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How Persevering Latina/o First-Generation College Students Navigate Their College Experience: Keeping Who They Are While Learning and Persisting in the Culture of College

Angela Judith Balcacer
Portland State University

How Persevering Latina/o First-Generation College Students Navigate Their College

Experience:

Keeping Who They Are While Learning and Persisting in the Culture of College

by

Angela Judith Balcacer

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Dissertation Committee:
Dannelle D. Stevens, Chair
Candyce Reynolds
Esperanza De La Vega
Elena Avilés

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Abstract

Latina/o first-generation college students, along with their families, are learning a new culture when considering going to four-year universities. While the conversation involving Latina/o first-generation college students can often focus on attrition, I am interested in exploring what, from participants' point of view, are the successes they experience as well as the most challenging obstacles they encounter on their journey to graduating from four-year universities. Employing the theoretical frameworks of constructivism, critical race theory, and cultural capital, the purpose of this study was to go beyond the conversation of Latina/o first-generation college student attrition by examining how they navigate postsecondary institutions and explore the implications associated with how higher education affects them. I intend to highlight the already powerful voices of Latina/o first-generation college students who are brave enough to be the first in their immediate families to embark on a demanding odyssey to attain four-year degrees. My participants were recruited from classes in the Chicano/Latino studies department as well as a cultural resource center, both at a four-year university in the Pacific Northwest. Using qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews, Draw-A-College-Student, and participant written reflections, I examined the lived experiences of persisting Latina/o first-generation college students from their own perspectives. To provide a well-rounded account of the Latina/o postsecondary experience, I engaged the voices of eight participants in this study. This research found that while Latina/o first-generation college students feel that they are trailblazers in working to improve family life through education, they often feel unseen and

underrepresented in higher education. Through highlighting Latina/o first-generation

college student voices and experiences instead of just focusing on attrition, this study also

recommends actions for change based on participant feedback. Ultimately, participants in

this study felt that more support is needed for Latina/o first-generation students to attain

four-year degrees in higher education.

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Chapter I: Introduction

A Personal Connection

The bell rings. The school day is ending. My backpack is laden with books and binders are heavy with homework. I arrive home. My mother and father are cooking and, as I enter the kitchen, the sweet smell of *arroz con pollo* wafts through the air, reminding me of my hunger. *"¿Tienes tarea?"* With high expectations in her eyes, my mother wants to know if I have any homework. *"No. No me dieron tarea hoy."* I lie. I know my parents can't help me with any of my college-level academic work. He never made it to high school; she never made it to college. What they know is how to work with their hands, something I have always admired in them. *"¿Estás segura?"* My father echoes my mother's concern. *"Te podemos ayudar si tienes tarea."* I nod at my parents' good intentions and am on my way to tackle the mountain of homework assigned that day. Sitting on the floor strewn with stacks of textbooks, I think about future challenges and wonder how I will be the first in my family to make it through unfamiliar college territory and fight against the odds on my own. All I know for sure is that I will try my very best to make my parents proud.

Even though my parents did not attain college degrees, I know that this does not devalue who they are. They continuously promoted a love of learning and will to succeed academically in our home. I made it, despite the arduous, epic journey through the college world. As a first-generation Latina college student in an immigrant family, I was able to survive, deciphering the cryptic demands and expectations of college on my own,

yet owing my success to my parents. My parents' story, while unique in its own way, is similar to many other immigrants' coming to the United States; they want the best for their progeny but may not know how one can attain success and traverse through the murky waters of the education system in a foreign country. My experiences are what prompt me to investigate the lived experiences of historically marginalized students from an insider's perspective, voices that may be hidden behind statistics on the education gap or failure to persist in higher education.

In my ten-year career as a secondary level teacher working with Latina/o high school seniors in low-income, urban neighborhoods, both in Portland, Oregon and in the Bronx, New York, I have witnessed the discouragement of Latina/o students who were the first in their families to go to college. Speaking with them about their postsecondary futures, I have heard some of them say they were not going to college because "That stuff is for White people." I have also heard Latina/o students say that they were not going to college because no one else in their family had, so why should they change anything? At times, Latina/o first-generation college students may view graduating high school as the endpoint and not the start of a new beginning; they may not want to become another statistic or see how they fit in the unknown realm of higher education. This phenomenon is not unfounded.

The domains of academic, financial, cultural, and social capital, as well as family concerns, assumptions about Latinos' backgrounds, and unwelcoming campus climates pose significant challenges to Latino student success. Considering these

collectively portrays a bleak picture for the future of Latino college

attainment. (Núñez, Hoover, Pickett, Stuart-Carruthers & Vasquez, 2013, p. 52)

In other words, there is a plethora of different obstacles Latina/o first-generation college

students face in postsecondary education that influences their level of achievement. In my

experience, because of these and other factors, Latina/o first-generation college students'

hopes of success may affect how they view their odds for success; if they don't see

themselves thriving in the foreign culture of college, they are less likely to pursue a four-

year degree. Thus, our education system plays a role in framing how students view

themselves, their potential in academe and, ultimately, society (Dennis, Phinney,

& Chauteco, 2005; French & Chavez, 2010; Garcia, 2010; Núñez et al., 2013; Orbe,

2004; Pyne & Means, 2013; Storlie, Moreno, & Portman, 2014). These obstacles are

what inspire my study on Latina/o first-generation college students' lived experiences of

persistence and hardships. The purpose of this study is to go beyond the conversation of

Latina/o first-generation college student attrition by examining how they navigate

postsecondary institutions and explore the implications associated with how higher

education affects them. I sought to relay these phenomena through the lens of students

who have been through at least two years of the four-year degree journey as Latina/o

first-generation college students.

Because of a variety of barriers, Latina/o college students face the possibility of

not attaining four-year degrees: "Even [Latina/os] who do attend college remain much

less likely than other groups to complete a four-year degree or continue to graduate or

professional schools" (Gandara & Contreras, 2009, pp. 196). Often, the focus of research

may be on the education gap or the lack of degree completion of minority populations

(Dumais & Ward, 2010; French & Chavez, 2010; Garcia, 2010; Inkelas & McCarron,

2006; Keels, 2013; Krogstad & Fry, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pino, Martínez-Ramos,

& Smith, 2012: Pyne & Means, 2013; Ross et al. 2012; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin,

2012; Storlie et al., 2014). At times, research can highlight the stories of those failing:

> Such stories are compelling, but they also simplify and homogenize the day-to-
>
> day experiences of underrepresented students, erasing contradiction and struggle,
>
> ignoring the larger historical systems of privilege and power that are embedded in
>
> the institutional fabric of schools in favor of a more seductive myth of success. By
>
> sanitizing the complexity of experience, it becomes easy to create a false
>
> measuring stick by which "less successful" students are seen as problematic,
>
> unfortunate, or not trying hard enough. (Pyne & Means, 2013, pp. 5-6)

One must ask, for whom does this "seductive myth of success" work? This focus on the

numbers can dehumanize Latina/os college students' stories of successes and struggles.

Without carefully analyzing students' lived experiences, which make them who they are,

how can we claim to fully understand their plight? Seidman (2013) explains that while

there while "So much research is done on schooling in the united states; yet so little of it

is based on studies involving the perspectives of the students" (p 9). Ultimately, all the

research in the world cannot replace a student's voice. Simply assigning numbers to

Latina/o first-generation college students who do not attain degrees takes away from their individualism and unique circumstances, as Minikel-Lacocque illustrates:

> … Too often our collective focus is on measurable outcomes such as grade-point averages, the rates of college acceptance and graduation rates and what those trends can tell u about underrepresented college students. While these numbers are certainly important, they do not tell us enough about the students' *experiences* [emphasis in original] in college. (p.100)

Focusing on only the numbers can be misleading. Alternatively, my goal is to examine the dynamic between Latina/o first-generation college students' lived experiences and how these are affected by the culture of higher education. As I have stated, the purpose of this study is to go beyond the conversation of Latina/o first-generation college student attrition by examining how they navigate postsecondary institutions and explore the implications associated with how higher education affects them. Thus, I considered the influence of higher education on these historically marginalized students as well as the factors relating to the culture of college that may create tension between the two. I examined stories of Latina/o first-generation college students' perspectives in order to better understand how they thrive and struggle in higher education.

Background of the Problem

In this section, I examine the challenges faced by Latina/o first-generation college students in American higher education institutions. I explore the background of Latino immigrant families, the issues with acculturation, and the role of education in shaping the

consciousness of these students. I also explore issues with four-year degree attainment

and cultural capital in the Latina/o first-generation student population.

Latino Immigrant Family Background, Acculturation and Education

Latina/os are an ethnically diverse and a relatively young population in the U.S

that by 2025 will compose 25% of K-12 students in the country (Gandara & Contreras,

2009, pp. 304-305), a statistic that highlights our need to investigate and better

understand the obstacles for first-generation Latina/o college students. Latina/os are one

of the fastest growing populations in the country and come to the U.S. for a variety of

reasons. Based on Taylor, Lopez, Martínez, & Velasco's (2012) findings focusing on

Hispanics' identities, behaviors, views about social issues, and language use,

> economic opportunities are the most common reason by far that Hispanic
>
> immigrants give for coming to the U.S. More than half (55%) cite this as their
>
> main reason, followed by 24% who say it was "for family reasons," and 9% who
>
> say it was to pursue educational opportunities. (p. 21)

This means that a substantial number of Latina/o immigrants are trying to improve their

odds for a more promising and productive future.

Latina/os or Hispanics can be any race and, according to the United States Census

Bureau, "Hispanic origin can be viewed as the heritage, nationality, lineage, or country of

birth of the person or the person's parents or ancestors before arriving in the United

States" (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). Thus, the term Latina/o does not necessarily

connote the existence of European roots. Latina/os are a unique group because they may

be from a variety of places and possess different attributes: "[The attributes] include citizenship, ethnicity, economic status, family roles, immigration, language, religion, and neighborhood composition" (Núñez et al., 2013, pp. 25-26). This myriad of attributes means that Latina/os have a rich, diverse background that makes their cultural heritage one-of-a-kind, an observation colleges can keep in mind when serving and retaining their Latina/o first-generation college students for education reform.

Immigrating to a foreign country is a brave decision, whether voluntary or involuntary, given the distress and difficulty associated with such drastic change. Immigrant parents or caregivers in the lives of first-generation college students may face a multitude of struggles getting accustomed to a new culture. Anzaldúa (1987) poetically describes the separation associated with leaving one's homeland: "To this day I'm not sure where I found the strength to leave the source, the mother, disengage from my family, *mi tierra*, *mi gente*, and all that picture stood for" (p. 38). To transplant one's identity into a new environment does not always translate into a sense of belonging. It takes a substantial amount of valor and resolution to leave one's land and people. In other words, separating from all one knows and holds dear for a chance at a better family life requires great courage; this is the type of courage most Latina/o FGCS muster when navigating the unfamiliar borderlands (Anzaldúa) or terrain of college culture.

As an immigrant, getting accustomed to mainstream society is associated with upward mobility, which, according to Gans (2007), leads to biased views about what is "mainstream" or "acceptable" social behavior:

> Immigrants who add significantly to their disposable income or become
> successful entrepreneurs in the mainstream economy may be tempted to adopt
> class-appropriate non-immigrant lifestyles… Economic success will persuade
> people to speak English more often or resort to the standard middle-class version
> of the language. (p. 158)

Ultimately, acculturation, incorporating traits of others' cultures into one's own to survive relates to cultural adaptation (Teske & Nelson, 1974, p. 358). Gans (2007) further describes acculturation as "processes by which immigrants become more like non-immigrants culturally and socially" (p. 154). Based on Gans' work, acculturation results in the loss of identity. Seeking to fit in and prosper may be the catalyst to acculturation. Blending-in means there is little deviation from the dominant language and middle-class way of life. Most importantly, for some, resisting the need to adopt a mainstream way of life is not an option.

Acculturation may result in conflict. Schwartz et al. (2013) examined first-generation college students' immigrant parents' experiences and discovered that "Most immigrants undergo a process of adaptation—known as acculturation—following their arrival in the United States" (p. 299). Their study examined the correlations between acculturation and immigrant parents' children's well-being and success in higher education. The researchers found that the process of acculturation affects one's sense of individualism, values, and self-identification; this a problem that often influences underrepresented students' educational performance and views about their success.

Further, there may be strife between immigrant parents and their American children: "The difference between the level of acculturation exhibited by parents and the level exhibited by younger family members is sometimes referred to as the 'acculturation gap'" (Dennis, Basanez, & Farahmand, 2010, p. 119). This imbalance or "acculturation gap" can make relationships between parents or guardians and their children complex, affecting their abilities to perform well in school (Dennis, Basanez, & Farahmand).

Because immigrants are often placed in a sink-or-swim situation when entering a foreign land, they may feel success is not possible without acculturating. Schwartz et al. (2013) assert, "First-generation immigrants are challenged with selectively acquiring the practices, values, and identifications of their new homelands while selectively retaining those of their cultural heritage" (p. 156). In other words, to progress in a new land and become successful, immigrants and their children may give up pieces of their identities, who they are, and what they believe. Anzaldúa (1987) describes the turmoil of vacillating between cultural worlds. She explains that being "... sandwiched between two cultures… [is] an inner war… Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often conflicting messages" (p. 100). It is not easy to live in two cultural worlds at once, especially when one culture supersedes the other in dominance. Thus, having two very different cultures often results in inner strife, and choices must be made about which one will guide our thinking and principles.

Latina/os may feel that without acculturating, they may not have a chance: "…Hispanic Americans may sacrifice their ethnic identity to increase social connectedness with American host culture… The acculturation process functions in part as a trade-off between traditional Latino tendencies and mainstream Anglo-American practices" (Valentine, 2001, p. 465). In a sense, acculturation represents success to those seeking to live a better life in this country, but at what cost? Being from another culture would then mean that we must alter or transform our identities to fit in with what America represents. To gain access to success in America, immigrants often surrender who they are to thrive, which contradicts the all-are-welcome-as-they-are pretense in American culture. As Anzaldúa (1987) previously stated, the "inner war" resulting from "being sandwiched between two cultures" is a construct we should explore in higher education given that culture is ever-present in the lives of bi-cultural students.

Seeking opportunities demonstrates that Latina/o immigrant parents or guardians are interested in a better life for their families. Latina/os place strong emphasis on attaining a higher education (Núñez et al., 2013). Trying to earn one's way into college is a driving force of the home culture, especially if Latinos may not have had the opportunity to do so themselves in their native land. But, is our education system doing all it can to support this growing population? Contreras (2011) answers this question with what she terms the "Brown Paradox":

The influence of Latinos is expanding in several aspects of American life, particularly their importance to the economy as consumers and workers, their

presence in neighborhoods and regions across the country, and their visibility in

popular culture, politics, and the media. Yet very little investment has

accompanied such shifts to ensure educational success and economic

sustainability among Latinos. (p. 2)

Latina/os are making their mark on American culture. However, as Contreras explains,

while the American culture benefits from the Latina/o presence, this host culture is not

actively seeking to improve conditions for this population. If our country benefits

economically from the presence of Latina/os, for example, our school system could

continue improving to ensure they are successful in their tireless fight for a promising

future via education. But, given the lack of persistence among students in this population

(Keels, 2013; Krogstad & Fry, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pino, Martínez-Ramos, &

Smith, 2012: Pyne & Means, 2013; Ross et al., 2012; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin,

2012; Storlie et al., 2014), why is higher education still struggling to better retain Latino

students in their quest to attain for four-year degrees?

Many Latina/o immigrant families know that the way to a better life begins with

education. However, this value is not always reinforced by the American education

system. Contreras (2011) continues illustrating this with what she calls the "Brown

Paradox":

The Brown Paradox is essentially society's paradox, because minimal investment

in Latino students in the United States has larger implications for American

society as a whole, potentially undermining our future viability as a nation. Doing

nothing to alter the current trend toward expanding Latino underclass in the

United States is not an option the United States can afford. (p. 4)

Today, Latina/os are a growing constituency in our populous society. Gandara and

Contreras (2009) project that the number of Latina/os will continue to increase in the

coming future. Because our society does rely on the success of its individuals, it is logical

to allot Latina/os as many opportunities as possible to pursue higher education. Our

country can literally not afford for Latina/os to fail.

Latina/o parents' familiarity with the American system and their views on the

importance of a higher education greatly impact Latina/o first-generation college

students' success (Núñez et al., 2013). In other words, parents or guardians' educational

background may influence how their students perform at school because of the exposure

students have to academic language and experience. As a relatively young immigrant

group to the country, Latina/o parents or guardians may not have had the opportunity to

finish high school. Ross et al. (2012) and the National Center for Educational Statistics

found that Latina/o or Hispanic parents are more likely than parents of other

underrepresented students not to have a high school education and less likely to have

four-year degrees, as *Figure 1* depicts:

Percent
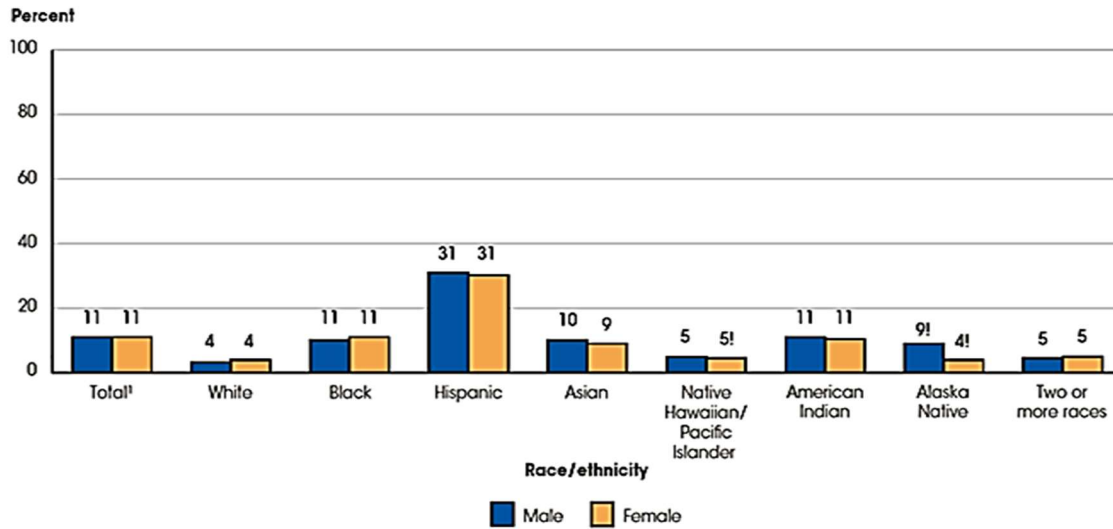
Figure 1: Hispanic parents without a high school degree.

Reprinted from "Higher education: Gaps in access and persistence study," by Ross, T., Kena, G., Rathbun, A. Kewal Ramani, A., Zhang, J., Kristapovich, P., and Manning E. (@012). (NCES 2-12-046). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

Pino, Martínez-Ramos, and Smith (2012) support this claim in explaining that "Latino students are far more likely than either Whites or Blacks to be first-generation college students… who had mothers and fathers who did not finish high school" (p. 24). The disparity in education between some Latino parents and their students is significant. Examining how Latina/o FGCS deal with this disparity in the 21st century can help explain the low four-year degree attainment rates. This disconnect affects how parents or guardians relate to their students and how the students view their educational futures (Núñez et al., 2013). This difference can result in alienation among Latino families in

which parents or guardians feel that their children are becoming "too American" and may

be losing part of their culture based on their experiences with American schools:

> … Many Latino families are made of relatively unacculturated parents who were
>
> born in another country residing with their children who have spent most or all
>
> their life in the United States and have been educated by the American school
>
> system. (Dennis, Basanez, & Farahmand, 2010, p. 119)

Latina/o first-generation college students may experience feelings of loneliness if their

parents or caregivers have not gone through the experience of being in college or

successfully attaining a college degree, a probable scenario based on *Figure 2*, which

shows that Hispanic parents are less likely to have a college degree:
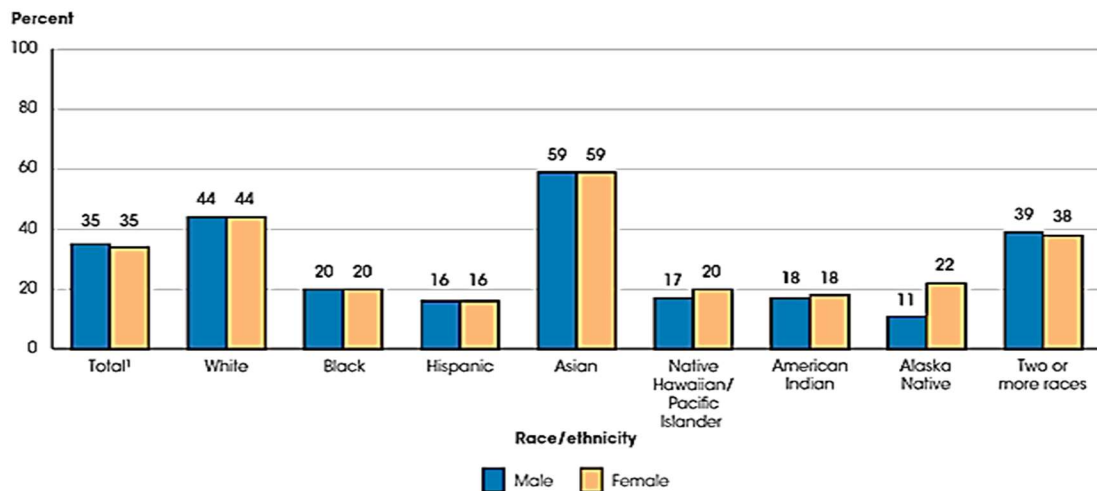
Figure 2: Hispanic parents with a four-year degree. Reprinted from "Higher education:

Gaps in access and persistence study," by Ross, T., Kena, G., Rathbun, A. Kewal

Ramani, A., Zhang, J., Kristapovich, P., and Manning E. (@012). (NCES 2-12-046). U.S.

Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

The difference in educational experience is also true for parents who graduated high school but did not go to college. The demands of college may not be evident to parents or guardians with less educational experience: "… Many Latino students are the first in their families to go to college, so their families may not be familiar with the experience of college and what that experience requires in terms of time and academic focus" (Núñez et al., 2013, p. 49). Given that Latina/os are more likely than other ethnicities to be first-generation college students (Gandara & Contreras, 2009), there may be additional challenges in trying to attain postsecondary degrees, such as approaching professors for help, understanding the financial aid, grant, and scholarship process, as well as not knowing what resources exist for them at the postsecondary level. These factors make the college experience more challenging for Latina/o first-generation college students than many other groups of underrepresented students. The growing Latina/o population and the number of first-generation students in this population make understanding these students' successes and hardships immediate. The need to study their experiences throughout their college education is high and stakes for the future even higher.

To reiterate, being the first to go to college in one's family is not easy. As stated previously, some Latina/os will be the first to experience the challenges and rigor of a college environment without the luxury of having people in their household who have

gone through the same experience and know the college terrain. Pino, Martínez-Ramos, and Smith (2012) maintain that "Latino families with [formal] levels of education… may be less familiar with how to access the appropriate information to assist their children in preparing for and applying to college" (p. 18). Due to this level of unpreparedness, some believe that Latino immigrant families are at a loss because they may not have the tools they need to prepare their young adults for the demands of college. I agree that not having guidance in the journey to and through college is more difficult as a Latina/o first-generation college student, but does this mean that deficiency views are warranted, and Latina/o first-generation college students' families have less social or intellectual mobility?

Persons with diverse backgrounds have a variety of knowledge and cultural-richness to offer, yet there are negative stereotypes associated with those who do not complete a certain level of education. Often, people may not acknowledge the varying forms of schooling and learning that exist within cultural spheres or dominant institutions. As Lave (1996) claims, "It seems imperative to explore ways of understanding learning that do not naturalize and underwrite divisions of social inequality in our society" (p. 149). Latina/o families that may not have college degrees are not uneducated. Lave is illustrating that learning, via everyday interactions and duties, produces wisdom and knowledge as well; it is not just a matter of memorizing material in textbooks. Latina/o immigrants, for example, come to this country with a plethora of

knowledge in diverse fields and, as a result, provide their students with different kinds of knowledge and sagacious advice (Núñez et al., 2013).

Ultimately, formal education is not the sole determinant of one's value or potential in society. For instance, there are often differences in cultural family support systems (Arevalo, So, & McNaughton-Cassill, 2016, p. 9). Not all support systems involve parents or guardians with a college education. Lave (1996) claims that "The 'informal' practices through which learning occurs in apprenticeships are so powerful and robust that this raises questions about the efficacy of standard 'formal' educational practices in schools rather than the other way around" (p. 150). Thus, wisdom does not only stem from going to school. Latino communities that have not attained high levels of education may be wiser than others who have had the luxury of going to college, based on Lave's argument on apprenticeships.

Historically, Latina/o first-generation college students have been depicted as "lacking" or seen through a lens of inadequacy because they are students of color who are the first in their families to venture off to college. Latina/o first-generation college students whose parents are not formally educated will experience more obstacles in their quest for higher education because other types of learning experiences are not as valued or acknowledged; henceforth, Latina/o first-generation college students are culturally and academically deficient to some. For example, Padgett, Johnson, and Pascarella (2012) propose that "Compared to students with highly educated parents, first-generation college students are already at a disadvantage in terms of their… resources before they even step

foot on a college campus" (p. 246). It may not be that the researchers are devaluing Latina/o first-generation college students, but that they are using the language that has been classically used in research; this lens of "disadvantage" assumes that Latina/o first-generation college students are already lacking before they begin their postsecondary careers.

In the past, educational research has showcased the recurring theme of Latina/o first-generation college students' family shortfalls (Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Núñez et al., 2013). Families are sometimes cast as not having the means to help their students be successful: "Although the family members of first-generation college students can provide emotional support, most family members cannot provide vital instrumental support" (Dennis, Phinney, & Chauteco, 2005, p. 234). However, Latina/o first-generation college students see it differently: "[Latino college students] often express that their families offer a key source of support in education through encouragement and guidance." (Núñez et al., 2013, p. 17). As responsible researchers, the attention needs to shift from a deficit view to a positive outlook on the promising potential of these students, a goal I believe research in the educational field is moving towards. By focusing less on attrition or the numbers of those "failing," seeking to modify deficit-view research to a more comprehensive examination of lived experiences of Latina/o first-generation college students seems tenable.

Latino families place strong values on the role and importance of family in their lives: "Traditionally, the Hispanic family is a close-knit group and the most important

social unit" (Núñez et al., 2013, p. 17). To many Latina/os, family is everything. Thus, Latina/o students' upbringing have a large impact on their academic trajectories and performance. Yet, just because immigrant parents of Latina/o first-generation college students may not have college degrees does not mean they are unable to promote the importance of education in their homes. Casting Latina/o first-generation college students' families as deficient sends the wrong message to these aspiring scholars. Their family ties need to be celebrated, not blamed. All in all, while some believe that Latino families are unable to support their students if they lack formal education, I think that this is not a flaw in who students' caretakers are but a motivating force to help their students pursue what their caretakers were unable or disallowed to accomplish.

Latino families' strong beliefs in the value of education are pervasive, which challenges stereotypes (Núñez et al., 2013). Their life experiences taught them what they know about the importance of education, and they pass that knowledge on to their students. If we place worth on the value of their families, home life, and culture while avoiding concentrating on the lack of resources, Latina/o first-generation college students are more likely to have more confidence in their potential. As Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2013) put it, "by drawing on household knowledge, student experience is legitimized as valid, and classroom practice can build on the familiar knowledge bases that students can manipulate to enhance learning" (p. 43). I agree that one's culture and home life are rich sources of learning through which students can grow. Home life, and not just school life, is responsible for the way students view themselves and their paths in

our society. Dewey (2013) also agrees that one's home life and educational life are inevitably intertwined: "… The school life should grow gradually out of the home life… It is the business of the school to deepen and extend [a student's] sense of the values bound up in [his or her] home life" (p.35). In short, Latina/o home life, family, and values are not responsible for first-generation college students not persisting or "lacking" in any way; instead, these factors enhance and promote the importance of education and self-betterment for first-generation college students. To legitimize who Latina/o first-generation college students are and where they come from is to acknowledge their lived experiences.

Trouble with Educational Attainment

Without education, society would be unable to evolve. Dewey (2013) argued that "education is the fundamental method for social progress and reform" (p.39). Education is the base that supports the fundamental pillars of society. Indeed, our nation's progress is linked to various social reforms, including the evolution of our flawed education system, an "essential driver… in the future of our nation" (Cross, 2014, p 168). Our education system is our ticket to an egalitarian society, yet it is failing our students of color because of oversight and neglect. Ladson-Billings (2006) reiterates this assertion by explaining that education is leaving our underrepresented students behind: "Our focus on the achievement gap is akin to a focus on the budget deficit, but what is actually happening to African American and Latina/o students is really more like the national debt…" (p. 5). She aptly illustrates the immediacy of the problems facing minority

students in our education system. Our emphasis on the education gap has dehumanized

our students in need of support; they are faceless numbers and statistics. Therefore, the

vehicle for research on the topic of Latina/o first-generation college students needs to

continue changing. Through social transformation and educational reform, our society

can work to right past inequities in order to repay what Ladson-Billings calls the

"educational debt" (p. 5) since it is a result of our history, politics, and moral compass.

The education debt that Ladson Billings (2006) refers to may be addressed

through radical change, like assessing how underrepresented students, such as Latina/o

first-generation college students, are being underserved by analyzing their experiences in

the college world. The reality is that Latina/o students are not graduating from four-year

institutions at the same rates as their peers: "Although data indicate an increase in Latino

students' college enrollment, Latino students continue to have a much smaller chance of

actually earning a bachelor's degree" (Arevalo, So, & McNaughton-Cassill, 2016, p. 3).

While there is growing concern, attention, and research around this problem, the issue

persists. Latina/o FGCS may not be attaining four-year degrees because they may have

trouble navigating the traditionalistic, dominant-culture model of higher education. It

should follow that if there is an increase in student participation in college, there should

be more students graduating; yet, this is far from the truth. Garcia (2010) also points out

that "… retention of Hispanic students has come to the forefront in part because the

number of Hispanic students enrolling in higher education has increased, and with this,

the number of Hispanic students dropping out of higher education has also increased" (p.

840). Subsequently, if there is a clear disparity between Latina/o first-generation college students and their peers in attaining four-year degrees, is it not a debt that must be addressed?

Students in the majority are outperforming minority students because "in addition to academic skills, university success requires mastery of the 'college student's role'" (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p. 425). But, who fits in neatly to the college student's role? Certainly, one must ask if there are enough support structures or resources in place to even the playing field for all students or whether colleges still primarily catering to White, predominantly middle-class students who may feel the right to a college education because of the likelihood that they will succeed (Minikel-Lacocque, 2015). Is this traditionalistic model impenetrable for Latina/o first-generation college students? Without acculturating to the mainstream to some degree, students of color may not succeed when it comes to achieving in higher education. Specifically, Latina/o students may not feel a sense of belonging at American universities and might feel excluded, lonely, and unsupported if they do not fit the "college student's role." These challenges are what prompt me to develop agency by trying to relay the Latina/o postsecondary educational journey through the lens of students who, like me, know the adversity, challenges, and victories involved in assisting a four-year college as first-generation college student.

Cultural Capital and the Latina/o First-Generation College Student

Educational opportunities and expectations in higher education may be out of sync for some Latina/o first-generation college students' culture and heritage if colleges do not acknowledge the diversity of its students of color. While diversity is an important part of universities' strategic planning for change, it can be more talk than action. Minikel-Lacocque (2015) states,

> At its inception in the late 1780s U.S. higher education was solely for the elite White male… [Today,] efforts to make campuses more diverse are made highly visible; [However,] most universities showcase their commitment to diversity on their website's homepage and in recruitment materials. (p. 2)

The American education system was indeed meant for White, upper-class men, and there are traces of that history still at play since colleges still remain predominantly White. Minikel-Lacocque reiterates this claim in saying that "a closer look reveals a disconnect between rhetoric and reality; despite these advertised efforts, most public four-year universities remain predominantly White" (p. 3). What does this disparity say about our colleges?

While strides are being made to improve the system, college still has the face of a White man (Pyne & Means, 2013; Núñez et al., 2013; Ross et al., 2012). There is dissonance between practice, dogma, and reality since the students of color that are in college struggle to get and stay there (Arevalo et al., 2016; Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Garcia, 2010; Krogstad & Fry, 2014; Pyne & Means, 2013; Storlie et al., 2014). I

concede that we are making progress to improve our accessibility and persistence in higher education, but higher education can still do more to solidify the importance of the heritage of our students of color.

Cultural capital is a theoretical construct that further explores the dynamics between the culture of power in society and its reflection in schools. The term "cultural capital" was first coined by Bourdieu and Passeron (2014/1977), and states that "the educational system, with the ideologies and effects which its relative autonomy engenders, is for the bourgeois society" and oversees the reproduction of this phenomenon in culture (p. 210). Bourdieu's (1986) theories around what it means to be culturally adept sheds light on why some succeed, and others don't. As illustrated by Bourdieu, capital

> … can present itself in three fundamental guises: as economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; as cultural capital, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications; and as social capital, made up of social obligations ("connections"), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility. (p. 242)

Cultural capital is a social asset. Particularly, cultural capital is acquired through time, experiences and attitudes learned mostly in the education system; it represents advantages

one stands to gain from family and school, which can turn into economic capital and elevate or lower one's standing in the social hierarchy:

> Parents transmit cultural capital to their children by passing along information and beliefs needed to succeed in the school environment. For college students, cultural capital… is acquired over time as a result of exposure to experiences, attitudes, and language of the parents. (Ward, Siegel, and Davenport, 2012, p. 6)

Cultural capital, passed down from generation to generation, symbolizes social advantages that elevate one's chances of success or social mobility. Without the appropriate, and often necessary cultural capital, one cannot gain economic capital, which then affects quality of life.

Cultural capital is a source of power for students via their education. Without it, students are less likely to be successful: "Cultural capital represents the education and advantages that a person accumulates, which elevate his or her capacity to fit into higher social strata; it provides students with the means to ensure social mobility" (Ward, Siegel, and Davenport, 2012, pp. 6-7). Because of the lack of their family's exposure to postsecondary experience, first-generation college students would have a more difficult time acquiring this type of capital. The unfamiliarity of first-generation students to college jargon, culture, and experience places them in a more compromising position than their counterparts, whose parents can pass down their college knowledge:

> Unfortunately, first-generation students receive relatively little cultural capital specific to higher education from their parents, who by definition have little or

>none to give… These parents may want their children to go to college and do
>
>well… but there are few details from lived examples that these parents can share
>
>with their children to help them in that quest. (Ward, Siegel, and Davenport, 2012,
>
>p. 7)

Parents may understand that the college experience requires sacrifice and hard work but may not know exactly what that looks like. First-generation students, in turn, are then less informed or prepared for college. In other words, first-generation students are then on their own:

>Specifically, cultural capital includes… for example, researching institutions,
>
>making informed decisions, applying to schools, locating financial resources,
>
>developing expectations and learning the language and terminology of college life
>
>and persisting in college once there, [like] locating campus-based resources,
>
>developing friendships and social connections, learning to navigate the academic
>
>curriculum, participating in campus activities, and making progress toward
>
>graduation. (Ward, Siegel, and Davenport, 2012, pp. 7-8)

It is these everyday processes or common knowledge that first-generation students have trouble with once in college. They then "lack" cultural capital because peers are likely to already have this knowledge and progress forward without having to learn routines, procedures, and norms. Cultural capital is what, based on Bourdieu's theory, predetermines how students will perform on their quest for higher education and, ultimately, success in life.

Specifically, Latina/o first-generation college students may feel out of place when they enter the world of higher education not only because of the statistical likelihood that they may not persist, but because college culture is very different from what they may deem familiar. Pyne and Means (2013) conducted a single case study of a low-income Latina first-generation college student during her freshman year at a selective, private, predominantly White university. The focus of the study was to explore incidents surrounding racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic identities. Pyne and Means related that Ana, the pseudonym used to protect the identity of the participant, often felt conflicted because she felt as though she did not belong on account of her difference: "As a Hispanic student attending a highly selective predominantly White institution, Ana is immediately visible among her peers, her brown skin and her international accent inescapable evidence of difference" (p. 11). Ana was one of the few Latinas in her school, which contributed to feelings of loneliness, inadequacy, and doubt. Concurrently, Ana also felt invisible: "She is frequently made invisible by her social and academic interactions with others and by a pervasive and deep-rooted sense that she must hide critical elements of herself in order to maintain an appearance of success in this environment" (Pyne & Means, 2013, p. 11). Because of the academic and sociocultural demands of college culture, Latina/o first-generation college students may have to acculturate to succeed.

Latina/o first-generation college students feel that pressure when they arrive at college (Pyne & Means, 2013). Pyne and Means' (2013) study participant, Ana, had

trouble in college as a first-generation Latina as she began her journey. Ana is the quintessential example of a Latina first-generation college student who may feel that she does not belong in her school environment. But, why? It may be because she is simply not part of mainstream, majority, White culture. Minikel-Lacocque (2015) illustrates this dynamic further in explaining that "Neither are 'mainstream' students asked to cross the border between their world and the worlds of their Peers of Color; rather, it is expected that the Students of Color will travel into the 'mainstream' world instead" (p. 174). As a result, underrepresented students are often asked to consider changing who they are to accommodate majority needs or the processes already in place. The world of the majority rules and those who don't fit in it, consequently, must change in order to thrive and, often, survive.

The culture of schools illustrates the values of a society. If what the society deems important are White ideals and standards, then schools will reflect that; this may be part of the reason why Latina/o first-generation college students of color struggle in college. Harris & Kiyama (2015) concur: "For Latina/o students in the U.S. who have complex cultural, linguistic, and geographical identities, the essence of who they are is contested in school" (p. 43). So, school can affirm who we are, or it can question our identities:

> Cultural capital of Hispanic undergraduate students can include celebrating
> Hispanic cultural events, providing Spanish language information for potential
> students and parents, and having Spanish-speaking faculty and staff. Universities
> that are serious about providing funding and other resources to reinforce the

cultural capital for Hispanic students should have higher recruitment and retention

rates for these undergraduate students. (Montalvo, 2012, p. 241)

Taking culture into account when considering reasons why Latina/o first-generation

college students leave college is crucial. Success should not only be guaranteed to those

who acculturate. In my case, college was not just difficult because I was unfamiliar with

the language of academe, but also because I didn't see myself in the environment given

the few people in positions of authority who looked like me; my lack of knowledge about

resources on campus; and, opportunities to connect with students from similar cultural

backgrounds, symptoms of what some deem to be a "lack" of cultural capital.

School is the foundation society is built upon. There is no denying that what we

have for a society today is the result of schools. Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes that one

cannot ignore "the contribution which the educational system makes to the reproduction

of the social structure by sanctioning the hereditary transmission of cultural capital" (p.

243). Our education system is, in essence, a valuation system; it determines what one is

worth in society. Not only is this so, but it is also generational. Parents or guardians can

allot cultural capital to their progeny. Bourdieu and Passeron (2014/1977) maintain that

"It is precisely its relative autonomy that enables the traditional educational system to

make a specific contribution towards reproducing the structure of class relations," making

the "lack" of cultural capital generational (p. 199). Hence, the school system, while

seemingly harmless and an emblem of social progress, plays a large role in transmitting

cultural capital, or worth, to those in the upper echelons of society. If one is born into a

family whose education and knowledge is recognized as proficient or dominant and, as a result, has the opportunity to progress up the educational ladder, one possesses cultural capital. The school system helps propagate this message, reproducing the existing social order or "norm."

The concept of cultural capital plays an important role in influencing students' progress. Socially, we are either "wealthy" or "poor." Our cultural background is predetermined and there is little we can do to change the course of our potential worth. Ward, Siegel, and Davenport (2012) also argue that cultural capital is acquired through time and socialization; it "serves as a vehicle for [social] mobility" (p. 248) that can determine one's place in the social ranks. The development of Latina/o first-generation college students' persistence, for example, depends on their cultural capital. Relating cultural capital to first-generation college students, Ward, Siegel, and Davenport (2012) state that cultural capital includes "the knowledge students and their families have about the variables involved in getting into college… and persisting in college once there… [It] is therefore the key factor in shaping the experiences of first-generation students" (p. 8). Thus, based on Bordieuan theory, Latina/o first-generation college students in immigrant families' growth and advancement is informed or determined by cultural capital. Given that "Hispanics are… the youngest population among all ethnic groups" (Núñez et al., 2013, p. 9) and, as first-generation immigrants, may still be learning the culture of their new country, it would follow that cultural capital would be more difficult for Latinos to attain and propagate.

Today, the notion of cultural capital is associated with the study of educational inequity. Yosso (2005) explains that the flaw in the theory of cultural capital lies in its injustice since it is "narrowly defined by White, middle-class values" (p. 77) yet determines everyone's future achievement. Cultural capital is prophetic, which makes it unfair and archaic. According to Dumais and Ward (2010), "Those in the power structure may select and reward those who possess knowledge of the dominant culture" (p. 246). Fundamentally, the elite have more cultural capital than those who have access to fewer resources or are not familiar with the dominant culture. Since cultural capital is passed down from generation to generation,

> … The transmission of cultural capital is no doubt the best hidden form of hereditary transmission of capital, and it therefore received proportionately greater weight in the system of reproduction strategies, as the direct, visible forms of transmission tend to be more strongly censored and controlled. (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 245)

In other words, cultural capital is the invisible enemy to those who are learning the American way of life, and this dynamic also seeps into schools. Cultural capital is tangible but difficult to obtain if one does not inherit it. Due to the differences in cultural capital, "[The less privileged students] may not be rewarded at the same rate as those students from more privileged backgrounds" (Dumais & Ward, 2010, p. 247). All in all, those who know more about the culture of power succeed.

Students who are not part of the majority or dominant class are seemingly "devoid" of cultural capital. Yosso's (2005) article's title captures the nature of the problem: "Whose culture has capital?" (p. 69). Whose way of life warrants learning and adopting? Unfortunately, as Yosso points out, "Bourdieu's work has often been called upon to explain why students of color do not succeed at the same rate as Whites" (p. 76). The danger in the idea of cultural capital, and what Bordieuan theory fails to take into account, is that this deficit view, which exists in U.S. education today, is fallacious, detrimental, and oppressive.

Boldly, Yosso (2005) asserts that there is no such thing as cultural capital. What exists, according to Yosso, is "the potential of community cultural wealth to transform the process of schooling" (p. 70). In other words, re-conceptualizing cultural capital as cultural wealth is transformative, constructive, and edifying for a community. Through cultural wealth, different groups can succeed and be acknowledged as valuable to society; these groups are then important enough to warrant attention and consideration. Cultural wealth means there is more to American life than the dominant account of what is right, just, and worthy:

> … the prevalent majoritarian master narratives, those of deficiency and of success… can be equally antagonistic to a genuine understanding of the first-year experience of underrepresented students in higher education. Both accept the dominant discourses that continue to deny higher education to low-income, first-generation students of color. (Pyne & Means, 2013, p. 5)

The dichotomy between the master narratives of unintegrated systems of power, and those who are "deficient," dictate who gets to benefit from school. Normative expectations of what it means to be successful also hinder the potential of our students of color. Cultural wealth, on the other hand, helps lift-up the existing voices of the undermined and subjugated. Precisely, 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). This new characterization of "wealth" draws on the knowledge, traditions, and worldviews underrepresented students bring with them to school every day, traits that should be acknowledged as relevant, respectable, and important in our ever-changing social milieu.

Statement of the Research Problem

In the previous section, I discussed major challenges Latina/o first-generation college students experience in American higher education as well as issues with acculturation, cultural capital, and degree attainment. In this section, I will delineate the purpose and reasoning behind my study and explain why it is important in the fight for equity in education. The purpose of this study is to go beyond the conversation of Latina/o first-generation college student attrition by examining how they navigate postsecondary institutions and explore the implications associated with how higher education affects them. I seek to explore the effects of the college-going experience on the developing identities of Latina/o first-generation college students to better understand

persistence in higher education. Part of the motivation for this study is that, overall,

Latina/os are struggling to stay in college, specifically four-year institutions:

> Even though more Hispanics are getting a postsecondary education than ever
>
> before, Hispanics still lag other groups in obtaining a four-year degree. In 2014,
>
> among Hispanics ages 25 to 29, just 15% of Hispanics have a bachelor's degree
>
> or higher. By comparison, among the same age group, about 40% of whites have
>
> a bachelor's degree or higher (as do 20% of Blacks and 60% of Asians).
>
> (Krogstad, 2016, para. 6)

In other words, Latina/os are coming across barriers impeding them from succeeding at

the postsecondary level; they are falling behind their peers. More Latina/os first-

generation college students are getting to college, but not persisting once there, so

completion of four-year program rates for Latina/o students are low (Núñez et al., 2013).

The lack of Latina/o degree attainment may be the responsibility of our faulty

school system: "Latinos have become the largest population of color in the United States

and in U.S. higher education. Yet, their low postsecondary educational attainment rates

suggest that P-20 U.S. education is not serving them as well as it could" (Núñez et al.,

2013, p. vii). In other words, our education system needs improvement, and this is

evident in the enrollment in four-year programs (Krogstad and Fry (2014), only 56

percent of young Latina/o or Hispanic students attend four-year institutions compared to

72 percent of Whites, 66 percent for African Americans, and 79 percent for Asian

students:
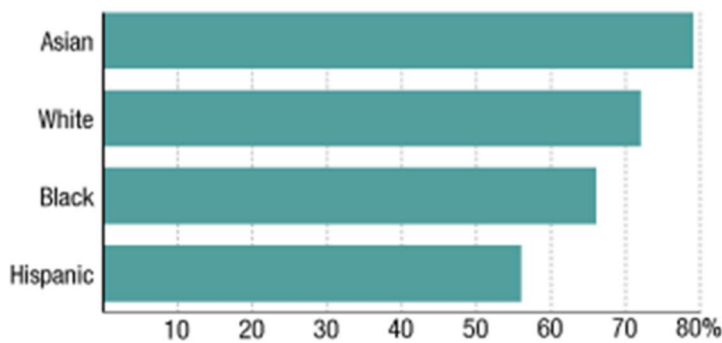
Figure 3: Percentages of students 18-24 who attended four-year universities, by race/ethnicity.

This figure illustrates the disparity between Hispanic four-year degree completion compared to other ethnic groups. Retrieved March 01, 2016, from http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/04/24/more-hispanics-blacks-enrolling-in-college-but-lag-in-bachelors-degrees/

The reasons for Latina/o first-generation college students' lack of persistence are multifold since Latina/o first-generation college students encounter a plethora of hardships and barriers in college. There are so many variables at play and so many obstacles on the path to postsecondary success that some Latina/o first-generation college students may fail to see their potential for attaining a college degree. The lived experiences of Latina/o first-generation college students, then, should be studied to better assist and understand their needs, struggles, and victories. To better grasp the depth of the problem, first it is key to better understand the systems at play behind what it means to be a first-generation college student since "The attrition number is even higher for Hispanics who are first-year students" (Garcia, 2010, p. 840).

