

4-21-2020

# Cultural Wealth and the Racialized Experiences of Persisting Latinx Business Students in a Predominantly White Institution: a Study on Sense of Belonging

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<https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.7327>

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Cultural Wealth and the Racialized Experiences of Persisting Latinx Business Students in  
a Predominantly White Institution: A Study on Sense of Belonging

by

Rebecca Sue Sanchez

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education  
in  
Educational Leadership: Postsecondary Education

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Portland State University  
2020

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## Abstract

The changing landscape of higher education calls for a shift in approach to ensure that all students are given not just the opportunity but also the environment in which to succeed. In order to facilitate the growing demand for a diverse workforce, universities must work to retain students and support them sufficiently as they move toward graduation. Student persistence rates from year one to year two show markedly different rates based on race and ethnicity with the lowest persistence rates associated with Latinx and Black students. National projections of college attendance by race and ethnicity predict that Latinx students will be the fastest-growing group attending college over the next ten years. This growth, coupled with the need for improvement in persistence rates, presents an opportunity for universities to enhance their support of Latinx students, improve the institutional bottom line, and increase the diversity of the educated workforce in the United States. Student sense of belonging is tied to persistence in college and is influenced by their experiences inside and outside the classroom. Students in this study demonstrated aspirational capital through their drive to make their parents proud and their clear future vision for themselves. Students relied on their social, familial, and navigational capital to support them as they adjusted to college and when they faced difficulty persisting. Placing the experience of persisting Latinx students at the center of this research, using interviews and photo-elicitation to form a qualitative case study, I demonstrated how student experiences in a school of business at a predominantly White public university influenced their sense of belonging and how their cultural wealth propelled them to persist toward graduation.

Dedication

*To my family:*

*Felix, Cassandra, & Alexandra Sanchez*

*Sue, Steve, & Tim Hiscoe*

## Acknowledgments

First, to my advisor: Karen Haley, thank you so much for reading and re-reading this dissertation and patiently helping me figure out where the gaps are, and where links need to be made. You have been an excellent advisor, and your support and encouragement were critical to my own persistence toward graduation.

To my dissertation committee: CeCe Ridder, Matt Carlson, Andy Job, thank you for reading this, for helping me improve, and for caring about the future of education. Time is precious, and I feel so honored that you were willing to devote some of your time reviewing this and working with me.

Felix, you have supported me through this doctoral program and our life together. Thank you for being a great partner to me, and an excellent father to the girls. Thank you for taking the girls so I could study and write, and thank you for bringing them back tired. Thank you for your support when I needed to go away and write to get this done!

Cassandra and Alexandra, you are my motivation, and I hope to be an inspiration to you as you grow up. You watched me attend a doctoral program full time, work a demanding full-time job while being a present, loving, and supportive mother to you both. Remember this: you can do it, if you want it. You can make it work, it will be hard, but you can do it. Believe in yourself.

Mom and Dad, thank you for all your support and encouragement and for taking the girls Sundays and overnights so I could focus on school. Without you, I would have struggled to get this done. It truly takes a village, and you are critical members of our village. You are everything I could wish for in parents.

To my cohort, without you, this journey would have been lonely and lacking. At times, I fell, and you were there to lift me and walk beside me. Thank you.

To the student participants for this study: I was blessed to spend time with you, hearing your experiences, ideas, and dreams. Thank you for sharing them with me so I could learn from you and work to make the school of business a better place.

Erica Wagner, thank you for pushing me to begin my doctorate and for your steadfast support of me through the past seven years. You have been a tremendous mentor, and your confidence in me drives me to work harder.

To my colleagues in the School of Business, thank you for checking in with me and for believing in me. To Maureen O'Connor, thanks for taking a chance on me, because you took that chance, I was able to get where I am today. To Darrell Brown, thank you for your mentorship and for helping me develop into the professional I am today. To Jeanne Enders, thank you for always making time to talk me through things – from parenting to coding, you are so giving with your time and care. To Nathaniel Garrod, thank you for being my right-hand person, for handling my job when I needed to step away and work on this dissertation. I appreciate that I can count on you. To Edgar Barrera, Alex Garfias, Noah Spencer, Halley Becker, Scott Campbell, and all the other people who provided input into this work, thank you. You helped make this dissertation better.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	i
Dedication .....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
List of Tables.....	ix
List of Figures .....	x
CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION OF THE PROBLEM.....	1
Background and Significance of the Problem.....	4
Conceptual Framework - Critical Race Lens .....	13
Statement of the Research Problem .....	15
Purpose of the Study .....	16
Methodology and Research Questions.....	17
Researcher Motivation and Connection to Study.....	17
Summary and Overview.....	18
CHAPTER TWO – REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....	20
Policies that Influence Latinx Student Success.....	21
Language Policy.....	22
Cultural Inclusion.....	23
Immigration Policy and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals.....	25
Latinx Student Cultural Considerations .....	28
Ethnic Identity Development .....	29
Cultural Orientation and Loyalty to Ethnic Heritage.....	30
Familial Influence .....	32
Retention and Persistence .....	34
Foundational Retention and Persistence Theory.....	35
Contemporary Retention and Persistence Theory.....	39
Sense of Belonging .....	43
Social Influences on Sense of Belonging.....	47
Academic Influences on Sense of Belonging .....	48
Latinx Student Sense of Belonging.....	51
Campus Racial Climate and Sense of Belonging .....	56



Critical Race Theory .....	58
Liberalism’s Failure .....	61
Whiteness as Property.....	62
Interest Convergence .....	64
Amplifying Voice - Storytelling.....	65
Critical Race Theory in Educational Research .....	67
Pedagogical Practices.....	68
Community Cultural Wealth.....	70
Summary .....	72
CHAPTER THREE – METHODOLOGY .....	73
Case Study.....	75
Site Selection and Research Participants .....	76
Site Selection .....	76
Participant Selection .....	77
Data Collection.....	80
Interviews.....	81
Photo-elicitation.....	83
Trustworthiness .....	87
Data Analysis .....	88
Researcher Positionality, Reflexivity and Bias .....	90
Limitations of the Design.....	93
Summary .....	95
CHAPTER FOUR – RESULTS AND ANALYSIS OF DATA.....	96
Community Cultural Wealth .....	97
Cultural Wealth – Aspirational Capital.....	97
Drive to Make Parents Proud.....	99
Perseverance .....	101
Sense of Purpose and Future Vision .....	103
Cultural Wealth – Familial Capital .....	105
Family Influence on Persistence .....	105
Family Commitments.....	107

Cultural Wealth – Navigational Capital.....	110
Prioritizing School .....	110
Self-Reliance – Independence.....	111
The Experience of Suffering.....	112
Cultural Wealth – Social Capital .....	113
Peer Connections – Ethnic Identity and Students of Color.....	113
Giving Back to Community .....	117
Cultural Wealth – Linguistic & Resistant Capital .....	118
Belonging .....	121
Racial and Cultural Experiences that Influence Belonging .....	122
Racism, Micro-aggressions, and White Student Oblivion.....	123
Ethnic or Racial Representation on Campus .....	125
Experiences with White Faculty and Faculty of Color.....	130
Ethnic Identity and Cultural Student Involvement .....	132
Cultural Reminders of Home .....	139
Experiences of Belonging on Campus.....	142
The Influence of Faculty and Staff on Belonging.....	144
The Importance of Peers .....	146
Belonging in Business School .....	147
Sense of Place Influenced by Space.....	153
Difficulty Engaging and a Lack of Community on Campus .....	160
Belonging and Likelihood to Graduate.....	164
Summary .....	166
CHAPTER FIVE – DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE.....	168
Latinx Student Community and Belonging Experiences.....	168
How Racism or Prejudice Influenced Belonging.....	173
Belonging and Community Cultural Wealth’s Influence on Persistence.....	176
Recommendations for Practice .....	182
Institutional Recommendations .....	182
Departmental or College Recommendations .....	185
Programmatic Recommendations .....	189

CULTURAL WEALTH OF PERSISTING LATINX STUDENTS	viii
Current Implementation of Initial Recommendations .....	191
Recommendations for Further Research .....	191
Limitations of the Research .....	193
Conclusion .....	194
REFERENCES .....	196
APPENDIX A – INITIAL STUDY INVITATION EMAIL .....	221
APPENDIX B – SECOND STUDY INVITATION EMAIL .....	222
APPENDIX C - INFORMED CONSENT FORM .....	223
APPENDIX D – FIRST INTERVIEW GUIDE .....	226
APPENDIX E – POST-INTERVIEW DEMOGRAPHICS .....	228
APPENDIX F – INSTRUCTIONS FOR PHOTO-ELICITATION .....	229
APPENDIX G – SECOND INTERVIEW GUIDE .....	230
APPENDIX H – CODES AND ASSOCIATED THEMES .....	231
APPENDIX I – PARTICIPANTS .....	233

List of Tables

Table 1. Participant Demographics.....79

Table 2. Student Rankings of Belonging and Likelihood of Graduating.....165

## List of Figures

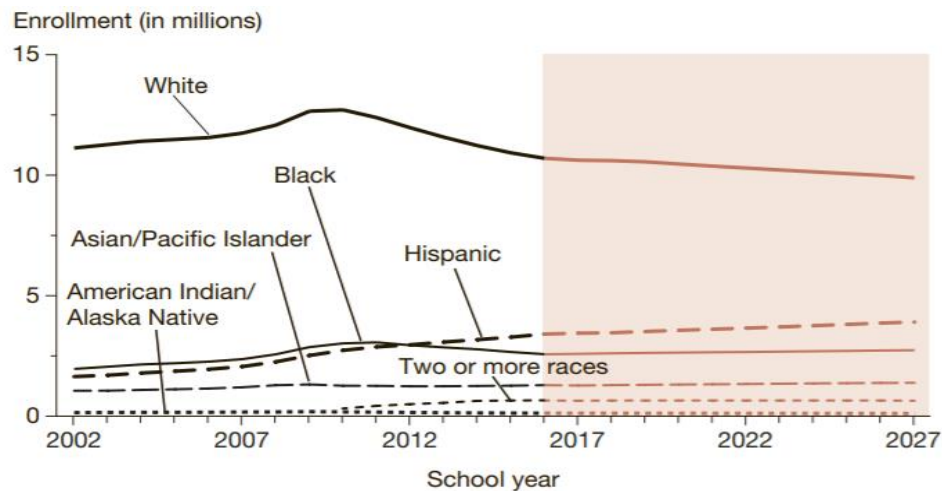
Figure 1. Projections of Education Statistics to 2027.....	1
Figure 2. Overall Retention and Persistence Rates by Race and Ethnicity.....	2
Figure 3. Photo taken by Monica representing strength and perseverance.....	98
Figure 4. Photo of a traditional blanket that represented Contreras' ethnic identity.....	134
Figure 5. Photo of La Casa Latina taken by Val.....	135
Figure 6. Photo of Sara's point of view in La Casa Latina.....	137
Figure 7. Photo of mural in La Casa Latina taken by Maria.....	138
Figure 8. Photo of Tito's Burritos taken by Michael.....	140
Figure 9. The Portland Mercado taken by Val that represents reminders of home.....	140
Figure 10. Maria's Photo of the Sunset From her Dorm Room Window.....	141
Figure 11. Abe's picture of the classroom environment.....	145
Figure 12. Representation of Belonging in the School of Business Taken by David.....	149
Figure 13. German's picture of the business school.....	151
Figure 14. Michael's Picture of the Stairs That Made Him Feel Seen.....	154
Figure 15. Carlos's picture of the Atrium stairs.....	155
Figure 16. Sara's picture of her team's Dia de Los Muertos Ofrenda.....	156
Figure 17. Michael's picture of the "snapshot of America".....	157
Figure 18. David's picture of the Party in the Park Blocks.....	158
Figure 19. Michael's picture of the library.....	159
Figure 20. David's picture of the event that reenergized him at a critical time.....	163

## CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION OF THE PROBLEM

Higher education was built by and for the White majority and it will take significant paradigmatic shifts in order to ensure the promise of education is one that benefits students of color. Of all students of color, Hispanic/Latinx students are the fastest-growing demographic group attending college, yet their persistence rates toward bachelor's degree completion lag behind that of their White colleagues. Enrollment projections for college attendance by race/ethnicity show the Hispanic/Latinx student population increasing by 16% from 2015 to 2027 (Hussar & Bailey, 2019). This compares to a 7% increase for Asian/Pacific Islander students and a 6% increase for Black/African American students (see Figure 1). Other races decline or remain flat.

**Figure 1**

*Projections of Education Statistics to 2027*

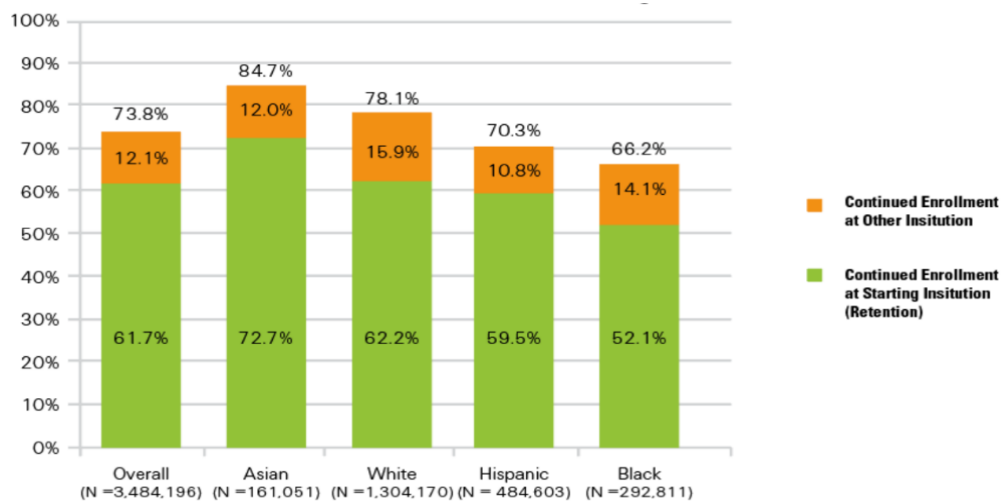


*Note:* Hussar, W.J., and Bailey, T.M. (2019). *Projections of Education Statistics to 2027* (NCES 2019-001). U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

National data highlights the problem of student retention and persistence in higher education with approximately 15%-33% of all students dropping out of college in their first year. Retention is the act of retaining a student year after year at the institution where they began college (Hagedorn, 2005) and persistence is the act of a student persisting from year to year toward degree completion at any institution (Braxton, Doyle, Hartley III, Hirschy, Jones, & McLendon, 2013). A student may not be retained by one institution but is indeed persisting toward degree completion through transfer to another college or university. Persistence rates from year one to year two for the fall 2017 cohort show 78.1% of White students persisting, 84.7% of Asian students persisting, 70.3% of Latinx students persisting, and 66.2% of Black students persisting (See Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Overall Retention and Persistence Rates by Race and Ethnicity for Fall 2017 Cohort*



*Note:* National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2019). First-year persistence and retention snapshot report.

Students who self-identified as Hispanic or Latino were the focus of this study, and thus the research reviewed was on students who identified as Hispanic, Chicano, or Latino/a in the original studies. Those original terms have remained in the review of the literature to ensure that the understanding of those populations and the intentions for those works are not misunderstood through their use in this research. Given the significant overlap in the terms, the research done with Hispanic, Chicano, and Latino students appears relevant to the students in this study.

The term Hispanic has colonialist undertones and is offensive to some due to its association with the conquistadores from Spain. Additionally, it has been said to erase the nuances of mixed heritages and force people to identify with the whiteness of Spain (Cruz, 2018). The term Latino is more inclusive than Hispanic when speaking of populations from Latin America, yet the gendered nature of the Spanish language does not resonate with everyone. Some resist using the word Latino and use the term Latinx “to push back on the inherently masculine term used to describe all genders in the Spanish language” (Rodriguez, 2019, para. 8). Throughout this research, I have chosen to use the term Latinx, a gender-neutral label for people who identify as having Latin American ancestry (Salinas & Lozano, 2017). Some students identify as Latino, some identify as Latina, and some identify as Latinx. This non-gender-based term may be used to “disrupt traditional notions of inclusivity and shape institutional understandings of intersectionality” (Salinas & Lozano, 2017, p. 1) by changing the language used in educational research. This paper is meant to be inclusive of men, women, and those who



prefer terminology that is not gender based and it is with that aim that the terminology is intentionally changed from traditional terms like Latino/Latina to Latinx.

### **Background and Significance of the Problem**

Latinx student persistence is vital to students, society, employers, and colleges and universities because everyone benefits from student degree attainment. Students benefit from increased professional opportunities and lifetime earnings as well as improved health and longevity. Society and businesses benefit because students who graduate are more likely to become civically engaged citizens and employees. Universities benefit because many rely on student tuition dollars and every student who leaves the university represents a loss of potential future tuition dollars as well as a loss of the funds invested in recruiting that student. Student persistence has been tied to students feeling a sense of belonging; a sense of fit at their institution. Viewing a sense of belonging and persistence of Latinx students through a critical lens allows for the consideration of the campus environment and the experiences of students of color.

Persistence toward a degree is essential for students because earning a bachelor's degree impacts their lives significantly, specifically their career and earnings potential, their longevity, and overall health (Chan, 2016; College Board, 2018). According to the College Board (2018), the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau data demonstrated that the expected lifetime earnings of a person with a bachelor's degree are 66% higher than a person with a high school diploma. Additionally, there is a high demand for diverse candidates in businesses. Thus, it is crucial to support Latinx students persisting toward degree completion as attaining a degree is likely to positively influence their economic mobility.

Research also shows that college graduates have better physical health and live longer than people without college degrees (Chan, 2016). Additionally, college graduates successfully navigate complex systems like health care HMOs easier than those without a college degree (Carlson & Blustein, 2003). Given the growth in the Latinx student population, it will be especially vital that institutions develop initiatives to ensure the persistence of Latinx students.

Student persistence toward degree attainment is essential to society because it influences civic engagement and debt repayment rates. College graduates vote at higher levels than non-college graduates (Galston, 2007). Kreighbaum (2018) found that students who complete a degree are 20% more likely to begin repaying their loans after leaving campus.

The U.S. Census Bureau projects the Latinx population growing significantly from 2016 to 2060, by 93.2% (Vespa, Armstrong, & Medina, 2018). Given the projected growth of the Latinx population, businesses will find that their clientele demographics are becoming more diverse. Thus, Latinx graduates are especially needed in the workforce due to their representation of the clientele businesses are serving (Maceli & Box, 2010; Robinson & Dechant, 1997) and a diversified workforce brings increased marketplace understanding, improved bottom lines, more effective decision making, and enhanced creativity (Robinson & Dechant, 1997). Some employers work to diversify their organizations because they adhere to the values-based decision to diversify; they believe it is the right thing to do (van Dijk et al., 2012) while other employers will only focus on diversifying if they can see the value-added to the organization that comes with a diverse

workforce (van Dijk et al., 2012). For the latter firms, a focus on the bottom line may be necessary. Firms that have pro-diversity policies have discovered an increase in their innovation and future firm value, so more employers are intentionally seeking out diverse candidates for hire (Mayer, Warr & Zhao, 2018). Society benefits from increased numbers of college graduates in more ways than those listed, therefore, it is beneficial to work on strategies aimed at improving student persistence and degree attainment levels.

Diverse student persistence is essential to colleges and universities as it provides a diverse educational environment and influences future financial sustainability. Having a diverse student body positively affects the educational environment felt by all students and the faculty of color at those institutions. This importance of diversity is widely understood in higher education (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002) as diverse student bodies positively influence the educational experience of all students and the professional experience of faculty of color (Antonio, 2003).

A diverse student body may request changes in what and how content is taught, thereby broadening the curriculum (Antonio, 2003). Having diverse students influences the experience of faculty of color positively by reducing their feelings of isolation, alleviating the need for them to be the primary voice in minority affairs, and by reducing the likelihood of tenure denial for faculty of color (Antonio, 2003). This impact on the experience of faculty of color is critical because Santos (2017) found that institutions with faculty members who were representative of the student body yielded higher graduation rates for Hispanic students. Thus, having leaders in higher education who look

like the students enrolled in the university may positively impact the persistence and graduation rates of underrepresented students (Santos, 2017).

However, institutions must work to meet the needs of their diverse students rather than focus on diversity for the sake of diversity. Hikido and Murray (2005) found that “White students gain disproportionately from diversity compared to students of color because increased structural diversity more dramatically increases their chances of engaging in cross-racial interactions, whereas minority students regularly interact across race” (p. 393). This point makes the argument for increased diversity less relevant for students of color and shifts this narrative to the experiential nature of college for students of color rather than the demographic makeup of the college itself. With the goals of diversity and access held by many U.S. higher education institutions, it is not enough to merely increase the number of Latinx students attending college; focused efforts must be made to improve the experience of students while they are attending college to support their persistence.

The second reason student persistence is important to public colleges and universities, in particular, is because they are increasingly dependent on student tuition dollars in order to maintain financial sustainability due to declines in state and federal funding (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2012). Each student who leaves the university represents a loss of revenue through tuition and a loss of the expenses put into recruiting that student (Raisman, 2013). In one study of 1,669 colleges and universities, Raisman (2013) calculated the average institutional revenue lost per cohort at \$13,267,214 for four-year public universities. In 2016, there were 710 four-year public

colleges and universities in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017), which would equate to roughly \$9.4 billion in lost tuition dollars per cohort nationally. The cost of recruiting each new student has been estimated at \$457 for public institutions (National Association of College and University Business Officers, 2012). The persistence rate for the fall 2016 cohort of students who began at four-year public institutions was 83%, which means 17% of those students dropped out entirely (National Student Clearinghouse, 2018). Public institutions lost a total of 228,977 new students collectively, and according to the National Student Clearinghouse (2018), they have no record of them transferring, which means that 228,977 students have likely dropped out of college after their first year. Multiplying those 228,977 students by the \$457 cost spent to recruit them, equates to a per cohort lost cost of \$104,642,489. Adding that amount to the lost future revenue demonstrates that public four-year universities alone are collectively losing more than \$9.5 billion each year as a result of student attrition. Given that Latinx student numbers are projected to grow while the proportion of White students attending postsecondary institutions is decreasing (Hussar & Bailey, 2017), it makes business sense for an organization to consider how it can retain its fastest-growing target market. The truism that it is cheaper to keep a customer than to get a new one is not lost on the business of higher education.

Previous research on retention spans the past fifty years dating to Spady's 1970 work wherein he applied Durkheim's 1897 theory of suicide to the concept of college attrition and focused a great deal on the elements that led to student persistence on predominantly White residential college campuses (1987/1951). Tinto (1975) developed

his student integration model that focused on a student's academic and social integration into predominantly White institutions (PWI), defined as campuses where White students make up 50% or more of the student population (Brown II & Dancy II, 2010). Though Tinto's (1975) work is still considered to be foundational, new and more appropriate models have been developed that take into consideration the realities of a diverse student body attending college on commuter campuses. Braxton and his colleagues (2013) developed a model that considered how student persistence might be influenced differently at commuter campuses. However, that model does not include a dedicated focus on the campus experiences of students of color.

In addition, Tinto's original work was focused on assimilation into the university and a "breaking up" with one's family of origin. These concepts are rooted in White, middle class, U.S. notions of independence. Factors found to influence Latinx student persistence positively run counter to the idea that to be successful in college, one must distance themselves from their family of origin and become assimilated into the dominant White culture. Assuming Latinx students need to adapt to the dominant culture in order to succeed is an approach that has failed to work, evidenced by the consistently lower persistence rates seen nationwide. It creates a situation whereby students are made to feel like they cannot be themselves to belong. The work of Torres (2003, 2004), Hurtado and Carter (1997), and Yosso (2005, 2006) are particularly relevant to the issue of Latinx student persistence. Torres (2003, 2004) provides a view into how family, cultural orientation, and generational immigration status influence the experience of Latinx students. Hurtado and Carter (1997) studied the sense of belonging and racial

climate felt by Latinx students. Yosso (2003, 2004) focuses on counterstorytelling and how non-dominant cultures create capital.

Students' perceived sense of belonging has been tied to their persistence. Students who experience feelings of not fitting in or of being rejected are closely related to student attrition from a university (Heisserer & Parette, 2002; O'Keefe, 2013). Bollen and Hoyle (1990) defined a sense of belonging as a feeling of acceptance in a particular community. Sense of belonging has also been described as a subjective sense of fit and affiliation within a college or university setting and the degree to which a student feels a part of the college atmosphere (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002). For this paper, belonging is defined as a subjective experience of feeling part of and accepted by the college community. Sense of belonging is particularly relevant to a discussion on Latinx student persistence because feelings of not fitting in can be magnified for students who are ethnic minorities attending predominantly White institutions (Just, 1999). Meeuwisse, Severiens, and Born (2010) highlighted the added difficulty for students who are first-generation college students:

Students who come from backgrounds where there is little history of participation in higher education can find academic culture particularly bewildering, and may lack the support and guidance that comes from having friends or family that have been through the experiences of attending university. (p. 531)

The opposite of belonging could be framed as alienation (Strayhorn, 2012). Alienation is the subjective experience of feeling out of place (Strayhorn, 2012). It is student alienation, marginalization, and isolation that institutions have an opportunity to address

in order to create an environment conducive to the development of a feeling of belonging for students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds.

When considering the lived experience of Latinx students, one cannot ignore the historical and current racist policies and practices that may influence their sense of belonging. Past policies that banned language and culture have structured the system of higher education of today because they have influenced the students who experienced them growing up. Current immigration policies, practices, and racist rhetoric from the US government may affect the sense of belonging felt by Latinx students in schools (Campos & Chavez, 2017). Thus, when considering Latinx student sense of belonging, one cannot ignore their racialized experiences on campus.

Bell (1992) states “racism is a permanent component of American life” (p. 13). As such, this permanence means that racist structures exist and will continue to be present in government, education, and other social domains (DeCuir, & Dixson, 2004). Prejudice and racism are fundamental to U.S. society. Perceptions of prejudice and discrimination influence the academic experiences of students of color. Nora and Cabrera (1996) found that educational experiences, social experiences, and academic and intellectual development were all negatively influenced by student perceptions of a racially hostile campus climate. They found three dimensions of student perception of discrimination and prejudice: campus climate, faculty/staff prejudicial attitudes, and experiences in the classroom. Student perceptions of prejudice and discrimination had an indirect effect on student institutional commitment and persistence (Nora & Cabrera, 1996).



Research has demonstrated that students of color experience more instances of differential treatment on campus than White students (Suarez-Balcazar, Orellana-Damacela, Portillo, Rowan, & Andrews-Guillen, 2003). Experiences of differential treatment on campus can lead students of color to feel alienated, isolated, intimidated (Freeman, 1997), segregated (Gossett, Cuyjet, & Cockriel, 1998), and unwelcome in predominantly White institutions (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2003; Turner, 1994). Thus, research into Latinx students' sense of belonging must consider the role that race, racism, and prejudice play in their lived experience on campus.

The world around them influences the student experience, and the current context those students are experiencing in the United States is one of racism and prejudice clearly outlined by Heather Lou (2017):

In a U.S. context in which President Trump has attempted to “Make America Great Again” by appointing White nationalists to his cabinet and officials in the House and Senate proposed to eliminate ethnic studies, accessible health care, and protections for people who are transgender, students, faculty, and practitioners with marginalized identities have felt a heightened threat to their livelihoods due to the legislature and rhetoric that impacts their civil rights. (p.197)

This quote demonstrates the society that people of color are operating in today, which can influence their sense of belonging in the U.S. and U.S. institutions like universities. When student experiences are viewed through the lens of critical race theory, it provides an opportunity to consider how issues of racism, prejudice, and discrimination influence the experience of students of color and their perceived sense of belonging. Issues of race and

racism directly influence the sense of belonging for students of color (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

### **Conceptual Framework - Critical Race Lens**

Given that Latinx students are operating in a society in which racism is endemic to U.S. society and education is laced with hegemony, and considering the findings that sense of belonging influences student persistence, this research was designed to spotlight the experiences of Latinx students to challenge the status quo. The disparity in persistence rates viewed through a critical lens can be seen as a deficiency on the part of universities in meeting the needs of their Latinx students rather than as a deficiency of the student. Deficit thinking posits that the students who do not persist are lacking the necessary knowledge considered relevant by the majority, thereby removing blame for the student attrition from the institutions themselves. Deficit thinking is considered “one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism that is manifested in U.S. schools” today (Yosso, 2005).

Critical theory is used to examine and critique society and culture (McLaren, 2015) and can be applied to education to encourage questioning and critique of the systems of education and those who hold power in those systems (Dugan, 2017). Educational systems have historically been a tool for the powerful to maintain power (Freire, 1993). Therefore, one must consider how the universities of today continue to perpetuate power differentials. Critical theorists are said to be “united in their objectives: to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities and injustices” (McLaren, 2015, p. 186). Critical theory posits that educational systems were set up to

benefit the majority and educators must analyze institutional structures, curriculum, and policies from the perspective of race, gender, and power to recognize and disrupt the system (McLaren, 2015).

Critical race theory takes the critical theory lens further to highlight how educational systems perpetuate power differentials that create inequities based on race. It frames the inequitable system as a problem that must be addressed and calls out that systemic inequity is challenging to address due to the hegemony that exists in U.S. society (Gramsci, Hoare, & Smith, 1971). Issues of power differentials, privilege, organizational structure, and norms must be viewed with a critical eye to identify the inequities in the system.

Community cultural wealth is a model that highlights the knowledge, skills, and abilities held by communities of color thereby countering the deficit perspective that can be seen in some research on student persistence (Yosso, 2005). Community cultural wealth is formed out of years of survival, resistance, and resilience in the face of micro and macro forms of oppression. It focuses on six types of cultural capital that are developed by communities of color including aspirational capital, navigational capital, familial capital, social capital, linguistic capital, and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005).

Critical race and cultural community wealth apply to a study on Latinx student sense of belonging and their persistence due to their focus on how particular populations have been marginalized and afforded little power while being expected to adapt to systems created by the majority population. Applying critical race theory to the problem of persistence among Latinx students casts the problem of inequities in higher education

as rooted in the systemic issues inherent in the educational system (McLaren, 2015). The system of higher education was not built for students of color and “the interests of the oppressors lie in changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them” (de Beauvoir, 1963, as cited in Freire, 1993, p.74). This statement reinforces the need for educational leaders to develop an understanding of the students’ experience so that they can better understand how to change the system for the students rather than change the students’ perception of the system (Bensimon, 2007).

Using critical race theory and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) as the conceptual frameworks for this research allows us to consider how institutions of higher education may perpetuate these disparities through policies, practices, and campus resources designed for the White majority. Equipped with information about what has influenced Latinx students who are persisting, and a motivation to improve higher education culture for students, universities will be uniquely positioned to change the policies and practices that perpetuate disparity between demographic groups.

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

The Latinx student population is growing significantly, their retention and persistence rates are lower than their White counterparts, and public institutions need to retain those students due to institutional dependence on tuition dollars. Research ties lower retention and persistence rates for students of color to systemic racism in the system of higher education, which influences the sense of belonging felt by students of color (Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, Yonai, 2014). Given the changing demographics of the college-going population and the inequity in retention and persistence rates by race

and ethnicity, there is a need for institutions to rethink how they provide support for Latinx students. If a higher percentage of Latinx students are leaving the institution, an investigation into their experiences on campus is warranted in order to improve their experience and their persistence toward graduation.

A focus must be placed on understanding the experiences of Latinx students at predominantly White institutions to improve student persistence rates. This study centered the experience of Latinx business students who persisted year over year toward graduation at an urban, commuter, doctoral-granting research institution in the Pacific Northwest in order to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences that influenced their sense of belonging and persistence on a predominantly White campus. The research site was the business school because it had the largest percentage of Latinx students at the institution in the study and because business is one of the most popular majors among college-going Latinx students (Center on Education and the Workforce, 2015).

### **Purpose of the Study**

Given that student persistence in college has been tied to students' subjective experience of a sense of belonging on a campus (O'Keefe, 2013) and Latinx students' sense of belonging on campus is influenced by their academic and social experiences (Hurtado & Carter, 1997), this study sought to understand how the experiences of Latinx students influenced their sense of belonging and in turn, their persistence. Additionally, this research amplified the stories of the students who persisted to understand the cultural wealth they possess and provide a counter-narrative to the oft-seen deficit perspective and individual student culpability placed on lagging persistence rates by educational leaders.

