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# The Role of Sense of School Belonging and Gender in the Academic Adjustment of Latino Adolescents

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The aim of this study was to examine the roles of sense of belonging and gender in the academic outcomes of urban, Latino adolescents. It was expected that sense of belonging would play a different role in males' and females' academic adjustment. Participants ( $N = 143$ ) included mostly Mexican and Puerto Rican seniors from a large, urban high school. The academic outcomes assessed were grade point average, absenteeism, motivation, effort, and educational aspirations and expectations. As hypothesized, females consistently had more positive academic outcomes than males. Sense of school belonging significantly predicted academic outcomes, including academic motivation, effort, and absenteeism. Regression analyses did not show that gender explained differences in the relationship between sense of belonging and academic outcomes. Implications and future directions for research on urban Latino males and females are discussed.

**KEY WORDS:** academic achievement; sense of community; gender; Latino adolescents.

A sense of community is viewed to be an important phenomenon in individuals' overall well-being. This concept is defined as having 4 elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). Membership involves a feeling of belonging or a sense of personal relatedness. Influence refers to the feeling that one matters in the group and that the group matters to its members. Members should also feel that their needs will be met by the group in order to feel as though one belongs. Finally, a shared emotional connection includes the belief that individuals have a common history and experience.

Sense of community or belonging is viewed to be an essential basic human need (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), and individuals are motivated to satisfy this need. As such, individuals seek interactions with others in order to feel a sense of relatedness. Because of its essential quality, human beings who do not have a sense of community or belonging might experience negative outcomes, such as stress or maladjustment (Baumeister and Leary, 1995).

Given the importance of sense of community in psychological functioning, researchers are interested in the role of sense of community in educational processes and outcomes. In fact, schooling is described as a social process (Dewey, 1958) where learning occurs in students' relationships and interactions with others in their environment, specifically classmates and teachers. Hence, Dewey (1958) argued that school administrators and teachers are responsible for facilitating a sense of community to help students achieve positive academic outcomes. Although sense of community is important for youth's academic achievement, schools pay less attention to the socioemotional needs of students and give priority to students' performance on standardized tests (Osterman, 2000). This is particularly true for large urban school systems that have many schools placed on probation for students' low test scores and are at risk for closing. School systems

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consequently emphasize individualism and competition in order to improve students' test scores, rather than community and collaboration (Osterman, 2000). Further, the typical pedagogy of high schools promotes competition. For example, social comparison techniques are used to evaluate students, such as tracking students by ability level and using class rankings (Eccles *et al.*, 1984). High school classrooms are also characterized as less personal than elementary school classrooms and students perceive less support from teachers (Eccles *et al.*, 1993; Reyes *et al.*, 1994). Overall, the practices that are employed in schools are based on a set of beliefs and values that promote achievement and mastery (Osterman, 2000). It is often believed that students' emotional needs are met outside of the classroom and school. Consequently, there is less emphasis on fulfilling the basic need of sense of belonging in school.

In order to understand the role of sense of community in school processes, researchers have examined how sense of community is related to a variety of academically-related outcomes, including academic performance and motivation. Gonzalez and Padilla's investigation (1997) of Mexican-origin high school students revealed that sense of school belonging was the only significant predictor of academic performance, even when other variables were included, such as supportive academic environment and cultural loyalty. A national longitudinal study that followed diverse students beginning in their 8th grade and again in their 10th grade showed that students with low academic grades tended to report low levels of sense of belonging (Smerdon, 2002). Research on middle school students shows that sense of belonging is positively related to grades (Goodenow, 1993a,b; Hagborg, 1998; Roeser *et al.*, 1996). However, Roeser *et al.*'s study of 8th grade, mostly White (87%) students found that sense of belonging had small, positive effects on year-end grades after prior academic achievement was controlled for in the analyses. The authors suggested that psychological indicators, such as sense of belonging, are likely to have stronger relationships with other important school behavioral outcomes, such as motivation.