Latina/o students who are the first in their family to go to college experience even more distress in the struggle to attain college degrees than other first-generation college student groups (Dennis, Phinney, & Chauteco, 2005). Ward, Siegel, & Davenport (2012) describe first-generation college students further as follows:

> For first generation students in particular, who typically have far less exposure to higher education than their non-first-generation peers, the college campus might seem like a foreign place. They may feel like frontier explorers who have entered a complex wilderness, equipped with their belongings and a lot of good wishes behind them but largely on their own. (p. 2)

First-generation college students are brave in accepting the challenge to embark on a journey full of challenges and the unknown. Due to the tension and stress associated with the challenges of being a first-generation college student, first-generation college students may "self-select out of pursuing a college education, because of the feeling that it is 'not for them,'" (Dumais & Ward, 2010, p. 250) silencing their unique voices in academe. When they make it to college, first-generation college students may feel inadequate, possibly believing that they may not fit in and not asking for help when they need it (Dumais & Ward, 2010). This tells us that they don't see themselves taking part in higher education, but why do some Latina/o first-generation college students think this way? One possibility is that students from more privileged backgrounds feel more comfortable asking for and accessing college resources since they are the ones with the most cultural capital (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Minikel-Lacocque, 2015).

Regardless, it is thinking that first-generation Latina/o students need to eradicate to be successful scholars.

Latina/o first-generation college students are learning a new culture and language when considering going to college, not only because they are the first in their family to undergo a postsecondary educational experience, but because the culture of independence in higher education may be different from their own cultural values. An important factor to consider is that Latino culture places a heavy emphasis on family and a collectivist mentality (Núñez et al., 2013). Familism, a term used to describe varying cultures' focus on family relationships, has been a term of interest when describing Latino culture: "Familism assumes a social structure in which the family's needs supersede those of the individual. Feelings of devotion, reliability, and mutual obligation toward the family are aspects of familism" (Arevalo, So, & McNaughton-Cassill, 2016, p. 4). Family is then a pillar in Latina/o culture. This value may conflict with the individualistic culture dominant in college life. Schwartz et al.'s (2013) findings further support this claim in determining that the ability to meet the needs of daily life on one's own is essential for first-generation college students who "attend universities dominated by American 'college culture'" (p. 311). An individualistic mentality may be one of the many conventions and customs Latina/o students must adopt once they are in college.

Going to college may also impact Latina/o first-generation college students' relationship with family: "… Many Latino students are the first in their families to go to college, so their families may not be familiar with the experience of college and what that

experience requires," (Núñez et al., 2013, p. 49) straining communication with loved ones. This separation in educational experience can then create rifts within family relationships. Keels (2013) found that first-generation college students of color experienced inner strife due to "issues they found difficult or impossible to discuss with family and friends who could not identify with their new experiences" (p. 146). It is difficult to try and relate the college experience to someone who has not been there and may not know the demands of college life, which then leads to Latina/o first-generation college student silence. Ultimately, there may be a clash between values in the Latina/o community and that of college culture.

To some, Latina/o college students' lack of persistence at the postsecondary level continues because of universal, systemic structures contributing to patterns of sameness in education (Minikel-Lacocque, 2015, p. 40). Latina/o first-generation college students face the obstacle of having to keep their culture and adapt to a new, White, predominantly middle-class way of life that outlines social rules in Anglo-centric terms:

> Hispanic, first-generation, and other underrepresented students arrive on college campuses and begin their search for belonging… It is important that higher education professionals understand the multifaceted identities they bring with them, how they may resist traditional expectations, and why they may possess doubts and ambivalence that falsely suggest that they are neither welcome nor ready for a college education or that they are imposters in this world. (Pyne & Means, 2013, p.11)

Here, the researchers explain that Latina/o first-generation college students may feel an incongruence with who they are and how they fit into college culture when trying to belong in the college world. The feeling of being imposters in college would then stem from believing that they don't belong and are out of place in academe. Minikel-Lacocque (2015) emphasizes that, without considering students' cultural background, heritage, and identities, "a cycle of inequality is put into motion whereby middle-class students continue to have access to academic success through the school's validation of their values and worldviews, and others are denied this access" (p. 40). Thus, Latina/o first-generation college students may struggle because they are unfamiliar with college-going culture and may not see how they fit in. Specifically, Latina/o language, culture, and traditions must be considered in curricula development, hiring practices, and social life in higher education to promote an inclusive environment (Dennis, Phinney, & Chauteco, 2005; Gummadam, Pittman, & Ioffe, 2016; Musoba, Collazo, & Placide, 2013; Pyne & Means, 2013). Without the appropriate structures in place, Latina/o first-generation college students in families with a "lack" of knowledge or background in what is considered formal education may not succeed in attaining four-year degrees.

Latina/o first-generation college students are placed in a sink-or-swim situation when diving into the postsecondary field: "Traditionally, institutions have put the responsibility on the student and family to adapt to the university" (Musoba, Collazo, & Placide, 2013, p. 367). Placing all the responsibility on the family and student to find belonging in college is not fair since they have a blank slate when it comes to experience

in college. Based on most colleges' culture, success is mostly up to the student; if he or she cannot cope with or assimilate to college life, the failure and blame is placed on their shoulders. Another way Musoba, Collazo, and Placide (2013) put it is that Latina/o first-generation college students and their colleges are not speaking the same language: "The students' lack of college culture knowledge combined with the institutional assumption that they did know created a somewhat adversarial relationship between the student and the perceived uncaring institution" (p. 364). The discord between the student and his or her school is augmented by this miscommunication of expectations and way of college life. This warrants the reconsideration of what it means to thrive in college and how one achieves success. As Pyne and Means (2013) put it, "The racial, ethnic, economic, social, and academic experiences of low-income, first-generation students of color may require nontraditional ways of doing higher education" (p. 11). Traditional higher education practices or "one-size-fits-all" approaches may not be conducive for Latina/o first-generation college student progress in attaining four-year degrees. Expecting students to know how to "play the game" is not enough. Keeping things the way they are or ignoring the experiences of diverse students may result in low levels of persistence for first-generation college students of color.

Latina/o first-generation college students would require a strong support system and many resources because they are facing what first-generation college students face everywhere and may struggle even more due to obstacles concerning race, ethnicity, and culture deficit views in the U.S. education system. For example, "Racial discrimination is

a pervasive phenomenon in the lives of many racial minorities" (Seller & Shelton, 2003, p. 1079). The existence and negative influences of racism on students' lives cannot be ignored since "… discrimination and negative stereotypes about ethnic minorities persist and can affect ethnic minority well-being" (French & Chavez, 2010, p. 411). Negative stereotypes, and discrimination as a result of these, hinder student development. Definitely, education is one of the institutions that has helped propagate discriminatory views. As Yosso notes, "Racism overtly shaped U.S. social institutions at the beginning of the twentieth century and continues, although more subtly, to impact U.S. institutions of socialization in the beginning of the twenty-first century" (p. 70). Racism has not been eradicated; it is still a part of minority students' lives. Institutional racism is not the same as it was in the past decades, but it has not been eradicated. Núñez et al. (2013) maintain that "the majority of Latinos report having witnessed racial discrimination, with the most common site being schools… Given anti-immigrant, anti-bilingual education, and anti-affirmative action movements, this is not surprising" (p. 3). In other words, with racism and discrimination being a constant, these Latina/o students face a plethora of obstacles other students and faculty may be unfamiliar with. Researching or better understanding their lived experiences is an imperative step in making reform in higher education. Allowing education to continue the way it currently functions is not an option if all students' wellbeing and success are considered.

In order to address Latina/o college student persistence, new avenues of student engagement and support may consider culture and student identity to better serve them.

For Latina/os, "The process of acquiring facility with the norms of the collegiate 'cultural system' is not something that can happen overnight. Underrepresented students must have early access to the… cultural capital that White, middle-class students already have" (Minikel-Lacocque, 2015, p. 73). Without access to mainstream cultural capital, underrepresented students like Latina/o first-generation college students are not likely to persist. These students, like all others, need to feel that they belong in their educational institutions. Latina/o first-generation college students must feel that they are part of the community because "Latino college students may actually benefit from ethnically sensitive educational support programs and pedagogical strategies that cater to the cultural characteristics of Latino students in order to increase their college graduation rate" (Arevalo, So, & McNaughton-Cassill, 2016, p. 5). With Latino culture and values in mind, colleges can make more informed decisions about how to reframe their approach to keeping their Latino first-generation college students population.

Culture cannot be ignored. Without the consideration of students' cultures in college life and instruction, colleges will not retain Latina/o first-generation college students whose background, beliefs, and traditions are a crucial component of what makes them who they are. All students must feel like their culture is incorporated in their educational experience for personal development to occur. In other words, forcing students into school culture or expecting them to acclimate on their own are not effective strategies with Latina/o students. If playing the game or conforming is a must for success in college, then Latina/os are likely to struggle; this means there is often automatic

acculturation at the cost of compromised cultural or ethnic identity for success in higher

education.

Significance of the Research Problem

In the previous section, I explained the importance of the issue regarding Latina/o

first-generation college student four-year degree attainment as well as possible causes of

students not persisting in college. I investigated what it means to be a first-generation

college student, how this relates to Latino family life and culture, and the college

experience. In this section, I continue to explore the importance of addressing the

problem involving Latina/o first-generation college students and what it means for higher

education institutions.

Education has a past of instability in the U.S., and injustice has been a theme in its

history (Cross, 2014, p. 171), especially when it comes to serving students of color: "The

public education system in the United States, often characterized as a 'great equalizer' in

our democratic system, has fallen short of its potential to facilitate social and economic

mobility among communities of color" (Contreras, 2011, p. 2). The education system is a

symbol of the possibility to ascend within social ranks, yet it does not offer the same

opportunity to everyone. Without the adequate cultural capital, students are not

guaranteed success. Students of color suffer as a result. Fowler (2013) denotes that as

educators seeking change in our imperfect system, "... school leaders must understand

that many of the people they deal with have been either unusually empowered or

unusually disempowered through the shaping of their consciousness" (p. 35). Those in

power have governed over what is acceptable and "just" in education, which brings up

issues involving acculturation and compromise for success in the educational careers

Latina/o first-generation college students.

Traditionally, education movements have reflected its times' values; these change

as our social climate changes. Schools showcase what society believes or deems

important, and their histories attest to that:

> Public education was established when only white men who owned a certain
>
> amount of property had full citizens' rights; therefore, the major figures in the
>
> Common School Movement were white, middle to-upper-class men. As a result,
>
> much of the organizational bias mobilized in public education is advantageous to
>
> those who belong to one or more of these social categories and disadvantageous
>
> to those who do not... (Fowler, 2013, p. 32)

Not everyone is in a position of advantage since some are more "fit" to succeed in

American schools. There are winners and losers when it comes to those counting on our

education system. Fowler further asserts that "Some people receive a steady stream of

messages suggesting that they are privileged, with natural rights to positions of power

and prestige" (p. 35). Cultural capital, family lineage, and our place in the socioeconomic

spectrum prophesizes our position of power in society, which is also applicable to the

potential success of Latina/o first-generation college students. Likewise, Fowler

maintains that education reinforces this phenomenon: "At the other end… are people who

have… grown up surrounded by messages that communicate their low status and

unsuitability for leadership" (p. 36). The dichotomy between those who are powerful and those who have been silenced is stark. Traditionalistic school culture hinders the growth and effectiveness of our education system and, based on this mentality, one can argue that most colleges work as a machine, which cultivate bureaucracies with hierarchical power structures that have been in place for decades.

The progress towards equity in education in our country can be compared to an old rusty engine; it works, but slowly and reluctantly. Traditionalistic, and often blatantly discriminatory, customs and norms in the U.S. education system have proven difficult to eradicate. There are still issues with changing a this-is-the-way-we-do-things-around-here mentality. Our education system's organizational structures, or rules of the game, are not conducive to social equity or change. Colleges, as equitable institutions, should systematically reexamine their infrastructure to make sure the education they are providing students with is inclusive; they should consider whether they are promoting equity or acculturation. We must continue to inquire whether higher education institutions work as factories with assembly-line, "one-size-fits-all" models and, if so, is this equitable and who benefits? The question is: "How can change occur if the systems are structured by strongly held, even cultural assumptions about effective or appropriate norms and ways of doing things?" (Marion & Gonzales, 2014, p. 330). It is not always a good thing to follow tradition; it, as our past shows, has been a tool used by those in power to subjugate. Organizations must be willing to evolve. Without continuous reassessment of an organization's culture, equitable change cannot happen since "...

making change in organizations… often requires making cultural shifts" (p. 261). Institutions may resist change because it is not only uncomfortable, but time-consuming and inconvenient. There is some opposition to change because it means redefining the norm. Collectively, as educators and leaders governing organizations, we should explore sustainable avenues that make sure underrepresented students are supported, recognized, and understood. We can interrupt the oppressive nature of the status quo through transformational leadership.

There is a need to support underrepresented students in our higher education system. Like any issue in U.S. politics, the effort to help underrepresented students be successful in universities is nuanced and often controversial. Being a change agent or leader means one must influence and achieve goals that help eliminate the exclusive status quo that is affecting Latina/o first-generation college students' success in higher education. In order to do so, higher education institutions would need to evolve based on a mission and vision of inclusiveness by being in a constant motion to continuously reinvent themselves. However, change makes people generally uneasy because it means it will result in the loss of "standard" ways of learning and growing. Without a strong mission and vision that incorporate all of students' needs and a willingness to embrace action for change, complacency creeps in and stays, creating conditions for inequity to thrive. What this study is interesting in assessing is, given these conditions, how do successful Latina/o first-generation college students navigate this reality?

Presentation of Methods and Research Questions

In this section, I briefly describe the methods I used to address my research questions. The purpose of this study is to go beyond the conversation of Latina/o first-generation college student attrition by examining how they navigate postsecondary institutions and exploring the implications associated with how higher education affects them. I conducted a qualitative study that aimed to explore the lived experiences of Latina/o first-generation college students in their journeys towards four-year degrees at a four-year institution in the Pacific Northwest. For this study, I employed open-ended, in-depth exploratory interview methodology, implemented participant artwork using a Draw-A-College-Student Test, which is adapted from Draw-A-Scientist Test (Mason, Kahle & Gardner, 1991), and used a free-writing prompt where participants described their artwork.

The reason behind my decision to conduct a qualitative study as opposed to a quantitative study was that qualitative methodology is more suitable to better understand participants' experiences as first-generation Latina/o college students:

> Although empirical research supports the examination of constructs influencing college degree attainment, quantitative studies do not thoroughly describe the meaning or depth of experience of Hispanic college students. As such, the in-depth understanding of salient issues, realities, and struggles encountered by Hispanic college students is warranted to fully understand the complex lives of this diverse group... (Storlie, Moreno, & Portman, 2014, p. 66)

Since I sought to focus more on the stories and lived experiences of Latina/o first-generation college students, as opposed to attrition or "the numbers," qualitative research was the most advantageous methodology. My study required that students' voices be the primary focus of the research. The most important factor was that my first-generation Latina/o students study participants felt heard. Ultimately, if my participants' felt their voices were being highlighted to explore the Latino experience in college, they could shed light on the issues with Latina/o persistence at the secondary level.

Choosing qualitative over quantitative methods put the participants' life stories in the center of the research dialogue: "By listening carefully to the educational experiences of marginalized peoples, research can begin to unearth hidden privilege and deconstruct the discourses that allow it to flourish" (Pyne & Means, 2013, p.3). I was interested in understanding the nature of what is disadvantageous for Latina/o first-generation college students as well as what creates the conditions for success. My goal was to allow Latina/o first-generation students to not only uncover their experiences and what they have been through, but also to allow for introspective dialogue.

Further, for the purposes of my study, quantitative methods, may have failed "to capture the true essence of these students' experience within higher education and so the examination of the qualitative research [became] paramount" (Storlie, Moreno, & Portman, 2014, p. 66). The goal was to let participants delve into their own college journey to dissect what helped them thrive and discuss the obstacles they encountered as well. My topic lent itself to exploratory interviewing as the main mode of research

because this is the type of "strategy of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives" (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). Using narrative information from my interviews, in my opinion, allowed me to let the Latina/o first-generation college students fabricate their own tapestry of experiences or story instead of giving them surveys using a Likert scale, for example. I believe that allowing the participants the freedom to tell their stories through interviewing, art, and writing was a powerful tool that can lead to a better understanding of what works or needs improvement for the Latino community in the field of postsecondary education.

My goal was to allow my data to emerge from my participants in the study. Analyzing the lived experiences of my Latina/o first-generation college student participants using in-depth exploratory interviewing, Draw-A-College-Student Test, as well as a free-writing prompt for participants to describe their art work generated rich, multimodal forms of data. After, I examined themes within the data to report my findings. I worked with 8 Latina/o first-generation college students who have persisted through at least 2 full years in a postsecondary institution. My research questions were as follows:

1. What is the experience of persisting Latina/o first-generation college students?

2. How do persisting Latina/o first-generation college students feel about their successes and/or hardships in higher education?

3. How do Latina/o first-generation persisting college students describe how they navigate the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987) of higher education?

Definition of Key Terms

Latina/os

Traditionally, the term "Latino" has been used as an all-encompassing term for Spanish-speaking peoples. However, this is fallacious in that there are many qualities and traits that make different groups of Latina/os different:

> Latino and Latina heterogeneity is often ignored in much of the social science literature, which often does not distinguish between the many national-origin groups included under the broad 'Latino/a' umbrella. Glossing over identifications based on national origin can be problematic… because Latino experiences and social processes differ systemically across subgroups… (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001, p. 36).

Latina/os are a diverse group within themselves and have more than one identifying quality and, as a result, should not be lumped all together without acknowledging the varying cultural distinctions among Latina/o groups. Because of their heterogeneity, Pino, Martínez-Ramos, and Smith (2012) describe Latina/os as a "population composed of individuals of diverse ethnicities who differ in their sociohistorical experiences, countries of origin… and community conditions" (p. 18.). So, there are many identities within the realm of what it means to be Latina/o which must be explored if studying this population. In terms of describing the group as a whole, "Hispanics [or Latina/os] are

categorized as an ethnic group—meaning they share a common language, culture and heritage, but not a common race" (Taylor, Lopez, Martínez, & Velasco, 2012, p. 9). While Latina/os have many commonalities, their sense of racial identity may differ. However, as Gandara and Contreras (2009) state, even given their tremendous diversity, most Latinos in the U.S. "encounter surprisingly similar educational challenges" (p. 7), which makes research on Latina/o educational struggles relevant to many.

Latina/o culture is rich, making us a unique group: "A range of factors—including cultural, historical, sociological, political, and others… contribute to this diversity and point to the development and existence in the United States of an overarching Latino identity" (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001, p. 34). Being a proud Latina, I know that while there are many ways Latinos identify, we have many ways of connecting through our exceptional culture as well. Because Latina/os are so diverse, there are many terms that describe the community. In the U.S., both Latina/o and Hispanic may be terms of identification based on one's country of descent: "The use of the terms 'Hispanic' and 'Latino' to describe Americans of Spanish origin or descent is unique to the U.S. and their meaning continue to change and evolve" (Taylor, Lopez, Martínez, & Velasco, 2012, p. 4). Moreover, there is diversity between Latina/o or Hispanic cultures even though they may feel a strong bond because of the Spanish language. Based on findings from the National Survey of Latinos (NSL) Focusing on Hispanics' identities, behaviors, views about social issues, and language use, conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center in 2011,

… by a ratio of more than two-to-one (69% versus 29%), survey respondents say

that the more than 50 million Latinos in the U.S. have many different cultures

rather than a common culture. Respondents do, however, express a strong, shared

connection to the Spanish language. (Taylor, Lopez, Martínez, & Velasco, 2012,

p. 2).

Thus, the Spanish language is one commonality among many may use to identify as

Latino. However, it is not grounds to assume that we are all the same: "… [Latina/o]

commonalities [include] Spanish language use, the valuing of cultural maintenance, a

cultural focus on family and religious traditions. Yet, even by these criteria is impossible

to make sweeping generalizations that apply to all or even most Latinos" (Ferdman &

Gallegos, 2001, p. 38). Latinos' different cultural identifications just adds to what makes

us a one-of-a-kind group.

Because of Latina/os' diverse cultures, Latina/os may not completely identify

with the label of being solely American: "Hispanics are also divided over how much of a

common identity they share with other Americans. About half (47%) say they consider

themselves to be very different from the typical American" (Taylor, Lopez, Martínez, &

Velasco, 2012, p. 2). From experience, I know that it is often difficult to articulate how

American one is without denouncing or giving-up one's Latino roots, a multifaceted

phenomenon:

… most Hispanics prefer their family's country of origin over pan-ethnic terms.

Half (51%) say that most often they use their family's country of origin to

describe their identity. That includes such terms as "Mexican" or "Cuban" or "Dominican," for example. Just one-quarter (24%) say they use the terms "Hispanic" or "Latino" to most often to describe their identity. And 21% say they use the term "American" most often" (Taylor, Lopez, Martínez, & Velasco, 2012, pp. 2-3).

Overall, Latina/os or Hispanics generally prefer to identify with their country of origin to describe their identity.

There are also contemporary terms that describe the Latina/o population. The term Latin@, for example, originates from a need for gender neutral language in Spanish:

[For] a group of people that includes a man, the word [used]... would be masculine even if that group is mostly made up of women… To get around this, a growing number of activists, academics and bloggers have taken to employing the webby appellation "Latin@," which includes both the masculine "o" and the feminine "a" as a way to describe people with Latin-American roots. (Demby, 2013)

An all-inclusive nomenclature for both genders, Latin@ is a term that encompasses a variety of Latina/o, cultures: "Latin@ is the relatively new spelling that is meant to both shorten 'Latino/a'... This term… recognizes various gender identities instead of the normative binary; and it effectively offers a more concise spelling" (Minikel-Lacocque, 2015, p. 11). Latinx is another contemporary term to describe the Latino population; it is used as a way to be more inclusive of this diverse population:

Latinx is the gender-neutral alternative to Latino, Latina and even Latin@. Used

by scholars, activists and an increasing number of journalists, Latinx is a

"linguistic revolution" that aims to move beyond gender binaries and is inclusive

of the intersecting identities of Latin American descendants. In addition to men

and women from all racial backgrounds, Latinx also makes room for people who

are trans, queer, agender, non-binary, gender non-conforming or gender fluid.

(Ramirez & Blay, 2017)

As shown, there are many terms used in the Latino community to identify with the

culture. For the purposes of this study, Latina/o is the term for Spanish-speaking persons

from Spanish-speaking countries.

First-Generation College Students

Ward, Siegel, and Davenport (2012) relate that the term first-generation college

student was a concept coined by TRIO, "a broad-based American higher education

initiative stemming from the Higher Education Act in the early 1960s," defining the term

as "students whose parents have not obtained a postsecondary degree" (p. 4). Programs

under TRIO were created to tackle low-income, first-generation students' needs and help

support or improve their college experience, usually by providing special services at the

secondary level. Generally speaking, "TRIO programs are designed to help low-income

and first-generation students… progress through the academic pipeline… to post-

baccalaureate programs while overcoming class, social, academic and cultural barriers to

higher education" (Ward, Siegel, and Davenport, 2012, p. 62). In other words, TRIO

programs provide opportunities to motivate, develop, and serve students on the road to college.

There are a variety of definitions when it comes to the term "first-generation" student. Often, scholars may depict first-generation college students as students whose parents have never attended college:

> … We argue that the definition chosen does matter, and that first-generation students should be defined as those whose parents did not attend college because doing so is consistent with the notion that one's level of intimate knowledge about college is the key factor shaping the first-generation experience" (p. XIV).

While there are differing definitions of first-generation college student, for the objectives of this study, first-generation college students are defined as individuals whose parents or guardians did not complete a four-year postsecondary degree. My participants would be the first in their immediate families to go to college; they are the first to venture out into the mystery that is higher education for many.

All in all, being the first in one's immediate family to attend college is hard to envision, but certainly, things are more difficult for the those first to embark on new endeavors:

> … Imagine [a] student… is the first in the family to attend college; the first to step outside of the social comfort zone and travel a different road than his or her parents, and the first to worry about deciphering a syllabus, interacting with faculty and advisers, living in a residence hall, and conducting independent

research. This new territory tests first-generation students' intellectual, social, and

emotional mettle. (Ward, Siegel, and Davenport, 2012, p. 26)

First-generation college students will face a lot of problems that traditional students will

most likely not encounter. To be first-generation means to be a pioneer, someone who is

not afraid of the unknown.

First-generation student status means more challenges and different kinds of

barriers. The odds of facing obstacles increases for minority first-generation students.

First-generation students of color face additional challenges:

… First-generation students with ethnic minority status might be at a much

greater risk than first-generation students without minority status. In a sense,

being dually at risk can compound the sense of isolation that some students feel…

given that individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds have traditionally been

underrepresented in many facets of campus life. (Ward, Siegel, and Davenport,

2012, p. 53)

First-generation students' lack of cultural capital means that they are "inadequate"

candidates for success at the postsecondary level. Student whose parents have gone to

college can pass down what they learned through experience, but first-generation students

may have less knowledge and, often, little support in their educational pursuits. It is like

visiting a different country where there is a different way of life, language, and customs:

The transition to college provides a form of culture shock requiring significant

social and psychological relearning in the face of encounters with new ideas; new

teachers and friends with different values and beliefs; new freedoms and

opportunities; and new academic, personal, and social demands. (Pascarella &

Terenzini, 2005, p. 61)

First-generation students, often leaving their families behind, are often unprepared to

cope with such change. This strife can often lead to disengaging from the college, which

affects their ability to persist: "… Integration, or the degree of students' academic

involvement on campus, both in and out of the classroom, is significant in impacting

persistence, transfer, and degree attainment" (Arbona & Nora, 2007, p. 251). Without

feeling as though they belong at their school, first-generation students are likely to

struggle.

Campus life is especially important since "These students require knowledge of

their institutions culture" in order to subsist and, as a result,

Success and retention for all first-generation students can be described in terms of

nature and nurture: The nature of the institution and the types of students it

enrolls, as well as how an institution nurtures those students who need assistance,

have a complementary impact on student success and retention. (Ward, Siegel,

and Davenport, 2012, p. 83)

The college or campus climate, assistance programs, and resources available to first-

generation students are crucial. Without the appropriate support systems, first-generation

students are less likely to attain four-year degrees. This reality is why studies about the

Latina/o first-generation college student experience are paramount to better

understanding what works and what is in the way of success for these students.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I analyzed the boundaries and context of my research problem to validate the merits of my study. I explored the educational significance of the problem and how this plays a role in the equity of our school system. In this section, I consider research literature related to my research problem. I investigate the varying theoretical frameworks that help me examine, as well as critique, the different views in research relating to my problem.

Change in U.S. Demographics

Our country's demography continues to change as the Latina/o population, as well as other minorities', continues to grow: "Latinos (often also referred to as 'Hispanics' or 'Hispanic-Americans') are the fastest growing 'minority group' in the United States and will soon exceed African Americans in number" (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001, p. 34). As made clear, we are one of the largest minority groups in the country. It is estimated that by 2060, Latina/os will "represent 31% of the total U.S. population" (Calderon-Galdeano, Santiago, & Taylor's, 2015). Thus, Latina/o numbers will continue to increase in the future and "In the 21st century, Latinos… will be responsible for the majority of the population growth in the United States" (Núñez et al., 2013, p. 25). So, much of our country's future depends on the educational success of the Latina/o population. If Latina/os continue to struggle to get four-year degrees, what ramifications will that have on our professional workforce and, as a result, our society's advancement? These

estimates highlight the importance of making sure that Latina/os are successful in our country.

Latina/os are not only the fastest growing population in our country, but in our postsecondary institutions as well:

> Now that Latinos are not only the largest population of color in the nation, but the largest population of students of color in the higher education system, it is imperative that researchers, policymakers, and practitioners understand and create the conditions to promote Latino college students' success. (Núñez et al., 2013, p. 93)

As stated previously, as the Latina/o population continues to grow, we should play close attention to their educational attainment to guarantee our society's progress in terms of producing qualified professionals. Latina/os are one of the largest minority groups in the U.S., yet this group continues to be underserved in education: "While the country has historically touted such diversity as a strength, underrepresented communities of color in this nation have not had full and equal participation in all facets of American life, and the inequality begins with education" (Contreras, 2011, p. 2). This inequity is an important area of research because the education of minority students is important to improvement in our country. If Latina/os are lagging behind other groups in attaining degrees, then the country's future is at stake (Núñez et al., 2013). The more growth there is in the Latina/o community, the more this population will continue to play a major role in the betterment of our country. If students stay in college, everyone wins: colleges would have fiscal

security; students would contribute to advances in varying fields; and, society would benefit from the well-educated, growing workforce.

Changes in the country's demographic makeup mean that colleges are also becoming more diverse: "Within the past decade, America's ethnic population has increased dramatically. This has created major changes in the ethnic composition of universities and colleges across the country" (Santos, Ortiz, Morales, & Rosales, 2007, p. 104). As illustrated, Latina/os will constitute a large percentage of students in U.S. colleges (Gandara & Contreras, 2009), which means that the number of students who are not completing college degrees warrants attention. Our school system should ensure that it is serving all students well. I posit that in order to better serve our country's students of color, research should consider the effects of college culture on underrepresented students' identity and persistence to better grasp why students do not complete degrees. In other words, as researchers, we need to speak to the students, better understand their scholastic experiences, and learn more about obstacles they face at the postsecondary level. Research on the student experience, when it comes to academic success and persistence, is warranted because Latina/o first-generation college students are struggling to climb up the educational ladder (Contreras, 2009). Understanding the interaction between these constructs will shed light on how students adjust to their educational environment and thrive once there. The cultural change on campuses throughout the country is related to college culture and how minority students are affected by it:

… Changes in student demography have important implications for campus

climate, which bear on students' ethnic identity as well as their adjustment to

college. Specifically, the greater diversification of university campuses has made

ethnic identity issues and interethnic relations more salient for individuals.

(Santos, Ortiz, Morales, & Rosales, 2007, p. 104)

Students' adjustment to college is highly reliant on positive experiences on campus. For

multicultural students, ethnic identity and interracial relations are paramount in forming a

campus culture of inclusivity. Essentially, research in the field of Latina/o first-

generation college student experiences on campus would be fundamental in

understanding the dynamics at play in student persistence.

Why College Matters

Latina/os, as any other group in the U.S., need a college education to secure a

prosperous and promising future. Postsecondary degrees are becoming a standard

qualification in the job market. To be successful in the work force in the U.S., one must

acquire a college degree to stay competitive: "Given the current unstable economic

conditions in the United States, a college degree has turned into a necessary commodity

for individuals nationwide, particularly those of Hispanic descent" (Storlie, Moreno,

& Portman, 2014, p. 66). Attaining college degrees is paramount to Latina/os' goals in

becoming innovators and leaders in society. Without the required education, Latina/os are

less likely to be in positions of power (Calderon-Galdeano, Santiago, & Taylor's, 2015).

Going to college is a complex and often difficult process for many students of color, and the challenges they encounter may affect their degree attainment (Dumais & Ward, 2010; French & Chavez, 2010; Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Garcia, 2010; Keels, 2013; Núñez et al., 2013; Minikel-Lacocque, 2015; Pino, Martínez-Ramos, & Smith, 2112; Pyne & Means, 2013; Ross et al., 2012; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; Schwartz et al., 2013; Storlie, Moreno, & Portman, 2014; Taylor, et al., 2012; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). As Gandara and Contreras (2009) make clear, it is critical that students feel they belong and are part of their school community. Examining how school culture affects students' sense of persistence and identity, then, is key. The purpose of this study is to go beyond the conversation of Latina/o first-generation college student attrition by examining how they navigate postsecondary institutions and explore the implications associated with how higher education affects them. My purpose is to explore persevering Latina/o first-generation college students' experience of being in college and how it affects them. I'm interested in their experiences of success, disappointment, achievement, and struggle and how these inform how they view themselves. Understanding the Latina/o college student experience with campus culture and including this understanding in institutional decision-making can result in institutional change, which directly impacts whether students stay in college (Arevalo, So, & McNaughton-Cassill, 2016; French & Chavez, 2010; Gandara, & Contreras, 2009; Garcia, 2010; Minikel-Lacocque, 2015; Núñez et al., 2013; Pyne & Means, 2013).

This literature review will summarize research regarding how the college experience impacts students and the formation of their identity. It will also explore theoretical frameworks that can help elucidate the problem of Latina/o first-generation college students not attaining college degrees. The theoretical frameworks will be the different lenses through which to examine the Latina/o first-generation college student experience.

Degree Attainment

Latina/o first-generation college students are not attaining degrees compared to their White peers in the U.S. According to the 2013 U.S. Census Bureau Current Population survey, "22% of Hispanic adults (25 years and over) had earned an associate degree or higher, compared to Asians (60%), Whites (46%), and African Americans (31%)" (Calderon-Galdeano, Santiago, & Taylor's, 2015, p. 4). As made clear, Hispanic college students are not making it through their postsecondary programs. Latina/os are struggling with four-year degree completion. Further, "Hispanics display a lower college graduation rate than their African American and White counterparts" (Arbona & Nora, 2007, p. 247). I hypothesize that Latina/o first-generation college students face the challenge of having to adjust to the new culture of college while trying to keep their own culture alive, which may affect their academic persistence and identity. Student backgrounds and heritage play a vital role in shaping their postsecondary experience. After all, "students' demographic characteristics and the skills and attitudes they bring to college influence their academic achievement and persistence in higher education"

(Arbona & Nora, 2007, p. 251). Latina/o first-generation college students' values, beliefs, and culture directly impact how they handle and adjust to the culture of college.

There is a sense of immediacy to consider the Latina/o first-generation college student persistence problem in undergraduate programs. While there has been progress in postsecondary degree attainment for their counterparts, Latina/o college student degree completion has continued to remain "stagnant" (Contreras & Gandara, 2009, p. 24). Krogstad and Fry (2014) maintain that "Hispanics accounted for just 9% of young adults (ages 25 to 29) with bachelor's degrees" (para. 5). This means that while there may be progress being made by other students in attaining four-year college degrees, Latina/o students are struggling to keep up. According to Contreras & Gandara (2009), there is a confluence of factors playing a role in how Latina/o students will experience college:

> Going to college begins long before kindergarten… The economic situation of parents, their schooling history, the neighborhoods into which children are born and raised; all have powerful effects on children's aspirations and preparation for schooling before they ever step inside a classroom. (p. 250)

To put it another way, it is not Latina/o first-generation college students' lack of motivation or hard-work, as some may erroneously believe, that makes them fall behind or depart from college. There is a plethora of factors at play that can help determine how Latina/o first-generation college students will react to college culture and whether they attain degrees. Latina/o first-generation college students' environment, experience with education, and their development of identity influence the likelihood of postsecondary

success (Núñez et al., 2013). There is a need to better understand how college affects students' development of identity and sense of persistence in order to better understand student success.

Theoretical Frameworks

Research in the field of education has taken many forms; it is a tool we use to build knowledge and explore phenomena. Research makes "the strange familiar" and can "help us get a better and deeper insights into the natural and social world" (Biesta, 2013, p. 7). Research is a reflection of our inquisitive nature and need to understand our environment as well as ourselves. Specifically, research in education is used to depict how students learn, schools operate, and society benefits from the system. Overall, educational research is

> … The scientific study of educational processes and practices, both as they occur in designated institutions such as schools, colleges or universities, and as they happen in less formal settings such as the workplace or the community. (Biesta, 2013, p. 5)

Subsequently, in order to understand the world of learning and personal development, "we need educational theory" (Biesta, 2013, p. 14). We would not be able to improve the system without research in education. Without educational theory, we would be unable to conduct research on the issues that impact how education plays a role in shaping who we become and how our society functions as a result.

The meaning of the word *theory* has taken many forms over time, which makes it difficult to define. Nevertheless, theory has a history grounded in the philosophical: "With Plato and Aristotle… theory became connected to the domain of the *non*emperical [emphasis in original] ... Theory became knowledge of a permanent and unchangeable reality *behind* [emphasis in original] the empirical world of change, flux and appearances" (Biesta, 2013, p. 6). The need for theory revolves around our need to explain phenomena in our environment. As sentient beings, we yearn to better understand ourselves and the world we live in. Theory, then, is needed to explain underlying systems or structures regarding how we live, identify, and progress as a society. In short, theory can help uncover the underlying dynamics behind any educational question and is an invaluable tool used in research to dissect social phenomena. The development, disproving, and substantiation of theories help us develop. Specifically, educational theory allows us to conceptualize phenomena and investigate the process of learning. Learning theories are examples of the tools we use to explore student growth and development. In what follows, I explore two theoretical frameworks in education that relate to Latina/o first-generation college students' development as it relates to education.

According to Willingham (2009), "We remember much better if something has meaning" (p. 42). If something is not related to our environment or self, we would be unable to understand it well. Further, he emphasizes that we learn in context. Willingham explains that our cognitive system is constantly struggling to understand new material by relying on background knowledge to help us interpret information. The environment is an

important factor in all learning based on Willingham's work. Similarly, the constructivist

position supports that human learning occurs in a social setting through practice and

observation. Constructivism is related to the notion that the environment is critical to

learning.

Constructivist theory is based on learning that results from the interactions

between the individual and the environment and is "a philosophy of learning as well as a

philosophy of teaching" (Narayan, Rodriguez, Araujo, Shaqlaih, & Moss, 2013, p. 169).

Moreover, the theory considers questions on how lived experiences and one's social

context interact to create meaning and result in learning: "Knowledge is not imposed

from outside people but rather formed inside them. A person's constructions are true to

that person but not necessarily to anyone else" (Schunk, 2009, p. 230). Put another way, a

person's learning varies depending on one's environmental and developmental context,

and each situation may result in different learning for different people.

Theories in constructivism stem from a constructivist worldview, which upholds

the idea that "individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work"

(Creswell, 2014, p. 8). Creswell (2014) maintains that the constructivist researcher strives

to understand how individuals construct complex subjective meaning out of their social

situation:

Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. They…

are formed through interaction with others… and through historical and cultural

norms that operate in individuals' lives. Thus, constructivist researchers often

address the processes of interaction among individuals. (p. 8)

In other words, the sociohistorical context of individuals' lives is crucial to understanding

how each person's background shapes whom he or she becomes. Constructivist

researchers ask questions that would help them better understand how individuals build

their own realities, which is ultimately based on how they see their role in the

environment they learn from.

To reiterate, constructivism supports the idea that we learn in unique ways

through interaction with others and our surroundings: "Constructivism is a learning

theory that posits that learners actively construct knowledge and make meaning based on

their experiences, individually or socially" (Narayan et al., 2013, p. 169). So, we *build*

knowledge; it is formed uniquely by us. Constructivism dictates that teachers cannot

transmit knowledge to a student. The student must construct knowledge on his or her

own. Freire (2013) advised against the idea that teachers are the ones responsible for

depositing knowledge into the minds of eager learners, which Freire calls the *banking*

style of teaching. Freire suggests that, as educators, "We simply cannot go to the

laborers—urban or peasant—in the banking style, to give them 'knowledge' or to impose

upon them the model of the 'good man' contained in a program whose content we have

ourselves organized" (p. 160). Using leaders and laborers in his example, Freire states

that we cannot just "dump" information into students' minds based on what we think is

worth learning. If this were the case, students would be seen as empty vessels waiting to

be filled with information, a concept of learning that is against constructivism tenets

relating to how we, as well as our environment, play a role in shaping who we are.

Narayan et al. (2013) agree that constructivism "is a theory that posits knowledge must

be constructed by a person, not just transmitted to the person" (p. 169). Students must be

free to construct knowledge on their own with teachers as mentors and guides that can

help them unpack the knowledge they alone can build.

Critics of the constructivist mentality would have trouble accepting forms of

instructional differentiation and individualization; they would be in favor of standardized

instruction and assessments that would measure all students' learning in a homogenous

way. Learning, according to the critics, should take shape in the same way for everyone,

and everyone must be able to demonstrate what they understand in standardized fashions.

My retort to such critiques would be simple: if we standardize learning, we are limiting

the way students internalize information and grow as thinkers as a result. The

normalization of material and assessments would be harming students' learning potential.

Students are not blank slates that come into the classroom without background or cultural

knowledge. To better understand the world, students must be able to use their

experiences, culture, and sense of identity to make meaning and interpret information.

New knowledge must relate to and be incorporated with pre-existing knowledge: "The

basic ontological assumption of constructivism is relativism, a philosophical theory that

postulates there is no absolute truth, only truth construed relative to the individual, or to a

particular time or culture, or both" (Narayan et al., 2013, p.170). Learning, then, is

cultural; it must revolve around how students see themselves, form their values, and understand their environment. Consequently, self-awareness is needed for knowledge to form.

Just like all people, Latina/os' environments and their culture shape and inform their sense of self. Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2013) illustrate the importance of culture in learning: "by drawing on household knowledge, student experience is legitimized as valid, and classroom practice can build on the familiar knowledge bases that students can manipulate to enhance learning," (p. 43) which is the major principle of constructivist theory. Thus, without considering students' sense of self, identity, and culture in college life, postsecondary institutions will not retain Latina/o first-generation college students whose background, beliefs, and traditions are a crucial component of what makes them who they are. As stated in chapter one, Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti assert that "… The ultimate border–the border between knowledge and power–can be crossed only when educational institutions no longer reify culture, when lived experiences become validated as a source of knowledge" (p. 42). All students must feel like their culture is included in their educational experience for personal development to occur. Culture and prior knowledge cannot be ignored; these must be a part of the learning experience for all students' personal and intellectual development.

Essentially, "The constructivist learning theory applies to undergraduate and graduate education" (Narayan et al., 2013, p. 180). Postsecondary institutions that do not take a students' background, values, and prior-knowledge into account would be the

antithesis of constructivist ideology: "The learner's… culture is essential to the constructivism learning theory because of its importance on how it shapes the learner's local and global views of themselves and the world" (Narayan et al., 2013, p. 169). What this means is that students must be able to question what they are learning and relate material to who they are and how they see the world.

Similar to the constructivist ideology, a transformative worldview in research validates students' backgrounds and cultures. According to Creswell (2014), the focus of a transformative worldview, on which advocacy research and critical theory are founded, is concerned with individuals' stories of struggle and hardship. The word *transformative* is key; the goal of this worldview is change. Advocates of the transformative worldview believe that research should "[contain] an action agenda for reform that may change lives of participants, the institutions in which individuals work or live, and the researcher's life" (Creswell, 2014, p. 9). Creswell goes on to state that issues addressed by supporters of this stance deal with matters "that speak to important social issues of the day, issues such as empowerment, inequality, oppression, domination, suppression, and alienation" (pp. 9-10). The point of the transformative worldview is to provide avenues for the marginalized to share their stories of disenfranchisement. Critical race theory is one of the perspectives of this philosophy in research.

Guba and Lincoln (2005) purport that critical theory is a "propositional, transactional way of knowing… as a means to social emancipation, which is an end in itself [and] intrinsically valuable" (p. 198). The critical theorist is an individual seeking to

make change in society by helping subjugated peoples share their realities and perspectives: "[Critical theorists] are increasingly concerned with the single experience, the individual crisis, the epiphany or moment of discovery, with that most powerful of all threats to conventional objectivity, feeling and emotion" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 205). Since research is widely viewed as objective and based on statistical factors, critical theory is often contested. An alternative perspective is that critical theory is not academic (Yosso, 2005). However, because of its social justice orientation and emphasis on research, it has gained reputability in the world of research.

Critical race theory stems from the need to give voice to those who feel silenced. Popkewitz (1990) explains that critical theory focuses on the hardships of marginalized groups and systems of oppression. According to Popkewitz, truth is structured in Critical theory as "[considering] the conditions of social regulation, unequal distribution, and power" (p. 48). Through critical theory, control returns to the community and the underrepresented. In other words, those who were and are still being silenced historically could have their voice heard through critical research: "Critical theorists… have always advocated varying degrees of social action, from the overturning of specific unjust practices to radical transformation of entire societies" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 201). Transformation and change are key tenets of critical race theory. In their research, "Critical theorists… are painfully aware of the necessity for members of the community, or research participants, to take control of their futures" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 202).

The well-being of people in minority groups as well as their need to be heard is paramount to critical research goals.

Critical theorists are in search of social change. Indeed, "… Critical theorists tend to locate the foundations of truth in specific historical, economic, racial, and social infrastructures of oppression, injustice and marginalization" (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 204). Critical theory is concerned with not equality, but equity, a concept that ensures all peoples have access to resources that guarantee success. Specifically, in education, critical learning theory "asks how and why knowledge gets constructed the way it does, and how and why some constructions of reality are legitimized and celebrated by the dominant culture while others are clearly not" (McLaren, 1997, p. 196). This theory purports that dominant culture guides our education system, making it difficult, challenging, or virtually impossible for minority students to succeed. Critical learning theory seeks to debunk the idea that there is specific knowledge that is worth teaching and learning.

Oppression can reproduce through the education system. The education system, according to critical learning theorists, tends to celebrate a set, mainstream curriculum and exclude the histories and values of other cultures. Schools systematically "devalue the cultural capital of students who occupy subordinate class positions" (McLaren, 1997, p. 219). As previously stated, based on Anzaldúa 's (1987) work, "predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through culture" (p. 38). This includes school culture. Therefore, the very culture of our education system

supports the idea that there is one right way of teaching, learning, and knowing. According to McLaren (1997), critical theory's goal is "to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities" (p. 186). Our goal as educators, based on McLaren's work, should be to reexamine how knowledge both misrepresents and marginalizes particular, as well as less dominant, views.

The need to include race in the conversation on educational inequality has also impacted critical theory. So, critical race theory "can be viewed under the larger umbrella of critical theory" (Beachum, 2013, p. 923). The point of critical race theory is to strive for an equitable society by challenging the status quo. It is concerned with social injustice and racial bias. While critical race theory "has its beginnings in the field of law," (Beachum, 2013, p. 924) it is a major framework often used to assess our education system's efficacy, flaws, and oppressive history. It aims to reframe how we think about race, define racism, and address deficit views. Yosso (2005) describes critical race theory as a "framework that can be used to theorize, examine, and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact our social structures, practices and discourses" (p. 70). It provides researchers with the opportunity to reassess oppressive and racist structures in society.

To better understand critical race theory, one must first examine the concept of race. Race, according to Chapman, Dixson, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings (2013), is a "social construct" with "enforced categories that are constantly recreated and modified through human interaction" (p. 1019). The topic of race is heavily complex,

controversial, and, often contested, in education. A major element people use for self-identification, race is critically important to who we are. It has also been a depiction used to oppress those who are considered different based on intolerant views. In education, critical race theory maintains that race "remains one of the most important characteristics in relation to how people experience education and the kinds of outcome that they are likely to achieve" (Chapman et al., 2013, p. 1019). Race, then, plays a major role in the education, and miseducation, of our youth.