The narrative shared by the students allowed a view into how they experienced the campus, whether they developed a sense of belonging within the institution, and to what they attributed their persistence toward graduation. This information can provide educational leaders with a deeper understanding of how to support Latinx students' in developing a sense of place, community, and belonging.

### **Methodology and Research Questions**

This qualitative case study included two interviews with 14 Latinx students pursuing a bachelor's degree. Undergraduate students were the focus of this work due to the importance of bachelor's degree attainment mentioned previously. Additionally, students were asked to take photos that represented their experiences on campus and where they found community. The following research questions guide this study of the experience of Latinx students studying business in a predominately White public institution.

1. Where do Latinx students find community or belonging (on campus or off)?
2. How do experiences of racism or prejudice influence feelings of belonging for Latinx students?
3. How do experiences of belonging or community cultural wealth shape student decisions to persist toward degree completion?

### **Researcher Motivation and Connection to Study**

Student persistence has been a focus of my professional practice for the past sixteen years. Improving the persistence of students from traditionally underserved backgrounds has become an increasingly critical component of my work. Each term I

review the list of students who do not continue in their studies, and each year, the number of Latinx students on that list grows. Additionally, this work is personal to me. Although I am a White woman with no lived experience that compares to that of Latinx students I will be studying, I am married to a Hispanic man who dropped out of college after two terms, and I am a mother to two daughters who are part Hispanic who I hope to watch graduate from college. My interest in his experience and my hopes for their future drove my interest in this topic.

### **Summary and Overview**

Through this study, I gained a deeper understanding of the experience of Latinx business students persisting toward graduation. Viewing their experience through their eyes using photo-elicitation methods and through their narratives via interviews, I was able to identify factors that influenced their success, most notably the cultural wealth they possess that enabled them to overcome hardship or barriers. Using the lens of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), I identified cultural capital they possess that informs our understanding of how universities can partner with students and their communities in order to facilitate student degree attainment.

Chapter two of this dissertation provides an overview of the literature that pertains to this study including policies and cultural considerations that influence Latinx students, retention and persistence theory, sense of belonging, critical race theory, and community cultural wealth. Chapter three provides an overview of the research methodology used including details on site and participant selection, data collection, and data analysis as well as researcher positionality and a discussion on trustworthiness. Chapter four details

the research findings as they pertain to community cultural wealth, racial and cultural experiences that influence belonging, and experiences of belonging on campus. The final chapter provides answers to the three research questions and recommendations for change to improve the experience of Latinx students on campus.



**CHAPTER TWO – REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Higher education was built by and for the White majority (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and as a result, students of color are disproportionately leaving college without a college degree (Johnson, Wasserman, Yildirim, Yonai, 2014). Student attrition from higher education has traditionally been attributed to student's lack of motivation, lack of preparedness, or a lack of integration into the college community, a view that perpetuates a student deficit perspective (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 1999, 2006). The system of higher education in the United States was designed around White middle-class norms and values like individualism that emphasize the need to separate from one's family and integrate into the college community. These views of the higher education experience may further disenfranchise students of color and create a space where students do not feel that they belong.

Sense of belonging has been used in student persistence research to understand the subjective experience of students and their feelings of connection to rather than their integration into the college community (O'Keefe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2008, 2012; Velasquez, 1999). Students who experience feelings of not fitting in have been found to leave universities at higher rates (Heisserer & Parette, 2002). Current and historical racist policies, practices, and rhetoric may influence the subjective sense of belonging for Latinx students and their families.

The literature reviewed in this study falls into four primary areas: historic policies that have influenced the educational experience of Latinx students, Latinx cultural considerations, foundational and contemporary retention and persistence theory, the

construct of sense of belonging as a component of contemporary persistence theory, and finally, critical race theory and Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model which served as the overarching conceptual frameworks used to guide the research in this study.

### **Policies that Influence Latinx Student Success**

Tierney (2000) asserted that the challenge in preventing student attrition from college is to create programs that have a goal of affirming and honoring students' identities rather than integrating them into the existing college system. He emphasized the need for the systems to change, rather than the students, an approach that is consistent with literature that details how institutions in the United States perpetuate inequities. For system change to be possible, educators must gain a deeper understanding of Latinx students, the issues they face, and their backgrounds. For this reason, the first focus of this literature review will be on policies that have impacted Latinx students and cultural considerations that influence their success. Understanding the historical policy implications for Latinx students provides insight into why using the lens of critical race theory is applicable when considering the issue of lagging degree persistence rates for Latinx students.

In order to understand the context of the educational system that Latinx students experience today, provided here is an overview of key policy decisions that have shaped the educational system into what it is today. Individual student and institutional contexts are created and influenced by fifty years of national policy and three hundred years of racist educational and societal policy. How those decisions were made three hundred years ago and who was involved are essential points of consideration in any focus on the

experience of students of color. Decisions about what constituted secondary education and postsecondary education and what and who would be taught, continue to shape the culture of U.S. education that students experience today.

Educational inequities that exist for Latinx students today can be better understood when considered in context with key educational policies of the last fifty years. Policies discussed here that have influenced the experience of Latinx students center primarily on language, culture, and immigration (DACA). Educational policies have a direct effect on Latinx students' sense of belonging as a result of either inclusionary or exclusionary policy implementation. Key policies are discussed here to spotlight the hegemony that is demonstrated through education which calls for an analysis of the persistence problem through a critical lens.

### **Language Policy**

The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 was proposed by Senator Yarborough from Texas who was concerned about the academic performance of Spanish speaking children. The act provides federal funding for schools to develop and run bilingual education programs and has been reauthorized multiple times since 1968 (Stewner-Manzanares, 1988). Senator Yarborough framed bilingual education as having the ability to influence student performance issues and high dropout rates positively. Additionally, he conveyed that English only policies were causing psychological harm and degrading the culture of Spanish speaking students (Stewner-Manzanares, 1988). The bill became part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act which has been reauthorized repeatedly throughout the past five decades. Students' perceived sense of belonging in education

may have been positively influenced as a result of the bilingual education act for Latinx students whose first language is not English. These students may feel an added level of support from their school community and a commitment from the institution to their success as a result of bilingual classes that ensure students are provided with the instruction they need to understand their future coursework.

### **Cultural Inclusion**

Cultural inclusion in U.S. education shapes the experience of Latinx students today and was altered permanently by the Chicano student walkout in Crystal City, Texas in 1969. The Chicano student walkout held over the winter months of 1969-1970 was instrumental in changing the community's acceptance of language and culture as expressed by students in school, and it challenged the traditional representations of Chicano people in classroom textbooks, media, and discussions (Barrios, 2009). Before the walkout, Spanish was prohibited in Crystal City schools, and although the high school was 87% Mexican-American, there were no lessons about Mexican history or culture (Stone Lantern Films, 2000). Students from the White minority ran the student council and enacted policy designed to keep Chicano students out of positions of power or leadership (Barrios, 2009). There were quotas on how many Chicano students could be represented in student activities, and there were activities where no Chicano students were represented at all.

Students began to speak truth to power, attending school board meetings, going to the superintendent, and eventually walking out of class on December 9, 1969, refusing to return until their demands had been met. The number of students on the picket line grew

to 2,000 students, and the national media converged on the town (Barrios, 2009). Senator Yarborough invited student leaders to Washington D.C. to discuss their experience. On January 9, 1970, the demands were met. This outcome created a shift in the power dynamic in the Crystal City school system, and within two years of the walkout, the professional leadership of the school was representative of the Mexican-American majority in the community (Barrios, 2009).

Another way to view the issue at the heart of the walkout is through sense of belonging. Chicano students in Crystal City felt like outsiders in their school. They felt misrepresented and judged. School policies were enforced that prohibited their culture and language (Barrios, 2009). After their demands were met as a result of the walkout, Chicano history and culture were celebrated, Spanish was spoken freely, and teachers and principals were hired that were Mexican-American (Barrios, 2009).

A possible testament to an increased sense of belonging is that in the year after the changes, 170 Mexican-American students who had previously dropped out returned to school to complete high school (Stone Lantern Films, 2000). The student walkout movement in Crystal City helped launch the Latino Civil Rights Movement of the 1970s which furthered the cause for equity and inclusion of Latinx individuals nationwide (Barrios, 2009). The Latino Civil Rights Movement and Crystal City Walkout were crucial points in history when the policies and practices of the U.S. educational system were challenged to consider how to improve the experience of students.

**Immigration Policy and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals**

Immigration policy continues to be an issue of debate in the U.S., and the current rhetoric espoused by the presidential administration seems to further an anti-immigrant hysteria that has plagued this country from its early days (Kramer, 2018). Immigration policy that impacted the educational experience of Latinx students is exemplified by a 1975 Texas legislature decision to adjust the Texas Education Code to deny elementary and secondary school enrollment to any children who were not legally admitted to the U.S. (West's Texas Statutes and Codes, 1976). Additionally, they amended their funding model to prevent state funds from educating those children. The outcome of that change resulted in a school district attempting to charge undocumented students' tuition to cover the loss of state revenue (American Immigration Council, 2016). A group of undocumented Mexican students subsequently filed a class-action lawsuit, and the case was raised to the Supreme Court and decided upon in June 1982 in *Plyer v. Doe* (American Immigration Council, 2016). The landmark 5-4 vote decision found the policy to violate the equal protection clause of the fourteenth amendment and reversed the educational code thus requiring that all students be provided free public education through grade 12.

Since *Plyer v. Doe*, there have been multiple attempts by state or local school districts to circumvent the ruling (American Immigration Council, 2016). In 1994, Proposition 187 was passed in California that prohibited elementary and secondary schools from admitting undocumented students. Proposition 187 also required schools to provide information to the federal government on the students denied entry, thereby

servicing undocumented students and their guardians up to the federal government as targets for possible deportation. Seven years after California's Proposition 187, Alabama passed HB 56 in 2011 that required schools to determine student's immigration status at entry and while entry was not blocked, schools were required to report all information on suspected undocumented immigrants federally (American Immigration Council, 2016).

California's Proposition 187 was struck down as a violation of *Plyer v. Doe*. Alabama's HB 56 remains on the books though in 2013 specific provisions were permanently blocked, including those requiring verification of students' immigration status (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2013). These attempts to deny access to education or to report on student immigration status are evidence of acceptance by some in the United States to treat Latinx students as somehow unworthy of an education.

Immigration remains an issue for some Latinx students in higher education. Students of particular concern at this point in history are utilizing the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. Due to the repeated failure of the DREAM Act, President Barack Obama chose to implement DACA through executive action. DACA delays deportation for individuals who were brought to the U.S. as children without documentation. These students are also known as Dreamers, who were nicknamed as such after the DREAM Act initially proposed in 2001.

The DREAM Act is the *Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act* and was initially proposed by Senators Dick Durbin and Orrin Hatch (S.1291, 2001). If passed, it would grant lawful permanent resident status to any individual who: a) was brought to the U.S. as a minor, b) has been continuously present in the U.S. for the four

years preceding the bill's approval, c) has met specific educational requirements, and d) has no criminal, security, or terrorism offenses (S.1291, 2001). The DREAM Act failed to pass Congress when it was first introduced in 2001, seen as collateral damage of the events of September 11th. It has been reintroduced to each Congress since then and has consistently failed to pass both houses in the same congressional session due to prolonged committee debate (American Immigration Council, 2017).

Individuals under the protection of DACA have been called DACAmended, a move away from the term "undocumented" (Gamez, Lopez, & Overton, 2017). Critics viewed President Obama's executive action as overreach and the subsequent President announced a wind-down of the policy in 2017 (Zong, Ruiz Soto, Batalova, Gelatt, & Capps, 2017). The status of DACA continues to be a matter of court debate as of February 2020 as the wind-down has been challenged. At the time of this writing, DACA recipients are allowed to apply for renewal and the program remains in existence. However, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service is no longer accepting new applications for protection under DACA (USCIS, 2020). In many states DACA allows recipients to attend college and work legally; however, unlike the DREAM Act, DACA does not provide a path toward citizenship (American Immigration Council, 2017). Though some states have enacted forms of the DREAM Act that allowed DACAmended students access to state funding or other rights afforded to U.S. citizens, those state actions do not possess the authority to create a path to citizenship in the United States (Gamez, Lopez, & Overton, 2017). College campuses can educate DACAmended students, and some students are eligible to receive state or private funding,



but the opportunities for career paths are less certain for DACAmented students (Oregon Gear Up, 2014).

Researchers have found that students who are on DACA experience a sense of belonging within the United States and their school experiences can influence their aspirations rooted in American culture (Gonzales, Ellis, Rendón-García, & Brant, 2018). Thus, the effect on undocumented Latinx student's sense of belonging when attempts are made to exclude them from educational settings publicly is relevant to this study.

Immigration policy is incorporated into this research because it is by and large being developed by those in power and affects the sense of belonging for students who may be DACA recipients, may have family members who are impacted by immigration policy, or whose ethnic roots may be tied to countries that may be walled off from the U.S. While immigration policy is not an issue for all Latinx students, especially those who may be third or fourth generation U.S. citizens, it is an area that cannot be ignored in any analysis of the current political forum and its effect on all Latinx individuals. Additionally, the rhetoric used by the current administration about immigration and Latinx individuals may be considered an affront to the sense of belonging for many people of color in the U.S.

### **Latinx Student Cultural Considerations**

Scholars have devoted significant research to identifying cultural considerations that need to be considered when supporting Latinx students (Gonzalez, 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Torres, 2003, 2004; Yosso, 2006; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, Solórzano, 2009). Cultural elements included in this study that may influence

Latinx student success fall into three significant areas: ethnic identity development, cultural orientation and loyalty to ethnic heritage, and familial influence.

### **Ethnic Identity Development**

Ethnic identity development can be described as how an individual comes to understand their ethnicity. Ethnicity is defined as the unique and distinguishing characteristics of a group based on national or cultural aspects (Torres, 2003). It is widely accepted that college is a period of identity development that can be further complicated for Latinx students grappling with their identity as an adult as well as their ethnic identity development (Torres, 2003). Latinx students are further developing their ethnic identity as it relates to that of the majority (often White) culture in higher education.

Student identity development in college impacts how they adjust to and interpret their college experiences (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Students may struggle to maintain their ethnic identity while trying to acculturate into the majority (Torres, 2003). For some time, college student support efforts were focused on helping students assimilate, defined as the move away from one's ethnic associations and the adoption of the culture, associations, and social institutions of the dominant society (Gans, 1997). Critical race theorists argued that this expected assimilation is further oppressing students based on race and suppressing the narrative of students of color, which is traumatizing to students during a critical stage of identity development (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Concepts that have gained traction as alternatives to assimilation are acculturation and cultural pluralism. Acculturation is defined as the adoption of the dominant culture but not necessarily the move away from ethnic-cultural associations (Gans, 1997). Cultural

pluralism has been described as a mix of norms and values representing different cultures within one society (Craft, 2017).

Latinx students may be grappling with their ethnic identity development while adjusting to adult and college life. Additionally, while those students are developing their identities, the schools they are attending may be trying to help them with the transition to college in ways that can be either helpful or detrimental to their sense of belonging.

### **Cultural Orientation and Loyalty to Ethnic Heritage**

Torres (2003) found four cultural orientations that impact the identity development of Latinx students: Bicultural Orientation, Latinx/Hispanic Orientation, Anglo Orientation, and Marginal Orientation. Her work in this area focuses on the nuances between Latinx students that manifest as a result of the perspectives held by them about their culture of origin and the majority culture. Bicultural orientation is defined as having an equal preference for two cultures and possessing high levels of ethnic identity development and acculturation (Torres, 2003). Students who demonstrated an Anglo orientation possessed greater comfort with the majority White population. Students who held a Latinx/Hispanic orientation maintained greater comfort with their culture of origin. Students with marginal orientation had a level of discomfort with both the majority White culture and their culture of origin and may have internal conflict around their identity (Torres, 2003). Cultural orientation and ethnic identity development are closely related to student loyalty to ethnic heritage, and as a result, these factors must be considered together when researching the student experience of Latinx students in higher education.

Loyalty to ethnic heritage is connected to the aforementioned concept of ethnic identity and is defined as a person's preference for one cultural orientation (Arana & Blanchard, 2017). Feelings of loyalty to ethnic heritage can vary greatly and may be dependent upon generational status. Generational status in this sense refers to immigration status in the United States. Torres (2003) defines recent immigrants as first-generation students born in the U.S. whose parents were born outside the U.S. are considered second-generation, and students whose parents were born in the U.S. are considered third generation. Though these definitions exist in the literature, it must be noted that the demographic survey for this study defined first generation as the first generation born in the U.S.

Students may feel like a bridge between two worlds as they adjust to campus life and expectations while trying to stay true to their ethnic heritage and the expectations of their families, students who are first-generation immigrants experience this more acutely (Torres, 2003). These students often struggle to explain the demands of college to their parents or the demands of their parents to their classmates (Torres, 2003). Students who are second or third-generation immigrants tend to experience less familial conflict around the role their parents play in their college life and their ethnic identity development (Torres, 2003).

A student's generational status and the degree to which they feel a preference for their ethnic heritage and culture must be considered when engaging in research with Latinx students. Administrators, faculty, and staff need to understand that loyalty to ethnic heritage and ethnic identity development can vary significantly from one

individual to the next, thus what works for one may not for another (Torres, 2003). There is no single approach to improving student experiences and their sense of belonging.

Enlisting Latinx students in the development of initiatives to improve the student experience may ensure student ethnic identity development is considered and represented.

### **Familial Influence**

Understanding how Latinx student families influence the student experience is also essential to ensure a comprehensive view of Latinx student support. Familial influence is defined as the degree to which a student involves their family in decision making and is influenced by their family systems (Torres, 2004). Family systems play a significant role in young adult ethnic identity development (Torres, 2004). When institutions understand the significance families hold in an individual student's life, they are more likely to develop programming that aligns with the students' history and culture. Familialism is "that cultural value which includes a strong identification and attachment of individuals with their nuclear and extended families, and strong feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity among members of the same family" (Marin, 1993, p. 184). Generational status and cultural orientation can affect the level of family influence exerted in an individual student's life (Torres, 2004). Students who are first-generation immigrants with a strong Latino orientation may have parents that exert more considerable influence on their educational decisions from whether to go away to school to whether to attend a study group at night (Torres, 2003).

Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) institutional model of student departure and the model of student departure on commuter campuses developed by Braxton and colleagues (2013) consider external commitments to be influential on student decisions to leave school. Family ties are an example of an external commitment that may be important to Latinx students. Latinx students often feel a strong sense of responsibility to their families and households (Torres, 2004). Additionally, students in college may experience a feeling of being stuck between family and school expectations, and this can result in a cultural conflict for students (Torres, 2004). Families may exert a strong influence on student decision making and play a significant support role through a student's college experience. Familial influence is strong for many undergraduate students, especially for Latinx students (Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006). Research has found that Latinx students tend to interact more frequently with their family members and rely on them more than they rely on institutions or other larger groups for assistance (Torres, 2004).

Tierney (2000) highlighted the importance of engaging with families to ensure student success, indicating that the strength and knowledge they have demonstrated by getting their child into college should not be ignored. Creating a collaborative and supportive environment for students of color wherein their communities are engaged will create conditions conducive to parental participation in their child's academic progress (Cummins, 1986). For these reasons, efforts focused on improving the success of Latinx students must also consider and leverage familial influence.

Knowing the policies that have created the system in which Latinx students operate and the cultural considerations that researchers have identified as influencing

Latinx student success is essential to understanding the direction of this research and how that research informs this study. Historical policies that restrict language and cultural expression provide context for claims that education has not been an inclusive experience for students of color. Additionally, understanding how current DACA policy decisions may influence the sense of belonging for recipients was key to this work. Finally, including the cultural elements unique to Latinx students allowed for a more holistic view of the student experience.

### **Retention and Persistence**

Retention and persistence rates provided by the National Student Clearinghouse (2019) encompass data from over 3,600 institutions. National persistence rates demonstrate the disparity in rates of White, Asian, Black, and Latinx students and a need to improve the rates of Latinx and Black students which lag behind their White and Asian counterparts (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019).

An understanding of foundational research on retention and persistence is necessary to understand how the approaches to student persistence have evolved over the past fifty years. This foundational research was relied on throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Beginning in the 1990s research on retention focused on nuanced elements of retention and persistence as well as differences between student types (residential, commuter, race/ethnicity). A review of recent approaches to student persistence provides an understanding of more tailored strategies including those that focus on different types of institutions and the subjective experience had by students on campus.

**Foundational Retention and Persistence Theory**

Institutional retention and student persistence have been a focus of educational research since the early 1970s beginning with the work of William Spady (1970, 1971) and Vincent Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993). Preliminary models focused on the characteristics of individuals and institutions as they related to student drop out. Tinto's initial model focused on the institution as a social system and applied Durkheim's (1897/1951) theory of suicide as a way of identifying individual behaviors as potential predictors of student drop out. The model focused on academic and social integration into the campus and distinguished between those who voluntarily left and those who were academically dismissed. Tinto's (1987, 1993) revised model incorporated external factors and broadened some of the existing factors; faculty interactions morphed into faculty/staff interactions and student intentions upon admission were considered. The elements within the revised model included pre-entry attributes, goals and commitments, institutional experiences, and academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993). Pre-entry characteristics include prior schooling, family background, skills, and abilities. Goals and commitments include the student's planned educational purpose, intentions, and external commitments to others that influenced their decision to stay in or leave school. Institutional experiences include experiences with academic and non-academic staff as well as institutional culture and its ability to encourage student engagement, which is defined as the degree to which a student engages in campus activities (Tinto, 1993). Institutional quality and opportunities available to students were found to be the most important influencers on a student's commitment to the institution.



Academic and social integration included experiences inside and outside of the classroom that influenced a student's sense of belonging on campus (Tinto, 1993). Student integration into the institution was found to be significantly influenced through positive or negative interactions with staff and faculty. Only strong intentions to graduate or clear career goals mitigated the effects of negative institutional experiences (Tinto, 1993). Academic integration encompasses students' curricular experiences and faculty/staff interactions (Tinto, 1993). A student's curricular experience embodied their perceptions of what happens in their courses and the completion of their curriculum (Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000).

Research into the students' academic experience must attempt to understand their unique perspectives because the student experience can vary significantly from one student to the next. Each student brings differing life experiences that may influence their success in the classroom, both positively and negatively (Swail, 2003). For example, a White student in the majority may experience a lecture entirely differently than a Latinx student in the minority. Academic experiences were found to further a students' feeling of integration on campus or instigate a decision to leave the university (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993; Nora, Cabrera, Hagedorn, & Pascarella, 1996).

Social integration includes interactions with peers, engagement with student organizations, extracurricular activities, and the student's perceived sense of belonging (Tinto, 1993). Student engagement in campus activities can help to facilitate peer to peer and faculty/staff interactions. Working to increase student engagement is the hallmark of most retention and degree completion programs. Extracurricular experience is the

perceived experience a student has in activities that are supplemental or outside of the classroom and are a form of student engagement (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2011). These experiences may include community-based learning, student organization engagement, workshops or voluntary seminars, internships, job shadows, advising, career services, and other opportunities.

Additional research conducted by Beal and Noel (1980) focused on three primary areas: (a) academic stimulation and assistance, (b) goal clarity and direction setting, and (c) student engagement experiences. Their work summarized the findings of a national survey conducted in 1979. Their focus on academic stimulation centered on instructional competence, advising, and learning support. The recommendations included tutoring support, evaluation of advising's effectiveness, faculty development, and expanded orientation activities. The focus on goal clarity and direction setting was named "personal future building" and included recommendations to enhance career and academic planning (Beal & Noel, 1980). Finally, increasing student engagement experiences was a recommendation, which included enhancing extracurricular opportunities, student/faculty relationships, unique academic programs, and student involvement with curriculum and departmental activities (Beal & Noel, 1980).

Bean (1980) sought to apply a model of employee turnover to student attrition to determine causal factors in student departure which resulted in the creation of a Student Attrition Model. One of the primary findings of the study was that reasons for student departure from college differed for men and women. The major difference Bean (1980) found was that men left the university even when they were satisfied with their university

experience, while women who were satisfied with their experience exhibited stronger institutional commitment. Bean developed recommendations for each gender to reduce student attrition. Recommendations to retain men included avoiding rigid scheduling in their first term and offering programming that provided opportunities for personal, intellectual, creative, and personal skill development (Bean, 1980). Recommendations to retain women included encouraging women to join campus organizations, emphasizing the usefulness of education in job placement, and maintaining an effective job placement program (Bean, 1980).

Bean sought to expand his original sociologic research on retention by joining forces with Eaton to apply psychology to retention practices. Together, they argued that factors influencing retention are unique to individuals and understanding each person's psychological processes is foundational to the development of effective retention practices (Bean & Eaton, 2001). Arguing that "retention rates are the collective result of individual decisions" (p.73), Bean and Eaton (2001) posited that for retention programming to work, it must work for each student. The areas of focus in their model include understanding student coping strategies, student locus of control, and self-efficacy (Bean & Eaton, 2001).

Additional models have been created in an attempt to explain, predict, and inform the process of attrition, student retention, and persistence. Models that are considered foundational but do not add new information relevant to this discussion include; Pascarella's (1980) Student-Faculty Informal Contact Model, Astin's (1984) Student

Development Model and the Student Retention Integrated Model (Cabrera, Nora & Castaneda, 1993).

Since the early work of Spady (1970, 1971), Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993), Bean (1980), Bean and Eaton (2001), and Beal and Noel (1980), the field of retention and persistence research has exploded, evidence of the increased importance of retention and persistence in higher education. Tinto's model has been replicated, tested, and improved upon in different settings and with varying types of students including large urban commuter campuses (Braxton et al., 2013; Pascarella, Duby & Iverson, 1983).

### **Contemporary Retention and Persistence Theory**

Transitioning from foundational models of retention and persistence to contemporary models, we see a shift from what may work for all students to nuanced approaches based on school type, student demographics, and psychological elements. The field of retention and persistence has evolved and continues to change as concepts like sense of belonging (O'Keeffe, 2013), growth mindset (Dweck, 2006), and grit (Duckworth, 2016) have been applied to college students. Individual and institutional factors found to influence student persistence include curricular experiences, faculty-student interactions, peer connections, extracurricular experiences, student engagement on campus, self-efficacy, goal commitment, social supports, institutional support through the transition to college, and students' sense of belonging, among others, (Beal & Noel, 1980; Bean, 1980; Bean & Eaton, 2001; Braxton et al., 2000; Braxton et al., 2013; Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Solberg, O'Brien, Villareal, Kennel, & Davis, 1993). Many previous models were developed in residential

campus environments, which theorists posited were not wholly transferable to other settings such as commuter campuses or community colleges (Braxton et al., 2013).

When considering college campuses that primarily serve commuter students, *Rethinking College Student Retention* (Braxton et al., 2013) gives institutions nine imperatives to employ to improve retention. The imperatives range from how an institution demonstrates and communicates care and commitment to students, to aligning institutional policies and practices with institutional mission, to creating reward structures that reinforce the staff and faculty who demonstrate care and respect for students (Braxton et al., 2013). These imperatives can be used to guide university action and to inform university decision making to improve student retention and their persistence. If university leaders consistently communicate the value of the students to the institution and place the student at the center of policy development, it may improve the student experience and result in a commitment by the students to that institution, thus improving student persistence rates.

Efforts to improve the student experience often focus on student social experiences. Social experiences that have been found to influence student persistence include interactions with peers, student engagement with organizations and clubs, and extracurricular activities, which may affect students' perceived sense of belonging (Tinto, 1993; Astin, 1999; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Student involvement and student engagement are often used interchangeably, though they are distinct terms that warrant clarification (Wof-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). Student involvement refers to the behaviors and actions of the student and the mental and physical energy they put into

their experience. Student involvement is the responsibility of the student to show up and get involved in campus life which may create a greater attachment to the college (Astin, 1999). Student engagement includes the effort institutions and students collaboratively devote to college experiences (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Student engagement is the responsibility of both the student and the institution and represents what the student does to get involved and what the institution does to provide effective, inclusive, and affirming educational practices (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Student engagement on campus can facilitate peer-to-peer and faculty/staff interactions (Astin, 1999; Kuh, 2009). Thus, a student can be involved on campus, but if they are not engaging in purposeful activities with mental energy, they may not reap the benefits from campus involvement.

Engagement is a two-way street in that the institution must partner with the student to create meaningful opportunities for students to engage with through campus involvement.

External factors playing into a students' decision to remain in or leave school include external pressures or commitments like finances, employment, and family responsibilities (Braxton et al., 2011). There has been a recent focus on financial issues that influence student persistence from studying how underrepresented students gain access to information about financial resources (Eichelberger, Mattioli, & Foxhoven, 2017) to how microgrants provided at a critical moment can influence a student's perception of the institution's care for their welfare (Wagner, Sanchez, & Haley, 2019). Additional external factors include a student's social support network which is the care provided to an individual from family, friends, or community organizations. Support

networks have been directly linked to student persistence decisions (Nicpon, Huser, Blanks, Sollenberger, Befort, & Kurpius, 2006).

Student transitional experiences in college also are a factor in their persistence decisions. Colleges and universities must ensure that students have the resources necessary to effectively make the transition to college (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). An effective transition is foundational to a students' ability to integrate socially and academically into the campus. A transition can be characterized by movement through adjustment periods including an ending, the neutral zone, and new beginnings (Bridges, 2004). The literature on transition emphasizes the importance of progressing through these stages at a pace that is comfortable for the person experiencing the transition. Students must be given support and the space to reflect upon the transition they are making, their feelings about the transition, and the difficulties they may experience in their adjustment to the new beginning (Bridges, 2004). In addition, student transitions must be supported in ways that affirm their identity, their communities, and their cultural experiences (Tierney, 2000). Research on transitions for Hispanic students found that positive influences on their transition and retention include participation in ethnic student organizations and maintaining strong family relationships (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

The retention and persistence research has evolved from one that focused on traditional students studying at residential campuses to models that are tailored to different student populations with unique needs and experiences. Over time, the blame for the lack of persistence has shifted from being placed squarely on the backs of the "unprepared" student to an understanding that persistence efforts rest with both the

student and the institution. Ways in which institutions ensure students feel a part of and connected to the institution can influence student persistence and ultimately, student degree attainment.

### **Sense of Belonging**

A student's perceived sense of belonging is influenced by their social experiences and can have a direct effect on their decision to persist (O'Keefe, 2013). Sense of belonging represents the degree to which a student feels a part of the college atmosphere (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002). Psycho-social elements found to influence student persistence in preceding models (e.g., academic and social integration on campus) are elements that must be considered with regard to their influence on sense of belonging. A student's sense of belonging influences their social integration into campus which is influenced by connections with peers, staff, and faculty (Tinto, 1993). Students perceived sense of belonging and their social experiences on campus are interconnected and influence each other. Sense of belonging influences a student's decision to leave a university; thus, it is an important factor to consider when researching student persistence.

Tinto's (1993) concepts of integration into the academic and social community are related to feelings of connectedness and belonging. For traditionally marginalized populations, the integration seems to be proposing a model of acculturation that does not value the cultures from which students originate (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Scholars who took issue with the concept of integration argued that the onus in this construct was placed on the student to change rather than the institution and the idea of integration



amounted to “cultural suicide” for underrepresented students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Tierney, 1993, 1999; Strayhorn, 2012; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). They argued that the focus in Tinto’s model was on assimilation and the assumption implied in the model was that students would break ties with their former communities to become integrated into campus (Tierney, 1992). Tinto reframed his model to state that the concept of membership, rather than integration, is more useful as it allows for “greater diversity of modes of participation” (Tinto, 1993, p. 106). It was through this reframe that the construct of sense of belonging and its influence on persistence began to gain traction in higher education research on retention and persistence.

Sense of belonging as a construct initially emerged from sociological research on perceived cohesion, which measured the extent to which individuals felt stuck to particular social groups on two scales: feelings of morale and sense of belonging (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990). Bollen and Hoyle (1990) defined a sense of belonging as a feeling of acceptance in a particular community as perceived by an individual. Sense of belonging is similar to the construct of sense of community and sense of acceptance or membership. Osterman (2000) defined it as a “feeling that one matters to one another, that their needs will be met through a shared commitment to be together” (p. 324). It is also defined as one’s perceived belief that they are indispensable to their community (Anant, 1966). Strayhorn (2012) defined a sense of belonging as “a basic human need and motivation, sufficient to influence behavior” (p.3). He goes on to explain that sense of belonging takes on a heightened level of importance in situations where the student is more likely to feel unsupported or unwelcome, inducing feelings of loneliness (Strayhorn, 2012). Sense

of belonging becomes a critical construct in environments where individuals are more likely to feel marginalized (Anderman & Freeman, 2004). This added information highlights the relevance of considering the construct of sense of belonging as applied to students of color learning in a predominantly White environment.

