A Phenomenological Study Of The First Year College Experience Of First-generation Latinx Students

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE FIRST YEAR COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

OF

FIRST-GENERATION LATINX STUDENTS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY DOCTORAL PROGRAM
HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING

BY
CEIL SCANLAN
JUNE, 2019
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE FIRST YEAR COLLEGE EXPERIENCE
OF
FIRST-GENERATION LATINX STUDENTS

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of
Doctor of Education
in the National College of Education

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Educational Psychology Doctoral Program
Human Development and Learning

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the first-year college experience of four first-generation Latinx college students and how they made sense of that experience. The participants were all graduates of a private independent high school in a suburban community, and research was conducted through interviewing the participants. Analyzing their perceptions garnered a deeper understanding of and insight into their lived experience in order to help develop strategies and programs to better support the enrollment, retention and graduation of first-generation Latinx college students. Study findings suggest that future practices at both the high school and the college level should include emphasis on providing culturally congruent outreach to parents, developing cultural competency in faculty and counselors, providing culturally responsive mentoring to students and their families, and including early exposure to the college process and financial aid information to better support these students in attaining their goals.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is with deep gratitude and awe that I first and foremost thank the four participants who made this body of work possible. They are exceptional men and women who opened their lives and hearts to me, and trusted me to tell their stories in hopes that it would make a difference.

A heartfelt thank you to my dissertation chair, Shani Beth-Halachmy, who believed in me, and provided judicious guidance, thoughtful encouragement, and steadfast support and advice throughout this scholarly journey. Thank you, too, to my dissertation committee — Diane Salmon, Terry Jo Smith, and Angela Elkordy who gave of their time and professional expertise, and provided many thoughtful insights and perspectives that supported and enhanced my work on this study.

Throughout the ten years of my doctoral journey my husband, Patrick, was a constant support, preparing dinner nearly every night and pushing me to go to the library so I could dedicate my time to writing and researching; I am deeply grateful for his love and encouragement. Thank you to my three children—Connor, Kelly, and Maureen —for being excited for me to go back to school, even though it meant I was sometimes preoccupied with my own school work. I hope that I have been a role model for them to believe in the importance of pursuing one’s passion and seeing it through to the end.

Thank you, too, to my extended family, dear friends, and compassionate colleagues for their encouragement and support, especially Barbara Sherman, my great friend and colleague, who insisted I pursue my Doctorate degree rather than a second Master’s degree. I’m glad I listened to her.
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To my dear Aunt Maryanne whose faith in me provided support and motivation, and instilled confidence in me that I could actually do this. She never failed to ask me every time I saw her, ‘So, when do I get to call you Doctor?’ She passed away five short months before I completed my dissertation, but I believe she knows I have finished it.

You can call me Doctor now, Maryanne.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Both of my parents were college graduates; my mother graduated from Mundelein College in Chicago and my father graduated from Iowa State University. Since I was in grade school, the expectation in my family had always been that I, too, would go to college; however, when my mother died unexpectedly in January of my sophomore year in high school, I was set hopelessly adrift. With no clear path and struggling to balance my academics with the new demands of household chores I had taken on as the oldest daughter in a family of seven children, my grades suffered and my motivation towards school plummeted. Despite this, my high school awarded me a scholarship in honor of my mother so that I could continue to attend my private all girls’ Catholic school. My teachers worried about me and were supportive of me as best they knew how, with one of the sisters even offering to help me do our family’s laundry. But I floundered, neglected my homework, and muddled through as best I could towards graduation. How I managed to get through high school is still a vague, but painfully palpable, memory. During my senior year of high school, my mother’s best friend from Mundelein College, Ellen Mae, encouraged me to apply to their alma mater. I was accepted and offered some scholarship money, which was incredibly encouraging. Ellen Mae was very supportive of me during this time, and provided me some guidance. In order to pay tuition, I applied for financial aid, took out college loans, and worked throughout college, as my father was not in a position to provide financial support. After my sophomore year, I transferred to Western Illinois University and majored in Special Education, with a Psychology minor. Carefully pinching pennies, I paid my own way through college with money from grants and loans, campus work-study, and several summer jobs.
However, even with working and financial aid, I ran out of money at the end of my first semester of senior year and could not pay the tuition bill for the spring semester. I was short $400, but it might as well have been $4000. I had exhausted my options as far as loans, grants and savings, and the grim reality was that I would not be able to return to college for my last semester.

That Christmas, as I attempted to patch the funds together, my older brother, Michael, gave me a Christmas present. Tucked inside an envelope were four $100-dollar bills to cover my tuition bill. True to his humorous nature, Michael had pasted little black and white photos of himself over the Benjamin Franklin images. My eyes still well up with tears when I remember this. There was no way I could thank him; I could not possibly give him a gift that even came close to his. This was more than $400; his gift changed the trajectory of my life because I could now return to college to complete my degree. He never asked for anything in return, or even for me to pay him back. He just said for me to do the same for somebody else in need someday.

In reflecting on this, I know that without the support and encouragement of my mother’s dear friend, and without the support and generosity of my brother, I would not be where I am today. The thoughtfulness of one individual who has your best interest at heart, and who is willing to give altruistically, can have positive ramifications that last one’s lifetime. I was able to return to Western Illinois, complete my college degree and earn my certification as a special education teacher for students with learning disabilities and social/emotional disorders.

This was an extremely challenging period in my life and a time when I needed support and guidance. Oddly enough, I didn’t really know that support might have been
available and I didn’t know how to ask for it. It was only because others realized I could use some help and reached out to me that I received it. Suffering the loss of my mother at a young age and struggling to navigate my way through the college process pretty much on my own, has deepened my understanding of the challenges others experience and sensitized me to the vulnerabilities many young people face. Certainly these experiences have shaped the way I view the world and have been the impetus that has guided my career choices.

I have had held several different teaching positions throughout my career as a special education teacher, from initially working as a teacher’s aide in a junior high self-contained classroom to teaching adolescents with emotional or behavioral issues during their hospitalization in a psychiatric hospital. Currently, I work as a learning specialist at a private independent high school in the suburbs of a large midwestern city. The work I am engaged in there is usually very rewarding; however, at times it can be quite challenging.

The school consists of a predominately white, upper-class student population and is situated within a white, wealthy, suburban community. The school professes a commitment to diversity in its mission statement and, therefore, they recruit students for enrollment who are of a diverse background — racially, ethnically and economically — to create a more diverse student body. Many of these recruited students come to our school on scholarship and they often encounter academic and social challenges that differ markedly from their previous school experience. Working as a learning specialist, I provide support to students who have learning issues or who need help developing study strategies to facilitate their academic progress. Additionally, I work with many of our students who are on scholarship, as they may be academically unprepared or have gaps in their learning or in their approach to school that challenge them in accomplishing their goals. Often, they struggle to ‘fit in’ with the
culture of our school. I have seen and felt their frustration with the challenges to their success at our school, especially when they were recruited because they were students who had done well in school, often earning A’s in their grade school.

A few years ago, I worked closely with two Latinx students, one male and one female, whom I got to know through our Spanish Heritage program. In this program, I was one of three faculty members who worked with our students of Latinx background to support them at our school. One of the Spanish teachers worked with students on developing their Spanish skills in reading and writing, another teacher worked with them on fostering leadership skills, and I worked with them to support their academic and study skills.

Both of these students were children of Mexican immigrants who had not attended college, so I began to work with them on some of the pieces of the college process — helping them edit essays, complete the FAFSA, and apply for scholarships. One of the students was awarded a General Assembly Scholarship, which paid her college tuition for one year. The other student earned a merit scholarship to college for $5,000.

