

“You Have to Have Money to Be Good”: How Capital Accumulation Shapes Latinas’ Pathways to College Sports

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The number of Latina women enrolled in higher education is steadily growing yet the proportion of college student-athletes who identify as Latina has barely changed. This study uses Bourdieu’s concepts of economic, cultural, and social capital to explain the small percentage of Latina athletes competing in collegiate sport. Data collected from semi-structured interviews with 31 Latina athletes show that all three forms of capital influence Latinas’ early sport opportunities and their experiences with the college recruiting process. Latinas with more economic capital played organized youth sport from an earlier age and participated on elite specialized travel teams. They were also better connected to knowledge about the recruiting process and people who could guide them through that process. Women from lower-income backgrounds had fewer opportunities to develop skill and less assistance with the recruiting process. As a result, sport scholarships are more likely to go to women from upper class backgrounds, reproducing the U.S. class and racial hierarchy and placing Latina women at a disadvantage.

Keywords: cultural capital, Latina, social capital, social class, student-athletes

Hispanic and Latinx¹ students are one of the fastest growing groups in American higher education, far outpacing other ethnoracial groups. In 1980, Latinx students comprised only 4.2% of all undergraduates. That number rose to 18.5% by 2015. Among Latinx college students, women outnumber their male peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018).

Despite this rapid rise in total enrollment, Latina students are not equally represented in all areas of the university, especially in intercollegiate athletics. According to data collected by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) (2018), the proportion of Latina student-athletes barely changed since the 1999–2000 academic year when Latinas made up 2.4% of all female athletes. By 2016–2017, that number had only risen to 5.2%, despite the steady rise in Latinas’ college enrollment. Much has been written about the underrepresentation of Latina women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)

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fields (Brown, 2008; Funk & Parker, 2018; Gándara, 2015) and at the postgraduate level (González, 2006; Sanchez, 2015) but there is far less scholarship on Latina student-athletes.

Women have long had to fight for their place in education and in athletics. They won a huge victory with Title IX, federal legislation that mandated equal educational opportunities regardless of sex. The law, passed in 1972, was designed to protect all aspects of education but quickly became known for its role in ensuring equal access to school sports. Even though disparities between men's and women's sports remain, Title IX boosted female participation at all levels of sport. Nevertheless, the benefits have not been equally distributed among all racial or ethnic groups (Brake, 2010; Suggs, 2006). Scholars have examined the law's impact on Black women (Pickett, Dawkins, & Braddock, 2012) but there have only been a handful of studies examining Latina student-athletes. This is not surprising given that Latinas have historically been underrepresented in sport literature (Iber, Regalado, Alamillo, & Leon, 2011).

Latinas are part of the continued fight for gender equality in sports but their participation in college teams is affected by unique social contexts that occur both inside and outside of college sport institutions. This research examines how socioeconomic status, knowledge about the college recruitment process, and social networks combine together to influence the number of Latinas competing at the elite intercollegiate level.

Theoretical Background

Bourdieu (1986) theorized about how societies reproduced social class divisions. Though he believed that economic capital (in the form of wealth and other material resources) was critical in social reproduction, Bourdieu argued that cultural and social capital were necessary in order to preserve and replicate social class differences over time. Cultural capital refers to "what you know" and consists of nonmaterial things, such as speech, tastes, and knowledge. Cultural capital is first transmitted through family socialization and built upon throughout the lifespan. Social capital refers to "who you know" in the form of social networks and group memberships. Though economic capital is central and can help a person access social and cultural capital, Bourdieu argued that all three were necessary for the dominant class to maintain power and that the influence of capital was often invisible. For example, Bourdieu (1986) posits that outside observers perceive the college admissions process as indicative of academic aptitude without recognizing that "ability . . . in itself is the product of an investment of time and cultural capital" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 48).

Though extensive research shows how these forms of capital affect general college attendance for Latinas (Alvarez, 2010; Ryan & Ream, 2016; Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002; Yosso & Solórzano, 2006), there is no research demonstrating how these factors affect university sport participation. European researchers established that while economic capital has the most powerful effects, all three forms of capital affect participation in organized youth sports (Andersen & Bakken, 2018; Ferry & Lund, 2018). Though instructive, these studies do not elucidate how capital specifically affects the ability to earn sport scholarships at U.S. colleges.

These works also lack an explicit gendered analysis. Bourdieu (1978) recognized that different groups of people considered the social profits of playing sports before committing time and resources to them. Specifically, he saw that skilled male athletes were rewarded with a boost to social status and that many boys and young men invested time in sports. Some young men from the lower class aspired to transform sport skills into economic capital through professional sport careers. At the time of his writing, professional opportunities for female athletes were limited and Bourdieu noted women could not gain much social status through athletic endeavors. Since Title IX and numerous professional opportunities have expanded to women, some of the social profits have increased but various people may still disagree on “the perception and appreciation of the . . . profits (Bourdieu, 1978, p. 835).” Therefore, it is important to consider the value attached to playing sports as well as the capital that the women have to access those opportunities.

Female student-athletes are perceived as the most skilled in their respective sports; however, this obscures the way that capital accumulation shapes sport opportunities and the value placed on those opportunities. Bourdieu (1986) theorized that capital was especially useful when resources were scarce. Since collegiate sports feature a limited amount of roster positions and scholarships, it is worth exploring the particular ways that capital matters for seeking college sport opportunities in the United States. One way to unmask capital's effects is to examine how it affects an underrepresented population, such as Latinas.