All in all, race is central to critical race theory work. Critical race theory "places an understanding of race and racism at the very heart of its approach… to understanding and opposing inequalities in education" (Chapman et al., 2013, p. 1019), an alternate perspective to the hidden, and sometimes blatant, deficit views in the field. Critical race theory supports the idea that racism is ubiquitous in the U.S., even though it may be subtler today than it has been historically, a controversial point. Beachum (2013) explains that

> Since the eradication of overt manifestations of racism (i.e., Jim crow laws and overtly racist behaviors), many Americans now believe that racism is a thing of the past. [Critical race theory] asserts the idea that the racism of today is more covert and complex. (p. 925)

In other words, critical race theory scholars maintain that racism is alive and well in the U.S. even if it is less explicit than in the past. Actually, an additional major principle in critical race theory is the idea of White privilege:

In CRT the phrase "White supremacy" is used very differently to its common meaning—the term usually refers to individuals and groups who engage in the crudest, most obvious acts of race hatred. But for critical race theorists the more important hidden, and pervasive form of White supremacy lies in the operation of forces that saturate everyday mundane actions and policies that shape the world in the interest of White people. (Chapman et al., 2013, p. 1020)

CRT claims that there are institutional practices in place that guarantee the success of the majority at the expense of the minority. Majoritarian views govern how we live, interact, and learn. There are "the subtle and hidden processes which have the effect of discriminating, regardless of their stated intent" (Chapman et al., 2013, p. 1020). Thus, racism may have taken another form, but it still present. In education, "policies are not necessarily neutral, they depend on who gets to judge and who writes the policy" (Beachum, 2013, p. 926). It's about whose culture is worth exploring; whose historical point of view is studied; and, whose heroes are celebrated. The people in charge, the ones dictating norms, have the power to decide what is okay to assume about any given race in policy, education, and even everyday life. Applying critical race theory to education is a matter of eradicating domination and dismantling subjugation.

Critics of critical race theory contend that there are many flaws in the logic of this framework and its precepts while its followers claim the fault is inherently in our current legal and educational system: "… many reject critical race theory under the guise of it being too subjective or not empirical enough. critical race theory supporters would

probably respond by questioning who gets to validate critical race theory?" (Beachum, 2013, p. 926). The problem lies in who makes decisions and who is forced to follow them. Once the dominant culture determines what counts and what does not, existing oppressive norms are difficult to exterminate. As Beachum (2013) explains, the nontraditional approaches of critical race theory scholars are often scrutinized in the field of educational research, but who gets to decide what reputable research really is to begin with? Moreover, critical race theory stems from scholars' "frustration with the silence on racism," prompting them to "challenge not only the foci of existing analyses, but also the methods and forms of argumentation that were considered legitimate" (Chapman et al., 2013, p. 1020). Ultimately, critical race theory challenges the very nature of what counts as research.

Another criticism of critical race theory is its lack of solutions to the problems it raises. Critical race theory "is heavy on interrogation, investigation, and critical analysis, yet light on practicality and providing a roadmap or vision for moving from theory to practice" (Beachum, 2013, p. 927). In my opinion, critical race theory is a good place to start in the fight against racism and discrimination; it guarantees that we question existing norms, reassess what is fair, and consider the interest of those who have been silenced through discriminatory traditions. While it does not provide a plethora of solutions, it does allow for underrepresented communities to showcase their voices and share their views and experiences, which have been often silenced in research historically.

Decidedly, critical race theory's goal is to validate the voices of the underrepresented and the population's struggles with inequity. critical race theory "views racism as a natural aspect of everyday life in the United States, thus permeating everything from academic disciplines to legal decisions to the modern workplace" (Beachum, 2013, p. 923). The main goal of critical race theory is to bring to light injustices experienced by minorities and help illustrate the permanence of racism in our society. In so doing, critical race theory claims that our education system is the product of racist ideals. Actually, "… The establishment, maintenance, and management of American schools was largely based on factory models" (Beachum, 2013, p. 926) where everyone must look, act, and think in similar ways, especially under the guise of colorblindness where there is equality and not equity, a problematic concept given its one-size-fits-all philosophy.

Meritocracy, the assumption that "people rise according solely to their efforts and talents" (Chapman et al., 2013, p. 1021), is also challenged in critical race theory. Theorists contend that hard work does not equal success for everyone if there is not a level playing field. Thus, "Students from more stable communities, with more wealth and resources frequently find it easier to successfully navigate through the education system. While students from more challenging backgrounds… [have] to work much harder to be successful" (Beachum, 2013, p. 926). To put it another way, critical race theory contends that underrepresented students have added burdens in advancing their education since

they have to confront racist norms in climbing up the educational ladder, a reality many

Latina/o first-generation students face, for example.

Ultimately, the goal of a framework like critical race theory is to eradicate the

subjugation, domination, and oppression of minorities, major inspiration for my research.

The concept of culture is central to critical race theory. This theory aims to critique the

dominant narrative of the "haves" and "have nots." One of the major tenets of critical

race theory is its use of storytelling from the point of view of the oppressed to illustrate

the racist aspects of everyday American life: "Counterstorytelling or counternarrative

stresses the importance of people of color telling their own stories. Their experiential

knowledge is highly valued as opposed to being pushed to the margins" (Beachum, 2013,

p. 924). In a way, counterstorytelling can help pave the way to reframing how

underrepresented populations are viewed, treated, and assessed in education. With

counternarratives, "critical race theory exposes the contradictions inherent in the

dominant storyline that… blames people of color for their own conditions of inequity"

(Chapman et al., 2013, p. 1021). Counterstorytelling help conquer the borderlands

(Anzaldúa, 1987) that separate. This is why providing avenues for students of color to

express their experiences in education is so important; they are told from another point of

view, a perspective that is often ignored or even silenced. Stories are never neutral;

someone has to be there hero in them and, often, the people in the majority play that role.

It is a matter of who has the power to tell the story. For equity, students of color's stories

must be heard and explored through research.

Stemming from critical race theory, Latino Critical Race Theory, or LatCrit

theory, focuses on the narratives of Latina/os in education: "As an outgrowth of the

critical race theory movement, Latina(o) critical race theory (LatCrit) challenges the

Black–White binaries in the United States to understand systemic challenges facing

Hispanic individuals" (Pyne & Means, 2013, p. 3). That is, it brings the Latina/o voice

forward. The LatCrit framework in education "challenges the traditional claims of the

educational system to objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal

opportunity. LatCrit theorists… challenge the predominant deficit frameworks used to

explain Chicana and Chicano educational inequality" (Solorzano & Delgano-Bernal,

2001, p. 313). Research is the vehicle through which LatCrit helps tell the Latina/o story.

LatCrit researchers "acknowledge that educational institutions operate in contradictory

ways with their potential to oppress and marginalize coexisting with their potential to

emancipate and empower" (Solorzano & Delgano-Bernal, 2001, p. 313). Furthermore,

LatCrit supports the idea that students of color's stories are legitimate and rich in nature

and must be researched in relation to their academic experiences so that we may improve

the state of education at the postsecondary level, in this case.

The LatCrit framework is rooted in critical theory's concern with eradicating

inequity. The framework "allows one to look at resistance among Students of Color that

is political, collective, conscious, and motivated by a sense that individual and social

change is possible" (Solorzano & Delgano-Bernal, 2001, p. 320). LatCrit theory supports

that race, ethnicity, and culture connect to school climate and should be part of the

equation when considering why students are not achieving. This framework also purports

that the hegemonic dominant culture in the U.S. dictates or prescribes how and what the

subordinate groups should learn, do, and believe, making opportunities to succeed

inequitable. Moreover, ideologies, society's production of sense and meaning, can also

serve to oppress those that do not partake in the dominant culture. Those who are

"culturally illiterate," or do not possess cultural wealth or capital, and do not adhere to

the culture of dominance "fail" in education (Yosso, 2005).

What I aimed to accomplish with my study was to provide an outlet for Latina/o

first-generation college students to express how college has changed, affected, or

affirmed who they are: "Like CRT more broadly, LatCrit re-centers attention on the lived

experiences of racial insiders, inviting these voices into the research conversation and, in

doing so, directly and/or indirectly contesting the race-neutral discourses that typify

institutional spaces" (Pyne & Means, 2013, p. 3). I explored how and why college may be

a vehicle for inequitable practices dictated by LatCrit via qualitative methods. As a

framework overall, and a tenant I agree with, "Critical race theory… places value on

qualitative data sources and the importance of voices and viewpoints of communities of

color" (Beachum, 2013, p. 926). Through my study, Latina/o first-generation college

students had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences in postsecondary education

and share their own stories of college life. Precisely, "LatCrit… [reveals] systemic and

structural challenges faced by Hispanic individuals, applying a critical lens to the

experiences of individuals on the margins of society and creating counterstories that add

more complex, highly contextual accounts to the literature" (Pyne & Means, 2013, p. 10).

In order to understand the merits and shortfalls of our education system for Latina/o first-

generation college students, I must explore their experiences within the system that lead

to persistence and the formation and validation of identity.

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Review of the Research Literature

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In this section, I will discuss varying works of research relating to my problem of

study. Since the purpose of this study is to go beyond the conversation of Latina/o first-

generation college student attrition by examining how they navigate postsecondary

institutions and explore the implications associated with how higher education affects

them, I explore research on identity to better understand how it is formed and how

college can have an influence on its development. Further, I include an analysis of the

research literature on belonging and college culture since I am interested in learning how

Latina/o first-generation college students traverse the college landscape and how they

feel they are, or are not, a part of the college's culture and the effect their sense of

belonging has on their identity. I also explore research literature on hegemony to

investigate matters of equity relating to the experiences of Latina/o first-generation

college students.

On Identity

What is identity? How is it formed? How important is identity important to how

students perform in school? Identity is not easily defined because it is known as such a

subjective term; it can be used to describe a multitude of characteristics:

In popular and academic discourse, the term identity is sometimes applied as a catch-all label for biological characteristics, psychological dispositions, and/or socio-demographic positions. However, having a British passport does not automatically give someone a British identity, nor does having a particular skin color or being intelligent necessarily give someone an ethnic identity or the identity of an "intellectual." Characteristics such as these only become part of identity to the extent that they are interpreted and infused with personal and social meaning, and that these meanings are applied to define individuals or groups—in other words, to the extent that people use them to answer the question "Who are you?" (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011, pp. 2-3)

In short, identity is a social construct. The point is not to state that the idea of identity is too flexible to define and understand but to illustrate its density and complicated nature. Although I agree that identity is fluid in a sense, I also believe that it is a concrete concept. Developing a working definition of identity, then, would involve investigating the most salient aspects people think make them who they are. Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles (2011) agree: "[Defining identity] may sound fairly simple, but in fact it masks a considerable amount of complexity" (p. 2). Considering the "Who are you?" question is critical in pealing back the layers of what identity means and understanding how it is important to us.

If someone were to ask another, "Who are you?", the simplicity of this question would baffle anyone. One would have trouble deciding what to say first or what attributes

would take precedence over other aspects of what makes their identity concrete. Identity can go "beyond the individual self to encompass significant others, social roles, face-to-face groups, and wider social categories" (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011, p. 4). This distinction is important to acknowledge because it illustrates the multifaceted nature in the concept of identity. It's not just about who one thinks one is but who one acts as being and who we are to others.

As stated previously, identity has many facets. It is a complex, loaded, and ever-changing concept in research. Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles (2011) contend that

Identity is simultaneously a personal, relational, and collective phenomenon; it is stable in some ways and fluid in others; and identity is formed and revised throughout the lifespans of individuals and the histories of social groups and categories, through an interplay of processes of self-discovery, personal construction, and social construction, some of which are relatively deliberate and explicit, whereas others are more automatic and implicit. (p. 8)

The authors illustrate that the construction of identity is both personal and social; really, we are a conglomeration of variables we may not be able to control. We play a role in how we view ourselves, but others also have a say in how we define, form, and change who we are. In order to analyze the construct of identity, one must acknowledge that the qualifiers which make up identity can be revised and even redefined.

Identity is grounded in social norms and interaction. In a "cultural environment… identity categories such as doctor, husband, father, Cuban-American, or American citizen

have particular meanings that have been constructed and established through social

discourse—and these meanings may also be debated and deconstructed" (Vignoles,

Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011, p. 4). Essentially, identity is an orchestrated merging of a

person's personal traits, beliefs, roles, relationships, memberships, among other

characteristics that form how we view our positions in society (Orbe, 2004). Specifically,

"Individual or personal identity refers to aspects of self-definition at the level of the

individual person" (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011, p. 3). In considering individual

or personal identity, ethnicity and race, two of the most prominent self-descriptors, in my

opinion, we should consider one's formation of self.

Erikson (1968) posits that we develop identity through experiences in our

environment and our interaction with others. During adolescence, identity formation is a

major developmental undertaking (Erikson, 1968). Erikson considers identity "much of

what has been called the self by a variety or workers, be it in the form of a self-concept, a

self-system, or in that of a fluctuating self-experience" that is formed through crises (pp.

208-209). He uses the term *epigenetic principle* to denote how we progress and

continuously build identity:

> Whenever we try to understand growth, it is well to remember the epigenetic
>
> principle… This principle states that anything that grows has a ground plan, and
>
> that out of this ground plan the parts arise, each part having its time of special
>
> ascendancy, until all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole… At birth, the
>
> baby leaves the chemical exchange of the womb for the social exchange system of

his society, where his gradually increasing capacities meet the opportunities and

limitations of his culture. (Erikson, 1968, p. 92)

According to Erikson, one develops from the ground up, each portion of our selves

reaching a pinnacle to form who we eventually become. Also, once a child is born,

society plays a large role in forming his or her perception of self or identity. Thus,

educational institutions, such as colleges, directly relate to how one views oneself and

one's place in society. Our sense of self is, in other words, constructed by our

experiences. Erikson states, "Personality… can be said to develop according to steps

predetermined in the human organism's readiness to be driven toward, to be aware of,

and to interact with a widening radius of significant individuals and institutions" (p. 93).

In other words, we affect and are affected by those around us and the powerful

establishments of social organization, standardized thinking, and communal norms.

Identity is partly a social construct; it is largely formed by our experiences with others

and social conventions; it is in the essence of an individual's culture.

Erikson (1968) theorizes that we develop in stages, and each stage has its own

form of what he terms *crisis*. Further, he states that most of identity formation occurs in

adolescence as the individual experiences these crises. He describes the concept of crisis

as follows:

… The word 'crisis' no longer connotes impending catastrophe, which at one

time seemed to be an obstacle to the understanding of the term. It is now being

accepted as designating a necessary turning point, a crucial moment, when

> development must move one way or another, marshaling resources of growth,
>
> recovery, and further differentiation. (Erikson, 1968, p. 16)

As we interact with our environment or society, we get to better understand and know

ourselves. However, at the personal level, throughout our experiences and interactions,

we experience crises that shift how and when we evolve as individuals. In adolescence, as

the individual interacts with society, he or she arrives at the conclusion that one must

integrate by forming an identity that is socially accepted:

> The adolescent process… is conclusively complete only when the individual has
>
> subordinated his childhood identifications to a new kind of identification,
>
> achieved in absorbing sociability and its competitive apprenticeship with and
>
> among his age mates. These new identifications no longer characterized by the
>
> playfulness of childhood and the experimental zest of youth: with dire urgency
>
> they force the young individual into choices and decisions which will, with
>
> increasing immediacy, lead to commitments "for life." (Erikson, 1968, p. 155)

To put it succinctly, identity is based on society's expectations and influence on the

individual. As we grow we realize that we must make choices, informed by experience,

that will be accepted by societal standards or in our environment. Our individuality is

based on our sociability. The commitments Erikson depicts as "for life" are characterized

by our need to belong; it is this need to connect with others that drives our principles,

which leads to the formation of identity.

Erikson (1968) purports that adolescents look to others when defining their own roles as individuals in our society and that they often look to others to believe in themselves. As part of the identity crisis in adolescence, "… the adolescent looks most fervently for men and ideas to have *faith* [emphasis in original] in, which also means men and ideas whose service it would seem worthwhile to prove oneself trustworthy" (p. 129). This need to be accepted and considered part of the community is fundamental, meaning that it is intrinsic part of identity development. Hence, it is crucial for youth to be embraced by people in their environment, which would include acknowledging individuals' culture and background. Erikson reiterates this concept by explaining that "the young individual's need to be 'recognized' by those around him… beyond a mere recognition of achievement [is] of great relevance to the young individual's identity formation" since others are so influential in how youth perceive themselves (p. 156). Recognition signifies acceptance. Further, Erikson states that young individuals must be "given function and status as a person whose gradual growth and transformation make sense to those who begin to make sense to him" (p. 156). Maturing identities need to be reaffirmed in order to develop. We understand ourselves better and grow as we better understand those around us, whom then play a role in helping us determine what is "acceptable." Without substantiation, one's identity would not progress through the evolving crises.

On Belonging

Relating Erikson's research on identity to my research topic, in order for students to learn, grow, and stay in college, they must feel like they belong there because their cultures are valued and respected by their educational institution and those in it. As in the constructivist view, students' culture is a key factor in how they learn and adjust to their educational environment. Musoba, Collazo, & Placide (2013) conducted a qualitative study examining how Hispanic and Black first-year students acclimated to their new educational environments. Firstly, the researchers claim that: "Sense of belonging has been used to identify the important affective nature of Hispanic membership in the university" because it is a factor in what keeps students in school (p. 357). Musoba, Collazo, and Placide go on to explain that comfort, acceptance, and fit are major predictors of student achievement.

As minorities, Latina/os may feel alienated at colleges that do not acknowledge the salience of their cultural backgrounds and needs. If Latina/o students don't see themselves fitting into the "model" of what and who is accepted in college, they are unlikely to attain four-year degrees. In studying how minority students transition from high school to college, Nora (2004) found that "students who feel they are personally accepted at their colleges are more likely to continue their enrollment" (p. 201). This means that a welcoming campus climate is needed to keep Latina/o students on track to earning college degrees; ultimately, they must feel that they belong and are part of the school and not just temporary, intrusive guests.

Latina/o students' cultural or ethnic identity has to be acknowledged, as per

Erikson's (1968) views on identify development, so that they feel valued. To clarify,

ethnic identity "is not static; rather, it refers to a process of integrating values and cultures

from both cultural heritage and the majority culture" (Núñez et al., 2013, p. 29).

Ethnicity, a term used to describe peoples' cultures (Adams, 2001), plays a significant

role in the development of identity in the Latina/o and other communities of color: "Race

and ethnicity are likely to remain significant cultural forces that shape American life,

organize social relationships, and anchor persona. As well as group identity, meaning

making, and orientation" (Adams, 2001, p .230). Ethnicity and race help form Latina/o

first-generation college students' view of themselves and others, as is the case for other

minority students. However, Latina/os are distinctive in that the terms Hispanic or

Latina/o are considered an ethnicity and not a race:

> Because Latinos do not fit into the prevailing system of racial categories in the
>
> United States, understanding Latino racial identity presents special challenges and
>
> challenges the prevailing racial order itself. This lack of fit often creates dilemmas
>
> for individuals, organizations, or institutions that must figure out what to do with
>
> us. (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001, p. 32)

This distinction makes understanding Latina/o identity and culture problematic and

confusing for some. In my experience, identifying as a Latina has its own challenges.

Often, explaining that one is Latina/o is not enough for people asking *what* I am. People

may want to understand who we are in a black or white binary. Ferdman and Gallegos (2001) have had similar experiences:

> We frequently encounter questions about our racial identity, countries of origin, or native language, as well as requests to provide simple 'rules' for dealing with Latinos in general... We have found this challenging, because our experience of Latinos as a group is of a multifaceted, dynamic, complex, and very heterogeneous people for whom simple answers are never sufficient. (p. 33)

As minorities we see the world differently. Our cultures and backgrounds are unique, and our sense of identity reflects this dynamism.

Based on Chavez and Guido-DiBrito's (1999) work, students of different cultures view the world through a different lens, one that only we can understand because of our ethnic background. Frequently, since we are minorities, we find ourselves outside social norms: "For [White Americans], ethnicity is usually invisible and unconscious because societal norms have been constructed around their racial, ethnic, and cultural frameworks, values, and priorities and then referred to as 'standard American culture'" (p. 39). The "standard American culture" the authors refer to is prevalent in our education system; it is dominant. Further, Chavez and Guido-DiBrito (1999) explain that "Persons from other groups… have experienced learning that is grounded outside their own cultural norms… may continue to struggle even after many years of white-normed education" (p. 45). College culture is no exception. According to Minikel-Lacocque (2015), we are leaving students of color behind because colleges work like assembly-line organizations that

mass produce curricula, instructional, and hiring practices for a specific type of student: White, predominantly middle-class Americans. Further, student educational success depends on how they see themselves fitting-in (Musoba, Collazo, & Placide, 2013). If students don't feel as though they belong because of the dominance of the majoritarian culture in our education system, they are unlikely to persist, an important matter concerning equity.

On Hegemony

There is a connection between the culture of power and practices of hegemony. Getting back to McLaren's (1997) work, hegemony refers to domination "not by sheer exercise of force but primarily through consensual social practices, social forms, and social structures produced in specific sites such as the church, the state, the school, the mass media, the political system and the family" (p. 202). Hegemony is a battle wherein the powerful rule over the oppressed. The dominant culture dictates what is acceptable. It prescribes how the subordinate groups should live and think. Thus, the subordinate groups are underprivileged, by definition. Moreover, ideologies, which are often based on the dominating culture's sense of meaning or what counts as important, can also serve to oppress those in the minority. "Culturally illiterate" people who do not possess cultural wealth or capital and do not adhere to the culture of dominance "fail" in our society and our education system: "These culturally subordinated and economically marginalized ethnic communities have struggled to forge their own positive American identity against presumptions of their racial inferiority" (Adams, 2001, p. 212). Without recognizing that

there is a dominant culture that dictates what is right and just, we would be ignoring a major factor when it comes to Latina/o first-generation college student success.

There are cultural implications surrounding the strife experienced by Latina/o first-generation college students in higher education since the standard college culture is that of White, mainstream America because of the power structures at play: "Because normative responses are invariably defined by those with social authority or by those most accepted by community, difference may be construed as failure, resistance, or deliberate, even vindictive, efforts at subversion" (Pyne & Means, 2013, p. 7). Without majority membership, challenges are guaranteed. Dominant negative views or stereotypes can affect identity development. If one is different, one is likely to be an outcast, a social aberration; accepting one's self is more problematic. Being an underrepresented student can make the journey towards success in college more arduous.

Structures of power are evident in educational research as well. For example, in their 2012 study, Pino, Martínez-Ramos, and Smith assessed whether Latina/o first-generation students had some form of an academic "ethic" based on their investigation of these students' participation in orientation programs. While the authors do not delineate what good "academic ethic or habits of mind" are, I assume they defined good academic ethic as values accepted by the majority because of traditionalistic views that have governed how we run our education system (Fowler, 2013). Majoritarian standards, or unspoken rules we are expected to live by in order to be successful in our White-dominant society, can be associated with the hegemonic majority.

All in all, being an underrepresented student in schools that are dominated by majority values is challenging. If culture is ignored and tradition dictates how schools operate, educational institutions can have an adverse effect on the development and identity of students. Valenzuela (2013) concurs: "Schools subtract resources from youth in… major ways. [For example, there is] a process of 'de-Mexicanization', or subtracting students' culture and language, which is consequential to their achievement and orientations toward school (p. 289)". In other words, schools help propagate existing structures of power in society (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 2014). Educational institutions can have an adverse effect on the development, identity, and overall growth of students.

On College Culture

Our education system, while intended to enrich the lives of students, can actually detract from who they are: "Schooling involves either adding on a second culture and language or subtracting one's original culture and language" (Valenzuela, 2013, p. 293). Because of tradition and convenience, schools continue to mostly cater to those who neatly fit into majority standards. As underrepresented students, Latina/o first-generation college students may experience a disconnect between their ethnic identities and school culture. As a Latina first-generation college student, college seemed foreign or alien to me. There were few people who looked like me on campus, people in positions of power that reflected my heritage, and minority faculty. I felt as though I had to blend into the background and remain silent to avoid standing out more than I already did. Stephens,

Townsend, Markus, and Phillips (2012) concur that most first-generation college students face multifarious hardships when it comes to acclimating to college culture:

> [First-generation college students'] adversity may… stem from another, largely unexamined source—a cultural mismatch between the largely middle-class, independent norms institutionalized in American universities and the relatively interdependent norms in working-class contexts that first-generation students are often socialized with before college. (p. 1390)

This cultural discord may affect how students adapt to their college environment and whether they persist in their journey towards a degree. As a Latina/o first-generation college student, one may need to trade-in one's sense of identity and culture to acclimate to dominant college culture (Keels, 2013; Minikel-Lacocque, 2015; Núñez et al., 2013; Pyne & Means, 2013; Pino et al., 2012; Taylor, et al., 2012). Without exposure to college life, Latina/o first-generation college students face difficulties because they may feel as though they do not fit in. Students need to feel connected to their schools so that they know they are accepted and part of the community. If Latina/o first-generation college students believe they are imposters intruding in college culture, these students may feel like the excluded, assimilated, college-going "other."

Our education system plays a large role in shaping people into who they become (Brown et al., 1989; Gummadam et al., 2016; Harris & Kiyama, 2015; Musoba et al., 2013; Nora, 2004; Pittman & Richmond, 2008; Pyne & Means, 2013; Santos et al.,

2007). In other words, schools and their cultures can influence how students view their

sense of identity:

> Although students are shown the tools of many academic cultures in the course of
>
> a school career, the pervasive cultures that they observe, in which they participate,
>
> and which some enter quite effectively are the cultures of school life itself.
>
> (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989, p. 34)

As the researchers illustrate, school culture has a substantial effect on students' academic

performance. Considering how and why school culture affects students is important when

it comes to leveling the playing field for all students to succeed. Research on school

membership and belonging needs to continue expanding to better understand why

Latina/o first-generation college students do not persist: "A construct rarely studied in

college students is a sense of school belonging, which is also referred to as connectedness

to one's school or perceived school membership" (Pittman & Richmond, 2008, p. 344).

More research is needed to continue peeling back the layers of Latina/o first-generation

college student persistence. An in-depth analysis of how students self-report about the

hardships and successes at their institution has helped shape their identities is warranted.

 Exploring the concept of school membership in Latina/o first-generation college

students can help shed light on why they do not persist. Overall, school membership is a

"sense of belonging [that] is more than specific relationships with individuals in the

school; it assesses the broader sense of feeling connected to the larger school

community" (Gummadam, Pittman, & Ioffe, 2016, p. 290). Pittman and Richmond

(2008) conducted a study to examine the relationship between a sense of university

belonging, quality of friendships, and psychological adjustment. Through questionnaire

data, the researchers deduced that students who had a positive sense of school belonging

because of a welcoming campus culture were more likely to express positive self-

perception. The authors explain that "… a sense of university belonging, like the sense of

school belonging at younger ages, is linked to students' positive self-perceptions of social

acceptance and scholastic competence" (Pittman & Richmond, 2008, p. 354). Based on

these findings, Pittman and Richmond recommend "intervention programs aimed at

enhancing students' sense of school [to] increase adjustment and ultimately success in

postsecondary education," an indicator that performance is tied to a student's sense of

identity in relation to his or her school and its culture (Pittman & Richmond, 2008, p.

358).

As ethnic minorities, the importance of school membership for Latina/os is highly

influential. Using self-reports from 311 undergraduates from ethnic minority

backgrounds, Gummadam, Pittman, and Ioffe (2016) studied the psychological

adjustment of minority college students and found it was linked to a sense of school

culture and membership. They found that the interaction between ethnic identity and

school belonging was significantly associated with self-worth. To put it another way, if

students felt edified because of the perceived value their school placed on them, or a

positive campus climate, they were better psychologically adjusted to the demands of

college. Adversely, "… not feeling connected [was] linked to worse psychological

adjustment" (p. 300). The study's results emphasized that minority students must feel part

of a larger community, belonging to a welcoming college culture; it suggests that colleges

should consider ways to incorporate or celebrate students' backgrounds. If the college

invests in all of its students, students will invest in it: "… Student perceptions of a

personal and social fit with a college are more likely to lead to a commitment to an

institution" (Nora, 2004, p. 199). Latina/o first-generation college students need to feel

that they are respected, valued, and welcomed since "Students want to attend a college

where they will be accepted for who they are and what they believe [to] experience fit on

both a personal and social level" (Nora, 2004, p. 199). Without a positive campus culture,

there is little positivity and chance of success. Gummadam, Pittman, and Ioffe summarize

their findings by highlighting that "More research is needed considering the interplay

between school belonging and other ways in which college students may feel a sense of

belonging" (Gummadam, Pittman, & Ioffe, 2016, p. 302). Learning about persisting

Latina/o first-generation student experiences would shed light on what is working and

what needs improvement when it comes to establishing a positive campus climate and

hospitable college culture.

As explained previously, family is highly important in Latina/o culture (Núñez et

al., 2013). As such, it would follow that having students feel part of the community in

college is crucial. Thus, a positive and welcoming college culture plays a vital role in

student persistence: "Visualizing the university community as a family provided a frame

of reference where [Latina/o students] knew how to belong and was congruent with their

cultural values" (Musoba, Collazo, & Placide, 2013, p. 362). School belonging and membership is not only a matter of retention, but equity. Musoba, Collazo, and Placide's 2013 study investigated the experiences of first-year minority students and their sense of school membership, finding that Latina/o first-generation college students "did not want 'hand-holding' or express a need for a deep relationship with administrators, but they wanted subtle affirmation that they belonged and someone to answer questions along the way" (Musoba, Collazo, & Placide, 2013, p. 366). Additionally, when colleges consider students' heritage as well as their academic needs, enrollment is positively impacted: "College programs that focus on establishing positive personal and social connections, acceptance, belonging, fit, encouragement, and comfort will facilitate student satisfaction and reenrollment" (Nora, 2004, p. 203). Hence, college culture is a major element to consider when it comes to student acclimation, inclusion, and academic, as well as social, well-being.

Student postsecondary retention has been researched thoroughly in the past (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). One of the most prominent theories regarding student departure is Tinto's (1993) work on student persistence in college. Tinto's model argued that each and every student enters college with predetermined traits that influence persistence and goals. Given these characteristics, students decide if they are satisfied with their institutions to continue as a college student. According to Tinto's model, a college student participates in three stages of passage: separation, transition, and incorporation (Tinto, 1993). Separation entails disassociating from one's community

prior to college; transition is the next period, which is when students learn new college behaviors and norms, letting go of old customs; and, incorporation refers to belonging to a variety of college communities (Tinto, 1993). Tinto argues that "Student departure may… serve as a barometer of the social and intellectual health of institutional life as much of the experience of students in the institution" (p. 5). The lack of persistence, then, is a reflection of a higher education institution's inability to serve its students and a weak infrastructure. Students' intellectual and social growth is stunted if an institution is ill-suited to provide an environment where student development is a priority. Students commit to an institution if the institution invests in them. But do institutions invest in all its students equitably?

A student's experience in their first year in college is crucial to their decisions to depart from an institution or persist: "… the largest proportion of institutional leaving occurs in that first year and prior to the beginning of the second year" (Tinto, 1993, p. 14). One of Tinto's main arguments is that college culture plays a major role in students' decisions to persist. Tinto argues that an "analysis of rates of institutional departure must… refer to institutional climate and the patterns of interaction among students, faculty, and staff that mark the life of the institution" (p. 16). In other words, there are many factors playing a role in student persistence, but campus climate is arguably one of the most important factors ins student persistence.

While Tinto's theories are widely known and studied many argue it does not account for students of color's experiences with campus racial climate: "Latinas/os travel

to postsecondary institutions outside their immediate communities and feeder colleges,

they rarely enjoy the same guarantee of ecological fit as do their White classmates"

(Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009, pp. 673-674). Because Latina/os are constantly

navigating between multiple worlds, that of home and the new environment of college,

they may have completely different needs and a different experience. Yosso, Smith, Ceja,

& Solórzano (2009) further explain the flaws in Tinto's model when it comes to Latinos:

> Tinto's (1993) separation stage marks students' physical, emotional, and social
>
> break from their home community, initiating their university transition. His model
>
> assumes that Students of Color would be readily welcomed and equitably
>
> rewarded for assimilating into mainstream college life. The reality for most
>
> Students of Color… [Particularly for] the Latinas/ os in our study, severing ties
>
> with the people and places representing safety, comfort, and belonging would
>
> only exacerbate their sense of isolation and rejection. (p 675)

Without considering the principles and values of students of color, as well as their past

experiences and what is necessary for their success, Tinto's model fails. For many

students of color, the college is not the center of their universe. Students of color "have

been fostering communities of resistance that deliberately bridge their worlds of home

and school" (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009, p. 679). So, there is no one, neat

and tidy model that can capture the high stakes and the messiness of being a minority on

a campus replete with majoritarian views and mostly White students.

Students of color and White students do not undergo the same experiences as beginning college students. Yosso (2006) explains that the stages of separation, transition and incorporation may work for White students, but not for students of color since the White students have a head start: the college climate is best suited for their needs. The stakes change if there is deviation from the White standard. Students of color, under these circumstances, have to adopt White norms and values to fit it; they must become White, middle-class Americans to succeed. Yosso (2006) proposes that "A negative campus racial climate thus injures Students of Color, who may eventually change majors, extend their time to degree, leave school, earn a low grade point average, and/or end up with a diminished self-concept" (p. 102). Thus, Tinto's model, while insightful in many ways, is not generalizable, especially for students of color. College culture must nurture student identities so that they feel edified and succeed. All students need to feel that they belong in their schools.

Methodology

The point of all research is to unearth discoveries that will best benefit the progression of our society, relationships with others, and ensure a productive future for all. According to Phillips (1990), research paradigms "serve as lenses, not blinders" (p. 41). Paradigms are guiding principles that should adjust a researcher's focus, not obscure it. Different paradigms in research provide us with different ways to see the world, construct knowledge on those observations, and make judgments on those constructions.

Paradigms are not mutually exclusive; they are also not flawless methods of inquiry. Guba and Lincoln (2005) assert that no method of inquiry is universally accurate. In other words, all methods have their strengths as well as limitations. Thus, researchers are "… in the business of providing reasonable justifications for their assertions, but nothing they do can make these assertions absolutely safe from criticism or potential overthrow" (p. 42). No system of inquiry is perfect. Further, Phillips (1990) states that researchers must believe that "… it is never sufficient to rule out the possibility that a much better theory might be devised to account for the phenomena that our presently accepted theory also explains" (p. 35). As researchers, we should keep an open mind about the theory or lese that would "best" serve our purpose or problem. More than one theory can work to explore a given phenomenon, and theories can be created that better address the phenomenon being studied. Researchers should always search for flaws, or room for improvement and additional solutions, in their work to generate more accurate theories that can contribute to the field.

The relationships between research paradigms are somewhat symbiotic; their lines blur; their histories intertwine. Guba and Lincoln (2005) explain that "to argue that it is paradigms that are in contention is probably less useful than to probe where and how paradigms exhibit confluence" (p. 192). So, there is value in considering the crossovers between schools of thought in research instead of criticizing the existing paradigms, since they do connect to one another. Morgan (2007) agrees that no paradigm is right or wrong, but the issue is implementing the paradigm that is "most appropriate for any given

purpose" (p. 54). As researchers, we must decide which paradigms best fit our research

subject, means, and goals.

To explore the multidimensionality of a problem, researchers should decide which

approach or philosophy would best address the issue at hand. The constructivist's

paradigm, for example, places emphasis on the human component in research; it allows

researchers to explore others' realities through their own lenses. The constructivist school

of thought is a guide, helping others better understand and interpret what *is* or what exists

using a well-designed study as the impetus. And, because of the relativist nature of

constructivism (Guba & Lincoln, 2005), the "truth" or findings in research are not fixed,

allowing for room to rediscover what we thought we already knew. Hence, paradigms

help researchers assess and reassess. Paradigms are the magnifying glass that helps the

researcher closely examine phenomena through a specific point of view.

Paradigms help researchers find a lens to explore phenomena, but participants are

the ones that really guide or contribute, the backbone for the research. Researchers co-

create, giving participants power by validating their perspectives and making them an

integral part in meaning-making. Being a qualitative researcher, my methodologies' goal

was to better understand the values and culture of my participants. Glesne (2016)

emphasizes that qualitative research is not just about studying people, their lives, and

perspectives, but also having the weighty responsibility of relaying others' truths. To

explore my participants' lived experiences, I conducted a qualitative study on how

Latina/o students persist in higher education and how the first-generation college experience affects them.

My study's goal was to better understand the experiences of Latina/o first-generation college students, a group that has, historically, had trouble with four-year degree attainment (Keels, 2013; Krogstad & Fry, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Pino, Martínez-Ramos, & Smith, 2012: Pyne & Means, 2013; Ross et al., 2012; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2012; Storlie et al., 2014). Further, the purpose of this study was to go beyond the conversation of Latina/o first-generation college student attrition by examining how they navigate postsecondary institutions and explore the implications associated with how higher education affects them. To accomplish this, qualitative means best served the purpose. According to Glesne (2016), "qualitative studies are useful for gaining a greater understanding of people's experiences, perceptions, and attitudes [and] for discovering and describing the contexts and processes involved in social structures" (p. 43), attributes that depict the purposes of my study. Qualitative research allowed me to explore how Latina/o first-generation students think college has shaped who they are and describe their experiences of persistence and struggle.

The methods I used to conduct my study were tailored to my focus: understanding the lived experiences of others. Methodologies are designed to help us recognize the diversity and uniqueness of each participant's truth. Glesne (2016) notes that "it may be best to think of the various methodologies as orientations rather than distinct, separate categories in that each approach primarily seeks to understand and describe social

phenomena from the perspectives of the participants" (p. 19). These orientations are what guide one's research on participant experiences. The point of qualitative research is to allow participants' voices to stand out, for participants to tell their counterstories (Beachum, 2013; Pyne & Means, 2013; Yosso, 2005; Yosso, 2006, Yosso, T. J., Smith, W. A., Ceja, M., & Solórzano, D. G. (2009). The researcher is not the expert on the subject of study, the participant is: "Casting yourself as learner correspondingly casts the research participant as teacher" (Glesne, 2016, p. 134). As Glesne emphasizes, as researchers, we could not function without the sacrifices participants to be part of our studies.

Specifically, my study employed three major strategies: in-depth interviewing, Draw-A-College-Student, and a freewriting prompt. The in-depth interviewing was the primary source of information in my research to closely analyze the lived experiences of my 8 participants. For each of my 3, thirty-minute interviews for each Latina/o first-generation college student, my goal was to allow the data to emerge from my participants in the study. I used the in-depth interviewing as the major vehicle to explore patterns or themes in persisting Latina/o first-generation college students' postsecondary experiences. The multiple types of qualitative data forms, such as field notes/research memos, interview audio recordings, Draw-A-College-Student, and a free-writing exercise, all served to investigate how college affects Latina/o first-generation college students and why they persist.

Cameron (2014) states that "Whatever else we do with words, when we speak we are always telling our listeners something about ourselves" (p. 170). Much about how we how we view ourselves, each other, and our places in society is depicted in the way we communicate. This is the main reason for why I chose to conduct open-ended, in-depth, exploratory interviewing as a major method in my research. In-depth interviewing is a major research tool designed to place the participant at the center of the research. Seidman (2013) defines the purpose of in-depth interviewing as "not to test hypotheses, and not to 'evaluate' as the term is normally used… At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9). When working with participants in any form of interview, researchers must listen carefully and with intent; it guarantees that we are using our participants' time effectively. By taking part in research, participants are giving the researcher a privilege to often very sensitive information.

To explore Cameron's ideas on the intricacies of communication further, she states that all moves in "talk" have meaning. The analysis of communication is, in essence, an analysis of social norms and values since "social changes… are bound to manifest themselves in all areas of social life, including the way people communicate," making our "talk" symbolic (p. 129). In my opinion, there is no better way to learn about a person's story than through their own words. Moreover, through discourse, "When people talk about aspects of identity, they are not just operating at the 'meta' level; they may be reflecting on identity, but they are also *doing* [emphasis in original] identity at the

same time" (Cameron, 2014, p. 172). What this means is that when we speak our truth, we are constructing our own patchwork of reality. Identity, one of the major thematic concepts in my study, is "done" or built through conversation, a construct Erikson (1969) would agree with given that his theories on identity revolved around our communication with others in our environment. Talk or discourse is an important part of our everyday lives and, as a result, I chose it as a major tool to explore the lived experiences of Latina/o first-generation college students.

To me, interviewing was the most adequate vehicle for the analysis and exploration of Latina/o first-generation Latina/o students' lived experiences. Seidman (2013) explains the appeal of the interview in saying, "I interview because I am interested in other people's stories. Most simply put, stories are a way of knowing" (p. 7). In other words, interviewing is a way to study perspective; it is building meaning; it is a form of inquiry. Researchers interview because it is a more personal approach to investigate the experiences of others, using their own words. Seidman goes on to explain that "Telling stories is… a process of selecting constitutive details of experience, reflecting on them, giving them order, and thereby making sense of them," a vehicle for understanding the experiences of others (p.7). Interviews allow participant and researcher to dissect memories, experiences, and the knowledge through discourse. Particularly, the social science and education research are good candidates for interview research: "Individuals' consciousness gives access to the most complicated social and educational issues, because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experiences

of people" (p. 7). One's educational career, as Seidman explains, or matters concerning education are deeply personal and, as a result, are best explained by the people who experience them.

Interviewing is using language to conduct inquiry. People have a need to express themselves and share their experiences, and interviews allow them to do just that. Seidman (2013) stresses that "At the very heart of what it means to be human is the ability of people to symbolize their experiences through language… Recounting narratives of experience has been the major way throughout recorded history that humans have made sense of their experience" (p. 8). Participants have the opportunity to process their experience through interviewing and are letting the researcher into their lives at the same time. Interviewing, in my opinion, was the best method to achieve my goal: to better understand the educational stories or lived experiences of Latina/o first-generation college students. Seidman goes on to explicate the benefits of in-depth interviewing:

> It is a powerful way to gain insight into educational and other important social issues through understanding the experiences of the individuals whose lives reflect those issues… Interviewing is most consistent with people's ability to make meaning through language. It affirms the importance of the individual without denigrating the possibility of community and collaboration… It is deeply satisfying to researchers who are interested in others' stories. (p. 13)

In-depth interviewing is about showcasing the voices and experiences of "experts" or participants that are highly knowledgeable on the subject because they have lived it.

Participants can reconstruct their story or experiences in education through in-depth interviewing. It is also about showing the participant that their narratives are worth exploring: "[An in-depth interview] demands that our actions as interviewers indicate that others' stories are important" (p. 9). I deeply valued not only my participants' time, but their willingness to share their unique, backgrounds and their very personal experiences in education as well.

Once I interviewed my participants, I transcribed the interviews and organized the material using In Vivo and Pattern Coding (Saldaña, 2013). Coding is a process of discovery and exploration. Glesne (2016) explains that "We categorize to make sense of things, to help us see patterns in social interactions" (p. 215). Thinking of data as threads and themes as the tapestry they compose effectively depicts the process. Searching for patterns in data is what leads to discovery. When coding, researchers are constructing, weaving, and illustrating. For this study, In Vivo and Pattern Coding were the most appropriate because my goal was to identify themes in my interviews with the participants. In Vivo coding allows researchers to use participant phrases and wording to organize information. According to Saldaña (2013), "In Vivo Coding is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly for… studies that prioritize and honor the participant's voice" (p. 106). This fit my purpose since one of my study's main goals was to honor the lived experiences or voices of my participants. In Vivo coding, as Saldaña points out, helps qualitative researchers preserve original meaning.

The point of coding data in two different ways or cycles is to discover prominent subjects or issues raised by my participants. Saldaña (2013) further illustrates that "coding is… primarily an interpretive act" (p. 5). In other words, coding is exploratory; it is not designed to yield factual deductions, which was not the point of my study. Via In Vivo coding, the interviewee's points are processed using his or her own wording. Pattern coding, as a second cycle coding strategy, then allowed me to sort and manage the In Vivo coding by finding major patters in the data. Saldaña explains that

> First cycle coding is a way to initially summarize segments of data. Pattern Coding as a second cycle method, is a way of grouping those summaries into smaller number of categories, themes or concepts… Pattern Codes are explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation. (p. 236)

I aimed to validate participants' experiences by allowing their voices to guide the organization of data via In Vivo and then identified major themes using Pattern Coding to further analyze the data, which were eventually interpreted into themes. Thematic analysis, according to Glesne (2016), is searching for recurring patterns and "segregating data into categories by codes or labels" (p. 184). Questions that would shape the coding of the data, as suggested by Glesne, would be: "What is being illuminated? What themes and patterns give shape to observations and interviews?" (p. 195). To reiterate, one of my main goals was to highlight what my participants say about their experiences as Latina/o first-generation college students and their development in a postsecondary setting; it was

all about stressing the importance of their voices. I aimed to provide a vehicle for

Latina/o first-generation college students to showcase their lived experiences about how

college affirmed or disaffirmed who they are or their identities.

After the third and final, exploratory, in-depth interview, participants partook in

an activity to Draw-A-College-Student. This tool is adapted from Chambers' (1983)

Draw-A-Scientist Test. Chambers adapted this tool from Mead and Metraux's (1957)

work and used it to analyze how students conceived of the scientist. Students drew an

image of a scientist and then wrote about their artwork. Chambers' study uncovered that

students pictured the classic scientist as an elderly or middle-aged man who wore a lab

coat. Students also depicted the scientist with glasses. These findings were interesting to

Chambers because they revealed the hidden assumptions students had about what a

scholar in the sciences looked like. For the purposes of my study, I chose to use the

Draw-A-Scientist Test model to mold the Draw-A-College-Student activity. The point of

this activity was to explore what my Latina/o first-generation college students thought of

the classic college students and possibly discover any assumptions related to their idea of

the college student.

Chapter III: Methods

In the previous chapter, I analyzed a variety of research on the frameworks this study employed, such as, cultural capital, critical race theory, constructivism. I also included critiques of each major framework for perspective. I organized the information using thematic concepts that applied to my research's purpose: to go beyond the conversation of Latina/o first-generation college student attrition by examining how they navigate postsecondary institutions and explore the implications associated with how higher education affects them. Because of my topic, I explored research on identity, college culture and belonging, as well as practices of hegemony. I also briefly touched upon the methods for my study. In this section, I will delve into the rationale for the methods this study employs.

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explored, as well as critiqued, literature pertaining to the Latina/o first-generation college student experience and challenges. After analyzing varying schools of thought for how to conduct my research, I employed the data gathering and best practices discussed in the previous chapter throughout my study. Now, I will delineate the specific methods, techniques, and other approaches I used for the purpose of my study. My research questions were:

1. What is the experience of persisting Latina/o first-generation college students?

2. How do persisting Latina/o first-generation college students feel about their successes and/or hardships in higher education?