I worked most closely with the young woman, traveling to her university campus with her to meet her advisor, and helping her navigate some of the financial aspects. I attended orientation with her to support her through the process of selecting classes and registering for placement exams. Her personal and family life was demanding, and even though she was an excellent student, she had to drop one of her classes. She finished her first semester, earning two A’s and a B, but she had to drop out of college and did not return for the second semester. Her reasons for leaving college were complicated. She had gotten married during her first semester, which brought some new financial and family obligations. Even with her scholarship, she still had to pay $1800 each semester, along with a $350 parking fee.
Additionally, she was driving forty-five minutes to an hour to and from school daily. Her school expenses, the long commute, and the need to contribute to her family financially all converged to make college no longer an option for her.

The young man also dropped one of his classes, as he was struggling with academic challenges and low motivation. He ended his first semester with two B’s and a D and lost his merit scholarship. He also did not return for second semester, as he felt he could not meet the demands and expectations of college, and finances were now more of a challenge. It was extremely disappointing, for them and for me, that both of them left after only one semester; I constantly questioned what we as a school could have done differently, or better, to support both of these students while in high school to foster their success in college.

**Statement of the Problem**

There exists a disparity in college acceptance, retention and completion rates between Latinxs and non-Latinxs within the United States. The Latinx population is growing yearly at a rate of 3.6% and they comprise 18% of the school population in the United States (U. S. Census Bureau, 2009; as cited in Rolon, 2005, p. 31). According to Gandara (2010), while the Latinx population in America is one of the fastest growing groups, “the growth in college degrees for Latinos is almost flat” and remains significantly below that of non-Latinx (p. 24). Additionally, she states that in 2008 only 12% of Latinxs aged 25-29 had earned a bachelor’s degree in comparison to 21% of African Americans and 37% of whites.

With the changing demographics of our country and the importance of getting a college education to secure a good job, we need to develop programming that will support the acceptance, retention and completion of Latinx students in college. Understanding the academic experience of Latinxs is critical as we look to ensure that there is equity in
education and that we have a depth and breadth of understanding how to best support all students to ensure their academic success. Access to equitable education is a topic that is examined in *The Institute for Higher Education Policy Brief*, which discusses the unique challenges that first-generation college students face. Many Latinx students are first-generation college students, so understanding their experience and the factors that may impede or foster their college success is critical in order to determine how best to increase their access to college and improve their retention and completion in higher education.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experience of first-generation Latinx college students and how they made sense of their first year of college. Capturing and understanding the unique experience of first-generation Latinxs gives voice to their experience and may lead to strategies and programs to better support the enrollment, retention and graduation of first-generation Latinx college students. This is something that educators, administrators and scholars should all be concerned with, if we truly believe in educational equity and social justice, to help a growing community of our population gain the skills and education that will positively impact the quality of life for all in America.

**Research Question**

- What is the lived experience of first-generation Latinx college students of their first year of college?

**Design and Methodology**

This study was a qualitative study with a phenomenological design. Data was gathered through interviews with four first-generation Latinx college students to gain an understanding of their lived experience as a first-generation college student. Participants
were recruited from graduates of the high school where I teach that fit the criteria of a first-generation Latinx college student. Analyzing the data from the interviews was essential to making meaning of the participants’ lived experience.

**Summary**

In chapter one, I opened with a narrative of my personal experience with the college process and a discussion of the career path I have chosen. In the introduction I share my experience helping two Latinx students with their college process, who both left college after their first semester. This led me to try to understand what things we as a school might have done differently to support them in this process that could have led to a different outcome. I followed this with my statement of the problem, statement of purpose, and my research design and methodology. In the next chapter, my literature review, I examine the educational experience of first-generation Latinx college students in the United States.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review literature related to the educational experience of Latinx students in the American education system, in particular first-generation college students, as my research question focuses on the lived experience of the first year of college for first-generation Latinx college students. The first part of this chapter focuses on the historical background of Latinx education, followed by a review of Latinx critical race theory. The last section of the chapter reviews current research in Latinx education and ends with a summary and conclusion.

Historical Background of Latinx Education

Growth of U. S. Latinx population

According to a 2010 U. S. Census Brief, the Latinx population is the fastest growing group in the United States (Humes, Jones & Ramirez, 2011). 50.5 million people identified as Latino or Hispanic in the 2010 census and they account for 16 percent of the population. In their report, Humes, Jones and Ramirez (2011) state, “The Hispanic population increased by 15.2 million between 2000 and 2010”, which is a 43 percent increase in that time period (p. 3). The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) predicts that “The number of Hispanic public school students is projected to increase from 12.5 million in 2013 to 15.5 million in 2024 and to represent 29 percent of total enrollment in 2024” (n.p.). Even though more Latinx students are enrolling in college (Lopez & Fry, 2013, n.p) and the Latinx population in America is one of the fastest growing groups, the growth in college degrees for Latinx remains significantly below that of non-Latinx. With the changing demographics of our country and the importance of getting a college education to secure a good job, we need
to examine our education practices and policies, and develop programming that will support the acceptance, retention and graduation of Latinx students in college.

Before going further, the definition of Latinx and my choice to use the term in this paper must be clarified. During the course of writing this dissertation, the term Latinx began to appear in scholarly use and in more common usage in the community in which I teach. The use of the word Hispanic or Latino were more commonly used terms when I began my research. I had started my writing choosing to use the terms Latino and Latina, often written as Latino/a. My rationale was based on my research which included this information from the U.S. Census Bureau (2010),

Hispanics or Latinos are those people who classified themselves in one of the specific Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino categories listed on the Census 2010 questionnaire - "Mexican," "Puerto Rican", or "Cuban"-as well as those who indicate that they are "another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin." People who do not identify with one of the specific origins listed on the questionnaire but indicate that they are "another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin" are those whose origins are from Spain, the Spanish-speaking countries of Central or South America, or the Dominican Republic. The terms “Hispanic, “Latino”, and “Spanish” are used interchangeably. (State and County Quick Facts, n.p.)

Even though Latino and Hispanic are often used interchangeably, Latino had become the more preferred term in an effort to draw the appropriate connection to Latin cultural roots as opposed to the roots that developed as a result of Spanish colonialism (Dotson-Blake, Foster, & Gressard, 2009). However, by 2014 the term Latinx began to emerge in social media and, according to Salinas and Lozano (2017) by 2016, “scholars [had] begun to use it more
Latinx has emerged as a gender-neutral and gender-inclusive term as opposed to Latino and Latina, which are used to convey gender (Salinas & Lozano, 2017; Tello & Lonn, 2017). I have thoughtfully and carefully chosen to use this term because it is gender-inclusive and, especially given the context of my dissertation, I find it important to take a position on promoting diversity and equity through the words I choose to use and the impact they have on the community they represent. For the purposes of this paper, the term Latinx will be used rather than Hispanic or Latino/a, except when it is being quoted from a source.