Literature Review

Because economic capital is so crucial to sport participation and to college admissions, the position of Latina families relative to others is central to the discussion. According to the 2016 U.S. Census, the median household income of Latina families (\$47,675) is substantially lower than the national median (\$59,039), and the Latina poverty rate (19.4%) is higher than the national poverty rate (12.75%) (Semega, Fontenot, & Kollar, 2017).

These averages obscure the variability in socioeconomic status and corresponding educational outcomes among the Latinx population (Fry, 2002; Sólorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). For example, Hispanics from high-income families are significantly more likely to enroll in college than their peers from low-income families (Nuñez & Kim, 2012) and Latinx students whose parents have a degree are more likely to enroll in college than other Latinx students (Cardoza, 1991; Ryan, 2016). These differences also affect sport outcomes.

Latina Pathways to College Sport

Though Latina women have been playing sport and engaging in physical activity for centuries, their contributions have been overlooked (Iber et al., 2011). This omission stems from the historical marginalization of people of color and women from sport institutions (Bruening, 2005). Extensive research captures the ways that race, ethnicity, and gender affect sport participation (Coakley, 2014); for the sake of brevity, this literature review only presents key studies that document how economic, social, and cultural capital affect Latina sport participation.

Research consistently shows that prospective college student athletes select institutions based on the athletic and academic environments of the institution (Chard & Potwarka, 2017; Goss, Jubenville, & Orejan, 2006; Huffman & Cooper, 2012). This research typically omits individuals who do not pursue college sports and excludes a deep qualitative investigation of how contextual factors, such as capital, shape decision making. In order to understand the lack of Latina athletes, it is necessary to gauge how the three forms of capital influence the pathway of moving from high school participant to prospective college student-athlete.

Armesto (2014) demonstrated that the majority of athletes from a primarily Hispanic high school district in Florida expressed interest in playing college sports but were concerned about college cost and scholarship availability. Those who can afford to play also need social and cultural capital to navigate the complex recruiting process. Smith (2006) discovered that many African American student-athletes learned about the procedures through athletic camps and tournaments. They also relied on family, friends, coaches, and guidance counselors who interpreted the complex rules and offered advice. Regardless of how they deployed capital to choose a college, all players shared a common trait: they were successful high school athletes.

Most college athletes gain valuable experiences playing youth sports. Cost and access are two of the biggest factors that affect youth sport participation (Allender, Cowburn, & Foster, 2006). Families have a big influence on children's participation in sport by providing the economic capital for registration, fees, and equipment (Wheeler, 2012). Higher income is associated with more participation in organized sports (Cairney, Joshi, Kwan, Hay, & Faught, 2015; The Aspen Institute, 2017), which are a critical pathway for earning collegiate opportunities. Over time, parents and college coaches have placed more emphasis on privatized travel teams than on organized high school sports. These "pay to play" opportunities are vital for attracting the eyes of college coaches, but are prohibitively expensive (Eckstein, 2017).

Low-income Latino families cite budget constraints as a major reason for not participating in recreational sport programs (Stodolska & Floyd, 2015). In addition, they often live in neighborhoods where high school sports are underfunded (Flores-González, 2000). The effects of social class are compounded for young women of color, who lack time to participate because they frequently work part-time jobs and assist with household responsibilities (Staurowsky et al., 2014). Sports can be particularly time consuming for Latina women, who report feeling pressure to balance family obligations with academic achievement (Cammarota, 2004; Espinoza, 2010). The NCAA has increased scholarships for women over the last 20 years but these opportunities have mainly been in sports such as lacrosse and golf, which are largely unavailable in predominately Latina high schools or have high financial barriers to entry (Brake, 2010; Suggs, 2006). Taken together, these factors contribute to the paucity of Latina college athletes.

While the role of socioeconomic status cannot be ignored, gender is still the biggest factor affecting sport participation. Girls' participation has risen over time but still lags behind that of boys (Staurowsky et al., 2014; The Aspen Institute, 2017). Some Latina women face pressure from their family to fill more traditional roles but there seem to be clear generational differences, with later generations more likely to be involved with sports than more recent immigrants (Acosta, 1999; Peguero, 2011; Simpkins, O'Donnell, Delgado, & Becnel, 2011).

Even with youth sport experience, young Latina women face disadvantages when it comes to cultural capital. Many Hispanic families lack specific knowledge about collegiate athletics, which is typically acquired through social networks. Without positions on exclusive travel teams or at elite high schools, Latina athletes are unlikely to work with coaches who have experience with the process. This lack of social capital widens disparities in awareness about college athletic opportunities. For example, in a larger study on Latino identity, Gil (2016) met a talented young Latino soccer player who had not been given any advice about how to obtain an athletic scholarship. Latinas who are able to forge connections have an advantage. Though not focused on athletic scholarships, Acosta (1999) demonstrated that Latina women who enjoyed sports and wanted to pursue careers in physical education were often encouraged by teachers or coaches.

Two studies about Latinx athletes highlight the role of capital in college athletics. Jamieson (2005) learned that Latina collegiate softball players lacked cultural capital when it came to college recruitment. Most of the women interviewed had little knowledge about the recruiting process. Their parents, while supportive of their pursuits, were themselves unfamiliar with college athletics. In order to gain a scholarship, many of the women relied on their social capital in the form of help from a coach or from peers. Narrative inquiry of three community college soccer players showed a similar pattern. One woman was initially recruited when playing on an elite club team, which she joined for free because her family could not afford it. Another woman wanted to play in college but was concerned about the cost. A coach connected her with the local community college, where she received financial assistance to play for the team (Martinez, 2018). Both studies suggest that the role of capital is essential to both the early development of Latina athletes and their decisions about college sport; however, neither fully captures the experiences of Latina athletes. Jamieson's research does not depict the variety of sport experiences and omits the voices of high school athletes who did not ascend to the next level. Martinez relied on narrative inquiry from a limited sample of community college athletes. Understanding Latina decisions about college sports requires a wider sample of athletes.