3. How do Latina/o first-generation persisting college students describe how they navigate the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987) of higher education?

Qualitative Means

In order to research a phenomenon, the researcher has to consider how his or her research methods will relay the world and realities of the participants. I chose to conduct a qualitative study because my aim was to listen, interpret, and retell the accounts, a fundamental aspect of qualitative research. As a qualitative researcher, I "[sought] to make sense of actions and narratives, and the ways in which they intersect" since my goal was to relay the experiences of others (Glesne, 2016, p. 1). The main goal of qualitative research is to examine how other people think, act, and relate to one another. Glesne (2016) describe the integral parts of qualitative research as follows:

> With the research goal of interpreting the social world from the perspectives of those who are actors in that world, it follows that the research methods include interacting with people in their social contexts and talking with them about their perceptions. (p. 9)

Additionally, Glesne asserts that "qualitative studies are useful (1) for gaining a greater understanding of people's experiences, perceptions, and attitudes, (2) for discovering and describing the contexts and processes involved in social structures, and (3) for generating theory" (p. 43). For researchers to better understand people and generate theory, they have to understand their participants' backgrounds; they have to explore their participants' stories; they have to listen.

In the end, the goal of qualitative research is to understand our world and the people in it. In so doing, researchers create theories that explain phenomena in our environment. The qualitative researcher also seeks to provide a vehicle for others to understand his or her participants; it is not just about transferability or generalizability. Glesne (2016) maintains that

> Rather than the goals of making generalizations about social behavior, the qualitative researcher seeks to provide enough detail and description that readers can enter into the work and find resonance with their own lives or develop empathy for and new understanding about the lives of others. (p. 153)

I chose to conduct a qualitative study because I believed it was the best medium to relay the lived experiences of my Latina/o first-generation college student participants. Maxwell (2013) asserts that "In a qualitative study, you are interested not only in the physical events and behavior that are taking place, but also in how the participants in our study make sense of these and how their understanding influences their behavior" (p. 30). I conducted 3 interviews with each of the 8 participants at a four-year university in the Pacific Northwest. As of the winter term in 2018, out of 31.8% student minorities at his northwestern university, 12.8% of the school's population are Latina/os and Latina/os constitute 9.9% of all degrees awarded (Office of Institutional Research and Planning, 2018).

Data Gathering

As stated previously, I implemented a multimodal approach to gather data. Participants were asked to partake in three 30-minute interviews; they were prompted to Draw-A-College-Student; and, lastly, I requested that they complete a five-minute free-write about their artwork. The purpose of this data-gathering strategy is to have many forms of data for analysis that can help shed light on the lived experiences, as well as educational past, of my Latina/o first-generation college student participants.

Demographic Information Form

I implemented a simple participant information form to collect details about general characteristics, academic standing, and background: "A simple participant information form can be of considerable use throughout the study" (Seidman, 2013, p. 52). This form, found in included in Appendix B, helped keep information organized. It will also serve as a frame of reference.

The Interviews

Interviewing is a means to an end, a method or tool. Research often relies heavily on interviewing because we can explore first-hand accounts from the participants' points of view: "The philosophic underpinning for the approach to interviewing allows researchers to craft a coherent logic for how they carry out their research" (Seidman, 2013, p. 20). Interviews provide researchers with structure. The interviewer, if interviews are used in a study, plays a large role in the effectiveness and productivity of their work: "… In in-depth interviewing we recognize, [as researchers], and affirm the role of the instrument, the human interviewer… The interviewer must nevertheless recognize that the meaning

[is] a function of the participant's interaction with the interviewer" (Seidman, 2013, p. 26). The interview depends on the technique of the interviewer and their willingness to allow the participant to speak freely about each question.

Meaning-making and language are mutually exclusive when it comes to how we interpret and perceive. Interviewing is heavily reliant on our use of language: "[A] complexity inherent in seeking the essence of the lived experience of participants is that our access to lived experience is primarily through language: the words we use to guide the participant and the words they use to respond" (p. Seidman, 2013, p. 18). Language and context also go hand in hand. Researchers must consider their use of language and context to carefully craft interview questions, and participants use these to paint a picture or relate the narratives of their experiences. Meaning-making in interviewing asks participants to consider the past in how they arrived at their present circumstances:

> The combination of exploring the past to clarify the events that led participants to where they are now, and describing the concrete details of their present experience, establishes conditions for reflecting upon what they are now doing in their lives. (Seidman, 2013, p. 22)

The interview should be an introspective and reflective experience.

For this study, I conducted 3 thirty-minute interviews for each of the 8 participants. The reasoning for the 3 interviews stems from Seidman's (2013) work. He suggests that the three-interview series: "allows both the interviewer and the participants to explore the participant's experience, place it in context, and reflect on its meaning" (p. 20). All 3

interviews were interdependent, meaning one could not go well or be productive without the other. One set the foundation for the next. This structure provided a focus, a beginning, middle, and end. Seidman states that "in-depth inquiry is best carried out in a structure that allows both the participant and the interviewer to maintain a sense of the focus of each interview in the series" (p. 23) Further, he states that each set of questions for the 3 interviews have a guiding theme. The themes for my 3 interviews were as follows:

- Interview 1: *Family Life and College Aspirations (30 minutes)*

- Interview 2: *First-Generation Student General College Experience (30 minutes)*

- Interview 3*: Identity and Culture (30 minutes)*

Additionally, the questions were crafted with Seidman's rationale for the three-interview series in mind:

> The first interview establishes the context of the participants' experience. The second allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs. And the third encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them. (Seidman, 2013, p. 21)

In other words, the first interview was about their background; the second interview was about the participants' building experiences in the context of the study; and, the third interview was like a reflection. I also employed field notes as I interviewed participants since "these working notes help interviewers concentrate on what the participants are saying [and allow] them to keep track of things the participant has mentioned" (Seidman,

2013, p. 82). Keeping all the data organized was a key focus throughout my study.

Finally, Seidman (2013) explains that there are strategies an interview can use to

maximize their time with participants. These include:

- Asking participants to tell a story,

- Asking participants to reconstruct, not to remember,

- Trying to keep participants focused by asking for concrete details,

- Avoid reinforcing participants' responses,

- Use the interview guide cautiously, and

- Tolerate silence.

All in all, being a participant in a research study is not easy, and I kept everything I asked

of my participants in mind to thank them for their valuable work in my study at its

conclusion.

The Interview Questions

As the interviewer, I was being given a privilege. The interviewee or participant

was entrusting me with his or her personal experiences. When seeking to examine the

concrete experiences, and the meaning of those experiences, there must be trust between

the interviewer and the interviewee. One of my primary goals in designing my study's

interview questions was to be sensible to student needs or being careful with the wording

of each question to consider potential sensitivity, while also seeking to illicit information

about Latina/o first-generation college students' lived experiences.

The differences between one's research and interview questions are stark: "Your research questions formulate what you want to understand; your *interview* [emphasis in original] questions are what you ask people to gain that understanding" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 101). The interview questions are what guide one's research journey on the path to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on any given topic. Glesne (2016) maintains that "Qualitative researchers play an active role in *producing* [emphasis in original] the data they record through the questions they ask, and the social interactions in which they take part" because of the exploratory nature of qualitative research (p. 44). When considering conducting interviews for research, Vogt, Gardner, and Haeffele (2012) advise that researchers consider their research goals. Vogt, Gardner, and Haeffele believe that interviews should be conducted

- When you seek 'subjective' knowledge that is most effectively obtained from the interview subjects.

- When questions call for in-depth answers not easily answered in survey formats.

- When in-depth information is more important than the ability to generalize to a larger population.

- When informants need time to think about and elaborate on their answers. (p. 47).

The goal of conducting interviews was to have a better, thorough understanding of the phenomena or participants' lived experiences being studied. I chose to interview as my main source of data because I was interested in my participants' stories and believed that one-on-one exchange would be the best medium to better understand them. Specifically, I

planned on conducting semi-structured interviews, which include "Questions that often emerge in the course of fieldwork and may add to or replace the pre-established ones" (Glesne, 2016, p. 96). For example, this style of interview allows for probing: "Your probes are requests for more: more explanation, clarification, description, and evaluation" (Glesne, 2016, p. 114). Probes can simply be waiting or silence as well as single words or phrases that ask participants to expand on their answers.

There is variety in how I approached my qualitative study; there is a difference between more and less structured approaches:

Structured approaches can help ensure the comparability of data across individuals, times, settings, and researchers, and are particularly useful in answering questions that deal with *differences* [emphasis in original] between people or settings. Less structured approaches, in contrast, allow you to focus on the particular phenomena being studied, which may differ between individuals or settings and require individually tailored methods. (Maxwell, 2013, p. 88)

Less structured approaches, then, would be more taxing on the researcher given that there would be unknown factors involved due to the lack of rigidity. While structure in research is desirable, less structured methods can allow for the possibility to discover or explore phenomena with more multidimensional means.

To reiterate, my in-depth interviewing strategy was also designed around semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow for a considerable exchange between participant and researcher; this type of exchange allows a researcher to ask

illustrative questions that will help the researcher gain a richer understanding of the

dynamics being studied. The semi-structured interview allowed for flexibility yet provide

some organization or guidance: "[The semi-structured interview] is sufficiently structured

to address specific topics related to the phenomenon of study, while leaving space for

participants to offer new meaning to the study focus" (Galletta & Cross, 2013, p. 24). The

semi-structured interview gave me the ability to have a concrete plan in place when I met

with my participants, but also allowed for my participants to lead the interview in

unexpected directions of value. If there was deviation due to the open-endedness of my

questions, there were opportunities to refocus the interview with more specific,

theoretically driven questions. I chose to employ semi-structured interviews because of

their versatility and "the arrangement of questions may be structured to yield

considerable and often multi-dimensional streams of data" (Galletta & Cross, 2013, p.

24). There was a lot of value in generating multimodal data. The hybridity of the semi-

structured interview method lies in its ability to allow the researcher to ask open-ended

questions as well as questions constructed with a theoretical framework in mind.

Because my interest was the lived experiences or stories of Latina/o first-

generation college students, there were opportunities for innovative approaches in how I

conducted my interviews, such as the implementation of open-ended questions in a semi-

structured interview, a good thing according to Maxwell (2013):

> The development of good interview questions… requires creativity and insight,
>
> rather than a mechanical conversion of the research questions into an interview

guide… and depends fundamentally on your understanding of the context of the

research… and how the interview questions… will work in practice. (p. 101)

Maxwell is conveying that genuineness in formatting or creating interview questions

matters; this, according to Maxwell, "creates a more symmetrical and collaborative

relationship in which participants are able to bring their knowledge to bear on the

questions in ways that you might never have anticipated" (p. 101). Further, balance is one

of the characteristics of a well-designed study, using Maxwell's argument.

Prior to each interview, I read an interview introduction script, found in Appendix

C, to remind participants of vital information and the study's aims. Specifically, my

interview questions were "life history inquiries [which] focus more on the life

experiences of one or several individuals" (Glesne, 2016, p. 97). They focused on (a) the

lived experiences of Latina/o college students in their school lives; (b) opportunities and

barriers undergone while in college; (c) changes in their sense of self as individuals

belonging to a given culture; (d) the perceived effect of college culture on their

developing identities. The study's interview questions were of an ontological nature,

which "address the nature of participants' realities," and aimed to examine the lived

experiences of participants as well (Saldaña, 2016, p. 70). They were "questions [that] are

anchored in the cultural reality of respondents and drawn from their lives" (Glesne, 2016,

p. 98). The questions were molded with the purpose of helping students convey how

college influenced how they viewed themselves and their success.

The interview questions, included in Appendix D, were written with identity theory in mind. Most of the questions were not only about the participants' feelings about being the first in their families to go to college, the questions were also about how the saw themselves relating to others, a major facet of the self (Orbe, 2004; Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). Additionally, the questions took Erikson's (1969) theory of identity formation into account by considering how the Latina/o first-generation college students' culture and environment influenced and helped shape their sense of identity. Being the first in one's family to leave home for college can be considered a major crossroads in the lives of my participants, a concept Erikson coined "crisis," or "a necessary turning point a crucial moment when development must move one way or another, marshaling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation" (p. 16). Schools help shape identity (Erikson, 1969; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, and Phillips, 2012; Musoba, Collazo, & Placide, 2013; Nora, 2004; Pino, Martínez-Ramos, & Smith, 2012; Valenzuela, 20113); therefore, identity development can be studied in the context of school.

Draw-A-College-Student

I based my Draw-A-College-Student activity on Chambers' (1983) Draw-A-Scientist-Test, using primarily on art and based on research Mead and Metraux (1957) conducted with students' writing about scientists. Chambers was interested in how the students perceived the classic image of a scientist, so he asked them to draw an image of a scientist. Later, students wrote an essay describing their art work. The study revealed

that high school students saw a scientist as middle-aged or elderly man wearing glasses in a white lab coat, which meant there were stereotypes associated with students' perception of who a scientist was and what they looked like. Over the years, varying researchers have adopted a similar model for exploring perceptions through art, such as Cox and Maynard's (2004) Draw-A-Man-Test.

For the purposes of my study, I asked Latina/o first-generation college students to depict, through art, a college student. With this exercise I aimed to explore Latina/o first-generation college students' perceptions of what a college student is or what it means to be one. After students are given enough time to draw their college student, they were prompted to free-write about their creation for 5 minutes, explaining the specific traits that were given to the college student in the drawing.

The Free-Write

The inspiration for using free-writing prompt stemmed from a research study by Hass and Phinney (2003). In their study, Haas & Phinney (2003) used a narrative approach to investigate ethnic minority students' process of coping throughout their first year in college. Haas & Phinney (2003) recruited 30 participants, all freshmen, from a predominantly ethnic minority, commuter university who were the first in their families to attend. The researchers wanted to know which factors played a role in successful coping mechanisms amongst individuals who thrived despite experiencing stress: "The goal of the… study was to gain understanding of the coping process in a particular context through the use of personal narratives in combination with background survey

data" (p. 708). The researchers were also interested in discovering how self-efficacy affected students' stress levels and found that students with the greater sense of agency performed better academically than their counterparts.

Haas & Phinney's (2003) study found that "students would cope more successfully in situations in which they feel that they have adequate support" (p. 710). The researchers' participants wrote in journals once a week, which served to capture their thought process: "We reviewed the stressful situations that minority first-generation college students face, the strategies they use in coping, the supports available to them, and the personal characteristics that influence the coping process" (p. 708). This study embraced the constructivist idea of analyzing the complexity of an issue by using open-ended means to attain information and construct meaning, something I planned to emulate in my research. After the three in-depth, semi-structured interviews with my participants, I provided the participants with the opportunity to Draw-A-College-Student. After the art activity, I asked participants to write what came to mind for 5 minutes based on their artwork and the topic, the college student. There was a sentence stem provided at the top of the page for participants who got stuck or didn't know where to begin. It was, "When I think of a college student, I picture…" After, I transcribed the interviews, analyzed the Draw-A-College-Student art, and also transcribed the free-writes to code and analyze recurring themes in participants' counterstories.

Participant Recruitment

Deciding on whom to interview and how to recruit is crucial to any qualitative study; this completely influences the perspective and data collection as well as the ultimate analysis. When considering conducting a qualitative study, a researcher must understand that this method "does not involve random sampling of participants in the statistical sense. The design is most faithful to the research question when you have formulated criteria for the selection of participants" (Galletta & Cross, 2014, p. 33). Clearly, my criteria for participant selection was in line with my research goals and questions.

To have more confidence that the information I uncover could be representative of the larger Latino community of first-generation college students, I recruited juniors and seniors at the undergraduate level as well as graduate students. The point of recruiting students that had persisted for at least two years was so that they had plenty of experience to draw from when describing their lived experiences in postsecondary education. My goal was to recruit students from the Chicano/Latino studies department and the Latino cultural center at a four-year university in the Pacific Northwest. The point or purpose was to achieve "representativeness or typicality of the settings, individuals, or activities selected" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 98). These students were able to describe the extent or influence of college culture on their ever-changing identities and persistence.

I recruited my participants from a four-year, predominantly White university in the pacific Northwest. My strategy to recruit participants was two-fold: (1) I visited the university's Latino cultural center to speak with its leaders about sending information

about the study to potential participants electronically, and (2) I requested that a professor teaching Chicano/Latino studies classes allow me to conduct a brief presentation in her classes about my research goals and questions to solicit participants. For both the electronic communications and the brief presentations, I provided potential participants with sample consent forms in case they wanted more detailed information about the research. Thus, I provided a detailed description of my study for each of the sources of potential participants and explained my purpose and goals for each of these recruitment streams.

Consent

There is always risk for participants actively engaging in research. It may not always be a great risk, but a risk nevertheless. Employing in-depth interviewing in my study was no exception:

> In-depth interviewing does not pose the life and death risk of biomedical research, but it is not risk-free. Interviewers [meeting] with participants three times as they ask them to reconstruct their life histories, provide details of their experiences in particular areas of inquiry, and then reflect on the meaning of those experiences… [create] a measure of intimacy… that my lead participants to share aspects of their lives that may cause discomfort and even some degree of emotional distress during the interview process. (Seidman, 2013, p. 63)

Because of these risks, I made sure that my consent form did not only describe the study

extensively but provided detailed and clear information about potential risks. Using the

consent form, found in Appendix A, I wanted my participants to be able to gauge whether

they would like to partake in the research given the description and detail in the

document. Participants were continuously reminded that no proper names were used to

protect their identities as well. Participants were also told that all information from the

study will be kept in locked file cabinets, password-protected computers, and eventually

destroyed.

Confidentiality

In the world of research, researchers and participants have a reciprocal

relationship. One cannot exist without the other, which means each party is just as

important to the work. However, the researcher has a plethora of responsibilities when it

comes to ensuring the participant's anonymity, comfort, and confidence throughout the

study. As the researcher, I understood that I was asking a lot of my participants in

requesting that they be present for three interviews. However, my organization of the

interviews and planning guaranteed that their time was maximized.

The researcher should not expect participants to volunteer their time without

establishing trust. Particularly, an interview "usually takes more of [participants'] time,

demands more attention, asks for more in-depth reflection, may address difficult topics,

and requires them to exert more effort to construct their answers" (Vogt, Gardner, &

Haeffele, 2012, p. 253). As I conducted my interviews, my goal was to keep the participants' interests in mind.

As Glesne (2016) depicts, the researcher must be a reassuring, anticipatory learner that must be grateful for the participants' contributions to the study: "Casting yourself as learner correspondingly casts the research participant as teacher" (p. 134). Building a rapport based on open dialogue shows participants that, as researchers, we are dedicated to accurately depicting their stories, the result of a reflexive lens aimed at understanding the many layers of a participant's life. Participants were also assured that their stories and identities would remain protected and anonymous.

Being qualitative researchers, our methodologies' goals are to better understand the worldviews of our participants. Our methodologies are designed to help us recognize the diversity and uniqueness of each participant's reality. The researcher is not the expert on the subject of study, the participant is. Glesne (2016) also notes that "it may be best to think of the various methodologies as orientations rather than distinct, separate categories in that each approach primarily seeks to understand and describe social phenomena from the perspectives of the participants" (p. 19). As Glesne explains, each participant has his or her own world rich with wisdom from their lived experiences. Our research is but a mere glimpse into what is true for him or her. Glesne is emphatic about our responsibility to be grateful for the opportunity to be let into a participant's world because not only is this invasive and time-consuming, but because it is an act of trust.

Glesne discusses the ethical considerations of a researcher who realizes that, historically, research has usually profited the researcher. When it comes to participant consent, Glesne urges researchers to keep in mind that "With a heritage of loss through signing names, many who have been oppressed, dominated, or colonized are understandably mistrustful of forms, especially those requiring signatures" (p. 160). Establishing a partnership with participants is not only beneficial to the study but recognizes that social justice should always be at the forefront of every research effort. For this study, the Institutional Review Boards', along with my own committees', code of ethics ensured that the benefits of the research outweighed any potential risks and that the researcher questioned who the research benefited and how the research was useful to participants, a major goal of the communitarian perspective, which "calls for an ethics rooted in human relations, care, and sociohistorical context" (p. 180).

Creating equitable "rules" for research conduct can be messy and get blurry. The best we can do is be honest with our research selves in making sure it's all about the participants. As researchers, our responsibility lies in relaying their story with accuracy and respect; this is why acquiring consent is crucial to conducting interviews: "Interviewing takes many forms and has many different research purposes, and the nature of informed consent will vary accordingly… Providing potential interviewees with a full description of what you seek is relatively easy" and a necessity when working with participants (Vogt, Gardner, & Haeffele, 2012, p. 254). Often, participants are simply viewed as study subjects, which dehumanizes them: "The research participant continues

to be viewed as an object to be studied rather than as a person with whom to engage in conversation, and who both teaches and learns in the process" (Glesne, 2016, p. 136). Participants should not have research done *to* or *on* them, but research conducted with them in mind.

A signed consent form not only related that the researcher understood what as being asked of participants in terms of potential benefits and risks, but that the researcher understood that the participant's will to partake in the research is a gift. Keeping confidentiality in mind is another complex and necessary process in research. To make sure that human subjects were treated fairly, professionally, and appropriately, "In the 1970s, the federal government mandated the establishment of Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) at all colleges and universities that accepted federal funding for research involving human subjects" (Glesne, 2016, p. 171). Some of the major guidelines the IRBs demand in reviewing proposals for researchers to keep respect and just treatment of subjects in mind are delineated by Glesne:

1. Research subjects must have sufficient information to make informed decisions about participating in a study.

2. Research subjects must be able to withdraw from a study, without penalty, at any point.

3. All unnecessary risks to a research subject must be eliminated.

4. Benefits to the subject or society… must outweigh all potential risks. (p. 172)

I did my best as a responsible researcher to honor and appreciate the time and effort my participants contributed to my study and the trust they placed in me.

Timeline

Below, I have outlined my timeline for completing my research, which would be complete in April 2018:

Research/Data Collection	May - August, 2017
Data Analysis	August-November, 2017
Chapter Four	November-December, 2017
Chapter Five	December, 2017-January, 2018
Final Edits	February-March, 2018
Dissertation Defense	April, 2018

Coding

Coding is used to encapsulate language in research via emblematic means. According to Saldaña (2016), a code in qualitative inquiry is "most often a word or short phrases that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 4). In qualitative research coding is a useful tool to see the full picture; it serves to organize information for analysis. Saldaña continues by explaining that "coding [is] the 'critical link' between

data collection and their explanation of meaning" (p. 4). The construct of coding is very

useful to qualitative researchers because it helps with the interpretation and systemize of

data. The representative nature of coding helps researchers capture the content of their

data concisely.

As stated previously, coding is a useful tool for the analysis of qualitative data.

Saldaña (2016) explains that codes are used for purposes of "pattern detection,

categorization, assertion or proposition development, theory building, and other analytic

process" (p. 4). It is also important to distinguish between decoding and encoding:

decoding is when researchers aim to decipher the meaning of a passage whereas encoding

is the process of labeling data (Saldaña, 2016). For the purposes of my study, I looked for

patterns or "repetitive, regular or consistent occurrences of action/data" in order to

examine the fruits of my interviews with my participants (Saldaña, 2016, p. 5). While

subjective, Saldaña illustrates the precise nature of patterns by delineating their

characteristics as follows:

- Similarity (things happen the same way),

- Difference (they happen in predictably different ways),

- Frequency (they happen often or seldom),

- Sequence (they happen in a certain order),

- Correspondence (they happen in relation to other activities or events), and

- Causation (one appears to cause another). (p. 7)

I analyzed "what it means to be human in a social world" through the lens of education

(p. 47). Coding, an exploratory cycle of discovery, helped me discern how first-

generation college students see themselves changing, or remaining the same through

college. The organic process helped me synthesize the stories that make up the narrative

of the Latina/o experience in postsecondary education:

Raw Data	•Interview Audio Recordings •Field Notes/Research Memos •Draw-A-College-Student + Free-Write
Coding	•1st Cycle: In Vivo Coding •2nd Cycle: Pattern Coding
Theorizing	•Thematic Concepts
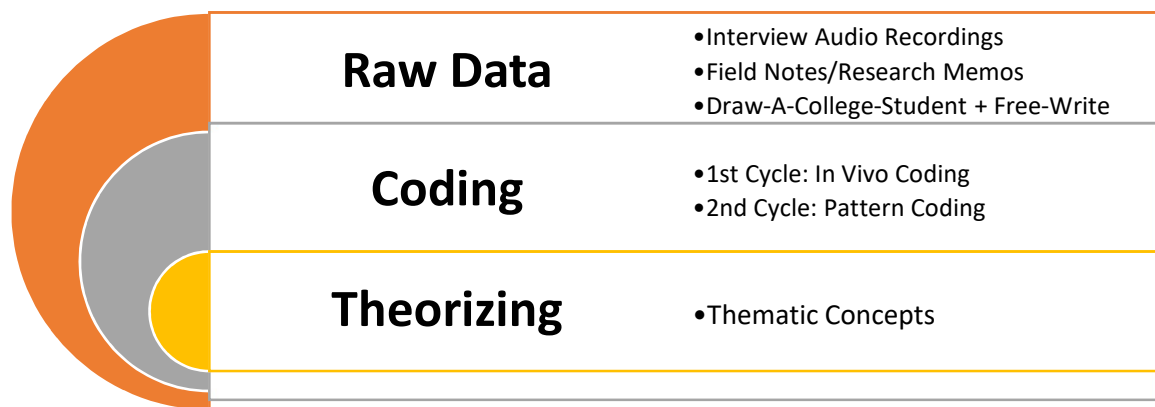
Figure 4: Data analysis process

Adapted from Saldaña, J. (2013). *The coding manual qualitative researchers* (2nd ed.).

Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Above, *Figure 4* depicts how I used coding to process the raw data. I analyzed

transcribed data from the interviews to investigate emerging themes using In Vivo

coding. According to Saldaña (2016), In Vivo… Coding, an elemental method, "[is a]

first cycle method – coding processes for the beginning stages of data analysis that

fracture or split the data into individually coded segments" (p. 55). As a first cycle

method, In Vivo coding provided a way to summarize segments of data. Furthermore, it

revolved around the actual language participants used in the interviews; hence, it is also

called "verbatim coding" since the root meaning of the term is "'in that which is alive'" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 105). I chose In Vivo coding because of the way it honored the actual voices of participants. After I applied In Vivo coding to my data, I moved on to Pattern coding, a second cycle method that requires "analytic skills such as classifying, prioritizing, integrating, synthesizing, abstracting, conceptualizing, and theory building" (p. 69). As Saldaña illustrates, Pattern coding is explanatory coding. It allows researchers to "[group the] summaries into a smaller number of categories, themes, or concepts" and "pull together a lot of material from first cycle coding into more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis" (p. 236). The main purpose of using Pattern coding was to extract major themes from the In Vivo codes.

As I analyzed my data, I started with preliminary coding, such as In Vivo codes, and continued to dissect the data via final codes, which is the last step in the coding process. I coded my data as I gathered it. Saldaña (2016) advises researchers to

Start coding as you collect and format your data, not after all fieldwork has been completed. When you write up field notes, transcribe recorded interviews, or file documents you gathered from the site, job down any preliminary words or phrases for codes on the notes, transcripts or documents themselves, or as an analytic memo or entry in a research journal for future reference. (p. 21)

I utilized field notes to supplement my interview transcripts. Research memos were also useful in keeping track of developing thoughts and generation potential connections, deductions, or overall ideas.

After my preliminary coding, I kept a record of the emerging codes in order to work towards developing final codes. These codes lead to a statement that proposed an interpretive observation summarizing the context of the study:

> [A] key assertion, like a theory attempts to progress from the particular to the general by inferring *transfer* [emphasis in original] – that what was observed…may also be observed in comparable… locations. This assertion also progresses from the particular to the general by *predicting patterns* [emphasis in original] of what may be observed and what may happen in similar present and future contexts. (Saldaña, 2016, p. 15)

One of the most critical outcomes of qualitative data analysis is to interpret how the individual components of the study weave together: "The actual integration of key words from coding into the analytic memo narrative – a technique I used for *codeweaving* [emphasis in original] – is a practical way to ensure that you are thinking how the puzzle pieces fit together" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 48). For this study, data analysis included codeweaving, as Saldaña described.

Triangulation and Validity

The structure of my interviews had a purpose. Each of the three interviews built on one another to create a detailed account of participants' lived experiences. Seidman (2013) maintains that the three-interview series helps establish validity in the interviewing process:

> The three-interview structure incorporates features that enhance the
> accomplishment of validity. It places participants' comments in context…
> Furthermore, by interviewing a number of participants, we can connect their
> experiences and check the comments of one participant against those of others…
> If the interview structure works to allow them to make sense to themselves as well
> as to the interviewer, then it has gone a long way toward validity. (p. 27)

I made sure I highlighted the words and voices of my participants to produce a detailed and accurate analysis of their experiences.

Glesne (2016) explains that "Qualitative methodologies tend to rely on more than a single method for obtaining data. This practice of using multiple methods is commonly called *triangulation* [emphasis in original], a term taken from surveying and navigation" (p. 44). My plan to ensure the soundness of my coding was to practice what researchers like Saldaña (2016) term "member-checking": … Solo and team coders can… consult the participants themselves during analysis… as a way to validate the findings thus far" (p. 38). I also kept copious analytical memos and maintained a reflective journal as well, a practice encouraged in the qualitative research field. As Saldaña explains,

> Coding and analytic memo writing are concurrent qualitative data analytic
> activities… Think of a code not just as a significant word or phrase you applied to
> a datum, but as a prompt or trigger for written reflection on the deeper and
> complex meanings it evokes (p. 44).

Having participants work with me on producing precise data helped me better understand the phenomena being studied and helped me ensure the validity of the study.

Contextualizing My Own Story

Finding your story in qualitative research requires fearlessness. Since the research connotes objectivity and, to some, discourages subjectivity, we tend to avoid letting ourselves into our own studies. However, it is difficult to imagine ourselves as separate from the work we do. Glesne debunks the idea that research must solely be approached with objectivity: "… We never enter into research as 'blank slates': rather we carry with us guiding theories and assumptions, even if not fully conscious of them" (Glesne, 2016, p. 34). As reflexive researchers, we are responsible for monitoring our subjectivity, not dismissing or eliminating it, which is why field notes are so important:

> The field journal… is the primary recording tool of the qualitative researcher. It becomes filled with descriptions of people, places, events, activities, and conversations; and it becomes a place for ideas, reflection, hunches, and notes about patterns that seem to be emerging. It also becomes a place for exploring the researcher's personal reactions. (Glesne, 2016, p. 72)

I used a journal to keep track of my thinking, possible biases, and conclusions. I thought part of staying focused on the work involves organizing one's ideas on paper. If there was no time for self-reflection, being a reflexive, responsible, trustworthy researcher was simply out of reach. I think it is quite difficult to separate ourselves from the role of "knower." And, why should we have to? Allowing ourselves to play a role in our own

research helps us better understand not only ourselves, but our participants' stories as well.

Concluding Thoughts

Latina/os play an important role in the progress and growth in the U.S.: "Because Latinos' share of the U.S. population is expected to increase to as much as one-third of the population by 2050, it is imperative for this nation's economic and social well-being to advance Latinos' postsecondary educational attainment" (Núñez et al., p. vii). Consequently, helping Latina/os achieve at the postsecondary level is not only an issue of equity and access, but would also be in the country's best interest. Yet, Gandara and Contreras (2009) believe there is a crisis in our country's way of educating our Latina/o youth; they stress that academic opportunities for Latina/o youth downgrades their potential to "a permanent underclass of American society" (p. 304).

The very culture of our education system can support the idea that there is one right way of learning and knowing. To reiterate, Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2013) assert that

> ... The ultimate border--the border between knowledge and power--can be crossed only when educational institutions no longer reify culture, when lived experiences become validated as a source of knowledge, and when the process of how knowledge is constructed and translated between groups located within nonsymmetrical relations of power is questioned. (p. 42)

 Educational institutions should acknowledge the relevance and importance of all their students' lived experiences and ways of knowing to ensure their success. Freire (2013) states that often, those attempting to change things in education disregard the student's culture, background, and beliefs in the name of a better education system:

> … Revolutionary leaders often fall for the banking line of planning program content from the top down. They approach the peasant or urban masses with projects which may correspond to their own view of the world, but not that of the people… The revolutionary's role is to liberate, and be liberated with the people—not to win them over. (p. 160)

As leaders aiming to change the path and promise of our education system, we have to redefine what a successful college student looks, acts, thinks, and sounds like. We cannot decide what is worth learning or knowing: "One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding…" (p. 161). We can try to be more inclusive and welcoming of all the different identities that encompass higher education institutions.

Ultimately, the reality is that "Many Hispanic students who begin postsecondary education simply do not graduate" (Pyne & Means, 2013, p. 1). Not only are opportunities limited, but Latina/o students are asked to mask aspects of their cultural identities to "fit in" in order to be academically successful: "Traditional notions of 'success' must be reconfigured to include the experiences of underrepresented students,

and we must reconsider what it is that a 'successful student' brings to his or her schooling" (Minikel-Lacocque, 2015, p. 74). For Latina/o first-generation college students, as well as other underrepresented students, attaining a four-year degree is a "borderland" (Anzaldúa, 1987) of paramount importance; it is a challenge that helps shape their future successes. However, without assimilating to the mainstream or dominant culture, to some degree, students are at a loss when it comes to achieving academically.

Chapter IV: Results

Introduction

In chapter three, I discussed the research methods I used to conduct my study with Latina/o first-generation college students. Since the purpose of this study was to go beyond the conversation of Latina/o first-generation college student attrition by examining how they navigate postsecondary institutions and explore the implications associated with how higher education affects them, I considered the lived experiences of my participants from their points of view. My research questions are:

1. What is the experience of persisting Latina/o first-generation college students?

2. How do persisting Latina/o first-generation college students feel about their successes and/or hardships in higher education?

3. How do Latina/o first-generation persisting college students describe how they navigate the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987) of higher education?

The previous chapter explored my role as interviewer and researcher as well as the method for recruiting my participants. My participants were chosen with a purpose: each one of them has a story of persistence to tell because they have successfully completed the first two years of a four-year degree. Specifically, this study employs a variety of tools and techniques, such as participant demographic information, in-depth, semi-structured interviews, Draw-A-College-Student activity, and a free-write to gather data.

Analysis of Data

Participant Demographics

First-generation Latina/o students are one of the largest minority groups struggling to attain four-year degrees (Krogstad, 2016; Krogstad & Fry, 2014). While the number of Latino enrollment in higher education is increasing, four-year degree completion for Latinos is low in comparison to their counterparts (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). My goal with this study was to examine the lived experiences and personal narratives of persistent students to offer a different type of insight into why four-year degree attainment is low. Stories of triumph matter too, however: "We need to understand not only why students… feel unwelcome, alone, and underprepared, but also why they *stay* [emphasis in original] in college and achieve academic success" (Minikel-Lacocque, 2015, p. 74). For the purposes of this study, I chose Latina/o first-generation college students who have had experience with a degree of success in their postsecondary careers, evident in how long they have persisted in college. I chose to examine the insights of college juniors, seniors, and graduate students to tell their stories of what it means to persist in college.

This chapter explores the perspectives, lived experiences, and voices of Latina/o first-generation college students who have persisted in college through at least two years and analyzes the overarching themes that emerged throughout the progression of data collection and analysis. The chapter is organized into four major sections: demographics and profiles of participants, themes in the interview data, themes in the draw-a-college-student and free-write data, and final summary of findings. Throughout Chapter 3, I

discussed the brief demographic questionnaire I used to collect participant characteristics

data. The questionnaire, found in Appendix B, was designed to collect preliminary

participant data about how they identified, their family history, and their educational

background. Specifically, it asked participants to share information about their gender,

age, nationality and heritage, college major, as well as their academic standing. The data

from the questionnaire is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: *Participant Background and Identification*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Self-Identified Nationality & Heritage	Academic Year	Major
Tony	36	m	Mexican	Senior	Anthropology
Diana	29	f	Mexican American	Senior	International Development
Carmen	25	f	Mexican	Junior	Accounting
Maria	21	f	Mexican American	Junior	Political Science & Philosophy
Antonio	23	m	Mexican American	Senior	Community Health Education
Alma	30	F	Mexican	Graduate Student	Early Childhood Special Education
Soraya	23	f	Guatemalan	Junior	Social Science
Rosa	28	f	Mexican	Graduate Student	Public Affairs

Summary of Participant Demographics

Table 1 indicates that the majority of the participants, 8 total, are of Mexican descent.

One participant, Soraya, identified as Guatemalan, 3 were born in the U.S., and 4 were

born in Mexico. Out of the 8 participants, one is undocumented, which makes the path

through college that much more of a formidable challenge. Further, Table 2 summarizes

additional demographic information: 2 of the participants were males and the other 6

females. In terms of their academic standing, 3 of the 8 were seniors, 3 were juniors, and

2 of the participants were graduate students.

Table 2: *Summary of Participant Characteristics: Birthplace, Gender, & Academic*

Standing.

Characteristic	Number of Participants
Birthplace	
U.S. Born	3
Mexican Born	4
Other	1
Gender	
Males	2
Females	7
Academic Standing	
Junior	

Senior		3
		3
Graduate		2

Participant Interviews

The data collection for this research aimed to gather information about the lived experiences of Latina/o first-generation college students' postsecondary experience; it sought to investigate the struggles these students faced but also relate stories of success and triumph against the odds. The lived experiences of persisting Latina/o first-generation college students are valuable sources of data given that they know what it takes to move up the postsecondary educational ladder and have been through the difficulties it entails as well. Through learning about these students' understanding and perception of the higher education experience, we can add to the body of knowledge that may help improve the future postsecondary endeavors of other Latina/o first-generation college students. To gather data that would address my research questions, I interviewed each participant three times. To reiterate, my research questions were as follows:

1. What is the experience of persisting Latina/o first-generation college students?

2. How do persisting Latina/o first-generation college students feel about their successes and/or hardships in higher education?

3. How do Latina/o first-generation persisting college students describe how they navigate the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987) of higher education?

Each interview was thirty minutes, and there were ten questions per interview. The first interview included questions on family life and college aspirations; the second interview questions were on the first-generation student general college experience; and, the final interview questions were on identity and culture.

Data Coding and Overarching Themes

As stated previously, this study's data may provide insight into the complexities of the Latina/o first-generation college student experience. Before categorizing the interview data, each code was assigned a symbol for positive connotation (+), negative connotation (-), and neutral connotation (n) to better describe each code's meaning. During the first cycle of coding my interview data, I organized the codes into In Vivo codes, which allows researchers to use participant phrases and wording to organize information (Saldaña, 2013). After organizing my interview data into In Vivo codes, I was able to begin categorizing the information into pattern codes, that is codes that are explanatory and help identify emerging themes (Saldaña, 2013). Lastly, I categorized the pattern codes into overarching themes. The themes represented by the pattern codes are discussed in the upcoming sections and depicted in Table 3. The twelve pattern codes are: being persistent; adjusting; experiences of exclusion; feelings of cultural isolation; burnout; social distance; academic aspirations; personal barrier; paying for college; social influences; words of wisdom; and identity development. The four overarching themes are: conquering obstacles; a sense of belonging; keeping one's identity; and navigating the college landscape.

Participant Profiles

As I coded and reached the overarching themes, I noticed that participants described similar feelings, yet each voice was unique and their stories singular. Prior to discussing the overarching themes, I will be introducing each of the participants' unique backgrounds.

Tony

Tony, who was born in Mexico and moved to the U.S. as a child, was the eldest participant in the study. He grew up on the Mexican side of the Texas border in a small town. At 13, Tony's parents moved the family to the U.S. side. Not speaking any English and entering the U.S. school system was a struggle for Tony; he describes the experience as being "thrown out into school" (Tony, Interview #1, 31 July 2017). Tony's academic path was not an easy one to traverse, so he struggled. He expressed his middle school and high school career were "challenging," having to "adapt as quickly as you can and try to just understand what's happening in your new surroundings" (Tony, Interview #1, 31 July 2017). High school was especially difficult because Tony did not feel as though the teachers were invested in his learning; so, he fell behind. College was no different for Tony. His college experience was also taxing. When asked about how he made it up the higher education ladder, Tony replied, "I have no idea how I made it to be honest" (Tony, Interview #3, 2 August 2017).

Tony's family culture placed great emphasis on the importance of education and making something of oneself:

I always loved education … My family, even though they never really went to

school, they did value education. So, I think that had been an influence on me and

I was like, "I want my family to look at me and be like, Whoa! You accomplished

something that none of us ever did." (Tony, Interview #1, 31 July 2017)

The result of this influence resulted in Tony's persistence in attaining his four-year

degree a month before his interview even though navigating the college terrain was not

easy.

Diana

Diana, a senior, was born in the Northwest to Mexican parents in a small town.

The eldest of three daughters, Diana comes from a large family. At the age of 19, Diana

joined the military and served for five years in the Navy. She traveled the U.S. and Japan

throughout her service. In high school, Diana describes her experience as going through a

"midlife crisis" or "panic mode" and, not knowing exactly what to do with her future,

joining the military provided her with the solace of a plan: "I joined the Navy because I

knew it was an avenue to hit two birds with one stone, both personally and being able to

pursue and education" (Diana, Interview #1, 31 July 2017). Diana's family, like Tony's,

also placed value on education. Diana explained that she felt an obligation to go to

college: "[My parents would say] 'I grew up with nothing and I've come this far, and I've

given you guys all this. So, that you guys can do more.' So, there's that responsibility"

(Diana, Interview #1, 31 July 2017). This charge motivated Diana to pursue her college

degree.

Carmen

Carmen was born in Mexico and moved with her family to the U.S. when she was eight. Her family crossed the border without documentation, making Carmen an undocumented immigrant. Carmen's family is tightknit, something that has helped her define her postsecondary academic goals:

> I want to take care of so many people in my family: my aunt, my mom, my grandma. And I want to do this for them… I also, want to be the person that I see walking down the street. You know, I see this person walking super dressed up. I want to be that person, and I want to tell people, and I want to show my intelligence to people. So, a college degree, that's what it means. I am capable; I'm smart, and I did this, and it's on paper. … I'm the one leading, and I'm the protector of the family because I'm [in college]. (Carmen, Interview #1, 1 August 2017)

Carmen stated that even her graduation from high school was "a big deal," since that made her one of the first to accomplish this goal. As a junior in college currently, she sees her college graduation as a large milestone she must achieve.

Maria

A Mexican-American who grew up entrenched in Mexican culture, Maria was mostly raised by her dad's side of the family. In grade school, Maria says she "fell between the cracks" and didn't get the help she needed, so she also fell behind her peers (Maria, Interview #1, 1 August 2017). So much so, that when it came time to apply to

college, she did not know what to do, whom to speak with, or where to search for answers: "I thought [applying to college] was… a physical form, and I didn't know where to start" (Maria, Interview #1, 1 August 2017). While both her parents did not finish high school, Maria saw her future turning out differently; she saw college in it, as she explains:

> Going to college [is] important for me because of visibility, like the idea that if one of us makes it, we all make it… proving something to myself… that I can do it, even when all the other people said I couldn't. (Maria, Interview #2, 2 August 2017)

Maria firmly believes in proving naysayers wrong by not getting her degree in just one major, but two: political science and philosophy. She is an excelling junior well on her way to achieving her dreams of finishing her bachelor's degree.

Antonio

Raised in the Pacific Northwest, Antonio attended mostly private schools, which he believes were instrumental in preparing him for college. He explained that he learned a lot about future planning and setting goals at the private schools. There were more resources at these schools, in Antonio's opinion. The counselors helped him get grants, scholarships, and admission into college preparation programs.

His upbringing was also contributory to his success in college. Having little education, Antonio's parents instilled an appreciation for education in him:

> My parents… had almost no education. They had to leave [education] to start
> working, helping-out their families in Mexico. They always told me that since
> they weren't able to have that opportunity… I should take advantage of the
> opportunity to go to school. They always told me that hard work could get you
> places. (Antonio, Interview #1, 7 August 2017)

Antonio's parents had virtually no means of subsistence once they arrived in the U.S.
However, that didn't stop them from being successful. They dedicated their efforts to
providing Antonio with the opportunities they did not have in Mexico. Antonio, a senior
in college, is a few classes away from completing his four-year degree. His parents led by
example, working hard to provide a better life for their son.

Alma

There is a mix of cultural backgrounds in Alma's upbringing. Her father came to
the U.S. at sixteen from Mexico, and her mother was born and raised in the U.S.
Throughout her childhood, Alma was very conscious about the lack of diversity in her
small home town: "Growing up, I didn't feel like I fit in but didn't know why" (Alma,
Interview #1, 7 August 2017). Many of Alma's peers went to college, something Alma
didn't consider doing until she realized it was an ambition in the lives of the people in her
town. Going to college was an ever-present possibility for her once she learned it was the
next logical step to take.

Alma explains that her decision to go to college was coincidental and a result of
the example of others, but the time to apply arrived, she was ill-equipped to handle the

demands of the application process: "I didn't know about the FAFSA until July of the summer I was going to start. I didn't know about scholarships… [the experience] was a struggle" (Alma, Interview #1, 7 August 2017). If it was not for the example of others, Alma explained, she would not have "[gotten] on that boat" (Alma, Interview #1, 7 August 2017). Nevertheless, she is a graduate student working to help elementary school students with special needs.

Soraya

A self-proclaimed family-oriented person, Soraya grew up in a five-bedroom house with five other families and only one bathroom: "It was super chaotic, but there was so much love and so much culture. [Growing up in that house] is my favorite memory" (Soraya, Interview #1, 7 August 2017). Soraya's upbringing took place in a Spanish only household; so, once she entered school, the language barrier was a culture shock. She admitted, "I wanted to beat the Spanish… accent out of me" (Soraya, Interview #1, 7 August 2017). The change in language also changed her role in her family. She was her mom and dad's resource because she could translate for them at hospitals and business offices, making her an adult before her time.

Even though she had to grow up fast as a contributing member to the household due to her ability to speak English, Soraya appreciates her parents. Soraya's parents were so hard-working that they set the standard for what it meant to be the best student she could be:

My parents are immigrants. They have no education. They came here with no

English, so they had to build themselves up. But it's kind of hard to build yourself

up when you don't have the tools… So, they worked all the time [and] I barely

saw my mom and dad growing up. (Soraya, Interview #1, 7 August 2017)

This example of working hard to attain one's goals was what makes Soraya a successful

junior in college. This also made Soraya appreciate the importance of an education and

value its potential to change the trajectory of her life.

