

# The Role of Family, Friends, and Colleagues Supporting Workers and Learners Navigating College

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## Abstract

Nationwide, almost one in two of full-time undergraduate students are employed. This qualitative study investigates how 69 workers and learners, who were full-time students in a Los Angeles County public college or university and who had a job, leveraged the wealth of knowledge and resources embedded in their familial and peer networks to strategically manage the demands of school and work. Informed by the theoretical frameworks of funds of knowledge and community cultural wealth, we illustrate the diverse ways family and peers contributed to the success of workers and learners, including sharing college-specific knowledge, providing financial resources, facilitating access to employment opportunities, and providing job-specific knowledge. Findings shed light on the ways workers and learners strategically manage their worlds of school and work with support from their family and peers.

*Keywords:* workers and learners, familial resources, funds of knowledge, community cultural wealth

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## The Role of Family, Friends, and Colleagues Supporting Workers and Learners Navigating College

In the United States, many students, regardless of socioeconomic status, need to work to cover their expenses as they attend school. Gone are the days when working over the summer would cover a student's college tuition. Nationally, an estimated 78% of the part-time undergraduate population works, compared to 40% of full-time undergraduate students who are employed (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). College students who work tend to be concentrated in low-wage service jobs, specifically in retail and food sectors (Carnevale et al., 2015; Carnevale & Smith, 2018; Conway et al., 2021; Tannock, 2001). Some scholars assert that favorable job conditions for workers and learners can positively influence educational success and career advancement (Piña et al., 2022; Remenick & Bergman, 2021). However, others find that students who work long hours—especially in jobs unrelated to their careers or campus experiences—have lower college completion rates. This is especially true for students who work more than 15 hours a week (Blanchard Kyte, 2017; Carnevale et al., 2015; Carnevale & Smith, 2018; Logan et al., 2016). To date, there is very little known about how working college students juggle their academic demands and job responsibilities. Much less is known about the role that families, peers/friends, coworkers, and educators play in supporting college students who must work to cover education expenses and to sustain themselves.

Families, including parents and older siblings relations, have been found to play an essential role in supporting working college students' academic success (Sax & Weintraub, 2014; Smith, 2020). Familial support is especially important for the success of first-generation college students (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; Capannola & Johnson, 2022; Kiyama & Harper, 2018; LeBoeuf & Dworkin, 2021; Smith, 2023; Tang et al., 2013). Similarly, college instructors and staff have been identified as important figures who support the well-being of college students (EAB, 2016; Hempel et al., 2020). Much of the research which examines the role of familial involvement (Kiyama & Harper, 2018) and the role of college mentors (Law et al., 2020; Morales, 2009; Morales et al., 2022) has focused on the experiences of students who are first-generation, low-income, and students of color. Missing from these conversations are workers and learners. Thus, more research is needed to examine the resources and relationship building strategies that workers and learners apply to help them navigate the two, often competing, worlds of work and school. More specifically, additional research is needed to examine the role that both family and peers play in supporting this student group in managing their employment realities and succeeding throughout their college careers.

In response to the deficit paradigms that have existed in higher education about minoritized college students (Pérez et al., 2017), we use two asset-based theoretical frameworks, funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), to frame our analysis of interviews with 69 workers and learners. These two frameworks highlight both the rich cultural and social resources workers and learners possess as well as the barriers that hinder their academic success. Given the

prevalence of workers and learners on college campuses today and their unique needs regarding access to financial resources and pertinent college information, this study answers the following research questions:

- (1) What are the knowledge and resources that workers and learners possess within their familial and peer networks?
- (2) How do workers and learners activate and mobilize these available relationships and resources to succeed in college?

## Literature Review

### Terminology

A variety of terms identify the population we call workers and learners. Some scholars focus on “working students” to distinguish students who work, and the impact work has on their educational experiences (Remenick & Bergman, 2021). Others use the term “earners and learners” to describe the experiences of college students who work (Núñez & Sansone, 2016). A few use the terms “working learners” to refer to students who need to work at a younger age and “learning workers” for more experienced workers who also attend college (Carnevale et al., 2015; Carnevale & Smith, 2018). Like Blanchard Kyte (2017), we use the term “workers and learners” to convey the simultaneity of pursuing education and engaging in wage labor. We prefer “workers and learners” because it allows us to bring students’ worker identity to the forefront, an identity that is often invisibilized in conversations pertaining to college students’ educational experiences.

### *Workers and Learners*

For years, scholars have noted the increased number of workers and learners on college campuses. This need to work has been attributed to ever-increasing college costs (Perna & Odle, 2020) and decreased state financial investments in higher education (Cummings et al., 2021). Moreover, the federal Pell Grant, which was created in 1973 to help low-income families access college, has lost its purchasing power (Heller, 2022). Whereas the Pell Grant once covered more than 70% of college costs in the 1980s, now the maximum Pell Grant award covers less than one third of the cost to attend a four-year public university (University of California, 2022). This trend has meant that many students, both from low-income and middle-income backgrounds, have had to work to secure the necessary financial resources to pay for their college education (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

Pursuing a college education without the necessary financial means is complicated by the fact that many workers and learners are burdened with other financial responsibilities. In fact, many workers and learners are not only responsible for paying their college tuition and fees, but also associated living expenses, whether that entails living on-campus or off-campus (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Other workers and learners work to

support their families (Melguizo & Chung, 2012). Regardless of the type of institution students attend (two-year or four-year college), students and their families have for years been burdened with the skyrocketing prices now associated with a postsecondary degree (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; King, 2006).