In order to understand more about the underrepresentation of Latinas in college sport, it is necessary to consider how capital influences their youth participation experiences and their engagement with the recruiting process. The current study asks the following research question: How are Latina athletes' chances to play college sport influenced by economic, cultural, and social capital?

Methods

Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 31 individuals who self-identified as Hispanic or Latina. Limiting the sample to women with these identities allowed the researcher to center the experiences of Latina women and give voice to a underrepresented group (Choo & Ferree, 2010). Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. The principal investigator sent an email containing information about the study to local college coaches, to Hispanic/Latina

student clubs at local colleges and universities, and to personal contacts with ties to sport or higher education organizations. These contacts were asked to forward the study information to possible participants or to provide the researchers with email contact information for women who might qualify. The researcher then verified that the women met the study criteria. All participants had to be 18 years or older and had to self-identify as a Hispanic or Latina female. Finally, the women must have attended high school in the United States and participated in competitive sport while in high school and/or college. The researcher connected with 31 women who met the criteria. Twelve women were referred by a college coach or administrator, nine women responded to notifications sent to student clubs, and 10 women were recommended by personal contacts.

After making initial contact and verifying the criteria, the researcher and participants arranged a mutually agreeable time and location for the interview. All participants received a \$15 gift card to an online retailer or a local café. The nominal incentives were approved by the institutional review board, therefore current student-athletes could accept the gift cards without violating NCAA policies on athlete compensation.

Of the 31 interviewees, 24 were currently enrolled in college and the remaining seven were college graduates ranging in age from 23 to 45. Fourteen of the women were involved in collegiate athletics; eight played at the Division I level (DI) and six competed in Division III (DIII). The remaining 17 women were involved with high school athletics but did not play NCAA sports. Of the collegiate athletes, nine were officially recruited before enrolling and five were “walk-ons”, enrolled students who earned a roster spot through a tryout. All DI athletes were offered athletically-based financial aid at some point in their college careers. Though DIII schools are prohibited from giving athletic scholarships (Ziff, 2017), multiple women used terms like “financial aid” and “scholarship” to refer to economic assistance from DIII schools. When doing so, they are referring to merit- and need-based scholarships, not athletically-based aid.

The women played a variety of high school varsity sports, including basketball, bowling, field hockey, handball, lacrosse, soccer, softball, swimming, tennis, track and field, volleyball, and wrestling. In order to protect the respondents’ identities, many of whom were the only Latina on their team, personal information is excluded from the results unless it is relevant.

All of the respondents identified as Hispanic/Latina but differed in other ways. Ten of the respondents identified with only one ethnic group. The remaining 21 participants identified with two or more ethnic groups. The respondents also varied by generational status and geography. Three athletes were born abroad and migrated to the United States before beginning school. Of those who were born in the United States, 22 were born to one or more immigrant parents and six were third- or fourth-generation Americans. The women grew up in 13 different states. The majority (20) grew up in the Northeast while the others were raised in the South (1), Midwest (1), Southwest (4), and West (5). Since the majority of Americans tend to describe themselves as middle class regardless of their economic position (Shenker-Osorio, 2013), the researcher did not explicitly ask about social class. Instead information about family income emerged through respondents’ own narratives about their upbringing and involvement with sport. This information was merged with U.S. Census data about their hometowns to

classify the women as working class (13), middle class (14), and upper middle class (4). Table 1 provides an overview of the 31 respondents.

Data Collection and Analysis

The majority (28) of the interviews were conducted face to face in a mutually agreed upon public setting such as a café or library. The remaining three interviews were conducted online via Skype (Microsoft, Redmond, WA) or FaceTime (Apple Inc., Cupertino, CA). All participants gave permission for the interview to be audio-recorded. The interview began by asking the women to describe their earliest sports experiences. Then respondents were asked to discuss the college recruitment and selection process and encouraged to reflect on their transition from high school to college. They were also asked to speak about any sport involvement that followed their high school career. Interviews ranged between 28 and 64 min.

Following the interviews, two research assistants transcribed the audio and discussed prominent themes with the main researcher. The main investigator imported the transcripts into NVivo data analysis software (QSR International, Melbourne, Australia) and coded for three main themes: economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital. Responses that mentioned the presence or absence of money were coded as economic capital. In addition, all sport experiences that cost money, such as camps, equipment, and travel were marked in this category. Finally, participants' mentions of work or leisure time were included as an indication of economic capital. To code for cultural capital, the researcher looked at all responses that mentioned knowledge about the recruiting process—this included stories about what the participants knew and what information they lacked. Finally, the social capital code was used whenever the respondent referred to a relationship that affected their sport experience, such as a parent, coach, or friend. After the data were coded, the researcher examined how frequently each theme occurred and how closely the themes overlapped with the women's sport experiences and with class and generational identifications (Given, 2008).