At its core, a sense of belonging is a feeling that an individual matters to others. As a construct, mattering was defined as a “feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, and concerned with our fate” (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, p. 165). Mattering includes commanding the attention of others, believing that others care about us, that others will be proud of our accomplishments, that others depend on us, and that others appreciate us (Scholssberg, 1989). The concept of mattering and belonging can be taken further back in history by considering Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs. The oft-cited hierarchy places belonging in the center of the pyramid, necessary before ego and esteem can flourish, which in turn, allow for the ultimate goal of self-actualization. Maslow (1962) saw belongingness as a primary, strong human need.

Numerous studies have investigated the influence sense of belonging may have on student persistence. Hausmann, Schofield, and Woods (2007) found that sense of belonging positively influenced academic achievement and persistence. Maestas, Vaquera, and Zehr (2007) determined that a sense of belonging is a critical aspect in retaining all students but especially essential for retaining students of color. They found that exposure to caring faculty, participation in extra-curricular activities, and engagement with concepts of diversity led to an increased sense of belonging for the students in their study (Maestas et al., 2007). Students who are racial and ethnic

minorities and perceive that their cultural experiences are inappropriate or not valued in the collegiate environment may decide to withdraw from school as a result of those perceptions (Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Zepke & Leach, 2005). For these reasons, studying the sense of belonging felt by students who have been traditionally underrepresented in college can result in new understandings about the ways institutions can improve support for their students.

In a review of literature focused on integration, engagement, and involvement, Wolf-Wendel, Ward, and Kinzie (2009) highlighted research that indicated students need to adopt the norms of the campus culture to develop a sense of belonging on campus. They liken the situation to playing a role, one that aligns with the values and rules of the institution while also conserving who a student is at their core. Attinasi (1992) theorized that students become integrated with the campus community by forming smaller affiliations that help them to make sense of the broader college community rather than by adopting the norms of the majority population. Students use cognitive mapping in order to get to know the campus environment; this mapping aids in their successful transition to college and in turn, influences their sense of belonging (Attinasi, 1992; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Tierney (1999) contended that students who are racial or ethnic minorities should be able to affirm their cultural identities rather than reject them as a component of integrating into the college community. A vital element of this integration is the idea that students will feel a stronger sense of belonging if they do not have to give up a piece of their identity to gain membership in the campus culture (Tierney, 1999).

Strayhorn (2012) outlined core elements of sense of belonging which were used to guide this research: a) “sense of belonging is a basic human need, is a consequence of mattering, and is a fundamental motive sufficient to drive human behavior” (pp.18-19), b) “sense of belonging takes on a heightened importance in certain contexts, at certain times, or among certain populations” (pp.20-21), c) “social identities intersect and affect college students’ sense of belonging” (p.22), and d) “sense of belonging engenders other positive outcomes, and must be satisfied on a continual basis as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change” (pp. 22-23). Taking the collective literature into consideration, the definition of belonging used for this study was a subjective feeling of acceptance in the college community. Sense of belonging was the primary theoretical framework through which Latinx student persistence was considered in this study.

The following sections provide an overview of social and academic elements shown to influence a sense of belonging. The discussion will then turn to research on Latinx student's sense of belonging and finally, how the campus racial climate has been found to influence their sense of belonging.

### **Social Influences on Sense of Belonging**

Students who get involved in student clubs or organizations tend to have a greater sense of belonging than students who are not involved or who are involved with student groups less frequently (Strayhorn, 2012). Strayhorn (2012) found that there are four ways in which involvement in clubs or organizations stimulates students’ perceived sense of belonging:

Connecting students with others who share their interests, values, and commitments, familiarizing students with the campus environment and ecology, affirming students' identity, interests, and values as a part of campus, generating feelings among students that they matter and others depend on them. (p. 115)

Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that students who belonged to campus religious organizations or Greek life had a stronger sense of belonging in their second year. They also found that student membership in social organizations was most strongly related to a sense of belonging in students' third year. They found that students who were members of ethnic student organizations did not have a higher sense of belonging and they posited that outcome might be due to students joining those organizations to share common problems related to their experiences of marginality on campus (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). This finding is particularly interesting given the finding that involvement with ethnic student organizations was found to have a positive influence on student's transitions to college and their subsequent retention (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Social engagement on campus has been a focus of retention and persistence research for decades and is a critical facet of the development of a sense of belonging on campus.

### **Academic Influences on Sense of Belonging**

Learning environments can contribute to or detract from a students' sense of belonging. One researcher focused on the classroom environment stating that sense of belonging is the "students' sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class" (Goodenow, 1993, p. 25). This

definition takes on a level of importance when we consider that for some students of color, the traditional classroom setting can negatively influence their overall learning and engagement with the material (Emdin, 2016). In these classrooms, students are taught to be receptacles of “cultural knowledge deemed valuable by dominant society” (Yosso, 2005, p. 75). If the classroom setting is seen as central to creating or inhibiting a students’ sense of belonging, then the instructional practices and their relevance to the changing student body must be considered.

Meeuwisse, Severiens, and Born (2010) studied the relationship between a learning environment, student connections, and the students’ perceived sense of belonging in four different universities in the Netherlands. Their study found that racial or ethnic minority students felt a greater sense of belonging if they had good *formal* relationships with both their instructors and other students, whereas students in the racial majority had a greater sense of belonging if they had good *informal* relationships with instructors and fellow students (Meeuwisse et al., 2010). They found that good formal relationships were developed when the learning environment was “activated,” meaning the learning was more collaborative and cooperative (Meeuwisse et al., 2010). An activating learning environment did not have a direct effect on a students’ sense of belonging, but it did have a direct effect on their relationships, which in turn influenced ethnic minority students’ sense of belonging. One interesting study finding was that a students’ sense of belonging influenced their progress toward a degree for only those in the ethnic or racial majority, there was no strong relationship between sense of belonging and degree progress for ethnic or racial minority students in this study (Meeuwisse et al.,

2010). This is an unexpected finding because others have found a sense of belonging to influence student persistence for a variety of populations (McGlynn, 2003; O’Keefe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012).

Student learning communities have been studied to determine how those academic communities of students compare to non-learning communities with regard to belonging. Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, and Salomone (2002) conducted 24 focus groups with first-year students to develop a 50-item survey instrument that was then used to compare the sense of belonging felt by first-year students who participated in learning communities with the sense of belonging felt by first-year students in general education courses. When the instrument was tested, it was determined that a sense of belonging grows out of a feeling of “valued involvement” in the campus environment. Valued involvement was identified as “1) establishing functionally supportive peer relationships that aided students in meeting the changes of the new environment, 2) believing that faculty are compassionate and that the student is more than a just another face in the crowd” (Hoffman et al., 2002, p. 251). Five factors were found to influence a sense of belonging in students: (a) empathetic faculty understanding, (b) perceived peer support, (c) perceived isolation, (d) perceived faculty support and comfort, and (e) perceived classroom comfort (Hoffman et al., 2002).

An additional academic influence on sense of belonging is the relationship students have with their faculty. The importance of faculty showing compassion and interest in students is a common finding of most sense of belonging studies. One institution conducted a self-study using 220 students as experts to inform how the

institution could improve in order to positively influence their sense of belonging, community, and connection in the classroom (McGlynn, 2003). Those students identified teaching methods and techniques that helped them learn, as well as teacher behaviors that aided their learning process. Themes that arose from this one institution study included the desire students have to be known and cared about by their professor and to matter to their professor (McGlynn, 2003). This desire can be tied back to the concept of mattering and the “condition of community” that is essential to human survival (Schlossberg, 1992). “Students’ feelings about what they experience in class—whether inclusion or exclusion, mastery or inadequacy, support or hostility—can not be divorced from what and how well they learn” (Wilkinson & Ansell, 1992, p. 4). Komarraju, Musulkin, and Bhattacharya (2010) emphasized the importance of faculty members making conscious efforts to connect with students who are racial or ethnic minorities as these students may not feel comfortable reaching out themselves or may not find it easy to approach faculty.

### **Latinx Student Sense of Belonging**

Sense of belonging has been found to influence student persistence (McGlynn, 2003; O’Keefe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012). Therefore, developing an understanding of the factors that influence the sense of belonging experienced by Latinx students is a foundational piece of this study.

Research on factors that influence how Latinx students experience a sense of belonging suggests that traditional activities or approaches may prove less influential. Studies on student participation and membership in the college community have often focused on traditional college activities such as student organizations, Greek life, or



sports. Hurtado and Carter (1997) suggested that a focus on those activities may not include representation of members of historically underrepresented populations. Additionally, opportunities for developing a sense of community within religious organizations, ethnic student groups, and other forms of cultural expression have been left out of studies on social integration and should be included to facilitate a greater understanding of the experience of underrepresented students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Transitional experiences and their influential role in students' perceived sense of belonging were a focus for Hurtado and Carter's study (1997), which found a strong relationship between Latinx students' sense of belonging and reports of frequent discussions of course content with others outside of class.

An assumption of integration in Tinto's (1993) original model is that students will separate from their family of origin. This approach to integration is not only ideologically Western-centric, but it has also been found to be counterproductive to Latinx student adjustment to college (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). Tinto explicitly stated that in order to "become fully integrated into the life of the college, students have to physically and socially dissociate themselves from the communities of the past" (p. 96). More recent studies have found that maintaining connections to supportive families assists students in their adjustment to college and their persistence to graduation (Anderson & Fleming, 1986; Bean & Vesper, 1992; Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora & Hengstler, 1992). An additional finding is that Latinx students who attend predominantly White institutions must maintain connections within and outside the college community in order to feel at "home" in the campus community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). It is clear that for many

Latinx students, it is vital that ties to their communities be maintained as they transition to and through college. Villalpando (1997) found that in comparison to White students, Chicana/o students demonstrated a greater sense of altruism and an interest in helping their communities or pursuing careers that would serve their communities.

Velasquez (1999) found that students with strong cultural identities had a higher perceived sense of belonging in college than students with weaker cultural orientations or those with negative perceptions of their culture of origin. An additional finding was that Chicano students who socialized with White students experienced an increased sense of belonging. Students with a bi-cultural orientation were found to be more adaptable to college life (Velasquez, 1999).

Maestas and colleagues (2007) studied factors impacting a sense of belonging on the campus of a Hispanic serving institution. Their study did not focus entirely on Latinx students' experiences, but given the institutional make-up, Latinx students were 33% of the sample size so represented the largest minority group studied. They framed a sense of belonging as comprised of three items: "1) I see myself as part of the university community, 2) I feel a sense of belonging to this university, and 3) I feel that I am a member of the university community" (Maestas et al., 2007, pp. 244-245). They found faculty interest in a student's development and participation in academic support programs to be significant influencers of a students' sense of belonging. Thus, faculty demonstrating an interest in students influenced Latinx student's sense of belonging at both predominantly White institutions (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) and Hispanic serving institutions (Maestas et al., 2007). Their findings indicate the need for faculty to take an

increased interest in their students and to connect students with academic support programs and opportunities for social involvement on campus.

Living in campus housing and participating in extracurricular activities and leadership was found to increase a student's sense of belonging (Maestas et al., 2007), which aligns with previous research done in predominantly White institutions. Socializing with students from different racial and ethnic groups than one's own also had a positive impact on student's sense of belonging at this Hispanic serving institution. Additionally, they found that in a diverse university, being able to "cope with diversity" and being supportive of affirmative action contributed to a sense of belonging (Maestas et al., 2007). They recommended that universities work to diversify the campus both at the student level and also the faculty, staff, and administrator level (Maestas et al., 2007). Increasing campus diversity may influence racial and ethnic acceptance on campus (Maestas et al., 2007; Antonio, 2003). Additionally, providing a required class for first-year students that promotes racial and cultural awareness may positively influence the campus racial climate for all students.

Strayhorn (2008) analyzed data from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire and conducted one-on-one interviews with Latinx students to get more in-depth information. Through those interviews, he found that Latinx students tended to report a lower perceived sense of belonging than their White peers. He found that time devoted to studying, grades, and interactions with diverse peers positively influenced the sense of belonging felt by Latinx students. Strayhorn also found that many of the students in his interviews were the first in their family to attend college, were more likely to come

from lower-income families, and were more likely to work while attending school than their White colleagues. Latinx students also shared that they had to create coping skills or navigational skills to navigate the college environment which was dramatically different from their community. They also shared their struggles maintaining their relationships back home while adjusting to college life (Strayhorn, 2012).

Nora, Kramer, and Itzen (1996) surveyed 324 first and second-year students at a private junior college and found that nontraditional Hispanic students' social integration into campus life was supported by the encouragement of fellow students, faculty, and staff which further demonstrates the importance of social connections. Factors that negatively influenced Latinx students' success included feelings of marginalization and isolation, strong family commitments, and self-defeating stereotypes (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Ortiz, 2004; Strayhorn, 2012). In order to overcome feelings of marginalization or isolation, Latinx students need to feel as if they are welcome and connected to the campus environment (Strayhorn, 2012).

Researchers studying the sense of belonging of first-year undergraduates from different racial/ethnic groups found that underrepresented students had a reduced sense of belonging than White students (Johnson et al., 2007). A smooth transition to school had a significant influence on students' sense of belonging and students who were able to locate academic help and communicate effectively with instructors outside of class expressed feelings that their transition to college was smooth (Johnson et al., 2007). Interactions with diverse peers also had a positive influence on Hispanic/Latinx students'

sense of belonging, but interactions with professors had a negative impact on sense of belonging for the same population (Johnson et al., 2007).

These studies shed light on what has influenced sense of belonging for Latinx students, including maintaining connections to their families, demonstrating pride in their culture, socializing with students from different racial or ethnic backgrounds, and devoting time to studying and grades.

### **Campus Racial Climate and Sense of Belonging**

Creating a welcoming campus environment for underrepresented students must begin with an understanding of the campus racial climate as those students experience it. Student perceptions of the campus racial climate are influenced by their interactions with students, faculty, and staff from different racial or ethnic backgrounds (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999). The climate for racial and ethnic diversity on campus is also influenced by “an institution’s historical, structural, behavioral, and psychological facets” (Johnson, Soldner, Leonard, Alvarez, Inkelas, Rowan-Kenyon, Longerbeam, 2007, p. 537). Latinx students who characterized their campus as having racial and ethnic tension reported lower levels of sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Positive interactions with diverse peers contributed to higher levels of sense of belonging experienced by Latinx students (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005).

Perceptions of a hostile racial climate on campus had a negative influence on most underrepresented students but not for Latinx students (Johnson et al., 2007). This outcome is opposite what Hurtado and Carter (1997) discovered in their study, and the difference could be attributed to the study scope or participants. The Hurtado and Carter

(1997) study combined four sources of information including data from the National Survey of Hispanic Students, the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data Systems, the Higher Education Research Institute, and the College Handbook whereas the sample for the study done by Johnson and colleagues was from the 2004 National Study of Living-Learning Programs which was primarily compiled of students from large public flagship universities with predominantly White enrollments. Additionally, the focus in the latter study was on multiple racial or ethnic groups rather than entirely Latinx students.

Sense of belonging can be negatively influenced when students experience microaggressions. Pierce (1995) defined microaggressions as “subtle, innocuous, preconscious, or unconscious degradations, and putdowns, often kinetic but capable of being verbal and or kinetic” (Yosso et al., 2009, p.660). In a study at three selective universities, Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solórzano (2009) found three types of microaggressions experienced by Latinx students. Those microaggressions included interpersonal microaggressions, racial jokes, and institutional microaggressions. The authors suggested that Tinto’s (1993) stages of passage did not apply to Latinx students, instead they posited that Latinx students address racial microaggressions and a hostile campus racial climate by building communities and developing critical skills to navigate between their different worlds of home, school, and community (Yosso et al., 2009). The students created academic and social counter-spaces where they built a culturally supportive community, and those spaces and the critical navigation skills they developed within them supported them as they faced microaggressions on campus.

Sense of belonging should be attended to through mutual responsibility of both the student and the institution (Johnson et al., 2007). While it is important for the student to engage and try to adjust to campus life, the institution must bear the majority of responsibility for creating a campus climate that nurtures sense of belonging for underrepresented students who may be carrying trauma from enduring racial oppression and a lack of feeling as if one belongs in predominantly White environments. Additionally, Tierney (1993) highlighted the absurdness of expecting students who are racial or ethnic minorities to integrate into a system of higher education that is rooted in centuries of oppression. Johnson et al., (2007) posited that schools “must attend to both their formal and informal environments in order to facilitate a more tolerant and responsive racial and general campus climate” (p. 538). An essential element of advising marginalized students is helping them feel that their institution cares for them (Heisserer & Parette, 2002; Braxton et al., 2013; Tinto, 1993). Thus, it seems clear that the university “must seek to create a welcoming environment where care, warmth, and acceptance are promoted, in order to achieve improved student retention” (O’Keeffe, 2013, p. 612). Understanding the campus racial climate and its influence on student sense of belonging is essential to consider when viewing the issue of Latinx student persistence through the lens of critical race theory. How the campus environment and climate affect Latinx students will be an important element to consider in this study.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory provides a lens through which to view the educational systems and the experiences of students of color on campus. It can be “used to theorize, examine,

and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact social structures, practices, and discourses” (Yosso, 2005, p. 70). Critical race theory also asserts that White people, particularly White women, have been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights and affirmative action legislation aimed at diversifying schools and workplaces (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Critical race theory questions the notion that White middle-class communities are the standards by which all others should be judged (Yosso, 2005).

Critical race theory emerged from critical theory and critical legal studies in the mid to late 1970s and 1980s through the work of Bell (1980, 1987) and Freeman (1977, 1980), who were critical of the slow pace of racial reform in the legal system. They were soon joined by other legal scholars who were also frustrated by the lack of progress of civil rights reform (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Critical legal studies focused on exposing how legal ideology has developed, supported, and legitimized the United States’ current class structure (Crenshaw, 1988). The critique of U.S. society’s mainstream legal doctrine provided by critical legal studies scholars is that the U.S. is far from a meritocracy, and racism must be considered in all matters.

Critical race theory acknowledges that racism is a fundamental component of U.S. society (McLaren, 2015; Yosso, 2005; Gay, 2002; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Solórzano, 1997, 1998). Tenets of critical race theory identified by multiple scholars include the assertion that racism is endemic, central, and permanent in U.S. society and has contributed to all manifestations of group advantage or disadvantage (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Solórzano, 1997, 1998). From a critical race perspective, claims that society is objective, neutral, meritocratic, and



colorblind must be challenged, and the elimination of racial oppression, and upholding all forms of social justice must be a primary focus (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Solórzano, 1997, 1998). Finally, the experiential knowledge of people of color is seen as critical in analyzing society, and critical race theory is interdisciplinary in its analysis and approach (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Solórzano, 1997, 1998).

A specific application of critical race theory is LatCrit [Latinx critical theory], which focuses on Latinx individuals' multidimensional identities and considers the "intersectionality of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression" (Delgado-Bernal, 2002). It challenges educational discourse on race, gender, and class through an examination of how educational theory, policy, and practice has the potential to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000). Educational systems and processes operate in contradictory ways, possessing the power to oppress and marginalize or to empower and emancipate (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Yosso, 2005). LatCrit views experiences of Latinx students like commitments to their family as a cultural asset rather than a deficit.

LatCrit scholars have added a layer of specificity and complexity to the concepts of identity development in an inherently racist society. They have looked at the intersections of immigration, sexuality, culture, human rights, and language and how discrimination tied to these identities layer on top of systemic, structural and institutional racism, classism and sexism (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Garcia, 1995; Hernandez-Truyol,

1996; Johnson, 1998; Yosso, 2005). LatCrit extends the critical race framework to consider layers of individual identity that intersect and influence their experiences in the world (Yosso, 2006). LatCrit provides a lens through which to examine issues of language, immigration, gender, sexuality, and class (Delgado-Bernal, 2002; Hernandez-Truyol, 1997; Villalpando, 2004). The analysis in this paper centers race and racialized experiences, so critical race theory remains as the theoretical underpinning rather than taking on the more layered specificity that LatCrit provides.

In this review of critical race theory literature, a focus will be placed on key elements identified through critical race theory research in education. Areas of discussion in this review are a critique of liberalism, whiteness as property, interest convergence, amplifying the voice of those who have been marginalized or oppressed (Ladson-Billings, 1998), critical race theory in educational research, and finally, pedagogical practices. Additionally, literature that speaks to the cultural wealth embedded in diverse communities, known as community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) are key to this discussion on Latinx student persistence and sense of belonging on campus.

### **Liberalism's Failure**

Critical race scholars are critical of the liberal perspective, which they view as insufficient and damaging. Primary tenets of the traditional liberal perspective are the notions of colorblindness and incremental change (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

Colorblindness “ignores the fact that inequity, inopportunity, and oppression are historical artifacts that will not easily be remedied by ignoring race in the contemporary society” (DeCuir et al., 2004, p. 29). Additionally, the notion of pretending not to notice

someone's color makes no sense unless there is something shameful about being that color (Thompson, 1998). Acting as if one is colorblind can create feelings of shame in others and is an example of a microaggression (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005).

Incremental change is the change that is acceptable for those in power and results in slow progress, often based on the notion of equality rather than equity (DeCuir et al., 2004). Equality maintains inequitable systems, systems that need to be dismantled and rebuilt to level the playing field for people of color (DeCuir et al., 2004). Equality maintains inequity when systems are inherently designed to benefit one group over another, yet efforts focus on treating all people the same. Racism can be hidden under the guise of shared values (Matsuda et al., 1993), values that maintain inequitable conditions. The critique of liberalism centers in the half commitment made to changing to oppressive and marginalizing conditions (DeCuir et al., 2004).

### **Whiteness as Property**

Whiteness is defined as “hegemonic racial power that privileges White groups while subordinating racialized others” (Hikido & Murray, 2016, p. 391). White privilege is a component of U.S. society that must be challenged because the current system advantages White students over students of color, and a system in which a student's race directly affects their educational outcomes is not a fair or equitable one (Yosso, 2005; Gay, 2002).

Whiteness as property was a concept proposed by Bell (1987) and Harris (1993), and its premise is that those who possess Whiteness have rights that resemble the rights of property including rights of use, rights of transfer, and the rights of exclusion. The

U.S. was founded by White males with property for whom the concept of individual rights separated from property rights was foreign (Bell, 1987). This inability to uncouple individual rights from property rights was the reason men who expressed a commitment to justice and liberty were able to continue the repression of people of color and women without the rights of property (Bell, 1987).

An exercise done in a college classroom by Andrew Hacker (1992) further demonstrates the concept of Whiteness as property. Hacker (1992) asked White college students what amount of compensation they would need to receive (if any) if they were forced to become Black, the White students in the class felt it was appropriate to ask for \$1 million for each year they would live while Black. White people either consciously or subconsciously recognize that they possess advantages and aspects of citizenship not available to people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Hikido and Murray (2016) conducted a focus group with five White students at an institution where they were the minority-majority (meaning they were the largest minority group but that White students were not the majority population). These students purported an appreciation for diversity and shared a belief that people were colorblind on campus when it came to race. As the focus group progressed, students shared their feelings that the university did not support their Whiteness and that students of color should be made to understand the importance of including White students in their cultural clubs and activities. These students failed to grasp that White people have always been included and supported when people of color have historically been excluded and denied equity (Hikido & Murray, 2016). The White students felt that students of color self-

segregated themselves and that the institution should create clubs that ignore rather than celebrate racial and ethnic differences among students. When White students do not recognize the privilege afforded to them by their whiteness, they can attribute many of their successes to their merit, believing that if others simply put in the effort, they too could achieve in similar ways (Hikido & Murray, 2016). White students tended to “reestablish ideological whiteness by dismissing structural and historical perspectives” (Hikido & Murray, 2016, p. 393). A racially diverse environment supported by pro-diversity policies is not enough to ensure White students will think critically about their positions of power and privilege or to consider issues of race and their racial identities (Hikido & Murray, 2016).

Without a commitment by the institution to include critical multiculturalism into pedagogical and institutional practices, White students will likely adhere to superficial and shallow understandings of multiculturalism that perpetuate the racial inequities (Hikido & Murray, 2016). Critical multiculturalism makes whiteness visible and accountable and encourages students to question the hegemonic ideologies perpetuated in traditional curriculum (Hikido & Murray, 2016). Students of color do not experience a world in which they are privileged based on the color of their skin, and they generally do not experience the right to leverage the color of their skin for their advancement the way that White people can leverage it, often without realizing their privilege.

### **Interest Convergence**

The premise of interest convergence is that White people will only grant privileges or concessions to communities of color when those concessions are not

disruptive to the standard way of life for White people or when those concessions help White people further their interests (Bell, 1980; Ladson-Billings, 1998; DeCuir, & Dixon, 2004). The *Brown v Board of Education* decision is an example of interest convergence. While the decision was lauded by many to be a step toward racial equity, it was made possible as a result of the interests of White men trying to boost the declining international reputation of the U.S. due to civil unrest (Ladson-Billings, 1998). In this case, the interests of the students of color to attend desegregated schools aligned with those of the government to tame the civil unrest that was beginning to be noticed abroad (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

### **Amplifying Voice - Storytelling**

The concept of amplifying the voice of those who have been silenced is a crucial tenet of critical race theory and is evidenced by the use of narratives and stories to detail the lived experiences of people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1998). The focus is on how the role of voice can provide additional power to people who have traditionally been oppressed and marginalized. Critical race theorists work to elevate minority viewpoints informed by a shared history of oppression, to rebuild a society being crushed by racial hegemony (Barnes, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Solórzano (1998) asserts that most research methods used “are rooted in... racist epistemologies... it is our responsibility to use them for transformative purposes” (p. 133). Counter-storytelling is made up of the stories of those whose experiences are rarely told (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-storytelling can serve four functions according to Solórzano and Yosso (2001): 1) the stories can build community among marginalized

populations by putting a face to educational theory, 2) the stories can challenge the perceived wisdom of people traditionally placed at the center of society, 3) the stories can provide a view into the lives of marginalized populations and facilitate feelings of solidarity and future, 4) the stories can demonstrate that by mending together the story and reality, a more vibrant full picture of the world can be created (Delgado, 1989; Lawson, 1995).

Storytelling may allow healing of the soul. When recounting the experience of oppression and the realization of how that came to be, a person of color may find that they are able to “stop inflicting mental violence on oneself” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 14). This is critical in a society dominated by stories from the majority that white-wash historical events and reconstruct reality in ways that maintain privilege and power (Delgado, 1989). Delgado Bernal articulates that “learning to listen to counter-stories within the educational systems can be an important pedagogical practice for teachers and students as well as an important methodological practice for educational researchers” (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 116). A counter-story challenges the dominant rhetoric or narrative given by the majority and gives voice to those who have experienced racism and silencing (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Student counter-stories can help educators see the racial privilege that is prevalent in the majoritarian narrative (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Hiraldo (2010) highlights how student counter-stories can be useful in analyzing campus climate and in research aimed at increasing institutional inclusivity.

**Critical Race Theory in Educational Research**

Dixson and Rousseau (2005) analyzed a decade of literature on the application of critical race theory in education. Their work provided an overview of critical race theory as it connects to its roots in critical legal studies. They discussed the restrictive versus expansive views of equality and noted that the differences center on equality as a result (expansive) versus equality as a process (restrictive) (Crenshaw, 1988). They referenced Rousseau and Tate's (2003) work, highlighting how the different views could result in educators treating all students the same rather than working to ensure that all students can attain the same outcome. This approach results in teachers not connecting the concept of equity to the educational outcomes of students of color. Dixson and Rousseau (2005) focused on how the notion of color-blindness in law and educational policy subjugates people of color further and maintains a system of White privilege (Gotanda, 1991). In their review of the literature, Dixson and Rousseau (2005) also found that of the five tenets of critical race theory, two were not thoroughly explored in educational research at the time. The two tenets were the interdisciplinary nature and movement toward ending racial oppression. They called for critical race scholars in education to come together to "strategize on ways to address the persistent and pernicious educational inequity facing our communities" (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005, p.23). Parker and Lynn (2002) emphasized that when critical race theory is linked to education it has the potential to foster connections from theory to activism on race-related issues. They assert that the key to using critical race theory in qualitative research is defining the methodological and epistemological analysis and its links with racism (Parker & Lynn, 2002).



However, “there is a need for caution in proceeding with the integration of critical race theory into educational research” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 21). Ladson-Billings notes the importance of research or analysis using critical race theory to be rooted in the critical legal studies literature from which it sprang that focused on the injustices embedded in the U.S. legal system. Ladson-Billings (1998) also asserts that it is necessary to move beyond using critical race theory as a framework to expose racism to a way to propose radical changes in order to disrupt the systems that perpetuate oppression and racism, which will require scholars to maintain unpopular positions in the face of those who are working to preserve their power in society. Ladson-Billings declared “We may have to defend a radical approach to democracy that seriously undermines the privilege of those who have so skillfully carved that privilege into the foundation of the nation” (1998, p. 22). This privilege pervades the infrastructure of the United States and is exercised within the systems of education, law, medicine, demonstrating an element of systemic racism as it plays out in U.S. society.

### **Pedagogical Practices**

School curriculum and instructional techniques are designed to maintain a White supremacist master script that silences the voices of students of color and legitimizes the voices of White students (Swartz, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1998). It reinforces the dominant standard knowledge that has rewritten the narrative of people of color into an ahistorical version of history that is colorblind and race-neutral. Instructional practices have historically taken a deficit approach to teaching students of color, viewing them as unprepared and tasking teachers with finding ways to teach “at-risk” students (Ladson-

Billings, 1998), which only perpetuates contemporary racism in found U.S. schools in the form of deficit thinking (Yosso, 2005). Students are seen as lacking in the necessary knowledge considered relevant by the majority. Students' realities in their classroom experience are primarily created by the quality of the teacher-student interactions (Seyfried, 1998), which is problematic if those interactions are rooted in at-risk deficit-based approaches to working with students. Research on counter-pedagogy and reality pedagogy is gaining traction in education and needs to be given the appropriate forum and resources to move into mainstream teacher education programs (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Emdin, 2016). Tierney (2000) advocates that one way to counter the idea that students are "at risk" is to hold students of color to expectations of excellence and to create classroom conditions that ensure students can learn and succeed.

Disparate levels of school funding are additional evidence of institutional and structural racism, which causes students of color to experience systemic racism at young ages before they may experience direct or overt individual racism (Ladson-Billings, 1998). School funding is predominantly done through property taxes which results in areas with higher property values having better-funded schools. These communities are often areas where redlining was conducted by real estate and financial institutions resulting in segregation and the intentional exclusion of communities of color (Blaisdell, 2016). The difference in funding per child can be thousands of dollars which translates into significant differences in programmatic offerings and support (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Ladson-Billings (1998) explains that without a change in funding formulas, the inequities of schooling will virtually guarantee the reproduction of the status quo. The

allocation of resources to schools that are districted to serve White communities may result in the availability of honors classes or advanced placement programs, further creating the racial divide in education. This funding directed to schools that are in predominantly White communities demonstrates the right of use granted to Whiteness (DeCuir, & Dixson, 2004).

### **Community Cultural Wealth**

Yosso (2005) coined the term “community cultural wealth” to develop a model by which the knowledge, skills, and abilities of communities of color are seen as valuable forms of capital that propel them forward in a world laced with barriers. This cultural wealth is formed out of years of survival, resistance, and resilience in the face of micro and macro forms of oppression. Students of color are the holders of valuable knowledge that bring strength to their communities (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Biculturalism, bilingualism, and a commitment to one’s community are viewed as valuable experiential knowledge when using a raced-gendered epistemology (Delgado Bernal, 2002). A raced-gendered epistemology emerges from a system of knowing rooted in oppression based on the intersection of race, gender, and class. This epistemology views “other” ways of knowing as valid and necessary to teaching students of color. Narratives of those who have experienced oppression and racism are used to demonstrate the lived experience of communities of color, which respects and honors the experiences of students of color and in turn supports their identity development (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Additionally, this approach can become a means by which to resist epistemological racism (Scheurich & Young, 1997).