Not only are more students working, but they are working longer hours than the recommended 10 to 19 hours per week (Carnevale et al., 2015; Dundes & Marx, 2006; Perna, 2010a). A majority of both full-time and part-time students are working more than 20 hours (see Table 1). To date, scholars have found that working more than 20 hours per week has negative consequences for students' educational experiences, including their academic performance (Miller et al., 2008; Perna & Odle, 2022; Wenz & Yu, 2010), campus involvement (Elling & Elling, 2000), academic motivation (Jach & Trolan, 2020), mental well-being (Barone, 2017; Peltz et al., 2020), and college persistence (Bozick, 2007; Darolia, 2014; Douglas & Attewell, 2019; Neyt et al., 2019). This is especially true for students who are first-generation college students, low-income, and historically underrepresented (Carnevale et al., 2015) and for students who work off-campus (Logan et al., 2016) or attend school on a part-time basis (see Table 2).

**Table 1. Percentage of Undergraduate Students Who Were Employed by Enrollment Status and Hours Worked Per Week, 2010, 2015, and 2020**

	Enrolled Full-Time			Enrolled Part-Time		
	2010	2015	2020	2010	2015	2020
Total Percent Employed	41	43	40	75	78	74
Less Than 10 Hours	4	4	3	2	2	1
10–19 Hours	10	11	9	5	6	6
20–34 Hours	16	16	15	22	25	26
More Than 35 Hours	10	10	10	43	44	40

*Note.* Full-time is defined as enrolled in 12 or more credit hours. Totals may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Adapted from *National Center for Education Statistics, The Condition of Education, 2022*.

**Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Undergraduate Students Who Were Employed by Enrollment Status, 2020**

	Enrolled Full-Time	Enrolled Part-Time
Gender		
Male	35	75
Female	43	73
Race		
White	42	78
Black	33	70
Hispanic	43	74
Asian	28	56
Pacific Islander	-	-
American Indian/Alaska Native	21	-
Two or more races	40	-
Age		
16 to 24	37	71
25 to 29	56	78
30 to 39	55	80
40 to 49	58	78
50 to 64	61	52

*Note.* Full-time is defined as enrolled in 12 or more credit hours. Totals may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. From *National Center for Education Statistics, The Condition of Education, 2022*.

Though securing employment is an important tool that can give students opportunities to explore their academic and professional interests (Carnevale et al., 2015), many workers and learners find themselves working in the food and retail sector (Ángeles et al., 2020). The disconnect between their current work and college studies forecloses the ability of workers and learners to obtain employment upon graduation in their desired career field (Jensen et al., 2011). Despite this disconnect, some authors argue that workers and learners are reaping benefits from working while learning (Douglas & Attewell, 2019). Workers and learners' ability to balance both work and school serves as an "indicator of dependability and self-discipline" (Douglas & Attewell, 2019, p. 11). Workers and learners who can successfully attain their college degree while working and gain experience in their chosen field seem to benefit the most. Indeed, the type of experience recent graduates possess seems to matter for employers (Fischer, 2013).

Though past research continues to shed light on the benefits and the challenges that working while pursuing a college degree present, research has not yet fully explored

the resources and relationships workers and learners leverage in order to meet the demands of both work and school. Understanding how workers and learners rely on their relationships with families, peers, and colleagues to strategically manage the often competing demands of work and school offers unique insights into the ways in which employers and college faculty and staff might better serve this growing population of working students on college campuses. The purpose of this study is to understand the ways in which workers and learners access and activate their social networks and relationships as they pursue a college education and simultaneously work. Among a diverse group of students attending two-year and four-year public college institutions in Los Angeles County, we examine the social relations and support strategies workers and learners used to inform their work, college, and career pathways. This study explores the role multiple trusted relations like parents, siblings, peers, and colleagues play in assisting workers and learners as they pursue employment and their college and career goals.

## Theoretical Framework

At a time when workers and learners face challenges in pursuing and completing their college education, it is important to highlight the “systemic factors that perpetuate deficit thinking and reproduce educational inequities for students from nondominant sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds” (García & Guerra, 2004, p. 154). Students who work long hours rarely have time to participate in extracurricular activities, attend office hours, or engage in community or internship learning opportunities (Pascarella et al., 2004). Rather than acknowledging the institutional factors preventing workers and learners’ engagement in academic and campus activities, college educators and practitioners might view them as underprepared for college (Pérez et al., 2017). Operating from a deficit perspective results in a missed opportunity to recognize how workers and learners have to navigate multiple “systems of power” (e.g., higher education, retail and service industries) where they negotiate and contest inequitable educational and work conditions (Ramos & Kiyama, 2021, p. 431).

To illustrate how workers and learners exchanged different forms of knowledge to succeed in college, we frame this study using funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), two theoretical constructs that acknowledge “historically-accumulated and culturally-developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133). These theories allow us to better understand how structural barriers are navigated and resisted using the strengths, assets, and knowledge that workers and learners bring with them into the workplace and the college classroom. Funds of knowledge refers to the historical and cultural repertoire of abilities, bodies of knowledge, assets, and cultural daily practices embedded within families and social groups. Community cultural wealth “focuses on and learns from the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed by socially

marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged” (Yosso, 2005, p. 69). Both of these asset-based frameworks focus on the wealth of knowledge and resources that workers and learners possess and leverage to achieve their goals in college and work.

Using the theoretical framework of funds of knowledge is helpful in illuminating how workers and learners transformed their social relations and exchanged “strategic bodies of essential information” (Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 1992, p. 314) in order to better navigate college and meet work demands. We attend to the ways workers and learners activated their networks and transformed their familial and communal resources into capital to contest and resist inequitable educational contexts (Esteban-Guitart et al., 2018; Kiyama & Rios-Aguilar, 2018; Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011; Smith & Lucena, 2016). In other words, we were interested in how workers and learners transferred and applied bodies of knowledge and the social relationships they already possessed “to situations outside of the home,” in this case college and work (Bernal, 2002, p. 110).