Rosa

With her parents' roots in Mexico, Rosa grew up in a small, rural town in

California. Rosa's parents are field workers who are very supportive of her educational

pursuits, even though they did not have the opportunity to follow their own dreams of

getting an education. Her parents raised Rosa and three other siblings on a very tight

budget. Nevertheless, they raised their children to value the opportunities an education

would provide for them, even though it may not have seemed ambitious to Rosa:

[I grew up] not really having any future [college] goals because nobody's ever

talked to you about them. My parents' biggest thing for me was, 'Go to school…

so you could work at a bank.' For them, that was going big. (Rosa, Interview #1,

14 August 2017)

Her parents did promote a college career: "[Going to college was] something my parents

stressed. It was, 'So you won't have to work in the field like us'" (Rosa, Interview #1, 14

August 2017). All in all, Rosa's parents were a great source of inspiration for her; it led

her to become a doctoral student with a focus on trying to go back to her small town and

helping the people she grew up with by studying public affairs.

Organization of Data Analysis

This section is categorized according to the overarching themes found in Table 3.

Table 3 lists the pattern codes and their definitions, which of the overarching themes the

pattern codes fit in and lists examples of In Vivo codes for each pattern code. *Figure 5*

shows a visual depiction of the relationships between the pattern codes and overarching

themes, which also includes a sample In Vivo code.

Table 3: *Code Clusters and Overarching Themes*

Pattern Codes	Definition	Overarching Theme	In Vivo Code Examples
Being Persistent	Need or desire that arises from within an individual that causes action toward some goal, irrespective of external stimuli.	Conquering Obstacles	"I was still going" "No idea how I made it" "Can't quit"
Adjusting	A condition of harmonious relation to the environment and the people in it so that internal and external needs can be met.	Navigating the College Landscape	"Out of my way to adapt" "Into uncharted territory" "Learning how to learn"
Experiences of Exclusion	Estrangement from others, especially those from whom a relationship was expected, or from the prevalent values, goals, or trends of society.	Sense of Belonging	"Didn't belong" "White kids do college things" "Felt too alone"
Feelings of Cultural Isolation	Lack of participation in, or communication with, the larger cultural	Sense of Belonging	"Most were White" "Anglo culture

	system, which can be internally or externally imposed.		"dominates" "Maybe I shouldn't be here"
Burnout	Negative feelings and/or behaviors resulting from unsuccessful attempts to cope with stress conditions	Conquering Obstacles	"Couldn't do it" "Chugging along" "Don't have same advantages"
Social Distance	The quality of separateness or devaluation individuals feel toward other individuals or groups because of socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, gender, or other differences.	Sense of Belonging	"Out of my element" "Parents don't know what it's like" "Wasn't getting experience others were"
Academic Aspirations	Inspiration or desire to reach a high level of academic achievement.	Keeping One's Identity	"Trying to be something" "Wanted an education" "Family protector"
Personal Barriers	Tangible or intangible personal obstructions that block, hinder, delay, deter, or interfere with personal growth or development.	Conquering Obstacles	"Harder on myself" "Fear" "Playing a big role"
Paying for College	Amount of money required by a student for expenses and means of financing higher education.	Navigating the College Landscape	"Work and school fulltime" "Can't afford not to work" "Working is overwhelming"

Social Influences	Social factors or circumstances that affect or alter some condition or situation.	Keeping One's Identity	"Mom's proud I'm making it" "Parents came from nothing" "Lots of pressure"
Words of Wisdom	Giving advice from personal experience about the higher education environment, rules, traditions, educational offerings, etc. to help other first-generation students understand and cope with navigating college.	Navigating the College Landscape	"Encouragement helped" "Need more student diversity" "More Latinos authority figures"
Identity Development	Retaining values or beliefs unique to an individual and growth due to learning and experience.	Keeping One's Identity	"Balance White college culture and your own" "Fitting in" "Finding people I saw myself in"

Sample In Vivo Code: *"Like being in a dark room"*

Sample In Vivo Code: *"Play the game"*

Sample In Vivo Code: *"Failed classes"*

Sample In Vivo Code: *"I actually did it"*

Pattern Code #2: Adjusting

Pattern Code #11: *Words of Wisdom*

Pattern Code #5 Burnout

Pattern Code #1: Being Persistent

Pattern Code #9: Paying for College

Theme #4: Navigating the College Landscape

Theme #1: Conquering Obstacles

Sample In Vivo Code: *"Had to take care of family"*

Pattern Code #8: Personal Barriers

Sample In Vivo Code: *"Financial worries keep you from studying"*

Pattern Code #3: Experiences of Exclusion

Theme #2: A Sense of Belonging

Theme #3: Keeping One's Identity

Pattern Code #7: Academic Aspirations

Sample In Vivo Code: *"Here taking up space"*

Pattern Code #4: Feelings of Cultural Isolation

Pattern Code #6: Social Distance

Pattern Code #12: Identity Development

Pattern Code #10: Social Influences

Sample In Vivo Code: *"I have to provide"*

Sample In Vivo Code: *"Lost in a sea of White people"*

Sample In Vivo Code: *"Had to bear through it, head down"*

Sample In Vivo Code: *"Two worlds"*

Sample In Vivo Code: *"Parents don't know what it's like"*

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Figure 5: Visual depiction of In Vivo codes, pattern codes, and overarching themes.

Presentation of Results and Interpretation of Findings

Overarching Themes

I described participant profiles and explained their academic standing described. Now, I discuss the different pattern codes the In Vivo codes led to. Each of the following sections is titled after the overarching themes the subordinate pattern codes produced. The overarching themes that emerged from the data were all deduced based recurring main ideas in the pattern codes. The following is a discussion of the four major overarching themes that arose from the data. Each of the four major themes will be followed by a discussion of the three subordinate pattern codes that led to each of the four themes.

Overarching Theme #1: Conquering Obstacles

Introduction

As mentioned previously, the first-generation college student population faces difficult obstacles in completing degrees: "Although the percentage of Hispanic 25- to 29-year-olds who have attained a bachelor's degree or higher has increased from 8% in 1980 to 13% in 2011, Hispanics continue to lag 23 percentage points behind Whites" (Aud, et al., 2012). One of the many possible reasons for the difficulties Latina/o first-generation college students face is that, because they are often on their own in the independent culture of college, they can struggle with being visible on campus:

>First-generation students represent a common thread cutting across all student
>
>cohorts and institutional types, yet they are the one population that remains
>
>largely unnoticed and poorly understood despite all of the research on students
>
>that has emerged in the past decades. They are frequently marginalized on their
>
>campuses, treated with benign disregard, and placed at a competitive
>
>disadvantage because of their invisibility. (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012,
>
>p. xiii)

In other words, first-generation college students are hidden, invisible unless they self-identify as being the first in their immediate family to attend college. Without this identification, they have fewer chances to access resources available to them, and they are less likely to attain four-year degrees, a necessity for future success: "… Earning a postsecondary credential, particularly a bachelor's degree, remains a critical opportunity for many Latinos to attain increased economic and social mobility" (Núñez et al., 2013, p. 5). Conquering obstacles to attain four-year degrees is paramount in making sure we have future Latina/o leaders.

First-generation college students' ability to navigate or manage the transition from secondary school to college is limited, meaning that they are carrying a weight that most students do not have to worry about. Ward, Siegel, and Davenport (2012) maintain that

>Because of their lower academic preparedness, inadequate cultural capital, and
>
>insufficient academic and social integration, first-generation students may

approach critical academic and social tasks during college with lower levels of

confidence than their non-first-generation counterparts. (p. 26)

Knowledge of college life is key in understanding the demands and navigating the

terrain of a college campus and, without this knowledge, students would not be able to

succeed in understanding college-level expectations. This necessary knowledge is

required to manage the role of being a college student and persist in attaining four-year

degrees.

<div align="center">

Overarching Theme #1: Conquering Obstacles

First Subordinate Pattern Code:

</div>

Being Persistent

All of the participants in the study described being a first-generation student as

a trying experience because of varying obligations, including the expectations of those

around them. For coding, being persistent was defined as having a need to take action

toward a goal means not giving up. Being the first in his family to go to college, Tony

had a lot of pressure to succeed, yet he didn't have much confidence that he would

make it until later in his life. After gaining the confidence to pursue a four-year degree,

Tony graduated in the summer of 2017:

> I didn't think that I could ever go to college or even have the capacity to do it
>
> until I was already in my 30's... In that time, I was able to get the confidence
>
> enough to try it again, but it did take me a while. I thought I actually can do
>
> this if I actually put myself into it and let go of the fear of failing. I graduated

working full-time, going to school full-time, [and] it's impressive how much

you actually get better at going to school… [It] seemed impossible. I can't

believe I did that. (Tony, Interview #1, 31 July 2017)

Having dead-end jobs and being, as Tony put it, "broke" were major motivators for

Tony. His will to have better prospects drove him to try going to college again years

later. However, Tony's apprehensions did not simply go away; he had to change his

mindset. For Tony, being persistent meant overcoming setbacks by falling and getting

back up.

Oftentimes, as participants described, reaching the high expectations of others

and trying to achieve academic excellence was simply about follow-through. As she

completes her final year in earning her four-year degree, Diana describes the

experience of being a first-generation college student: "I think it's juggling everything,

my own expectations, and other people's expectations. I just focus on trying to finish

my work and make sure that I get things done" (Diana, Interview #1, 31 July 2017).

Having the motivation to finish stems from the will to be a trailblazer, or as Maria, a

junior, put it, "Playing a big role" (Maria, Interview #1, 1 August 2017) in one's

family and community as a first-generation college student. Like Diana, Maria goes on

to explain how, regardless of the discouraging statistics on Latina/o first-generation

student completion of four-year degrees, she still has the willpower to press on: "I'm

doing it; all these negative things, they exist but I'm not buying into it, and that's what

I'm proving to myself" (Maria, Interview #1, 1 August 2017). According to

participants in the study, being persistent depended not only on the expectation they

had for themselves, but the expectations of those around them as well.

As I coded the data from my interviews, I noticed a widespread premise among

participants' interview responses and their inspiration for persisting. Many participants

mentioned family and their communities not only as a source of support, but

inspiration to stay in college. Alma, a graduate student in the school of education,

explained that she did not become the successful first-generation Latina student she is

on her own, but with the help of people who cared about her: "I didn't get here by

myself [and] as a first-generation Latina, it's our duty to bring our community along…

It takes a community to get someone where they need to go." (Alma, Interview #3, 10

August 2017). It was not just one person's effort that helped Alma stay in college; it

took a village. Likewise, Soraya stated, "I wouldn't be [a junior] today without the

help of... my parents" (Soraya, Interview #1, 7 August 2017). Based on recurring

comments, most participants cited their Latino parents as being the main influences in

their academic decision making. Rosa, a doctoral student whose parents work in the

fields, was another participant who felt strongly about the impact of her parents in

persisting through her college career:

> [My parents] are very hard-working… and very supportive of me, especially in
>
> my educational pursuits. Being a first-generation [college student], it's
>
> something very personal, [because of what] I've learned. I also try to help my
>
> family... To make my parents proud. (Rosa, Interview #1, 14 August 2017)

Thus, for most participants, being persistent was related to the reinforcement and backing they received from their Latino parents and community. Even when confidence was low, most participants' parents were there for support, or as Rosa stated, "[believing] in you even though you don't really believe in yourself" (Rosa, Interview #1, 14 August 2017).

Conversely, not all participants mentioned their parents as sponsors or promoters of their postsecondary calling. Tony, for example, explained that his father, who did not get far into his own educational career, was not as supportive as his mother. Tony shares, "My dad, maybe because he never went [to college] … doesn't really care. Maybe he never… saw the value in it. [My father said] 'You got to go work'" (Tony, Interview #1, 31 July 2017). Grounded on Tony's father's experience, work and providing for oneself is more important than getting a postsecondary education. Hence, based on this logic, going to university is not a priority if one's subsistence is most important. This sentiment was also present in other participants' lives. Antonio, who is almost done attaining his four-year degree as a senior, had a similar experience with his father:

> I would say the number one stress came from my dad, and the main thing he
> would say was, "Why are you going to college if what you're studying isn't
> going to make you money?" He viewed it as messing around. (Antonio,
> Interview #1, 7 August 2017)

Making money to support oneself was much more important for some participants' parents than mastering a discipline. Carmen also went through the difficult process of

having to justify her choice to go to college. She expressed, "[College put a strain] on my mom because she thinks I'm just wasting time because she doesn't really understand what [college] is" (Carmen, Interview # 1, 1 August 2017). Maria echoes these sentiments based on her experiences with her father as well: "To hear that question 'Why do you need education?' from your dad… It's like, 'Should I really be doing this?'" (Maria, Interview #2, 2 August 2017). One of the participant who most described not feeling encouragement from parents to persist in college was Maria. Admittedly, her parents did not understand why she would pursue a college education to begin with. Maria said,

> I had told my mom I was going to go away [to college], and I was going to try, and she basically said "Oh, you're not going to make it." To hear that from your mom is really hard... To [dad], if you just work really hard, you can get whatever. Because that's what he did, and that's what everyone else in my family did. So, it's like, "Why do you need education?" (Maria, Interview #1, 1 August 2017)

The heartbreak the participants described because of their parents' lack of support in their quest for a four-year degree was devastating. Not feeling that encouragement hurt these first-generation students' sense of self-confidence. Without parental support, the participants who described not having fundamental sponsorship felt insecure. Participants who did not have the guidance to persist from their parents were riddled with self-doubt.

All in all, the majority of responses from participants were about their relatives and community as a strong reason to persist and not give up. For Tony, his mother is the most influential advocate that helped him keep going in times of uncertainty: "So, the fact that I actually did make it through, my mom's pretty proud of it. She wants a copy of my diploma and stuff like that… If anything, I think she's more proud than I am" (Tony, Interview #1, 31 July 2017). Tony later explained, "I… always valued education. Just having it feels good. You finally accomplish something that I, especially me, didn't think I would ever accomplish" (Tony, Interview #2, 1 August 2017).

The experience of having parents who support a college education inspired being the same source of strength for other family members in some of my participants. After having gone through the difficulties involving being a first-generation college student who is almost done attaining a four-year degree, Diana wants to be this kind of source of support for other aspiring scholars in her own family. She said, "I think as long as I use my college experience… to encourage my younger cousins and my sisters to continue to go to school… then it will be a real asset" (Dina, Interview #3, 2 August 2017). Family encouragement helped most of the participants overcome the feelings of insecurity and self-doubt. Most participants stated that they would never have accomplished their goals without family guidance. Having the experience of being supported by family and community was a major predictor of success or persistence in the Latina/o first-generation college students who participated in this study.

Overarching Theme #1: Conquering Obstacles

Second Subordinate Pattern Code:

Burnout

Due to the different obstacles or difficulties the first-generation participants experience throughout their college careers, burnout was another predominant idea in the interview responses. For coding, burnout was defined as when students have negative feelings about their unsuccessful attempts to accomplish something. All participants described the feeling of being a first-generation student as off-putting and disorienting and experienced an overall feeling of being lost, tired, and overworked with little academic support. Persistence did not look the same for all participants. One of the interviewees, Tony, finished his four-year degree right before our interviews after leaving school to go back later in his life. His experience persisting through college was not easy. After leaving college and working a variety of "dead-end jobs," he made his way back to school. He describes his first experiences with traversing through the college experience:

> I had no idea what was going on. So, I quit. I quit because I was like, "I don't know what I'm doing here, and I will never make it." I actually tried to go to college after I graduated high school like within a year, and I realized that I just could not do it. I could not do it… I felt like [going to college] killed my complete confidence and spirit. I had no idea how to do anything. And so, I

just felt completely… freaked out. I got scared and ran away. (Tony, Interview

#1, 31 July 2017)

Tony's first try at college was disheartening because he felt as though he didn't know

his place or could not successfully or confidently navigate the college terrain. His

experience was similar to Diana's, who felt that being a first-generation student

limited her ability to finish her degree at the same pace as others. She explained,

There're other people who already know how to do things because their

parents have been down that [college] road and they have connections…

Because they've been brought up in that lifestyle, it's an advantage. I don't

have any of those advantages. (Dina, Interview #1, 31 July 2017).

The absence of the knowhow or advantage Diana explains is familiar to first-

generation college students since they are the first to embark on the postsecondary

journey in their immediate family (Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Minikel-Lacocque,

2015; Núñez, et al., 2013). Soraya reiterates this statement, "[My parents] never really

laid it out for me. I feel like I laid it all out for myself" (Soraya, Interview #1, 7

August 2017). Feeling as though they were starting college with a shortfall due to their

Latino parents' lack of knowledge with the postsecondary system was a recurring

sentiment among participants. They expressed that the lack of knowledge about

college resulted in a lack of confidence and burnout. Carmen, a junior majoring in

accounting, felt the same uncertainty or unassertiveness in her ability to persist:

I had no dreams for myself because I knew I was kind of limited, I guess… I

just felt, "It's so much. It's getting harder and harder, and it's just I keep

failing, failing, and failing." It feels like I'm working toward something that

I'm still not sure about. (Carmen, Interview #1, 1 August 2017)

The experience of discouragement was a significant letdown that led to exhaustion and

an uncertain future.

Not knowing what she was getting into when she applied to get to college,

Alma found it difficult to ask for help from her parents or anyone else in that regard:

"You feel… shame of asking a question that you think is simple or you should know

the answer to" (Alma, Interview #2, 9 August 2017). Other participants shared this

uneasy feeling of uncertainty in accepting the academic changes college entailed.

Maria shared that she feels colleges, as well as society, expects that all students know

how to navigate the school and climate, but that it's not fair for first-generation

students:

> You might have heard of these [college] terms, these broad things that maybe
>
> people who have family who have gone to school know and so, they've heard
>
> it. They know what it feels like… That's what's dark to me… Society expects
>
> you to know, but you just don't. (Maria, Interview #1, 1 August 2017)

The presence of this sort of distrust does not help first-generation students. Yet, while

the participants describe suffering from burnout or being overwhelmed by their new

college environment, they are persisting, nevertheless. Continuing to try and succeed

when the obstacles seem insurmountable takes great courage, an admirable trait in all

of my participants.

Overarching Theme #1: Conquering Obstacles

Third Subordinate Pattern Code:

Personal Barriers

When it comes to personal barriers, participants described going through an array of different obstructions in their path to attaining four-year degrees. Personal barriers, defined as tangible/intangible personal obstructions that interfere with personal development for coding, were major elements in hindering participants' success. One of the most discussed obstacles in the interviews was how difficult it was to go to college without a frame of reference or having parents who did not know what going to college entailed. There was a disconnect between student and parent about what it takes to be a college student. Soraya describes the same dynamic in how she feels about her Latino parents and their role in her life as a college student:

> It's strange to talk about [college] with my parents. They don't really know how to ask the questions, like, "Oh how's school going?" or they can't give me advice about how to do it… They don't really know how to ask questions about it, and I think they feel bad about that. So, they don't even try anymore. They don't know enough about it to… connect with me. (Soraya, Interview #1, 7 August 2017)

As recent immigrants to the U.S., as Alma expresses, Alma's parents struggled to adjust themselves, let alone trying to help her with another unknown element such as college. Alma experienced a separateness from her parents because of college. Soraya describes a similar experience in that her parents' good intentions didn't always

translate into practical assistance with how to navigate the college experience. Rosa

echoes this similitude in experiences with her parents by stating,

> Again, my parents are so supportive. Even though they don't really understand,
>
> they've always been willing to... If I need something, [say], "Do you need
>
> help?" And I always try to tell them no, but sometimes I do need help. (Rosa,
>
> Interview #1, 14 August 2017)

As Rosa details, parents' inexperience with college didn't translate into them not

caring about it; they just couldn't help with something they are unfamiliar with, and

their first-generation students knew it, making it a personal barrier. Parents' naiveté

with college life, expectations, and demands didn't help their first-generation students'

self-confidence in tackling the new and unfamiliar demands of college.

Parents' background or experience with their own education had a large impact

on their relationships with their students in other ways as well. Participants also

explained that the disconnect between Latino parents and their first-generation

Latina/o college students created a barrier between them. Not only did the students

become leaders by being the first to pursue a postsecondary education, they also

became outsiders. Diana describes this phenomenon,

> I'm one of the only people who's about to finish college. I have a one other
>
> cousin who went to college, and we stand out. And in a way, that's alienating
>
> because other people don't know the experience that we've gone through… I
>
> have to make sure I don't come-off snobby because my sister made that

> mistake when she tried to go to college and there's some tense family ties.
>
> (Diana, Interview #3, 2 August 2017)

Diana explains that being the first to attempt college creates a divide between the

student and their family members, another symptom of the complex issues related to

being a first-generation student: "… first-generation students may feel that family

members resent their blossoming success, and thus they may call into question, and

eventually abandon their own academic pursuits or plans for the future" (Ward, Siegel,

& Davenport, 2012, p. 56). Soraya described the same dilemma regarding being proud

of her academic accomplishments: "I'm torn between being that person that had the

privilege to go to college and wanting to show it off but then again trying to be humble

about it, you know?" (Soraya, Interview #1, 7 August 2017).

Going to college can make a Latina/o first-generation student be "the one who

made it" which can cause family tension, as both Diana and Soraya described. Carmen

provides an explanation for this separation in expressing the following: "We come

from a... Well I guess, we are just a small humble family, with humble jobs, we don't

have careers. Nobody actually went to college or anything like that" (Carmen,

Interview #1, 1 August 2017). She continued by explaining that she was heading in her

parents' footsteps by getting a job to provide for her family instead of going to college.

She said,

> Right after [community college] I got a job as a bookkeeper and I was happy…
>
> I had more money than [my mom] and everybody looked up to me in the

family… I was working, and I used that as an excuse [to not go back to

college]. (Carmen, Interview #1, 1 August 2017)

After working as a bookkeeper, Carmen made plans to attend a four-year college

because she saw others around her taking the same step.

Carmen, who also struggled with her plans to go to college due to her

undocumented status, communicated that she was unsure about what role college

would play in her future:

[My parents] didn't even know… what it took to apply. They didn't know

anything. My mom… doesn't know how I applied. She doesn't know anything

about it. It's been rough. I started off as just going because everybody was

going. I never really knew what I wanted to do… I started getting hints that

maybe college was a big deal. I never thought I'd make it to… any four-year

university. I was like, "Well, I'm undocumented, so there's no way I'm going

to go any further than that. I'll be happy with a desk job that pays me $11 an

hour. I will be happy with that." (Carmen, Interview #1, 1 August 2017)

Carmen struggled very much with her seemingly insurmountable obstacles of being

not only a first-generation student, but an undocumented first-generation student. But,

that has not stopped her from fighting to follow her dream of attain a four-year degree.

She declared,

I'm just bad about talking about my story, the documented stuff. I don't really

feel bad about it. I don't. I mean I don't want everybody to know because it

doesn't define me. So, I don't tell people, but I just look at myself like a

badass. I'm doing this. I worked my way up here. (Carmen, Interview #1, 1

August 2017)

Carmen overcame the stigma of not being able to achieve her dreams because of her

undocumented status using her accomplishments as inspiration. She knows she can

overcome anything as she continues to fight to graduate from college. Overall, there

were a multitude of personal barriers participants faced, and still face, as Latina/o first-

generation college students seeking to attain four-year degrees.

Overarching Theme #2: A Sense of Belonging

Introduction

The decision to go to college is cumbersome and distressing for many students;

this is especially true for first-generation college students (French & Chávez, 2010;

Garcia, 2010; Minikel-Lacocque, 2015; Musoba, Collazo, & Placide, 2013; Núñez et

al., 2013; Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012; Pyne & Means, 2013; Stephens,

Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012;

Storlie, Moreno, & Portman, 2014; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). People are

expected to go to college in order to have a productive professional future and going to

college is considered a coming-of-age milestone in one's educational career. Yet, the

playing field is disproportionate for students whose parents do not have experience

with the postsecondary realm. Indeed, first-generation students are often not equipped

to handle the demands of college because of their lack of exposure and experience:

> … First-generation students typically have lower levels of cultural capital,
>
> lower educational aspirations, lower socio-economic status, insufficient
>
> knowledge about curricular offerings, inadequate finances, and poorer
>
> academic preparation. It is as if the starting point for first-generation students
>
> on entering the institution is the bottom of a ten-foot hole, and they are
>
> equipped with a five-foot ladder. (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012, p. 28)

Ward, Siegal, and Davenport's (2012) five-foot ladder for a ten-foot hole analogy is so

fitting because first-generation students are significantly behind those who already

have the adequate-length "ladder" to climb up the ranks in the college world in

persistence. One of the reasons behind this phenomenon could be "unwelcoming

campus climates," which are detrimental to students becoming acclimated to their new

environment (Núñez, et al., 2013). In order to persist, students need to feel accepted by

their schools (Nora, 2004). Inhospitable campus climates can make students feel

inadequate, insecure, and unwanted, resulting in low grade point averages or

discontinued enrollment (Yosso, 2006). First-generation students' ability to handle

these different obstacles depends on how supportive the educational environment is for

them. Thus, feeling like they fit in is paramount to their success.

Based on the emphasis of graduation rates or numbers, Latina/o first-

generation college students' stories are often seen as either successes or failures. When

an underrepresented student doesn't make it to graduation, he or she is viewed as

another statistic (Pyne & Means, 2013). Students of color are often associated with

low persistence rates, and their lived experiences are not taken into account,

undermining their stories and voices:

> If a student graduates, there is a collective pat on the back, and the student's
>
> college experience is moved to the "success" column on the spreadsheet. But if
>
> the student was unhappy during her entire college career, if she left campus
>
> every chance she got, and if she couldn't wait to simply finish her degree,
>
> deeming her college experience straightforward success is missing much of the
>
> story. (Minikel-Lacocque, 2015, p. 100)

The lived experiences, the stories of successes and failures, and the voices of Latina/o

first-generation college students should be considered in the discussion about who

makes it to college graduation and why. Because college often means impending

tension and anxiety, it is important that we understand what first-generation Latina/o

students go through: "Entering college requires youths to face multiple transitions,

including changes in their living arrangements, academic environments, and friendship

networks, while adapting to greater independence and responsibility in their personal

and academic lives" (Pittman & Richmond, 2008, p. 344). It is because of the

complexity of this transition that it is important to incorporate the perspectives of the

Latina/o first-generation students, the pioneers, who have first-hand knowledge of the

college experience.

Admission to college constitutes a massive change or shift in lifestyle. Students

face the reality of having to uproot their entire lives, and the expectation of extreme

self-reliance adds to the mix of stress. Further, compared to their non-first-generation

peers, first-generation students struggle to find their place in the college environment: "First-generation students… are often… grasping from day one for an anchor, a sense of belonging on their campus [and] have… the perception that they may not belong and may not have what it takes to succeed" (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012, p. 112). Hence, first-generation students' confidence levels about their place at the institution may waver based on experience. In studying how adolescents negotiate membership in an educational environment, Goodenow (1993) described school belonging as the way students perceive how they are "accepted, respected, and included by others in the school environment" (p. 80). Belonging is how students connect with one another and to the larger school environment. The sense of belonging to an academic community is important in determining how and why students perform well in school. Feeling a sense of belonging when trekking through the new college landscape is a necessity for many first-generation Latina/o students who may feel uncomfortable, not knowing how to navigate college: "Considering that college students are often living away from home for the first time and embedded within a new community, a sense of school belonging may be of particular importance" (Gummadam, Pittman, & Ioffe, 2015, p. 301). First-generation students have to feel as though they are part of their school so that they can be successful.

School belonging should be a part of the scholastic life of any college student. Due to feeling underrepresented, unsupported, or invisible (Gandara & Contreras, 2009), Latina/o first-generation college students especially need to feel as though they belong. Gummadam, Pittman, & Ioffe's 2015 study, which considered the

psychological adjustment of students of color in college based on school belonging and ethnic identity, found that school belonging was an important factor in the well-being of minority students: "… This study suggests the continued need to consider a sense of school belonging among ethnic minority college students, not only because of its ties to academic outcomes and retention in college… but to help improve students' psychological adjustment" (p. 303). Students educational livelihood, psychological stability, and self-worth were related to whether students felt that they belonged to their school.

As stated previously, belonging is an important factor in the overall well-being and academic accomplishments of Latina/o first-generation college students, since belonging is related to persisting. According to Hausman, Schofield, & Woods (2007),

Based on their early social experiences as they adjust to a new and sometimes daunting environment, first year students may quite quickly develop a sense of whether they belong at their school, which then affects their early sense of institutional commitment and intentions to persist. (p. 831)

School belonging can have a positive or negative effect on persistence. Hausman, Schofield, and Woods (2007) found that a sense of belonging was a significant predictor of institutional commitment as well:

How well a student adjusts to the academic environment of college is thus closely tied to their developing sense of belonging with the college… Once students begin college, taking measures to ensure that they become well-

integrated academically may help guard against a decline in sense of

belonging. (p. 829)

So, to be well-adjusted in college, for both social and academic growth, one has to feel

a sense of belonging. Experiences of exclusion work in the opposite way. If students

feel that they are outsiders, they have less investment in staying at their institution.

Diversity on campus matters when considering how and if students feel they

belong. While diversity is touted as one of many admirable and desirable

characteristics of many postsecondary institutions, this is not always the case. Yosso,

Smith, Ceja & Solórzano (2009) explain that, "Certainly, recruitment brochures would

not advertise a campus climate wherein Whites enjoy a sense of entitlement, while

Students of Color face charges of being unqualified and 'out of place'" (p. 660). While

many students of color experience feeling out of place at university given the

overwhelming representation of White students, universities still advertise diversity as

one of their areas of strength. Yosso, Smith, Ceja & Solórzano (2009) continue in

stating that

Beyond portraying a racially diverse group of students in recruitment

brochures, historically White universities do not necessarily commit to

providing equal access and opportunities for Students of Color, let alone

promise an inviting, positive campus racial climate. (p. 664)

Going to college does not guarantee a welcoming and inclusive climate for all students

of color. Universities advertise belonging, but feeling like part of the school does not

always happen for everyone.

Overarching Theme #2: A Sense of Belonging

First Subordinate Pattern Code:

Experiences of Exclusion

One of the most prevalent issues participants brought forward was the lack of Latina/o student representation on campus. The importance of diversity was a subject all participants mentioned in the context of going to college. For coding, experiences of exclusion were defined as experiences that result in estrangement from others. Many of the participants expressed that they felt like outsiders, underrepresented and misunderstood. Rosa asserted, "You always feel a little excluded… when everybody's White… [Because of the lack of diversity], there's always that student separateness" (Rosa, Interview #2, 14 August 2017). Being a minority, she felt out of place, a sentiment echoed by Tony, who stated,

> I'm not going to lie, if [the] room [was] full of White people, I would probably think twice about what I was going to say, because I didn't want to sound like a fool… Just because I don't want them to be like, "Look at this Mexican fool over here. He doesn't know what he's talking about," you know what I mean? I don't know if a White kid would feel the same way. I think he would just be like, "Oh, I just don't know," and that's it. I don't think he would attribute it to his race or his culture. (Tony, Interview #3, 2 August 2017)

Tony not only felt underrepresented, but also self-conscious. He claimed that he would rather say nothing in a college classroom than look like what he termed "a Mexican

fool." This feeling excluded him from participating in class discussions often. Rosa experienced similar circumstances: "I was very careful how I would speak, and I think that it still carries today. I'm always very careful. I'd rather not say something rather than saying something and having it sound 'off'" (Rosa, Interview #2, 22 August 2017). The absence of self-confidence because of the lack of diversity in a classroom had a significant impact on how Tony and Rosa perceived their abilities as students.

Feeling like a minority among a plethora of White students made Soraya feel like she had to change to be successful:

> I felt like I'd have to be more White, like completely get rid of my accent, my culture, and just try to be like them. I feel myself… slipping into that mindset of, "You have to act White so that you can relate with them." (Soraya, Interview #3, 21 August 2017)

After having the experience of persisting in college to her junior year, Soraya says that she learned to change her mindset, but it was hard to do: "Now, I say, 'That's not right. You are not White, and you don't have to be White in order to be successful on this campus'" (Soraya, Interview #3, 21 August 2017). Not everyone overcomes this feeling, though. Carmen feels that she still battles feelings of exclusion as she progresses into her senior year. She stated,

> Seeing myself as the only... Every class I walk into, I'm always one out of two persons of color. Always, always. Especially [as] the classes get higher and they get more advanced; it's always me and 30 other White people. (Carmen, Interview #2, 8 August 2017)

Feeling like one stands-out can have a negative effect on self-image if there are

feelings of exclusion (Gummadam, Pittman, & Ioffe, 201; Hausmann, Schofield, &

Woods, 2007; Minikel-Lacocque, 2015; Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Carmen terms

this feeling as seeing oneself as the "only," an adept term given that loneliness can be

the aftermath of feeling excluded.

Feeling lonely was constant for some of my participants because of

underrepresentation on campus. Carmen goes on to describe her experience:

> I didn't participate in any activities, any school dances… I didn't go to any of
>
> that because I just felt too alone. The college is trying really hard to put
>
> everybody together but it's not really working. They're not really reaching out
>
> to us [Latinos] and they're not making an environment for the new incoming
>
> students. (Carmen, Interview #1, 1 August 2017)

Carmen concedes that the university tries to have students get to know one another but

also, as a Latina, does not feel that they try to reach her specifically. Another

participant who felt that it was difficult to find other Latina/os on campus was

Antonio. He related that he "had trouble… getting to know which places [he] could go

to where there was diversity" (Antonio, Interview #1, 7 August 2017). Not knowing

where or how to find classmates with common backgrounds or ethnic identity,

Antonio did not feel like he belonged:

> As soon as you start feeling lonely, you feel like, "Why am I here?" When
>
> you're just out here alone, you're just overthink things… If that's something

> that you can't overcome, you'll just stay lonely all the time and not be able to
>
> change things. (Antonio, Interview #2, 8 August 2017)

The loneliness resulting from the feeling of exclusion or that they did not belong was daunting for participants. It made many of them question whether they fit in on campus. These experiences did not help them establish a sense of community within the university.

Overarching Theme #2: A Sense of Belonging

Second Subordinate Pattern Code:

Feelings of Cultural Isolation

During the three interviews, participants continuously described that Latino culture was an important part of how they identified. For coding, cultural isolation was defined as the absence or a lack of representation of one's own culture. Culture, according to most participants, should also play a role in schooling, since feeling as though one's culture is not represented is alienating. Participants thought having one's culture represented in college was one of the most important recommendations for change. Tony describes what he believes is the most current influential culture in college:

> Anglo culture still dominates in college [because] they have more access to it
>
> and [resources]. Maybe they have families where their parents went to college.
>
> So, there's a culture of "I went, your grandpa went, we're all going to go." We
>
> didn't have those things at all. (Tony, Interview #2, 1 August 2017)

Tony explains that White culture is the pervasive culture in college. He believes White

students have more access to it because of their access to not only resources, but many

family members who have been to college, and these are the factors that play a large

role in postsecondary level success. Maria has a similar sentiment; she expressed,

"You don't see a lot of people of color… I feel like that's because [college] is mostly

geared towards privileged people… You have to have some kind of level of privilege"

(Maria, Interview #2, 2 August 2017). Maria believes that without privilege, success is

less tangible in college.

The overrepresentation of the dominant White culture of college, according to

participants, was often overwhelming. Rosa commented, "It's every day. I'm just like,

'Everybody's White.' There's not a lot of people that look like me… It's still kind of

like, 'Oh, well you're the only Brown person here'" (Rosa, Interview #3, 24 August

2017). Rosa also explained that, while what she says sounds hyperbolic, it was often

literal; she was the only person of color in some of her advanced classes. Speaking

from experience, I also know what it is like to be the only Latina in a college class;

this is off-putting, isolating, and intimidating. Diana expands on this dynamic by

stating, "[As a Latina in college] you stick out… I'm sure other people don't get asked

why they're studying German as much as I do… I often [questioned] if I was really cut

out to do this" (Diana, Interview #3, 2 August 2017). Other participants also

mentioned that self-doubt was a side-effect of feeling underrepresented. Tony

questioned whether college was where he belonged as well:

I'm studying anthropology, which is a very White field and… Sometimes I feel

like I don't belong because I just don't see enough people that look like me…

If there were more people like me, I would feel more comfortable. I [often]

thought "What am I doing here?" There was always this thing in the back of

my head of like, "I'm just a poor Mexican boy. I don't know what I'm doing

here, especially here, where most of the other kids are White." So, you… look

around and you're like, "Wait, I'm the only non-White person in this

classroom." It's kind of in the back of your head. For that matter, I always felt

like, "Maybe I shouldn't be here." (Tony, Interview #2, 1 August 2017)

Tony's internal monologue is a clear example of the insecurity experienced by

students who feel they don't belong in college.

Wondering if college is the right place to be in also led Antonio to not only

question his own abilities, but to blame himself as well: "You start thinking if…

there's a problem with you, if there's a problem with the culture that you're in. And

then at the end, it always comes back to you. So, just to self-blame" (Antonio,

Interview #2, 8 August 2017). Questioning one's own culture as a possible source of

guilt is an extreme response to feeling out of place; this is reality for a lot of students

of color, participants suggested. In short, being the "only," to refer back to Carmen's

words, is not only daunting; it is simply lonely.

Overarching Theme #2: A Sense of Belonging

Third Subordinate Pattern Code:

Social Distance

For coding, social distance was defined as feelings of separateness. Feeling as though one does not belong can result in feeling distant from the college community, based on Rosa's comment:

Not seeing other people that look like you… It's like, "Okay, I don't want to be the only Latina in the room," you know what I mean? So, you keep a low profile. I think that's always been in the back of my mind a little bit… It's definitely something that I always am conscious of. (Rosa, Interview #3, 24 August 2017)

Keeping a low profile means that one lives in the background on campus; one becomes invisible. Speaking from experience, distance can feel like safety; it is sometimes the only coping strategy that will do the least damage. Carmen echoes the sentiment of feeling out of place by saying that

[Being] thrown into classes, the environment, and just being surrounded by people that didn't really look like me or didn't have my same story, would be really intimidating and I [would feel] like I didn't belong… [Not belonging] feels like, "This is definitely not for me. This is something people with money do. This is something people's families have done for generations." But I'm here as a newbie. I don't even know what's going on… It's too big, too much, too soon. (Carmen, Interview #2, 8 August 2017)

The word "thrown" connotes a sense of harsh, drastic, abrupt change. Carmen not only felt like she was incompatible with college, but inept to deal with its demands,

thinking that she was in the wrong place wasting time and money. Carmen believed that the transition between high school and college was not seamless; it was violent, even.

One of the participants expressed that, while living with his parents to save money for school, he felt even more distant from his college community because he did not live on camps:

> I had just gotten to know a few Latinos, not many as I would like, mainly because I don't live on campus, So, I didn't really have that full college experience… For the most part, [students] that were able to live here on campus were more connected… than those that live off campus. (Antonio, Interview #1, 7 August 2017)

According to participants, finding a community to belong to in a strange and foreign setting is not easy. The feeling of being lost and alone is constant. Soraya expresses this feeling in saying,

> It's just the feeling of isolation... That could be harmful… because you don't connect with [Anglo culture], and they don't connect with you. So, I'd say that's how it's hard being the only Latina…That's one difficulty I've had, just trying to make my own ground here, have my own roots, find my own community. (Soraya, Interview #1, 7 August 2017)

Soraya continued describing her experiences with isolation in the third interview:

> [I'm] trying to find my place in this campus, because sometimes I feel like I'm not grounding myself enough on this campus as I should be. And I feel like…

"Do I really belong here? Is this where I should be?" (Soraya, Interview #3, 21

August 2017)

This social distance is a complex side effect of the lack of representation on campus.

There is no sense of community if students don't feel like they belong. Without a

sense of community, how can there be a sense of safety to explore and learn?

The dynamic between the student and the campus climate must be harmonious

for students to feel comfortable enough to acclimate; if not, there can be the inner

strife Tony describes:

> It is weird to be in a classroom where they'll be thirty people and you're the
>
> only non-White person. Again, I don't know if they even notice that I'm not
>
> one of them or whatever, but to me it kind of [matters]. It is strange. It makes
>
> me… uncomfortable. I didn't belong. I don't know how to explain it. Just, I did
>
> not belong with the rest of the [students]. Those things where in the back of
>
> your head and you're like, "I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't be here. What am I
>
> doing here? I don't have the capacity to go to school. I'm not like these
>
> [students]." I always felt like I was behind. And I was like, "Well, I shouldn't
>
> be here because, again, I don't even know what they're talking about… I'm
>
> completely out of my element, and I'm just making a fool out of myself.
>
> (Tony, Interview #3, 2 August 2017)

Tony second guessed his intelligence; thought of himself as an outsider; and, felt

humiliated for believing he could even go to college. This sense of anxiety and self-

doubt was difficult for Tony, who continuously questioned his place at college: "I

should probably go back and do dead-end jobs because that's probably what… my family has done. That's what we've all done. I'm trying to maybe be something I'm not" (Tony, Interview #1, 31 July 2017). Feeling like a phony kept creeping into Tony's thinking, creating more internal conflict. Maria had similar emotions. Isolation was a continuous issue in Maria's college narrative. She remarked, "[The campus climate feels] disconnected, distant… It feels like everyone is in their own little bubble. I feel like I'm just here, taking up some space" (Maria, Interview #1, 1 August 2017). Feeling like she was there just "taking up space" hurt Maria's sense of direction. Being the only person of color in college classroom can also result in second guessing one's capabilities and potential as a student, as Rosa details:

> I noticed that now I'm always the person that has an accent in the room… I
> think probably the hardest part is... I'd say just watching my language, making
> sure I [pronounce things] correctly… [The higher up you do in education], it's
> like, "People are looking at you, so you better be careful." So… do I feel safe
> of always saying my opinion? I guess in that way is that exclusion? I don't feel
> safe… [Professors] open the floor if I wanted to say something, but again
> because I put up that facade I want to just be really careful with what I say.
> (Rosa, Interview #2, 22 August 2017)

Rosa describes not feeling safe to speak because she was the only person of color in her class. Hurtado and Ponjuan (2005) argue that this is not an anomaly:

> … Students who tended to speak Spanish at home were more likely than
> English dominant speakers to perceive a hostile climate for diversity on

campus. This suggests that students who retain strong cultural ties are less

likely to see their university as a welcoming campus environment. (p. 244)

Why would students with strong cultural roots perceive the campus climate to be

hostile? Perhaps the campus climate is only catering to a certain type of student and, if

one does not fit the mold, feelings of inadequacy arise. These feelings of insecurities

permeated most participant responses about the lack of diversity on campus. Antonio

shares this concern by claiming,

> I started feeling a little bit more lonely. Especially the classes I was taking,
>
> sometimes I'd be the only one that was different… I would say part of the
>
> campus climate is feeling alone, especially when you don't live on campus.
>
> (Antonio, Interview #2, 8 August 2017)

Maria describes the dynamics of what it means to go to college by stating, "It's a game

you have to play. You don't realize you're playing it... but you are your entire life,

you're playing it. And in college you have to be aware that you're playing it, if that

makes sense" (Maria, Interview #2, 2 August 2017). Largely, most participants related

that learning about how to "play the game" of college was a disheartening challenge

that often resulted in despair.

Overarching Theme #3: Keeping One's Identity

Introduction

As explained in chapter two, Erikson (1968) believed that identity is not

stagnant, but a continuing function. As we grow older, we become more aware of the

process along with the elements that make up our identities: "Identity works to integrate the reconstructed past and imagined future into a psychosocial pattern that makes sense to the self and to the people and the institutions who bear witness to the self's development" (McAdams & Guo, 2014, p. 16). Our experiences, the people around us, our environments and the institutions in them all contribute to our development of identity. In other words, society is responsible for helping us become or form ourselves: "… It is the interactions in social settings that construct who we are" (Kaufman, 2014, p. 35). Erikson (1968) firmly believed that the social setting was crucial to individual identity development; it is a communal undertaking. The experience of going to college, then, contributes to one's identity development. Hanson agrees by asserting that "Identities are created as we think, talk, and tell stories about who we are, where we have been, and what we have done" (p. 7). College helps shape us. While college is responsible for producing society's future leaders, experts, and professionals, it also becomes part of our life narrative: "The experience of college becomes part of a student's life story and a part of their past" (Hanson, 2014, p. 7). Thus, analyzing the effect the experience of college has on identity is needed to better understand the college student.

Culture is a significant part of what makes us unique. To depict the plight of people of color who are asked to leave their culture behind in order to be part of the dominant culture, Anzaldúa (1987) describes the irony of being the invisible while also being the discernable outsider:

> I am visible—see this Indian face—yet I am invisible. I both blind them with
>
> this beak nose and I am their blind spot. But I exist, we exist. They'd like to
>
> think I've melted into the pot, but I haven't. We haven't. (p. 86)

She eloquently depicts how the concept of the melting pot, often used to praise the state of diversity in the U.S., can actually be an oppressive construct. She hints at the concept of people of color having to melt into the pot of mainstream society in order to belong, but also acknowledges that there is great resiliency to resist the erasure of one's identity and culture. No one should have to give up who they are or how they identify to be accepted; yet, this could be described as a secret, and oftentimes not so secret, requirement to become part of the dominant culture.

Overarching Theme #3: Keeping One's Identity

First Subordinate Pattern Code:

Academic Aspirations

Participants' academic aspirations were described along with their profiles earlier in the chapter. All of them described that education was important to them and that their families contributed to how they felt about completing college in one way or another. For coding, academic aspiration was defined as a desire or inspiration to reach one's four-year degree. For participants, family influence dictated how participants formed their academic aspirations most. Soraya conveyed that her parents were her motivation to succeed:

I saw how my parents work even still to this day. And when I saw that I was

just like, "I'm So, incredibly blessed for my parents." There's this saying where

a dad telling his kids, "I work with my hands, So, you don't have to." I think

that was what really motivated me; it was just seeing my parents. I said, "Okay,

I'm going to go to college… They came to America for this sole reason, to give

me this opportunity. I want to [give] back to my parents, my family, my

community, myself. (Soraya, Interview #1, 7 August 2017)

Soraya says that her parents' sacrifices was what helped her realize her opportunity to

advance her academic career. Another source of inspiration for Soraya was to realize

that not everyone in her family has had the same chance to go to college: "My cousins,

who I grew up with, asked me what I was studying and one of them said, 'At least one

of us [made] it.' That broke my heart" (Soraya, Interview #1, 7 August 2017).

Whether positive or negative, participants' families' influences serve as fuel for

participants to complete their four-year degrees.

Keels' 2013 research illustrates that some of the first-generation college

students may struggle with identity due to their disconnection from parents, and

"Enjoying the autonomy becomes virtually impossible as a result of this social

separation" (p. 149). Latina/o first-generation college students in Keels' study also

experienced difficulty because their parents feared they would lose part of their

cultural identity once they assimilated to American college life; thus, students felt

what the author calls "breakaway guilt" (p. 153). Latina/o first-generation college

students may feel alienated and alone due to disengagement from parents or guardians

who may be unfamiliar with the world of academia. This differentness can cause a rift in family membership. It can damage Latina/o Latina/o first-generation college students' sense of identity in terms of autonomy and self-worth, resulting in battles over ideology and values. This divide is one of the downsides to the climb up the hierarchical structure of power through education in our society for some immigrant families (Núñez et al., 2013).