Yosso (2005) highlights the importance of understanding the cultural wealth that people of color possess and attempts to shift the narrative around cultural capital. The primary goal of this model is to empower people of color to see the value and assets already possessed by their communities. The model of community cultural wealth was created by adapting Oliver and Shapiro's (1995) work from *Black Wealth/White Wealth*. Yosso's (2005) model of community cultural wealth includes six inputs: a) aspirational capital—"the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (p. 77), b) linguistic capital—the skills gained via communication in more than one language, c) familial capital—knowledge, cultural intuition, and experiences within the family that nurture a sense of community history, d) social capital—peer networks that provide support and community resources to enable navigation through society, e) navigational capital which enables people of color to maneuver through societal institutions in the face of racial hostility and discrimination, and finally, f) resistant capital—knowledge, and skills developed through behaviors that challenge inequality and oppression (Yosso, 2005).

In higher education, the model of community cultural wealth can be used to replace the notion of "cultural capital," which is traditionally associated with knowing what is needed to be successful in college. This reframe considers the life experiences of these students as relevant forms of "cultural capital" that will assist them in navigating through their college experiences and beyond (Yosso, 2005). The primary goal of this model is to empower people of color to see the value and assets already possessed by them and their communities. This model is included in this study as it provided

significant insight into the many ways Latinx students navigate higher education successfully despite the barriers they face.

### **Summary**

Policies that have shaped the educational landscape for Latinx students and research on cultural considerations that influence success for Latinx students provide context to understand their educational experience. Knowing how the research on retention and persistence theory has evolved over the past fifty years, allows a more informed perspective on the problem of student persistence. Going deeper into the persistence research and considering the psychological concepts of mattering and belonging provides an understanding of the complex individual feelings that influence student decisions to remain in school or to leave.

Additionally, critical race theory was used as a conceptual framework to consider the experience of Latinx students learning in a predominantly White environment. The higher education learning environment has changed very little from its inception and continues to operate in ways that marginalize and alienate underrepresented students. Considering the cultural wealth that students of color bring to their educational experiences provides insight into elements that influence and support their persistence. This study provides a deeper understanding of the student experience, student perceptions of the campus, their sense of belonging, their cultural wealth, and the experiences or resources they felt influenced their persistence.

### CHAPTER THREE – METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of persisting undergraduate Latinx students studying business at a predominantly White research institution in the Pacific Northwest. Their sense of belonging in a predominantly White institution and the cultural wealth they brought with them to college were prominent features in this study. The research design for a study of the Latinx student experience as viewed through a critical race lens required a qualitative methodology that amplified the voices of students of color.

The problem addressed in this study was lower persistence rates of Latinx students, and the approach required hearing from the students who are persisting toward graduation. The problem thus called for methods that allowed a deeper narrative about the student experience. Qualitative approaches result in rich, thick descriptions provided by participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For those reasons, this qualitative case study included interviews and the photo-elicitation research method, which aligned with a key tenet of critical race theory: voice. Additionally, I utilized a short post-interview questionnaire to collect demographic information.

Research using the lens of critical race theory necessitates that social activism be woven into the project (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005), to that end, this research aimed to shine a light on the issues that require improvement in order for institutions to better serve their growing Latinx population and provide clear recommendations for institutional decision-makers in addition to providing opportunities for change that are immediately implementable. Dixson and Rousseau (2005) state “scholarship should

employ any means necessary to address the problem of inequity in education” (p. 22). It is with that goal that this research endeavored to hear the perspectives of Latinx students to amplify their voices and their experiences so that we could learn from them and enact real change that will support their journey to graduation.

Though research has been done on Latinx student persistence, Latinx student sense of belonging, and on student persistence in business school, much of this research has been quantitative (e.g., Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Maceli & Box 2010). Additionally, traditional research on persistence has often focused on what was lacking in the student who left the university. There has not been sufficient research on the lived experiences of Latinx students studying business in a predominantly White institution and how those experiences coupled with or countered by their cultural resources lead to their persistence. This research provided a platform for students to share their experiences and what led them to persist in college. Using the lens of critical race theory and Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model allowed a view of the Latinx student experience as one of strength and resilience in the face of a potentially racist, prejudicial system of higher education.

Gaining a deeper understanding of the experience of persisting Latinx students highlights ways an institution can reinforce systems that nurture a student’s sense of belonging while breaking down the systems that inhibit a student’s sense of belonging. Understanding this may provide opportunities to improve students’ experience, their sense of belonging, and in turn, their persistence in higher education. Given the growth

of the nation-wide Latinx student population, this study's potential implications are relevant to the success of students, institutions, and the future workforce.

The following research questions on Latinx student experiences guide this study:

1. Where do Latinx students find community or belonging (on campus or off)?
2. How do experiences of racism or prejudice influence feelings of belonging for Latinx students?
3. How do experiences of belonging or community cultural wealth shape student decisions to persist toward degree completion?

### **Case Study**

A case study approach was appropriate to use as it provided a view of the Latinx student experience in the business school. "A case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 37) and "it is the messy complexity of human experience that leads researchers to case studies" (Erickson, 1986 as cited in Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p.3). Therefore, a case study with varying sources of information within that system presented a holistic view of the student experience.

Parker and Lynn (2002) posit that "the thick descriptions and interviews, characteristic of case study research, not only serve illuminative purposes but also can be used to document institutional as well as overt racism" (p.11). Thus, a case study provided an appropriate approach to critical race research focused on the experience of Latinx students.



This case study utilized semi-structured interviews and photo-elicitation methods with undergraduate business students at the institution in the study. I employed the photo-elicitation method of qualitative research by asking Latinx students to take pictures that represented their experiences on campus at a predominantly White institution and where they found community or belonging (on campus or off).

### **Site Selection and Research Participants**

This research centers the voices of the Latinx students in this study as the amplification of their stories validates and leverages their experiential knowledge in the design of systems to support their success, which is a facet of critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Student experiences are institutional assets that provide a counter-narrative to the traditional institutional perspective of student deficit when considering persistence and efforts made to improve retention.

#### **Site Selection**

The university in this study is a public, doctoral-granting, predominantly White, research institution located in the Pacific Northwest with an undergraduate population of around 23,000 students and a high commuter population. The business school was chosen for this study because it has the largest percentage of Latinx students on campus with 17.5% of all Latinx students at the university. Business is one of the most popular majors among college-going Latinx students nationwide (Center on Education and the Workforce, 2015). The business school within the university serves approximately 3,600 undergraduate students. Of those 3,600 students, 16% identify as Hispanic/Latino, 14% identify as Asian or Pacific Islander, 4% identify as

Black or African American, less than 1% identifies as Native American or First Nations. Each year approximately 30 to 60 Latinx students begin as freshmen studying business at this institution. Each year 28% to 43% of those freshmen Latinx students leave the institution in this study, resulting in a departmental retention rate for Latinx students that varies from 57% to 72% (Institutional Data, 2019). This site was also chosen due to my proximity and access to the population.

### **Participant Selection**

The participants in this research were 14 students who self-identified on their admission application as Hispanic or Latino, began as first-year students studying business, and were persisting in business as sophomores, juniors, or seniors. Students were identified using the institution's student information system. Students eligible for participation in this study began at the institution in the fall terms of 2015, 2016, 2017, or 2018. The total number of students of all races and ethnicities who started as freshmen in those years is 847, of those, 167 identified as Hispanic or Latino. Of those 167 students, 75 students were persisting toward their degree at the institution and were still business majors. Of those 75 students, seven were on track to graduate before the interviews commenced, leaving the initial eligible purposeful sample size at 68 persisting Latinx students in July 2019 when study invites were sent (See Appendix A). Students were sent an initial invite and several weeks later a second invite went out to the remainder of students on the list who had not responded. The final number of students who were interviewed was 14. All students chose to return after the first

interview to share photos of their experience as a Latinx student on campus and where they found community or a sense of belonging.

Descriptive data for the students in the study are summarized in Table 1, Appendix H, and discussed here. Students selected their own pseudonyms at the end of the first interview. Their ages ranged from 19 to 34, six of them were 19, and five were 20-21, two were 22-24, and one student was 34. Ten of them were the first generation in their family born in the US, two were second-generation (their parents were born in the US), and two were recent immigrants (one of them here was under the DACA provision, and the other is going through the immigration process currently). Eight students were first-generation college students. Seven students were sophomores, three were juniors, and four were seniors. Five of them began at the university in 2016, five began in 2017, and four began in 2018, there were no participants from the 2015 cohort though they did receive invites. Four of the students expected to graduate within a year in 2020, five planned for a 2021 graduation, and the remaining students were aiming for 2022.

Students were asked how they identify with regard to race or ethnicity. Students were able to select multiple options in this category or add their own, and the ethnicities they wrote included Columbian, Mexican, Mexican American, and Venezuelan. All but two students personally identified as either Latina/Latino/Latinx or Hispanic. The remaining two students who did not select Latinx selected Mexican American and South American as the way they identify. Additionally, four students identified as Chicana/Chicano. All students were business majors and the concentrations within business they were pursuing included advertising, marketing, finance, management, and

supply & logistics management. Ten of the students were marketing majors, although marketing is one of the largest majors in the school, the major was overrepresented in this study. Marketing is the most popular major among Latinx students in the school of business, management is the second most popular major among Latinx students and it was the second most frequent major in this study with three students majoring in that area. There were two advertising majors, and one each of finance and supply & logistics majors. Additionally, two of the students were double majoring in options outside of business: Spanish and economics.

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Class Standing</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity Selected</b>	<b>First Generation Student</b>	<b>Generational Status in US</b>	<b>Age</b>
German	Soph	South American, Venezuelan	No	Recent Immigrant - Not DACA	24
Maria	Soph	Latina, Hispanic, Chicana, Mexican	No	1st	19
Contreras	Junior	Latino, Hispanic	Yes	1st	20
Sara	Senior	Latina/x, Hispanic, Chicana	Yes	1st	21
Carlos	Soph	Latino, Chicano, Mexican	Yes	1st	19
Martin	Junior	Latino/x	Yes	2nd	19
Monica	Soph	Hispanic, Mexican	Yes	1st	19
Isabella	Soph	Latina, Chicana, Mexican American	Yes	1st	19
David	Junior	Latino, Hispanic, Mexican	No	Recent Immigrant - DACA	21
Vanessa	Soph	Mexican American	No	1st	19
Val	Senior	Latina, Hispanic, Columbian	No	1st	20
Abe	Senior	Latino, Mexican	Yes	1st	22
Michael	Senior	Latino, Hispanic, Mexican	No	2nd	34
Jesus	Soph	Latino, Chicano, Mexican	Yes	1st	20

### **Data Collection**

Upon obtaining the institutional review board's approval, I reviewed the list of eligible participants to check their enrollment for summer and fall terms. Students who were registered for summer or fall terms remained in the sample and emails were sent to the first set of students on the list inviting them to the study (see appendix A). Subsequent study invites were sent to the remaining students on the list and follow-up invites were sent until I had identified 14 participants.

Initial data collection included the first semi-structured interview, followed by the photo-elicitation, and subsequent semi-structured interview about the photos and their racialized experiences on campus. The first interview centered on their experience on campus in the classroom and in other academic settings (tutoring, advising), their connections with faculty or staff, their social experiences, where they find belonging, their measurement of a sense of belonging on campus and in their academic department, how they succeed in school, and what motivates them. After the first interview student participants were asked to take or find five pictures that represented their experiences on campus at a predominantly White institution and five pictures that represented where they find community or belonging (on campus or off).

The second interview initially centered on the photographs they provided and their narrative about the spaces, people, or experiences. The second half of the discussion focused on their racialized experiences on campus, experiences of racism, discrimination, or micro-aggressions on campus, their perceptions of faculty representation, their ranking

of their likelihood to graduate from the university, and finally, their recommendations for how the experience of Latinx students could be improved.

The primary instrument in any qualitative research undertaking is the researcher herself, meaning the data collection and analysis was influenced by my research questions, perceptions, positionality, and interests as well as the development of the semi-structured interviews and photo-elicitation elicitation protocols. Interviews provided a rich understanding of the student experience via two methods, verbal and visual. Photos provided a view of the student experience through their eyes.

### **Interviews**

Interviews allow a view into how a person interprets the world around them. Interviews provide opportunities for a researcher to hear detailed descriptions of a particular situation that would not be possible with observation alone (Weiss, 1994). Patton (2015) states “We cannot observe feelings, thoughts,...intentions...behaviors that took place at some previous point in time” (p.426). Interviews provide an opportunity for researchers to understand the lived experience of a participant through what they share of their past and their interpretations of the present (Weiss, 1994). In this research, the goal was to gain an in-depth view of the experience of Latinx students studying business at a predominantly White institution. Therefore, interviews provided insight into how participants viewed their experiences on campus and how they made meaning of the social and educational issues they face. Additionally, meaning-making is a complex process that is both individualistic and socially constructed. It requires participants to “look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation”

(Seidman, 2013, p. 22) and that they consider their experience within their present context. Elements of student's past and present surfaced through our interviews that informed the way they viewed the campus, how they made meaning of experiences on campus, and how they perceived their feelings of belonging.

Participants were invited to participate in two 60-minute in-person interviews (see Appendix A for study invitation). At the first meeting and before beginning the interview, participants were briefed on the study, its purpose, and scope. The informed consent form (see Appendix B) was explained, presented in writing, and questions about the study were answered. Students were asked about their academic and social experiences on campus, where they find community, and their support systems (see Appendix C for the full interview guide). These questions were designed to elicit information about experiences that have been shown to influence student sense of belonging and persistence. The goal of the first interview was to gain a deeper understanding of each student's experience and the systems they rely on for support. At the end of the first interview, participants were asked to fill out a short demographic survey (see Appendix D) to allow for comparison of student demographic information with past research on cultural considerations found to influence Latinx student belonging and persistence. Once the survey was completed, the participants received instructions for the photo-elicitation portion of data collection (see Appendix E) and were given a \$25 gift card as a token of appreciation for their time. Every student who was interviewed initially chose to return for the second interview which took place approximately two weeks after the first interview. Scheduling the second interview within two weeks of the first was done to

increase the likelihood that the student remained available and that the information shared in the first interview remained fresh in their minds.

The second student interview consisted of eight questions (see Appendix G), with the first 30 minutes dedicated to a discussion of the photos they took. The second student interview was a focused conversation about the meaning the student attributes to the pictures they took or their interpretations of what each image represented to them. Additionally, in the second half of the interview, our conversation shifted to a discussion about their experiences on campus as a student of color. After the second interview, students were given a second \$25 gift card.

Utilizing both verbal and visual methods was done to improve the internal validity of the data findings. Internal validity is enhanced by using multiple forms of data, called triangulation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After each interview, I captured ideas that stood out to me and the key points that I wanted to reflect on when reading through the transcripts of the interview and coding. All interviews were recorded via an online artificial intelligence transcription service. The transcriptions generated were checked for accuracy against the recording and were then uploaded to a secure computer drive. To improve reliability and to familiarize myself with the data, I reviewed each transcription to ensure they were accurately transcribed before coding (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

### **Photo-elicitation**

Historically, Eurocentric methods of academic research have dominated the field of education and other ways of knowing have been disregarded or pushed to the margins of academia (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002). A variety of terms have been coined



to demonstrate how “issues of power are tied to the legitimacy of knowledge” (Huber, 2009, p. 641). These terms include the apartheid of knowledge (Delgado Benal & Villalpando, 2002), academic colonization (Córdova, 1998), the regime of truth (Foucault, 1980), epistemological racism (Scheurich & Young, 1997) and epistemic violence (McLaren & Pinkney-Pastrana, 2000). What each of these terms has in common is that they are naming the institutionalized racism that is perpetuated through the replication of traditional forms of academic research that do not consider how narrow definitions of knowledge “maintain the structures of power and elite interests that exist within and beyond the academy” (Huber, 2009, p. 641). Photo-elicitation as a qualitative research method can be used to empower traditionally marginalized populations (Palibroda, Krieg, Murdock, & Havelock, 2009; Wang & Burris, 1997).

Research participants who engage in photo-elicitation take pictures and provide interpretations of the photographs to help others “see the world through their eyes” (Palibroda, Krieg, Murdock, & Havelock, 2009, p. 8). This process can illuminate areas of concern or areas of pride or strength for the participants. Additionally, photo-elicitation can be used to center voices that have historically been left out of academic or policy discussions (Mejia, Quiroz, Morales, Ponce, Chavez, & Torre, 2013). Additionally, using images in research contributes to a more vibrant case study and provides an additional source to increase understanding of the student experience allowing for further triangulation of the data. For these reasons, photo-elicitation as a tool for empowerment and centering was employed in this study.

Photos can provide insight into what the photographer sees as important to capture and may convey their cultural values (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Photo-elicitation is particularly relevant for use with students of color because it offers “alternative ways of knowing” (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 119). Learning about the experiences of Latinx students through an interview alone is not sufficient as it may not provide the appropriate outlet for the expression of the student experience. Counter-storytelling relies on the narratives of people of color (Delgado Bernal, 2002), and incorporating alternative ways of knowing beyond the traditionally accepted research methods can facilitate that narrative more inclusively.

Mejia (2015) cautions that alternative forms of academic research like photovoice or photo-elicitation have the potential to recreate systems of oppression or issues of racial inequality, and therefore researchers must work to “prepare for instances where the method may further disempower those who are meant to be empowered by it” (p. 671). She also encourages researchers to consider how they may go beyond methods that encourage voice to nurture opportunities for participants to be active creators of knowledge that can influence change in their communities (Mejia, 2015). For these reasons, I endeavored to ensure that all ideas generated through the photos and interviews are attributed to those students who produced them and that they are in alignment with the sentiments the students shared, never taken out of context.

There are limits to what can be conveyed through language alone. Additionally, utilizing participant-generated images creates a shared research relationship and shared power with participants (Branch & Latz, 2017). Given that a great deal of the research

that exists in student affairs has been done from a Eurocentric perspective (Branch & Latz, 2017; Drucker, 2014), the photo-elicitation method in this study provided an opportunity for a more inclusive and representative contribution to this case study.

The direction given to participants for the photo-elicitation element was to take five pictures that represented their experiences on campus at the predominantly White institution. Additionally, they were asked to take or find five pictures that represented where they find community or belonging (on campus or off). All participants had access to a camera via their mobile phones. Participants were asked to email the pictures to me one day prior to the second interview so that the images could be printed to use in the second interview. The second interview's purpose was to encourage dialogue about the student experience in the context of their pictures. During this interview, I had printouts of each photo and asked each participant to describe for me what the photo meant to them, what drew them to this photo, and to point out components of the picture that were meaningful to them. These interviews were recorded and transcribed, which enabled me to review the dialogue along with the photographs. When there were elements of the photo narration that I did not understand or cultural pieces that arose that I was not familiar with, I asked follow-up questions to ensure I had a complete understanding.

Photo-elicitation provided a view into the student's lives and an opportunity for their reflection on the meaning they ascribed to the photo. The photographs were artifacts that allowed for a more vibrant, deeper narrative about the student experience. The images were used as a device that enabled us to dialogue about how the participant made meaning of their experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Trustworthiness**

I documented all data collection procedures so this study could be replicated to improve the study's reliability (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Throughout my data analysis, I considered the ways I may be wrong, and I looked for evidence that challenged my conclusions (Maxwell, 2013). For example, given my conceptual framework of critical race theory and my theoretical framework of sense of belonging, I was specifically looking for how instances of racism influenced student feelings of belonging, and I found none of the students in my study felt that they had experienced overt racism on campus. This finding challenged the assumption that I held that the students in my research had experienced racism on campus. Throughout the analysis, I reflected on how I was coding, discussed my process with my advisor, with colleagues in my program, and I journaled about my thought process, all in efforts to improve the credibility or trustworthiness in my analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Additionally, I included discrepant information that runs counter to the themes I generated to demonstrate that not all perspectives align with the direction of my research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). For example, some of my interviews yielded student rankings of belonging that seemed low, yet those same students rated their likelihood of graduating at the highest level, which I was not expecting. Some students shared a lack of engagement on campus – yet they are successfully persisting year over year, that interview data was essential to include as it provided a counterpoint to experiences shared by other students and to research that indicates student engagement is an important component of retention initiatives.

I also considered reactivity, that is, how I may have influenced what each student said and how that influence affects the inferences I am making from the data (Maxwell, 2013). Specifically, as a White woman in an apparent position of power, directly connected to the program and students I am researching, it is possible that my presence influenced their level of openness or honesty about their experiences in the business school. Additionally, given that I am a White woman, it is possible that they did not feel comfortable sharing experiences of racism on campus with me. I was transparent about my intentions and goals for the project and my positionality with them. Confirmability represents the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 1986). Given that I was studying the experiences of students who had been the focus of my professional activities for the past five years, it was essential that uncoupled my interests and motivation from their outcomes or perspectives. Trustworthiness was enhanced through these considerations and the study design.

### **Data Analysis**

Coding initially began inductively whereby I coded every passage of text that appeared interesting via open and provisional coding with the first seven interview transcripts. I conducted open coding—creating labels for chunks of data and provisional (a priori) coding—codes that are predetermined from the literature (Saldaña, 2016). I began the analysis process by reviewing the transcripts line by line to identify words used by participants that stood out given my research questions. Those quotes were highlighted and an open code was attributed to them. Codes applied that relate to the theoretical and

conceptual frameworks used and stem from the literature include sense of belonging—connection to others, family involvement, lack of representation, community cultural wealth—social capital. A full list of codes utilized can be found in Appendix I. I continued to interview students while maintaining my initial interview protocol to ensure I did not drift in response to the initial codes.

I then took the many passages of text and coding and looked for themes that emerged and developed initial broader codes and sub-codes. I went back and re-coded the initial seven transcripts using qualitative data analysis software and used these codes and sub-codes throughout as I coded all 28 interviews while watching for new codes/themes to emerge that were not present in my initial seven transcripts. Upon completing the full analysis, I reviewed the codes, looked for patterns and places where the codes seemed to align or not, and then I grouped them into themes and sub-themes.

The pictures were coded in conjunction with the second interviews as they were representations of belonging and the student experience. In addition to using the images and the student narrative to further understand each individual student's perception of their experience and belonging, I looked for themes across the student's photos. I was interested in seeing whether there were any shared experiences across my participants on place, people, or their perspective.

To increase the internal validity of the research, I coded each student's two interviews as close together as possible, often on the same day for the later interviews. I looked for alignment or oddities in the responses (triangulating the data). I coded the second interview transcripts, not the pictures. The pictures were used to elicit responses

about where students found belonging or what their experience was like on campus, so coding the picture content was not an element relevant to this study.

I viewed the interviews and photo narratives through the lens of critical race theory, considering how stories of power or racism were enacted in the students' daily lives. Issues of power and representation were raised by students, and several of them experienced microaggressions on campus. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that "it is analyzing the data, in light of the theoretical framework and the power relations of society that inform how people make meaning, that makes the study critical" (p. 59). This statement emphasizes the importance of not losing sight of your lens when faced with mountains of transcribed interviews. In order to ensure that my conceptual framework is maintained throughout the analysis process, and to stay true to the notion of voice and counter-storytelling, I relied heavily on student quotes to demonstrate particular themes that arose from the analysis. The words used by participants represent microcosms of their consciousness (Seidman, 2013; Vygotskiĭ, 1986); thus, using student quotes helped to convey their personal narratives more keenly.

The major themes that arose from the data analysis included four elements of community cultural wealth, student racial and cultural experiences on campus that influenced their sense of belonging, and their experiences of belonging that were not explicitly racial or cultural.

### **Researcher Positionality, Reflexivity and Bias**

It was important to me that I did not "turn others into subjects so that their words can be appropriated for the benefit of the researcher" (Seidman, 2013, p. 12).

Seidman (2013) asserts that “Research is often done by people in relative positions of power in the guise of reform. All too often the only interests served are those of the researcher’s personal advancement” (p. 12). For that reason, the implications and recommendations for action of this dissertation will be based on participant voices and focused on real change in order to improve the experience of Latinx students at the campus in the study.

I acknowledge my limitations in applying a lens of critical race theory to the problem of student persistence and sense of belonging because as a White cis-gendered woman, I have experienced a great deal of privilege and unawareness through my life of the barriers that exist for people of color. I am limited in my ability to fully comprehend the system that oppresses students of color because I am part of that system, and it was built for people who look and learn like me. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998) stated “when Whites are exempted from racial designations and become “families,” “jurors,” “students,” “teachers,” . . . , their ability to apply a critical race theory analytical rubric is limited” (p.11). In this work, I remained positioned as a learner, not espousing to be an expert in critical race theory methodologies or applications. Some scholars believe critical race theory should not be used by White researchers as it is seen as another appropriation by White people of knowledge developed by people of color (Hayes & Juarez, 2009).

Additionally, Delgado (1997) asserts that the role of Whites in fighting oppression is to work with other Whites. However, Bergerson (2003) identified ways that White researchers can use critical race theory to fight systemic and structural racism. As a



White researcher, I must see the privilege that comes with my race and reject that privilege, challenging racism I observe, and recognizing that critical race theory is a framework developed by people of color to understand and explain experiences that I will never be able to fully understand (Bergerson, 2003). Bergerson (2003) also reinforces the need for White researchers to join the fight to legitimize research methods that come from the lived experiences of people who have been historically marginalized.

As a White woman researching the experiences of Latinx students, I endeavored to work from a place of transparency and authenticity, never pretending to be someone I am not (my last name sometimes leads others to assume I am Latina). I was clear about my intentions and what led me to research this issue with the students I met. I maintained a position of inquisitiveness and compassion as I collaborated with the students I interviewed. My role was to hear their experiences, ask questions, then apply a theoretical lens to see the problem in new ways. In using my positionality to amplify the voices of the students, I am able to center their experiences as creators of the knowledge institutions need in order to facilitate the persistence of Latinx students. Finally, through this work, I present possible solutions for administrators to enact to improve the experience of Latinx students, and I will adopt some of the changes in the program I oversee. Thus, my role as a researcher on this project varies through the project from inquirer to collaborator to amplifier then implementer.

As a researcher, I acknowledge: a) I was researching in site in which I had a vested interest, b) I was researching Latinx student experiences as a White woman, an outsider who has no lived experience that compares to that of the students, c) I have

preconceived notions about what the department in the study does to create a sense of belonging and retain students, d) I am married to a man with Mexican, Native American, and Spanish heritage whose family I have spent significant time with and those experiences create assumptions that had the potential to limit my data collection (if I assumed I knew what students were referencing) and analysis (if any bias I had developed came through in that analysis), e) I am a parent to two children who are Latinx and White, and my hopes for their future partially drove my interest in this topic.

My interest in this topic developed at the intersection of these factors I have acknowledged. As an administrator responsible for student retention and degree attainment, I have watched year after year as our freshman class has become more diverse. Term after term I review lists of students who stop attending and I see an increasing number of Latinx individuals listed. This quarterly experience influenced my decision to study how the experience of Latinx students on campus may be affecting their persistence. Additionally, as the partner of a Hispanic person who dropped out of college, I have heard about the challenges he faced while in college, which helped spur my interest in understanding the cultural considerations and factors that have been found to influence Latinx student success. Finally, as the parent to two girls who are part Hispanic, I have a vested interest in contributing to literature that has the potential to improve the way colleges support Latinx students.

### **Limitations of the Design**

This design relied on the participant to provide their perspective on the student experience. By nature of human involvement, the data had the potential to be skewed by

the participant's mood, health, or motives for participating (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The information the participants shared was selected by them (consciously or unconsciously) and was their perspective on the experience at that given point in time (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, a limitation of this design is that the data collected is subjective and in order to overcome the inherent subjectivity, multiple perspectives on the phenomenon had to be taken into consideration via the case study approach. Hurtado and Carter (1997) asserted that it is difficult to study a subjective experience like whether an individual feels included in the college community. Despite the difficulties, it is critical that institutions pay attention to students' experiences and perceived sense of belonging and that they work to understand the subjectivity as best they can. Institutions that focus on the subjective experience of students may be poised to act to improve student experiences on campus and their feelings of belonging.

This study was conducted in one department at one institution which creates a limitation in that it was representative of just a small subset of the population at the university and thus has limited transferability. An additional limitation is that my professional position as executive director for the department in this study may have influenced how students responded to me and the interview questions. Finally, my race is a limitation. Interviewing Latinx students as a non-Latinx person may have decreased the feelings of safety experienced by these students that would facilitate their willingness to share experiences of race or racism on campus. It is possible that the students would have answered the questions differently than they would if they were being interviewed by someone external to the organization or someone who shared their same race or ethnicity.

### **Summary**

The methods proposed in this study were carefully selected to provide answers to research questions focused on understanding the experiences of Latinx students. Using a case study approach that centered the student experience and their perceptions of belonging on campus provided an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that contributed to their persistence in business school. Through the semi-structured interviews and photo-elicitation, the student experiences on campus and their cultural wealth were illuminated to create a more holistic view of the elements that drive the students in this study to persist toward graduation.

#### CHAPTER FOUR – RESULTS AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the experience of Latinx students studying business in a predominately White public institution. Research questions focused on how and where Latinx students find community or belonging, how experiences of racism or prejudice influence feelings of belonging for Latinx students, and how experiences of belonging and/or community cultural wealth shape student decisions to persist toward degree completion.

Primary themes emerged around the cultural wealth the students possess, racial or cultural elements that influenced their experience and feelings of belonging, and finally, academic and social influences not identified as racial or cultural that affected their feelings of belonging. Student cultural wealth was a driving influence on their ability to persist in college in the face of challenges, as such, it is the first theme that will be discussed. Additionally, influences on belonging shared by students were coded based on whether race, ethnicity, or culture were of primary importance or whether the narrative was not racial or culturally focused. Those instances in which experiences were racial or culturally focused are discussed second, then experiences not identified as racial or culturally based are presented. The final section presents the rating of their sense of belonging and their likelihood of graduating.

Photo-elicitation was a central piece of this study and the photos the students took feature prominently in the findings; through these pictures we see a glimpse of their experience on campus and where they find belonging. Student quotes also feature prominently as the importance of voice is a key component of critical race theory.

Amplifying voice is particularly important when approaching research through a critical lens because traditionally, the voices of people of color have been missing, or the narratives have been co-opted by the majority population. For that reason, the student narratives are central throughout these findings.

### **Community Cultural Wealth**

Community cultural wealth is an asset-based approach to understanding student experiences and the capital they bring with them to campus. It is comprised of six facets of cultural capital possessed by communities of color that assist those communities in surviving and resisting both macro & microforms of oppression (Yosso, 2005). Those six forms are used to present the data in this study in regard to persistence and belonging. Aspirational capital, familial capital, navigational capital, and social capital were the most prominent.

### **Cultural Wealth – Aspirational Capital**

Aspirational capital is defined by Yosso (2005) as “the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real or perceived barriers” (p.77). Three students shared that what helps them succeed or persist toward graduation is the experience of others doubting them or not believing in them. This lack of faith from others is a barrier, whether real or perceived. Students consistently spoke to their dreams for the future and the ways they wanted to live into their parent’s vision for them and their future. Aspirational capital went beyond the ability to maintain hopes and dreams, it was a motivating force for the students in this study.

This showed up for the students in consistent “eyes on the prize” mentality. These students demonstrated a drive to finish their degree that was motivated by making their parents proud, proving those who doubted them wrong, and displaying the ability to overcome barriers placed in their way. Hard work was prominently brought up in the interviews. They attributed their persistence to their ability to “grind,” defined by students as working hard, pushing themselves. These students used the word persistent when describing themselves and talked about how the need to work hard makes them stronger individuals. Monica shared a photograph she took of a piece of engraved wood that simply read “stronger” (see Figure 3), which represented to her the strength that she possesses that pushes her forward.

**Figure 3**

*Photo Taken by Monica Representing Strength and Perseverance*



*Drive to Make Parents Proud*

The motivation of making their parents proud was particularly salient for 9 out of 14 students in the study. This seemed to go beyond the general desire young adults may have to please their parents. The sentiment shared by the majority of these students was spurred by a need to accomplish because their parents had overcome so much to get them to where they were—able to attend college and work toward a bachelor’s degree. Some talked about growing up in poverty, their parents coming to the US specifically for them to have a good education, and they consistently commented on how hard their parents were working to create opportunities for them. Abe remembered why his parents came to the U.S., which helped him persist in moments of doubt:

Growing up with a big family and having five siblings has been extremely hard for my family, and we didn't have the luxuries that others had... My parents came to the US for me and my brothers to have a good education. That has been the biggest impact on me wanting to pursue higher education, they're still working and they have been working in agriculture since they got here... That's another big factor that pushes me to go even though I've gotten to times where I felt like I can't do this anymore. The hard times, I felt that I couldn't keep going, but they have given me so much courage to keep going.