To identify the various forms of capital and resources workers and learners were bringing from their homes and communities into college spaces and the workplace, we relied on the concept of community cultural wealth. Yosso (2005) asserts that there are “at least 6 forms of capital such as aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital” (p. 77) which minoritized communities possess but that are undervalued and invisibilized. For example, we were not only attuned to how workers and learners “dr[ew] on social contacts and community resources” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79) or relied on their social capital, but to how they came to be recipients of navigational capital—knowledge and skills which would allow them to better maneuver between college and work (Yosso, 2005). This second theoretical framework helped us identify specific types of knowledge or capital that workers and learners had to leverage in order to better navigate educational institutions versus seeing them as “lacking, limited, [or] inferior to the ‘norm’” (Bernal, 2002, p. 115). Together these two frameworks shed light on the power structures that create challenging working and learning situations for students and the various ways workers and learners marshal their family and community’s resources.

## Methods

The data analyzed in this study is from a larger study that was designed as a critical Participatory Action Research (PAR) project informed by research justice tenets, which calls for intentional participant involvement throughout all aspects of the research design process (Data Center: Research for Justice, 2013; Jolivéte, 2015; Torre et al., 2012; Zeller-Berckman, 2014; see Ángeles et al., 2022 for more details about the research process). As such, we partnered with two-year and four-year college faculty throughout Los Angeles County and trained student-researchers in their classes to



partake in different parts of the research design and fielding processes. Since we were interested in examining the experiences of a large number of workers and learners attending multiple institutions, including two-year and four-year colleges in Los Angeles County, this larger study used both survey ( $n = 865$ ) and interview ( $n = 69$ ) data. Though we were able to publish our findings using excerpts from interviews to illustrate the findings from our survey data (see Ángeles et al., 2020), rich data emerged revealing the different ways workers and learners draw on their relationships with family, peers, and colleagues to attain their educational and working goals, which we highlight in this paper.

## Research Participants

Participants were recruited using the social networks of undergraduate student-researchers enrolled in a series of University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Labor Studies courses taught by Labor Studies faculty and members of our research team. Study participants were eligible for the study if they were 18 years or older, working at least 16 hours per week, and enrolled in at least six units at a public community college, state college, or state university in Los Angeles County. Our criteria for eligibility were informed by prior research that found that college students who are employed for more than 15 hours per week tend to face a number of challenges, the most concerning of which is delayed graduation times and/or deferral of studies (Carnevale & Smith, 2018; Horn & Malizio, 1996). All those that were determined to be eligible were interviewed. We focus on 69 participants for whom we had data about the institution they attended and the sector in which they worked.

Most of our participants identified as Latinx (see Table 3). Across the population of workers and learners who work and study in Los Angeles County, more than half identify as Latinx (Ángeles et al., 2020). Moreover, like other scholars who have found that the majority of working learners are women (Carnevale et al., 2015), almost two thirds of our participants identified as women (see Table 3).

## Data Collection

The interview data informing this paper was collected over a two-year period (2018 and 2019) by student-researchers, many of whom identified as workers and learners themselves, who enrolled in a series of courses focused on workers and learners issues through the UCLA Labor Studies Program. The design of our courses reflected the research justice tenets informing the design of this study; as such the course was designed to build student-researchers' capacity to produce knowledge that could then be used to inform policy and social reform recommendations and action agendas (Jolivéte, 2015; see Ángeles et al., 2022). Two different cohorts of student-researchers carried out the interviews during the summer of 2018 and 2019. Interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol addressing participants' experiences juggling work and college responsibilities. Questions delved into worker and learners' college experience



(e.g., What are you studying? What are you hoping to get out of your education?), work experience (e.g., What are the reasons you work? How did you get your job? What skills are you gaining from your job?), and well-being (i.e., including financial, socioemotional, and physical health). All interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted approximately 30 min. Interviews were conducted in English and transcribed verbatim. Participants were compensated for their time and received a \$25 gift card.

Though we did not explicitly ask how family, friends, or colleagues aided workers and learners during their college journey, participants at different times discussed the role they played in helping them navigate academic or financial demands when answering the question: “Tell me about your school” or “How did you get your job?” Often participants would narrate their college journey by discussing their K-12 experiences

**Table 3. Participant Information**

	Number of Participants
Gender	
Male	23
Female	42
Other	4
Race	
Latinx	28
Other (including Asian, Black, white and Multiracial)	12
Unknown	29
College Type	
Four-Year State University	46
Four-Year State Colleges	12
Two-Year Community Colleges	11
Employment Sector	
Retail/Food/Hospitality	20
Higher Education	20
K-12 Education	7
Administrative Services	7
Healthcare	5
Other	6
Multiple Sectors	4

*Note.* For 29 participants, there is missing demographic information related to their race due to the fact that either participants did not wish to disclose or student-researchers collecting data solely conducted the interview without collecting demographic information. Pseudonyms are used to discuss the experiences of individual workers and learners.

and how with help of family, friends, and educators, they handled the transition from K-12 to postsecondary and how that help continued throughout their college careers. Workers and learners again mentioned family, friends, and colleagues when describing the process of job hunting. As we discuss in our findings, workers and learners employed these familial and communal networks to secure jobs.

## **Data Analysis**

Because of our research justice approach to our participatory social justice design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017) and our commitment to involving student-researchers in every step of the knowledge lifecycle, student-researchers with faculty guidance were taught how to engage in a preliminary round of coding and first round of coding (Saldaña, 2016). Student-researchers were tasked with reading the transcript of the interview(s) they had conducted and jotting down their initial reactions and ideas for possible codes in an analytical memo. After large group discussion, a codebook was created and student-researchers and the first author engaged in descriptive coding, in which codes were used to capture the basic idea(s) of the passage. Because of the study's larger focus on work experiences, codes like "coworker relations," "manager relations," and "work schedules" were captured under a larger category titled "job conditions."