As Keels (2013) illustrates, going to college can cause differences between the Latina/o first-generation college student and his or her parents. Diana described the difference she noticed going to college created from her parents:

> I can't go to [my parents] to be like, "Oh, what should my next career move be? Should I do this? Should I take these courses?" … My dad, he's like, "When are you going to graduate?" And it's a really frustrating question… I mean like, "You don't know what it's like to have to take a certain amount of credits, or not being able to take a class because it's not available because it's full. You also, don't know what it's like to go to school full time and work full time, and still have a life outside of that." Yeah, I don't feel like my family gets it very much. (Diana, Interview #1, 31 July 2017)

Many participants echoed Diana's feelings about being lost in the process of college because of a lack of guidance at home. Rosa explains that her parents also did not fully grasp the concept of college and saw it as mostly a means for bettering one's financial future:

[Being a first-generation student], it's an honor. [But], I feel like sometimes my

family doesn't understand like, 'Why are you still broke if you already have

done so much education, but you're still broke?' They translate success to just

finances. So, no, I don't even have a car right now, so it's like, "Why are you

really doing this?" So [I've] been educating them. Trying to tell them how it

works and what I'm doing. It's been difficult. (Rosa, Interview #1, 14 August

2017)

For the most part, parental influence served to help motivate participants to continue

working to attain their four-year degrees, as Soraya reflects:

Despite [my parents] not being able to help me with my college path, they help

me by inspiring me, motivating me, and I want to pay them back for how much

they've given me and my siblings. One of my goals is just to be able to provide

for them, buy them a house. So that's my motivation. That's what gets me

through, just thinking about my parents being the end goal. (Soraya, Interview

#2, 14 August 2017)

Tony had a similar experience with his mom. He said, "My mom always [said] 'I

couldn't do it. So, I want you guys to go to school.' She would always push us to read

and to get better grades" (Tony, Interview #1, 31 July 2017). Whether positively or

negatively, participants' parents had a strong influence on shaping their students'

academic aspirations.

All in all, participants described experiencing hesitation about whether they

would "make it" through college, but all of them are persisting. Carmen thought high

school was going to be the end goal for her: "Friends never even talked about college. I never talked about college. I knew high school was going to be a big achievement and I thought that was it for me" (Carmen, Interview #2, 8 August 2017). Because no one else had gone to college in her immediate family, Carmen thought she would follow in their footsteps. She describes her encounter with applying to college and what she went through once there:

> [Getting into college] was just me messing around with the computer and logging in and just doing the application process [on my own], and I said let's do it. I didn't know what classes to take… It took me [longer] because I just kept taking classes that I didn't need. And I kept getting discouraged and... I had no help. (Carmen, Interview #1, 1 August 2017)

The frustration of not knowing how to navigate the college landscape was traumatic for Carmen. She felt as though she was alone on the journey for a four-year degree. Carmen didn't know who to turn to. She describes her feelings of self-doubt and her sense of perseverance once she decided to give college a try:

> It was just always a doubt. I was like, "Oh that's not for me. It's not my place. I'm coming into a spot that is this specific group of people…I'm going into it, and I don't what I'm going to do… I'm going to be intimidated, but I'm going." (Carmen, Interview #2, 8 August 2017)

Even before she arrived at college, Carmen thought that college was for a specific kind of student and that it would be harder for her.

Overarching Theme #3: Keeping One's Identity

Second Subordinate Pattern Code:

Social Influences

For coding, social influences were defined as social factors or circumstances that affect or change a condition or situation. Participants' parents were the major source or social influence for how participants felt about college, as Antonio reminds us: "I would say it was a lot of pressure [being a first-generation college student], especially since my parents had no education. They always stressed that I should go to college. So, there was a pressure there" (Antonio, Interview #1, 7 August 2017). Parental influence was one of the motivating factors mentioned by most participants, but familial obligations was also influential. Going to college was not just about the participants' lives; it was also about their families' futures. Alma describes,

> I'm not only here for me. I have to worry about my family. I have to worry about my sister, my brother, and my mom, my dad, the bills, taking care of them, and family problems as well. I can't just focus all of my time on school, studying, making friends, hanging out. That's not really what I can do. What I do when school starts [is] just go to work and then come to school, back and forth, back and forth, and study when I can. (Alma, Interview #3, 10 August 2017)

Alma details that school did not always come first. Family was the priority. Feeling responsible for the wellbeing of family was another recurring idea in participant responses. Soraya also had siblings to worry about, along with school:

> [Living at home], you have to not only think about yourself. You have to think
>
> about, "Oh, I have to take care of my sister" or "When can I work? When can I
>
> study?" So, I have to think about all of that on top of just, "How many classes
>
> can I take? How many classes will be covered by financial aid?" So, for me, I'd
>
> say it's complex. (Soraya, Interview #1, 7 August 2017)

Family obligations were important for participants, given that familial ties are an

important part of Latino culture (Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Núñez, et al., 2013).

Other social influences also played a role. Having the experience of working

helped Carmen put her college career into perspective. At first, she learned, "[Being a

secretary] was the biggest. They were the highest we could think of in the family"

(Carmen, Interview #2, 8 August 2017). However, once she considered going to

college, she explained that a whole new world opened up to her. Her experience

working as a secretary helped prepare her for the possibility of college and pursuing a

career in accounting. Another facet of social life participants mentioned as influencing

their college-going decisions were their friends. For example, Carmen describes one of

the ways she was exposed to the realm of college at a friend's house:

> Going into somebody else's family like visiting my friends and seeing their
>
> parents have degrees, have their own businesses, have the luxury to go
>
> camping every weekend, or go to the beach, or to travel, when my family was
>
> working seven days a week all the time [was tough]. (Carmen, Interview #2, 8
>
> August 2017)

In this case, Carmen discovered that going to college was a way to climb the social ranks. She learned that the path to personal economic success includes college. So, some participants learned about college through the example or exposure to others. Further, social justice issues were other factors motivating my Latina/o first-generation college student participants to take action by going to college to further their careers and contribute to the advancement of society and justice for its all its people. The uneven playing field in college itself was a motivator for Carmen, for example, who remarked,

> I have bigger sense of I need to succeed at this because everything around us is bringing us [Latinos] down. Almost everything around us is not made for us; it's bringing us down, and it's meant to bring us down… [College] is not teaching me my culture. (Carmen, Interview #3, 10 August 2017)

Here, Carmen alludes to the social justice issues Latinos face, specifically in college. She would like to have her culture represented more and see people like her in class. Diana also viewed social justice issues as reason to continue her academic career: "I [was interested in] how unequal things are in terms of access and justice… I also, feel that responsibility to my Latino community" (Diana, Interview #1, 31 July 2017). Social justice was a major motivator.

Overall, parental influence was among the most mentioned elements that affected participants' decisions to go to college. Work experience, family obligations, examples from others, and social justice were the other most prevalent social factors

mentioned as well. All of these factors contributed to helping the Latin/o first-generation college get to college and persist once there.

Overarching Theme #3: Keeping One's Identity

Third Subordinate Pattern Code:

Identity Development

As discussed previously, identity development includes how one forms the self through interaction with others and our environment (Erikson, 1968). For coding, identity development was defined as retaining values or beliefs unique to individual growth through learning experiences. All participants believed that college had a noteworthy impact on forming who they have become. For participants, identity development also related to how they saw themselves growing as they interacted with college culture.

Tony believes that having one's culture represented in college does not always happen: "It's important to find a balance between integrating into that White college culture and keeping your Latino identity… [to] try to find that balance, try to mesh" (Tony, Interview#2, 1 August 2017). Being around the dominant culture while one's culture is not as represented is disorienting. Tony feels that, as a Latino, his identity was put to the test because White culture threatened to take over his identity. From experience, I know that being immersed in the mainstream culture and not seeing my Latino culture represented in college made me question if there was something wrong

with my own culture or who I was. Maria attests to how the dominant college culture

made her have similar thoughts in saying that,

> [Being a Latina in a predominantly White campus is] challenging. I would say
>
> that because there's so many little obstacles that you have to get through to get
>
> to the big obstacles. And yeah, especially on… campus, it's very difficult to
>
> navigate… [Colleges should] develop who we are more or not stifle [our
>
> identities] … I personally was feeling like it was an identity eraser… That stuff
>
> makes you hurt inside but you don't realize until you've gotten such a big dose
>
> of it that you're just kind of broken… That's the institution. (Maria, Interview
>
> #3, 8 August 2017)

Maria believes college stifles identities in big "doses," which results in the breaking

down of a student. Carmen repeats Maria's sentiment in asserting, "You don't really

learn about yourself and you're not really represented at all" (Carmen, Interview #3,

10 August 2017). The term Maria uses to describe college culture here is interesting; it

is an "identity eraser." Rosa agrees with Maria's assessment of how college affects

identity development: "You really battle with 'Who am I?... This is what everyone's

doing, should I do this?'" (Rosa, Interview #3, 24 August 2017). In other words,

college culture can take away from what students know their identity and culture to be

and suggests that students melt or blend in to the mainstream pot.

Soraya is one of the participants that explicitly referred to the border-crossing

(Yosso, 2006) that colleges ask their minority students to do. She expands on how the

college experience requires that one question the fit of one's identity:

It's completely two different cultures, two different worlds, because I have my

culture back at home and then I have my culture [in college] … I have to learn

how to fuse them both together without risking who I am as a person… I don't

want to ignore one of my identities because I am a Latina, but I'm also a

college student. (Soraya, Interview #2, 14 August 2017)

Crossing the identity border between college student and Latina seems like a

confusing and difficult task based on what Soraya describes. The two worlds, from

what participants expressed, seem to clash often. Rosa explains how the two worlds

would often collide:

I would always have to be the one [in class] that mentioned, 'There's also

subcultures within our country and society," and so... I would always have to

be like the reminder, like, "Hey, I'm not White." … There does need to be

some type of… more education on just our [Latino] culture in general, because

it's easy to forget about it. (Rosa, Interview #2, 22 August 2017)

Thus, Rosa is saying that, in order not to erase students' identities, colleges need to

incorporate different cultures into the college experience itself. If not, Latina/o first-

generation college student identities would be devalued or not affirmed, resulting in a

loss of culture and identity. Rosa provides an example of this dynamic:

I always change my language whenever I'm talking to people at school… I

would even say that because I'm here and it's predominantly White, I don't get

a chance to practice a lot of my Spanish. I guess I get used to assimilating so

much, because sometimes I just do it all the time. (Rosa, Interview #3, 24

August 2017)

Here, Rosa describes how she assimilates to survive and succeed in college. Soraya

expands on this construct:

I feel [college is] kind of a White narrative. When you think about college, it's

a White person thing. And, in some cases, people do assimilate to it. They try

to erase their culture, make themselves seem as similar as White people as

possible, so they can connect with them and actually be like them. But in other

cases, if you're not so much like that, you kind of struggle between two

identities…. I feel like that's just the biggest thing when I think about college,

is the assimilation and trying to be like other people, especially when you're

coming from a background like mine, you just want to assimilate. You want to

fit in. You want to be like other people. (Soraya, Interview #1, 7 August 2017)

Wanting to fit in so badly that taking on the traits of others sounds like a good idea is

detrimental to students' self-confidence. Tony added that the overall perception is that

"College culture in American society is mostly White," and "White [students do]

college things" (Tony, Interview #2, 1 August 2017). This feeling of feeling that

college belongs to a specific group of people was heavily discussed in the interviews.

Soraya brings up the idea of college as the identity "eraser," in Maria's words (Maria,

Interview #3, 8 August 2017), again here. Moreover, she describes that this reality

results in significant inner strife.

Soraya later continued to describe that it is better to adapt and change who

rather than keeping one's identity but not belong:

I guess being comfortable would be just forgetting what I look like. The color

of my skin, financial background, that kind of stuff. I just want to let it all go

and find somewhere where I belong without worrying about any of that... I

think I don't have to let go of those at all, but right now, that's what it feels like.

Because I know there is a balance between both where you can be your entire

identity and belong here. I just haven't found that yet and I haven't found out

how to balance it completely… I feel like it's definitely difficult to find your

place, especially when you're coming from a first-generation [student

background] and being from two different cultures. It's difficult to [blend] both

of those easily. (Soraya, Interview #3, 21 August 2017)

Soraya alludes to the possibility of intertwining college culture and her own Latino

culture but being unable to so. She believes a "blend" of the two is necessary for

success. She also mentions a need to change who she is to fit in, but forgetting her

identity, the color of her skin, where she comes from for the price of fitting in on

campus seemed not only extremely unfair to her, but unjust.

Overarching Theme #4: Navigating the College Landscape

Introduction

Successfully navigating the college landscape results in persisting. Persistence

is different from retention. Instead of asking "'How do we stop the revolving front

door and retain students at the institution?'" we ask, "How can we enhance our

learning environment so that students will be motivated and inspired to persist?'"

(Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012, pp. 64). The latter question would consider how

colleges could make students from all races and ethnicities feel like they belong at the

school; it would mean colleges would continuously be reinventing themselves and

changing best practices to improve.

 Persistence relates to a more constructive stance on what it takes to have

students stay in college whereas retention is more about the issues students come

across:

 … Persistence is a more positive and active term that suggests going beyond

 simply retaining students in the system… The three domains of retention—

 academic, personal, social, and cultural—represent key problems and stressors

 many students encounter in college that have a negative impact on their

 personal experience… It is the degree to which student feel both

 psychologically and socially connected to their institution once they enter the

 environment. (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012, pp. 64-65)

Persistence means that adjustment, both psychological and social, be contemplated

when considering why students stay. Without the consideration of these qualifiers,

students would be reduced to numbers and statistics. Persistence also entails a variety

of other factors for first-generation students:

 … First-generation students success and persistence fundamentally relate to (1)

 academic integration, or the degree to which first-generation students navigate

the academic environment and reconcile the gap between expectations and

realities; (2) personal and social integration, or the degree to which first-

generation students experience a sense of belonging at the institution: and (3)

cultural integration, or the degree to which first-generation students discover

and understand… the values, norms, traditions, beliefs, behaviors, and other

tenets of campus culture. (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012, pp. 62-63)

In other words, without adjusting to the culture of college, or finding oneself at home

in the college environment, students are less likely to persist. Students' academic

performance matters, but to consider why some students may not do well

academically, the numbers do not tell the entire story.

Going to college is a time of great change for the student and his or her family.

Students must leave all they know and are familiar with behind and embark on a new

journey; this is true for all students:

The college experience is a time of transition. Whether it is a transition from

adolescence to early adulthood for traditional-age students or transition from

one life path to another for the older students, the college experience inevitably

calls for reconsideration of one's role and responsibility in the world.

(Magolda, 2014, p. 25)

Changes from the transition to college also have an effect on identity development in

adulthood: "Emerging adulthood is marked by identity exploration and opportunities

for life transformation" (Magolda, 2014, p. 25). Thus, the college experience is

marked by differences in how we define who we are (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The identity development that takes place at the college level does not just stem from the student:

> When we consider the effect that college has on the development of students, we often think in terms of psychological or cognitive changes… The fallacy with this approach is that college is not an individual experience, rather, it is a social experience. One might even say it is a social process. (Kaufman, 2014, p 35)

Going to college means that students must widen their horizons to think about their place, or potential contributions, to society while interacting with a new environment and the people in it. Regardless of age, students are leaving behind one lifestyle for another and have to learn to adapt to the changes quickly. But not all students have the same advantages. Specifically, first-generation students have to get used to a whole new set of rules, people, and way of life on their own: "When first-generation students go away to college, it can sometimes seem as though they are entering a foreign land, where they are met with a new language, new customs and great uncertainty" (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012, p.128). Becoming accustomed to any new setting is trying and moving on to college includes not only academic differences, but cultural ones as well.

When students do not adapt well to the new environment of college, they struggle. First-generation students are likely to many obstacles if they feel alone and helpless. This is why when considering how students navigate the college landscape colleges should not assume that all students have the same advantages: "The

assumption that all students come in with a general understanding of the collegiate world unintentionally places some students even farther out on the margins of the institution" (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012, p. 75). All students must feel welcome, supported, and motivated in order to succeed socially as well as academically. As discussed previously, if first-generation students feel they do not fit in, they will not persist: "The degree to which students feel they fit into the fabric of the institution is a crucial component of their decision to stay or leave when they are faced with vexing challenges" (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012, p. 75). If students think they're outcasts, they will not want to stay in college.

Belonging is a crucial component of navigating the college landscape effectively and efficiently. Students must feel they matter where they are:

> Many first-generation students have an omnipresent fear of being in an environment for which they have no frame of reference and in which they sense they might not belong… Being a cultural outsider can ultimately lead to a crisis of competence and fears of academic inadequacy. (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012, p. 75)

First-generation students are likely to feel like they are on their own more because they are the first to venture off into college and, as Ward, Siegel, and Davenport explain, are more susceptible to feeling alone. They need to feel like they belong in the college culture, but that their own culture, as a student of color, is valued (Minikel-Lacocque, 2015; Núñez, et al., 2013; Pyne & Means2013)..

Overarching Theme #4: Navigating the College Landscape

First Subordinate Pattern Code:

Adjusting

As described previously, adjusting to college for first-generation college students can be a challenge. Adjusting was defined as a condition of harmonious relation to the environment and the people in it so that internal and external needs could be met for coding. First-generation students have very little frame of reference given that they are embarking on an odyssey through college on their own. Carmen describes the loneliness she felt being the first to go to college:

> Adjusting to college. Again, just feeling alone and not being able to talk to my family about it because they won't understand what it's like… They don't understand the workload that it takes or what it means… I took So, many classes. And I failed So, many classes. I just didn't know. (Carmen, Interview #1, 1 August 2017)

Maria restates Carmen's point in her own words: "My mom has an eight-grade education and my dad made it to twelfth grade, but didn't finish, So, [I] don't know how to navigate anything [or get] any help anywhere" (Maria, Interview #1, 1 August 2017). The lonely feeling of being the first to go to college was ubiquitous for participants.

Maria very eloquently describes what it is like trying to adjust to the foreign college environment as a Latina first-generation college student:

> Being the first person to, in my family to go to college… That experience, it's being in a dark room and being blindfolded on top of that… and having to feel

around and not knowing what you're looking for. That's what it is to me, at

least. (Maria, Interview #3, 8 August 2017)

To describe what it's like to feel lost and out of place in college, Maria uses the

metaphor of being blindfolded in an already dark room and feeling around to find

something she doesn't even know she is looking for. This creative way to think about

the challenges of being the first to go to college describes how frightening the

experience can be. She doesn't know where to go; who to see; or how to tackle

challenges that arise regularly. She does not even know what she's trying to find in in

the dark room that is college to begin with. Diana's comment resonates with Maria's

metaphor. She says, "[Being FGCS is] like going in unchartered territory, because I

can't talk about it to anybody" (Diana, Interview #1, 31 July 2017). Going into the

unknown blindfolded and then being expected to adjust is a tall order. Adjusting to

college for Tony, as is the case with many first-generation students (Ward, Siegel, &

Davenport, 2012), was tough as well:

> It was challenging trying to… adapt as quickly as you can and try to
>
> understand what was happening in your new surroundings… [I had to get] in
>
> the rhythm of learning and actually learning how to learn. I always felt like I
>
> had to catch up. I felt like I missed a lot of things. So, those are the things that I
>
> think kind of hurt me... [As a person of color] Sometimes you do… feel like
>
> maybe you have to try harder. (Tony, Interview #3, 2 August 2017)

Above, Tony describes his attempts at adjusting as "getting in the rhythm of learning

how to learn." He constantly felt as though he needed to catch-up to others and had to

try harder. Based on Maria, Tony, and Diana's explanations of what it means to be

first-generation college students, it is fair to say that adjusting to the unknown college

landscape is a formidable obstacle to conquer, or as Carmen says, it is about "putting

up a daily fight… [having] to give myself pep talks every day" (Carmen, Interview #2,

8 August 2017).

While colleges are constantly advertising all the resources they have for

students of color (Minikel-Lacocque, 2015), Alma points out that the visibility of

resources is not always clear:

> [Adjustment] is definitely building community within [the school], and not just
>
> building but finding it. You have to find it on your own here on campus. It's
>
> not something that's just like, "Here's a pamphlet of all the resources available
>
> for first generation Latinas." (Alma, Interview #2, 9 August 2017)

Carmen shares the same experience:

> I found [resources] by myself because I just got tired of waiting for somebody
>
> to tell me my first year here, and I just roamed around the school. And I said,
>
> "I'm going to go into every single building and see what's going on, and I'm
>
> going to find out myself because apparently nobody's going to teach me."
>
> (Carmen, Interview #3, 10 August 2017)

Not having direction when it came to accessing the resources available on campus was

another heavily discussed topic throughout the interviews. A constant lack of

information was ever-present in the academic lives of my participants. Maria stated

that

[The problem is] not getting the information that you need... There are so,

many things I learned about this year that I should have known my first year of

school… It's just, you're guiding yourself… [At four-year universities] you're

on your own… I didn't have an advisor. I don't have an advisor now. I've

advised myself throughout this entire thing because I don't even know where

to go. That's the thing. (Maria, Interview #2, 2 August 2017)

Alma also adds to the conversation of feeling disoriented and adrift while at a loss for

information: "But really, [first-generation Latinos] don't know what we don't know

until we know we don't know" (Alma, Interview #2, 9 August 2017). The feeling of

being lost when it came to finding resources or seeking-out specific people for varying

advising issues was constant for a lot of participants. While these experiences made

them self-reliant, according to Maria, they still wish that they didn't have to learn the

hard way.

Another issue that arose was being one or few persons of color who was often

asked to say something about race or felt an obligation to say something about race in

conversations during class was something that participants discussed substantially;

some felt tokenized. Soraya stated:

When I'm in a classroom with, I guess, just White people, I feel like I'm always

that person that brings race into an issue. I tend to always bring up race

issues… [but] it's really tiring being around a White campus because,

sometimes I feel like I have to change myself for them or that I have to explain

things to them. And I'm okay with teaching people and helping them, but at the

same time, it gets exhausting having to do it over and over again. (Soraya,

Interview #3, 21 August 2017)

Soraya says that having to be the one to speak for an entire people is cumbersome. She

describes that being the representative for an entire ethnicity is not fair. However, it is

such an important subject to Soraya that she is always willing to "go there." Alma felt

she had to live in more worlds than most people and that she was treated differently

because of who she was. She states, "[As one of the few queer women of color on

campus], it's hard to be tokenized" (Alma, Interview #3, 10 August 2017). Alma

thought that having to always be placed in boxes is unjust as well. Rosa describes

similar experiences:

> I don't want to say [being a person of color in a predominantly White campus]
>
> is a burden, but it is an extra thing to do because then you have to educate
>
> people on how it's different for you, or the other alternative to self-preservation
>
> is just assimilate. The opportunity to educate people on what it is for you to be
>
> a Latina doesn't really present itself, I would say… I'm the only Latina usually
>
> in the classroom, so sometimes when I do want to talk about the experiences
>
> for me of what I experience in my ethnic group. I always wonder, "Is that too
>
> much [information]?" (Rosa, Interview #3, 24 August 2017)

Rosa explains that what comes to mind when she thinks of being in a predominantly

White campus is the word "burden," yet she is more than willing to help people

understand why her experiences are different.

To reiterate, a major recurring emotion when it came to adjusting to college was the feeling of loneliness. Carmen explains that the lack of diversity has a large impact on how she feels at the university: "It's really hard to find somebody that just looks like you or that shares kind of the same experiences" (Carmen, Interview #3, 10 August 2017). Not seeing oneself represented by other students on campus has an impact on how one perceives one's place and potential in the academy. Antonio agrees,

> It's always more comforting seeing someone with your own skin tone, or that could speak the same language as you, and it's just more enjoyable when you notice those things. But when it's not present, it's just like going back to… a lonely feeling. (Antonio, Interview #3, 10 August 2017)

Seeing Latinos reflected in the student body is comforting, according to participants, and lets them know they are in the right place. Soraya adds,

> It's not diverse when you go in the classroom and you're the only person of color in there… It's kind of hard… I'd say [this university] is striving for diversity, and they want to make it really diverse. But once you get into a classroom, it feels like it's not. [Once you] get into a classroom, it doesn't feel like it's supposed to be diverse and that we're honoring everybody's differentness. (Soraya, Interview #1, 7 August 20217)

Preaching diversity and practicing diversity are different things, according to Soraya. Participants also did acknowledge that culture is celebrated on campus at times and that there are multiple culture centers on campus, but it's not as accessible as it seems,

according to Rosa. She states, "I know that [cultural events are] happening. There are things going on, but how do you know? You have to dig" (Rosa, Interview #2, 22 August 2017).

Overarching Theme #4: Navigating the College Landscape
Second Subordinate Pattern Code:

Paying for College

Paying for college was another murky and often unclear process the participants brought up as a major concern. For coding, paying for college was defined as the amount of money required by a student for expenses and financing their higher education. Not knowing what to do or how to get the money they needed haunted them. Ward, Siegel, and Davenport (2012) state that "Although increasing numbers of college students each year are under greater financial pressure, the challenge for first-generation students is even more acute" (p. 57), adding to the many challenges first-generation students face. Carmen expressed her unawareness about the entire process: "I didn't know what it meant, what it took to go to college" (Carmen, Interview # 2, 8 August 2017). Most of the participants described themselves as perseverant and determined to work hard and make enough money to continue persisting through college. However, work did interfere with their schooling.

Having to work through most of his college years, Antonio began his trek through college with different sources of income, including scholarships and grants, but they didn't last through the entire four years: "My third year, I started having less scholarships and so, I had to start working" (Antonio, Interview #1, 7 August 2017).

Because of the lack of funds, Antonio had to work full time, which interfered with his

studies. He explained why his studies were affected by him having to work full time:

"If you worry about finance throughout your college education, it affects your studies,

because depending on what you end up doing for a job, you don't have as much study

time, and you're always tired" (Antonio, Interview #2, 8 August 2017). For Antonio,

working made excelling in his classes that much harder because he was often

exhausted, physically and mentally.

Tony's experience in college was also affected him by having to work full

time. This experience, while trying, proved why college was important for him: "I had

dead-end jobs and that helped me take college seriously and see it as a way out... to

make my life better" (Tony, Interview #1, 31 July 2017). Going to college provided

Tony with hope for a more fruitful future. But working did affect his college

experience Tony also explains that he didn't have the luxury of not working while in

college:

> Having to struggle with a job… was difficult too because I can't afford to not
>
> work like a lot of young kids do. I've had to figure all that out on my own…
>
> I've always had to work, and it would get overwhelming sometimes. There
>
> were entire semesters or whatever where I slept four or five hours a night. It
>
> was tough. It makes you want to quit, but I was like, "I can't quit. I can't quit."
>
> (Tony, Interview #2, 1 August 2017)

While working literary took sleepless nights, Tony's resilience in wanting to further

his career is evident. He didn't quit once he realized college was the only way to

improve working the "dead-end" jobs he had to take to provide for his family.

For Diana, trying to pay for college was one of the top sources of anxiety. She

related,

I have to be realistic because it sucks having to drop classes, and it's a waste of

money... And those are all adjustments that I've had to make, but I would say

the logistical part of it, the planning, [the finances] … those are the stressors.

(Diana, Interview #3, 2 August 2017)

Having to pay for school also did not allow Diana to live on campus, which affected

her overall college involvement: "It was stressful because I was still working, and I

chose not to live on campus. So, I wasn't getting the full experience that other students

were" (Diana, Interview #1, 31 July 2017). Antonio echoed Diana's concern about not

being involved on campus because of work. He said "[Because of work] I wasn't able

to really have a lot of… friends. So, every time I'd be here, I would feel like alone...

Having that social life would have helped-out a lot" (Antonio, Interview #1, 7 August

2017). Tony expanded on the same idea by explaining that he would have

… Loved to join [clubs]. I do see them [and think], "Man, that sounds cool. It

seems like fun." But I go back to [thinking], "I work 40 hours a week. I don't

have the time. I barely have time to just do my school work. I don't have time

to participate in any other kind of extracurricular activities." (Tony, Interview

#3, 1 August 20217)

Diana, Antonio, and Tony all expressed great regret in not being able to participate in

campus activities, clubs, or memberships because of work. Regardless, in Diana's

case, even though getting the money to pay for classes constantly worried her and did

not allow her to become immersed in activities on campus, she was willing to do

whatever she could to continue going to college:

> I said, "You know what, I think I can afford it. I can go back to just going three
>
> times a week to the office and then working Saturdays and Sundays. I can do
>
> it… I can just struggle my way all the way again. I'll drop my phone; I'll drop
>
> my internet; I'll drop everything. I'll do what I can." (Diana, Interview #1, 31
>
> July 2017)

Diana knew that she could not give up going to school no matter what the cost to

improve her future.

> Other participants cited family as the source for their decision to stay in school

even though it cost more than they originally thought. Carmen said her family was a

strong motivator for her to make the financial sacrifices necessary to continue going to

school as well as her "dead-end" job:

> [I thought], "What is [success] going to take? My job is not going to take me
>
> anywhere. [It's] probably going to be $15 an hour tops. By then it's not going
>
> to be enough. I want my mom to stop working. She's getting older." (Carmen,
>
> Interview #1, 1 August 2017)

Carmen goes on to describe her financial situation and her obligations, making her

work two jobs, and how these affect her schooling:

> I went without a phone, went without helping in the house for a long, long time
> because I was paying for my school… I [went] without actual meals. I… have
> to send money to my grandma for her medicine every month. So, that's my
> one-day job. That's what it's paying for. My [other] job is paying for me living
> and me just going to school. (Carmen, Interview #1, 1 August 2017)

Even though she had to make sacrifices to continue going to school while helping her family, Carmen persists. She expressed that she is also very thankful to her family, who helped her get through the tough times of having to work more than one job. She stated, "I've gotten a lot of help from my family… [by] not paying rent. [I just pay for] some food… bills when I can, but my grandma is what I take on. She's my responsibility" (Carmen, Interview #1, 1 August 2017). Not every participant described their family as supportive when it came to financing college. Maria explained that her parents were not receptive to her requests for help:

> I had no support from my family because I was taking care of all my sisters,
> and I was the only one really providing… [Once], I approached [my dad] about
> helping me pay for school. He was thinking "Oh, it's like a couple hundred
> dollars" … and I [said], "Oh, no, no, no. It's not." And he [replied], "Well,
> then why do you need to do that?" (Maria, Interview #1, 1 August 2017)

This is not abnormal, according to Ward, Siegel, & Davenport (2012): "Some parents of first-generation students express negative attitudes about college and even discourage their children from attending, especially if it will take them away from home temporarily or permanently" (p. 56) Not all families promote the idea of college.

Although Maria's parents did not help her get money for school, she found a way and

is currently one year away from her four-year degree.

Rosa's parents were another example of family who helped with her financial

path to college. Without their help, the doctoral student explains, she would not have

persisted. She said,

> Financial stress is always a stress of course… In my first year, I really messed
>
> up on my financial aid, and I didn't get any student loans or aid. My parents
>
> only make like 30,000 a year combined as field workers… but they stepped up
>
> and they helped me get through that. (Rosa, Interview #3, 24 August 2017)

Alma also described paying for college as a top stressor. Her story is also one of

sacrifice to attain higher education:

> [My] number one [worry] would be financial stress because I do have to work
>
> to help provide for my family. I have a lot of bills to worry about, so I can't go
>
> full time to school as much as I'd like. (Alma, Interview #3, 10 August2017)

Alma gave up going to school full time to help family with finances, making her path

to education a little more complicated: "It's really hard to work full-time when you're

a full-time student… when school should be your primary job... And so, I feel like

working and having to set aside my schooling sometimes is very difficult for me"

(Alma, Interview #3, 10 August2017). It takes a great deal of time management skill to

work and go to school simultaneously as well as a great deal of responsibility. When

asked how she does both well, Soraya stated, "I'm just trying to find… balance"

(Soraya, Interview #1, 7 August 2017). While financing college places stress on both

the student and his or her family, working together first-generation students and their families find a way to make their college dreams a reality.

Overarching Theme #4: Navigating the College Landscape

Second Subordinate Pattern Code:

Words of Wisdom

When asked what advice they would give incoming Latina/o first-generation college students, participants had a lot to say. The following are major mini-themes in their responses regarding advice for future Latina/o first-generation college students:

Advocate, Don't Sabotage

Tony is a big believer in helping one's situation by being realistic. He says, "I actually told my friend this, 'Don't sabotage yourself. Don't put yourself in a situation where you know you're going to fail... like trying to do too much'" (Tony, Interview #2, 1 August 2017). Taking too many classes while having to work, for example, is something Tony would not suggest. Diana also believes in self-advocacy. She recommends, "Don't wait for other people to help you. [Have] a very proactive mindset and advocate for yourself… Be proactive and don't expect to get the full answer from one person" (Diana, Interview #2, 1 August 2017). Diana believes students should not wait around for answers; they should go find answers themselves. As Ward, Siegel, and Davenport state, "Colleges and universities should strive… to teach students how to… navigate the campus, and how to be self-advocates" (p. 120). Maria goes a step further and recommends that students familiarize themselves with the unspoken rules of college: "You have to be ruthless and you have to play the

game… There's no way around it" (Maria, Interview #2, 2 August 2017). "The game"

of being successful in college, Maria says, takes time and practice.

Maria conveyed that part of playing the game in college is knowing where to

go for help or to find resources. Soraya agrees:

Don't be afraid to ask for help and take-up as many resources as you can.

That's the thing with me, I used to be afraid and nervous and I felt like that was

just a hassle, asking for help. But, there are people literally working there to

help you. They're there for your benefit. They want to help you. Try to reach

out… I didn't feel like I could go to these places for help. And I feel like if I

did to begin with, I could've been a lot further [in my academic career].

(Soraya, Interview #2, 14 August 2017)

Soraya conveyed that she was a shy student at first and felt uncomfortable asking for

help, but quickly learned that wasn't helping her have any advantages. Those who ask,

Soraya described, are the ones who make it far up the educational ladder.

Make Connections and Look for a Mentor

Diana strongly believed in peer mentoring as a way for students to make connections

with other students and receive guidance first-hand: "Peer mentoring [would be a good

idea for] the first two years that you're here in school just because you can't cover all

the resources that are available in one term" (Diana, Interview #2, 1 August 2017).

Diana also believes in the power of peer-mentoring because it allows students to see

what success looks like. Ideally, she described, it would be best to pair Latina/o first-

generation students with other Latina/o first-generation students: "I do think it's

important for younger people to see other [Latinos] succeeding" (Diana, Interview #2,

1 August 2017). Antonio agrees with Diana's recommendation:

> Having a few people that are specifically assigned to first-generation students
>
> [would be] good for [Latinos]. It would be good for [the mentors] to be first-
>
> generation as well. So, they'd be able to relate to the students and that they
>
> know that [we] made it and so can they. (Antonio, Interview #2, 8 August
>
> 2017)

Antonio, like Diana, believes students can learn about success in college through

example.

> Alma thought that networking or making connections with fellow students,

professors, and staff should be a top priority for Latina/o first-generation college

students:

> You have to know people. You have to know the connections. You have to be
>
> in those networks. And I think that is a big thing, networking. People don't
>
> realize that until [they] get connected. Being resourceful in that sense [is
>
> important] and not necessarily having to find the answers by yourself but
>
> finding people who can help you do that and that you're comfortable doing it
>
> with. (Alma, Interview #2, 9 August 2017)

Being reclusive or shy is something to work on if that's the case, Alma specified,

because it takes a village to make Latina/o first-generation students succeed.

> Finding professors and staff to work with was a great resource, participants

explained. Soraya communicated that the connections she made were a big help. She

emphasized that "Along the way, I met a lot of great professors who believed in me"

and continued "I wouldn't be here today without the help of my school counselor.

[Because of their help] I feel like I thrived" (Soraya, Interview #1, 7 August 2017).

Rosa also champions the idea of networking. She said, "Create allies… There are

people willing to mentor you and help you" (Rosa, Interview #3, 24 August 2017).

Find Your Culture

Knowing that Latinos are represented in the school is crucial, according to

Carmen. Looking for glimpses of her culture was what helped her feel less alone. She

stated, "[What made me adjust to college was] finding groups of people who… I saw

myself in. I just kept trying to find places where I fit in" (Carmen, Interview #2, 8

August 2017). Multicultural centers are examples of places Carmen thought she fit in:

"Multicultural centers… that was a big thing. I still go there and… feel welcome just

hearing music in Spanish. [It feels good that] you're represented, because we don't

feel like that a lot of the times" (Carmen, Interview #2, 8 August 2017). Soraya

expresses a similar thought in saying, "Having [multicultural centers] is really great.

That's a start. Having a place where [we] can be who [we] are around people who are

just like [us]" (Soraya, Interview #2, 14 August 2017). Seeing oneself in others or

representation on campus was a very important suggestion for change from

participants. Rosa also recommends finding one's culture on campus:

> I feel more connected [because of joining Latino organizations]. Without that, I
>
> think I would again just feel like "Oh my god, everyone's White." Remember
>
> who you are… I feel that [without] people you know or organizations I would

not even probably [have] gone to school… Join some type of organization with

people that you feel connected to… Because, otherwise, it's easy to get lost in

everyone else's perspectives. (Rosa, Interview #3, 24 August 2017)

Rosa advises that it is easy to get lost in a sea of students without seeking culture.

Carmen, Soraya, and Rosa all believe in combating feelings of loneliness through

seeking culture on campus.

Further, Carmen advises, "Know you're not alone… Find your groups and

reach out because your advisor isn't going to tell you… You have to reach out for

diversity" (Carmen, Interview #2, 8 August 2017). One way to reach out for diversity,

in Carmen's opinion, is to take a class on culture, "a class that just talks about you in

any sort of way. Because you're not just learning about... your [roots]. You learn about

the American way" (Carmen, Interview #3, 10 August 2017). Diana adds that classes

on culture should be required for all students: "[Chicano/Latino studies] could be one

of those recommended courses" (Diana, Interview #2, 1 August 2017). Soraya

reiterates this recommendation: "I feel like everybody should take different kinds of

ethnic studies classes because they can learn a lot and I feel like you become more

[knowledgeable] when you learn about other cultures" (Soraya, Interview #2, 14

August 2017). Thus, classes on culture can be a big help as well.

Alma agrees that seeking out culture, whether it be classes, clubs, or

multicultural centers, is key. She asserts,

You really have to go and seek out those [cultural] events, those student

groups, and connect with those individual people, because otherwise, I think

that you could just be lost in the sea of White people... Really, it feels like that

in a class. (Alma, Interview #2, 9 August 2017)

Vanishing in a "Sea of White people" resonates with a lot of what participants

described as issues with visibility on campus as a Latina/o.

Believe in Yourself

Tony explained that to get confident about his school work, writing

specifically, took time. He even had doubts about his vocabulary because he spoke

Spanish:

[I was] afraid of not knowing the language, not knowing how to write

properly… I [was] always harder on myself because I didn't grow up speaking

English. So, there's always this thing, like, "I don't know English enough."

And it always kind of stayed in the back of my head… Even though it might be

a word that no one else understood, I [was] very critical of myself. Like, "I

should know that word. I should know what that is." (Tony, Interview #1, 31

July 2017)

Tony went on to describe that being self-conscious only held him back, and he advises

incoming Latina/o first-generation students to believe in their potential: "Just do your

thing... Don't let those little voices in the back of your head that tell you, you don't

belong or maybe that your English is not good enough or things like that" (Tony,

Interview #1, 31 July 2017). Tony is a big believer in having confidence that one has

the skills needed to succeed. Believing in yourself takes work though, according to

Tony. Nevertheless, believing in oneself should take precedence, Tony explained.

Carmen's last piece of advice is, "Don't be afraid. You do belong" (Carmen, Interview #2, 8 August 2017).

Draw-A-College-Student Findings

After the third and final interview, I asked participants to work on an activity that included artwork and writing. The Draw-A-College-Student activity was modeled after Chambers' 1983 open-ended study with children. Chambers' Draw-A-Scientist-Test yielded such interesting results for Chambers on children's preconceived notions about scientists that I thought it would be a useful activity for my participants to explore notions of what it means to be a college student in current times.

For the Draw-A-College-Student activity, participants were asked to illustrate a college student to explore their perceptions of what it means to be a college student. No other direction was provided for the artwork. Once they were done with the art, they were asked to create a written version of their art in 5 minutes. In other words, they were asked to write a description of their artwork where they described to their college student's traits and characteristics. For the writing, if participants got stuck, there was one sentence frame provided. It read "When I think of a college student, I picture…" Most participants did not need to use the sentence frame to begin writing.

The Draw-A-College-Student activity was very interesting. Participants approached the task in a variety of ways, including assigning non-human traits to their college student conceptions. For analysis, I first categorized the major traits participants employed in their drawings. Table 4 is a visual of the different

characteristics or elements in the participants' drawings. The categories I developed

were: appearance, emotion, gender, background and props. Table 4 describes which

participants included these traits in their drawing:

Table 4: *Draw-A-College-Student Art*

Category	Tony	Diana	Carmen	Maria	Antonio	Alma	Soraya	Rosa
Appearance								
Human		x	x		x	x	x	x
Non-human	x			x				
Emotion								
Happy		x	x			x	x	
Upset				x				
Mad								
Neutral	x				x			x
Gender								
Female		x				x	x	
Male			x		x			x
Other								
N/A	x			x				
Background								
Inside			x	x	x			
Outside	x	x				x	x	x
Props								
Diploma				x	x			
Books		x	x	x	x	x		
Computer		x	x		x			
Desk			x	x	x			
Food/Drink		x			x	x		

The checklist serves as a visual frame of reference for what participants thought

constituted a college student. The Draw-A-College-Student findings will be explored

in two sections: (1) the most prevalent or frequent elements (2) the participants'

drawing free-write.

Tony
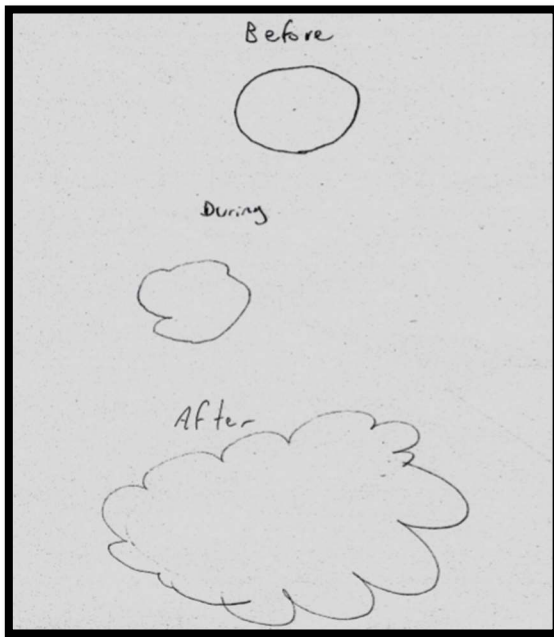
Figure 6: Tony Draw-A-College-Student

Most Prevalent or Frequent Elements

Tony's Draw-A-College-Student art depicted three shapes instead of an actual human student. The first shape, titled "Before," is a neat circle. The second, titled "During," is a circular but imperfect shape. The third and final shape, titled "After," is almost like a cloud, very uniquely shaped. To me, it seems like Tony is drawing the personal or developmental stages of a college student. College takes a high school student, then a neat circle, and makes him or her into a unique individual while learning about how he or she is. By the time the four-years are done, the college student, in this case a cloud shape, is its own exceptional being because of the experience of having gone through college. This creative portrayal of what a college student is explains that college makes us more three-dimensional.

Drawing Free-Write

For the free-write, Tony wrote,

A student comes in molded into a certain shape… When the student begins to

become "enlightened," blobs start to appear. That represents their growth and

new knowledge. By the end of the college experience, they have developed

into a giant blob. A blob is like a finger print… No two are alike. Education

should produce students as blobs, not circles. (Tony, Free-Write, 2 August

2017)

Tony's ideas are very insightful. He explains that education is a person-shaper or a

molding-machine; it is responsible for, by the end of the college years, making us very

matchless individuals or "blobs." In other words, Tony is expressing that the college

experience changes a person, and he sees a college student as going through a

transformative experience.

Diana

Figure 7: Diana Draw-A-College-Student

Most Prevalent or Frequent Elements

Diana's Draw-A-College-Student art shows a young lady with glasses and a purse. There are a variety of props and some writing. She has "4 Years" and "zzz" written by a clock. There is a money sign, books, and a cup of coffee. Additionally, there is a Packman image facing what appears to be a lightbulb, a brain, from two angles, a computer, and a desk. Interestingly, Diana has arrows going from an "X" on the left side of the page to the "X" on the right side of the page, and the young lady is in the middle. There is another arrow above her head with another "X." To me, this suggests that the young lady is going through a process of transformation, the "X" on the right-hand side, from what I assume, being college graduation.

Drawing Free-Write

For the free-write, Diana described that the college student is "tight" on money, even with the consideration of aid the student receives. She described the student as having glasses because she was "smart." She continued,

> The student… reads a lot and studies a lot and that's why they don't get enough sleep. I wrote "4 years" because, supposedly, you finish the degree in four years. I put the little arrow marks with the "X's" because the quintessential student goes everywhere, including traveling abroad… I drew the brain from multiple perspectives because they are learning that other perspectives are out there… The lightbulb represents your own ideas... And, then the coffee because I am personally addicted to coffee... The figure under the arch is da Vinci's "Renaissance Man" … because the student has to be well-versed in many things and have a critical mind. (Diana, Free-Write, 2 August 2017)

Diana's approach to the Draw-A-College-Student activity was more practical and straightforward. She thought of materials a college student would need; what they would experience; and, challenges they may face. It was interesting and creative that she thought to compare Leonardo da Vinci's "Renaissance Man" to the college experience.