Many Latinxs are first-generation college students. First-generation is defined in The Institute for Higher Education Policy Brief as “those whose parents did not attend postsecondary education” or those “whose parents did not earn a degree” (Cunningham, Cooper, Leegwater & Smith, 2012, p. 3). ‘First-generation college student’ does not necessarily mean that a student is from a minority population, but they are “more likely than their peers to be racial/ethnic minorities” (Cunningham, et al., 2012, p. 3). According to the report The Condition of Education (2012) for the year 2011, 61% of the Hispanic population in the U.S. aged 5-17 years old were considered first-generation college students, in that neither of their parents had attended college and had a high school education or less. This is in comparison to 23% of the white population in the same age group and 41% of the same aged black population. (Aud, S., Hussar, W., Johnson, F., Kena, G., Roth, E., Manning, E., Wang, X., & Zhang, J.) Being a first-generation Latinx college student brings unique challenges to the college process and experience, and these require unique supports and solutions. Understanding issues that may either impede or foster the success of first-generation Latinx college students is critical in order to determine how best to increase their
access to college and improve their retention in and completion of college. Starting with a review of statistics for Latinx college enrollment, retention and graduation rates will provide some relevant background for these issues.

**College Enrollment, Retention and Graduation Rates of Latinxs**

Despite the fact that the Latinx population in the U. S. is the fastest growing group, Latinxs as a group have the lowest level of educational achievement (Liu, 2011). In terms of high school enrollment, Latinxs are the second largest group of students at “22% of high school students”, but they have the largest high school dropout rate. (Santiago, Calderón Galdeano & Taylor, 2015, p. 7). Even though Latinxs make up 22 percent of the high school population, they constitute “only 13 percent of the nation’s high school graduates” (Santiago, 2011, p. 9). A statistic indicative of a more positive trend is that the high school dropout rate for Latinxs is decreasing. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the high school dropout rate for Latinxs in 2000 was 28 percent and by 2012 it had decreased to 13 percent. (NCES, 2002, as cited in Nora and Crisp, 2009; NCES, 2013, as cited in Santiago, Calderón Galdeano & Taylor, 2015). However, this lower percentage of Latinx high school graduates does negatively affect the college enrollment rates for this group.

The percentage of Latinxs enrolled in college - 37.5 percent of all Latinxs aged 18 to 24 years - is still lower than the percentage of their white counterparts enrolled in college - 42.1 percent (Lopez & Fry, 2013). However, the college enrollment rate for Latinx high school graduates is increasing with a record number in 2012 of “49% of young Hispanic high school graduates enrolled in college”. (Lopez & Fry, 2013, n.p.). While the college enrollment rate for Latinx high school graduates is on the rise, nationally Latinxs make up only 16 percent of college students (Ennis, Rios-Vargas & Albert, 2011). In examining
college graduation rates for Latinxs, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, “in 2012, 14.5% of Latinos 25 and older” had earned a college degree (as cited in Lopez & Fry, 2013). There is a disparity between Latinx students who enroll in college and those who attain a college degree, and this degree attainment lags behind that of the white population aged 25 and older who has earned a college degree. A smaller percentage of Latinx students are enrolling in college than are white students, and of those who enroll, a larger percentage of Latinxs than whites drop out before earning their degree. In considering that the percentage of Latinx students who graduate from high school is lower than their white counterparts, fewer Latinx high school graduates are enrolling in college than are white high school graduates, and a greater percentage of Latinxs drop out of college than their white counterparts it is critical that we examine why this is. Some of the factors to be considered are the educational experiences of the parents, the socio-economic status of the family, the student’s academic preparation and school support, and cultural perspectives - both that of the student and their families, and that of the education system.

The literature on first-generation college students provides descriptors that are unique to this group and that define their experience. The parents of first-generation students have not attended college themselves and, therefore, they and their children often lack knowledge about the college process, expectation of the college experience and funding for college. These students “are more likely to come from families that have lower incomes” (Vergara & Hightower, 2006, p. 83) and often will work part-time or full-time to pay for college (Cunningham, Cooper, Leegwater & Smith, 2012; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell & Perna, 2008). Additionally, first-generation students are often less academically prepared for college, enroll part-time in college or in two-year colleges, often live at home to help out with
responsibilities and lack specific knowledge about how to pay for college and financial aid opportunities (Vergara & Hightower, 2006; Cunningham, Cooper, Leegwater & Smith, 2012; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell & Perna, 2008). Weaker academic preparation often results in first-generation students enrolling in remedial coursework in college. First-generation students have a higher dropout rate and take longer to complete college than non first-generation students (Engle & Tinto, 2008, as cited in Cunningham, Cooper, Leegwater & Smith, 2012). Each of these characteristics presents challenges that can make college enrollment and retention for first-generation students daunting, and are obstacles that must be dealt with to successfully graduate from college. While these are factors that may describe and impact many first-generation college students, there are other considerations, such as social and cultural factors, that additionally impact first-generation Latinx college students.

**Cultural Challenges Latinx Students Encounter**

Latinx students who are also first-generation college students often face cultural challenges that impact their educational experience. Vergara and Hightower (2006) discuss the impact that Latinx families have on their student attending college. In a study conducted with first-generation Latinx college students at the University of La Verne, Prieto-Bayard (1999; as cited in Vergara & Hightower, 2006) found that the students’ parents did not understand college demands and felt challenged by their student and the school, students experienced a change in values, and there was pressure from family for students to conform to traditional roles. Similarly, Castillo, Conoley, Choi-Pearson, Archuleta, Phoummarath, and Van Landingham (2006), found in their study of Mexican American female college students that “the conflict of balancing the values and beliefs of two different cultures may be a source of perceived distress for some Mexican American women in college” (p. 155).
These cultural expectations are an important factor to consider when examining Latinx’s educational experiences. However, it is not just the culture of the student that impacts his or her educational experience, it is also the culture of the school that shapes a student’s experience. Murrell (2008) discusses his situated-mediated identity theory and how it considers the “cultural legacies of a people” and the importance of incorporating these legacies and representing them “in the social and cultural environments of the school” if students of color are to have equal access as whites to educational achievement and success (p. 20). He calls for examining the achievement gap between students of color and their white counterparts not as a deficiency on the part of the students of color, but to consider our educational systems “and the ways they fall short of providing students what they need to perform, achieve and develop” (p. 5). He posits that traditional identity theory is based on white, middle-class norms and does not take into account the racial, cultural and linguistic identities of children of color. Identity is fluid and is shaped by the many social settings in which individuals interact. Therefore, Murrell (2008) argues that schools must work to incorporate racial, ethnic and cultural identities of students of color to create “identity-enabling school environments to promote identities of achievement” (p. 35). Additionally, he asserts that the identities of the teachers must be taken into consideration as well as those of the students, because it is these interactions of identities that shape and inform student learning. Arana, Castañeda-Sound, Blanchard, and Aguilar, (2011) found in a study they conducted to understand what factors contribute to college persistence for Hispanic students that, for some students, having a “recognizable cultural identity within the university” was of significant benefit to them (p. 245). They assert, “Shared cultural experience seems to offer emotional support, which in turn encourages engagement and persistence” (p. 246). They
discuss the importance of considering the interaction of the student’s cultural identity with that of the school and offering programming that supports their culture and heritage helps foster a connection.

In the next section I will discuss Critical Race Theory and Latinx Critical Race Theory, and while I find this an effective lens to examine the educational challenges of Latinxs, I also see Murrell’s situated-mediated identity theory as another lens to deepen the understanding of these educational challenges, while also providing a tool to facilitate change within school systems that will support achievement for Latinx students.

With the growth in the Latinx population in the U. S., it is predicted that by the year 2060 thirty-one percent of the U. S. population will be Latinx (Santiago, Calderón Galdeano & Taylor, 2015). Consideration must be given to what factors and supports contribute to educational attainment for Latinxs, and what factors impede their educational success, when faced with the low percentage of Latinx high school and college graduates. Clearly, supports must be considered to foster educational attainment, but the barriers must be explored as well. It is critical then that we look at factors that pose unique challenges to higher education for Latinxs and consider factors that promote college success for this population. In examining this, Latinx Critical Race Theory has shaped my understanding and provided a perspective for understanding Latinx education experiences.