Researchers are interested in academic motivation because, as Goodenow and Grady (1993) pointed out, sense of belonging is discussed by motivation theorists as having priority over needs for knowledge and understanding. Hagborg's (1998) research of White middle school students revealed a positive relationship between sense of school belonging and motivation. Goodenow's work (1993a,b) also demonstrated a positive relationship between sense of school belonging and motivation, as measured by expectancies for success in and intrinsic value for a specific academic subject, among diverse sam-

ples. Moreover, Goodenow and Grady (1993) conducted a study with Black, White, and Latino 7th to 9th graders and found that sense of school belonging was positively correlated with students' intrinsic value, expectancies for success, and academic effort. Interestingly, sense of belonging seemed to play a greater role for Latino students compared to the other racial/ethnic groups, such that the relationship of Latino students' sense of belonging to academic outcomes was strongest. Goodenow and Grady suggested that the strong relationship for Latinos might be due to their communal values.

Research demonstrates that a sense of school belonging predicts other academic outcomes in addition to academic performance and motivation. Sense of belonging is found to be positively related to academic self-efficacy and positive school affect (Roeser *et al.*, 1996), academic effort (Goodenow, 1993b), educational expectations (Smerdon, 2002), and amount of time spent on homework (Hagborg, 1998). Overall, the available research shows that students' feelings of belonging in their school environment promote positive school behaviors.

An interesting pattern that has emerged is gender differences in students' sense of belonging and its relationship to academic outcomes. Researchers found that girls reported a greater sense of belonging than boys (Goodenow, 1993b; Goodenow and Grady, 1993). Further, research shows that the relationship between expectancies for success and sense of belonging is stronger for girls in middle school than for boys (Goodenow, 1993a; Goodenow and Grady, 1993). Even research conducted with high school students illustrates a similar pattern. Smerdon's (2002) longitudinal study showed that high school females reported a greater sense of belonging than their male counterparts. Goodenow explained these gender differences by referring to the varying socialization processes of girls versus boys. Gilligan (1982) argued that relatedness and connection with others is more important for girls, whereas competition is more central for boys.

The findings regarding female students reporting a greater sense of school belonging than male students might explain the gender differences in academic performance, particularly among Latinos. There is growing interest in exploring gender differences in the academic achievement of minority youth (e.g., Saunders *et al.*, 2004), particularly because the gender gap is wider in minority groups compared to Whites (Rong and Brown, 2001). Research demonstrates that Latina females are more likely to finish high school than Latino males (Wojtkiewicz and Donato, 1995). Latina females also tend to have higher grade point averages than their male counterparts (Lopez *et al.*, 2002). Valenzuela's (1999)

qualitative study of Mexican American youth revealed that females from every generational group tended to outperform males. Research illustrates other gender differences that may account for Latina females' higher academic achievement. For instance, Latina female students tend to report higher levels of aspirations, spend more hours doing their homework, have a more positive rating of school climate, and perceive more social support than Latino male students (Lopez *et al.*, 2002; Matute-Bianchi, 1991). Nonetheless, researchers have not examined how sense of belonging might play a role in these gender differences.

Given that female adolescents tend to report a greater sense of school belonging than male adolescents (Goodenow, 1993b; Goodenow and Grady, 1993; Smerdon, 2002) and that the relationship between sense of belonging and academic motivation is stronger for females (Goodenow, 1993a; Goodenow and Grady, 1993), it might be that sense of belonging is more strongly related to a variety of academic outcomes for females than for males. This gender difference in the relationships between sense of belonging and academic outcomes might explain the better academic performance of Latina females compared to Latino males.

### The Current Study

The present study examined the relationships between sense of belonging, gender, and academic outcomes in a Latino, urban high school sample. Past research on sense of belonging is mostly conducted with junior high, White students. Little is known about the role of sense of belonging in the academic experiences of urban, Latino high school students, a group that is important to examine given their lower educational status in the U.S. compared to White youth. Specifically, Latinos have the highest high school dropout rate in the U.S. (26%; U.S. Department of Education, 2005). It is especially important that researchers examine the factors that facilitate Latino youth's success in school because of this group's rapid population growth in the U.S. Further, 12th grade students were sampled in this study in order to obtain a perspective from those who are not necessarily at risk for school dropout. We targeted senior students in an urban high school with a high dropout rate. These youth were considered resilient in their environment because they were still in school. Additionally, because Goodenow and Grady (1993) found that the relationship between sense of school belonging and academic outcomes was greatest among Latino participants, it was expected that sense of belonging would play an important role in this sample. Finally, researchers have not sufficiently examined why Latina females are

performing better than Latino males in school. It might be that sense of belonging is playing a role given that research shows that females tend to report a greater sense of belonging than males and that females' sense of belonging is more strongly related to academically-related outcomes than for males (Goodenow, 1993a; Goodenow and Grady, 1993; Smerdon, 2002). This study is important in filling these gaps in the existing literature.