Engaging in this initial first round of coding revealed patterns about how workers and learners were drawing on their relationships with family, friends, and colleagues to navigate college and meet work demands. During subsequent rounds of coding, student-researchers were no longer involved in the project. Interested in further exploring the social networks workers and learners were alluding to, the authors engaged in pattern coding (Saldaña, 2016). Through this process, we were able to identify the various types of relationships workers and learners had with family, friends, and colleagues and how these relationships allowed them to activate resources in order to better overcome school and work demands. In this latter stage of coding, the theoretical frameworks of community cultural wealth and funds of knowledge were essential to understanding the different bodies of knowledge and resources being activated by workers and learners in relationship with others. For example, we began to make note of how siblings and family members shared their wealth of navigational capital with workers and learners. These differences resulted in the subcategories (e.g., "Older Siblings and Cousins Sharing College-Specific Knowledge") we highlight below in our findings.

## **Researchers' Positionality**

The first author is the daughter of Mexican immigrants who grew up in California. Like many of the participants in the study, she juggled multiple jobs to offset financial costs attributed to pursuing an undergraduate degree at a private institution on the East Coast. She worked throughout the academic year, including summers. Not being able to afford non-paid internships, she relied on the assistance of the university to provide funds to subsidize employers, in addition to relying on the social network of

her mother, a blue-collar worker providing childcare for white-collar workers whose connections extended into various sectors, including non-profit, engineering, and government. Given these experiences, she was attentive to how workers and learners spoke about the ways they leveraged the relationships they had with family, peers, and colleagues to help them to navigate academic and work demands.

The second author was raised in a German immigrant household in upstate New York. Most of her schoolmates were also the children of immigrants and spoke multiple languages at home. Their parents had secure full-time jobs in local factories or public institutions. By the time she graduated from high school in 1982, however, most of the businesses had relocated or shut down, forcing families and their children to move, reskill, or find new work. Deindustrialization forced schools to close or consolidate and students had to rely on their social networks and community resources and relationships to find jobs and new employment opportunities for their siblings and parents. Living through her hometown's transformation from a thriving manufacturing town to a place of boarded-up factories and high unemployment has motivated the second author to study the intersections of social and family networks, public education, and labor relations for the past three decades.

Our collective experiences led us to note the various ways in which workers and learners discussed leveraging the resources within their communities. It was because of our own familiarity with these strategies that led us to dive deeper into an analysis to further examine the different ways workers and learners discussed mobilizing resources to navigate work and college. Without the unique perspectives we have as former workers and learners, we might not have been attentive to various ways in which family members, peers, and colleagues assist workers and learners in attaining their future goals. Furthermore, our working-class backgrounds bolster our commitment to studying the intersection of issues of labor and education and making visible the unacknowledged funds of knowledge and collective community assets used by students from nondominant communities.

## **Trustworthiness**

There were a variety of processes we used to ensure that our analysis was thorough and comprehensive. First, many of our research team members identify as workers and learners. Studying issues from an insider perspective allowed us to bring a more nuanced understanding, rooted in our lived experiences, to the problems that workers and learners were facing (Costley et al., 2010). When the research team came across instances in which workers and learners discussed working to accrue financial resources versus asking family for financial help, members of our team saw these as examples of workers and learners' awareness of their families' financial situation and desire to not burden them with additional expenses. In other words, members of the research team were able to "unravel and comprehend [the] intricacies and complications" arising from our findings (Costley et al., 2010, p. 3). We also held biweekly meetings, which provided opportunities for research team members to discuss any emerging findings. Additionally, we met with

community stakeholders (Rudestam & Newton, 2015), including faculty members at the local colleges and universities as well as college students, to discuss our tentative findings.

## Findings

We found that workers and learners' social networks made up of family, peers, and colleagues played an important role in helping them access certain types of knowledge and mobilize resources that aided them in achieving their educational, work, or career-related goals. For example, workers and learners' families, specifically older siblings and cousins, generously shared valuable information about how to best succeed in higher education. As we show, workers and learners benefited from the resources their various communities shared with them. In what follows, we highlight how workers and learners strategized to more aptly navigate college and work in order to improve their chances of success.

### Workers and Learners Navigating College with Family Support

Family and peers play an important role in the lives of college students. In this section, we highlight the rich knowledge workers and learners' families possessed and how it assisted workers and learners in navigating college. We also show how families provided financial resources to assist workers and learners offset educational expenses.

#### *Older Siblings and Cousins Sharing College-Specific Knowledge*

Many workers and learners spoke about how they knew very little about college before matriculating, as many did not have family members that had pursued higher education and/or had received very little information in high school. However, workers and learners who had older siblings and cousins in college were able to supplement their limited access to college knowledge. Older siblings and cousins oftentimes shared the knowledge they had accumulated to help workers and learners better manage the college process and transition to college life.

Elisa, a Latinx participant working in retail and service while studying at LA City College, described her experience navigating college,

To be honest, I didn't really have help. I think maybe my counselor was like [some] help, but for the most part my cousins helped because they were older and they went to school. That's what made it easier for me with filling out the FAFSA and all of that. They are the ones that helped me out; I didn't really ask for help in college or in school.

Knowing that her cousins had experienced college, Elisa was able to activate their accumulated knowledge to demystify, in this case, the financial aid application. Likewise, Emi, a Latinx participant attending Santa Monica City College and working in retail, described how her siblings' accumulated wealth of college knowledge informed her pursuit of college,

All my siblings went to college, so it was something they talked about going. I learned how to fill out applications also because of them, I learned about school because of them, schools I had no idea existed . . . [My siblings] all kinda wanted me to go to their school.

Emi benefited from the aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005) infused by her family, helping make college a possibility for her. Moreover, she was able to draw on the different types of college awareness that her siblings possessed, from knowing how to fill out a college application to becoming familiar with the various types of college that existed. Her family's wealth of knowledge sustained her throughout the college process.