**Latinx Critical Race Theory in Education**

Latinx Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) provides a framework to examine race and racial inequality in education as it relates to the Latinx experience. This framework examines issues that affect Latinxs that Critical Race Theory (CRT) does not necessarily address, specifically “language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype and
sexuality” (Villalpando, 2004). Examining racial inequity in the U. S. historically has been along the lines of Black and White (the Black/White binary) but including these issues gives ‘voice’ to the experience of marginalization and oppression that is unique to Latinxs. LatCrit borrows the structure and tenets of CRT, but “emphasizes the intersectionality of experience with oppression and resistance and the need to extend the conversation about race and racism beyond the Black/White binary” (Yosso, Villalpando, Delgado Bernal & Solórzano, 2001, p. 99). This broadens the scope of the discussion about educational inequity while including the perspective and experience of the Latinx population. Ladson-Billings, (1998) discusses the importance of “voice” in CRT stating, “The voice of people of color is required for deep understanding of the educational system” (p. 16). The dominant narrative is most often privileged and is told over and over again. Without the voice of people of color this narrative remains unchallenged and, along with it, educational inequity remains unchallenged. Ladson-Billings and Tate IV (1995) posit, “without authentic voices of people of color (as teachers, parents, administrators, students, and community members) it is doubtful that we can say or know anything useful about education in their communities” (p. 58). Providing a structure that gives authentic voice to those individuals and groups that are marginalized exposes oppression and educational inequity; it makes visible racism and inequity, which is the first step in initiating change. Dixson and Rousseau (2005) explain that ‘voice’ in CRT is the validation of the experiences and knowledge of people of color as the authority on their oppression and the inequity in education they experience. Tate (1994; as cited in Dixson & Rousseau, 2005) explains the importance of giving ‘voice’ to Latins at the higher levels of education. He argues, “We must continue the battle to have our experiences and voice heard in academic discourse. Our voices provide stories that help others think in different ways

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about complex, context-dependent domains like schools and communities” (p.12). LatCrit gives voice to the Latinx experience, creating an opportunity for Latinxs to tell their stories and providing an important insight and perspective that promotes critical thinking about educational inequity.

One powerful way to give ‘voice’ to the Latinx experience is through counterstorytelling. According to Delgado (1989) counterstorytelling “is both a technique of telling the story of those experiences that are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society) and a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power and whose story is a natural part of the dominant discourse – the majoritarian story” (as cited in Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 327). Counterstorytelling provides the perspective of those who experience oppression and racism in a way that cannot be told by those in power. It is only with this perspective that the majoritarian story can be dismantled. Dixson & Rousseau (2005) discuss the importance of counterstorytelling as “a means to counteract or challenge the dominant story” (p.11). The counterstorytelling component of LatCrit exposes the reality of the educational experience of Latinxs as they see it and live it. The authors provide an example of counterstorytelling with a Latinx college student describing his high school experiences, “His account of his experiences at the predominately Latinx school includes descriptions of low expectations on the part of teachers, a school-wide focus on discipline and a lack of academic rigor in the curriculum, even for college-bound students” (Fernandez, 2002; as cited in Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Using the lens of LatCrit and the component of ‘voice’ in LatCrit brings to light the reality of the Latinx educational experience from the Latinx perspective and exposes the discrimination, oppression and racism that challenge the dominant story.
Counterstorytelling also presents and validates the rich cultural wealth that Yosso (2005) describes as a strength of communities of color, bringing it to the forefront as an asset and resource that will foster resistance and transform racism and oppression in our educational system. From the framework of CRT, Yosso describes six forms of cultural capital that are inherent in communities of color: “aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant” (p. 77). These are positive components and expressions of resilience, competent language and social skills, strength in family connections, development of community networks, facility to navigate social structures, and resistance to racism and prejudice. Counterstorytelling involves not only exposing systemic racism, oppression and educational inequity, but also revealing Latinx cultural richness and knowledge that is so often overlooked when only the dominant story is told.

According to the framework of CRT, it is not enough to expose systemic racism, oppression and educational inequality; CRT and LatCrit both demand a change in the status quo. CRT requires an understanding of the underpinnings of racism, oppression and educational inequity, but then, in consideration of the social activism component, CRT and LatCrit in education requires one to work to dismantle it and transform it. (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Since the formation of CRT, scholars have been calling for changes in education, but changes in educational inequity and education policies have been slow to come. Yosso (2005) discusses the challenges to educational change stating, “Educators most often assume that schools work and that students, parents, and community need to change to conform to this already effective and equitable system” (p.75). The challenge is for school leaders to look critically at policies, programming and curriculum through the lens of CRT and recognize that the culture of schools needs to
change. Murrell (2008) is one scholar who has discussed the importance of changing the culture and environment of schools by including the culture and identities of students of color. This is a process that needs to start with educational leaders who recognize the value of teachers examining their own identities, values, behaviors and culture and who are willing to work at becoming “cultural learners”. He describes this as a collaborative effort between parents, teachers and school leaders to develop an educational environment that will promote student engagement and participation for all learners and will lead to academic success.

It is critical to give voice to the Latinx educational experience so this perspective is included and valued in educational programming and policies. This will help promote understanding of Latinxs unique educational experience.

Current Relevant Research

Barriers to Latinx Academic Success in College

There are many challenges and obstacles for college students to navigate in order to successfully complete college; for first-generation Latinx college students these obstacles can be very complex. Three of these more prominent obstacles discussed in the literature - financial concerns, work obligations, and academic preparation - will be discussed in the following section.

Financial concerns. Low socioeconomic status often is a concern for many Latinxs, according to Aud, Fox, and KewalRamani, (2010), as 27 percent of the Latinx population in the United States lives in poverty (as cited in Crisp, Taggart & Nora, 2015). This has an impact on financial considerations when it comes to paying for college. Vergara and Hightower (2006) studied a first-generation Latinx college program at the University of La Verne, California and found that “ninety percent of the first generation minority students at
La Verne reported that they had some concerns about financing college” (p. 88). Lack of awareness about the cost of college, the availability of financial aid and the completion of the FAFSA can be challenges. Hurley and Coles (2006), recommend that an added emphasis on financial aid and scholarships should be provided by counselors for Latinx students. Kiyama (2010) discusses the financial barriers encountered by parents in an outreach program stating, “Parents’ educational aspirations for their children was often clouded by anticipated financial barriers” (p. 347). She describes the sacrifices parents were willing to make in order to have the money for college costs, which included moving to a smaller apartment or taking on a menial campus job to get a tuition waiver. Students can apply for financial aid to cover some of the costs, but according to the 2003/2004 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (as cited in Nora & Crisp, 2009) “Although proportionately Latinos were more likely to receive aid than all of the other racial groups combined, they received the lowest average aid award of any racial/ethnic group” (p. 322). Scholarship money may be available, along with grants, but lower socioeconomic status remains a barrier to college enrollment. For students who are undocumented there are issues of having to pay out-of-state tuition and their ineligibility for federal financial aid, which is an additional obstacle (Contreras, 2009). Additionally, low-income, first-generation students have a greater “unmet financial need – need that remains after applying all financial aid” than their peers and they often fall short of what they need to pay for college (Engle and Tinto, 2008, p. 3). Financial concerns for first-generation Latinx students are often a barrier to persisting in college.