Carmen
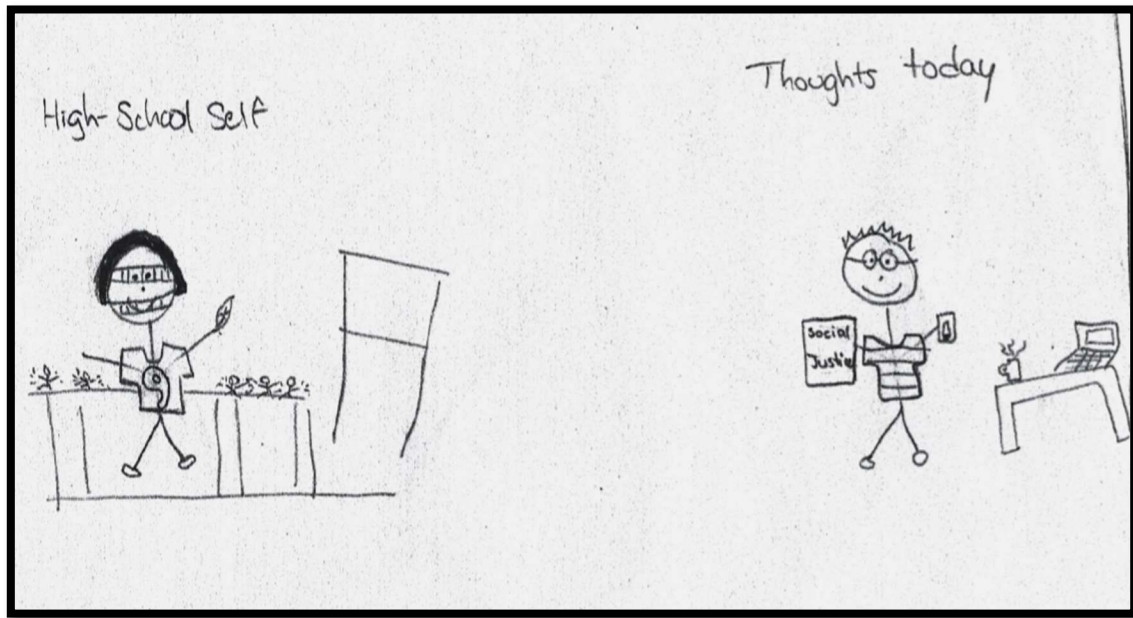
Figure 8: Carmen Draw-A-College-Student

Most Prevalent or Frequent Elements

Carmen's Draw-A-College-Student art includes two human students, one on each side of the page. The student on the right-hand side has the words "High School Self" above him. He seems to be a football player, since he is wearing a helmet and a jersey with the number "9" on it. There is an audience behind the student football player cheering him on and a goal post. On the left side of the page there is another student, with the title "Thoughts Today." This student is holding up a book titled "Social Justice." There is also a table with a computer and a cup of coffee on it. For me, this drawing signified the change students experience from their high school years, having more surface-esque interests and problems, to college, where the student becomes a completely different person learning about society and its problems.

Drawing Free-Write

For the free-write, Carmen wrote, "In high school, a college student to me sounded like your all-American football player boy. I never pictured a girl in college… Now, I picture a college student as a typical [North-westerner], White, male (again)" (Carmen, Free-Write, 10 August 2017). Carmen's depiction included only a boy because she thought mostly boys went to college. She also mentioned that the male college student was White. Carmen described that the student was holding a social justice book. College is where he first learns about this concept.

Maria
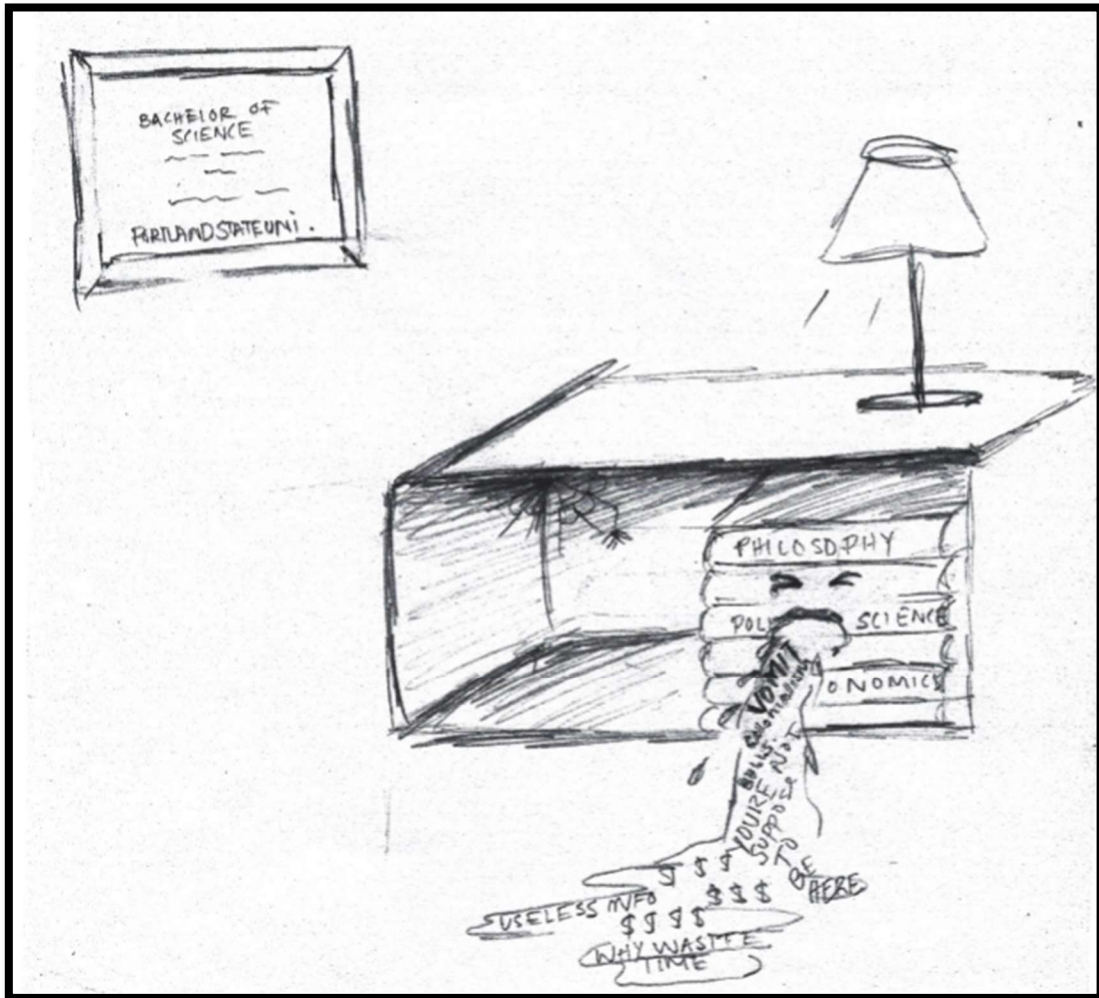
Figure 9: Maria Draw-A-College-Student

Most Prevalent or Frequent Elements

Maria's Draw-A-College-Student art is truly unique. Her illustration of a

college student is not a college student at all. She drew a graduation certificate on the

wall. Then, she illustrated a desk with a lamp on it. Under the desk there is a pile of

books on scholarly subjects, such as philosophy or political science. The most

interesting thing, in my opinion, is the books are personified. The stack of books is the

college student. It is upset, vomiting. In the books' vomit, there are words such as

"Colonialism," "Why waste time?", "You're not supposed to be here," and "Bull."

The vomit in the drawing also included multiple dollar signs. This very creative

approach to drawing college student says a lot about Maria's experience at the

university. She does not think the institution is fair, unprejudiced, or a good experience

overall.

Drawing Free-Write

> For the free-write, Maria used the sentence frame. She wrote,
>
> When I think of a college student, I picture… getting left on the shelf. It's the
>
> student who has all of these expensive books with words that are supposed to
>
> mean something… [At first], the college student is hopeful because they have
>
> been sold an idea: a degree. They proudly place it on the wall in an expensive
>
> frame, but once they have that degree, they aren't hopeful… They've become
>
> the books on the shelf. Soon, they're outdated, and a new edition is on the
>
> market. (Maria, Free-Write, 8 August 2017)

Maria is not vague about her feelings toward the university. Her words connote an

experience that led her to believe what she states above: college is selling a product

that expires quickly and may not be worth the time.

Antonio
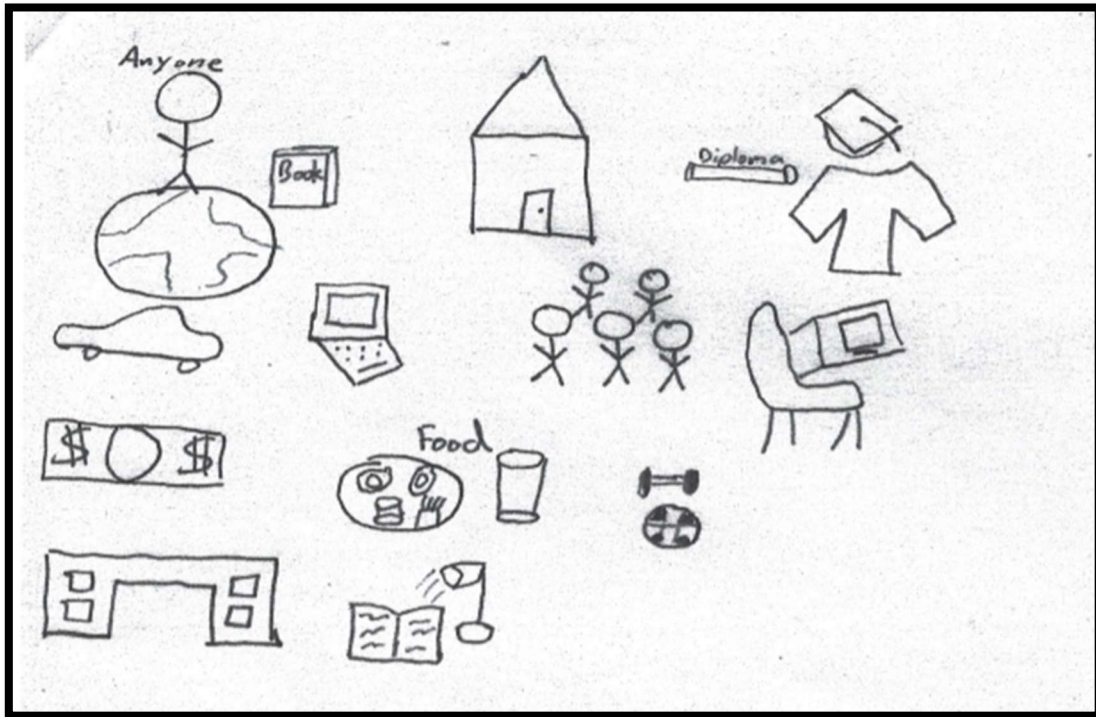
Figure 10: Antonio Draw-A-College-Student

Most Prevalent or Frequent Elements

Antonio's Draw-A-College-Student art displays an array of items. For example, there is a bill, the world with a student on it, book with a lamp shining on it, car, computer, soccer ball, a graduate with a diploma, a chair with a book on it, along with a house and a group of people. The image I found most telling was the person on top of the word labeled "Anyone." Antonio believes that any person can be a college student. The world, in my opinion, can mean two things: that the college student is on top of the world, or that the college student can be from anywhere in the world. Regardless, the drawing shows that there are a lot of elements at play in the life of a college student, according to Antonio.

Drawing Free-Write

For the free-write, Antonio wrote, "Anyone can be able to get into college. It doesn't matter, who, where, what you are… All that matters is that you can be in college" (Antonio, Free-Write, 10 August 2017). Then, he provided a list of "must-haves" all college students need. They included the following:

- "Some sort of transportation... because it matters how you get to college,

- Long study sessions for final exams,

- Stress relievers, like friends, family, and sleep,

- Food… which can be expensive on campus,

- Family supporting the student to succeed,

- Professors supporting… the student, graduation being the end goal,

- Opportunity to learn something new, and

- Freedom to express your true self" (Antonio, Free-Write, 10 August 2017).

Antonio, like Diana, took a more practical approach to the task by creating a detailed list off the necessities of a college student. The item on the bulleted list that stood out to me was the last one, "Freedom to express your true self." Meaning, college should not be a machine that that churns students into professionals, or produces the same type of person, but a vehicle for learning *and* self-exploration.

Alma

Figure 11: Alma Draw-A-College-Student

Most Prevalent or Frequent Elements

Alma's Draw-A-College-Student art illustrates a scene with a variety of items.

In the background we see words like "Sleep?" and "Stress," with a distraught face next

to it. There is also a student with a backpack holding a book. By her are two books,

titled "ELL/SPED," and "Racial Equity." Underneath these things are the words

"Work," repeated five times, followed by the word "Homework." We also see a cup of

coffee and a slice of pizza in the background. The scene itself shows the student

trekking up a hill, and on the hill, there is a rolling rock, seemingly headed towards the

hiking student. On the top of the hill there are the words "Master's Degree." Also, there is a group of faces, all expressing happy emotions but one. Underneath the faces, is states, "Swimming in a sea of White people."

To me, it seems that the hill is very symbolic of the long road to degree attainment and, on that hill, the rolling rock are the different obstacles the student will encounter. The statement "Swimming in a sea of White people" seems to be very significant, meaning that the student feels lost and alone amongst the White faces, perhaps.

Drawing Free-Write

For the free-write, Alma was the participant who wrote the most. Alma, using the sentence frame, wrote,

When I think of a college student, I picture… a stressed-out person who looks as though they haven't slept for days. I think of a first-generation student. I think of the words "work" repeatedly and the word "homework" thrown in at the end because that is what many of us do out of necessity. We work all day and come home or go to the library… and continue to do homework late into the night. I also see a first-generation college student as an avid coffee drinker… who may be eating unhealthy foods because it is more affordable and accessible… As a first-generation student, I often feel and see that we are "Swimming in a sea of White people." I also feel it is as though we are "Swimming upstream, against the current." I also see a first-generation student as having to climb up a steep mountain with many barriers and obstacles to

overcome before reaching the top or the end goal… I also see many people

supporting this student… which may include family and friends. As well as

generations of resilient people who fought and struggled during their lifetime

so that I can have the opportunities and privileges that they did not have and

help advance and further educate our *gente* and our *comunidades*. (Alma, Free-

Write, 10 August 2017)

Alma symbolically depicts what it is like for a college student if they are first

generation both in images and in writing. Since she is a first-generation student

herself, her expertise on the subject shines through. She mentions the challenges

against the odds a lot of first-generation students face. She also explains the trials first-

generation students of color experience being underrepresented in academe.

Soraya
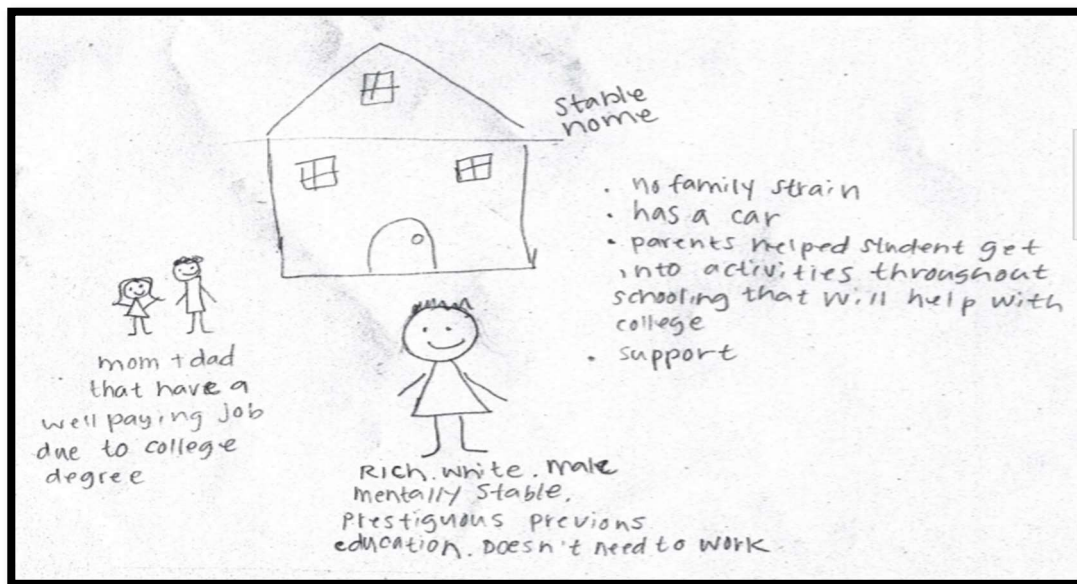
Figure 12: Soraya Draw-A-College-Student

Most Prevalent or Frequent Elements

Soraya's Draw-A-College-Student art has both images and text. The most predominant image is that of a home with the label "Stable." The bulleted list next to the home reads,

- No family strain

- Has a car

- Parents helped student get into activities throughout schooling that will help with college.

- Support

On the left of the home there is a family with a caption that reads "Mom and dad that have a well-paying job due to college degree." The family appears to be happy. Underneath the house we find the college student with a caption as well, stating "Rich. White. Male. Mentality Stable. Prestigious previous education. Doesn't need to work."

In my opinion, Soraya, like Carmen, pictures a male when thinking about a college student. Soraya listed elements in the drawing that help a college student do well in school. The stable home, supportive family, and the monetary flexibility of the college student Soraya pictures would help with persistence in school. It is interesting that when picturing a college student, Soraya thought of a successful college student with ideal circumstances for degree attainment, possibly suggesting that if a student gets to college, it's because they can; they have what it takes to make it through college if they are already there.

Drawing Free-Write

> For the free-write, Soraya wrote,

> What I have drawn/written reflects my views on the typical college student. I see a White, heterosexual male who comes from an affluent family who helps him throughout his academics, starting from an early age. They have enrolled him in programs that allow him to be the perfect candidate for college. They pay for his education, so he doesn't have to work, allowing him to focus only on his education. I imagine him moving into a dorm at 18 years old, and his parents have helped him buy appliances for his room. He doesn't have any obstacles preventing him from graduating. He come from a stable home, allowing him to be a care-free college student. (Soraya, Free-write, 21 August 2017)

Soraya explains that a college student, to be successful, must have what she may consider a usual, well-performing student. The male college student's postsecondary path is laid out for him to attain his degree. I would argue that Soraya believes that without the traits she described another college student would struggle.

Rosa

Figure 13: Rosa Draw-A-College-Student

Most Prevalent or Frequent Elements

Rosa's Draw-A-College-Student art is a simple portrait of a male college student wearing a baseball cap backwards. The young man is wearing a shirt with the word "State" on it. He also has a backpack on. He seems to be smiling as well. To me, her choice to draw a male student is very telling. The casual appearance of the young man says that he is relaxed and in a good mood, due to his smile. Maybe, he is happy because he doesn't have many worries.

Drawing Free-Write

For the free-write, Rosa expressed,

For some reason, I picture a "frat bro" [who] typically wears a sweatshirt and a backwards hat and appears easy-going. This was a constant sight [in my experience]. But more than anything a person like this is often advertised throughout the campus. Though I will say it's gotten better… a little more

diverse, [but] you can't go far without finding one. (Rosa, Free-Write, 24

August 2017)

Rosa's personal truth is that the male, casual student is not only omnipresent, but

advertised by the university. She alludes to the student possibly being in a fraternity,

signaling that he has a sense of community. Maybe, his casual style is present because

he's not struggling to fit in, a possibility.

Draw-A-College-Student Findings Summary

Commonalities

Five of seven students who drew humans drew smiles on their characters. One

of the participants' (Tony) depiction of a college student was completely symbolic he

used shapes to describe his college student. The other participant (Maria) who did not

draw people personified a pile of books. The books, given its human characteristics,

seemed very upset because of its expression and because she drew them vomiting

words and statements to make her points. Out of the human drawings (six), three of the

participants drew their college students as female and three as male. Most of the

drawings' backgrounds had no setting. The most commonly used prop was books.

Motifs

The three female students that drew males when they pictured a college student

mentioned that they associate college goers with males. All of the three males had

smiles on their faces, possibly signifying confidence and contentment because they

were male. For the Draw-A-College-Student free-write, the participants described their

male students as having some kind of upper hand or privilege that helped them go to

school. One participant (Soraya) stated that the college student she pictured was not only White, heterosexual, and male, but had multiple support systems and resources to go to college and complete his degree successfully. Only two of the eight participants drew females as college students. Another participant (Carmen) wrote that she "never pictured a girl" when she thought of a college student.

The two participants that drew symbols or personified their college student characters had dissimilar thoughts about what college does to a student. In the free-write, the participant (Tony) who drew the college student as shapes explained that college helps "mold" students into "blobs" that have more dimension as they continue in their college experience. The free-write explained that the student becomes more unique or complex through time in college. He also used words like "enlightened" and "developed," which connote that college has a positive effect on students. The personified books depiction of the college student (Maria) had a completely different view of what college does to students. She used the free-write to explain that college students are like really "expensive" books that become "outdated." This may mean that not only is college a negative experience, but it has a detrimental effect of student development. All in all, the Draw-A-College-Student art activity and the free-write really helped inform how participants thought college affects students and who the traditional college student is. It is important to note that some of the participants did not draw pictures of themselves as a college student, which is an interesting detail that may signify that they might not see themselves as traditional college students.

Limitations and Constraints of the Study

The purpose of this study is to go beyond the conversation of Latina/o first-generation college student attrition by examining how they navigate postsecondary institutions and explore the implications associated with how higher education affects them. No study is perfect, as Maxwell (2013) explains: "[Validity] depends on the relationship of your conclusions to reality, and no methods can completely assure that you have captured this" (p. 121). This section will discuss the background, limitations, and constraints of my study along with my positionality as the researcher. Specifically, this section will address the study's sample size, participant selection process, and role of the researcher.

Because this is qualitative research, it was less concerned with objectivity than a quantitative study, for example. My goal was to capture Latina/o first-generation college students' experiences from their own point of view. Thus, the study is more about depth and lived experiences. I was interested in conducting research where participants' voices were the highlight instead of me conducting research *on* them. Through the use of qualitative methodology, I sought to capture the perspectives of the students going through the experience of persisting in college not just citing numbers and statistics as the proof of the problem with Latino/a first-generation college student four-year degree attainment.

For my study, I collected rich data, which included field notes and journaling, interview transcripts, artwork, and a free-write, to explore these concepts. By "rich data," I mean data that are detailed, varied, and revealing enough to provide a full picture of the phenomenon being studied (Maxwell, 2013). I employed interview

recordings and notes, drawings, and writing for data variety. The variety of data helps

with detail and clarity (Glesne, 2015; Maxwell, 2013). Participants were each

interviewed three times for a half hour each session, and I was not only taking

interview notes while with the participant but reflecting using a journal after each

interview. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and examined using the theoretical

frameworks of critical race theory, cultural capital, and constructivism, then coded

using first cycle (In Vivo coding) and second cycle (pattern coding) methods (Saldaña,

2013). After the third interview, participants were asked to Draw-A-College-Student,

to explore their perceptions of what it means to be a college student, and then write for

five minutes about their creation. This means participants had three means for relating

information: verbally, through art, and writing, giving the research more dimension.

Some of the limitations and constraints I encountered were regarding the selection of

participants, other possible perspectives, along with time. My involvement as the

researcher and fellow first-generation Latina college student is also addressed in this

section. Ideas that could be explored in future research are included as well.

Originally, I started with 9 participants who agreed to partake in the study. One

of them couldn't make it to the interviews within the designated times and, after

meeting with the other potential participant, I discovered that he did not meet all of the

requirements to be a participant in the study. Ultimately, eight participants dove into

the research with me, which worked well since I sought depth over breadth,

interviewing each participant three times. Of the eight participants, two were male.

Ideally, a larger sample size with more variety in gender would have been more

informational because of the quantity of data it would have produced. However, more

data is not always better data. Additionally, most of my participants were of Mexican

decent. But, 3 were U.S. born and 4 were Mexican born, adding to the variety in

perspective.

Participants were recruited in two major ways: through the Latino multicultural

center at the university and through the Chicano/Latino studies department. It can be

argued that because the streams of sources for participants are all related to cultural

centers or studies, that they would share similar opinions or have the same types of

personalities, but I think that because everyone's journey through college is so unique

and marked by personal experiences, everyone's path differs, even if all participants

were Latina/o first-generation college students involved in cultural activities on

campus. Another possible limitation in this study was that I only included the

perspectives of students who have persisted through at least two of the four

undergraduate years. While the voices of those who don't persist, for both voluntary

and involuntary reasons, are also very valuable, my goal with that study was to focus

on not only the obstacles Latina/o first-generation college students face, but what

worked for them and why they are still persisting.

Another limitation concerning participants relates to the participants' ages. The

youngest participant was 21 (Maria) and the oldest was 36 (Tony). The differences in

age could have an influence on participant perspectives on the college experience.

However, because this study is concerning mostly juniors and seniors, as well as

graduate students, participants were expected to be older. Further, regardless of

participant age, many participants agreed on the difficulties and challenges encountered by Latina/o first-generation college students in this study. They also agreed on their sense of pride in beating the odds and progressing towards their degrees.

Member checks (Creswell, 2014; Glesne, 2016) or respondent validation (Maxwell, 2013) was another measure put in place to help establish validity. This measure ensured that participants were given the opportunity to provide opinions on the data; this measure is especially useful because it ensures that participants' ideas, views, and values do not get misrepresented. Respondent validation is when a researcher solicits "feedback about [the] data and conclusions from the people [in the study]" (Maxwell, 2013, p.126). Indeed, participants had the chance to "determine the accuracy of the qualitative findings" so that they felt that their voices were clearly conveyed (Creswell, 2014, p. 201). However, because of time constraints, availability, and the demands of family and college life, not all participants were able to provide feedback for member checks. But, each participant received the transcript and had the opportunity to read about the findings, nevertheless.

As the researcher, my role is of the upmost importance to the validity of the study. The researcher, as Creswell (2014) describes, is a "key instrument" because "the researchers are the ones who actually gather the information" (p. 185). Researchers are the ones manipulating the data. Creswell expands on this idea by stating that "Qualitative research is interpretive research: the inquirer is typically involved in a sustained and intensive experience with the participants" (p. 187). Not

only am I, as the researcher, interacting with the participants, I am deciphering their

ideas and beliefs to convey their lived experiences. Because of the personal nature of

the researcher's role, there are ethical and strategic issues as play, so it is important to

reflect on practice. With these specific issues in mind, "Inquirers explicitly identify

reflexively their biases, values, and personal background, such as gender, history,

culture and socioeconomic status that shaped their interpretations formed during a

study" (p. 187). In other words, every researcher has his or her own biases.

Taking the above factors into account, and being a Latina first-generation

college student myself, I have my own biases as the researcher. There is no researcher

that is bias-free. To keep the integrity of the research intact, I took measures to keep

my biases out of the research. I monitored my subjectivity by keeping field notes to

keep track of my own thinking. I reflected, wrote down ideas, notes about participant

emotional reactions to questions, and jotted-down connections I had with participant

answers. I then reflected on the field notes prior to interpreting participant data using a

journal. Self-reflection is what can ensure reflexivity (Creswell, 2014; Glesne, 2016).

The value of time in any research study is inestimable because it allows for the

possibility of a larger scope; this is true for most qualitative research, which can be

time consuming and demanding (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). For this research, if

time allowed, it would have been useful to also conduct focus groups or group

interviews with all participants. It would have been interesting to hear them build on

one another's ideas and ask each other follow-up questions. I had this idea after

conducting the one-on-one interviews when participants expressed interest in knowing

about the other participants' responses to the same questions. I expressed that they would be able to read the findings for themselves during the member check process. Further, with more time and means, I would have added more perspectives to the research. Other perspectives that could have been included in this study are professors' and parents'. The two parties' opinions could have been included in what has helped students persist at the college level and what it means to be a college student. Both of these perspectives would have added to the depth of the study if time allowed.

Studies like this serve to replace the numbers regarding attrition with student voices instead, asking for their views on what does or does not work for persisting Latina/o first generation college students. Participant voices were highlighted, and their stories presented so that we can better understand the Latina/o first-generation college student experience without assigning labels. The study also serves the purpose of replacing deficit views in education concerning who "drops out" and why.

In the next chapter, I will synthesize and continue analyzing my findings, presented in this chapter. I will also investigate the implications for future research along with what the findings mean for our education system for Latina/os first-generation college students.

Chapter V: Discussion

Introduction

Regarding attrition, Krogstad and Fry (2014) noted that only 56 percent of young Latina/o or Hispanic students are present in four-year institutions compared to 72 percent of Whites, 66 percent for African Americans, and 79 percent for Asian. Additionally, Gandara and Contreras (2009) maintain that there is a Latino education crisis for this historically marginalized group; they are falling behind when it comes to four-year degree attainment. We know that in 2013, Hispanics accounted for 15% of bachelor's between the ages of 25 and 29. So, Latino four-year degree attainment is low (Núñez et al., 2013). Further, "22% of Hispanic adults (25 years and over) had earned an associate degree or higher, compared to Asians (60%), Whites (46%), and African Americans (31%)" (Calderon-Galdeano, Santiago, & Taylor's, 2015, p. 4). While telling, these numbers do not tell students' stories. The college-going process cannot be boiled down simply to who graduates and who does not. In order to ameliorate the problems with Latina/o college student degree attainment we should consult the actual students going through the experience. This study deliberately explored the experiences of Latina/o first-generation college students who have persisted through their first two years on their road to a four-year degree and wanted to share their stories of challenges and victories.

The purpose of this study was to go beyond the conversation of Latina/o first-generation college student attrition by examining how they navigate postsecondary institutions and explore the implications associated with how higher education affects

them. A broader goal of this study was to relay the lived experiences of Latina/o first-generation college students who persist in the face of discouraging odds. By way of this study, stakeholders and leaders in higher education institutions could not only be more informed about the Latina/o first-generation experience but add to the existing body of knowledge to help improve the future postsecondary ventures of incoming Latina/o first-generation college students. The research questions the interviews were designed to answer are as follows:

1. What is the experience of persisting Latina/o first-generation college students?

2. How do persisting Latina/o first-generation college students feel about their successes and/or hardships in higher education?

3. How do Latina/o first-generation persisting college students describe how they navigate the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987) of higher education?

I founded this study on review of research literature that shows Latina/o first-generation college students struggle to complete four-year degrees (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Calderon-Galderano, Santiago, & Taylor, 2015; Contreras, 2009; Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Garcia, 2010; Gummadam, Krogstad, 2016; Krogstad & Fry, 2014; Minikel-Lacocque, 2015; Musoba, Collazo, & Placide, 2013; Núñez, et al., 2013; Pittman, & Ioffe, 2016; Pyne & Means; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; Yosso 2006). For my study, I focused on students who have persisted through their sophomore year to relay obstacles as well as successes on the road to persistence. In chapter four, I presented and analyzed both interview and Draw-A-College-Student art

and writing data. In this chapter, I synthesize my findings, connect my findings to the

research literature and situate them in a larger context, while discussing implications

and recommendations as well.

Synthesis of Findings

As the Latino population continues to increase quickly (Ferdman & Gallegos,

2001), in the U.S. as well as in higher education institutions (Núñez et al., 2103), we

cannot afford for them to fall behind in attaining four-year degrees since the country

relies on the education of its workforce (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Higher

education for Latinos is crucial and: "… Since an increasing proportion of working-

age residents of the United States will be of Latino descent, it is in the country's

collective national interest to advance Latino education attainment" (Núñez et al.,

2013, p. 5). Estimates relate that by 2060, Latina/os will "represent 31% of the total

U.S. population" (Calderon-Galdeano, Santiago, & Taylor's, 2015). But how likely are

they to be leaders in our society without four-year degrees? To ensure that all

members of our society have the chance to spearhead change and growth in our

country, we need to invest in their opportunity for a higher education.

Latina/o first-generation college students are asked to become "border-

crossers" to "critically navigate" the college landscape (Yosso, 2006). They are asked

to cross the border of their home culture, whether it be ethnic, racial or socioeconomic,

and that of college culture (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Gandara & Contreras, 2009;

Minikel-Lacocque, J., 2015; Montalvo, 2012; Núñez, et al., 2013). Latina/o first-

generation college students and other students of color are asked to cross borders between many worlds, yet institutions provide little guidance. It is almost as though colleges think that the navigation strategies needed for students of color to succeed should be built in or come with the student. However, this is not only unreasonable, but unfair because students of color are asked to fuse who they are and where they come from into the mainstream college world while other students have the luxury of fitting right in.

First-generation students, particularly students of color, can struggle to find a place and success in college (Gummadam, Pittman, & Ioffe. 2016; Harris & Kiyama, 2015; Keels, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Musoba, Collazo, & Placide, 2013; Nora, 2014; Núñez, et al., 2013; Pascarella, & Terenzini, 2005; Pino, Martínez-Ramos, & Smith, 2012; Santos et al., 2017; Schwartz et al., 2013). The college environment has not always been welcoming to students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, such as Latina/o students: "Latina/o students experience education in the face of long-standing structural inequalities and on campuses where economic and White privilege set the unquestioned norms" (Pyne & Means, 2013, p. 11). College, an uneven playing field, functions on the premise that the dominant culture is normative, which is a type of violence against those who are different and have less of a chance to succeed in this uneven playing field. In her work, Anzaldúa (1987) states that "The dominant white culture is killing us slowly with its ignorance… Ignorance splits people, creates prejudices" (p. 108). Students of color are outsiders in institutions that have a history of prejudice:

> … Colleges tend to endorse diversity to the extent that it serves White
>
> students… Beyond portraying a racially diverse group of students in
>
> recruitment brochures, historically White universities do not necessarily
>
> commit to providing equal access and opportunities for Students of Color, let
>
> alone promise an inviting, positive campus racial climate. (Yosso, Smith, Ceja
>
> & Solórzano, 2009, p. 664)

As Yosso et al. explain, colleges often boast about the diversity on campus on

recruitment materials, but when it comes to leveling the playing field for all students,

diversity takes on a different meaning, prompting the blame game to begin: the blame

gets placed on the student, their families, or their socioeconomic status. The point is,

Latina/o first-generation college students may not feel welcome in a setting where they

may not see many people who look like them or their culture represented and, if

colleges do nothing about that, four-year degree attainment will continue to remain

low for this population.

Revisiting Results

In the quest to relay the lived experience of Latina/o first-generation college

students, I employed multiple data-gathering methods. In going beyond the

conversation of Latina/o first-generation college student attrition by examining how

they navigate postsecondary institutions and explore the implications associated with

how higher education affects them, art, writing, and conversing really highlighted the

voices of the participants. Table 5 shows a summary of major findings in the study.

Table 5: *Summary of methods and findings*

Method	Analysis	Purpose	Findings
Research Question #1: What is the experience of persisting Latina/o first-generation college students?			
Interview Session #2: First-Generation Student General College Experience (30 min.)	In Vivo Coding Pattern Coding Identifying Themes	To explore participants' lived experiences in college; what they believed contributed to their persistence; and, illustrate what it is like to be a Latina/o first-generation student.	• Lack of support • Lonely • Separateness • Underrepresented • Lack of connections • Don't fit in with dominant culture • Sometimes the only person of color in class • Leader in the family • Future leader in society • Perseverant
Draw-A-College-Student Art Activity Draw-A-College-Student Free-Write	Tallying Similarities Tallying Differences Evaluating Drawing Elements Classifying Motifs	To allow participants to use more than one mode of communication (oral, art, writing); and, to investigate assumptions Latina/o first-generation college students have about what it means to *be* a college student.	• Feel "tricked" to buy into college (Maria) • Become a more complex individual (Tony) • Have multiple needs (Antonio) • Is not the perfect or ideal student (Soraya)
Research Question #2: How do persisting Latina/o first-generation college students feel about their successes and/or hardships in higher education?			
Interview Session #1: Family Life and College Aspirations (30 min.)	In Vivo Coding Pattern Coding Identifying Themes	To convey participants' home lives and past education experience and investigate their future goals after college.	• Feel unheard • Family doesn't understand • Want to make something of themselves • Have hope for change
Draw-A-College-Student Art Activity	Tallying Similarities Tallying	To allow participants to use more than one mode of communication (oral,	• Quintessential scholar (Diana) • Trekking uphill,

Draw-A-College-Student Free-Write	Differences Evaluating Drawing Elements Classifying Motifs	art, writing); and, to investigate assumptions Latina/o first-generation college students have about what it means to *be* a college student.	obstacles in the way (Alma) • Many obstacles rolling down the path to degree attainment (Alma) • Feelings of defeat (Maria) • Feelings of accomplishment (Diana)
Research Question #3: How do Latina/o first-generation persisting college students describe how they navigate the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987) of higher education?			
Interview Session #3: Identity and Culture (30 min.)	In Vivo Coding Pattern Coding Identifying Themes	To explore how as Latina/o first-generation college students, participants are beating the odds of persisting and to examine the different borders participants perceived to exist in postsecondary education.	• Seeking and representing Latino culture • Don't buy into majoritarian narrative • Finding mentors who understand the importance of culture • Advocating for yourself
Draw-A-College-Student Art Activity Draw-A-College-Student Free-Write	Tallying Similarities Tallying Differences Evaluating Drawing Elements Classifying Motifs	To allow participants to use more than one mode of communication (oral, art, writing); and, to investigate assumptions Latina/o first-generation college students have about what it means to *be* a college student.	• Swimming in a sea of White people without losing sight of who you are (Alma) • Molding and changing (Tony) • Coping (Maria) • Learning anyone can make it (Antonio)

The First-Generation College Student Experience

Figure 14 shows what it was like for participants to be a Latina/o first-generation

student. The summary was also compiled using the multiple forms of data analysis.
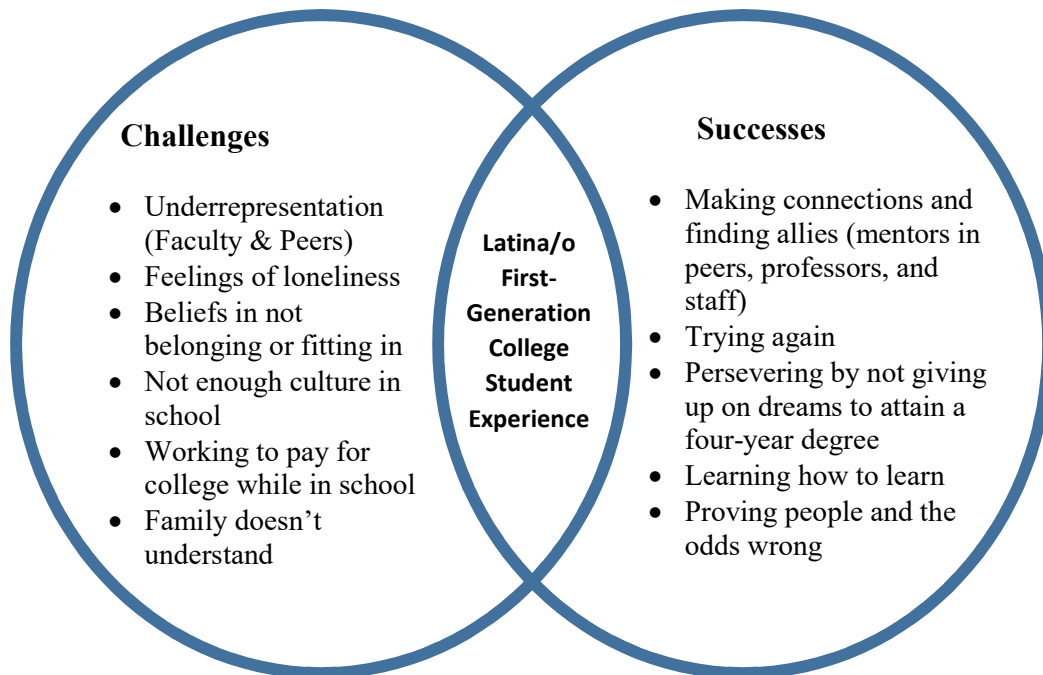
Challenges

- Underrepresentation (Faculty & Peers)
- Feelings of loneliness
- Beliefs in not belonging or fitting in
- Not enough culture in school
- Working to pay for college while in school
- Family doesn't understand

Latina/o First-Generation College Student Experience

Successes

- Making connections and finding allies (mentors in peers, professors, and staff)
- Trying again
- Persevering by not giving up on dreams to attain a four-year degree
- Learning how to learn
- Proving people and the odds wrong

Figure 14: Summary of Latina/o first-generation student challenges, successes, and wisdom.

Because Latinos are one of the more recent immigrant population in the U.S. (Núñez, et al., 2013), they are more likely to be first-generation students. As my participants explained in both the interviews and the Draw-A-College-Student activities, being a first-generation college student is rough, to say the least. The Latina/o first-generation college student experience is riddled with all kinds of barriers. They don't feel as though they have the advantages their non-first-generation college student peers have (Diana, Interview #1, 31 July 2017). Simply, it's difficult to be a first- generation student: "Balancing relationships, expectations, and cultural issues means that first-generation students experience college life differently than their non-first-generation peers" (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012, p. 57). Carmen described the experience as "too big, too much, too soon" (Carmen, Interview #2, 8 August 2017). Alma very astutely describes the experience of being a Latina first-

generation student during our first interview. She thought being a Latina first-generation student

> [Was] just like you're going blind, and it's a dark road. You know it's somewhere. You got to move those leaves and make the path, but you don't know that there are obstacles until they come… You have to be resourceful and determined. (Alma, Interview #1, 7 August 2017)

As Alma illustrates, the metaphor of going blind on a dark road with obstacles in the way her lived experience as a Latina first-generation college student. Being a Latina/o first-generation college student means you are willing to give up the luxury of knowing how to navigate a system and just jump in to the unknown. In chapter four, Maria also made a similar point. She compared being a first-generation Latina college student to being in a dark room. Not only are you, as a first-generation student in a dark room, but you're also blindfolded she believed, having to "feel around and not knowing what you're looking for" (Maria, Interview #3, 8 August 2017). Antonio agrees with Alma and Maria's analogies. To him being a first-generation college student was similar:

> First-generation student problems [are] where we have to figure out everything. We have to pave our own road… Having to pave your own path and all the obstacles that come along with it, it's really hard when you don't know where you're going. (Antonio, Interview #1, 7 August 2017)

Feeling lost and alone, participants explained they often did not know what to do, whom to speak with, or where to go for answers. This sentiment was prevalent in the interviews as well the Draw-A-College-Student activities.

First-Generation Student Families and Cultural Capital

In detail, Alma describes the feeling of being disoriented and adrift because she did not have the necessary support systems:

> Sometimes, I feel like I don't have enough support. I do have my family, but they can't really support me in terms of my academics because they don't know how to support me… Being first-generation, it's hard to get the support that you need from your family. Not that they don't want to; it's that they don't know how, and we don't know how to ask for the kind of support that we need. We don't know until we're there… It's like we're all learning together. (Alma, Interview #3, 10 August 2017)

Alma explains that while her Latino parents' intentions were always to help her with school, they didn't always know what to do or what help looked like at the postsecondary level.

The multiple problems experienced by Latina/o first-generation college students would be because they do not have enough cultural capital, according to Bourdieu and Passeron (2014/1977). They believed that all students have what they called cultural capital before they even get to campus. Cultural capital is a form of social currency or wealth. It is one's access to resources, an ability we inherit (Bourdieu, 1986; Minikel-Lacocque, 2015; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012; Yosso,

2006). Cultural capital encompasses how we experience education in terms of assets, affluence, and advantages, which then turn into economic capital and elevates one's standing in the social strata (Bourdieu, 1986; Dumais & Ward, 2010, Montalvo, 2012; Nora, 2004). Cultural capital influences student performance. Bourdieu (1986) argues that cultural capital is generational, and it eventually affects one's prosperity. Moreover, cultural capital is most available to those with means and a history of privilege, something first-generation students often don't have (Núñez et al., 2013; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). Traversing through the college landscape is then more arduous and the likelihood of persistence is low: "Intentional measures must therefore be taken to counter the absence of college-related cultural capital for first-generation students" (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012, p. 75). Bordieuan theory contends that low cultural capital will most likely result in a destiny with low probabilities of success.

The absence of cultural capital means one does not know, as Maria described, how to "play the game" in higher education. Not knowing how to navigate the higher education system is a symptom of not having enough cultural capital, according to Bourdieu and Passeron (2014/1977). Students without much cultural capital may not know about routines and procedures, or any other basic norms required to succeed in college because their parents did not pass this knowledge down to them. As a young population of immigrants to the U.S. (Núñez et al., 2013), Latinos would then not have much cultural capital, which becomes the case for their children once they begin school. Bordieuan theory on cultural capital dictates that Latina/o first-generation

students' path will be difficult; however, as explained in chapter two, this is a deficit

view and should be revised thinking of, not what students lack, but assets students

bring with them to school (Yosso, 2005; Yosso, 2006). While it is true that some

students are more equipped to navigate schools because of resources, parent

familiarity with the system, and membership to the dominant culture, this does not

mean that Latinos are lacking and will likely fail. One question to ask though, is are

our schools propagating the idea of cultural capital?

As stated in chapter one, Pino Martinez, and Smith (2012) found that Latino

families with less formal levels of education may struggle in helping their students get

to and through college. We know that having parents who attended college helps their

students navigate the landscape (Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012). Support at

home is crucial for any student. Soraya, for example, expressed that her parents did not

know enough to help, and they also couldn't connect with her (Soraya, Interview #1, 7

August 2017). All eight participants expressed, in one way or another, that not having

a frame of reference, or parents who went to college, was hard.

Without family support, whether voluntary or involuntary, Latina/o first-

generation students are likely to struggle (Núñez, et al., 2013). However, this does not

mean that because a Latino family has not been through the formal education system

they can't support their students. On the contrary, education is a revered necessity for

a lot of Latino families, meaning parents tend to highly value education if they did not

have a chance to complete their own (Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Minikel-Lacocque,

2015; Núñez, et al., 2013). While it was difficult not to receive guidance from parents,

many participants, like Rosa, asserted that their parents were their biggest supporters and source of inspiration.

There were also positive feelings associated with being a first-generation Latina/o college student. As first-generation college students of color, my Latina/o participants said that the overall first-generation student experience is extremely taxing. But, participants also declared that, as leaders heading off to college, they felt like they were contributing to the advancement of their family. Carmen even described herself as the "protector" of the family because of her college student status (Carmen, Interview #1, 1 August 2017). As Maria stated, "If one of us makes it, we all make it… I'm doing it" (Maria, Interview #1, 1 August 2017). These are definitely admirable pioneers fighting to prove many people, and numbers, wrong.

Significance: Equity, Not Sameness

The culture of schools is a reflection of the dominant culture in society and can propagate the culture of power. As I quoted in chapter one, Anzaldúa (1987) asserts that "Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture" (p. 38). As students observe and participate in college culture (Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1989), what messages are our schools sending to its students? In chapter one, speaking from experience, I explained that I once overheard some of my high school seniors say that they were not going to college because "That stuff is for White people." Is it? Is this what society and our schools are communicating? More appropriately, the question should be, who is the fittest to survive in this flawed system?

All participants related White culture to college culture and privilege in the interviews. They expressed feelings of aloneness and loneliness because they felt they did not belong or fit in, thinking of themselves often as "the only" person of color (Carmen, Interview #2, 8 August 2017). "Swimming in a sea of White people" (Alma, Free-Write, 10 August 2017), students often found themselves being one of the few, or literally the only, student of color in a class of thirty White people (Carmen, Interview #2, 8 August 2017). Many students related that they often asked themselves, "Why am I here?" (Antonio, Interview #2, 8 August 2017). Maria addressed this sentiment by saying she was in college just "Taking up some space" (Maria, Interview #1, 1 August 2017). As Rosa stated in chapter four, "You always feel a little excluded… when everybody's White… There's always that student separation" (Rosa, Interview #2, 14 August 2017).