Throughout the research process, the principal investigator considered her positionality as a European-American female. She was conscious of the power dynamics presented in the relationship and attempted to center Latina voices. Though she was situated as an outsider with respect to ethnicity, her gendered history in athletics allowed her to establish trust among the respondents and make sense of their sports experiences (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Hesse-Biber, 2014). She relied on both her insider and outsider statuses to accurately reflect the lived experiences of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

Findings

Economic Capital

The pathway to college sports often begins with entry-level leagues organized for young children. Eighteen of the women consistently participated in youth sports; all but one were from middle or upper middle class backgrounds. This is not atypical considering the fact that league fees and equipment costs can exceed many families' budgets. Additionally, Francisca explained that "transportation or the

Table 1 Overview of Respondents

Name	Athletic Participation	Socioeconomic Group	Generation^a
Division I players			
Ana	Recruited athlete, full athletic scholarship	Middle	2.5
Gina	Began as walk-on, later received partial scholarship	Middle	2.5
Juana	Recruited athlete, full athletic scholarship	Middle	2
Raquel	Recruited athlete, turned down athletic scholarship	Working	2.5
Sammi	Recruited athlete, full athletic scholarship	Middle	2.5
Valentina	Recruited athlete, full athletic scholarship	Middle	2
Victoria	Recruited athlete, full athletic scholarship	Middle	3
Whitney	Recruited athlete, full athletic scholarship	Working	3
Division III players			
Adriana	Recruited athlete, offered aid package ^b	Middle	3
Allie	Walk on	Working	2.5
Flor	Walk on	Working	3
Francisca	Walk on	Working	2
Melissa	Walk on	Working	2
Rachel	Recruited athlete, offered aid package ^b	Upper middle	2.5
High school athletes			
Abril		Middle	2
Alma		Working	2
Amanda		Upper middle	2
Beatriz		Working	2
Breanna		Middle	2
Danna		Middle	2
Inéz		Working	2
Josi		Middle	2
Kesara		Working	2
Lissie		Working	1.5
Luisa		Upper middle	2
Marisol		Middle	3
Paola		Middle	1.5
Tara		Middle	3
Tracy		Upper middle	2.5
Vanessa		Working	2
Xiomara		Working	1.5

^a1.5 = born abroad, arrived in United States as a child; 2 = born in United States to two immigrant parents; 2.5 = born in United States to one immigrant and one citizen parent; 3 = born in United States to U.S. citizens.

^bDIII schools cannot issue scholarships. Athletes who spoke about receiving aid to attend a school did not explicitly mention athletic scholarships but they did describe the overall aid package that they received.

responsibilities of having to work or take care of the children in the home and a language barrier" all inhibited Latinas' ability to participate.

For these reasons, working class women traveled a much different route to sport success. They had experience playing at local parks and in physical education classes, but generally did not play organized sports consistently until middle or high school. Some of the working class women joined a youth sport league for a brief time. For example, Lissie referred to a youth soccer league as a "one-time thing because it was very expensive and my family couldn't keep up with it." In total, 12 out of the 13 women whose sport dedication began in school came from a working class background. School sports were attractive to these women because it "was free through the school" and it was "something productive" and "healthy" to do after school. School sports were one of the only acceptable ways for some women to socialize with their peers. For example, Xiomara said:

I think I've always been involved [in sports]. I'm an active human. I remember a lot of my social activity revolved around playing soccer with my cousins and stuff . . . After that, in middle school I got involved with sports because my dad was very strict. And then I could stay after school and hang out with all my friends. So I joined all the sports teams in middle school.

Early experiences in school and recreational sports are important but elite club teams represent a critical juncture in the college sport pipeline. These clubs, a major investment in time and money, are particularly important for team sports. The women who participated on elite teams traveled extensively. For most of these women, their families traveled with them whenever possible, further increasing the cost and commitment. Families considered the costs in relationship with the potential rewards. Juana, a DI soccer player, transitioned to "bit of a higher up" travel team in order to be seen by more college coaches. She recalls that, "It was a little bit more money but it was worth it because now I am here [in college]." Valentina, another DI soccer player, mentioned shifting to a less competitive team to save money, but only after she had committed to a university. Unfortunately, the costs are usually out of reach for low-income families and are a major financial sacrifice for many middle class families. Ana, a DI basketball player, noted:

My dad and my mom, when we grew up we weren't in the best position financially, so they sacrificed a lot just so I could get the private workouts and the traveling teams. Even though we couldn't really afford it they made sure that I was at the tournaments that I needed to be at so I could get the exposure.

The investment paid off for Ana but was not something that every family could provide, as evidenced by Inéz, a high school tennis player:

You have to have money to be good. I mean, you can be good without the money but you need the equipment. You need to travel. To make a name for yourself. To make money in that sport. And my parents weren't going to spend on that.

In addition to club sports, athletes could often gain an edge by attending camps, hiring personal trainers, or buying the latest equipment. Many of the

respondents named these experiences as instrumental to their success. Of course, all of these things require economic capital. Most working class respondents and some middle class respondents described these opportunities as “not in my budget” and “financially too much for my family”. Two contrasting examples emphasize the role of economic capital in securing training opportunities. Abril remarked that her “parents were able to send me every year to a volleyball camp upstate and it was a really good one. I had great coaches up there and I always came back better the next year.” Her experience was vastly different than that of Inéz, who was invited to a training facility with some of her teammates. She went a few times but could not afford the fees so she spent the off seasons practicing at the park with her friends instead, where she lacked exposure to the type of elite coaching that could help sharpen her skills.

Not only did these experiences cost money, but they were time intensive. Upper and middle class respondents could afford to spend extra time traveling or practicing. Adriana started playing travel softball when she was 10, because an acquaintance from her church needed an additional player for a weekend tournament. She played well in the tournament and continued in subsequent years as softball became a “year-round process” that involved her and her family traveling almost every weekend to tournaments. Breanna had a similar experience playing for a club volleyball team. “We went to so many colleges. We went to so many tournaments in [city]. We went to all of them. We went to [university] a few times . . . When I say it’s my life, it’s literally my life.”