Additionally, Maria’s parents reinforced to her how hard they worked so that she could follow her dreams. Her dad means a great deal to her and his narrative about how and why he crossed the border to come to the U.S. is one that she remembered in the context of her perseverance toward graduation:



My dad only went to the eighth grade, that's all that they had where he grew up. My parents, both of them, they've always encouraged me to chase my dreams. My dad always told me to do what he couldn't. My dad is my person, my inspiration, I love him to death. He got his citizenship in 2008, here in Portland, and at the time, I didn't really know what that meant... I recently asked my dad if he struggled while he was crossing the border. He's like, "I didn't struggle physically, but I struggled mentally... I was leaving my home, I was leaving my parents, my siblings... I didn't know if I was ever going to see them again, but I knew I had to do what I had to do." He's always telling me, "You have so many opportunities here, take advantage of every opportunity you get. You're so intelligent." He's always motivating me... He's like "I did all this for you."

Sara, whose parents run a restaurant in Portland and have worked long days and nights to build it to what it is today, talked about how giving up on school would be a dishonor to her mom and keeping that in mind helps her persist to graduation:

If I give up now, I give up on my mom. My mom came from a town where she started working at seven years old, sometimes didn't even have enough to eat. So that [leaving school] would be a dishonor to her. She's given me so much.

Contreras spoke about the joy she felt when she realized she was giving her mom a traditional American experience when her mom helped her move into her dorm. That event triggered in Contreras a realization that this degree wasn't just for her:

I remember walking into my dorm room, it was me, my mom, my brother, and my sister. I remember her [mom] telling me "Wow, you've really made it." I thought to myself, you're actually in a dorm room and you're living that American dream, this is what so many family members experience. I'm so glad my family members are able to experience this. I remember my mom was just so mesmerized because she'd never seen anything like that. She'd never been around so many different family members moving in their students. I'm so grateful that my mom gets to experience this. After that I thought to myself that this is more than just for me, I think it's more for my mom.

The motivation to finish school was not merely for financial gain, because it is necessary for employment, or because it was a lifelong dream of the students in the study.

The motivation to finish, the answer to the question—what keeps you in the game—was

overwhelming “for my parents” or “because my parents sacrificed so much for me.” This drive to make their parents proud seems to straddle both aspirational and familial capital in the cultural wealth model and it demonstrates the importance of family support of the college experience for the students in this study.

### *Perseverance*

Proving others who doubted them wrong was another motivating force. Students shared stories of teachers in high school writing them off with regard to their academic success or college capabilities. Contreras experienced a feeling of being written off as a lost cause in high school before joining the AVID program. AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) is a non-profit college readiness program designed to decrease opportunity gaps. She spoke about the feeling that she had in her first class at the university as she looked around and saw a few students of color. She reflected on the historical and systemic racism that exists in education as she affirmed to herself that she needed to take advantage of being in college and get it done: “There's only two Hispanic students here but look at everybody else [other students of color]. They're here, and they're not supposed to be here, and I'm not supposed to be here, but we're here.”

Many students felt the drive to prove others wrong. Maria shared how extended family members were placing cultural expectations of marriage and children on her, and that drove her to want to counter that expectation by completing her degree:

I have a huge family and the majority of them are men. So it's always like, “You're going to get pregnant at 16, or you're just going to get married, and that's it for you” type of deal. It's a lot of older people in my family who have that mindset. I just laugh because I'm like, “that's not going to happen.” If they say I can't, I'll do it, I'll prove them wrong, and I'll do it ten times better than they think I'm going to do it.

German, who was a recent immigrant from Venezuela, had a strong sense of independence and self-reliance. He actually preferred to have people against him or doubting his abilities because having others doubt him fueled him more: “I hate when people know that I’ll make it... I’d rather have people against me than with me. It just fires me up, makes me more comfortable, and drives me to work harder.” Upon learning that Latinx students have lower graduation rates than White students, Michael said: “If you tell me, I’m less likely to graduate, I’m probably going to try harder to graduate.” This perseverance and tenacity consistently came up throughout the study with many participants. Contreras shared a determination and a sentiment that she needed to bring that diploma home to her family, this idea of bringing the degree home to the family was important to other students as well: “I think about my family... how I need to come home with my trophy.”

Finally, Abe talks about how he had to work hard to overcome feelings of being academically behind and the importance of being authentic throughout, asking for help, and also doing his part to try to change the system for those coming after him:

I come from a small school so there were not a lot of opportunities for me to learn from or to take. So when I came here, a lot of things were new to me, so I felt more behind compared to someone else who had those resources available to them... They were more advanced than me, so that kind of put me at a disadvantage from everyone else. It's hard because you have to do more to do all that work, you get stuck, and when you get stuck, you don't know who to get help from or who to ask... I'm being ambitious, being persistent, determined, motivated. All those things can get you far, I just feel that you have to do it genuinely and authentically with great intention. I think that's what I've been doing, and I think that's what keeps me in my peace right now. No matter how much I struggle, I know that I will get over it. I can overcome it, asking for help, and talking to people like you to change the system a little bit.

Overcoming academic difficulties and pushing past other's expectations of them, including those who doubted them, drove the students to work harder in order to persevere toward graduation.

### *Sense of Purpose and Future Vision*

The students in the study had a demonstrated sense of purpose throughout our interviews. Two key findings emerged here; they possessed a clear future vision for themselves that drove their persistence, and their sense of purpose and future vision propelled them to prioritize school consistently. Often their future visions intersected with a deep desire to give back to their communities or to pave the way for others to come after them. Maria shared her life plan and vision to empower other women and also to change the lives of those immigrating to the US:

I plan to graduate, then go to Texas for law school and focus on immigration and have a law firm with multiple lawyers who focus on multiple angles. That's a dream right there.... I want to promote strong, independent women who are really trying to make a difference in their lives and the lives of others.

German seemed to internalize the university motto and referred to it throughout our interviews. He saw himself launching entrepreneurial ventures in the future using his supply chain and negotiation skills. German was incredibly career-focused; throughout our conversations he consistently brought up the importance of gaining the necessary skills as quickly as possible so that he could move on in his professional pursuits. His future vision for himself was centered on improving his community:

I know that I'm working hard towards something... I don't believe that I was born just to be one more... Our quote for [the university] 'Let Knowledge Serve the City,' some students they don't understand what it is. You see, for me, when you get knowledge, it's about providing a solution to your community. Being a better person, trying to really improve what's surrounding you.

Abe saw education as a path to increasing representation in positions of leadership and power, and his pursuit of a degree is a means to help his community, which was instilled in him at a young age:

I want to see more representation, you know, I think that's the big thing for people like us [Latinx people] who are tired of seeing the same person lead something or make decisions for us. I think it's time that people start taking action, and I think the best way to do that is through education. That has been instilled in me since a very young age... I knew that my only way was to get a good education, and from there, go back and help my family and my community.

Sara's future vision included having a successful full-time career while at the same time helping her parents with the bookkeeping for their restaurant. Vanessa expressed certainty that she will take this education and change the world for others in some way but how she would affect change was still developing for her.

One counter perspective to the importance of education was offered by Jesus, who did not feel that education was necessary for success. He didn't see school as necessary for success. He was striving for success but saw it as attainable through multiple paths. Interestingly, Jesus gave the lowest score for belonging in the business school (5) and one of the lowest scores for belonging at the university (5), though he ranked his likelihood of graduating from the university at a 10 (see Appendix I).

Future visions for themselves seemed to be clear, very few students were unsure about the path that they saw for themselves and those who did not have a specific plan shared a belief that no matter what happened, they were going to be successful and give back to their communities. Many of these students and their families encountered significant barriers prior to arriving on campus and throughout their years as students.

The stories of parents working long hours in restaurants, crossing the border to move toward a dream, and spending their life doing hard agricultural labor to provide for their children demonstrated an ability to “dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances” (Yosso, 2005, p.78). The aspirational capital demonstrated by both students and families in this study is an example of how cultural wealth shows up in ways that support students in accomplishing their goals.

### **Cultural Wealth – Familial Capital**

Familial capital is the knowledge possessed by students that provide cultural intuition, and a sense of community history and memory (Yosso, 2005). This capital is not limited to immediate family but includes a broad definition of family to include both extended family and also friends that may be considered “one of the family.” Familial capital is embodied by the ways in which students continue to maintain connections with their community and families, the way those communities support their students, and the ways in which the students reduce feelings of isolation by staying in relationship with their family. In this section, instances of family support and student commitments to their family are most prominent.

### ***Family Influence on Persistence***

Students in this study demonstrated how they shared the experience of college with their family, which influenced their family’s buy-in and support of the student’s persistence. Vanessa shared how her family reflected her goals back to her at a critical time and as a result, it kept her persisting toward graduation:

There came a time I was just like, “I don't want to go to college anymore, why did I even come.” They're like, “well, you came because didn't you say you wanted to do this? Maybe not change the world, but change someone's world?” I was like, okay, keep on trying even though you feel like giving up, you have to motivate yourself to see what you can change. So, I feel like that's what keeps me going.

Many students spoke about how they engaged their family and shared the experience and the campus with their loved ones. Michael's story was particularly striking as the university campus experience was shared by three generations within one term. His mother returned to school to finish her degree, which influenced his decision to come to the university. She toured him around the university, showing him good places to study as well as telling him to go see his professors in order to build relationships. His mother finished her bachelor's degree in spring, Michael was taking classes during that term while making time to bring his toddler and older son to see what a college campus was like. He began bringing his oldest son to campus to hang out and play basketball after he finished studying for the day. Michael's familial community was present on campus. Michael also shared how his wife and her family are supportive and help manage child care to facilitate his ability to focus on completing school. Family proved to be an essential element of Michael's support system, which influenced his persistence.

Students relied on their families for emotional support as they adjusted to either being away from home or managing the workload of college. Contreras shared how her mother reinforced her decision to attend university and also expressed support not tied to degree completion:

My mom reminding me that I'm here not for her, I'm not here just to get a degree, and I'm not here to make my family proud. I'm here for myself. She always reminds me, 'you are the first one to go to university and your family wants to see you succeed, but at the end of the day, if you're unhappy, just know that there's other paths, and you're going to succeed either way.'

Students shared that it was important to them that their families were understanding when they were unable to make it home for birthdays or quinceaneras due to studying or project work. Abe was unable to see his family on a regular basis, but their words of affirmation motivate him from afar:

I just tell them what I'm doing and they support me. So, that is very reassuring for me to have family even though they can't support me in other ways. The love that they gave me and the support, just saying, "we're here for you, and we're proud of you." I think that's the biggest thing for me to feel motivated.

A few students were critical of themselves about grades they received and their parents provided words of encouragement and reassurance that B grades were not the end of the world. Isabella has called her mom to share her dismay over getting a B instead of an A: "she's like, 'it's okay that you didn't get the A, you're still there. You're doing it by yourself, so you have to give yourself credit for that.'"

### ***Family Commitments***

Commitments to family came up as important through student's educational journeys. One sentiment that ten of the students shared was how important it was to them that their parents understood the expectations of college and what they were going through. Abe shared that his family recognized the importance of him finishing his degree: "They can't really understand the college life experience but they can understand that I'm doing this for me and for them." Some students shared how because they were first-generation students, the notions of schoolwork outside of class were new to their



families, and they needed to help their families understand the expectations of college. Vanessa shared an experience that was represented in the literature –bridging between worlds (Torres, 2003), trying to help her family understand the commitments of school: “Sometimes they will be like ‘Why aren't you home? Why are you doing homework so late? That's why you have school, to do your homework.’ Then I'm like no, at school you get lectured, you don't have homework time.” She also explained that she committed initially to another university but was dissuaded from attending that school due to its distance from her family and their concern about her being far away. The commitments and expectations of family both influenced where she decided to attend college, as well as her current experience of managing homework and family needs.

David realized that as he turned 22 and moved in with his girlfriend, his family commitments changed from being a kid in his parent’s house to managing his own household. Those new family commitments influenced how he approached school:

It dawned on me, “I am responsible, we're both [he and his partner] mutually responsible for how our lives are going now, and I'm not a kid anymore.” So, if I did... fail a class or something that would have a significant effect on life outside of school. Whereas I think when I was living with my parents failing a class would have just been like, okay, take it next year, but now I pay rent, and I have money obligations, things that I can't risk.

German viewed family commitments as a liability, sharing that he was supporting his mother, who is not able to work due to her immigration status. This seemed to create tension for him as he was supporting both her and his little brother while working and attending school full time. When asked what he thought would help Latinx students graduate, he shared the perspective that family commitments and money seem to be an

issue for Latinx students he interacts with and that if something is not done change that, it will be a societal problem:

The student's problem is that they have to look after their parents, they are immigrants who don't work, or they don't make enough money. They're in the situation as me where they have to support their family. So their problem will always be money, money to actually educate them and if you don't educate them, then you will have 20 years from now our population's problem.

Michael also shared the perspective that family commitments may interfere with some student's ability to persist, suggesting that if students who left college were surveyed, we would find they left to take care of their families: "There is a very big family culture... Survey those people [those who left college] find out what happened in their life that caused them to stop and take care of their families." Martin shared his decision to leave his hometown to go to school because he felt that if he had remained at home, it would be difficult to focus on school due to the family commitments that existed there: "There was no way of me getting things done if I stayed at home because I have a huge family and there's a lot of responsibilities there."

There appeared to be strong connections between most of the students in the study and their families. The commitments to family remained strong for students while they were in college though many of them found ways of moderating those commitments with the requirements of college. Many students worked to help their families understand the expectations of college. When considering why Latinx students have lower persistence rates, two students attributed that to family commitments and the importance of caring for and supporting their family. This dedication to family and the support those families provide is an example of how familial capital can show up for students in college.

**Cultural Wealth – Navigational Capital**

Navigational capital is the capital possessed by students that helps them navigate institutions that were not built with them in mind (Yosso, 2005). One of the students who spoke to this directly without prompting was Contreras who took a picture of her and a fellow Latina friend studying in the library. She said that picture represented to her that “even though colleges aren’t necessarily made for people like us, it just goes to show with this picture that we’re like anybody else, right?”

Themes that emerged related to navigational capital included the need students felt to not waste any time in order to graduate as soon as possible with a well-paying job, the ways in which they came to be self-reliant and independent in order to succeed, and how past experiences of suffering resulted in resilience that enabled them to persevere.

***Prioritizing School***

The importance of prioritizing school and not wasting time or money was brought up by many students. Val, a student raised in Columbia, knew that she would finish college because she doesn’t leave things half done. For her, it was about having clear priorities, ensuring that she knew what she was there for and that she never lost sight of that throughout her time at the university.

Students shared the strategies they used to ensure that their work is done on time and well. Michael, a non-traditional student who has two children at home, shared how scheduling blocks of time on campus for studying was critical to his success, he works to complete all his work at school to minimize the need to do it while at home with his kids. He also shared that he is driven by the validation he gets from receiving A grades on his

work. Grades were also important to David, who discussed how his pursuit of those grades was influenced by his homeschool experience with his mother:

I was homeschooled from fifth grade on. I had my mom teach me until ninth grade, and she's like a very intense Latina woman who takes no BS, and anything less than an A is not acceptable, like, nothing is acceptable except perfection. I grew up under that, and so I brought that with me to campus. So yeah, that's what drives me academically.

Monica also attributed her ability to prioritize school to her mother. She felt that she could not relax until her responsibilities were met, a trait that she picked up observing her mother's strong work ethic. She also shared that she felt pressure to perform well in her classes in order to retain her scholarship. There were White students in her residence hall that she viewed as not taking their education as seriously because they had the luxury of not having to worry about money like she did:

I just feel like if you come from a family with more money, you can afford that luxury [not prioritizing school], but for myself, I didn't think I could have that luxury because I was here mostly on scholarships. So, I took my education very seriously. I did all my schoolwork first and then when I had free time, I would do other things.

This pressure to ensure they passed their classes to avoid unnecessary expenses was felt by many students in the study. Their strong work ethic and the financial pressures to graduate quickly influenced their feelings of success in college and their drive to persist.

### ***Self-Reliance – Independence***

Becoming independent and leaning into self-reliance was another finding that demonstrated the navigational capital held by the students in this study. There was a strong desire from students to accomplish their goals on their own with little help from others. German shared how the university size results in students learning how to be self-

reliant because within the university he feels small “like an ant,” on his own, and that he grew to be independent as a result of that required self-reliance. David added how the commuter campus and older population of the university influenced his need to be self-sufficient. He compared it to the experience of students at other schools:

Portland state’s community has actually let me grow my career and work and live in the city as an adult. I feel much more grown-up than my peers on other college campuses. I think it’s been good, ultimately it’s a net positive. I’ve heard from other students here that it forces you to grow up.

David also shared his need to prove to himself that he could graduate on his own with as little help as possible, which aligned with sentiments shared by other students.

### *The Experience of Suffering*

An unexpected theme that emerged in this study was how students perceived the experience of suffering or their ability to overcome adversity as key influencers in their drive to succeed and persist. A code that initially arose while coding German’s transcript and reemerged in other student narratives was “the experience of suffering.” A few students in the study held the perspective that their past experiences of suffering in various forms were what assisted them in persevering. Contreras shared how she felt that her life experience resulted in a deeper understanding of the concepts of resilience that were discussed in her classes:

We talk about resilience a lot, there are so many students in that class, who would talk about it, but didn't necessarily have experience... So like an abusive household, I experienced that. Say, like, drugs and addiction, I experienced that. Poverty, low-income households, I experienced that. Healthcare and how that affects us, I experienced that. I experienced a lot.

German explained that his experience of suffering included the way he has been treated as an immigrant, struggling financially, and even his house catching fire: “without my

experience, I think I wouldn't have the courage to keep pushing for my degree. If I don't try, no one will try for me.” Jesus spoke about how those outside of the university are supporting him while he suffers in school:

My girlfriend, she's always been supportive of me. She's been like “stay in school, you've got this even though it's beating you up, you've got this”... The school itself has not been supportive of me, but the outside resources around me, is where my community is, and that's what is supporting me to actually succeed.

The experience of suffering and the resilience that has developed in the students pushes them to persist. The cultural capital they have developed through years of navigating spaces and social institutions that are unsupportive and at times, hostile to them is a piece of what propels them forward, overcoming obstacles and pushing onward.

### **Cultural Wealth – Social Capital**

Social capital is the community and network of people that support students along the way. This was one of the most prominent forms of cultural wealth in this study. Students described how they rely on others for support and how shared experience makes it easier to connect with others. Students who felt it was easier to connect with other Latinx students believed their fellow Latinx students might have similar family traditions, food, or language, which provided familiarity for the students. Students who shared that connecting with other students of color felt easier than connecting with White students, attributed it to the shared experience of being in the minority.

### ***Peer Connections – Ethnic Identity and Students of Color***

Connection with other Latinx students was something many students expressed a desire for, and they also felt making those connections was easier than making connection with White students. Abe saw two distinct experiences for Latinx students on

campus, the experience of the Portland locals who often lived at home and were comfortable in the city, and the students like him who had moved from rural areas and were living on campus, adjusting to city life. The times when he felt most alone were when he could not find those who shared the experience of moving to the city and adjusting to college life. Abe wanted to be with others who understood what he was going through. He worked to find others who either had similar backgrounds or were also Latinx students. He joined and helped grow the multicultural fraternity on campus, which helped give him a sense of place and the ability to be around others who looked like him: “I think I'm always gravitating to people who look like me... It makes me feel comfortable knowing that I'm not the only one that's there... Even though there are not a lot of us.” Monica saw the impetus to gravitate toward others of the same ethnic identity as a cultural need that helps with adjustment to college:

I think it's a cultural thing. I feel like a lot of people tend to gravitate to making friends toward their culture, especially when you're new to college because you're trying to figure things out... If you have a friend who's similar to you, you just feel calm, more at home, if that makes sense. Because oftentimes, you grew up the same way and have the same type of thinking, so it automatically clicks.

Michael, an older student, expressed an understanding about why students are drawn to other students like them but also a concern that gravitating toward students with shared identity divided students: “Everyone's still trying to understand themselves so by default, you're going to try to find those most like you, but in my opinion, I think that separates more than it brings together, but I understand wanting to feel safe.”

Vanessa noticed self-segregation happening within the university multicultural center: “You can see more diversity, but at the same time, it's diversity within your own

group. You stick to your ethnicity, that's what I noticed.” Monica noticed this same thing happening in classes and attributed it to needing to feel a sense of familiarity during a time of transition: “I noticed a lot of people like if they were Asian students, they would often associate with themselves, people in their culture.” This observation was shared by multiple students who noticed that the university (though considered diverse), was not very integrated and that students were self-segregating more than they expected. The students were interested in a more diverse university though none expressed a strong desire for a more integrated campus. When asked about her relationships with peers, Monica reflected on her primary social group: “I noticed that most of my friends were students of color, even if they weren't Hispanic.” Val, a permanent U.S. resident who was raised in Columbia, reflected on her draw to other international students:

I think I relate more to international students... it's easier connecting and talking to them. I feel that it's because we've experienced the same things. So I feel we find more things in common. For example, some of us were like, “Oh, my God, I miss food from home.” I have some White friends, but I think we [other international students] have topics to talk about that we're more familiar with than I guess, like Americans.

Students shared how the relationships they built through special programs before school began helped them feel a deeper sense of belonging at the university and greater comfort on campus. These experiences varied from doing programs in high school that rooted them to the university from the beginning, to being a student-athlete, to GANAS, which featured prominently. GANAS stands for Gaining Awareness and Networking for Academic Success, and it is a year-long support program for incoming Latinx students offered through the Diversity and Multicultural Student Services on the university campus. Students in this study who participated in the GANAS program shared how



significant the program was for them in both creating relationships with peers and also in helping them further develop their ethnic identity. Carlos shared an example of this:

The first experience I had on campus was in GANAS, so that really helped me to not just meet people and have support for knowing how to navigate a university being a first-time student, but also being with people who come from similar backgrounds to me. Starting off at this like foreign place with people who are experiencing it the way you are for the first time. We learned a lot about Latinx experiences in the US and we read stories and listened to podcasts. It was like people telling you about your life. It felt good because my hometown, it's not whitewashed, but the people who live there who are Latinx, they mostly don't speak Spanish... But when I got here [GANAS], it was like everyone did.

In our second interview, Carlos brought in a picture of the lounge space where GANAS students hung out the first term, and he shared how the GANAS program gave him a physical space that was familiar and comfortable, which became his go-to hang out spot throughout his first term.

The retention programming provided by GANAS was one of the most influential programs for the student participants and it helped those students develop a sense of community, navigational skills, and a sense of place on campus, all while also reinforcing their ethnic identity. Martin heard about GANAS from fellow students and wished he had been informed about it in time to join. Students sign up for it prior to coming to campus for their freshmen year and by the time he was aware of the program, it was too late for him to join.

It was evident throughout the study that connections with other students of color and fellow Latinx students were significant influences on student feelings of belonging on campus. Those connections helped students gain a sense of comfort around others creating the potential for additional shared experience.

*Giving Back to Community*

Students spoke about the social capital they will provide to their communities upon graduation. Students saw themselves as developing networks and skills that will enhance their ability to provide for others. Additionally, they saw themselves as blazing a trail that others will see as an inspiration and that others can follow. Sara spoke about how the pursuit of her degree was for her race/ethnicity and to be an inspiration to others:

La Raza is like our ethnicity, the Mexicans. I think only 9% of Mexican Latina women actually graduate from college. I've got to do it for that community. I've got to represent out here, you know? People like President Trump are trying to push us down so hard. So, no, we're not going to let people like that stop us. So, I've got to be an inspiration to other people... If I can do that for one person, that is how I've succeeded. That's what we've got to do because you're not a success if you have never helped another person.

Through the photo-elicitation element of this study, Abe shared a photograph of a university marketing profile on him. He explained that after the story ran, other students came up to him to let him know that they identified with his narrative and his story spurred them on. The realization that his story was helping others who may have doubted themselves drove him to persist in times of doubt:

I realized that being persistent and being resilient and sharing your story authentically can be really impactful. People were seeing my story, and they would come up to me saying “I love your story, I really relate to your story” and I think that was one of the most meaningful things, to know that you can make an impact on people with your story... I feel that we learn from each other that way and you become more determined to go for your goals... At that time, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I was struggling. But, I mean, just looking at it [the marketing piece on him] gave me a sense of like okay, I can do this... I didn't believe that this [college] was possible in the first place, at a young age. Now here, I have overcome so many more things, I made a huge leap to be here and I think sharing the experience with people helps me keep going and make a difference to someone's life... I know that others are going to come after me, and they can struggle, but I think if they can see someone like me has done it, it will also encourage them and motivate them to do the same.

Abe saw sharing his journey as a way to give back to his community and to help others who come after him.

The sentiments shared by Sara and Abe were echoed by other students. Though I did not ask how students saw themselves giving back to their communities, it was a finding throughout the interviews. Students relied on their communities for emotional support as they transitioned into college and throughout. Their social communities helped students feel less alone and more prepared to navigate the university. Sharing their stories with others and reflecting on how much they had accomplished helped push them to persist when they were struggling. Students planned to provide for their communities, furthering the social capital of the group.

### **Cultural Wealth – Linguistic & Resistant Capital**

Two additional forms of cultural wealth that were discussed in the literature include linguistic and resistant capital. There were instances of both of these shared

within the study though they did not emerge as prominent themes shared by the majority of students in relation to their persistence or belonging.

Linguistic capital represents the knowledge and abilities held by students who have the skills to communicate in more than one language, which demonstrates social and intellectual skills that have been enhanced throughout their life. They may have grown up in a culture of storytelling or may have been translators for their parents or other family members. The importance of learning the native language to the family came up throughout interviews with Carlos wherein he shared experiencing pressure to learn Spanish despite a lack of need for it in his hometown because his hometown was full of White people. Reflecting back on this, he was grateful that his mother pushed him to learn Spanish.

The social relationships that were developed in part due to shared language proved to be some of the most important relationships to students in this study. Maria made strong friendships in her first term with two Latina students and felt that their shared fluency in Spanish enabled them to connect casually in ways that helped deepen their relationship: “I joke around with them in Spanish a lot, like I’ll send them memes in Spanish and that’s how our friendship began.” Isabella also commented on shared language and memes: “Whenever somebody says my name right, I feel like we’re already off to a great start. I feel like we’ll be able to talk in two languages, share music in two languages and memes.” Language also came up in discussions about places where students felt belonging. A restaurant adjacent to campus called Tito’s Burritos was referenced by four students. Students felt a level of comfort and a sense of belonging

there in part because they could speak Spanish to the people who ran the restaurant. The restaurant was owned and operated by Latinx people rather than White people.

Resistant capital is the “knowledge and skills that are fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). There were few examples students shared of them challenging inequality. Contreras shared her experience speaking truth to power when she was helping a friend advocate for space for students of color on campus: “I went there and the first thing I see is three or four ladies, two guys, and they're all White.” She went on to share the experience of helping her friends stand up to a panel of White people with power who she felt were creating inequity among the cultural student groups. Contreras seems to have a strong inclination toward advocacy as she later stepped into a leadership role in a student organization called Las Mujeres when faced with the possibility of the group dissolving as a result of no student involvement. She felt that stepping into that leadership position influenced her feelings of belonging at the university:

I joined Las Mujeres because some of the members that are in it this year, were like, ‘hey we need people because Las Mujeres is about to vanish and if we don't have people in the club, we don't have a place to speak, we don't have a place to get together and talk about what we're going through and share that with [the university]... that was also a moment when I was like, okay, I'm a part of [the university] and what's going on at [the university]... One of the things that I need to do in life is advocate, share my experiences, and meet new people.

Contreras also expressed a desire for a Latinx focused advocacy group in the school of business, a group dedicated to the needs of Latinx students in business was a recommendation that came from other students in the study:

I wish there was some type of group, team, or a club that was specific to us [Latinx students studying business] and to whatever needs my peers have, a place where we could sit down and gather new ideas about how to make the school of business better, and share new opportunities.

Maria shared an interest in participating in advocacy efforts like the women's march and Pride events. When sharing a picture of the women's march, she shared this view on advocacy: "When we can come together, agree on one thing and fight for the same thing you can truly make an impact." Her drive to advocate post-graduation for those in need via practicing immigration law is another demonstration of her drive to challenge inequality. Some students viewed participating in this study as a form of advocacy and conveyed their ideas for change in hopes that through this study, the issues they raised would be amplified to the school of business and to the university.

Cultural wealth possessed by the students in the study drove them to persevere in the face of a challenging system of higher education, it assisted them in prioritizing school, leaning on their communities, and finding ways to navigate difficult structures and systemic barriers. The ability to make connections through shared history and language supported them in creating friendships and places of comfort and belonging. The experiences they had facing barriers and seeing inequities drove some students to an awareness of, and interest in, advocacy efforts on campus. It was clear that the cultural capital they brought with them to college enabled them to persist and was of critical importance to them as they progressed through the university system.

### **Belonging**

Influencers on belonging that emerged from the student interviews have been divided into two primary areas; racial or cultural influences on belonging and campus

experiences of belonging that were not racially or culturally specific (as shared by the students). The racial/ethnic/cultural experiences of these students cannot be uncoupled from the overall campus experience of belonging but they are separated out to delineate experiences that were distinctly racial, cultural, or ethnic related. In addition to the influences on belonging, student rankings of belonging and their likelihood to graduate will be discussed.

### **Racial and Cultural Experiences that Influence Belonging**

Student racial experiences on campus varied and were influenced by their past experiences with race and diversity in their youth. By and large, students who grew up as one of few Latinx people in their hometown or in their past classrooms, seemed to experience the racial climate and diversity at the university as positive, whereas students who came from predominantly Latinx communities, found the university to be less diverse than they expected. Contreras shared how the diversity of the university influenced her experience in the classroom:

[this university] likes to advertise itself as a very diverse school and for me, from my experiences and where I come from, I love it. I feel that anywhere I look, there's someone who doesn't look like me, someone who is of color. I think that's really important... It makes me feel not so alone. You don't really get that at other universities.

Having other students of color in the classroom influenced Contreras' willingness to speak up in class because she felt a sense that there were others who were like her. She held a positive perspective of diversity at the university but acknowledged that she knew many students who didn't feel the university was diverse.

Several students shared that they appreciated when events or activities were specifically catered toward them and their culture. Reminders of cultural elements from home reinforced a feeling of comfort. Seeing Baile folklórico at an event, creating ofrendas on Día de Los Muertos, walking by students playing Lotería, or going to events catered with authentic Mexican food all demonstrated to students that the university sees them and appreciates their culture, which positively influenced their feelings of belonging at the university.

Themes that emerged from the interviews that influenced a student's racialized experience on campus included experiences of racism, micro-aggressions and White student oblivion, the importance of representation on campus, their experiences with White faculty and faculty of color, student ethnic identity and their on campus cultural engagement, and how Latinx students create belonging by looking for reminders of home, food, and culture.

### ***Racism, Micro-aggressions, and White Student Oblivion***

Very few students in the study shared that they had witnessed or experienced instances of racism, discrimination, or micro-aggressions on campus though several believed that racist situations do happen on campus. There was an instance on campus when Carlos was taken off guard by seeing groups of students in “Make America Great Again” hats – hats that for many Latinx people represent the racist, nativist language of an anti-immigration president and his followers (Bailey, 2019). Mostly the students in the study shared instances of micro-aggressions that occurred in class discussions as a result



of White student oblivion to how they were offending others with their words. David explained it:

It's not something that is brought to the front of mind for me if I did experience some kind of aggression or racism. But I think even the stuff that I may experience here might just be someone's unconscious bias, rather than an intentional, you know, trying to hurt someone, which I have experienced in the past so it just feels like even the worst that [the university] might have to offer is nothing compared to where I've come from, and so in that sense, it just feels like something I never think about because I feel like I don't have anything to worry about... Sometimes people say things that they don't mean like "Latinos work cleaning houses" and things like that. It's just things that they assume because that's what they've seen in their experience, and that's something I can easily have a conversation about.

Student experiences of race included additional experiences with White students that demonstrated the White student's oblivion to how their actions and words impacted the experience of students of color. Monica shared experiences in her dorm:

There were stereotypical White rich students who kind of gave off the idea that they're here for the typical college experience, and not really for the academics. So sometimes they were the louder people who were disturbing other students trying to study.