Despite workers and learners describing what they perceived as their family's lack of understanding about the college process, the opposite was true. The families of workers and learners possessed valuable knowledge about the college experience. When asked what information or resource was most helpful in applying and enrolling in college, Jacky, a Latinx participant studying at UCLA and working on campus in a peer mentoring program, named her older brother. She shared,

I have an older brother. He's just a year older than me and he actually went to college first. He went to Berkeley and he kind of guided me through the whole college process and the applying process, so he was really helpful with that.

According to Jacky, her brother was a supportive mentor in her college experience. Specifically, he was transferring the accumulated knowledge he came to possess as a first-generation college student to assist Jacky on her college journey.

Workers and learners not only mobilized their families' wealth of knowledge to prepare for college, but also leveraged their knowledge as they navigated higher education. Jazmin, a Latinx participant attending California State University (CSU) Dominguez Hills and working in the local police department, described how older siblings played an important role in relaying specific college information to them, information that allowed them to better handle college demands. Jazmin differentiated the help they received from their sister from that of their broader family, stating,

I feel like my family is very supportive; they're very understanding, so they help out in whatever they can. My sister, she actually goes to UCLA so . . . I can talk to her about [college] because she knows, she knows exactly what I'm going through better than anyone in the house . . . I don't know, she just understands me . . . I'm counting on having her support, it just makes it better.

Workers and learners were not just mobilizing their families' specific college knowledge, but also accessing the navigational capital they had accumulated in order to "maneuver through institutions" that are neither created "with Communities of Color in mind" nor workers and learners like herself (Yosso, 2005, p. 80).

This type of navigational capital was passed down by older siblings or cousins to workers and learners; significantly, workers and learners who had younger siblings also took it upon themselves to share the wealth of knowledge they had accrued since enrolling in college. Roberto, a Latinx student at UCLA working on campus as a library assistant, explained:

I have two younger sisters. I am the first one going to college, so I pretty much want [to show] them anything is possible, just putting your mind into it and perseverance. So, I help them out. Right now, I have one of them that's doing nursing in Mount Saint Mary's and she just started school, so I've been telling her, you know, you got to do this, you get your books from here, this and that. I didn't have that. I didn't have people telling me where to get my books for a cheaper price, where to get all these free resources they have through your school. I had to do everything on my own. I didn't do everything on my own, but I had to look for things on my own.

Reflecting on his experiences navigating college, Roberto noted how he felt that he had to do everything on his own. He was solely responsible for searching for resources like cheaper textbooks or free resources. As an older sibling, he hoped to transfer this body of knowledge to his younger siblings, along with instilling in them aspirational capital, the belief that anything is possible despite the challenges they might have to overcome (Yosso, 2005).

### *Family Providing Financial Resources to Workers and Learners*

Access to financial aid has long been deemed a major barrier to college completion (Long & Riley, 2007). College students and their families not only have to worry about rising tuition costs, but living expenses as well. Many workers and learners we interviewed reported receiving financial aid to defray the costs of attending college. Yet many workers and learners continued to struggle financially. Despite working, many of them relied on their parents for help.

Though many workers and learners spoke of not wanting to burden their families with extra expenses like their related college costs, some workers and learners mobilized their own and their families' financial resources to offset their need for greater financial assistance from their college. Juana, a Latinx student attending El Camino Community College and working part-time as a tutor, reported the difficulties in covering related college and living expenses with her income. As someone deemed ineligible for financial aid because her family makes more than \$70,000, she had to work to pay for living expenses. Juana shared,

The reason I have a job [is] strictly for survival. I wouldn't have a job if I didn't have to, but I need to pay for gas, I need to buy myself food, I need to help out my family when I have an extra buck or two. So it's mainly survival. I would not be doing it if I didn't have to do it. I would love to just be able to go to school.

Despite working in order to survive, Juana's income was not enough to cover her educational expenses. She explained,

Well, when school comes around, when enrollment fees and all of that comes around, I definitely have to look to my parents and they will help me out with the fees and things like that. Because it's just ridiculous, even though it is community college, it's still too much for me to be able to give out of my paycheck. It would be a whole month's work and I obviously can't do that. Or I can't afford to do that, because then I wouldn't pay for my car, my insurance, or my phone bill or anything I have to pay at the moment.

In spite of working to secure financial resources, her work salary did not allow her to pay off her educational and living expenses. In response, she relied on her parents' financial resources.

The need to cover living expenses associated with attending college, whether that be housing, food, or transportation, was cited throughout all of the interviews. When discussing his need to work, Mo, a Pacific-Islander student at UCLA working an on-campus administrative job, quickly listed the expenses the income from his job helped cover,

Bills. That's my only big thing . . . I'm paying all my bills. I pay my car insurance, I pay my car, I pay my apartment, and I pay utilities. Things like groceries. Sometimes, I usually get help from my mom when it comes to groceries and things like that.

However, despite stating that "money has been pretty good for me," Mo had to draw on his family's financial resources in order to meet food-related expenses. Even as a college student who was working and not relying on family to cover major educational expenses, mobilizing family resources, no matter how small, mattered. Similar to Mo, Santiago, a Latinx student attending UCLA and working two jobs, one as a research assistant and the other at the university store, discussed the various expenses for which he was financially responsible,

Usually if I have any bills or something to pay like, say, my credit card or also my groceries, now that I'm living in an apartment, but before it would be like for my dorm . . . I usually buy my own stuff. My parents still buy my clothes. Any more, any other things, any additional things they won't give me money anymore because I work now.

Santiago lists the living expenses for which he was financially responsible, including credit card bills and groceries. He emphasizes the fact that he is responsible for "buy[ing] [his] own stuff" given that he now works not one job, but two jobs. Nevertheless, like Mo, Santiago benefitted from his parents still leveraging their financial resources to help him offset living expenses (e.g., buying clothes).