In contrast, many working and middle class girls cut back on sports participation in order to perform paid or unpaid work. Vanessa quit lacrosse her senior year because she was working. She explained that “I started serving as soon as I turned 18—at the time, it was either I could work or I could do sports. And it was work at that time in your life”, in order to save money for college. Melissa stepped back from sports to help her family, who could not afford child-care:

Because I had my driver’s license and I would drive to high school, my parents would want me to come back home when my sister would get out of elementary school and I would have to pick her up, and I would take her to track practice with me. And so this happened, my sophomore, junior, and senior year. She would sit on the bleachers while I did practice . . . My senior year of track season, I decided not to do track because of my sister. I just felt obligated to take care of her. And I just felt guilty leaving her constantly. I would go to practice and focus on that but at the same time I was thinking about my sister and wondering if she was okay.

Taken together, the Latina women from wealthier backgrounds accumulated more organized sport experience over time. Working class women stayed active through informal play but lacked the necessary skills to earn a place on high school teams, especially if their classmates came from financially secure backgrounds. Melissa explained that she played volleyball recreationally with her family but failed to make the school team on two occasions, even after she tried teaching herself the techniques at home. She noted that most of the girls who made the team “did club sports on the side” or “had been playing on a team for 2, 3 years, maybe longer.” Even players who made the team would feel underprepared, like Beatriz,

who “was on the team with people who trained since they were 3 starting with tee ball” and thus was hesitant to take on new positions on her softball team. When they did earn high school roster spots, girls from lower income backgrounds often played on teams from predominately minority high schools that had limited resources and poor coaches. Several participants noted that their competitors had the latest equipment while they were stuck with “hand me downs from the school.” The lack of preparation and resources produced a unique anxiety in working class women. Melissa explained that it “weighs on your psyche” to constantly see others with better facilities, equipment, and uniforms.

Because of the overlap between class and race in the United States, respondents took note of the fact that the better high schools with the nicest facilities were in White suburban areas. Tracy remarked that “the better you got in sports, it just got Whiter and Whiter.” Many athletes remember feeling insecure against predominately White teams. For example, Paola “always saw the White girls being so good and athletic because their parents put so much money into soccer clubs.” The feeling of not measuring up led some women to end their participation. Beatriz, a high school athlete who quit the volleyball team, said:

. . . some people, when they grow up in sports, they gravitate towards that wherever they are and they don't care who is on the field with them. When you are not exposed to that, you are putting yourself in a position to be rejected, to be judged, or to fail. So some people like me, I'd rather not fail and would just walk away from the situation.

While most of these factors described the economic capital that allowed athletes to gain the experience needed to earn a college scholarship, socioeconomic status also directly affects the recruiting process. Whitney explained that her family needed “a certain amount of money to do the [recruiting] videos and to send them out just to help me get recruited.” For other athletes, it was less about the investment in the recruiting process and more about what they might have to give up by being an athlete. Lissie had the talent to compete in college but she never participated in the recruitment process. She stated:

It was never going to be a possibility in terms of money. If I would have had the ability to have a scholarship or have a parent that could pay my tuition without me having to worry about in the back of my mind and I could just focus on sports and school, then yeah, I would have done it.

Lissie also mentioned that her plan to work during the day and take classes at night prevented her from engaging with the recruiting process. Some high school players took steps in the recruiting process but eventually shifted their focus to academics. Kesara, a soccer player, was discouraged by her mother, who told her that “we are a low income family so we're banking on . . . an academic scholarship to college. If you get a sports scholarship and if you get injured that's the end. You can't bank on just sports.” Kesara's mom was worried that a sport scholarship was unreliable. Raquel, an excellent high school athlete, had some related concerns because she wanted to succeed academically in college. She was recruited by two DI college coaches but turned down the first school because athletes had to live and study on the main campus, which would cause problems if she wanted to change

her major to one that was located on the satellite campus. She was accepted into the second school and had “the option of requesting athletic money” but turned it down because she had received a substantial academic scholarship. She made this decision because, “I felt it was safer. I just had more comfortability. Not that I’m not devoted to the team, but it’s just I know if I wanted to leave I could.”

These examples demonstrate a consistent theme: women were likely to turn down athletic opportunities to pursue what they perceived as better educational opportunities. There were several underlying reasons for this. First, many of the women received substantial academic aid that usurped what they would have received from a partial athletic scholarship. Second, small schools where they might make the roster were in a lower academic tier than some larger universities where the women had been admitted. For example, Abril explained that while she thought about playing college sports, “the schools that looked at me were perhaps a lesser caliber than I wanted to go to.” These factors meant that some women would likely have paid more tuition for a less reputable degree if they wanted to pursue college sports. As a result, many women chose to walk away from sport. Gina faced this decision after a successful career in high school soccer and track:

I would have liked to play soccer [in college] but I think for me, it was all depending on if I got a scholarship. And I didn’t get a scholarship for either [soccer or track]. I actually did get an offer to run at [small DIII school] but I actually wanted to go to [DI university] so I actually chose [DI university]. I got a scholarship for academics there. Because I had the academic scholarship, it kind of pushed me more towards—maybe I should focus on my studies.

Women who were outstanding athletes on elite club teams had more options. Finances were important to them but they were typically offered full scholarships from multiple DI schools with solid academic reputations and flexible pathways toward their desired majors. For example, Valentina said when she decided which school to attend that “money was a huge factor for me and my family. [DI University] offered a full ride. They offered a fifth year—at the time, I was looking to [specific major] and it was a 5-year program.” Ana received multiple scholarship offers to DI schools but chose the school she saw as the best fit for her future career:

I want to be a lawyer, that’s my big goal after college. I don’t plan on going overseas, I don’t plan on going professional. [My sport] is just something I’m good at that’s getting me through college, that I love, however I don’t have to do it for my whole life. So when I was deciding, I really did look into the academics. I heard of [DI institution] how it works with all of the law internships that I could get here.