Based on past research, we hypothesized the following: (a) females will have more positive academic outcomes than males, as measured by grade point average (GPA), absenteeism, motivation (as measured by intrinsic value for and expectancy for success in English class), academic effort, and educational expectations and aspirations, (b) females will report a greater sense of belonging than males, (c) a greater sense of belonging will predict more positive academic outcomes, and (d) there will be gender differences in the relationships between sense of belonging and academic outcomes, such that the relationship between sense of belonging and academic outcomes will be stronger for females than for males.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were recruited from an urban, Midwestern public high school. The student body was 95% Latino (48% Mexican, 40% Puerto Rican, 8% Other Latino), 4% African American, and 2% Other. In addition, the majority (85%) of the students at the school were eligible for free lunch, an indicator of lower socioeconomic status. The school graduation rate was relatively low (53%). On any given school day, approximately 20% of students were absent. Regarding chronic truancy, on average, 20% of students were absent from school without a valid excuse for 18 or more of the last 180 school days (Valdez and Rodriguez, 2002).

Participants included 143 12th-grade students whose demographic characteristics were similar to the larger student body. Fifty-two percent ( $n = 74$ ) were female and 48% ( $n = 69$ ) were male. Forty-two percent ( $n = 60$ ) identified themselves as Mexican, 39% ( $n = 56$ ) as Puerto Rican, 9% ( $n = 14$ ) as Other Latino (e.g., Nicaraguan, Cuban), and 6% ( $n = 9$ ) as biethnic Latinos (e.g., Puerto Rican and Mexican; Salvadorian and Mexican). Four participants were biracial (3%; e.g., Puerto Rican and African American). Participants' mean age was 17.87 years ( $SD = .66$ ). Fifty-nine percent ( $n = 85$ ) of the participants came from 2-parent homes, while 32% ( $n = 46$ ) came from single-parent homes. The majority of participants' parents

had a high school degree or less. Specifically, 53% ( $n = 66$ ) of their mothers and 61% ( $n = 65$ ) of their fathers had less than a high school education, while 35% ( $n = 43$ ) of their mothers and 26% ( $n = 27$ ) of their fathers had a high school education.

### Procedure

Senior students were recruited from English and Film classes in May of their senior year. The school principal and the English Department chair identified 13 English and Film courses that ranged in academic levels, from remedial to honors classes, so that a diverse student body was targeted. All students in these classes were invited to participate in the study. As part of the recruitment procedures, a predominantly bicultural, bilingual team conducted presentations about the study. One hundred eighty-seven students indicated an interest in participation. Informed consent was conducted via IRB-approved procedures. Adult consent forms were distributed to students who were at least 18 years of age, and child assent and parental consent forms were distributed to students under the age of 18. Passive parental consent was used with minors such that parental consent forms only had to be returned if parents did *not* want their child to participate in the study. The research team also contacted the parents/guardians of minors to ensure that they received the parental consent form, to discuss the study and answer any questions, and obtain oral consent from parents. A few days after the recruitment presentation and informed consent was obtained from participants, surveys were administered in the same classes in which students were recruited. Although 187 students indicated an interest in the study, 150 (80%) students completed the survey due to student absences. Seven (5%) participants were not included in this study because they were not of Latino descent, which resulted in 143 participants. Every participant received a \$15 gift certificate to a local electronics/music store.

### Measures

#### *Sense of School Belonging*

The Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM; Goodenow, 1993b) assessed participants' sense of belonging in their school. This scale includes 18 items, of which 5 are reversed items. The items tap into perceived liking, personal acceptance, inclusion, and respect and encouragement for participation. Sample items in-

clude, "I feel like a real part of (name of school)" and "Teachers here are not interested in people like me." Responses are on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from *not at all true* (1) to *completely true* (5). Participants' responses to these items were totaled to generate an index of sense of school belonging. Possible total scores range from 18 to 90. Internal consistency reliability for this sample was good (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .87$ ). Goodenow's research (1993) revealed good construct validity of this scale.