As Santiago explains further, despite two jobs, he struggled to offset living expenses. He attributed this to the fact that his jobs were on-campus and thus end once summer break arrives. To make up for the lack of financial resources, he would reach out to his parents stating that “summers are kind of hard because I always have to ask my parents for money to pay for dorming, or before this summer it was like for my apartment.” At other times, he relied on them for “money, especially for groceries.” While workers and learners worked to be able to cover these living expenses, a majority shared how their income was not enough to cover all living expenses and thus benefited from mobilizing their families’ economic resources.

Regardless of how much their parents’ financial contribution might be, most workers and learners, like Ana, a Latinx student at UCLA working in housing, appreciated the help they received from their family. Ana shared,

My family is a really good resource. They help me out a lot. I know they give whatever they can and it’s usually not that much, but I appreciate it. They would buy me food or take me grocery shopping.

Though their parents’ financial contributions might not be “that much,” the assistance parents provided was significant: it helped address a pressing concern and reduced any risk of being food insecure. Workers and learners had one less financial burden to overcome.

## **Workers and Learners Navigating Work**

In this section, we discuss how family, peers, and coworkers offered their social capital and shared knowledge they had about specific jobs to assist workers and learners in securing employment and, consequently, aiding their goal of securing financial resources to defray college-related expenses.

### *Family Helping Workers and Learners Secure Employment*

While nearly one third of the workers and learners ( $n = 20$ ) we interviewed held jobs in the retail and service industry, many others held a variety of on-campus college jobs, worked in local K-12 schools, and engaged in administrative tasks across offices in Los Angeles. With a need to work in order to secure financial resources to pay off their educational and living expenses, workers and learners gained knowledge from their access to their family members’ social capital and drew on it to secure employment.

Elisa, a Latinx student attending LA City College while juggling two jobs, described how she benefited from her sister’s already established connections to obtain a job as a housekeeper. She explained,

With the housekeeping, my sister started getting into nannying and she had houses where she asked me, “Do you want to start cleaning houses?” and I was like, “Sure.” And she pretty much passed them down to me. That’s how I pretty much got into the house cleaning.

Were it not for her sister's network, Elisa would not have been able to gain access to her second job as a housekeeper.

Like Elisa, Nicolás, who was a student at CSU Long Beach and working as a frontline worker at a hotel, spoke about the role a family member had in him securing his job, "I work at a hotel, it's 20 hours a week. I got it because one of my family members works there, so she recommended me, and I got the job." Nicolás' family member might have been aware that he, as he put it, "needed money for rent and just any other school expenses." Regardless, it was their social capital and, equally important, their ability to recommend Nicolás, that helped him find employment and thus an income to cover living and school expenses.

Many other workers and learners discussed how their family assisted them in securing work. Luis, a Latinx student at UCLA working in a local K-12 school, noted the role his sister played in helping him secure employment. Despite initially stating that no one helped him find his current job, he quickly retracted and shared,

No, just, well, my sister worked in the district as an attendance clerk and she's the one that told me to apply for the teacher's aide position and that's where I started off as a teacher's aide . . . I did that for a year and then applied for a different position, got that, and then so and so on.

His sister's intimate knowledge of what job opportunities were being promoted at the district helped Luis get his first job. Without access to her, he could have potentially missed out on the opportunity to apply, not only for the teacher's aide position that was available then but also for the other positions he was able to secure in the ensuing decade.

In the case of Elisa, Luis, and Nicolás, family members were leveraging their social contacts as well as transferring the knowledge they had about work in order to help them secure a job. In spite of the fact that their social network and/or knowledge might be limited to jobs in service and retail related fields, their testimonies show how their families are rich in valuable resources and information that have helped them obtain financial resources needed to pay for educational and associated costs.

### *Peers Helping Workers and Learners Secure Employment*

In this section, we focus on how workers and learners leveraged their peers' social networks as well as knowledge about the job application process to obtain employment.

Mari, a UCLA student working in the entertainment industry, noted how it was her roommate who informed her about and recommended her for a job at a casting studio. Unlike other workers and learners, Mari transformed the social capital of her roommate to not only attain employment, but a job that helped her develop a skill set related to her career interests. For other workers and learners, this was not always the case. Nevertheless, drawing on their social networks to access the accumulated social capital their peers had developed was essential for workers and learners to secure jobs.

By vouching for workers and learners, peers used their workplace roles to help workers and learners gain jobs, in addition to sharing specific, helpful information about workplace conditions. For example, Roberto, a Latinx student at UCLA working on campus, discussed how his friend helped him secure a worker and learner friendly on-campus job,

I actually got the job because one of my friends, one of my roommates at [student support program], he was a supervisor there. I was looking for a job because I needed money to pay off my books and I really didn't want to ask my parents for money, so I wanted to have money in my pocket. So the reason why I got this job was because he was working there and he told me they had a pretty good, flexible schedule, which they do. So they work around your hours and stuff. That's why I got it.

As Roberto shared, he was not only able to obtain a job, but he secured one with a “pretty good, flexible schedule.” Working a job that has flexible hours is crucial for the success of workers and learners and Roberto had assurances that this new job was a worker-and-learner friendly environment. Another worker and learner, Jon, an Asian student at UCLA working an on-campus job, depicted how he benefited from his friends' accumulated work knowledge,

In terms of career support, I think my friends help me explore different options: ‘Oh, you're interested in this; well, I have a friend who interned here and they can probably give you some information,’ or, ‘Oh wait, you're interested in there; I have a job offer from them, I'm willing to give you a referral if you need it,’ so like, you know, I have that kind of networking here too now.