**Work obligations.** Latinx students, who often have a lower socio-economic status, may be expected to work to help with the costs that financial aid and scholarships do not meet. According to Vergara and Hightower (2006) the students in their study were “expected
to work, sometimes two jobs, during college to contribute to the family income” (p. 85). Work obligations can interfere with the time students need to dedicate to studying. Haviland and Rodriguez-Kiino (2009) discuss a case study of first-generation Latinx female college students in which 38 percent of the students worked to offset college costs, some as much as 20 hours a week. This compares to eight percent of college students nationally who work. In their report, Tornatzky, Macias, Jenkins, and Solios (2006) discuss the challenge to succeeding in college for Latinx college students due to family obligations and the expectation to contribute to the family by working or helping out with younger children. Working is one avenue to help relieve the financial barrier many Latinxs face in paying college costs, but if often presents another barrier to college success.

**Academic preparation.** The rigor of a student’s secondary academic preparation is a significant factor in his/her ability to successfully manage the academic workload of college. There is considerable discussion regarding the academic preparation of first-generation Latinx college students in the literature and the impact it has on college success. Borrero (2011) states that data shows “Latinos are more likely to live in poverty and attend under-performing schools than their peers” (p. 24) and that many Latinx students are also English Language Learners (ELLs), which challenges their academic achievement. The study conducted by Hernandez (2002) in which he interviewed first year Latinx college students about their experience indicates that students felt academically unprepared for college. Seventy percent of the students interviewed said they had difficulty adjusting academically to college. One student is quoted as saying “I don’t think high school prepared me to go to college…I used to take all the honors classes and supposedly they were preparing me for college…but the work can’t compare to college” (p. 73). Students not only felt challenged
academically, but also had difficulty with the expectations and “pace” of college work. Additionally, Hernandez (2002) cites a study by Richardson and Skinner (1992) of ethnic minority college students in which “the most often cited reason for underachievement was lack of preparation” (p. 78). Lascher (2008) discusses studies that indicate that Latinx students enter college less academically prepared than non-Latinxs. A 2007 ACT study (as cited in Lascher, 2008) “showed that while Latinxs had made gains in recent years, they lagged in double-digit percentages behind other high school graduates with respect to meeting ACT-Tested benchmarks in each of the four areas tested” (p. 21). Tornatzky, Macias, Jenkins, and Solios (2006) argue that Latinx students often have weak study skills and weak preparation in math and science and recommend for “post-secondary institutions to provide early, intense and program-integrated remedial services” (p.11). According to Berkner and Chavez, (1997) “many Latino/a students begin postsecondary education with lower levels of ‘college readiness’, a measure of qualification for university-level work computed from several precollege measures such as senior class rank, aptitude scores, and academic course GPA” (as cited in Crisp, Taggart & Nora, 2015, p. 251). Students in the program at University of La Verne rated themselves low as far as academic abilities, and Vergara and Hightower (2006) discuss the tendency of first-generation minority college students to have less confidence in their academic, math and writing ability than whites or minorities who are not first-generation. Secondary academic preparation that does not provide students with the level of rigor required in college nor teach students study skills that facilitate college success can create an obstacle for first-generation college students.

Faced with financial concerns about how to pay for college, juggling a work schedule along with a study schedule, and being academically unprepared are complicated challenges
that many first-generation Latinx college students must overcome to graduate from college. The literature also discusses another complex challenge to college success that many of these students experience, and that is the conflict between the values of their home culture and the culture of their school.

**Challenge of Navigating Between Two Cultures**

Schools have their own culture, comparable to the different cultures within our society. The school culture in the United States is most often reflective of the dominant culture in American society (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch & Greenfield, 2000), and according to Davis (2005), the culture of education in America is Euro-centric, capitalistic and emphasizes individual success. Students are expected to make educational and occupational choices that are of benefit to them. Many first-generation Latinx students are the first in their family to go to an American school and experience these cultural expectations, which can be markedly different from the culture of their home (Borrero, 2011). Latinx cultures emphasize interdependence and a core value they share is collectivism (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Greenfield, 2000). According to Ruiz (2005), collectivism encourages “interdependence and group collaboration” as opposed to the American educational values of competition and individualism. First-generation Latinx students struggle to navigate both worlds without compromising their identity and cultural values, all while striving for academic success. As Vergara and Hightower (2006) explain, “The tradeoffs can be traumatizing as students sacrifice their close ties with family members in order to succeed in school” (p. 84). This cultural challenge can be an emotional and psychological burden that students must navigate as they work to strike a successful balance between their home culture and the culture of the school system. This is a complicated dynamic for first-generation Latinx students to manage.
in their pursuit of an education and an additional obstacle to overcome. Working to engage Latinx families and value their involvement in their student’s educational process is paramount.

**Importance of Engaging Families**

**Impact of parent involvement.** Throughout the literature, the importance of working to engage families and involve parents in their child’s education process is seen as a critical factor in a student’s academic success and college completion. Research indicates there is a correlation between parental involvement and academic success and students perform better academically as a result of parental involvement (Dotson-Blake, Foster, & Gressard, 2009; Marschall, 2006; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003). Additionally, parent involvement has a positive effect on college enrollment. In their study on parent involvement and its effect on college enrollment for diverse ethnic groups, Perna and Titus (2005) demonstrate that parent involvement “promotes college enrollment by conveying norms and standards” (p. 507). When discussing factors that will increase the academic success of Latinxs, the importance of encouraging parental involvement and supporting parents in culturally appropriate ways to facilitate their involvement deserves significant attention.

**Latinx parent involvement.** Borrero (2011) discusses the importance of family support for college enrollment in a study of first-generation Latinx students. All of the students in this study expressed that it was the support of their families that helped them get accepted into college. Additionally, in their study Vergara and Hightower (2006) explain the importance of family involvement in Latinx student’s college retention stating, “In the eyes of FGSSP’s [First Generation Student Success Program] creators, academic success for first
generation students is strongly tied to family support” (p. 89). The support of parents and extended family helps first-generation Latinx students navigate the college process and manage the challenges they face that can be a barrier to college retention. According to Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch and Hernandez (2003),

…‘minority’ parent involvement in children’s schooling is a positive thing to the degree that it can result in (a) teachers’ increased understanding of the families and communities children come from, (b) parents’ increased understanding of how schools operate, and (c) opportunities for mutually-forged school culture.

(p. 47)

The impact of parental involvement positively affects the academic success of their children; for Latinx families this can also foster mutual cultural understanding that can help parents feel welcomed in the school and help teachers understand the wealth of the families’ cultural assets. However, it has not been easy for Latinx families to be included in their child’s educational process.

**Challenges to Latinx parental involvement.** The literature discusses some of the challenges that Latinx parents face in being involved in their student’s school and education and the importance of the school partnering with them to facilitate parental involvement. Perna and Titus (2005) discuss that the impact of parental involvement varies across races and ethnicities and they posit, “allocating resources to promote parental involvement is an effective approach for programs that are designed to increase the college enrollment of underrepresented groups” (p. 487). Cultural differences must be taken into consideration to effectively engage Latinx parents in the school. Dotson-Blake, Foster, and Gressard (2009) argue that the cultural disconnection between Latinx families and the school can cause
families to feel their cultural values are not valued and therefore parents do not engage with school personnel. Kiyama (2010) also discusses the importance of understanding the perspective of underrepresented families in order to engage them. She argues that educators need “to understand the realities that low-income and underrepresented families often face…There are realities behind what is often perceived to be a lack of involvement or lack of interest…lack of information does not mean lack of interest” (p. 352). Educators and school personnel need to work to develop and understand the cultural perspective of Latinx families. This is what is really at the core of involving and supporting Latinx parents in their child’s education, as this involvement is critical to the academic success and college enrollment of first-generation students.