#### *Motivation*

Consistent with the expectancy-value theory of achievement motivation (Atkinson, 1964; Eccles *et al.*, 1983), students' expectancies for success in and their intrinsic value for an academic school subject were measured. Two scales developed by Pintrich and DeGroot (1990) were used to measure motivation. The instructions for both scales asked participants to refer to their English subject class. The 1st subscale consisted of 9 items and assessed students' expectancies for success. A sample item is "I expect to do very well in this class." The 2nd subscale also included 9 items and measured participants' intrinsic value. An example of an item is, "Understanding this subject is important to me." Internal consistency reliability for each scale was good (Cronbach  $\alpha$ 's = .90 and .89, respectively). Responses to both scales were on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from *not at all true of me* (1) to *very true of me* (7). Students' responses to each scale were totaled to create indices for expectancies for success and intrinsic value. Total possible scores range from 9 to 63.

#### *Academic Effort*

This variable was measured with Murdock *et al.*, (2000) 4-item scale, which assesses self-reported frequency with which students attended school, participated in class, completed homework, and studied for exams. A sample item is, "How frequently do you attend school?" Responses were on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *never* (1) to *always* (5). Students' responses were totaled to create an index for academic effort. Total possible scores range from 4 to 20. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .64.

#### *Educational Aspirations and Expectations*

Based on a measure used by Stevens, Putschell, Ryu, and Mortimer (1992), 2 questions were asked to assess aspirations and expectations. Educational aspirations were measured by asking, "If it were up to you, how far

**Table I.** Means and Standard Deviations of Study Variables and Comparisons Between Males and Females

	M (SD)			n	t value
	Overall	Males	Females		
Cumulative GPA	2.66 (.78)	2.46 (.71)	2.85 (.79)	142	-3.09**
Absences	21.32 (15.05)	20.39 (12.85)	22.17 (16.86)	132	-.68
Sense of belonging	59.48 (10.51)	57.81 (10.65)	61.03 (10.19)	143	-1.85†
Expectancy for success	48.99 (8.88)	48.24 (8.62)	49.68 (9.11)	141	-.97
Intrinsic value	50.73 (8.91)	48.44 (9.11)	52.82 (8.24)	142	-3.01**
Academic effort	15.64 (2.48)	14.91 (2.46)	16.31 (2.32)	143	-3.50**
Educational aspirations	4.69 (1.15)	4.38 (1.11)	4.99 (1.11)	142	-3.26**
Educational expectations	4.03 (1.03)	3.84 (.87)	4.20 (1.13)	143	-2.13*

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; †  $p = .07$ .

would you like to go in school?" with responses ranging from 1 = *less than high school graduate* to 6 = *PhD or professional degree*. The item that measured expectations asked, "What is the highest level of schooling you really think you will finish?" with the same response scale.

#### Academic Achievement

Students' cumulative GPA and attendance data were obtained from school records by school personnel as a measure of academic achievement. GPA was measured on a 4.0 scale. Attendance data included total absences for the given academic year.

## RESULTS

### Bivariate Analyses

Means and standard deviations for all study variables are presented in Table I. Females and males were com-

pared on all study variables using independent sample *t* tests (see Table I). Consistent with the study hypothesis regarding gender differences in academic outcomes, females tended to have more positive academic outcomes than males. As shown in Table I, females had significantly higher GPAs, educational aspirations, and educational expectations than males. In addition, female and male students differed in intrinsic value for English class and academic effort, with females having higher scores than males. Contrary to what was expected, females and males did not significantly differ on their sense of school belonging.