Jon noted the two benefits he received from his peers leveraging their social capital: (a) referrals to specific jobs he might be interested in and (b) access to information about potential work experiences he would like to pursue. Later on in the interview, he confessed that he “did not think that he would need [networking], but apparently the world runs that way.” Indeed, securing jobs and gaining access to specific work and career knowledge was facilitated when Jon, like other workers and learners, relied on the social networks, in this case, of their peers.

### *Colleagues Leveraging Social Networks*

In addition to family members and peers, we also highlight the ways in which colleagues, including supervisors and managers, tapped their social networks to provide workers and learners access to resources that would help them move toward achieving their career goals. Coworkers acted as institutional agents who had both the power and knowledge to share resources and opportunities with workers and learners (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). Workers and learners thus benefited from the social capital that their coworkers possessed and gained access to resources and information regarding career opportunities.

Guidance for job or career advancement was an important resource coworkers provided to workers and learners. Jazmin, a Latinx criminal justice student at CSU Dominguez Hills, discusses how her coworker helped her gain a job more closely related to her career goals,

*Jazmin:* Well, I'm currently employed with the [local] police department and I started working there because it's what I want to do in the future. So hopefully I get hired through [the local police department] as a police officer. [Currently] in my position, it gives me advantage of getting to know the city, getting familiar with the area, familiar with police codes and how to use radio transmissions.

*Undergraduate Researcher:* How did you hear about the job and did you have any access to resources or people that helped you get your job?

*Jazmin:* I heard about this job at my previous job, which was [at a retail store]. One of my coworkers there, she asked me what I wanted to do in my, with a career, and I told her I wanted to become a police officer, and she pointed me to her husband who was at the time a homicide detective for the [local] police department, and he basically helped me get into the department.

Though Jazmin's coworker could not provide "guidance regarding future educational and occupational plans" pertaining to her ultimate career goal of working in law enforcement, specifically the FBI, she was still able to bridge a connection between Jazmin and her husband (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995, p. 121). This in turn led to access to information about her career of interest as well as an actual position within the police department. Securing a job that was so intimately related to her professional goals is a hard feat to accomplish, as most workers and learners work in unrelated fields, like she did when working in retail. Fortunately for her, she resolved the mismatch between her retail position and her career goals and quickly aligned her job with her career interests.

For other workers and learners, coworkers were able to connect them with resources that would aid them as they navigated both college and work. Jane, an economics major, left her job in retail to work in the financial industry. At her new place of employment, Jane's boss was generous with sharing her wealth of knowledge and brokering connections with people within her network. She described the help she received from her boss,

One of my bosses' clients went to UCLA at the time when I was applying [to college] . . . and I sat down with her and had like a three-hour, four-hour lunch, and she actually directed me to a few resources—"Oh, talk to this person about if you want to know more about this, this person is this major and can tell you about this"—and so she was really awesome; be[ing] able to have to have that tangible person to talk to, not just this computer and google tell me whatever they want to tell me.

Hearing that Jane was applying to college and considering UCLA, Jane's boss tapped her social network to help establish a direct relationship between Jane and her contact. The relationship Jane had fostered with her boss allowed her to access someone with intimate knowledge about the student experience at UCLA. The benefit of this work relationship for Jane was not just that she received help in navigating the workplace, but also the world of school.

## Discussion and Implications

To date, most of the research on workers and learners has focused on how their participation in the labor force impacts their academic performance and shapes their academic trajectories (Body et al., 2014; Miller et al., 2008; Perna, 2010b; Watanabe, 2005). Moreover, most of these studies use quantitative methods. In contrast, this study examines the diverse experiences of workers and learners using qualitative research. Whereas other studies have focused on the influence families have on the decisions of workers and learners to pursue education (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018; Núñez & Sansone, 2016), the findings from this study point to the rich and accumulated wealth of knowledge and resources embedded in the familial and peer networks for workers and learners. Findings from this study highlight workers and learners' agency given the various ways they leverage and activate bodies of knowledge and resources in order to better balance work and school.

While the focus of our paper is not on the first-generation college experience, many of our workers and learners were the first among their families to pursue higher education. Other scholars have also made note of this shared identity among workers and learners (Carnevale & Smith, 2018; Elling & Elling, 2000; Núñez & Sansone, 2016; Perna & Odle, 2020). Workers and learners alongside their siblings and cousins engaged in knowledge brokering and shared strategies that were based on their own college experiences (Delgado, 2023; Jusinski, 2019; Yosso, 2005). These sources of information and strategies shared by their siblings and cousins allowed workers and learners to better navigate higher education (Brookover et al., 2021; Delgado, 2023; Jones, 2015; Roksa et al., 2020; Takimoto et al., 2021; Yosso, 2005).

Our findings illustrate how workers and learners leveraged different members of their larger social network to gather information and resources to better navigate college and meet their financial responsibilities. This is consistent with existing research that highlights how access to a variety of actors allows students to gather information from varied sources (Jabbar et al., 2019; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Being in contact with people in different sectors allowed workers and learners to acquire different types of work opportunities. For example, workers and learners who had family members often working in the service industry activated their social networks to acquire references or employment. For other workers and learners, their peers played a role in providing references and passed down information about working

conditions and what jobs might be best for students like them who have to work and learn, as in the case of Roberto.

As Jon concludes, social networks play an important role in accessing vital information about possible work opportunities. This was especially true for workers and learners who had access to colleagues with a more expansive social network, as in the cases of Jazmin and Jane. Indeed, there is much research showing that social networks help students from upper- and middle-class backgrounds secure internships (Hora et al., 2019) and job opportunities post-graduation (Adler, 2016). Workers and learners are aware of the potential benefits activating social networks has on their ability to get jobs (Chan & Francis, 2022).