Many participants expressed that they felt detached and lonely. Diana added, "You stick out" in college as a person of color" (Diana, Interview #3, 2 August 2017). This ruthless, drastic, and violent experience of being in isolation or excluded hurt students in more than one way, including academically, socially, and emotionally. How is one supposed to feel safe and comfortable enough to learn in this type of environment? Many participants explained that they kept a low profile to blend into the background, making them invisible, thrown into a lose/lose situation, "swimming against the current," (Alma, Free-Write, 10 August 2017) and out of place.

Schools can help propagate or promote existing structures of power (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 2014). Educational equity matters because the state of

education is what drives our country's success (Cross, 2014). So, it would follow that

if this is true, our people should get an advanced education for our society to prosper,

but that is not happening for everyone. Like I explained in chapter two, if what the

society deems important are White ideals and standards as the master narrative for

thinking and living, then schools will reflect that.

Latina/o students have complex "cultural, linguistic, and geographical

identities" (Harris & Kiyama, 2015), which may not fit into what they described as the

permeating White culture of college. In other words, Latinos may be struggling with

navigating the traditionalistic, dominant culture. Revisiting Ward, Siegel, and

Davenport's (2012) analogy, Latino first-generation college students are equipped

with a five-foot ladder to navigate a ten-foot hole. If the dominant culture in higher

education is White culture, how is a first-generation Latina/o, who is first to venture

into the postsecondary unknown, supposed to know where to go, who to see, and what

to do? While I concede that there is a plethora of resources for underrepresented

students, they are not always visible, easy to access, or widely advertised: "… [First-

generation college] students are often unaware of the broad range of educational and

career-building options available to them" (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012, p.109).

Tony was one of the participants who expressed he was extremely unprepared

for the demands of college. He provided an example:

> [When] I was actually in college, I was like, "Wait a minute! I'm supposed to
>
> know how to write this essay already? And I'm supposed to be doing all these
>
> things?" … You're supposed to figure it out and do it… I'd show up and

realize I don't know anything about anything. (Tony, Interview #2, 1 August

2017)

This experience made Tony feel lost and hopeless. Carmen described that her

acclimation to college consisted of just "being handed a syllabus and [the professor]

saying, 'This is what we're going to do'" (Carmen, Interview #2, 8 August 2017).

During our interview, Maria claimed that these experiences, feeling lost and

unprepared, are just part of life as a first-generation student. She declared, "[Latina/o

first-generation college students] don't know where to look [for resources] … And,

you're just left in the dust" (Maria, Interview #2, 2 August 2017).

Latina/o first-generation students and institutions of higher education are not

always speaking the same language. There is a discord or mismatch between them

(Musoba, Collazo, and Placide, 2013). Colleges expect students to know how to

navigate the college landscape or play "the game," as Maria called it, once they arrive

on campus, but not all students do. This form of expected extreme self-reliance does is

not working for a lot of Latina/o first-generation college students who discontinue

enrollment (Minikel-Lacocque, 2015; Musoba, Collazo, & Placide, 2013). College

shouldn't function as an assembly line, aiming to produce the same type of student via

a culture of sameness and dominance in the name of tradition. If education is the door

to social mobility (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport 2012), and higher education is catering

to dominant culture (Minikel-Lacocque, 2015; Schwartz et al., 2013), then not

everyone will have the same chance to pass through and be successful. One-size-fits-

all education does not work for people from diverse backgrounds.

Implications

Education, the "great equalizer" (Contreras, 2011, p. 2) in our society is falling short and affecting the social and economic mobility of students of color. Specifically, the conversation about Latina/o college student attainment usually involves looking at the numbers, or how they are "lacking and disadvantaged," debasing and not considering the lived experiences of the students going through college (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Statistics are not students. Thinking of students as numbers is not only dehumanizing but places all of the blame on the student. Indeed, institutions tend to place the responsibility of adapting on the student and his or her family (Musoba, Collazo, & Placide, 2013). Research in education tends to simplify the struggle minority students face when trying to acquire four-year degrees, and make the problem black and white (Garcia, 2010; Pyne & Means, 2013): minority students either graduate, or they don't. This is not only unfair because it homogenizes the experiences of underrepresented people, but because it takes away the human voice or lived experiences of the students (Pyne & Means, 2013).

For future research it would be interesting to include the perspectives of Latina/o first-generation college students who are starting out on their college careers. In this proposed longitudinal study, their pre-college views about what it means to be a successful college student could be considered and then revisited once they persist in college for at least two years or, unfortunately, discontinue enrollment. The cross-referencing of this information would result in substantial knowledge about conceptions, or misconceptions, students had coming in to college and how these

beliefs changed based on experience or how the beliefs helped/did not help them persist.

Future research should also continue highlighting student voices and sharing their actual stories, not just the numbers (Seidman 2013) to rethink education for Latinos. Deficit views in education research often focus on one side of the story or seem to highlight the students who don't make it (Minikel-Lacocque (2015). This not only takes away from students' stories but makes them faceless failures.

Recommendations

The school and the way it treats its students both matter for the persistence of Latina/o first-generation college students:

> Success and retention for all first-generation students can be described in terms of nature and nurture: the nature of the institution and the types of students it enrolls, as well as how an institution nurtures those students who need assistance, have a complementary impact on student success and retention. (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012, pp. 83)

Once a college accepts a student into its campus, the student is part of it. Colleges should take some responsibility over students' ability to persist and succeed. Further, colleges should be concerned not only with students' academic performance, but their acclimation to the environment as well. In other words, the concern should not only be about their grades, but how they feel about being at the school.

Ward, Siegel, and Davenport (2012) explain that the higher education field has a long way to go in order to successfully help first-generation students navigate the college landscape:

> ... The number of first-generation students who clear the many academic personal and social barriers in front of them is too small. It is therefore vital that as educators we do what is necessary to equip these students with the tools needed to successfully navigate higher education. (p. 128)

Change is needed now. Linking this section to the findings, including student recommendations for change from chapter four under the theme "Words of Wisdom," I will be revisiting participants' suggestions and referring back to the research literature to substantialize their claims. In the next section, I have categorized the findings, based on the data analysis, using language from the interviews with participant. The four categories that compose the recommendations for change are phrased using verbs because they are about actions we can take or improve to help Latina/o first-generation college students succeed. The categories are: include culture, encourage mentoring, add diversity, and centralize information.

Include Culture

Including culture in education is one of the most important recommendations for change, based on participant responses. According to previous references to Erikson's (1968) work on identity, it is safe to say that culture matters. As I have already described, we are affected by our environment and those around us, a constructivist tenet. Constructivism emphasizes that students use their experience,

sense of identity, and culture to learn (Nayaran, et al., 2013). As Freire (2013) avows, students are not empty vessels waiting to be filled to the brim with knowledge. They are already full of knowledge from their culture and home life. Constructivist ideology strongly advocates for students' cultures to be employed in schools. González, Moll, and Amanti (2013) champion the same idea by explaining that new knowledge must be tied to pre-existing knowledge so that context helps students learn and students know that their culture matters. Learning should not only be about content; it should relate or acknowledge culture.

Because identity is a social construct, it is formed by our experiences with others and our surroundings. The social constructs of identity and culture intertwine. For White Americans, according to Chávez and Guido-DeBrito (1999), the concept of ethnicity is invisible because social norms and customs have been built around their culture, views, and values. Students from varying cultures see the world differently (Chávez & Guido-DeBrito, 1999). One's culture is a crucial component of what makes us not only unique, but whole.

The lack of representation in higher education is unjust, according to critical race theory. Critical race theory revolves around what Anzaldúa (1987) describes: "If we can't see the face of fear in the mirror, then fear must not be there" (p. 67). Critical race theory contends that our society has stopped fighting racism because it believes it has been eradicated, but this is far from the truth (Yosso, 2005; Yosso, 2006; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). Critical race theory posits that racism is alive and well today (Beachum, 2013; Chapman, Dixson, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billing, 2013;

Solórzano, & Delgano-Bernal, 2001). It argues that, students who do not fit in with the dominant culture will struggle with what Chávez and Guido-DeBrito (1999) call "white-normed" education.

Stories are Told by the People Who Control the Social Master Narrative

Providing a vehicle to highlight the lived experiences and voices of people of color is crucial. Experiential knowledge is highly valuable in studying the dynamics between the "haves" and "have nots" (Beachum, 2013). Further, counterstorytelling is a major principle of critical race theory (Beachum, 2013; Pyne & Means, 2013; Yosso, 2005; Yosso, 2006, Yosso, T. J., Smith, W. A., Ceja, M., & Solórzano, D. G., 2009). Helping the disenfranchised and marginalized tell their stories using their own, powerful voices is what critical theory advocates, an act my participants bravely partook in.

If culture is disregarded in the name of tradition, schools can have a debilitating effect on student identity. An example of this is what Valenzuela (2013) called "de-Mexicanization," where schools subtract or take away students' unique language and culture to force students of color into mainstream society. To revisit constructivist philosophy, learning must be situated in culture and past experiences in our environment. Learning takes place in a social setting through practice and observation and interaction between the individual and the setting (Creswell, 2014). Culture is important to our students because their beliefs, values, and traditions make them who they are. Learning is itself cultural. It should draw from household knowledge and student backgrounds (González, Moll, and Amanti, 2013). Hence,

expecting students to acclimate to a culture they are unfamiliar with at school in order

to learn does them a disservice. If we care about student learning, then we should learn

about, incorporate, and acknowledge students' cultures.

Latina/o first-generation college students can feel as though, because their

culture is not represented in the student body or faculty, and often curricula, (Minikel-

Lacocque, 2015), there is a disconnect between their school and their culture. Latino

culture is so rich, there are many aspects of the culture colleges can encourage them to

explore:

> Latinos tend to share certain cultural orientations. These include (a) strong
>
> family ties; (b) an emphasis on familiar and social relations through respect,
>
> trust, and moral education; (c) an emphasis on religious faith and spirituality;
>
> and (d) a view of the Spanish language as a critical part of their heritage. It is
>
> important that higher education institutional leaders, policymakers, and
>
> practitioners understand and build on these assets to support Latino students in
>
> navigating college. (Núñez et al., 2013, p. 94)

Having their culture be part of their schooling is a substantial motivator. As Núñez et

al. (2013) explain, stakeholders in higher education would help students persist if

culture was added to the experience of college for Latina/o first-generation college

students. Without it, the likelihood of feeling like they don't belong and are alone is

high.

Students feeling like they don't belong at their schools is highly problematic.

This cultural mismatch (Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012) is detrimental

to student persistence and growth: "Some first-generation students may experience

social and cultural clashes with the institution… becoming more marginalized than

they were when they first entered the campus community" (Ward, Siegel, &

Davenport, 2012, p. 75). Feeling like one should trade in one's culture to fit in is a

feeling many Latina/os first-generation students experience (Keels, 2013; Minikel-

Lacocque, 2015; Núñez et al., 2013; Pyne & Means, 2013), as my participants clearly

illustrated. Assuming the role of the excluded, "other" on campus is harmful to

students because they can associate this with negative feelings of self-worth

(Gummadam, Pittman, & Ioffe, 2016; Pittman & Richmond, 2008).

One way to combat the negative feelings resulting from the cultural starvation

students experience on campus is for them to tell their counterstories, as participants

did for this study. Another form of intervention is for students to find counterspaces on

campus:

> Social counterspaces allow room… for students to vent frustrations and
>
> cultivate friendships with people who share many of their experiences….
>
> Counterspaces exist on and around campus, through both formal and informal
>
> activities (e.g., dinner gatherings, community outreach programs, campus
>
> cultural centers, intramural sports, cultural floors in residence halls, and ethnic
>
> newspapers or radio shows). Building community in social counterspaces
>
> cultivates students' sense of home and family, which bolsters their sense of
>
> belonging and nurtures their resilience. (Yosso, Smith, Ceja & Solórzano,
>
> 2009, p. 677)

One academic counterspace participants described as helping them thrive and persist

was the experience of taking a class through the Chicano/Latino Studies Program at

the university. Yosso, Smith, Ceja & Solórzano (2009) offer that classes on culture are

also counterspaces: "… Students often sought out Chicana/o or Latina/o studies

classes that served as academic counterspaces in which they fostered skills of critical

navigation and learned to see themselves as contributing to a legacy of resistance to

oppression" (Yosso, Smith, Ceja & Solórzano, 2009, p. 679). Such classes make a

statement: your culture matters, and it is worth studying.

Many of my participants were from the Chicano/Latino Studies Department.

Some may say that this could be why they speak so highly about the classes, but I

believe that the classes are part of what gave them the confidence to participate in this

study and voice their struggles and stories of persistence, not an easy task. Likewise,

constructivists would approve of curricula that draws on household knowledge

(González, Moll, and Amanti, 2013; Nayaran, et al., 2013). The Chicano/Latino

Studies classes some of the participants were a part of had a lasting impact on them.

Tony described the experience as altering the trajectory of his academic mindset:

> We don't know anything about ourselves. We don't know anything. We come
>
> to college knowing history of all these people… [Teaching us about Latino
>
> culture] makes you feel like less of an outsider. [It] just makes you feel like
>
> you are a part of this country. (Tony, Interview #2, 1 August 2017)

Tony continued speaking about his experiences with classes on culture in our third

interview:

> I decided to get a minor in Chicano/Latino Studies and I never intended to… I took a class and another class... I actually found myself enjoying it… Learning about writers that were from where I was from helped to give me an identity, a better identity of who I was, to know there are people like you out there actually writing books and being activists, people that I didn't know about… It helps you feel more confident in yourself. (Tony, Interview #3, 2 August 2017)

Relating learning to culture has a positive effect on identity and self-worth, Tony explains. Tony also mentioned that this is where he made the most connections with other Latina/o students. Ultimately, seeing his culture reflected in his studies sent Tony a clear message: you can be a scholar; you can be an activist; you can be something great. Antonio also relates that

> It'd benefit… first-generation students to take Chicano/Latino studies [classes]. "[Chicano/Latino Studies classes] go more in-depth of what identity really means in… culture. I would say that those type of classes do a better job of helping you distinguish your own identity. Even if that's not your culture, you're learning how identities were formed, how they are viewed and that would help you develop your own identity Taking a class and learning more in-depth about your culture helps-out a lot. It put [things] in perspective, that my culture is bigger than what I knew it was. (Antonio, Interview #3, 10 August 2017)

Carmen echoed the empowerment Tony felt because of these counterspaces or classes. Participants almost made it sound like these classes were what helped them navigate the college terrain the most, which Carmen illustrates:

> Chicano Latina Studies classes made me want to [learn] our customs, our history… After I took [the Chicano/Latino studies] class, I felt so at home... I felt like I belonged… It gave me strength, and it gave me confidence to walk around and say, "Yes. I'm here. First-generation brown woman, bilingual. I'm here." (Carmen, Interview #3, 10 August 2017)

These classes breathed new life into Carmen. She explained that without that experience, she would not have been as successful. Maria was another student who had experience taking classes on Chicano/Latino Studies. She explained that taking these classes helped her edify who she is: "Classes like… Chicano/Latino Studies… help you work through [obstacles]. That's what… helps build identity" (Maria, Interview #3, 8 August 2017). Identity and culture go hand in hand and, if colleges are seeking to help students learn about who they are, their strengths, and how they can change the world, my participants would say that classes on culture are an effective option.

The phenomenon of feeling more included by taking classes on culture is not unfounded. Based on their study relating Latino educational outcomes and campus climate, Hurtado & Ponjuan (2005) explain that

> Students who took courses that emphasized diversity tended to report a higher sense of belonging… [Our] findings suggest that a diverse curriculum can have

a direct and indirect influence on promoting a higher sense of belonging among

Latino college students. (p. 245)

So, classes on culture helps with adjustment and inclusivity. Rosa added that it is also

"a way to create pride" in one's culture (Rosa, Interview #3, 24 August 2017).

Providing opportunities for Latina/o first-generation college students to explore their

cultural backgrounds not just at home, but through academics helps their overall

confidence:

> The process of building communities reflective of their cultural knowledges
>
> and their university insights and skills can transform students… In this regard,
>
> counterspaces enable Latinas/os to develop skills of critical navigation through
>
> multiple worlds (e.g., home and school communities) and ultimately to survive
>
> and succeed. (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009, p. 678)

Hence, allowing for student learning, reflection, and exploration of their culture helps

students navigate the college landscape. Rosa felt that studying one's own culture was

important because otherwise, "It's easy to forget about it" (Rosa, Interview #3, 24

August 2017). Alma mentioned that, whether it be a class on culture or a culture

center, it helps: "You feel not so alone. You don't feel like it's' you against the world

or you against this White world" (Alma, Interview #3, 10 August 2017).

Encourage Mentoring

One of the most prevalent myths critical theory argues against is the idea of

meritocracy. Thinking that successful students are the students who work hard and, as

the saying goes, "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" is prejudicial (Beachum,

2013; Chapman, 2013). If the playing field is not equal for everyone, then there are some working a lot harder than others to succeed, even survive. Students with more resources and who belong to the dominant culture are going to struggle significantly less than students from more challenging backgrounds (Beachum, 2013). This is why having structures or systems in place like mentoring is an important part of Latina/o first-generation student support. Having a helping hand, whether it be from a peer, professor, or staff member, helps one feel supported.

Mentoring is not a new concept. It has been around for a long time but, according to Minikel-Lacocque (2015), they are often ineffective. Large, federally funded programs are a great start to combat attrition and help students persist while there but, as Minikel-Lacocque describes, these programs have "massive numbers of students to serve and only a small handful of staff members to do so" (p. 72). Mentoring should be about providing Latina/o first-generation college students with the attention they need to do well in school. If programs are understaffed, significant change is hard to accomplish. Mentoring should be personal. Looking at grades should not be the only source of information for mentors on how a student is doing in college, which is what college support programs often do (Minikel-Lacocque, 2015). Grades do not explain how the *whole* student is doing. Building relationships for emotional support is imperative:

> … Close personal relationships… may at times be more accurate predictors of
> 'success' than a high grade-point average. It is this 'relational' aspect of
> college that must be considered as seriously and in tandem with 'academics' if

we are to truly understand and improve the educational experiences of all

students. (Minikel-Lacocque, 2015, p. 74)

The relational component has to be part of the mentoring process if a student is to

grow and feel supported. Moreover, mentoring should serve the purpose of letting

Latina/o first-generation students know that they have an ally, no matter what the

problem, in their corner. To do so, mentors can

> … Expand [their] approach to systematic checks of grades and test scores… to
>
> include exploring questions such as, 'How does this student feel with regard to
>
> fitting in on campus? Does this student feel emotionally and/or racially
>
> comfortable here? Has anyone taken the time to get to know this student?'"
>
> (Minikel-Lacocque, 2015, p. 170)

Asking about students' personal wellbeing lets them know they are important and that

their happiness, not just their grades, matter.

Most students would welcome the chance to suggest change and share how

things are going because it provides them with guidance. In Musoba, Collazo, and

Placide's 2013 study on the college experiences of first-generation students of color,

they found that "The need for a preexisting relationship with an advice giver was

important to these Hispanic and Black students and was a recurring comment" (p.

363). Not only would students benefit from guidance from peers, staff, or professors,

but, as Garcia (2010) explains, the feedback mentoring could generate would then help

stakeholders in higher education know how to improve programs:

> When students are asked about barriers, they will answer, and often feel
>
> relieved that someone asked... It also seems that by asking students what
>
> problems they may be experiencing, colleges… may be able to uncover
>
> underlying problems in personnel, communication between offices, or other
>
> systemic problems. Such problems might not otherwise. (Garcia, 2010, p. 846)

Additionally, mentoring programs can be tailored to student preferences and needs.

Both peers and staff would have a significant impact on Latina/o first-generation

college student performance. It all ties back to the need for support in a foreign setting

my participants described for first-generation Latina/o first-generation college

students. This type of support system would not only help emotionally, but

academically as well:

> The notion of the importance of a support network is that participation in
>
> academic support programs not only creates a higher sense of belonging among
>
> Latinos in college but also results in substantially more confidence in Latino
>
> students' own analytical skills… This suggests that such support structures
>
> have multiple effects—enhancing skills, building confidence, and diminishing
>
> the marginality that can come when students realize they have much to learn in
>
> order to be successful in college. (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005, pp. 249-250)

Helping Latina/o first-generation college students belong would have a significant

effect on how they feel about being in college, their level of ability, and overall

wellbeing. Even just having informal contact or constant communication with peers

and staff helps with persistence and acclimation to college. Hausmann, Schofield, and

Woods agree: (2007) "Students who reported more peer-group interactions, interactions with faculty [and] peer support… reported having a greater sense of belonging (p. 829). The more support students get, the more likely they are to stay in college.

In this study, participants expressed that the influence of professors made a difference. Tony explained that when professors showed they cared by taking the time to give him detailed feedback or ask how he was doing, he felt he had an advocate:

Getting feedback… [from professors], and them showing excitement for your learning, I felt like they cared… Instead of telling me "Man, [your writing] is terrible! What are you doing here?" [My professor] said, "Just stick with it and I guarantee you'll get better at it" … And I was like, "You know what? Maybe she's right" … I do feel like I belong when I engage with professors. (Tony, Interview #3, 2 August 2017)

Tony illustrates that feedback, guidance, and simply checking in with someone can change the way one feels about the college experience. He even said that the attention he received helped him feel like he fit-in in college. Minikel-Lacocque (2015) agrees with Tony: "Understanding how to foster the relationships necessary to create a sense of belonging for underrepresented students must become a central facet of how we… pave the way for students to excel instead of merely survive" (p. 176). Survival is what my participants explained it felt like when they felt lost, alone, and inept. Tony articulated that he did go from survival mode to feeling more at home once he realized he had allies in the staff at school. Rosa goes a step further in suggesting that Latina/o

first-generation college students need mentoring support, but also from mentors from

diverse backgrounds, specifically Latinos: "[It's important to] provide a better

environment [with] advisors that maybe look like you or understand you… Or have a

similar background. Someone you could connect with" (Rosa, Interview #3, 24 August

2017). This idea is also backed by research. Musoba, Collazo, and Placide (2013)

conducted a study on the experiences of first-year Latino students in colleges with

high number of Latinos. They state, "The students shared that when they saw other

students like them who had 'made it,' it helped them see the university as a place

where they could succeed" (p. 366). One of the most requested action for change,

aside from having more peers of color, was having more professors of color:

> If you see more people like you, and you're like, "Oh, okay. Maybe I won't
>
> feel like I'm surrounded by all this authority that is usually White people."
>
> [Seeing more people of color as authority figures] would have made me feel
>
> more at ease... All the professors I've had were White people. I haven't had a
>
> non-Anglo professor in anthropology. It makes you think that maybe this
>
> shouldn't be the place for you. (Tony, Interview #3, 2 August 2017)

Tony also stated that he would have liked to see "more Latinos on staff… and in

advisors" (Tony, Interview #2, 1 August 2017). Alma voiced the same concern: "It

was really hard to really feel like I can truly connect with my White professors… It's

also, not understanding where I was coming from and my perspective as a first-

generation Latina and the struggles that come with that" (Alma, Interview #2, 9

August 2017). Having more diverse personnel sends the message that all are welcome

in all facets of the university. Soraya got even more specific, stating "Seeing professors… women of color… is really inspiring" (Soraya, Interview #2, 14 August 2017). The more exposure students got to people who have stories of perseverance and are like them, the more likely they are to get inspired to persist.

Add Diversity

As stated before, culture is a major part of the lives of Latina/o, and it should be reflected in their schools, whether it be in the student body, staff, courses available, or campus events. Culture matters:

> … Cultural integration into the college environment is important to the engagement of first-generation students in campus life, and thus is arguably essential to student success and persistence… students are more likely to persist and be successful in college if they feel connected to the institution and feel supported in their curricular and cocurricular endeavors. (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012, pp. 66-67)

Students are more likely to commit to their college if they feel it is a place where they belong or are wanted. However, because of the lack of diversity on campus, Latina/o first-generation college students feel like outsiders. One of the reasons for this is the lack of diversity on campus, a factor that highly influences Latina/o first-generation college students' level of persistence: "... campus diversity appeared to be vital to many students' attachment and integration into the campus culture" (Santos, Ortiz, Morales, & Rosales, 2007, p. 108). How can Latina/o first-generation college students

feel safe and welcome when very few students look like them on campus? What does a lack of diversity tell students about their colleges?

Latina/o college students may feel silenced and unseen because of little Latino representation. Since diversity on campus can have an effect on the level of their commitment to the school, it is dire that colleges attempt to diversify their student body:

> ... A structural characteristic of the university that contributed to students' sense of belonging and acceptance was the degree of perceived ethnic similarity to peers attending the school. This was especially the case for many ethnic minority students. Having a sufficient 'critical mass' of students from one's perceived ethnic group afforded students with an important base of support that appeared to enhance their sense of belonging to the institution. As a result of campus diversity, many students did not feel singled out or isolated because of their ethnic background. (Santos, Ortiz, Morales, & Rosales, 2007, p. 108)

In other words, if Latino students see other Latino students on campus, they will not feel so out of place, which then affects their persistence. Pyne and Means 2013 study explained that students arrive on campus searching to belong but, with their multifaceted identities, don't have the luxury of fitting right in since the dominant society governs college life.

Latina/o students in predominantly White campuses often feel as though they have to mask critical parts of who they are to fit in the mainstream population

(Minikel-Lacocque, 2015; Pyne & Means, 2013). Students of color overall often feel

that have to cross the border from their world to the world of the dominant culture

(Minikel-Lacocque, 2015; Yosso, 2006). No one likes to feel like an intruder, and

students of color feel the rejection when they set foot on college campuses, as my

participants described. Soraya voiced how she felt about the lack of diversity on

campus and how this affected her feelings of belonging:

> It is difficult, and I feel like it's a form of slow violence against me just because
>
> I don't feel like I do belong here. Being on this campus, I feel like I don't
>
> belong just by not [being around] people who look like me. (Soraya, Interview
>
> #3, 21 August 2017)

Latina/o first-generation college students must feel like they belong and fit in; if not,

they are not likely to stay in college and fall between the cracks, as Rosa describes:

"[It's] really difficult to… create your own identity [because] it's so easy… to get lost

in a campus" (Rosa, Interview #3, 24 August 2017).

Centralize Information

Colleges should ask, "Are we making the best, well-concerted effort, and are

we doing everything we can do to help Latina/o first-generation students persist and

feel like they belong on campus?" in order to increase this population's persistence

levels and academic success:

> Previously acquired social and cultural capital and a perceived entitlement to
>
> postsecondary education may be factors that allow some to advance in their
>
> educational trajectories whereas others do not. Educational institutions may be

complicit in supporting these disparate outcomes if students who have had

more access to social and cultural capital are more successful than students

who have experienced less access to these forms of capital. (Wells, 2008, p.

30)

If student have not been exposed to the language, culture, and even basic routines in

college, how are Latina/o first-generation students going to succeed at a college that

heavily relies on student self-sufficiency and has little support for them? We have a

long way to go because students are not graduating from four-year universities,

meaning programs and support systems are still not working or some are not even in

place yet.

One of the other major reasons participants said they struggled was because

there needs to be a change in how students can access centralized information and

learn about opportunities: "Institutions that are disjointed and marked by functional

silos are not as effective in creating an environment conducive to learning as those

institutions in which collaboration and cooperative spirit are evident" (Ward, Siegel, &

Davenport, 2012, p. 37). Maria voiced her concerns over this issue:

It's having to know what you need and where to find it but then there's all

these different ways to get to it, and it really should just be streamlined and

very easy to do… [It] feels like "I don't know where to look and they keep on

sending me to different places." (Maria, Interview #2, 2 August 2017)

Part of acclimating students to university culture is, simply, to orient them as to where

to go, who to see, and what to do when they need something. And, orientations do take

place regularly but, as Carmen explained in her experience, they just took her to a few

buildings and then just told her "Hi. Welcome to college… Now go to class" (Carmen,

Interview #2, 8 August 2017). Naturally, orientation programs are a crucial component

in helping students acclimate, but how can we improve what already exists? Because,

based on participant responses to interviews and Draw-A-College-Student activities,

they really felt lost much of the time. Further, orientations are often "discrete events

[and] optional one-on-one offerings that are not integrated with other first-year

programs" (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012, p. 35). So, orientation is one concept

that can should be revised and updated regularly, based on student needs.

When a student gets to college, is given the tour, and attends orientation, are

they ready to navigate the college landscape? Some say student persistence requires

more than that, including reinventing colleges' infrastructure. For, example, Ward,

Siegel, and Davenport (2012) suggest that departments, programs, divisions, all work

together to restructure and simplify the process of getting information instead of

working separately and having different processes that confuse students:

> A number of effective programs probably exist on any campus, although some
>
> may be hidden from view because of campus politics or territoriality and others
>
> may be visible but in need of an update. It is also important to create some
>
> overlap among interventions… The success and retention of first-generation
>
> students are not solely the responsibility of one office or division, so it is
>
> imperative that a cross-divisional review take place to identify programs and

services across the campus that exist to support these goals. (Ward, Siegel, &

Davenport, 2012, p. 122)

Politics and territoriality, as the researchers explain, often get in the way of student

interests (Minikel-Lacocque, 2015). Nevertheless, clear, organized, and readily

available information is important for all students, especially if they are first-

generation students. The more centralized and clear and streamlined the processes are

for each department a student comes into contact with, the less confused and lost they

will feel, seemingly simple but not easy to achieve. Oftentimes, students don't even

know that departments or programs even exist, as Soraya illustrates:

I feel like there are a lot of programs out there, but we're not aware of them.

You could have as many programs to benefit people of color, low income,

students and families but the issue is getting them to know it's there. (Soraya,

Interview #2, 14 August 2017)

Centralizing information is beneficial. Even if improved minimally, streamlining

processes and vehicles of communication will have a large impact on student

achievement and acclimation.

Summary of Recommendations

Every Latina/o first-generation college student experience is unique and each

perspective about their experiences in college should be honored. In this study,

participants had different views about their overall college experience. Tony, for

example, stated "I do think [today], colleges are doing a good job of being more

inclusive of more people" (Tony, Interview #2, 1 August 2017). He felt there is

significant change happening in higher education. On the other hand, Diana stated, "Perspectives [at the college level] are not as wide as they should be, and when they are offered they're not exactly welcomed" (Diana, Interview #3, 2 August 2017). While their opinions about the college experience differed, all participants did say that postsecondary education needs change to better serve Latina/o first-generation college students. As Tony voiced, "I think it would be nice to be more inclusive, to be more understanding of [Latino first-generation college students] … and just be aware where they're coming from" (Tony, Interview #1, 31 July 2017). The more educated we are about what Latina/o first-generation students need, the better they will perform and eventually persist.

All of the participants conveyed that they are proud of the advancements they have made in school as the first in their families to go to college. Carmen provided an example of how she feels on the impact she has as a Latina college student. She said that during a tour of the campus for incoming freshmen, she noticed two Latino students trailing in the back of the group, seemingly keeping to themselves. She stated that "They looked intimidated …. [So], I just waked by to be like "Hey! I'm here! [Latina/os] are here also" (Carmen, Interview #3, 10 August 2017).

Assisting Latina/o first-generation college students in their quest to attain four-year degrees requires a reinvention of what already exists and innovative ideas to create what does not exist yet. Resistance to change or keeping things the way they are is not helping:

More access to scholarships, more detailed awareness of barriers to admission,

and an increase in postsecondary educational attainment have not, however,

addressed the day-to-day challenges that accrue while navigating college as an

underrepresented student. Few classrooms and campus organizations genuinely

function like the contact zones they can be, instead continuing to define the

college community in Anglo-centric terms where all students, regardless of

who they are assumed to fit the majoritarian discourses. (Pyne & Means, 2013,

p. 11)

Latina/os, whose complex cultural identity and background makes them unique, need

to be the focus of change regarding persistence. College in its present state is just not

working for *all* students. Because college is a place where the dominant culture

controls the narrative, change needs to happen for Latina/o first-generation college

students to succeed and feel more supported and less lost, alone, and confused. Ward,

Siegel, & Davenport (2012) provide a succinct list of what the focuses should be for

higher education transformation regarding students' needs:

Navigating campus culture, understanding the language of the college campus,

knowing the value of engagement, and having a catalog of educational coping

skills passed down from generation to the next are important ingredients in

student success that are often [missing in] first-generation students. (p. 106)

While these are elements that the researchers describe as not existing in first-

generation students, it does not mean they are unable to learn these skills with help

from their colleges. In Table 5, I have included a brief summary, of major areas of

change in postsecondary education and specific comments participants made regarding

each of these.

Table 6: *Participant Suggestions for Areas of Change*

Specific Areas of Change	*Participant Suggestions*
Curriculum	"[Chicano/Latino Studies] is actually pertinent to my life experience. It made me feel closer to my community" (Diana, Interview #3, 2 August 2017).
Programs	"[Orientation] was one huge day of events and like, 'Hi. Welcome to college… Now go to class.' It didn't feel like it was personal" (Carmen, Interview #2, 8 August 2017).
Services	"[Resources] should be the first thing on every school webpage... Very user friendly, like 'If you need this, go here,' and it's just laid out flat" (Maria, Interview #1, 1 August 2017).
Physical Spaces	"College tours should show all the cultural centers" (Carmen, Interview #3, 10 August 2017).
Role Models/Mentors	"Representation matters and seeing [staff] just like me is like, 'Yeah, I can do this because they're doing it, so I'm going to do it, too'" (Soraya, Interview #1, 7 August 2017).

As shown, if we want change in persistent numbers for Latina/o first-generation

college students, we need to ask *them* about their experiences. We can theorize plenty

but, without student input, it would just remain what it is: theory. The lived

experiences of Latina/o first-generation college students matter. The numbers tell a

story of how many Latina/os discontinue disenrollment, but they are not everything.

Conclusion: Navigating the Borderlands of Higher Education

Anzaldúa (1987) describes life on borders as "life in the shadows" (p. 19). Latina/o first-generation college students know the feeling. They describe themselves as meshing, blending, becoming part of the background on campus, becoming invisible and, according to Maria, Alma, and Antonio, paving their own path in the darkness.

Anzaldúa (1987) proclaims that her work is concerning the "Texas-U.S. Southwestern/Mexican border" (p. 19). But she also mentions that her work is about other types of borders. She explains that

> The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy. (p. 19)

College is one of those borderlands for Latina/o first-generation college students. Two cultures meet and only one is dominant. Crossing borders in college means defying naysayers, beating the odds, persisting. It means claiming privilege that has been reserved for those who can speak the language of the majoritarian narrative.

Navigating borders is almost a contradictory concept. How does one navigate obstacles or blockages, lands where one is seemingly not allowed, or lands where one feels out of place? Anzaldúa (1987) goes on to define the purpose and logic behind borders:

> Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish
>
> *us* from *them* [emphasis in original]. [It is] a narrow strip along a steep edge. A
>
> borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue
>
> of an unnatural boundary. (p. 25)

Borders are constructed with the intent to keep certain people out and assign privilege

to those on the inside, those who belong. They are there to build constructs that have

historically separated people: *us* and *them*. Crossing the different borderlands of

society comes with the possibility of harm. Taking part in this act means great risk.

One step off that narrow strip, and one can fall over the steep edge, potentially

damaging the body, one's identity, and the resolve to step out of the margins.

Latina/o first-generation college student cross a border daily. They traverse

through unknown territory for the promise of a brighter future, hope. Tony, Diana,

Maria, Carmen, Antonio, Alma, Soraya, and Rosa are all trailblazers, but it comes at a

cost. In their quest, they are often met by a cold or unwelcoming campus climate, that

results in feelings of aloneness, self-doubt, insecurity, and lack of safety to learn.

When asked to describe her beginning experiences as a Latina first-generation college

student, Carmen used words like "no dreams… limited... and failing" (Carmen,

Interview #1, 1 August 2017).

Anzaldúa (1987) emphasizes that "There are many defense strategies that the

self uses to escape the agony of inadequacy… One remains ignorant of the fact that

one is afraid, and that it is fear that holds one petrified, frozen in stone" (p. 67). Anger,

sadness, disconnecting from family, believing one is not good enough, the sense that

the shadows is the only safe place are all coping strategies employed by many of the

Latina/o first-generation students in this study. Not only is this so, but they may feel

that their voices are stifled because when they speak up, it is not always welcomed. As

Carmen stated, "Nobody really listens to your story [as] just a first-time college

student. A lot of these people don't know" (Carmen, Interview4 #3, 10 August 2017).

The defense mechanisms can extend to self-blame. Antonio said he went as far as to

start blaming his own culture for feeling as though he did not belong. As described in

chapter four, he stated, "You start thinking if… there's a problem with you, if there's a

problem with the culture that you're in. And then at the end, it always comes back to

you… just to self-blame" (Antonio, Interview #2, 8 August 2017). The feelings of

inadequacy were so strong for Antonio that he thought because he was the one

standing out, he must be the problem. Anzaldúa's alludes to this issue when she states

that "Rejection strips us of self-worth; our vulnerability exposes us to shame" (p. 110).

Not being wanted can result in us not wanting ourselves; our inner confidence is

crushed, and we feel the blame.

Other participants also described their feelings of inadequacy and not

belonging as being a fraud: "I feel like I just never fit in…. Imposter syndrome is what

it feels like. It's just I don't belong here… [It's] a big shock every day" (Carmen,

Interview #3, 10 August 2017). Carmen's feelings of inadequacy, sadness, and

loneliness made her feel like she was feigning to be someone she was not supposed to

or allowed to be: a college student. Diana echoed this emotion in saying, "I went

through that syndrome where… you feel out of place, like you don't belong... I had to

talk myself into just bearing through it, just putting my head down and chugging

along" (Diana, Interview #1, 31 August 2017). Chugging along reminds me of what a

machine does; it keeps going until there's nothing left and it dies. We conform or cope

to avoid the harm done to us, or as Anzaldúa (1987) explains, "To avoid rejection,

some of us conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the

shadows" (p. 42). These Latina/os felt so out of place, that they thought that they not

only did not fit in, but were intruding, pretending to be someone they weren't

supposed to be, crossing a forbidden border.

As I described in previous chapters, equal participation in our American life

starts with equal access to education (Contreras, 2011). If there is a "gatekeeper

culture" in higher education dictating norms, then who gets to cross the gate? A focus

on equity is what can interrupt the "this-is-the-way-we-do-things-around-here"

mentality in education. As I cited previously, Marion and González (2014) ask a very

relevant question when it comes to transformation in institutions: "How can change

occur if the systems are structured by strongly held, even cultural assumptions about

effective or appropriate norms and ways of doing things?" (p. 330). Anzaldúa (1987)

would say, "Individually, but also as a racial entity, we need to voice our needs. We

need to say to white society: We need you to accept the fact that Chicanos are

different, to acknowledge your rejection and negotiation of us" (p. 107). The spark of

potential is slowly being extinguished from within Latina/o first-generation college

students. They are already coming in with doubts, hesitancies, and fear. To add an

unfamiliar, alien, cold, and often unwelcoming setting to this circumstance results in chaotic damage to one's identity, confidence, and feelings of self-worth.

To close, and to restate the significance of the problem, I will end with the author who inspired my research question on borderlands. Anzaldúa (1987) asserts,

> … Our psyches resemble the bordertowns… The struggle has always been inner and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the "real" world unless it first happens in the images in our heads. (p. 109)

If we keep telling ourselves that everything is okay and that those who make it deserve it and those who don't simply failed, we are not facing our psychological borders in education. Further, if we cannot imagine new, innovative ways of avoiding the negative and harmful feelings the Latina/o first-generation students depict in this study, we are harming ourselves, our future. New avenues regarding student support and engagement should include Latina/o culture and student identity so their higher education institutions can better serve them. It is my hope that we can use future research to continue exploring the lived experiences and highlighting the voices of Latina/o first-generation college students who often feel alone, hopeless, and in the shadows.

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Appendix A: Participant Consent Form

Consent to Participate in Research

Informed Consent Letter for Study Participants

Consent to Study title: How Latina/o First-Generation College Students Navigate

Their College Experience: Keeping Who They Are While Learning the Culture of

College

Study title: How Latina/o First-Generation College Students Navigate Their College

Experience: Keeping Who They Are While Learning the Culture of College

Principle investigator:
Dannelle D. Stevens
Graduate School of Education
Curriculum and Instruction
PO Box 751
Portland, OR 97207-0751
503-705-9828
Email address: bgsd@pdx.edu
angela.balcacer@gmail.com

Co-Investigator:
Angela J. Balcacer
Graduate School of Education
Curriculum and Instruction
PO Box 751
Portland, OR 97207-0751
503-863-4896
Email address:

Introduction to the Study:

You are invited to participate in a research study with researcher Angela J. Balcacer

from the Department of Curriculum & Instruction, Graduate School of Education, at

Portland State University in Portland, Oregon. The purpose of this study is to go

beyond the conversation of Latina/o attrition to examine how persevering Latina/o

first-generation college students are affected by postsecondary institutions and explore

the implications associated with how higher education affects students' sense of

identity.

You are being asked to participate in this study because it is important to highlight the

powerful voices of Latina/o first-generation college students who are brave enough to

be the first in their immediate families to embark on a demanding odyssey to attain a

four-year degree.

This form will explain the research study and will also explain the possible risks as

well as the possible benefits to you. We encourage you to talk with your family and

friends before you decide to take part in this research study. If you have any questions,

please ask one of the study investigators.

What will happen if I choose to participate?

As a first-generation Latina/o college student, you will be sharing your story of

perseverance and determination to strive for a degree from a four-year postsecondary

institution. I am interested in exploring what, from your point of view, are the

successes Latina/o first-generation students experience as well as the most challenging

obstacles Latina/o first-generation students encounter on their journey to graduation.

As a participant in the study, you will be asked to:

1. Complete a consent form.

2. Take part in three 30-minute, one-on-one interviews with the researcher.

3. Draw a college student during the interview, discuss your art work, and

    complete two free-writing prompts about being a college student.

Data will be gathered throughout the study. The data collected include: audio

recordings of the conversations or interviews, research notes and reflections, and

participant artwork/free-writes.

Participation in this study will take a total of 2 hours over a period of about 3 weeks.

What are the risks or side effects of being in this study?

There are no known risks in this study, but some individuals may experience

discomfort when answering interview questions. Speaking about or revisiting past

experiences can bring up and uncover strong emotions or emotional distress. The

researcher will be careful to support your emotional needs and, if needed, will

communicate with university staff to help find more substantial emotional support.

However, every effort will be made to minimize any risks.

What are the benefits to being in this study?

There will be no direct benefit from this study aside from the pleasure of sharing your

experiences as a strong Latina/o first-generation college student. Your academic

standing will not be affected in any way. Your voice will help add to the body of

research on the Latina/o higher education experience. You would be contributing to a

research conversation on perseverance of Latina/o college student as opposed to the

traditional focus of attrition in past studies. This study will recognize and validate your

voice and the voices of other Latinos in higher education. (Each participant will receive a $5 Starbucks gift card after each of the three interviews as a token of appreciation.)

How will my information be kept confidential?

One of the researcher's primary goals is to protect participant confidentiality. All data/material will be kept for 3 years in a locked file or electronically password protected in the researcher's home office and then destroyed. Your name will not be used in published reports in this study.

Note: It is my legal obligation to report child abuse, child neglect, harm to self or others or any life-threatening situation to the appropriate authorities, and, if so, confidentiality cannot be maintained.

Institutional Review Board:

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may call the PSU Office for Research Integrity at (503) 725-2227 or 1(877) 480-4400. The ORI is the office that supports the PSU Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is a group of people from PSU and the community who provide independent oversight of safety and ethical issues related to research involving human participants. For more information, you may also access the IRB website at https://sites.google.com/a/pdx.edu/research/integrity.

Voluntary Participation:

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to participate entirely without jeopardy to your academic standing.

Cost to participate:

There is no cost for your participation in this study.

Consent

You are deciding to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided (or the information was read to you). By signing this consent form, you are not waiving any of your legal rights as a research participant.

You have had an opportunity to ask questions and all questions have been answered to your satisfaction. By signing this consent form, you agree to participate in this study. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you.

_____   _____ _____

Name of Adult Participant (print)   Signature of Adult Participant   Date

Investigator's Signature

This research study has been explained to the participant and all his/her questions have been answered. The participant understands the information described in this consent form and freely consents to participate.

_____   _____   _____

Name of Adult Investigator (print)   Signature of Investigator   Date

Appendix B: Brief Demographic Questionnaire

Please provide the following information:

Participant full name: _____

Age: _____

Gender: _____

Major: _____

Minor: _____

Please describe your nationality and heritage: _____

_____

Please circle your academic year: Junior   Senior   Graduate Student

Appendix C: Interview Introduction Script

Introduction (15 mins):

- I introduce myself as facilitator

- Purpose of the study and interview is discussed. I will explain the overarching purpose of the study, which is to go beyond the conversation of Latina/o persistence by examining how Latina/o first-generation college students' heritage and culture are affected by postsecondary institutions and explore the implications associated with how higher education affects these students' sense of identity. I will also explain that I seek to relay these phenomena through the lens of students who have been through the college journey as Latina/o first-generation college students.

- Format of the session and guidelines for participating are reviewed

- I review the consent form and advise participants that their participation is completely voluntary

Appendix D: In-Depth Interview Questions

Interview Questions:

First Interview: Family Life and Academic Aspirations (30 min.)

1. How would you describe your parents and where they're from?

2. Tell me a bit about your childhood and your family dynamic. What was your upbringing like?

3. How would you describe your early experiences in school?

4. In what ways is going to college important to you?

5. What life experiences help you in the quest to complete your degree?

6. What is it like being the first person in your family to go to college?

7. Where do you think your college experiences and your quest for a degree will lead you professionally?

8. How did you learn about the resources available to you in college?

9. How do you feel about how the college treats Latino families?

10. How would you describe your overall experience navigating the college terrain?

Second Interview: First-Generation Student General College Experience

1. How would you describe your feelings of belonging or not belonging in college?

2. How is your college experience going so far?

3. What is going well?

4. What types of support have you received at home or in school to help you navigate academic life and finish your degree?

5. Describe your experience being introduced to the college (campus tour, welcome seminars, etc.).

6. How would you describe your experience transitioning to a college environment?

7. What has been the most challenging part of your adjustment to college?

8. What are some of the specific things that made your transition to college successful or not as productive?

9. What advice would you give Latina/o first-generation college students entering college for the first time?

10. How would you describe the college climate?

Third Interview: Identity and Culture (30 min.)

1. How would you describe your sense of feeling like you are part of the school?

2. How do you feel that being Latina/o affect how other students, professors, and administrators in the college view you? Provide an example.

3. What is it like being a member of your ethnic group in a predominantly white campus?

4. How did college nurture your sense of developing identity?

5. How did college conflict with your sense of developing identity?

6. How would you describe the top stressors that interfered with your personal and academic growth in college?

7. In your opinion, how do you think colleges can better serve their first-generation Latina/o students?

8. How do you feel that college helps/does not help Latina/o students develop an identity?

9. What college experiences help you in the quest to complete your degree?

10. If you could do it all over again, what would you change about your college experience, if anything?