Bivariate Pearson correlations for study variables were conducted separately for males and females (see Tables II and III). As Tables II and III illustrate, these correlations showed a different pattern for males and females. It was found that sense of belonging was positively related to intrinsic value for and expectancy for success in English among female participants but not among male participants. Among male participants, sense of belonging was significantly related to their absenteeism rates and their educational expectations, but they were not related for their female counterparts. Male and female

**Table II.** Bivariate Correlations of Study Variables for Males

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Sense of belonging							
2. Cumulative GPA	.08						
3. Absences	-.29*	-.39**					
4. Expectancy for success	.07	.24*	-.21				
5. Intrinsic value	.17	.26*	-.23†	.72**			
6. Academic effort	.36**	.38**	-.42**	.36**	.42**		
7. Educational aspirations	.02	.20	-.01	.20	.33**	.07	
8. Educational expectations	.29*	.13	-.14	.37**	.37**	.23†	.58

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; †  $p < .10$ .

**Table III.** Bivariate Correlations of Study Variables for Females

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Sense of belonging							
2. Cumulative GPA	.17						
3. Absences	-.11	-.49**					
4. Expectancy for success	.36**	.44**	-.22†				
5. Intrinsic value	.31**	.42**	-.30*	.70**			
6. Academic effort	.35**	.43**	-.39**	.48**	.57**		
7. Educational aspirations	-.01	.33**	-.18	.24*	.21†	.25*	
8. Educational expectations	.02	.27*	-.21†	.40**	.32**	.26*	.66**

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; † $p < .10$ .

students had similar relationships between sense of belonging and academic effort, GPA, and educational aspirations. Specifically, for both groups, sense of belonging was positively correlated with academic effort, and sense of belonging was not significantly correlated with GPA and educational aspirations.

### Roles of Sense of Belonging and Gender in Academic Adjustment

A series of hierarchical multiple regressions were conducted to understand the role of sense of belonging and gender in participants' academic outcomes. In addition, these regressions tested the hypothesis that female participants' sense of school belonging would be more strongly related to academic outcomes compared to male participants. In each of the multiple regression equations, sense of belonging and gender were entered 1st and the interaction between sense of belonging and gender was entered 2nd.

The results of the regression analyses are presented in Table IV. Consistent with the hypothesis that a greater sense of belonging would predict more positive academic outcomes among participants, sense of belonging significantly predicted absenteeism ( $\beta = -.19$ ,  $p < .05$ ), expectancies for success in English ( $\beta = .22$ ,  $p < .01$ ), intrinsic value for English ( $\beta = .23$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and academic effort ( $\beta = .35$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, sense of belonging did not significantly predict GPA, educational aspirations, and educational expectations. Additionally, as predicted, female participants had more positive academic outcomes than male participants. Specifically, the regression analyses revealed that gender was a significant predictor of the following variables: GPA ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $p < .01$ ), intrinsic value for English ( $\beta = .21$ ,  $p < .05$ ), academic effort ( $\beta = .23$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and educational aspirations ( $\beta = .27$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Contrary to study hypotheses, there were no significant gender differences in the

relationships between sense of belonging and academic outcomes among participants.

### DISCUSSION

The current study sheds light on the roles of sense of belonging and gender in the academic outcomes of urban, Latino adolescents. Our hypothesis that female participants would perform better academically than males was supported. Females tended to have higher scores than males on GPA, educational aspirations and expectations, intrinsic value for English and academic effort, which is consistent with past research (e.g., López, 2002; López *et al*, 2002; Rong and Brown, 2001). The research is sparse in understanding what is accounting for this gender disparity. Past research demonstrates that female adolescents tend to report a greater sense of belonging than male adolescents (Goodenow, 1993a; Goodenow and Grady, 1993), which is congruent with the idea that relatedness is important among girls and women (Gilligan, 1982). However, we did not find a significant difference between males and females on sense of school belonging. Perhaps we did not find a significant difference because our sample is different developmentally compared to past research, which is mostly conducted on middle-school samples. It might be that the gender difference in sense of belonging weakens in later adolescence. Given that we targeted 12th-graders, older adolescents are probably not as interested in fitting into the school environment, and thus, males and females may be more similar in their perceptions of school belonging. Younger adolescents, particularly females, are more likely to focus on their relationships at school because this is their main context and will be for years to come.