These choices were much more difficult for women who were not recruited by schools with strong athletic and academic reputations and for low-income women. For example, Xiomara initially pursued college wrestling² but changed her but mind, stating:

My family is very poor. I know that I need to help them so the schools that offered [wrestling] were not at the type of level where I would build the type of network I want to build. You get in a lot of situations, especially when you

have an accent, where sometimes people don't think I'm as smart as I am and that to a degree . . . will hold people back in my situation so I thought about it a lot. It was a really hard decision, because wrestling was my life. Like at this other [small DIII] school, the scholarships they were giving me were not comparable to what I got [at this elite research university] for academics.

Cultural Capital and Social Capital

Economic capital directly influenced athlete development but talent alone will not help someone gain a roster spot on the college team; prospective college athletes need to engage in the formal recruitment process. Though all of the study respondents played competitive high school sports, they did not all want to pursue NCAA-level sports. Some deemed themselves not skilled enough while others wanted to focus on academics. For example, Luisa was passionate about her future career and played lacrosse “just for fun”, therefore she enrolled in a university that was known for her major and had a club-level lacrosse team. Danna loved playing high school sports but also said, “it's not something that would dictate where I would want to go because I definitely value my education over my sports.”

The women who expressed interest in playing varsity sports differed in terms of their knowledge of the process. This knowledge, or cultural capital, was often passed on to them through parents, relatives, coaches, and peers, and therefore having specific social capital was important to acquisition of cultural capital. The importance of cultural capital started early. Allie played recreational sports but never joined a travel team. She explained:

I remember in middle school one kid played on the traveling team. But it was just this thing that nobody really knew about. I went to one of the more diverse middle schools—we always kind of got the low end of the stick. It is on south side, so they just think kids on south side don't really care about that stuff.

Allie did not have the cultural capital to know about travel teams. She also lacked the social capital to open up this possibility because she lived in a place where “nobody really knew about it.” On the other hand, Amanda lived in a town where many people played travel sports. Her father and her friends asked her if she wanted to join. Juana had a very different experience. She began at the recreational level but later joined a travel squad. She recounted:

I did rec sports until I was 8. I remember one game, some coach came up to me and he was like ‘We have a girls team. Here's my card.’ That never really happened to me before so I showed it to my mom and she was like, alright, we can try it. And I've been on that travel team from [ages] 8–13.

Juana's ability to join the rec league put her in position to find out about more opportunities. In addition to alerting athletes to early opportunities, social networks are critical for explaining essential components of recruiting. For example, Sammi's parents “didn't understand what the actual process was like”, but she played for a high school coach who was a former DI player. The coach walked Sammi through the recruiting procedures and gave her advice that eventually helped to secure a DI scholarship. Rachel's high school coach convinced her to

seek out the field hockey coaches when visiting DIII campuses, which helped Rachel to secure a roster spot. Kesara's high school soccer coach handed her a list of contacts and a template letter to use if she wanted to email coaches. Ana remarked: "when I was being recruited I had a lot of people by my side telling me how to choose a school and when to choose a school."

Not all prospective athletes get this type of advice. Gina eventually ran in college but did not have a lot of help from her parents along the way. She mentioned that "it would have been nice to have that guidance or for them to help me to see if I could seek out a scholarship." When she was a senior in high school, Paola's coach asked her if she wanted to play soccer in college. At this point, most prospective athletes have already been in communication with colleges but Paola had not pursued that path because her "parents knew nothing about going into college for soccer." She asked her coach about the process and, following his advice, she stated:

. . . [I] looked up everything. I made my own profile and stuff because I think that was what you had to do and then coaches look at you. So I got a call once and I got an interview . . . But then he [the college coach] told me—why didn't you do this freshman year? And I was like 'I had no idea I had to do it freshman year.'

Paola was a good player on a bad team at a small high school in an immigrant enclave. Because college coaches will not regularly visit such places, the high school coaches do not have a lot of experience with college recruiting. Their efforts often come too late for people like Paola and for Francisca, a strong athlete who "really wanted to play volleyball [in DI], but felt like my coach didn't necessarily know how to get me there up until . . . it was too late." Melissa, a runner, had a similar experience, commenting that "even though I had a great coach in high school, he never talked to me about like, 'hey, I think you have potential to run in college. These are the steps you need to take'". This was a common story for most athletes in under-resourced schools. Xiomara was an exception because her coaches were familiar with the process. According to her, it was because her high school "was really bad [academically], but sports people cared. So everybody was trying to go to school for a sport, not everybody was trying to go for academics."

By comparison, some athletes knew exactly what to do because they also played on club-level teams where that knowledge was regularly circulated. For example, Adriana played club softball. She knew that in order to be seen by college coaches, she had to "make a highlight film" and post the video on a specific recruiting website. When asked how she knew about the site, she mentioned that her dad had learned about it from other coaches. Unlike Paola's parents, Adriana's dad was a second-generation American who spoke English well and was very involved with organized softball.

Not all parents were capable of helping students get recruited or making sense of the scholarship offers. Whitney showed a lot of promise as a young athlete but her parents never attended college and did not understand much about college sport. She was unaware of the recruiting process until an administrator approached her at a high school tournament and offered to assist her with making a video and

contacting college coaches. She was somewhat overwhelmed by the offers that came in. Fortunately, she had a relative who had graduated college:

. . . [relative] helped me out a lot with those things with like a chart of the different schools that were interested in me and . . . if they were going to let me play, cause there are a lot of schools that will recruit but won't let you play. And also academically wise to see if they were stronger than other schools.

