spaces such as schools and universities are also sites of resistance. Thus, educational institutions specifically hold potential to interrupt the circular process of such inequality. Schools, colleges, and universities can make structural changes in values, curriculum, pedagogy, staffing, student enrollment, the construction of policy, etc. to increase Chicano students’ educational achievement and the deep, meaningful learning that helps de-colonize such students and their communities. Such structural
change represents the institutional transformation in higher education defined by Eckel and Kezar: “the type of change that affects the institutional culture is deep and pervasive, is intentional, and occurs over time” (Eckel and Kezar, 2003; cited in Harper and Hurtado, 2010). Cuba’s model of education, along with Smith’s review of scholarly literature on the success of underrepresented students in higher education (2015), reminds us that we hold the answers to such success in our grasp. The future will indicate the degree to which policy makers have the will to enact them.

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