**School outreach to parents.** Marschall (2006) explains that Latinx parents have very different ideas than school personnel about the roles of parents in education. She discusses that the school defines parent participation as attending “formal activities, such as school events or meetings or volunteering at the school…more traditional and formal roles”, which not only excludes the perspectives of participation of minority populations but also deflects “attention away from their [the school’s] responsibility to establish effective parental involvement programs for marginalized groups” (p. 1057). The onus is often on the minority family to assimilate or adapt to the culture of the school, but this makes Latinx parents and families feel unwelcome and devalues their cultural perspective. Marschall (2006) goes on to say that schools need to make the effort to reach out to Latinx parents as this “will not only improve parents’ and schools’ understanding of one another, including expectations, barriers, and resources, but that will foster mutually reinforcing and supporting relations” (p. 1057). School outreach to engage parents involves cultural understanding and cultural competency.
This approach takes the burden of assimilation off of the families, recognizes and validates their cultural assets, and puts the onus for parental involvement on both the school and the families. This can facilitate an effective parent-school partnership.

Clark and Dorris (2006) address the importance of schools partnering with parents in their study of university programs that engage parents in their child’s college preparation. The programs work with parents to convey information to them about the college process, and to help them develop advocacy skills and form relationships with school personnel. They also discuss the importance of schools reaching out to the parents to initiate that relationship.

In their study of the University of La Verne’s FGSSP, Vergara and Hightower (2006) discuss the program’s emphasis on improving communication with parents and ensuring that “culturally and linguistically appropriate materials” are developed (p. 91). In the three years of the study of this program, retention rates for students in the FGSSP were higher each year than they were for freshmen that were not enrolled in the program (Vergara & Hightower, 2006). Gandara (2010) also recommends that schools initiate communication to parents in a culturally appropriate manner. Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, and Perna, (2008) assert that it is important for schools to take the initiative to connect with parents to get them involved. The importance of connecting with and engaging parents of first-generation Latinx college students is a critical factor in ensuring the success of these students. Family is a central component of Latinx culture, and reaching out to and communicating with parents in culturally appropriate ways, and valuing their input and perspective, helps them support their student. This has been shown to have a positive impact on college retention and completion of first-generation Latinx college students.
**Including Latinx cultural perspectives in parent-school partnerships.** Having the school take the initiative in getting parents involved in their child’s education is a way to make parents feel welcomed, but that involvement needs to be a partnership. This means including the perspective and the cultural values of the parents. Dotson-Blake, Foster, and Gressard, (2009) advocate for including parents in the process saying, “To effectively develop a culture of respect, partnership efforts must involve parents in the planning process…It is extremely important to honor and respect the talents and resources available in the families of their students and the members of their communities” (p. 235). Including the families and the parents’ voices is critical to developing communication, cultural understanding and effective parent involvement. Similarly, Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, and Hernandez, (2003) assert, “Success with parents from these Latinx immigrant communities is predicated on cross-cultural understanding and openness to hearing how parents want to participate” (p. 68). The literature calls for training and professional development for teachers to develop cultural competency. Dotson-Blake, Foster, and Gressard, (2009) argue that educators must learn about parents’ cultural values and expectations and call for “formal cultural competency workshops” (p. 236) to broaden educators’ cultural perspectives. Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, and Hernandez, (2003) discuss the importance of professional cultural competency development to “bring about deepened relationships with parents, greater parent involvement in schooling and positive effects on students” (p. 66). What is significant is that educators need to develop skills and strategies that will help Latinx families be included in the culture of the school by valuing and including their perspectives and cultural values. Auerbach (2006) argues for the importance of understanding cultural ideologies such as *educación* which “encompasses moral training, based in the home, as well
as academic training, based in the school, with the former a condition for the latter” (p. 278). Additionally, Marschall (2006) demonstrates that schools with more culturally competent teachers who actively reach out to Latinx parents have “significantly higher levels of parent involvement in traditional school-based activities” (p. 1069). Outreach to Latinx parents by culturally competent teachers who see the value in parent involvement will support first-generations students in their academic achievement.

**Latinx parent involvement in the college process.** Parent involvement in the education process is also important so they have a clearer and more in-depth understanding of the college admissions, expectations and commitments, and financial aid. Kiyama’s (2010) findings indicate that many Latinx parents who have not attended college have an incomplete and inaccurate perception of the college process and are unclear of the expectations and demands of attending college. She describes one student who had hopes of attending college, but was “missing certain components of how to get there” (p. 345). According to Kiyama (2010) it is not a unique experience for first-generation college students to have less access to information about the college process. She recommends drawing on the knowledge that families already have about the college process and building on that, and then educating parents about what it entails, including addressing financial aid concerns. Rowan-Kenyon, Bell and Perna, (2008) discuss the difficulty that first-generation parents have in supporting their children in the college process, as they have not gone to college themselves and lack that first-hand knowledge and experience. This is concern is supported by Hernandez (2002) when he recommends “bilingual and culturally sensitive parent orientation programs need to be developed to familiarize parents with the college setting…and to better understand the academic rigor and demands that will be placed on their children” (p. 79). Vergara and
Hightower (2006), in their study of the FGSSP at the University of La Verne, which has programming that includes parents in the college process, state that the FGSSP “sees its role as strengthening students and their families as they move together through the college experience” (p. 89). Because many Latinx students are often first-generation college students, parents may be unaware of the expectations and demands that the college process and attending college requires, so this program works to educate the parents to inform and empower them. Parents of first-generation Latinx college students often lack a full understanding of the college experience, but want to be supportive of their student. Engaging them in the process early on, genuinely valuing what they contribute to it, and continuing to keep them engaged throughout their child’s college career is essential to college retention of those students.

**Valuing Latinx Families’ Cultural Assets**

**Deficit Thinking and Misconceptions**

The literature discusses the challenge that first-generation Latinx students encounter in schools when their cultural assets are not recognized and valued. This diminishes students’ cultural capital, and they often have to deal with a school system and teachers that have a ‘deficit view’ when it comes to Latinx students and Latinx culture (Kiyama, 2010; Yosso, 2005; Villalpondo, 2004). Yosso (2005) explains that “Deficit thinking takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because: (a) students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skill; and (b) parents neither value nor support their child’s education” (p. 75). This line of thinking that puts the blame for students’ failure on the student and his culture, absolves the school of having to incorporate diverse cultures and requires the student to assimilate to the dominant school
culture. Villenas and Deyhle (1999) argue that blaming the students’ culture and language for school failure “gave comfort to the teachers but little hope for any institutional critique of either their expectations, pedagogy, or the limited school curriculum” (p. 429). The literature discusses the importance of ‘reframing deficits’ and seeing the potential in the culture and language of Latinx students (Rolon, 2005; Kiyama, 2010). Kiyama (2010) asserts, “If we continue to assume that parents and families are lacking in experience, knowledge, and educational attainment, we will overlook the inherent resources that are present in these families” (p. 350). Recognizing the cultural values and language of Latinx students as assets will empower them and their families and contribute to students’ academic success rather than failure.