Another reason why males and females in the current study did not significantly differ in their sense of belonging might be because of Latino cultural values. Latino cultures tend to be interdependent due to their value for collectivism (Marin and Marin, 1991; Triandis

**Table IV.** Summary of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses of the Role of Sense of Belonging and Gender in Academic Outcomes

Academic outcomes	Predictors	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
GPA	Step 1					
	Sense of belonging	.001	.01	.13	.08**	
	Gender	.36	.13	.24**		
Absenteeism	Step 2					
	Sense of belonging × gender	.001	.001	.37		.00
	Step 1					
Expectancy for success	Sense of belonging	-.26	.12	-.19*	.04 <sup>†</sup>	
	Gender	2.79	2.64	.09		
	Step 2					
Intrinsic value	Sense of belonging × gender	.15	.25	.37		.00
	Step 1					
	Sense of belonging	.19	.07	.22**	.06*	
Academic effort	Gender	.85	1.48	.05		
	Step 2					
	Sense of belonging × gender	.26	.14	1.05 <sup>†</sup>		.02 <sup>†</sup>
Educational aspirations	Step 1					
	Sense of belonging	.20	.07	.23**	.11***	
	Gender	3.77	1.44	.21*		
Educational expectations	Step 2					
	Sense of belonging × gender	.11	.14	.45		.00
	Step 1					
Educational aspirations	Sense of belonging	.08	.02	.35***	.20***	
	Gender	1.14	.38	.23**		
	Step 2					
Educational expectations	Sense of belonging × gender	-.00	.04	-.03		.00
	Step 1					
	Sense of belonging	.00	.01	.01	.05*	
Educational expectations	Gender	.61	.19	.27**		
	Step 2					
	Sense of belonging × gender	.00	.02	-.08		.01
Educational expectations	Step 1					
	Sense of belonging	.01	.01	.13	.05*	
	Gender	.32	.17	.16 <sup>†</sup>		
Educational expectations	Step 2					
	Sense of belonging × gender	-.02	.02	-.76		.01

\**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .01; \*\*\**p* < .001; <sup>†</sup>*p* < .10.

*et al.*, 1990), which is related to the ability to be influenced by others, conformity, and a willingness to trust and make sacrifices for the welfare of other ingroup members (Marin and Triandis, 1985). Because of the emphasis of the ingroup, it seems that a sense of relatedness is particularly important to the success of Latinos. Perhaps this cultural value weakens gender differences in Latinos' sense of belonging.

As predicted, sense of belonging played a positive role in participants' academic outcomes, including academic motivation, as measured by intrinsic value for and expectancies for success in their English subject, academic effort, and absenteeism. Our findings are consistent with previous research (Goodenow, 1993a; Goodenow and Grady, 1993; Hagborg, 1998). Hence, sense of belonging is playing an important role in psychological pro-

cesses and behaviors that are essential in Latino students' academic performance. Students who are intrinsically motivated will engage in behaviors more out of personal choice than external expectations (Osterman, 2000). Consequently, motivated students will put forth a greater effort in school, which should lead to positive school performance. This argument is related to the finding regarding the relationship between sense of belonging and absenteeism. Specifically, a greater sense of belonging predicted fewer total absences. Students who do not feel a sense of belonging in their school environment were more likely to miss school. There is probably less of a motivation to attend school if you feel like you are not accepted, important, and cared for in your environment. Overall, sense of belonging played a role in important psychological processes and school behaviors.



Inconsistent with previous research (Goodenow, 1993a; Hagborg, 1998; Roeser *et al.*, 1996; Smerdon, 2002), we did not find that sense of belonging was a significant predictor of GPA and educational expectations and aspirations. It might be that sense of belonging did not predict expectations and aspirations because each of these measures included only 1 item, which might have limited the ability of sense of belonging to predict these outcomes. Roeser *et al.* found that the relationship between year-end grades and sense of belonging weakened when prior academic grades were controlled for in analyses. They stated that sense of belonging seems to have a stronger relationship with other behavioral indicators such as motivation, which might explain why GPA and sense of belonging were not significantly related in this study.

The lack of a significant relationship between sense of belonging and GPA, aspirations and expectations might also be explained by participants' stage of development. Goodenow (1993a) found that the relationship between sense of belonging and academic outcomes was weaker among 8th-grade participants compared to 6th- and 7th-grade students. She stated that perhaps older students rely less on the support of teachers and peers in estimating how they will do in school. Our sample consisted of high school seniors. It might be that sense of belonging is not as important to them because they are thinking about their future plans; specifically, they were focused on graduating from high school and beginning a new stage of life. This may make sense of belonging less salient in predicting their grades and future expectations and aspirations. Sense of belonging is more likely to play a role in GPA and future expectations and aspirations among younger students, such as 1st- or 2nd-year high school students.