Students that did not have coaches or relatives often sought out the advice of friends and former teammates who were competing in college. Victoria did not know anything about the process until she saw an Instagram post from a local athlete who had recently signed a letter of intent with a DI university. The social media post inspired Victoria to reach out to a former high school classmate who was competing in college. They were not close but he was the only person she knew who had been through the recruitment process. He sent her some sample emails that she used as a template for contacting college coaches.

Though not all prospective athletes have the cultural capital to navigate the recruiting process, some can still make it as a walk-on by acquiring social capital. That is exactly what happened for Melissa and Gina, two track athletes who attended different schools. During their first year of college, both athletes had chance meetings with upperclass students who were on the track team. The track team members invited the women to try out, and Melissa and Gina eventually made the team. After not being recruited, both women competed for all 4 years and Gina was eventually offered a partial scholarship.

Cultural capital was also important for knowing the "right" sports. Two of the athletes grew up playing American handball. The sport is popular among Latinx people living in large urban centers in the Northeast. There are some local high school teams but there are only a few college teams, therefore even knowledge and connections are only of limited help.

The Influence of Capital and Generation

When it came to athletics, almost all of the women who received athletic financial assistance were from the upper and middle classes and played youth sport. Of the women in this sample, six of the eight DI players came from middle or upper middle class families, competed at the elite youth level, and eventually earned a scholarship. The two that did not compete at the elite youth level were from the working class and had unique stories. Whitney's mother discouraged a sport scholarship but her family member provided money and advice to help with recruiting. Raquel did not seek a scholarship because she thought it was safer to focus on academics, but her merit-based academic scholarship enabled her to compete as a walk-on. Additionally, six of the eight DI players had at least one parent who was a United States citizen. These families placed a value on using sport as a springboard for academic success. Of the six DIII athletes, the two who were formally recruited were from higher income backgrounds and had parents who were U.S. citizens. One played youth sports and one started in middle school. The other four women started competing in middle or high school. Neither of these women were recruited; they all earned merit- or need-based scholarships and

eventually walked on to their college teams. These women had a mix of immigrant and citizen parents. Finally, nearly all of the women who stopped after high school had immigrant parents. These women varied in socioeconomic status but shared the prioritization of academic opportunities.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Latinas in the United States are a diverse group and their experiences seeking college scholarships reflect that diversity. These data demonstrate that economic, social, and cultural capital contribute to the underrepresentation of Latina women in college sports. Women who came from wealthier families were more likely to accumulate the capital needed to secure a college scholarship. Economic capital allowed girls from these families to play organized youth sports from a very young age, giving them a head start in training and practicing their sport. Early training and the confidence it bolstered helped higher income women secure positions on their school rosters and/or elite specialized travel squads. Participation on travel teams required further economic commitment and commanded more time. Financial security meant that women could spend more time practicing and competing and that their families could travel with them.

Economic capital also directly affected athletes' abilities to accumulate cultural and social capital. Women who lived in middle and upper class areas were more likely to know how to sign up for a youth travel team. Many of these women had U.S. citizen parents who were familiar with the sport process. Others played or lived in neighborhoods where they were noticed by coaches and recruiters. Because most college coaches recruited from elite specialized sports, girls from high-income families had a greater likelihood of being recruited by college coaches. Women who did not have the money or time to play travel sports might still garner attention through a successful high school career, but this was unlikely given the fact that these women also lived in underfunded school districts with substandard athletic programs that college coaches routinely passed over. Furthermore, a few women showed potential early on but stepped away from high school sports because the time commitment prevented them from contributing to their families' economic needs. Some took part-time jobs and others took unpaid jobs, such as childcare, to assist their family members.

The relationship between economic, cultural, and social capital extended through the college recruitment process. By participating on elite travel teams and in well-funded high school districts, middle and upper middle class women met people who taught them about the recruiting process, which was especially important since most women said their parents did not know much about college sports. Even without this cultural capital, these girls benefited from educated English-speaking parents who could help them make sense of the college admissions process. Girls from lower-income families did not have these connections. Their parents typically held working class jobs and/or spoke Spanish. These parents were staunch advocates of education, but did not have a roadmap for their daughters' college plans, placing the burden on making academic and athletic decisions onto the women themselves.

Even though not all families valued sport, families of all income brackets encouraged their daughters to succeed academically and to attend college. Families

from different economic brackets and generations valued sport and education differently, demonstrating Bourdieu's (1998) point that social groups differ in how they value sport. Upper class families valued education and used sport as a vehicle to obtain it. Working class women saw greater social profits in education than they did in sports. No matter their financial status, the women realized that their route to economic mobility lay outside of sport. Many of the women who eventually played college sport only did so after committing to the academics of an institution; almost all of the women who were "walk-ons" received substantial academic- or other merit-based aid at their universities. As Bourdieu (1998) theorized, women received limited status gains from sport participation. Therefore, it makes sense that Latinas, especially those from the working class, placed academic success over sport participation.

The data makes clear that Bourdieu's (1986) three forms of capital are critical for accessing college sport opportunities. However, it is important to note that critical race scholars rightly argue that Bourdieu's (1986) conception of capital has the potential to mark minority groups as culturally deficient. In response, Yosso (2005) claims that communities of color possess forms of cultural capital that are systemically devalued by society's dominant groups. She theorizes that this "community cultural wealth is an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro forms of oppression (Yosso, 2005, p. 77)." While community cultural wealth is an asset that can help students navigate the college recruitment process, that very process is embedded in dominant systems of power which fail to recognize the significance of marginalized groups' knowledge and contacts. The current research views Latina underrepresentation as stemming from those systematic barriers and not resulting from inherent cultural deficiencies.