Overall, our findings underscore the importance of utilizing asset-based perspectives, including funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) to understand how workers and learners are overcoming barriers they face—they are college students who juggle both academic responsibilities and work responsibilities. Like other scholars (Pérez & McDonough, 2008; Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012), we argue that there continues to be a need for educational research to move beyond examining college student experiences using an individualistic lens or one that only focuses on the roles of their parents, but instead should account for other social relations, including family members and peers, that play a role in their work and college lives. When informed by asset-based perspectives, practitioners in higher education can engage in creating curriculum and programming that utilizes the bodies of knowledge workers and learners already possess to discuss the importance of social networks in relation to career development. For these reasons, we utilize funds of knowledge and community cultural wealth to attend to the diverse bodies of knowledge and resources that are embedded within workers and learners' familial and communal networks. Our study contributes to the growing number of studies using these theoretical lenses, specifically funds of knowledge, when examining student experiences in the college context (Ramos & Kiyama, 2021).

As we have shown, the workers and learners in our study were members of various communities, not just their immediate family. They benefited from the relationships they had formed with peers and their colleagues. Despite being confronted with issues stemming from the economic divestment in higher education, which has disproportionately affected both students from low-income families and minoritized students, workers and learners were in possession of key bodies of knowledge and resources which they used to advance in their careers. There is no doubt that family members, including parents and siblings, in addition to peers and coworkers, possess “knowledge that is passed from one generation to the next” or in this case, to workers and learners so that they might succeed at attaining their educational and career goals (Bernal, 2002, p. 113). It is clear that workers and learners used their cultural wealth in order to help them attain their educational and career goals.



## Limitations and Future Directions

In this study, we focus on workers and learners who attended a variety of Los Angeles County public community colleges or four-year colleges and universities. Though a majority of our participants attended a four-year university—which is perhaps influenced by the fact that many of them were recruited by undergraduate researchers affiliated with UCLA—future research may explore how institution type impacts workers and learners’ academic and work experiences. Resources, like access to work-study employment, might differ depending on institution type, which in turn affects how well workers and learners can balance work and school schedules (Ángeles et al., 2020). Moreover, our study was solely focused on the experiences of workers and learners in Los Angeles County. Researchers building on this work should consider expanding the geographical scope as well as accounting for regional differences; state policies dictate budgets of higher educational institutions and shape labor policies, which can either hinder or help workers and learners progress through their college careers.

Workers and learners were employed across a variety of sectors. Most study participants were employed in service and retail as well as in higher education. From past research, we know that jobs in the service and retail sector make it difficult for workers and learners to balance school and job responsibilities (Ben-Ishai et al., 2016; Carnevale & Smith, 2018). For those who worked in higher education, many held work-study jobs on campus. Future research may explore the experiences of students who work on-campus versus those who work off-campus jobs to better understand how colleges and universities might want to better support workers and learners to improve their access to accommodations and resources to ensure their academic success.

The composition of our sample reflects the diversity of workers and learners in Los Angeles County (Ángeles et al., 2020). We were preoccupied with attending to participants’ identities as students and workers through an ethnographic approach that prioritized understanding their lived experiences from their unique positionality as workers and learners (Small & Calarco, 2023). However, we recognize that their working and learning experiences are shaped by other factors, such as their racial/ethnic, linguistic, immigrant, social class, and gender identities, as well as their identities as first-generation college students or not. We did not explore in great depth how these identities shaped workers and learners, though we did have a few workers and learners speak to their experiences as Latinx students or as part of mixed-status families. There is a need for further research to take an intersectional lens and account for the ways workers and learners are differentially impacted by systemic inequities.

Due to the larger focus of the study on the worker and learner experience and how their school environment and workplace shaped their day-to-day experiences, we did not center the relationships they had with family, friends, and colleagues. We did ask about the role teachers and managers had in their lives and the ways they accommodated (or did not) their work and school needs. However, when we asked about



how they managed school and work responsibilities, workers and learners spoke about their reliance on family, friends, and colleagues. Our findings contribute to the larger conversations amongst higher education scholars (Jones, 2015; Takimoto et al., 2021) by highlighting how a specific group of college students, workers and learners, benefits from these relationships. Future studies should consider how these relationships might differentially impact the lives of workers and learners.

As our study's findings demonstrate, workers and learners relied on their familial and peer networks to access information and resources needed to succeed academically and secure work. How then might higher education institutions provide support to help workers and learners navigate college and secure financial resources needed to pay for college costs and associated living expenses? We believe that higher education institutions can begin to invest in their faculty and staff so that asset-based pedagogies are utilized when teaching and serving workers and learners. We call on educators and administrators to affirm and normalize the experiences of workers and learners, but more importantly to provide concrete supports like offering hybrid courses, flexible office hours, evening and weekend classes, spaces for worker and learner exchanges with faculty and administrators, sleep and rest spaces on campus, low-cost and free options for food insecure students, and faculty training on worker and learner issues, including a basic needs statement in faculty syllabi (The Hope Center, 2020; UCLA Labor Summer Research Program., n.d., 2020). Equally important is the need to invest in programs and personnel that support workers and learners' access to job experiences that advance their careers, especially since their social networks are often limited to particular sectors (e.g., service and retail industries). These types of investments will not only support workers and learners' success during college, but will also help them with successful transitions from college to their careers.

## Conclusion

We examined the role that families and peers play in helping workers and learners succeed both in college and work. Moreover, we analyzed how social relationships facilitated workers and learners in overcoming educational challenges, in particular financial barriers and their need to find work. We demonstrated the various people in the lives of workers and learners who aided them and the specific types of capital they leveraged on their behalf. Activating different types of capital like the navigational capital their older siblings shared with them was useful in helping workers and learners achieve their educational and career goals. Despite the financial challenges workers and learners must overcome to attain their postsecondary goals and the lack of institutional support to gain access to financial resources, workers and learners demonstrated their agency and persevered. It is our hope that the findings of this study inspire more faculty and higher education administrators to affirm the identities of workers and learners. We invite them to take action to remove the obstacles that impede workers and learners' success as they navigate both work and school.

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