**Validating Cultural Knowledge and Values**

Validating the culture of Latinx students and recognizing and celebrating the cultural capital that they have is important for increasing college retention and graduation rates in first-generation students. Borrero (2011) discusses the importance of recognizing the linguistic ability of bilingual Latinx students as an asset. There is also an asset in the strength of Latinx’s extended families and Borrero (2011) argues that it is important to validate the “funds of knowledge” that Latinx students have accumulated through their culture (p. 25). He asserts that it is important to value the multicultural backgrounds that diverse students bring to the classroom and see this background as a resource, which will foster their academic success. Kiyama (2010) demonstrates the importance of recognizing the resources inherent in Latinx families. One such resource is the concept *educación*, which is the Latinx family’s role in creating a sense of “responsibility that serves as a foundation for all other learning” (p. 349). Validating Latinx culture as an asset empowers the student, allowing him/her to
move away from the deficit view that organizations sometimes unwittingly perpetuate. In her examination of the Puente Project, Laden (1999) discusses the Project’s emphasis on affirming students and acknowledging “what they bring with them as valuable cultural assets that provide a foundation and framework for their learning experiences” (p. 59). She argues that the most successful college programs embrace the socioeconomic and cultural diversity of its students of color, empowering students to use their background to transition to a new situation. Laden says this instills in students “a sense of belonging to the organization from the very beginning” (p. 60). This sense of belonging that is created through embracing the students’ culture and recognizing it as an asset facilitates the students’ ability to navigate between the culture of the school and that of their home. Laden goes on to say this affirms Latinx students “as academic achievers who can make it in higher education and as ethnically identified and ethnically affirmed individuals who are accepted for who they are” (p. 67).

For students that have to balance two cultures - the culture of their heritage and the culture of their school - this affirms not only who they are, but that their unique culture is valued and that they have cultural capital, which will help them achieve academic success. Yosso (2005) advocates for using the lens of Critical Race Theory to see the “cultural wealth” in minority communities and calls for a restructuring of “US social institutions around those knowledges, skills, abilities and networks – the community cultural – possessed by People of Color” (p. 82). Embracing diverse cultural values and knowledge as assets and incorporating them into educational culture will facilitate a change in education that will promote educational equity and foster academic success for first-generation Latinx students.
Often it is the families that are expected to adapt or change to the school culture. However, successful engagement and empowerment of Latinxs means that educators and school policies need to make changes, too.

**Factors that Contribute to Academic Success for First-Generation Latin College Students**

**Cultural Competency of Educators and School**

It is important to recognize and validate the cultural wealth of Latinx students, but teachers need to develop the skills to incorporate diverse culture perspectives into their pedagogy. Haviland and Rodriguez-Kiino (2009) discuss a Title V faculty development program at a small women’s college with a 30 percent female Latinx population and a faculty who is 85 percent white. The purpose of the program was to address the “gap between the cultural backgrounds of the faculty and students at the college and the important effect that gap might have on limiting student success” (pp. 201-202). Recognizing that there was a cultural divide and that it was impacting students’ academic achievement was important, the faculty participated in professional development to learn “how to adjust their pedagogy to make the course material relevant to students’ experiences” (p. 201). There were two components to the program – the first was “faculty development programs grounded in multicultural pedagogy for 21st century learners” (p. 198). The second component was a program for the students that provided supports such as mentors and tutors. The faculty training program began with the teachers examining their own culture and then provided support for them to develop culturally responsive pedagogy. Faculty participated in a six-week online course and a three-day summer retreat. Although faculty demonstrated changes in attitudes towards their students and a deeper understanding of their cultures and
ethnicities, faculty were challenged with incorporating culturally relevant material into their practice. Ultimately, though, the study showed that ongoing professional development that is embedded in teaching practice is necessary to facilitate a more culturally competent pedagogy. Dotson-Blake, Foster, and Gressard (2009) call for educators to learn the cultural practices of their Latinx families and not hold onto the expectation that the parents and students need to adapt to the culture of the school. They assert that schools should develop “cultural competency activities that can be infused into the normal routine of teacher inservices and parent engagement opportunities” (p. 237). Additionally, they call for including “specific suggestions for working with the Latinx community into professional development in-services for the faculty” (p. 237). In their report Cunningham, Cooper, Leegwater and Smith (2012) provide an example of a school with a large Latinx population and a predominately white faculty that provided professional development workshops to faculty, staff and students. The training was on cultural sensitivity in order to “create a more relevant classroom experience” (p. 16). The professional development consisted of a series of workshops that were led by outside experts in diversity work. The results indicated that this training led to an improved campus climate and a “greater sense of connectedness” (p. 17). Providing professional development and in-service training is necessary in order for teachers to have the tools and resources to include various cultural perspectives in their teaching. Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, and Hernandez, (2003) discuss the importance of “professional development on cultural values” not only for teachers to develop cultural understanding, but also to incorporate that knowledge into their classrooms and pedagogy, which will make their teaching more relevant for diverse cultures. The authors describe the Bridging Cultures Project, which was a research project in six elementary schools in California whose goal was
to improve the educational experience and outcomes for their Latinx students through
developing cultural awareness, not only of their students but of their own culture as well.

Developing cultural competency is just one component of inclusive change.
Examining the curriculum and whose faces are pictured and whose voices are heard
throughout is another component to consider.

**Multicultural Curriculum**

School culture often mirrors the dominant culture of society, which is true of the
Curriculum as well. For Latinxs, this is challenging as they seldom see themselves
represented in the school curriculum, and therefore it may have little meaning in their lives.
Rolon (2005) discusses the benefits of creating a school environment and curriculum that
acknowledges and integrates Latinx identities. Stein (2005) posits that the social literacies of
Latinxs must be included and honored in the curriculum, and our changing demographics
demand a multicultural curriculum. He goes on to say that what works for a white student in
the classroom does not necessarily work for a Latinx student. Laden (1999) in her study of
the Puente Project discusses the writing program in which Latinx students,

…read and do oral and written exercises based on Latino and other multiculturally
diverse literature…students draw on their multicultural expertise and firsthand
knowledge of their own cultural backgrounds…Thus, the students begin from a
position of strength by focusing on what they know as a foundation to which they add
new knowledge and skills in English composition. (pp. 62-63)

The Latinx students see their language and culture reflected in the curriculum, which makes
the curriculum more relevant for them. Burns, Keyes, and Kussimo (2005) discuss the critical
importance of curriculum being relevant in order for students to be motivated to learn. They
emphasize the importance for curriculum to build “on the strengths and cultures reflected in
the student body” (p.116). This is important not only for the Latinx students and other
minorities; it is important for students of the dominant culture so all students see the strength
and value in diversity. Rather than viewing the various cultures and experiences of Latinx
students as barriers to education, it is important to build on those cultural experiences and
integrate them into the curriculum.

In addition to developing cultural competency in educators and including a
multicultural perspective in the curriculum, providing supportive mentoring programs for
Latinx students is another consideration to provide a successful educational experience for
Latinxs.

**Mentoring Programs for Student and Families**

The literature identifies mentoring as a key component to successful college retention
for first-generation Latinx students. Mentoring is an essential component of both
California’s Puente Project and the University of La Verne’s First Generation Student
Success Program (FGSSP). Laden (1999) describes a mentor as someone

…who enhances the skills and intellectual development of the protégé; …
facilitate[s] the protégé’s entry and advancement; … welcome[s] the newcomer into a
new occupational and social world; … acquaints the individual with the organizational
values, culture, customs, resources and specific actors… provides advice and moral
support when necessary. (p. 57)

A mentor can be an individual from the professional community, a peer mentor or a faculty
member. The Puente Project is an excellent example of effectively integrating mentoring
into a college retention program for first-generation students. The mentoring component
enlists professionals from the Latinx community and, according to Laden (1999), it is considered “as crucial and having the greatest stake in the success or failure of the education of its Latino youth” (p. 62). Mentors are integrated into the program and they commit to mentoring a student for at least a full school year. The Puente Project emphasizes that mentors come from Latinx backgrounds, as they are cultural role models who “demonstrate how they maintain their cultural identities while successfully pursuing their career goals” (p. 63). The mentoring relationship is important in sustaining a student’s motivation, providing guidance and facilitating an understanding of the professional world. Puente students have also formed their own internal mentoring program, using older Puente students at a four-year university to mentor younger students who are transferring there (Laden, 1999). The transfer students benefit from the older students’ knowledge and experience, which promotes a smoother transition for them to the university.