Despite the lack of significant findings between sense of school belonging and academic performance, aspirations, and expectations, sense of belonging did play a positive role in absenteeism, intrinsic value for and expectancy for success in English, and academic effort. It is important for schools to continue making an effort in providing an environment that is accepting, respectful, and encouraging of adolescents. This is especially important in schools with such high dropout rates similar to the school in the present study.

Contrary to our hypotheses, regression analyses did not find significant gender differences in the relationships between sense of belonging and academic outcomes. Although there were different patterns for males and females in the relationships between sense of belonging and academic outcomes as indicated by the Pearson correlations, the regression analyses showed that gender did *not* interact with sense of belonging in predicting participants' academic adjustment. Our findings are inconsistent with

past research on younger adolescents (Goodenow, 1993a; Goodenow and Grady, 1993). Again, it seems that the role of sense of belonging in students' academic outcomes changes during later adolescence and thus does not explain the gender gap in Latino adolescents' academic achievement.

### Implications and Future Directions

It is important to understand the context of our sample to appreciate study findings. Our sample included 12th grade students at a public high school with a high dropout rate. This sample included the "better" students of the school. They were students who overcame obstacles in their school and community environments and defied the risk of dropping out. Thus, many of our measures might have had more variation (e.g., educational aspirations and expectations) if a more diverse group had been included. Future researchers might target a wider range of students to gain a better understanding of the role of sense of belonging and gender in Latino adolescents' academic adjustment. For example, researchers could target all 9th graders at a given school before students are legally allowed to drop out. Also, assessing adolescents earlier in their high school career is likely to illuminate a wider range of feelings about belonging in the school environment when fitting in is still important. However, this study does shed light on what is occurring during later adolescence. Twelfth-grade students at the end of the school year are more likely to be concerned with completing school and with their future than on developing or maintaining a sense of belonging in their school.

Even though the study's sample was biased in that they were the higher-performing students relative to their classmates who had already dropped out in previous years, compared to national averages in which the current study took place, this sample was not doing so well. At the high school, only about 1/3 of the seniors had taken the ACT (Valdez and Rodriguez, 2002), a standardized test required for many colleges. Given the economic changes in our society and the decrease in lower-skilled, high-paying jobs, it is imperative for high school students to attend college to gain access to better-paying jobs. The school provided college workshops to students in the spring of their senior year because so few students had made plans at that point to attend college. Although some adolescents from our sample will be successful educationally and economically, given the low number of students who planned to attend college, many will be in positions that will make it difficult for them to compete successfully in the U.S. labor market. Researchers and practitioners should be concerned with

the low number of urban, Latino adolescents who have access to the university academic pipeline.

Additionally, future research should focus on the disparate academic outcomes between Latino males and females. These gender gaps have only been increasing over time. Past researchers examine this difference only in preliminary analyses so that gender can be accounted for in other analyses. However, the examination of gender should become central in research. Investigators do not have a clear understanding about why Latino males are increasingly lagging behind their female counterparts. One researcher found that immigrant parents tend to more strictly supervise their female children than their male children (Qin-Hilliard, 2004). Perhaps the lesser monitoring of Latino male youth exposes them to more negative influences, which would consequently affect their academic performance. Also, minority male students are more likely to be viewed as having behavioral problems compared to other groups (Lewis, 2003; López, 2002). López's (2002) participant observations of a New York City public high school revealed that Dominican and other Caribbean male students were criminalized in the school context. Further, López witnessed the use of violence toward these young men by school personnel. Overall, urban, minority young men seem to be viewed as "problems" in the school environment (Fine, 1991; López, 2002), rather than students. Teachers might have low and negative expectations of Latino male youth, which influences how teachers interact with these students. Male youth, in return, sense these low expectations and might behave as such. It is probable that the differential treatment of urban Latino males and females in the school environment contributes to varying perceptions of belonging in school. Researchers need to examine the school experiences of minority males and females to better understand the differences in performance.

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