Additionally, Maria shared how a classroom discussion in a small group about Christopher Columbus that centered on his discovery rather than the repercussions of his conquest reinforced for her feelings of being different:

They were talking about Christopher Columbus and how it's awesome that he discovered America. I let everybody speak before I spoke, I wanted to hear everything. They were like, "Do you want to add something?" I went off. I was like "I don't know how you guys can say that I don't know if you guys know what Christopher Columbus did, how he killed, he enslaved, those are my ancestors." I just spoke my truth, and I didn't want to offend anybody, but I felt offended. So I had to stick up for myself. I was just like, "I don't think anyone in this room who isn't a person of color will ever understand the true meaning of being different, being not in the majority, being the minority." There's a point in time you come to the realization, you're going to be treated different for the rest of your life.

This and other events influenced her feeling that there would always be barriers for her because she is brown.

One coping method used by students that relates to cultural wealth is brushing away instances of micro-aggressions or not focusing on them as a form of self-preservation. Students shared examples of hearing insensitive comments then deciding that it isn't worth their time to address it. Abe shared how his strategy is to ignore instances of racism in order to not let the comments impact him:

If I were to think about putting my focus on that [experiences of racism], it will really affect me in the long run. So for me not to let that happen, I always just try to ignore that and try to keep a peace of mind. That way, I can focus on what's important and not let these things affect me in a way that I'm not able to sleep because of it.

The experiences of microaggressions and White student oblivion seemed to be moments that both jarred the students and increased their awareness of the different types of situations and people they will face in life. None of them shared that the experiences changed their perceptions of the university, but they did change how they viewed their fellow students and, in some cases, resulted in them changing how they approached classroom discussions, leaning into a place of advocacy.

### *Ethnic or Racial Representation on Campus*

Some students were concerned about a lack of representation on campus. They expressed a desire for more students who looked like them and commented on a noticeable shortage of faculty of color or people of color in leadership positions at the university. Nearly every student in the study explicitly stated that the university and the school of business need more faculty of color to live into the image of being a diverse

institution. Monica shared that she felt she needed to leave the dorms in order to find diversity at the university. Vanessa noticed that she saw a lot more student diversity in her freshman year than she is seeing in her second year. Jesus commented on the lack of diversity within the school of business:

There is definitely an imbalance of White students to Hispanic students. I rarely see the Hispanic students. There's other races that are more represented here than Hispanic students, at least in the school of business, because I know [the university] is very diverse, it's just specifically in the school of business, it's not very diverse.

Perceptions of diversity at the university varied from an incredibly diverse campus to one where students struggled to find others who looked like them. Those perspectives of the university were influenced by the experiences students had prior to coming to campus. David shared:

I don't think I ever experienced direct racism, especially because I grew up in conservative homeschooling and so that's such a huge leap from this liberal Portland campus that it makes me feel that here is probably the safest - racially speaking that I've ever felt, mostly because we just kind of hide in the numbers when you're in a big crowd.

Contreras shared that she experienced a culture shock of sorts when she arrived on campus because she had come from a town with so few Latinx people. She shared how seeing other students who looked like her helped her realize that she was where she needed to be, a perspective which differed from some of her peers:

Even though some people might say [this university] isn't as diverse as other places like Florida or California. To me, this place is a lot more diverse than where I come from, and it really made me feel welcomed, it made me feel like I belonged here.

Monica, who grew up in a town that was split half White and half Latinx, also referred to the diversity of campus as a bit of a culture shock because there were so many

more ethnicities and races represented on campus. She felt that hometown experience made her see the university as diverse because she saw more than just two races in her classes. Maria came from a predominantly White conservative town with very few students of color, and she noticed and appreciated that people in Portland were more open-minded than people in her hometown. Students discussed the juxtaposition of the university being in the center of the “Whitest city in America.” Maria felt: “campus is diverse. I can't say that for all of Portland. Portland is different, I can say that for sure, but [the university] is very diverse.” Carlos pointed out that being the most diverse campus in Oregon isn't a particularly high bar:

I know that this is one of the big selling points for [this university]. That it is the most diverse campus in Oregon, but at the same time, Oregon itself is pretty White. That's good that it's diverse for Oregon, but it's still predominantly White.

Both Isabella and Martin shared experiences of noticing in their classes that they didn't always see the diversity that the university claims to have. Vanessa noticed the vast majority of people in her class were White but also commented that she went to a nearly all-White school so she was used to that experience. Martin shared the moment he realized he was the only student of color in a philosophy class:

I just looked around and there was literally no student of color, and I was just like, “I don't know how I feel about this.” It's the first time where I kind of felt overwhelmed. If you're in an environment where there's just no student of color, it makes you feel like you're alone, like you're an outsider basically. But in most cases, since I do see students of color here on campus all the time, I definitely know that I'm not alone.

Some students shared examples of moments when representation did seem to be a primary concern for administrators or when representation seemed to be improving. Sara

participated in a group of students mentored by the Associate Dean in which the Dean worked to ensure representation when admitting new students to the group:

This group is meant to help you and to connect you with people of different backgrounds. So, in that group, there's people with a lot of ethnicities, everything is so diverse. I love it. It doesn't feel forced, everybody in there, she really took her time to make sure that they were a good fit.

Val saw the ethnic diversity at the university change since she started several years ago:

I didn't know before coming here that Portland was one of the Whitest cities... Yeah, nobody looks like me. I felt like nobody was similar to me. But throughout the years, you can see the difference of how it's changing. People from so many different countries are coming here.

Monica and a few other students spoke to the importance of representation on career panels and her desire to learn from other Latinx business owners or leaders:

Bring in people of color from the industry because sometimes you just go and you listen to people who are White, and they talk about their story, and they're really successful, but realistically, in the real world and also statistically White people just have that advantage over people of color. So doing everything that they would do, following their steps doesn't mean that you'll get to the exact same spot they are in. Having people of color come in and talk about their struggles, compared to like, other people who didn't have as much struggles kind of puts it into perspective and makes it more realistic for your future goals. You're listening to this person, this person struggled with this, so it's likely that I will also like encounter this struggle.

One consistently raised concern was the way that the university markets itself as the most diverse university in the state and how people of color are often placed on promotional material. It felt a bit deceiving for some of the students when they arrived on campus and wondered where all the people of color from a differing races and ethnicities were. What is important to note here is how those perceptions can be dramatically different depending on the diversity in a student's hometown. Students who came from what they labeled as incredibly White towns found the ethnic diversity at the university

refreshing and comforting, whereas students who came from towns or cities that were predominantly Latinx or predominantly people of color felt more deceived by the marketing. Although student academic majors did not seem relevant to other findings, an exception was this finding about university marketing. The majority of the students in this study were marketing majors, so as a result, they may be more likely to consider the messaging goals for the target market as a result of their academic focus. Carlos spoke to his perceptions of how diversity is used in marketing:

I do think that the photos they [the university] use on brochures are very calculated in terms of showing certain types of people like there's an Asian kid in this photo, or whatever... They try to push the diversity the same way as rainbow capitalism. Where Pride month, corporations go all out for that kind of thing. It's not with malice, but it's more like a corporate greed or they just want to sell to people. [the university] isn't to that level, but they do definitely try to cater to that.

Abe raised the marketing as a potential ethical issue in the recruitment of new students:

Be more intentional about the way they [the university] market something, because a lot of us can perceive that [marketing] in a different way... What I've seen personally is trying to use diversity to make the university seem like it's a very diverse place. In reality, from my experience being here, I don't think that's true. The truth is that a lot of it is just used as a marketing tool... I don't know if that's very ethical. I just think that representation needs to be more genuine and more authentic to the university, compared to just using it as a tool to show off that they are diverse. So maybe that's the first thing that I think needs to either change or needs to be better within the university, so that way people like me when we're trying to come to this university, we know what to expect.

Students want more people in leadership who look like them and they want the university to market itself in authentic ways that reflect the actual demographic make-up of campus.

Student perceptions of whether the campus was diverse were dependent upon their experiences of diversity before coming to the university with those coming from

predominantly White communities feeling that the campus was more diverse than those coming from communities where more races or ethnicities were prominent.

*Experiences with White Faculty and Faculty of Color*

Students were asked about their experiences with White faculty and their experiences with faculty of color. Some students felt that White faculty often make assumptions about shared knowledge that perhaps White middle-class students may have, but that students who come from different backgrounds may not possess. When the faculty make those assumptions, it can be intimidating for a student to raise their hand and possibly be the only student who doesn't understand. Students also shared experiences of faculty pushing on with the lecture and getting frustrated at student questions, which resulted in students feeling discouraged to seek help. This experience of a faculty pressure to "get through the material" was experienced by other students and was limited to encounters with White faculty. Abe's experience demonstrated how a faculty member's behavior could cast doubt on a student's own perception of their abilities to succeed professionally:

A lot of times, White faculty think that everyone understands and just keep going with the subject and most of the people in there that understand are everyone that's not a minority. So, my White counterparts will understand the subject, because they already have knowledge on it... It's harder for us, but if we were to ask the question, sometimes we don't get the answer we need, and so we just feel discouraged to ask again. We don't want to feel embarrassed and feel that we shouldn't be here. There have been instances where I feel very discouraged, to a point where I thought my professionalism and work ethic were not good. I think that came from someone that was a White faculty. It's very unfortunate because... if you're getting taught this right now, what makes you think that you're going to be able to succeed?

Most students shared that they had few (if any) faculty of color, and if they had a Latinx faculty member, they were typically teaching Spanish classes or classes in the Chicano-Latino Studies department. Maria shared:

In business in particular, I feel like I don't have a lot of people that look like me to look up to that are in higher positions. You know, I don't think I've even had a professor of Latin descent or Latin origin yet. It's always been like that. That's a very common thing to see, and I'm just tired of it... I just see a lot of White people that have positions of power, who can do a lot more... When I'm done with college, I'd hope to see more brown people in those positions.

Monica felt empowered the first time she saw a Latina professor who was a guest lecturer in one of her courses. Jesus said he never felt discrimination from White faculty but he has noticed that they pay less attention to him than the faculty of color. Isabella shared that White faculty cannot seem to pronounce her real name and she appreciates it when they put in the effort to say it correctly. Sara shared the problematic case of when a White faculty member was trying to talk about issues of race and looked to the people of color in the room to be the voice of all people of color.

Michael realized through our discussion that all but one of the professors who had a significant impact on him during his time at the university were faculty of color. He shared his concern that so many of the business case studies used in college represented White men which he felt could be influencing how students conceptualize what it means to be a business leader during a formative time in their lives:

What we see is old White men. I feel like that's all we see and you become used to it. Then it's what you expect when you go out into the world because you saw so much in school. I feel like right now when you're shaping your mind as an adult, you're able to pick and choose what you give yourself, and we as a school and community could purposefully choose case studies, examples, or teach-outs that included more Latino businesses.



Abe shared that it is easier to relate to faculty of color and that it can be hard to approach White faculty who likely do not have a shared experience with him. He felt that other people of color might have experienced similar difficulties getting through their degree programs and professionally and that it is essential that the university hire more faculty of color so that students of color have faculty who may struggled in similar ways:

Sometimes we're seen as less, that's how I feel when it comes to being and looking at everyone and it seemed like I feel less compared to my counterpart Caucasian who has more resources. So I think it sometimes feels discouraging to not see as many people who look like me... Then, it feels isolating that you don't know if you approach this person [White faculty] who does not look like me if there's going to be a sense of acceptance or there's going to be more rejection because they don't want to relate to you or they won't understand where you're coming from... Get more faculty that are people of color. I know that is something that is hard to do. I think a lot of students want to see that more within the scope of business and overall in general but I just think having faculty that are people of color that have different backgrounds, I think that shows the real diversity that the school says it has.

A few students shared that they felt there was no difference in their experience with faculty of color and White faculty. However, some of them did share negative experiences with White instructors in elementary or high school, for example, there were several instances of White instructors singling students of color out or whitewashing history lessons. There were also several incidences of White high school instructors writing students in this study off as “not college material.” At times, as a result of this, students doubted their own ability to complete their degree, questioning whether college was for them before even setting foot on campus.

### ***Ethnic Identity and Cultural Student Involvement***

One of the most significant findings was the impact of culturally specific student programming which included student organizations or clubs and physical spaces

dedicated to Latinx students (La Casa Latina or the Diversity and Multicultural Student Services Lounge). Experiences of ethnic identity development came up particularly for those students who were engaging in cultural or ethnic focused student activities like GANAS or by going to La Casa Latina. Those students shared examples of their instructor or fellow students opening their eyes to some of the systemic issues faced by Latinx people. Additionally, some of the students shared how their experiences of learning more about their culture and history reinforced pride in their ethnic identity and their feelings of camaraderie with their fellow Latinx students. Maria's conversation with a friend demonstrates pride in their ethnic identity:

My friend tells me "I'm proud to be a minority." I was like "What? I'm not proud to be a minority but I'm proud to be Latina" and he's like, "Yeah, that's what I meant." He meant I'm proud to be who I am and I'm proud to be different.

Contreras shared the experience of becoming proud of colors on a traditional blanket (see Figure 4) once she arrived at the university:

When I was younger I was always trying to get away from my culture. When I moved here, I actually went to this festival and I remember I saw one of these blankets, it's blue, black, and white. I've always been so embarrassed of these colors and this pattern, and I don't understand why because it's lovely. I bought my first blanket the first year I moved here... [the university] is pretty diverse compared to where I'm from, I was able to finally appreciate what my other peers were appreciating. They were able to help me realize that you don't need to be anybody else. When they finally opened my eyes, I was like, wow, I've been neglecting part of my culture. For what reason? Because I'm trying to be someone else, because I'm trying to be like the people from back home, from my school. Nothing wrong with them being them. It's the fact that I was trying to change myself and hide simple things like the pattern in a blanket, the colors of it.

**Figure 4**

*Photo of a Traditional Blanket That Represented Contreras' Ethnic Identity*



Students who were developing their ethnic identity also shared mixed feelings about being “White passing.” Carlos felt that being White passing resulted in him being spared from experiencing direct racism to the extent that others may experience it. Michael explained that he is “White on the outside, but brown on the inside,” and due to that, he is seen as a White person. He felt that he might not be welcomed into La Casa Latina unless he wore a nametag with his Latinx last name. Sara shared how it was only through conversations with those in MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) and at La Casa Latina [as represented by Val’s photograph in Figure 5] that she came to embrace that even though she was White passing and may not have experienced the same things her counterparts who were darker-skinned, she is still a person of color and should feel comfortable labeling herself as such:

I'm White passing, I felt guilty about it because am I really a person of color if I don't experience the experiences of everybody else? I had these big conversations I could not have with people that were not of color, who were not Latinx... If it wasn't for them, I would not claim Latinx, and I didn't feel right claiming Latinx because I didn't know enough. So, it wasn't until I met them and I knew more that I was like “okay, I’m Latinx. I can claim that I'm Latina and Mexican.”

**Figure 5**

*Photo Of La Casa Latina Taken by Val*



Martin said students have to find the cultural centers and student clubs on their own because they are not told about them. He credits his initial sense of community to finding La Casa Latina and then branching out to the multicultural fraternity from there. Students heavily participated in groups like MEChA, Las Mujeres, Spanish club, and the Latin dance club. Two students (Abe and Martin) were part of the Multicultural fraternity

on campus, and one of the students (Monica) co-launched the Multicultural Business Student Association. Abe expressed a need for more funds to be allocated to student organizations that are culturally specific to help them recruit and expand their ability to create a sense of place for traditionally underrepresented students. Two students raised a recent budget cut decision that decreased the hours of operation for La Casa Latina (resulting in a 5 PM daily closure) as a problem and something that could impact Latinx student's sense of place.

Some students shared that mentors from GANAS or the Director of La Casa Latina pushed them to attend cultural events on campus that reinforced their feelings of belonging through shared cultural experiences. Contreras, who worked at the cultural resource center, shared that the student employees there are paid to attend up to five hours of cultural events. She felt that investment by the university incentivized her to get out there and experience activities that positively influenced her feelings about campus. Isabella had a desire to attend the events but was unable to participate in them due to her work schedule and need to study in off-hours. Sara went out of her way to engage at La Casa Latina (see Figure 6) and was excited that for the first time in her life she had Mexican girlfriends.

**Figure 6**

*Photo of Sara's Point of View in La Casa Latina*



Most students felt that La Casa Latina or getting involved with culturally specific groups positively influenced their journey. Though La Casa Latina was described by many of the students as a safe haven or a place of comfort, there were a few students who, after going there, felt like the center space was predominantly for Mexican students or that it was cliquish. Michael shared his perspective on the value of culturally specific programming being most useful for students who are feeling marginalized:

I feel like organizations that are based off of race or culture, I understand the benefit of going to something like that but I feel it's limiting in a way. I guess if you felt more marginalized, gaining support would feel better. I guess that's an indicator that I don't feel as marginalized, it is an indicator that I do feel accepted... I think those type of organizations, although they do provide good, I think ultimately they separate more.

He went on to say that he believes those groups can be dividing if students limit their interaction to those groups of people. Sara’s narrative provides a counter perspective: “I feel like I needed a group of people that are like me culturally. That doesn't mean that I wouldn't want to be with people of other cultures. It’s just sometimes you need your little safe haven.”

Vanessa felt welcomed and included from the moment she stepped foot inside La Casa Latina. Other students shared their life stories with her and showed interest in hers. Vanessa and Maria are friends. Vanessa brought Maria to La Casa Latina for the first time during a time when Maria was stressed about school. Maria saw a mural with people who looked like her and it reinforced for her a sense of belonging: “Vanessa took me to the cultural resource center, that is where I first saw this picture. I was just like, wow, that's really cool, these people look like me” (see Figure 7).

### **Figure 7**

*Photo of Mural in La Casa Latina Taken by Maria*



Nearly all students had significant engagement with these groups and centers, which may have contributed to their persistence and their feelings of belonging. Support programs based on cultural affinity and physical spaces designed for Latinx students were influencers in both student feelings of belonging and indirectly their persistence toward graduation. They accomplished this by providing opportunities for students to build relationships with students and staff who supported them through difficult moments. The affinity spaces and student groups provided students with safe places to be surrounded by others who may have a higher likelihood of shared life experiences.

### *Cultural Reminders of Home*

Food represents a reminder of home to many of these students and reminders of home served as comforts when students needed them most. Through the photo-elicitation I was intrigued to see one place continue to show up in the pictures, a place called Tito's Burritos (see Figure 8) was familiar, friendly, and a reminder of home to students. This restaurant is Latinx owned and operated, and is filled with Spanish speakers, familiar smells, music, and sights (at times Spanish soap operas on the TV). Latina students who speak Spanish are greeted in friendly ways like "Mija" (my daughter), which is a term of endearment from someone older to a younger woman (not always related). Students liked to study there as it reminded them of being in their mom's or grandma's kitchen.



**Figure 8**

*Photo of Tito's Burritos Taken by Michael*



Food was an important reminder of home to Val as well. She missed the food from Columbia and experienced feelings of comfort when she found an off-campus food cart pod called Portland Mercado that features food from various countries in Central and South America (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9**

*The Portland Mercado Taken by Val That Represents Reminders of Home*



Students pursued other reminders of home. A number of the students in this study were from more rural areas and they shared the ways they were trying to adjust including maintaining connection with the outdoors, watching the sunset (see Figure 10) to think of how it looked from home or looking for friends on campus from the same hometown who understood their struggle of adjusting.

**Figure 10**

*Maria's Photo of the Sunset From her Dorm Room Window*



Reminders of home on campus were helpful for the students as they adjusted to college and experienced feelings of homesickness or a desire for familiarity. These reminders, coupled with the cultural groups and spaces, provided students a greater sense of belonging on the campus.

Providing affinity groups and spaces for Latinx students was an critical university investment of resources as they influenced belonging for the students in this study. The students in this study experienced White students who lacked awareness of their privilege and how their words and actions affected the students of color around them.

Representation of Latinx faculty was particularly important as students in the study felt a greater comfort approaching faculty of color than they did White faculty. Additionally, university marketing was perceived by some students as calculated and inauthentic. The racial and cultural experiences on campus positively and negatively influenced student feelings of belonging on campus.

### **Experiences of Belonging on Campus**

Students shared feelings of belonging, a sense of community, and feeling like part of a family. A consistent sentiment shared by the students was that in order to belong at the university, you have to really push yourself. Abe referred to his process of pushing himself as “seeking to belong.” The students all felt a sense of belonging at the university and within the school of business but the extent to which they felt it seemed to be connected to their goals for their time at the university. They described the school as different from traditional universities due to the diversity of purpose of the students it serves including people who are attending just for the education and degree who don’t want the typical college experience and those who came to the university expecting a more traditional college experience of social events and friendships to last a lifetime. Sara described the way you could attend school and not engage as “like a water drop on a sheet of oil, you have to really go out of your way. The first two years, I didn’t go out of

my way, and I didn't feel like I belonged at all.” She then joined the Dean’s group, began attending Latin dance club, participated in Las Mujeres, and hung out at La Casa Latina. Those activities helped her turn around her sense that she had a lack of belonging.

Students who lived on campus felt that was an important element of their experience and shared that they thought more students would feel belonging if they lived on campus but they recognized the higher cost of campus living. The campus motto was brought up by two students. German shared: “When I read ‘let the knowledge serve city,’ I was like ‘this is it, this is it.’” The alignment of the motto with his vision for himself reinforced his decision to attend the university.

Students described campus experiences as feeling like a family, including on-campus jobs, being an athlete, and just being in the business school building. Students shared an affinity for the university for several reasons; they appreciated the different perspectives they heard on campus, the civility with which controversial discussions happened, the strength of the programs, the resources offered, the way students were able to work and attend school simultaneously, and the openness that the university, its staff, and its students had to difference like religion and gender. Contreras knew this was a place she belonged when she realized that she was able to participate in discussions that would not have been possible in her hometown due to the conservative nature of the people in the town. The open-mindedness of the campus as a contrast to student’s hometown experiences was consistently raised as something that helped them feel a sense of belonging.

Primary themes that emerged as influential in student feelings of belonging included experiences with faculty, their peers, and their academic department. Additionally, a sense of community and place was influenced by physical spaces on campus. Finally, students shared their difficulty engaging on campus and instances when they felt a lack of community.

### ***The Influence of Faculty and Staff on Belonging***

Faculty or staff members who were able to demonstrate to students a true sense of caring for them greatly influenced their feelings of belonging. Some students shared the sense that specific staff or faculty were in it with them, that they were working alongside the student to navigate the university. When asked about the faculty member who had the most significant impact on them, most students thought of faculty members who taught their yearlong freshmen seminar course. This multi-term course enabled the students and faculty to develop deeper, more meaningful relationships than were possible in their 10-week quarter length courses. Students shared how much it meant to them when staff or faculty reached out to them to offer help rather than the onus being placed on the student to reach out for help. Martin shared: “I feel like if you don't reach out, you don't know what's going on, and they [students] may lose motivation at some point or maybe don't feel as recognized.” In many instances, it was just one critical faculty or staff member that made a student feel a greater sense of belonging.

Instructors were able to influence feelings of belonging through the way they conducted their classrooms (see Figure 11). Students shared that instructors who were open to questions helped them feel welcome at the university. Carlos spoke about a

professor who he felt had the most significant impact on him and influenced his sense of belonging at the university. The professor took the time to learn about student interests and memorize their names and their pronouns. The same professor called the class a learning community and said that they would be learning from each other, not just from him. Additionally, students shared several experiences of faculty who demonstrated an interest in their learning beyond what they expected, including offering the student the ability to customize projects or meet to discuss research interests. Jesus had an instructor who invited him out for coffee, and he felt that the instructor was “actually interested in my life.” Three students shared that the instructors who had the most significant impact on them were ones that taught their classes in less traditional ways like flipped classrooms, more physical movement, and creating safe spaces to ask questions or fail.

### **Figure 11**

*Abe's Picture of the Classroom Environment*



Some students, like Jesus, avoided contact with professors where possible: “I sometimes make contact with a professor, but I mean, that's only when necessary. I don't really like bothering them. I feel like a nuisance sometimes.” Abe shared how he really had to push himself to engage with faculty and staff: “It's hard for me to reach out to someone who's staff or faculty, especially professors, or instructors. It's hard because you don't want to seem that you don't deserve to be there because you're not smart enough.” The feelings of hesitation to contact a professor were not unique to Jesus and Abe.

### ***The Importance of Peers***

Another significant influence on student sense of belonging were their on-campus friends. Many shared the experience of loneliness initially, then seeking out friends or connections with others, then a sense of relief when they found the people who they came to rely on for companionship. Making friends seemed to be a process that they were not all comfortable with, and some shared that programs that initially placed them with other students and required them to connect like GANAS or the “How to Succeed in Business School” course were beneficial when they needed that nudge. The friendships they made in those first experiences on campus in some cases, lasted through their college experience. The comfort of having friends you knew would be at an event on campus led some of them to try new experiences that they would not have if they had to attend alone. Contreras reflected on some advice she received when considering the difficulty of making friends that other students shared with her due to the university's commuter school nature:

You better be a part of something, and you better reach out for what your school offers because if not, you're going to feel alone. You're not going to have a support system, you're not going to have anybody to study with, and that's all going to lead to you going downhill, and you're going to drop out.

This caution from her high school AVID teacher stuck with her and resulted in her working to create relationships that would help her feel supported and drive her to persist.

Students commented on how much their peers influenced their feelings of belonging. Contreras shared her perspective on shared suffering in the library during finals week:

It motivates you to continue working. It gives you this little boost, like okay, we're getting work done, and we're all going to suffer together. I see everyone else struggling and not sleeping, and stressing out about school, and I'm doing the same thing. It motivates me to finish and to be better.

The shared experience of being a student came up frequently, whether it was the motivational support from student groups or clubs or whether it was lifting their head from their book as they studied and seeing other students sharing in the experience of grinding through finals preparation.

### ***Belonging in Business School***

Students shared feelings of community within the school of business, among their business student peers, with faculty and staff, and as a result of programming and spaces that supported them. The students in the study seemed to feel that they could relate more to other business students due to the shared understanding of subject matter, career focus, and classroom experience. Eight of the fourteen students expressly referred to the importance of the shared experience they had with their fellow business students as it related to creating a sense of community for them. For some students, the most



significant community they felt on campus was with their fellow business students. They see the same people from their introduction to business class years ago and from the many group projects in business courses. One student recommended that the school of business host events like a Latin night so that Latinx business students could meet each other in efforts to create a greater sense of community among Latinx business students. David, who is in the university honors program, observed a different mentality that he sees when he works with business students as opposed to non-business students, describing business students as objective, focused, and not trying to BS anything. He felt that he had a clearer understanding of the motivations of his fellow business majors and that there was a shared identity as a business major that positively influenced their sense of belonging. German also felt that he understood business majors better, that they understood him and how he gets things done. Michael described the business school as inclusive and felt a camaraderie with his fellow classmates. Additionally, Jesus said:

I belong here. Just watching all the students grinding it out together. It's like, I am a part of the school, really a part of the school... It just makes me see that we're all struggling here, and we're all trying to fight through together, even if we have our own journeys.

German shared how the community he feels in the business school makes him feel less small in a large school: "When you are here [in the business school], you're just part of this community. So somehow you feel not like an ant, but you feel more part of a family." Abe spoke to this community within the business school as well: "I have found community with people in the school of business since we have the same kind of struggles that we encounter, a lot of the same problems."

The staff and faculty in the business school influenced the student's sense of belonging, as did the business building itself and the support programs provided to students. David took a photograph of an affirmation board (see Figure 12) that the student services office in the business school puts up each term and shared that it represented his feeling of belonging on campus:

This little board really exemplifies that I'm in this struggle to study business with everyone else. The prominent placement, right next to the classrooms right as you're walking, and then a bunch of encouraging post-it notes all over the place. It's just something that made me really feel like I belong in the business school and that regardless of heritage, we're all in this simultaneously.

**Figure 12**

*Representation of Belonging in the School of Business Taken by David*



Scholarships awarded or hardship tuition assistance given contributed to student sense of belonging and acceptance in the business school. Abe shared the experience of being awarded a scholarship and how that influenced his feeling of accomplishment:

I'm hard on myself, so I feel like when I get a scholarship, it's pretty big, it reminds me that I am capable... I was awarded a scholarship again this year, and

this was my second year, so I was like “okay there's people who see that I am capable of finishing my degree and I'm capable of succeeding in college” so it just shows a sense of accomplishment in a university, especially in the school of business.

The size of the business school led many students to create smaller communities where they felt a sense of belonging. Smaller communities and critical faculty and staff demonstrating interest in students and their success positively influenced student feelings of belonging. These smaller communities could be academically focused like the athletic and outdoor industry student group, or programmatic support like the Dean's Future Leaders Group, or the Atmos program. Six students were part of a specialized program designed for students of color in the school of business called Atmos that provides holistic support for academics, life, and career planning. The Atmos program and the two staff members who run the program were mentioned numerous times as some of the most critical connections that students made in the business school. Carlos felt that having a mentor assigned through the Atmos program would be a positive addition to the programmatic support as he found that helpful in his first year through the GANAS program. Two students in the study were members of the Dean's group. Sara shared:

That group is literally a godsend, really everybody in there I consider my family. That group made me feel like I was part of the school of business... Instead of feeling like I'm in shark waters and everybody's trying to get that last piece of meat, we're all working together to get there. So now I feel like those little fishes, the ones that band together so they don't get eaten by the shark. That's how it feels being in a group. I've never felt more a part of [the university] until I got into that group, I wish there were more groups like it.

Students shared that they perceive the business school as caring about helping them graduate, get jobs, and connect with leaders in the business community. Jesus

shared his perspective on the business school [as represented in German's picture in Figure 13] as representative of where he finds belonging despite challenges he faces:

This is the School of Business. This is belonging and experience right here, where I feel like I belong. I even though sometimes I do face challenges. I feel like I generally belong here because we are all here for one interest in business... I just feel like this is the place I belong. I didn't see myself going to any other school... I knew [this university] had a better school of business, so this is the only reason why I came to [the university].

**Figure 13**

*German's Picture of the Business School*



Two students shared that they had not yet felt a strong sense of belonging within the business school due to not engaging with business groups (only receiving emails from the business school) or not taking classes in the business school building because they were only beginning their second year. They framed belonging as a work in progress,

something they were on their way to attaining. Martin felt that more opportunities to engage should be directed at first-year business students and marketed via multiple formats. He wanted to get involved in the business school but didn't know how to do it. David also experienced difficulty learning about what was going on and suggested that faculty make announcements in their classes in order to reach the captive audience of students who may benefit from participating in campus activities. Another student who was placed on academic probation shared how the academic standing policy and the communication he received from the school negatively influenced his sense of belonging:

Right now I am on academic probation because I failed a course. It just feels like they're attempting to kick me out. Me personally, I'm trying my best right now to get back to a point where I want to feel connected back into business. That kind of reduces my sense of belonging here at the school of business, but at the same time, that's my fault, but there's forces behind me, they're pushing me forward.

Students shared mixed feelings about advising, some students saw their advisor frequently and found it helpful, some students saw an advisor once and then struggled to fit in another visit due to life commitments and the busy schedule of advisors. One student found it very difficult to figure out who his advisor was, and another felt that his advisor should have reached out to him when he first started at the university. A few students shared frustration at having to go multiple places for information; these were students who had two advisors, a business advisor, and either an athletic advisor or an honors advisor. Sara had developed a connection with an advisor who then left the university and she struggled after that to find another advisor who she felt was as helpful. She shared a discouraging experience with an advisor who questioned her ability to succeed as a business major.

Mentorship, whether formal or informal, given or received, was discussed by students as a way they experienced support. It was also an area in which they desired more support from the business school. Carlos shared that he sought out mentors to keep him motivated. Martin felt student persistence would be positively influenced if faculty members did outreach each term to students they knew well. Contreras expressed a desire to have a peer mentor in the business program who she could talk to about her experience and the things she is struggling with. Two students expressed a desire to have support around applying for scholarships and filing their FAFSA or ORSAA, they both felt that process was very confusing and that would be a way for the university to support their persistence. Contreras suggested that this would be someone who would sit with you and help you through it rather than you having to do it on your own.

Overall, students felt a greater affinity for and belonging to the business school than they did to the university in general. They appreciated the programming and support offered by the business school and suggested ways to improve the programming.