This is exemplified by two handball players, Lissie and Danna. Lissie was mentored by older male players from her neighborhood. Danna's social network included some of the nation's top players. Both women credited these contacts as inspirational role models but this social capital was not converted into athletic scholarships because there are few available in that sport. Similarly, athletes like Francisca persisted in sport despite receiving poor coaching and limited resources. Her ability to navigate obstacles while maintaining high aspirations is a form of community cultural wealth that has the potential to drive academic and athletic success. These strengths went unrecognized by college coaches who are recruiting within a system that prioritizes top travel teams over high school athletics.

Limitations and Future Directions

One major limitation of this research is that all of the athletes in the sample both played sports in high school and attended college. The result is that Latinas from higher income backgrounds are overrepresented compared to the U.S. population. It also means that women who were unable to play high school sports for any reason and women who did not attend college are excluded. Therefore, there may be additional hurdles facing prospective female athletes who withdraw from school or sports at an earlier age. In addition, the number of student-athletes may reflect college choice among Latinas, who are much more likely to enroll in 2-year colleges than at 4-year colleges (Carnevale & Fasules, 2017; Sólorzano et al., 2005).

Many 2-year colleges sponsor school sports and offer scholarships, but these athletic programs are administered by the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) and not by the NCAA. Future studies should include Latinas who never competed in sports, high-school athletes who did not attend college, and community college athletes.

All of the women involved in this research were reflecting back on their high school years; additional longitudinal research could better help scholars understand how women experience the recruiting process in real time. Furthermore, 60% of all participants grew up in the Northeast and another 15% hailed from the West. Though respondents in this study shared similar stories regardless of geography, additional research could examine possible regional differences, especially among Latinas living in the South and Midwest. Because this study was focused on Bourdieu's (1986) forms of capital, it omitted the ways racial and gender ideologies might actively shape the playing careers of Latinas. Moreover, the study examined how youth sports, school sports, and family characteristics influence prospective student athletes. Additional research should investigate how Latina athletes navigate college sports once they join the team and how their careers are shaped by community cultural wealth, as well as race, class, and gender. Finally, it would be interesting to examine how the college recruiting process might be similar or different for Latino men who face some of the same obstacles but have the potential to gain more economic and social status from sport.

Even with these limitations, the research is still instructive because it suggests why Latinas are absent from college athletic programs. While some women do not have the desire or the talent to play in college, it is still important to make sure that students who can and want to play get a fair shot. Based on this research, there are several policies and practices that could help close the gap. Because Latinas disproportionately come from lower income brackets, any effort for reform needs to address larger questions of economic inequality. Similarly, reformers must also target systematic school segregation and the soaring costs of youth sport.

Within higher education institutions, there are certain steps that athletic departments can take. These steps may help college programs find overlooked athletes and would increase the diversity on their women's sport teams. First, college coaches can make more effort to recruit from high schools in low-income districts. These coaches have busy recruiting schedules but they frequently see the same women at multiple tournaments. Alternating between local high school contests and elite travel competitions would allow the coaches to get a look at fresh talent and to recognize community cultural wealth. Next, coaches recruiting Latina players, especially from low-income districts, should also strongly consider meeting the families and explaining the process to them. In some cases, this may mean hiring a translator. This would take the burden off students and show that the university cared about creating a link with the family. Armed with more knowledge of the process, parents could work together with their daughters to make decisions about playing sports in college. Additionally, colleges can work more closely with high school athletic departments to increase the social and cultural capital of their students and parents by inviting current and former student-athletes to talk to high school students. The college athletes could explain the process and answer questions about recruiting. High schools can also organize all-star games or skills clinics that bring the best players together and invite college coaches to such

showcases. Finally, the NCAA can consider adding championships in sports that are practiced and celebrated among Latinx communities, such as handball. These steps will not guarantee that college athletic opportunities expand to more Latinas but they can create more cultural and social capital for these women. Through doing so, it may help us see more Latinas on the playing fields.

Conclusion

These data help explain the low rates of Latina women in NCAA sports. In this sample, sport experiences differed by class. Because U.S. Hispanics are overrepresented in low-income groups, many Latina women are likely to experience sport similarly to the working class women in this sample. They will be less likely than middle and upper class women to play sports anywhere on the recruiting pipeline, to know how to tap into potential college opportunities, and to connect with individuals who could assist the process. They will also be less likely to have family members who are familiar with the college admissions process. They will be more likely to start sports later in life, to have fewer developmental opportunities, to lack confidence in their athletic abilities, and to play on bad teams with poor coaches who are not helpful in seeking sport scholarships. They are unlikely to be recruited or to be awarded substantial athletic aid from reputable academic institutions. Finally, the women who do choose to go to college may be more likely to pursue academic opportunities because they see a greater chance of achieving mobility through academics. As a result, the college sport system reproduces social class and its overlapping racial dimensions. The majority of opportunities are awarded to those women from higher-income backgrounds. In the United States, those individuals are predominately from White, European backgrounds. What seems to be a lack of Latina talent and an abundance of skilled White athletes is actually the result of the wider distribution of cultural, social, and, primarily, economic capital.

Notes

1. Hispanic refers to people who have Spanish ancestry. Latino/Latina refers to people from the geographic region of Latin America—Latinx is a more gender neutral term for the same group of people. These terms are often contested; I follow Gonzalez (2011) in using both interchangeably.
2. At time of publication, women's wrestling was not an NCAA sanctioned sport but 38 schools competed in the Women's Collegiate Wrestling Association. Many of these teams offered athletic scholarships (National Wrestling Coaches Association, n.d.).

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