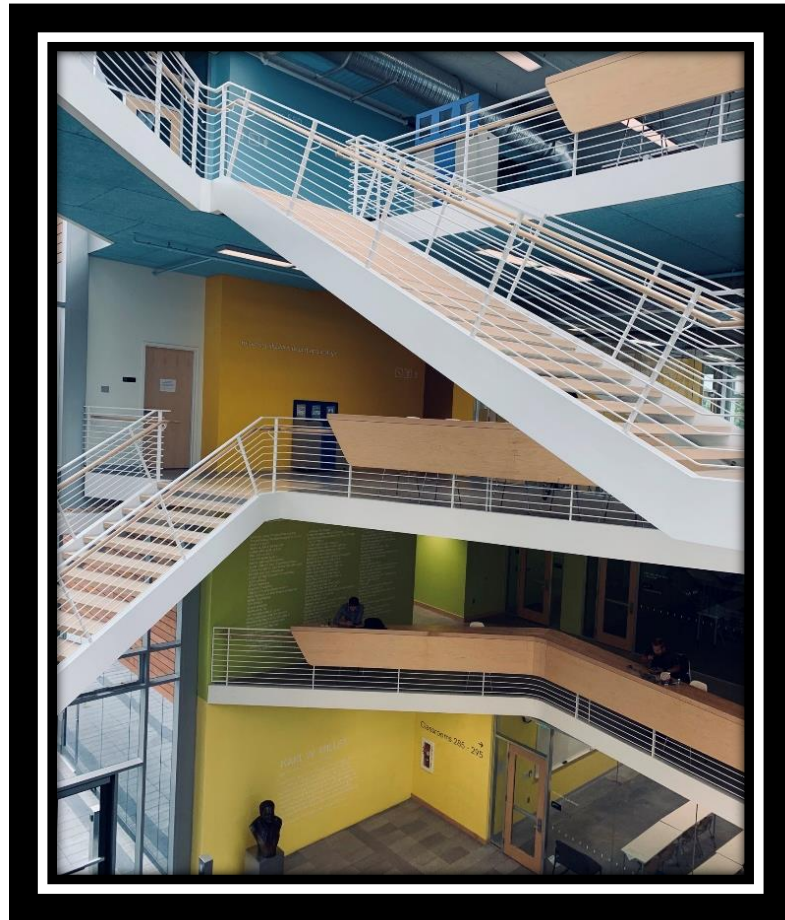
### ***Sense of Place Influenced by Space***

The impact of physical spaces on student sense of belonging was demonstrated through the photo-elicitation component of the study. The importance of the business school building to their sense of place and belonging was evident as most of them took photographs of the building both inside and outside. They shared how being in the building among other students who were studying and hustling made them feel like they were not alone. The tiered laptop bars, the study rooms, and the terrace that overlooks the city were all places that students shared as being important to them. The rooftop terrace

was described by three students as a place where they go for solace when they are feeling stressed. Michael felt that as he walked the cascading staircases through the building he was truly seen as a part of the business student community (see Figure 14).

**Figure 14**

*Michael's Picture of the Stairs That Made Him Feel Seen*



Students shared a feeling of pride that they attended classes in the business building, which at the time of the study was the newest building on campus. The atrium steps were also featured prominently in photographs as students felt they represented a communal location that provided business students a sense of place (see Figure 15).

**Figure 15***Carlos's Picture of the Atrium Stairs*

The cultural resource centers: La Casa Latina and the Multicultural Center, were also prime spaces that students highlighted that demonstrated where they find belonging. The art in these two spaces was particularly significant to the students and was featured in several photographs (see Figure 7 earlier). Three other buildings that were featured prominently were the library, the student recreation center, and the student union. The library was described as a place where students had a feeling of being “in it together,” particularly around finals week. The student union was a place where students described being able to be passively present, a place where they could be alone but not lonely



because they were surrounded by others. Two students shared how they would observe other students interacting as a way to see how to make friends or engage with others; people-watching with a purpose. The student union was also where many cultural events took place, including Latin Night, International Night, and the Día de Los Muertos ofrenda competition [see Figure 16].

**Figure 16**

*Sara's Picture of Her Team's Dia De Los Muertos Ofrenda*



Food carts that were both adjacent to campus and further away were also photographed. Michael described the food carts as an image of America: “I love coming here and seeing all the different people, it's like a snapshot of America, all the different ethnicities, all different food, all different cultures” (see Figure 17).

**Figure 17**

*Michael's "Snapshot of America"*



Students who lived on campus took pictures of their residence halls. Monica took a photo of her freshmen dorm building and shared that she felt it was a good experience that she was able to live in the dorms and wanted more students of color to have that experience:

There weren't a lot of students of color who lived in the dorm. I know that all the people I met throughout the year who were students of color didn't actually live in dorms. So it was kind of interesting to see that difference, that not a lot of students actually had the opportunity just because it is pricier. I had the opportunity to do it because of scholarships I had received.

The park blocks that run through campus were the focus of several pictures, and they represented nature as well as student activities for many of the students as they were where the farmers market and events like Party in the Park happened (see Figure 18).

**Figure 18**

*David's Picture of the Party in the Park Blocks*



Students shared place-based self-sustaining behaviors that positively influenced them in their persistence. These behaviors included maintaining connections to nature and ensuring they prioritized their health by using the campus recreational facilities. In one case, the link to nature was appreciation of a tree that stands at the center of the university library [as seen in the photograph in Figure 19 taken by Michael]. The library was built around a tree and the tree represented strength and persistence to some students. Contreras shared how nature reminds her of home and how seeing the tree grounds her:

I can look out and there's a big tree, it reminds me that we need to always stay connected to our surroundings and our environment. It's easy to lose that, especially downtown because everything is so concrete. I really love hanging out here because even though it's indoors, and even though I'm in the middle of the city, this tree always grounds me and reminds me that there's still things growing where I am in this environment at [the university] and I'm still growing along with it. It reminds me that I'm not in the same in the same spot. I'm changing every day, even though I don't realize it, it's happening.

**Figure 19**

*Michael's Picture of the Library*



Students shared the importance of exercise, and the recreation center was a place that many found a sense of belonging. They associated positive feelings with particular spaces and there were recurring spaces that came up across our conversations. It is clear that the students in this study gravitated toward a few key areas on campus where they found comfort and belonging.

*Difficulty Engaging and a Lack of Community on Campus*

Students experienced difficulty balancing school, work, and other life commitments, including off-campus jobs and connections with friends and family who were not involved in their college experience. Students who expressed a lack of community shared fewer experiences of engagement on campus and fewer (or no) friends on campus. The students who shared these experiences all worked off-campus and felt that they primarily came to school to attend classes. Students who worked off-campus were significantly less active in university extra-curricular activities than students who worked on campus. They shared that they were unable to find the community where they fit in or were not interested in finding it and were here just for the education. David described it as comfortable isolation, a feeling like he was not obligated to maintain relationships with his fellow students, and Jesus felt a sense of belonging but no community, a distinction he described as an internal feeling of belonging versus a lack of people to connect with. The students who worked off-campus shared their need to get their classes done and get to their jobs, and they found little to no time to return to campus to engage in campus activities that were not required as part of classwork. This included not attending things like tutoring or academic coaching that could positively influence their academic success. Isabella shared that she relied on online support more as a result of her inability to stay on campus to access resources and commented that more online resources would be helpful. At one time, Abe was working three jobs to make ends meet. Jesus worked 10-hour days before coming to school at night, which resulted in him feeling exhausted and having a hard time staying awake. He doesn't have

time to attend advising during the day, so continues to follow the advice he received his freshman year. Isabella explained her lack of a sense of community:

I just come to school, I don't really attend things that will make it feel more like a community... I know that sounds bad because there's so many things I can do to be a part of the community. But it's never on the days I'm here, and so I don't typically like to come back, especially because I have to go to work or do homework... On my part, I can't make it the community that it could be for myself, but [the university] is doing everything that they can to make it the community for me and my peers.

David felt that the difficulty he had engaging in activities on campus is partly due to the commuter campus culture of the university and one where you are on your own to engage. It was not what he initially expected:

I feel like from the beginning here you just sign up for classes and go to classes and then figure it out, talk to your advisor, sign up for some more classes, and then go to those classes. I definitely expected it to be much more like "here's your class that you're studying with, those kids you started with, and let's do this orientation together and then you'll have another thing that you'll all do in six months." I thought it was more like that, but this is more like a commuter campus where it's much more segmented. I wouldn't be able to describe to anyone what campus life is like here, and I think that's because I commute, but I've also been here for years, this is my fourth year. So I think by now I would have gotten a little more connected, but I don't think it ever happened. I think from what I hear from my fellow classmates, that's the general sentiment.

Students found it difficult to find out what activities were available for them to attend or engage in, and for some students, they felt there was no central resource or marketing that was effective at informing them about opportunities. Additionally, many students thought it was easier to engage on campus if you lived on campus and one of the students who does live on campus felt that more scholarships to cover housing should be provided to students of color so that those who were from the Portland area could have the opportunity to move onto campus in order to engage more deeply.

The size of the university and of their classes was another barrier they saw to engaging and belonging on campus. Martin felt he had a delayed sense of belonging as a business student because he wasn't taking classes in the business building due to the large class size of the introductory business course. German spoke about feeling small like an ant, one of just 22,000 undergraduate students, and he found it challenging to get the attention he needs. Maria talked about how relationships are hard to form in big classes:

I'm always in big classes. So I feel like there's hardly ever relationships between students and our teacher. It's just "come to my office hours if you need help," or you know, just that there's not a lot of socializing, I would say, so I feel distant from my professors most of the time.

Additionally, Abe expressed a need for students to go out of their way to engage, which he felt was particularly true for students of color:

To be able to feel you belong here, you have to put the work in to do it. I don't feel that the university has been like, "okay, we're here for you and working on this, we have a goal for you," I feel you have to go, especially for a person of color or minority group, you really have to go and ask and seek all those things that you can have access to.

Four students shared moments in the past few years when they were not able to get the support they needed. These experiences included discouragement coming from advisors, family members, or friends outside of college. However, that discouragement was not seen by all students as negative. As in the aforementioned element of aspirational capital wherein students worked harder when people doubted them.

Fleeting feelings of isolation were experienced by nearly all students in the study and were predominantly in their first year at the university as they adjusted to college life. For some students, the feelings of isolation were in the residence halls filled with people who were different from them, for others the feelings of isolation centered around

speaking English as a second language or realizing they had just moved to the Whitest city in the U.S. Off-campus work, the nature of a commuter school, and a big university with large classes all have the potential of negatively influencing a student's ability to engage on campus to create a sense of community or belonging.

Though these students are persisting, each shared moments of doubting their abilities or moments when they questioned whether they could or should persist toward graduation. David shared a photograph of an event in the park blocks that happened in his junior year when he was feeling burnt out and questioning whether to stay in school (see Figure 20). He shared how the event with familiar music and good energy helped re-energize him at a critical moment.

**Figure 20**

*David's Picture of the Event That Reenergized Him at a Critical Time*



Vanessa's family told her to finish the year out when she felt like school wasn't right for her, at the end of the year her parents asked why she would give up when she



had come so far. Abe also described moments of doubt: “There have been multiple times where I felt like higher education wasn't for me, in this university... just thinking that for me, I have to struggle more to be here than peers who don't look like me.”

A couple of students shared moments in their experience when they were unsure they would be able to persist due to financial circumstances. They referenced the importance of being awarded scholarships or hardship tuition assistance at critical times when they were faced with possibly dropping out. They talked about the need to hustle, managing multiple jobs to pay their bills or to help support their families. Some shared the experience of needing to slow their education because they couldn't afford to attend full time or having to find additional funding because they were not eligible for financial aid due to being a DACA student. One recommendation from a student who is currently under DACA was that the institution could do more to help faculty, staff, and students become more aware of the resources for DACA students. He shared how both he and his advisor were not aware of the resources available on campus for DACA students and that if the resources were more accessible or readily known about, it may help increase those students' feelings of support.

### **Belonging and Likelihood to Graduate**

Students were asked to rate their feelings of belonging in the school of business and at the university (as a whole) on a scale of one to ten with one being low and ten being high (see Table 2). Student feelings of belonging at the university and within the school of business varied from five to ten. The most frequent number given for belonging at the university was a seven and the most frequent number provided for

belonging in the business school was a ten, demonstrating that students felt a greater sense of belonging within the school of business than within the university as a whole which may be representative of the feeling shared by several students about how hard it is to stand out or be noticed at the university due to the size of the school.

Students were also asked to rate their likelihood of graduating from the university on a scale of one to ten (see Table 2), again with one being low and ten being high. The average of all scores given was 9.5 demonstrating strong confidence in graduating possessed by the students. No student gave below an eight, seven students gave a ten, and one student gave an eleven because she felt her likelihood of graduating was off the scale.

**Table 2**

*Student Rankings of Belonging and Likelihood of Graduating*

Pseudonym	Belonging at the University	Belonging in Business School	Likelihood of Graduating from the University	Class Standing	First Gen Student
German	10	10	8	Soph	No
Maria	10	10	10	Soph	No
Contreras	10	9	11	Jr	Yes
Sara	8.5	10	10	Sr	Yes
Carlos	8.5	7	9	Soph	Yes
Martin	8	9	9	Jr	Yes
Monica	7.5	8.5	8	Soph	Yes
Isabella	7	10	10	Soph	Yes
David	7	7	9	Jr	No
Vanessa	7	7	10	Soph	No
Val	7	6	10	Sr	No
Abe	6	8	9	Sr	Yes
Micheal	5	8	10	Sr	No
Jesus	5	5	10	Soph	Yes
<b>Average</b>	<b>7.6</b>	<b>8.2</b>	<b>9.5</b>		

### Summary

The cultural wealth demonstrated by the students in this study appears to be an essential force pushing them forward. There were some clear connections between the literature on community cultural wealth and the ways in which cultural wealth showed up for the students in this study, including significant elements of aspirational, familial, navigational, and social capital. Students shared experiences of persevering to make their parents proud and a clear future vision for themselves, both elements of aspirational capital. Their aspirational capital propelled them forward in their drive to graduate for their parents and their communities. Their familial capital manifests as the support they receive from their family and the commitments they have made to their family. Their familial support reinforced their decisions to persist at critical junctures. They demonstrate navigational capital as they figure out how to navigate a predominantly White institution, prioritize their schoolwork, be independent, and overcome adversity and past experiences of suffering. They rely on their navigational capital when faced with real or perceived barriers. They leverage social capital in their relationships with others who have a shared identity with them, and in their commitment to give back to their communities, they relied on their social connections and reflected on their desire to give back when they needed the motivation to persist.

Student experiences of belonging were influenced by their racial, cultural, social, and academic experiences on campus. Experiences of micro-aggressions and White student oblivion, the lack of representation on campus, and the lack of accuracy in the marketing of the university were elements of a student's racial experience on-campus that

created negative feelings for students. Though those examples did not always negatively influence feelings of belonging, at times, they negatively influenced student perceptions of the White students on campus.

For some students, the perceived diversity of the campus was positive, and others felt it was not diverse. The importance of ethnic identity development was apparent in the experiences of students who seemed to develop greater pride in their culture as they became connected to fellow students with shared culture at the university. Organizations or physical spaces that reminded students of home or provided affinity opportunities with their peers positively influenced their feelings of belonging.

Connections to peers, with particular spaces on campus, and with their academic department, were elements of the student experience that influenced belonging. Students who experienced difficulty engaging were often drawn off campus due to off-campus jobs or other responsibilities like raising children. Additionally, attending a large commuter school made engaging and building community difficult for some of the students. Despite difficulties engaging, all of the students in this study were determined to graduate and found a sense of belonging within the school of business and the university despite facing moments of doubting themselves or when it felt like they couldn't go on.

**CHAPTER FIVE – DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

This research focused on the experience of Latinx students in business, their belonging and cultural wealth, and its influence on their persistence and it contributes to the literature on Latinx student success and persistence and the inherent cultural capital they bring with them to college. Weiss (1994) states that qualitative interview studies “describe how a system works or fails to work” (p.10). The results of this research show how the students of color within this system have persisted year over year by utilizing their cultural capital to mitigate moments when the system fails to work for them.

The students in this study shared incredible tenacity and a dedication to hard work and overcoming barriers, demonstrating that even though persistence rates for Latinx students may be lower, the cultural wealth they bring with them to college incites a drive to completion. This chapter addresses the research questions posed for the study and provides recommendations for how the university in this study can change to improve its support of Latinx students. Implications for change arising from this study focus on what institutions can alter or enhance to improve the campus experience for Latinx students rather than on what students themselves should do as they are clearly persisting in the face of barriers.

**Latinx Student Community and Belonging Experiences**

The first research question centered on where Latinx students find community or belonging (on-campus or off). Throughout the interviews and photo-elicitation, it became clear that the students in this study found community on campus with other Latinx students or students of color primarily through cultural centers and student organizations.

Additionally, students described some campus experiences as feeling like a family, including working at on-campus jobs, being an athlete, and spending time in the business school building with their fellow business students. Students continued to connect with and rely on their families and their extended community for feelings of belonging.

Student rankings of their feelings of belonging at the university and within the school of business varied from five to ten. Students felt a greater sense of belonging within the school of business than within the university as a whole, which may be representative of the feeling shared by several students about how hard it is to stand out or be noticed in a large university. This was represented in Attinasi's (1992) study that found that students who formed smaller affiliations were able to adjust and make sense of the larger organization. The extent to which students felt a sense of belonging seemed to be connected to their goals for their time at the university. Students who had a goal of getting involved and immersed in the college experience as well as graduating seemed to engage more deeply with events or support services and they felt a stronger sense of belonging. Students who focused on getting through the degree to degree attainment seemed to engage less on campus, and some of them shared a slightly lower sense of belonging than students who were more involved on campus. This finding is backed up by the research done by Strayhorn (2012) that found students who were involved in campus activities tended to have a greater sense of belonging than students who were not involved on campus. Students shared an appreciation for the university for several reasons; they appreciated the different perspectives they hear on campus, the civility with which controversial discussions happen, the strength of the programs, the resources

offered, the way students are able to work and attend school simultaneously, and the openness of university staff and its students to differences like religion and gender.

Faculty or staff who demonstrated an interest in them by asking about their lives and their goals positively influenced their feelings of belonging. This aligns with research that found empathetic faculty understanding and support influenced student feelings of belonging (Hoffman et al., 2002). Additionally, faculty who approached teaching in alternative ways had the most significant impact on their learning from their perspective. Meeuwisse, Severiens, and Born (2010) found that students in the minority felt a greater sense of belonging when they had good formal relationships with their faculty, which was influenced by learning in collaborative and cooperative environments like the ones described by the students in this study. Two students shared that they avoid or struggle to engage with faculty. Seyfried (1998) stated that students' realities in their classroom experience are primarily created by the quality of the teacher-student interactions. Given the importance of those interactions and the hesitation to engage (particularly with White faculty) that some students experience, an effort should be made by the faculty to improve those classroom interactions.

Nearly all students felt a strong belonging within the business school. They referenced shared experience with their fellow students and a sense that they "get" each other. The size of the business school led several students to create or join smaller student groups within it. They believed that the staff and faculty of the business school cared about helping them graduate, get jobs, and connect with leaders in the business community. Students expressed a desire for connections with the business school earlier

in their curriculum and for faculty to help students become more aware of events on campus that may be relevant to them. Students wanted more mentoring provided by the business school as well as assistance with the FAFSA or other scholarship applications.

Built spaces influenced student sense of belonging. Students found belonging in affinity spaces like La Casa Latina, the Multicultural Center, and the Diversity & Multicultural Student Services Lounge. Students who were developing their ethnic identity felt the GANAS program was vital for them, and others explained how peers they met at La Casa Latina helped them develop a greater sense of belonging through shared identity and culture. La Casa Latina and GANAS directly influenced student feelings of belonging, by providing opportunities for students to build relationships with peers and staff who supported them through difficult moments, which may have had an indirect influence on student persistence. GANAS enabled students to transition to school smoothly, which has been found to significantly influence students' sense of belonging, their ability to locate academic help, and communicate effectively with instructors outside of class (Johnson et al., 2007). Affinity spaces provided students with safe places to be surrounded by those who have a higher likelihood of shared life experiences. This finding that the students in this study found community with smaller groups within La Casa Latina or GANAS aligns with Attinasi's (1992) theory that students become integrated into the campus community by forming smaller affiliations that help them to make sense of the broader college community. While most students felt that La Casa Latina positively influenced their sense of place on campus, a few students felt the center was predominantly for Mexican students or that it was cliquish. Students felt a greater



sense of belonging when they saw elements of their cultural history show up on campus, examples of this included Dia de Los Muertos events, Latin week, Latin Dance Club, and having authentic food close to campus. Additional spaces students shared that demonstrated where they found belonging included a local restaurant called Tito's Burritos, food carts, the business building, the library, the student union, dorms, the park blocks, and the recreation center.

Students also found belonging within their academic department, particularly with support programs like Atmos and the Deans Future Leaders Group, as well as at their on-campus jobs. A few students expressed that living on campus was a positive experience overall because it allowed them to engage on campus with after-hours activities that nurtured feelings of connection to the university, which is backed by research that found on-campus living to increase a student's sense of belonging (Maestas, 2007). However, residence halls were described by one student as dominated by predominantly White and privileged students, which did not engender feelings of belonging for that student.

The majority of students in the study felt most comfortable with their fellow Latinx students due to there being a greater likelihood of them having shared childhood cultural experiences. Additionally, a number of students in the study expressed greater comfort with other students of color due to the shared experience of being in the minority in predominantly White spaces. Making friends as an adult was a process that a few students were not entirely comfortable with and they shared how programs that initially placed them with other students and required them to connect (e.g., GANAS or the "How to Succeed in Business School" course) helped them get to know other students.

The Latinx students in this study predominantly found community and belonging with smaller groups, with peers who shared experiences with them, and in cultural spaces or student organizations that reinforced their ethnic identity. They developed community within their major and with faculty and staff who demonstrated caring and concern for them as individuals.

### **How Racism or Prejudice Influenced Belonging**

None of the students in the study shared that they had witnessed or experienced instances they perceived as racism or discrimination on campus, however several shared experiences with micro-aggressions and White student oblivion. In these moments, the students either challenged the offender or ignored it as a form of self-preservation. Alva (1991) highlighted student abilities to navigate in stressful events and conditions that put them at risk of dropping out. This self-care approach demonstrated by the students in this study is an element of navigational capital that assisted them in persevering through those stressful events. Additionally, Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solórzano (2009) found that Latinx students addressed racial microaggressions by creating academic and social counter-spaces where they built a culturally supportive community, which seemed to be represented through the student's significant participation in ethnic or racial student clubs, spaces, and organizations in this study.

There were differing perspectives on campus diversity that seemed to be tied to the diversity of a student's hometown. Student's feelings about the diversity of campus varied from some feeling it was diverse compared to their hometown to others feeling it lacked representation and that the marketing done by the university touting diversity was

inaccurate. The university is marketed as the most diverse institution in the state and a few students expected greater diversity when arriving on campus as a result.

A few students felt that some White faculty made assumptions about shared knowledge, or were unapproachable. Experiences with White faculty demonstrated insensitivity to the students in this study and included faculty continuing to say student names incorrectly, looking to the students of color in the room to be the voice of people of color in discussions about race, and paying less attention to the students of color than the White students. These experiences with White faculty can be considered alongside Nora and Cabrera's (1996) three dimensions found to influence student perceptions of discrimination and prejudice: campus climate, faculty/staff prejudicial attitudes, and experiences in the classroom. If the classroom experience for these students included microaggressions committed by faculty or fellow students, it has the possibility of influencing student perceptions of prejudice and discrimination which Nora and Cabrera (1996) found had an indirect effect on student institutional commitment and persistence. White students' lack of awareness about how their behaviors and comments were experienced by Latinx students were another component that influenced participant's feelings of belonging on campus. White students being inconsiderate in the dorms or in-class discussions influenced the way the students in this study viewed those peers. These experiences did not affect student sense of belonging but did influence some of their decisions to speak up in classroom discussions to share their perspectives.

Students felt if there were greater representation of Latinx faculty, staff, and students, it might positively influence their feelings of belonging. Representation of

Latinx faculty seemed particularly lacking and was limited to a few subjects (Spanish, or Chicano/Latino Studies). Students also expressed a desire for consistent inclusion of Latinx leaders from the community on career panels or as guest speakers. A concern was raised that the repeated use of business cases that feature White men could result in students being trained to think that White and male is what a business professional looks like. The requests for representation among the faculty are consistent with Santos (2017) research that demonstrated higher graduation rates for Hispanic students when their faculty look like them.

Critical race perspectives reviewed in the literature that showed up in the findings included the notion of interest convergence between the university trying to diversify itself and the students who were interested in attending a diverse university. The stories shared by students in this study of the way White students comported themselves (in the dorm rooms or classroom discussions), unaware of their impact on others, could be viewed as a demonstration of Whiteness as property. Whiteness provides societal benefits, including the ability to be oblivious to issues of race and racism, which showed up in the White students and some White faculty as insensitive words and actions.

Those microaggressions and experiences of White people oblivion seemed to be moments that both jarred the students and increased their awareness of the different types of situations and people they will face in life. Sometimes they chose to confront the issue and sometimes they chose to ignore it, but nevertheless they persisted and their sense of belonging at the university was maintained in spite of those moments. They leaned on their peers and spent time in affinity spaces where they found belonging to counter the

experiences. None of them shared that the experiences changed their perceptions of the university, but they did change how they viewed their fellow students and, in some cases, resulted in a shift in how they approached classroom discussions, leaning into a place of advocacy. The answer to the question of how experiences of racism and prejudice influenced belonging is that the students relied on their communities for support and belonging and they leveraged their cultural wealth to move beyond those experiences and persist. They found belonging with their peers on campus and the influence of those connections was stronger than the impact of the microaggressions and the White people oblivion on student feelings of belonging.

#### **Belonging and Community Cultural Wealth's Influence on Persistence**

The majority of the students in the study felt a sense of belonging on campus though elements of cultural wealth seemed to be more significant influencers on their persistence than belonging. When asked what keeps them in the game, persisting year over year, most students pointed to elements of aspirational capital: their drive to make their parents proud or their future vision of themselves, none referenced their feeling of belonging at the university as critical to their persistence. Students, by and large, felt a sense of belonging somewhere on campus, which was often with a club, organization (GANAS class), or physical space like La Casa Latina, which again affirms the research done by Attinasi (1992). Connecting with these smaller communities was a necessary tactic used to combat the large size of the university and the business school.

Four forms of cultural wealth were prevalent for the students in this study: aspirational capital, familial capital, navigational capital, and social capital. Aspirational

capital was demonstrated through their clear goals and future visions of themselves that students brought with them to campus. They persevered through difficult times, and their prior experience of maintaining their dreams in the face of barriers or others doubting them provided them with roadmaps to overcome those challenges. Additionally, their drive to make their parents proud propelled them forward and was fueled by their acute awareness of everything their parents had overcome and sacrificed to get them to where they are today. That awareness and the encouragement they received from their parents helped them persist in the moments when they felt they couldn't go on. Overcoming difficulties and pushing past the predictions of those who doubted them drove the students to work harder in order to persevere toward graduation. Additionally, sharing their stories with others and reflecting on how much they have accomplished helped push them to persist when they were struggling.

Familial capital was evident in how students relied on their families for emotional support and understanding throughout their college experience. Some students shared the experience of college with their family, which influenced their family's buy-in and support of student persistence. Family played a critical role for many students, as they turned to them in moments when they doubted themselves. This aligns with Torres' (2004) research that found Latinx students relied on their family more than on institutions for assistance. The commitments to family remained strong for most students while they were in college though some found ways of moderating those commitments with the requirements of college. A few students made their decision to attend this university in order to honor the family commitments they had or because they felt a need to be further

away to ensure that school took priority over those commitments. Torres (2004) found that families exert significant influence in the student's college choice decision-making process, which aligns with the narrative shared by a couple of students in this study. The need to convey the demands of college to their families was brought up by students which also aligns with Torres' (2003) findings in which students felt like a bridge between two worlds. The families in the study were understanding when students were not able to attend family events, which was important to the students. Two students surmised that if Latinx students are persisting at lower rates toward graduation, family commitments may play a factor due to the strong familial culture of responsibility and commitment. Students in this study found ways to manage those familial commitments and engage their families in efforts to support their persistence toward graduation.

Navigational capital showed up for students as the ability to prioritize school, to be self-reliant, and to use experiences of suffering and the resilience they developed to persevere and navigate potentially hostile spaces. Most students shared an intense focus on school that was influenced by a feeling of pressure to pass their classes in order to avoid unnecessary extra expenses. A few expressed that they don't have the luxury of failing, which ensures they keep their focus on passing classes and making progress toward graduation. Additionally, several students shared that a work ethic instilled in them by their parents assisted them in prioritizing school over less critical activities. Students felt a need to become self-reliant and independent, which may be a particularly salient feeling for Latinx students navigating predominantly White spaces that were not designed with people of color in mind. Three students spoke to their experiences of

suffering including how suffering had built up their resilience, provided them courage, and resulted in them relying on their community outside of school for their support. The cultural capital they developed through years of navigating spaces and social institutions that are unsupportive and at times hostile to them is a piece of what propels them forward, overcoming obstacles and pushing onward.

Social capital included the networks students brought with them to college and those they developed while in college. Connections with fellow Latinx students and other students of color helped them feel less lonely in the predominantly White university. Shared experience was important to them when making friends. Students felt it was easier to connect with other Latinx students who may have similar family traditions, food, or language. Students felt connecting with other students of color was easier (than connecting with White students) due to the shared experience of being in the minority. Their social circles helped them feel connected to campus and a sense of happiness and belonging when surrounded by friends (e.g., dinners, watching movies, dancing).

The students talked about the importance of social communities in which the students grew up. Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that maintaining connections with their communities helped Latinx students to adjust to campus life. Students were not asked in the interviews about how they planned to give back to their communities but the topic came up naturally. They wanted to give back to their communities by sharing their journey, demonstrating to younger siblings or community members that college is possible, or helping to increase the percentage of Mexican Latinas attaining a college degree. This altruistic motivation aligns with Villalpando's (1997) finding that in



comparison to White students, Chicana/o students demonstrated a greater interest in helping their communities or pursuing careers that would serve their communities.

Students possessed strong confidence in graduating from the university, with the average ranking of their likelihood of graduating at 9.5. Fleeting feelings of isolation were experienced by nearly all students in the study. Experiences of isolation were predominantly focused on the first year at the university as they adjusted to college life. Four students shared key moments when they were not able to get the support they needed. These experiences included discouragement coming from advisors, family members, or friends they had before beginning college. Some students experienced difficulty engaging on campus, which influenced their feelings of belonging and, at times, made them question whether to persist toward graduation. They struggled to balance school, work, and other life commitments, including off-campus jobs and connections with friends and family who were not involved in their college experience. Students who worked off campus and primarily came to school to attend classes expressed a lack of community and shared fewer experiences of engagement on campus and fewer (or no) friends on campus. These students who worked off-campus relied on online materials or resources due to their inability to linger on campus to use resources.

A few students expressed difficulty finding out what activities were available for them to engage in and that there was no central resource or marketing that was effective at informing them about opportunities. Another student shared that he thought if faculty members reached out to Latinx students to see how they were doing, that persistence could be positively influenced. This desire is backed up by Komarraju, Musulkin, and

Bhattacharya's (2010) research that recommended faculty members making concerted efforts to connect with students who are in the racial or ethnic minority because those students may be less comfortable reaching out on their own.

Students shared moments when they were unsure they would be able to persist due to financial circumstances. They talked about the need to manage multiple jobs to pay their bills or to help support their families. Some shared that they had to slow their education because they couldn't afford to attend full time or were unable to receive financial aid.

The third research question concerned how experiences of belonging or community cultural wealth shape student decisions to persist toward degree completion. The answer to that question is that feelings of belonging did not shape decisions to persist and instead, the credit for their persistence goes to the cultural wealth possessed by the students in this study. The student's drive to make their parents proud because of all the things their parents did for them and their future vision for themselves propelled them toward graduation. Their social networks and families provided support for them in moments of doubt influenced their persistence. Their ability to navigate a predominantly White and often oblivious institution influenced their persistence.

Leveraging the strengths within students and reflecting back to them everything they overcame to get to where they are may prove more useful than focusing efforts on helping them develop a deep sense of belonging. That is not to say that belonging should be overlooked entirely, creating safe, comfortable spaces for students to develop meaningful relationships with their faculty, staff, and fellow students is a foundational

piece of the college experience. However, it is the capital within each student that enables them to build on that foundation to persevere and persist toward graduation.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Given the projected growth of the Latinx student population, it is essential that changes be made to better support these students in an effort to increase their persistence. Considering that the system of higher education was built by and for the White majority and still struggles to demonstrate equity in educational attainment for historically underrepresented students, there is an opportunity for educators to reflect on how to improve Latinx student persistence. Viewing the problem in a critical way requires educators to make an intentional effort to gain a greater understanding of the experience of students of color.

The recommendations are broken down into three sections. Institutional recommendations that pertain to institutional resources and student engagement opportunities provided for all Latinx students on campus, departmental or college level recommendations that include curricular or pedagogical opportunities and resources allocated for Latinx students in their school or college, and programmatic recommendations that could be leveraged to improve customized support for Latinx students at a smaller scale.

#### **Institutional Recommendations**

Several institutional recommendations came out of this study that range from a change in hiring practices to resource allocation to a change in the university's approach to marketing. The primary recommendation from this research is that the university needs

to hire more Latinx faculty and staff in positions of teaching and administrative leadership. Students consistently shared concerns about the lack of Latinx faculty or administrators. The university needs to make a concerted effort to diversify its faculty, staff, and administrative leadership to represent the racial/ethnic make-up of its students. Students experienced classroom environments and university support efforts differently when they were being led by people of color. This recommendation is primary because students shared that having faculty of color made them feel a greater sense of comfort in approaching that professor. They also shared how seeing faculty who looked like them created feelings of empowerment. Beyond representation of faculty, some students also felt that they continue to see people in positions of power who are White and they thought that it was time for some changes that bring more diverse voices into those leadership positions. The university must make significant improvement in not only the recruitment of faculty and staff of color but also improve the culture so that those faculty and staff are retained at the university. Like the recruitment of students, merely bringing in faculty and staff of color is not sufficient and does little to improve the experience of those faculty, staff, or students.

The next recommendation emerges from students experiencing difficulty engaging with support services because they work during regular business hours. The importance of engaging students where and when they need support services was evident in examples of students being unable to utilize advising or tutoring due to their work schedules. Several students shared dismay that the open hours for La Casa Latina were cut due to budget restrictions. These two findings provide a rationale for providing

support services like advising and tutoring after hours and restoring the former operating hours of important affinity spaces for students of color, especially because smaller affinity communities within the university were influential in student's positive social experiences on campus. The university should consider ways in which it can support students in launching and nurturing sub-communities to help the university and academic colleges feel smaller and supportive to students. Examples of these included Las Mujeres, MEChA, and La Casa Latina.

There are certain buildings on campus that students gravitated toward and felt an affinity with like La Casa Latina within the student union or the business building. The university should consider those spaces and ensure they are kept up to date, and that student's needs around space are heard and acted upon. Student lounge spaces seem to be places where students feel a particular comfort, and not all buildings provide for that experience (e.g., the business building). Funding that allows those buildings and affinity spaces to remain open and available for students should be allocated.

Some students raised concerns about how the university markets itself as the most diverse university in Oregon. There was a feeling that this marketing set up false assumptions about the diversity on campus and that it was similar to rainbow capitalism, in this case, marketing toward specific populations using people of color selectively in advertising in order to financially benefit the institution through increased enrollment. The university's communications and marketing department needs to be thoughtful about how diversity is touted and ensure that marketing collateral aims for accuracy in

representation and provides context to any claims of being the most diverse institution in the state (by sharing the demographic breakdown and numbers of students).

### **Departmental or College Recommendations**

In addition to university marketing changes, departmental or college marketing also needs to be conducted in a thoughtful way, ideally engaging the target students in the design and creation of the collateral. In a school of business that has a concentration in marketing, there are hundreds of students who could be financially incentivized to review and consider marketing collateral prior to those materials going to print to ensure they are appropriately customized without tokenization. Students shared a concern about how marketing materials seem to tokenize people of color at times by placing diverse faces in the posters and viewbooks intentionally without considering authentic student experiences. Striving to market a program authentically while ensuring that White faces do not dominate materials is a balancing act that students could be engaged in while they develop professional skills.

Departments or academic colleges need to consider the importance of student connections with their academic field of study and help students develop a stronger relationship to their academic major early in their college experience. This is particularly important when coursework is not front-loaded. Though many students may change their majors, the sooner they can develop a deeper understanding of their field and feel a tie to their major, the sooner they may begin to form relationships with faculty or advisors that could positively influence their persistence. Students in the study shared a feeling of disconnection with the school of business until they began taking more classes in the

building. Several students expressed a desire for an increased connection with their department and its events and activities. Embedding career events and activities early in the curriculum and providing career coaches to assist students in creating their future vision may facilitate student persistence as a result of deeper connections to their field of study or a more definite sense of where they can take their degree professionally.

The school of business in this study recently began holding large introductory courses with enrollment caps of 150 for the first major course. Students in this study shared how those large classes made them feel like they couldn't connect with the instructor or their fellow students. Additionally, students felt like they didn't really begin to make connections with their academic department until they started taking classes in the business building. In an effort to address both of these concerns, departments may want to consider whether large survey courses are actually meeting the needs of students and how to develop some intentionality around where classes are being held. A smaller class may help students build community, and keeping the introductory course in the business building may tie students to the business school from day one.

The most meaningful faculty-student relationships noted by students in this study were predominantly in courses that spanned multiple terms with the same faculty. The lengthened period of time is particularly helpful at a school running on a quarter system where the turnaround from term to term is so quick. A recommendation that comes out of this is for departments or colleges to create a course series or block scheduling that allows first-year students to remain with the same students or faculty within their academic department in the first year. For the school of business, this would require

finding faculty who can teach introduction to business in the fall term and then business communication in the winter term, allowing students to opt for the same instructor two terms in a row if they feel the instructor's teaching style is a good fit for them.

A few students in the study found culturally specific groups or programming later than they wished they had. Examples of that programming include; the GANAS Retention program, La Casa Latina, MECHA, Las Mujeres, Latin Nights, and the Latin Dance Club. Outside of the information students get at orientation, the school of business in the study does nothing to promote the culturally specific programming offered to the whole campus. There is an opportunity for partnership in messaging to help promote those support services, which may assist with student ethnic identity development and promote developing a connection to others with a shared history. This promotion was a request from several students. Given the importance of that programming for the persisting students in this study, it warrants being tied into departmental approaches to retention efforts.

The White student oblivion that resulted in micro-aggressions or feelings of discomfort for students in this study needs to be addressed. At an institution that promotes its diversity, an effort needs to be made to change the environment the students of color are entering into and that change begins with changing White people's awareness of their role in the oppression of people of color. The White students, faculty, and staff require training to realize their role in perpetuating the oppression that currently exists in higher education. White people need to become aware of and acknowledge how they have benefited from their Whiteness. They need to recognize the implications of



historical events and be more thoughtful and aware of their privilege and the space they take up. Additionally, a tenet of critical race theory is that liberalism is failing, and when well-meaning White people continue to think they are doing their part by welcoming more students of color to the university, that is a demonstrated example of a liberal viewpoint continuing to fall short of enacting real change. Simply diversifying the entering class each year is not an effective strategy to correct the inequities that exist in degree attainment. The university, department, or academic college must adjust the curriculum to teach the White people how to be actively anti-racist and aware of how their words and actions can result in micro-aggressions. Changes to White student, faculty, and staff learning in this area may result in a better experience felt by students of color. Additionally, the classroom experience that continues to perpetuate centuries-old “sage on the stage” methods of teaching must be challenged to change to ensure that forms of teaching and knowledge sharing from communities of color are utilized to create a more inclusive pedagogical experience for the changing demographics of students.

Given the comments from students about the lack of representation on career panels and the positive benefits of affinity groups, the department should work to create more major-specific opportunities for Latinx students, including professional panels and student organizations for Latinx students. There are national organizations that could have local chapters launched and financially supported by the department like the Association for Latino Professionals for America (ALPFA).

Given the importance of families as outlined by the literature (Cummins, 1986; Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006; Marin, 1993; Tierney, 2000; Torres, 2004) and

reinforced by the students in this study, the university, the school of business, and the programs that serve Latinx students should nurture the ability for families to engage on campus. Family inclusion in orientation, quarterly, or year-end events are some ways this could happen. A bi-lingual quarterly newsletter could go out to families as well, informing them of the activities, important dates, and events happening on campus.

### **Programmatic Recommendations**

When asked what they thought would help Latinx students persist, some students brought up the need for financial support. The university needs to offer more ongoing financial support that students can count on. Financial support from a department or program has been found to demonstrate to the student recipients that the department is invested in them and believes in their abilities (Wagner, Sanchez, & Haley, 2019). Additionally, students expressed a need for someone knowledgeable to assist them with their financial aid applications as their parents were not familiar with the process and unable to help. Devoting staffing resources to this effort or coordinating services with financial aid may result in a larger number of students submitting their financial aid and scholarship applications on time, which could increase the number of students who are awarded funds.

The importance of relationships built before the term began and in the first weeks was evident, as many students shared examples of friendships that lasted from pre-term campus experiences or from their first week of class. Friendships were vital in helping students feel a sense of belonging. Students who shared that they came to campus primarily for class and had few friends expressed a lower sense of belonging than

students who had developed friendships at the university. As such, programmatic relationship building between students themselves and between students and faculty or staff should be a priority for retention and persistence initiatives. This could be facilitated through bridge courses, first-term courses, or extra-curricular activities that are incorporated into the required curriculum through extra credit opportunities to engage the students who primarily focus on coursework rather than seeking out extra-curricular activities. Finding ways to help faculty and staff build meaningful relationships with students that demonstrate a genuine caring for the student should also be a priority.

The students in this study shared a clear future vision of themselves they had developed early in their high school or college days. Assisting all students in developing a future vision with clear career goals or a personal purpose could help those students who may leave the university prematurely. Students shared that in moments of doubt, they either reflected on their “why” or others reflected it back to them, which helped them push through and persevere when they felt discouraged. One intervention that could be done programmatically is asking students at orientation to share their why, the reason they decided to go to college. Those reasons could be reflected back to those students mid-way through their first term or first year.

Departments should take a close look at any policy communication that students receive to ensure that the message is written in a tone of support rather than enforcement and that it is written with students in mind rather than policymakers. This recommendation comes from the student who was placed on academic probation felt the

communication he received about the probation policy negatively influenced his sense of belonging within the school of business.

### **Current Implementation of Initial Recommendations**

Dixson and Rousseau (2005) assert that the “call to action must move beyond mere recommendations,” the call must include implementation (p.23). Given that charge, I have begun implementing certain recommendations. In partnership with key members in the department, I have started a review of hiring practices for staff working with undergraduate students to create a more inclusive hiring and onboarding process. Additionally, a group has begun discussing how the department can alter hiring and onboarding processes to improve representation in the school of business. The academic probation communication campaign has been rewritten to convey a message of partnership and support rather than enforcement. The rationale to lower the class size for introductory courses in order to house them in the business building has been conveyed to school leadership who are considering the accreditation impact of the change.

Additional possible changes in the works include hosting an annual professional panel focused on Latinx business leaders, a mentor group for Latinx students hosted by a Latinx faculty member, and the financial support for a re-launch of a student chapter of the Association for Latinx Professionals of America.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Further research could expand the study to look at the experience of those students who didn't persist. That study could center the questions on what the institution failed to do or provide to help the students persist. An additional study could center on

whether a higher sense of belonging is reported by students in specific majors within the institution and could work to identify what works or what doesn't in helping students develop a sense of belonging to their college or major. Then those ratings of belonging could be compared to college or major persistence or degree completion rates to identify whether there is any relation between belonging and persistence for the students in those majors. Relatedly, researchers could study a sense of belonging to the institution as compared to a sense of belonging to a school or college within that institution.

A longitudinal study could be deployed that focuses on how students' perceived sense of belonging changes over time, what they attribute the change to, and whether it is related to student persistence. Those students could be interviewed about their expectations for belonging and engagement in their first term and at the end of their first year and at each of those interval points for the subsequent four to five years. Then the data of students in the study who left the institution could be considered against those who persisted at the institution to see whether there were insights that could be gleaned in the first term to develop early intervention strategies to help those students most likely to leave the institution prematurely. A study of student cultural wealth could focus on the linguistic and resistant capital pieces that were not prominently featured in this study.

This study was done at a public doctoral-granting predominantly White research institution in the Pacific Northwest. The study could be replicated at a Hispanic Serving Institution, at a smaller private institution, or at a geographically different institution. It could be replicated with different demographic groups. Given the also lower persistence

rates of Black/African American students and their projected enrollment growth over the coming years, a study on the cultural wealth that drives them to succeed is warranted.

### **Limitations of the Research**

The population for this study was limited to the school of business in a large public university, as a result, the findings may not be transferable to students at other institution types or in other majors. The recommendations should be considered in light of that limitation, and future research should be done with unique populations to ensure that any programmatic support is designed for those students.

No students shared experiences of direct racism or discrimination on campus and few shared experiences of witnessing or experiencing micro-aggressions. It could be that those instances happen, and the students who experience them chose to leave the university, or it could be that these students have genuinely not experienced them on campus. The participants knew that I was not Latina, thus due to my positionality and lack of shared ethnicity, there may have been a reluctance to share openly with me, they may not have felt the level of safety necessary to share experiences of race, racism, micro-aggressions, or discrimination with me knowing that as a White woman, I do not have a shared experience of racism or discrimination with them. There is also a chance that business students mostly between the ages of 19-24 (with one 34-year-old), may be less likely to identify micro-aggressions directed toward them, given the lack of curricular focus by the business school on systemic racism, discrimination, or oppression. Younger students may be earlier in their ethnic identity development and less likely to notice affronts to that identity. Given those potential constraints on the data collection, a

limitation of this study is that it may not represent student's actual experiences of racism on campus.

### **Conclusion**

This case study used the words of students to illuminate Latinx student experiences on campus, their feelings of belonging, how their racial experiences on campus influenced their belonging and how their cultural wealth positively influenced their persistence toward graduation. Engagement on campus, a friendly classroom experience, the care that faculty and staff show their students, and the smaller communities students create for themselves were all critical elements that influenced student feelings of belonging.

Students felt there was a lack of representation in the faculty and in administrative positions on campus. There is a saying that you have to see it to be it; if students do not see themselves in teaching and leadership positions, they may not think those are roles for them. Additionally, students felt safety in numbers, so increasing the diversity of the student body may improve student's feelings of comfort and belonging given their gravitation toward other Latinx students or fellow students of color. Students raised concern with how the university markets itself, particularly when the university uses the statistics of being the most diverse institution in the state, there needs to be thoughtfulness, intentionality, and context that supports that claim so students are able to get an accurate sense of how many other students of color they may see in their classes.

The literature in this field has not considered whether Latinx student persistence was most influenced by belonging or by student cultural wealth. This study contributes to

the literature on student persistence and fills that gap in the knowledge. A sense of belonging was felt by all the students in this study but they did not attribute their persistence toward graduation to that belonging or comfort on campus. The primary finding of this study is that the cultural wealth these students relied on throughout their college career was the dominating force in their success. The capital they developed and brought with them enabled them to leverage their resilience and their drive to overcome barriers. Reflecting on their familial history and all their parents overcame to help them get to where they are was the primary thing that kept them focused and working toward graduation. That image of bringing home that degree to their families, sharing it with their communities, and achieving success for their race was prominent in their minds and kept them focused and driven to achieve that vision.



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**APPENDIX A – INITIAL STUDY INVITATION EMAIL**

Hi <Name>,

I am a doctoral student researching the experience of Hispanic and Latino students studying business. I invite you to share your experiences with me. This study will consist of two in-person 60-minute interviews and will also include you taking pictures that represent your experiences on campus and where you find community to share with me. You will be compensated for your time in each interview with a \$25 gift card. Here are the details:

**Why you?**

You qualify for participation in this study because you self-identified as being Hispanic or Latino when you were admitted to the university, you began as a freshman studying business, you persisted in college to year two or beyond, and you are still studying business.

**What is this all about?**

The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences of Latinx students studying business at a predominantly White institution. I am interested in how students perceive their educational experience and their sense of belonging on campus or off campus.

**What do you get out of this?**

Benefits to you as the participant include the ability to have your experience potentially shape the way Latinx students are supported in educational settings. Also, you will be compensated for your time with a \$25 gift card for each one-hour interview.

**What is the time commitment?**

Each interview will take about 60 minutes. Taking photos between the two interview times can be done throughout your regular daily activities.

If you are interested in participating, please reply to this email to schedule your first interview!

Sincerely,  
Becky Sanchez  
EdD Doctoral Candidate

*Additionally, I am the Executive Director of Undergraduate Programs in The School of Business at Portland State University*

*My pronouns: she, her, hers*

**APPENDIX B – SECOND STUDY INVITATION EMAIL**

Hi <Name>,

I am researching the experience of Hispanic/Latina/o/x students studying business for my dissertation and in an effort to identify ways to improve the student experience. I am interested in how students perceive their educational experience and their sense of belonging. This paid study includes two meetings with me and taking or finding five pictures that represent your experience on campus as a Hispanic/Latina/o/x student and taking or finding five pictures of where you find belonging or community (on or off campus).

You will be compensated \$50 in Amazon gift cards for your time (\$25 per interview). An additional benefit to you as the participant is the ability to have your experience potentially shape the way Hispanic/Latina/o/x students are supported at this university and within the School of Business.

You were carefully selected to receive this invite because you self-identified as being Hispanic or Latino when you were admitted to the university, you began as a freshman studying business, and you are persisting to graduation, still studying business.

There are five spaces remaining for this study, if you are interested in sharing your experience, just reply to this email to schedule your first interview, I will work around your schedule.

I am so interested in getting to know you and learning from your experience. I look forward to hearing from you!

*Sincerely,  
Becky Sanchez  
EdD Doctoral Candidate*

*Additionally, I am the Executive Director of Undergraduate Programs in the School of Business at Portland State University*

*My pronouns: she, her, hers*

### APPENDIX C - INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title: Latinx Student Persistence: A Study on Sense of Belonging

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The box below highlights the main information about this research for you to consider when deciding whether or not to join the study. Please carefully look over the information on this form and ask questions about any information you do not understand before you decide to agree to take part.

#### Key Information for You to Consider

- **Voluntary Consent. You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to take part or not. There is no penalty if you choose not to join or decide to end involvement.**
- **Why is the study being done? The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences of Latinx students studying business at a predominantly White institution. I am interested in how you perceive your educational experience.**
- **How long will it take? Your participation should last 60 minutes for each meeting, two meetings total.**
- **What will I be expected to do? You will be asked questions about your experience as a Latinx student on campus. You will be asked to take ten pictures that represent your experience and where you find community. There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in your perspective.**
- **Risks. Some possible risks of taking part in this study include being uncomfortable during the interview due to feelings of vulnerability as you share your experience. I will work to minimize feelings of discomfort. Additional (though unlikely) risks include possible identification through your answers. I will work to minimize these risks by ensuring your interview recordings and transcripts are kept secure and that when I write about your experience, I do not provide detail that would link back to you. Additionally, I will use a pseudonym for you in the write-up, and you will be able to choose it.**
- **Benefits. Some benefits that may be expected include the ability to have your experience amplified and to potentially shape the way Latinx students are supported in educational settings. You will be compensated for your time with a \$25 gift card for each one-hour interview.**
- **Participation is entirely voluntary. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your relationship with the university or with me in any way. If you decide to take part in this research, you may choose to withdraw at any time.**

**APPENDIX C - INFORMED CONSENT FORM - CONTINUED****Process of Being Selected for an Interview**

You were selected for participation in this study because you self-identified as being Hispanic or Latino when you were admitted to the university, you began as a freshman studying business, you persisted in college to year two or beyond, and you are still studying business.

**How will my privacy and data be protected?**

I will take measures to protect your privacy including separating your personal information from your interview quotes and using pseudonyms when sharing your experiences. All interview transcripts, recordings, and related documents will be kept in secure password-protected electronic locations, and physical documents will be kept in locked locations. Quotes will be de-identified to ensure anonymity in data storage. Individuals and organizations that conduct or monitor this research may be permitted access to inspect research records, and this may include private information. This includes the Institutional Review Board that reviewed this research. Confidentiality will be maintained except when instances of elder, child, or sexual abuse are disclosed. As a mandatory reporter, I am obligated to report those instances. Despite taking steps to protect your privacy, I can never fully guarantee that your privacy will be protected.

**What happens to the information collected?**

Quotes from the interview will be used in a dissertation and may be used in further research on this topic for academic publication or presentations.

**What if I want to stop my part in this research?**

Your part in this study is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study, but if you do, you may stop at any time. You have the right to choose not to take part in any study activity or completely stop at any point without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to join in will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University.

**Who can answer my questions about this research?**

If you have questions or concerns, contact Becky Sanchez, at [beckys@pdx.edu](mailto:beckys@pdx.edu) or 503-725-4745 or dissertation advisor (Principal Investigator), Karen Haley at [khaley@pdx.edu](mailto:khaley@pdx.edu).

**Whom can I speak to about my rights as a part of research?**

The University Institutional Review Board (“IRB”) is overseeing this research. The IRB is a group of people who independently review research studies to ensure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. The Office of Research Integrity is the office that supports the IRB. If you have questions about your rights or wish to speak with someone other than the research team, you may contact: the Office of Research Integrity Phone: (503)725-5484, Toll-Free:1(877)480-4400, Email: [hsrrc@pdx.edu](mailto:hsrrc@pdx.edu)

**APPENDIX C - INFORMED CONSENT FORM - CONTINUED****Consent Statement**

I have had the opportunity to read and consider the information in this form. I have asked any questions necessary to decide to take part in the study. I understand that I can ask more questions at any time. I understand that each interview will take about 60 minutes of my time and that what I say will remain confidential meaning it will not be connected back to me in an identifiable way. I understand that the interview will be audio-recorded and those recordings will be destroyed once the study is complete. By signing below, I understand that I am volunteering to take part in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been provided with a copy of this consent form. I understand that if my ability to consent for myself changes, I may be asked to provide consent before I continue in the study.

I consent to join this study.

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**Name of Adult Participant**


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**Signature of Adult Participant**


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**Date**
**Researcher Signature**

I have explained the research to the participant and answered all questions. I believe that they understand the information described in this consent form and freely consent to participate.

---

**Name of Research Team Member**


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**Signature of Research Team Member**


---

**Date**

**APPENDIX D – FIRST INTERVIEW GUIDE**

1. Tell me about your academic experience on campus.
  - a. Tell me about your experiences with faculty.
  - b. How do you interact with professors in the classroom?
  - c. Tell me about the professor you connect with most.
  - d. Tell me about your experiences with advising, tutoring, in the classroom with peers.
  
2. Tell me about your social experiences on campus.
  - a. Tell me about your experiences with faculty/staff/fellow students outside of classroom settings.
  - b. Tell me about any other things you do on campus outside of attending class.
  
3. Where do you find community on campus?
  - a. How do you see yourself as belonging or not within the university community?
  - b. How do you see yourself as belonging or not within the business school community?
  - c. Are there instances where you have felt isolated or like an outsider on campus?
    - i. If so, can you give me an example?
  
4. Where do you find community off-campus?
  - a. How have you been able to maintain family relationships while in school?
  - b. Where else do you experience feelings of community?
  
5. Tell me about what helps you succeed in school.
  - a. How does your family support you?
  - b. How do you experience support from other forms of community (friends, mentors)?

**APPENDIX D – FIRST INTERVIEW GUIDE - CONTINUED**

6. What keeps you in the game? How do you keep your focus on completing your degree?
7. On a scale of 1-10, how much do you feel like you belong on campus?
  - a. Can you tell me more about how you chose that number?
8. On a scale of 1-10, how much do you feel like you belong within the business school?
  - a. Can you tell me more about how you chose that number?

Questions informed by Hagerty & Patusky 1995; Hoffman, et al., 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Maestas, et al, 2007; Yosso, 2006

**Research Connection**

Q1-Q2: Academic and social experiences have been found to influence sense of belonging and student persistence (Hoffman, et al., 2002; Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1993, 2006). These questions are designed to allow students to provide a broad narrative about those experiences. (RQ 1)

Q3: A sense of community on campus has been linked to student sense of belonging (Hagerty & Patusky 1995; Hoffman, et al., 2002; Strayhorn, 2012). (RQ 1a & 1c)

Q4 – Q6: Community cultural wealth and counter-narratives about support and success (Yosso, 2005, 2006) are critical elements to consider for students of color. Hurtado & Carter's (1997) study on Latino student's sense of belonging included a focus on connections to family. (RQ 1b & 1c)



**APPENDIX E – POST-INTERVIEW DEMOGRAPHICS**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Pseudonym Name Chosen: \_\_\_\_\_

What is your major(s)? \_\_\_\_\_

When do you expect to graduate (year &amp; term)? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you the first person in your immediate family to attend college?    Yes            No

How do you identify with regard to race/ethnicity? Examples include: Hispanic,  
 Latino/a/x, Chicano/a/x, Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Etc.

Please include all that you identify with. \_\_\_\_\_

What is your generational status in the U.S.? Check one.

This is for research purposes only, will be kept strictly confidential and will not be shared  
with the university.

- Recent immigrant (you came to the U.S. after birth). Yes? Are you a DACA recipient?
- First-generation (born in the U.S., parents were born outside the U.S.)
- Second-generation (parents were born in the U.S., grandparents were born outside the U.S.)
- Third-generation (grandparents and parents were born in the U.S., great-grandparents were born outside the U.S.)
- Fourth-generation or Native American (Great-great grandparents were born outside the U.S., or as far back as you know, your family has resided in the U.S.)

**Research Connection:** Demographic questions chosen based on literature regarding culture, immigration and persistence (Torres, 2003, 2004).

**APPENDIX F – INSTRUCTIONS FOR PHOTO-ELICITATION**

Thank you for your willingness to participate in the photo-elicitation component of this research!

The goal for this part of your participation is for you to take pictures that represent your experience studying business at this university. This is your opportunity to express yourself visually. When we meet again, we will review the pictures together, and you will have the opportunity to share your narrative about the photos.

**Step by Step Instructions:**

1. Please take or find five pictures that represent your experience on campus as a Hispanic/Latinx student.
2. Please take or find five pictures that represent where you find community or belonging (on campus or off).
3. Email the pictures you select to me one day before your second interview. The images will be enlarged and printed for our in-person discussion.
4. Attend the second interview to share your perspectives about the pictures and what they represent or mean to you.

If you have any questions about these instructions, please contact me via email.

**Thank you for your participation!**

**APPENDIX G – SECOND INTERVIEW GUIDE**

1. Tell me about what this picture represents or means to you.
2. How does this picture represent belongingness or community to you OR  
How does this picture represent your experience as a Hispanic/Latinx student?
3. Is there anything you want to highlight or point out in this picture?

**AFTER PICTURE DISCUSSION:**

4. Describe the racial climate you experience on campus.
5. Have you witnessed or experienced racism, exclusion, micro-aggressions, or discrimination on campus because of your Hispanic/Latinx background?
  - a. If yes, how have those experiences influenced your feelings of belonging on campus?
6. Tell me about your experiences with White faculty.
7. Tell me about your experiences with faculty of color.
8. What could the university or the business school do in order to support you or make you feel more welcome in college?
9. On a scale of 1-10, how likely are you to continue your studies and graduate from this university? If below 5, how likely to continue studies elsewhere?
10. What do you think the university or the school of business could do to help Latinx students persist to graduation?

**Research Connection:**

Q1-Q3: When interpreting images, we must ask questions about what and whose purposes the images serve in order to consider what hegemonic assumptions or ideologies are being conveyed (Denton, Kortegast, & Miller, 2017). (RQ 1a, 1b, 1c)

Q4 – Q7: Designed to provide data that can be used to analyze the student experience and their previous narrative (interview and photo elicitation) through a critical race lens. (RQ 1, 1a, 1b, 1c)

Q8 & Q10: Opportunity for students to share their ideas, seeing them as sources of knowledge that can inform institutional approaches to student support (Delgado Bernal, 2002). (RQ1 + Implications)

Questions informed by research on belonging, critical race theory, and Latinx student persistence (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Maestas et al., 2007; Yosso, 2006)

**APPENDIX H – CODES AND ASSOCIATED THEMES****Community Cultural Wealth**

## Aspirational Capital

- Drive to Finish - Make Parents Proud
- Drive to Finish – Perseverance
- Drive to Finish - Prove Doubters Wrong
- Sense of Purpose - Future Vision
- Sense of Purpose - Prioritizing School
- Views on Success

## Navigational Capital

- Prioritizing School - No Luxury of Wasting Time or Money
- Self-Reliance – Independence
- The Experience of Suffering

## Resistant Capital

- Advocacy

## Familial Capital

- Familial Capital
- Importance of Family
- Family Commitments
- Family Support - Sharing School with Family
- Family Support – Understanding

## Social Capital

- Cultural Group, Club, Organization, Center Involvement
- Giving Back to Community
- Peer Connections - Ethnic Identity
- Peer Connections - Students of Color

## Lingual Capital

- Second Language

**Racial or Cultural Influences on Belonging**

- Cultural Group, Club, Organization, Center Involvement
- Different from Hometown
- Lack of Diversity in Hometown
- Diversity in Portland
- Food Influences on Belonging
- Ethnic Identity Development
- Pride in Ethnic Identity
- Ethnic or Cultural Considerations
- Breaking Cultural Expectations
- Immigration
- Ethnic or Racial Representation on Campus
- Lack of Representation
- Lack of Diversity
- Experiences with Faculty of Color
- Experiences with White Faculty
- Marketing to Students
- Microaggression
- Racism
- White Student Lack of Awareness
- Never Felt Alienated, Different, Discrimination
- Perceptions of Difference
- Perceptions of Diversity at [the university]
- Racial Experience

**APPENDIX H - CODES AND ASSOCIATED THEMES - CONTINUED****Positive Influences on Belonging not Explicitly Racial or Cultural**

- Belonging in Business School
- Connections to Nature
- Prioritizing Health
- Faculty or Staff Connections
- Influence Belonging
- Faculty Interactions
- Feelings of Belonging
- Sense of Community
- Feeling Like Part of a Family
- High Academic Expectations
- Persistence - Hard Work
- Institutional Commitment
- On-Campus Job
- Effective & Ineffective Teaching
- Mentorship
- Peer Influence on Belonging
- Peer Interaction
- Friends on Campus
- Pre-term Relationship Building
- Programmatic Student Support
- Reminders of Home
- Sense of Place Influenced by Space
- Shared Experience- Business Students Get Each Other
- Experience of Being a Student
- Student Engagement - Not Cultural, Race, Ethnic Oriented

**Negative Influences on Belonging not Explicitly Racial or Cultural**

- Policy Influences on Belonging
- Big Classes - Hard to Make Connections
- Large School - Hard to Stand Out
- Difficulty Engaging
- Lack of Engagement
- Doubting Abilities
- Questioning Persisting
- Feelings of Isolation
- Not Yet Feeling Sense of Belonging
- Instructor Impact on Feelings of Welcomeness
- Lack of Feelings of Community
- Lack of Friends on Campus
- Lack of Support from Others
- Feeling Written Off
- Life Commitments Interfere with Academics
- Off-Campus Job
- Financial Barriers

## APPENDIX I – PARTICIPANTS

Pseudonym	Belonging at University	Belonging in Business School	Likelihood of Graduating from Univ	Class	Race or Ethnicity Selected	First Gen Student?	Generation in US	Age
German	10	10	8	Soph	South American, Venezuelan	No	Recent Immigrant Not DACA	24
Maria	10	10	10	Soph	Latina, Hispanic, Chicana, Mexican	No	1st	19
Contreras	10	9	11	Jr	Latino, Hispanic	Yes	1st	20
Sara	8.5	10	10	Sr	Latinx, Hispanic, Chicana	Yes	1st	21
Carlos	8.5	7	9	Soph	Latino, Chicano, Mexican	Yes	1st	19
Martin	8	9	9	Jr	Latinx	Yes	2nd	19
Monica	7.5	8.5	8	Soph	Hispanic, Mexican	Yes	1st	19
Isabella	7	10	10	Soph	Latina, Chicana, Mexican American	Yes	1st	19
David	7	7	9	Jr	Latino, Hispanic, Mexican	No	Recent Immigrant DACA	21
Vanessa	7	7	10	Soph	Mexican American	No	1st	19
Val	7	6	10	Sr	Latina, Hispanic, Columbian	No	1st	20
Abe	6	8	9	Sr	Latino, Mexican	Yes	1st	22
Michael	5	8	10	Sr	Latino, Hispanic, Mexican	No	2nd	34
Jesus	5	5	10	Soph	Latino, Chicano, Mexican	Yes	1st	20
<b>Average</b>	<b>7.6</b>	<b>8.2</b>	<b>9.5</b>					