Vergara and Hightower (2006) discuss the significance of the mentoring program at University of La Verne’s FGSSP. Mentors in this program can be alumni, faculty or staff members, or older students. Mentors work closely with students, assisting them in choosing a major, “assessing career interests, and figuring out strategies for dealing with the challenges of being a first generation college student” (p. 92). Mentors are included in the end of the year celebration for the students, along with family members, faculty and staff.

A mentoring partnership is of great benefit to first-generation college students as they navigate new paths. Mentoring is a two-way relationship and one that can help students learn the ropes and facilitate the transition to a new environment. Professional mentors from the community, as well as peer mentors within the college program, can be valuable assets in the success of first-generation Latinx college students.
Facilitating teachers’ cultural competency through professional development, developing a curriculum that incorporates diverse cultures, and providing mentors to support first-generation Latinx students and their families are factors that the literature shows contribute to the academic success of first-generation Latinx college students.

**Summary**

The Latinx population in the United States is the fastest growing population but it has the lowest educational achievement. While college enrollment for Latinxs is increasing, it is still below that of their white and black counterparts, and the college graduation rate reflects a significant college dropout rate for Latinxs.

First-generation Latinx students face many challenges to not only higher education, but to high school graduation. With 27 percent of the Latinx population living in poverty, finances are a concern. Along with this, contributing to the family through work often is an obligation that young Latinxs have. Latinx students often are academically unprepared, which is a challenge to their success in college. Navigating between the culture of the home and the school culture makes it more challenging for Latinxs to be successful in school.

Parent involvement has been shown to be a significant factor in students’ academic success, but Latinx parents encounter challenges to their involvement in the schools. Historically, ethnically diverse families have been expected to assimilate to the culture of the school, and this results in parents being disengaged from school involvement. Schools need to reconsider this expectation and work to include diverse perspectives in their partnerships and reach out to parents to welcome them into the school community.

It is critical that schools and educators partner with parents, but they also need to see the value in Latinx families’ cultural knowledge and values. Schools must adapt to our
changing demographics and incorporate different ways of knowing into the environment, the pedagogy and the curriculum. Providing professional development to develop cultural competency, creating curriculum that is reflective of our changing and increasingly diverse student body and providing supports in the way of mentors are key components to promoting the academic success of a diverse population.

Understanding the lived experience of first-generation Latinx college students will give voice to their particular experience and shed light on what supports and resources were valuable to them and also worries and challenges they encountered. This can help us understand issues in our educational system that is at the root of educational inequity and look to develop policies and programs that support all students.

**Conclusion and Implications for Future Research**

There is a body of research that addresses the lower academic success of first-generation Latinx students, along with the obstacles they must work to overcome in order to achieve that success. Indeed, there are many challenges, but the research also addresses the factors and supports that can lead to higher academic achievement. Our education system is slow to employ these components, and it is not keeping pace with the growing Latinx population. However, there are many first-generation Latinxs college graduates and this begs the question – what support did they have throughout college? What challenges did they encounter and what resources and strategies helped promote their success? This is an area to examine more in depth. Another area is to look at how school policy and practices play a role in supporting Latinx families or oppressing them.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of first-generation Latinx college students and how they made sense of their first year of college. Capturing and understanding the unique experience of first-generation Latinx students gives voice to their experience and may lead to strategies and programs to better support these students in high school and in college.

Research Question

The following question was initially formulated to guide this study:

- What is the lived experience of the first year of college of first-generation Latinx students?

However, as I interviewed my participants, the questions I created for the interview protocol led to the participants sharing extensive, meaningful, and important information about their high school experience of going through the college process as a first-generation Latinx college student and how that experience shaped and informed their college decisions and choices, and ultimately their first-year college experience. Another research question emerged during the interview process that I recognized was essential to understanding the participants’ college experience and important to include. Their college experience did not just begin with attending college orientation, but it began when they started the process as sophomores and juniors at Dewey Upper School. As I began to comb through the data from the interviews, I formulated a second research question to include the participants’ high school experience and the impact that had on their college process and decisions.
• What factors during high school shape and inform the college application and admission process for first-generation Latinx college students?

Research Design

This study was a qualitative study with a phenomenological design. The researcher gathered data by interviewing students to gain a deeper and richer telling of the participants’ stories within their social or organizational experience. Creswell (2013) explains the criteria for determining when to use qualitative research. He explains:

We conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored...when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study...to develop theories when parallel or inadequate theories exist for certain populations and samples or existing theories do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem we are examining. (pp. 47-48)

Qualitative research allows the researcher to deeply examine and understand an issue, centers the participants’ stories in the study, and can lead to new theories that effectively guide policies and practices.

Denzin and Lincoln (2008) define qualitative research as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, multiple practices that make the world visible” (p. 4). The researcher is immersed in the study, collecting data and “attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p. 4). Qualitative research involves the researcher engaging in that which he is studying and working to make meaning of the lived experience of the participants. Creswell (2013) builds on Denzin and Lincoln’s (2008) definition of qualitative research, but
emphasizes including a specific qualitative approach or framework in the methodology. He defines qualitative research as beginning,

…with assumptions and the use of theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. (p. 44)

Qualitative research requires the researcher to investigate and understand the meanings that individuals give to a problem. In order to do this in an organized and structured manner, Creswell (2013) argues for including a specific qualitative approach in the methodology. He explains the reasons for identifying a specific approach are,

…to present it as a sophisticated study, to offer it as a specific type so that reviewers can properly assess it, and, for the beginning researcher, who can profit from having a writing structure to follow, to offer some way of organizing ideas that can be grounded in the scholarly literature of qualitative research. (p. 69)

Using a specific approach in one’s research helps guide and structure the research, while enhancing its scholarly tone. Being a beginning researcher myself, including a specific approach in my methodology helped focus my study, as well as guided my research process. A phenomenological methodology was the best-suited approach for this research study and next I explain how this fit with my study.
Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a methodology that guides the researcher in an exploration of the lived experience of participants with a common phenomenon and facilitates understanding its essence. I chose this method because my research is centered on understanding the lived experience of the first year of college for Latinx college students and how they made sense of it. Lichtman (2006) describes the phenomenological method as looking “at the lived experiences of those who have experienced a certain phenomenon…moving from very specific and detailed statements about the phenomenon, or even examples of the phenomenon, ultimately to the essence of the phenomenon” (p. 70). She explains the importance of examining the ‘lived experiences’ of the participants with a common phenomena and analyzing the data collected to find a common essence of that experience. This is similar to Creswell’s (2013) definition of phenomenological research. He states, “a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon…The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (p. 76). What is important in both of these explanations is understanding and highlighting the lived experience of the individuals who are participants in the study.

According to van Manen (2014) phenomenology is a “method for questioning, not a method for answering or discovering or drawing determinate conclusions” (p. 29). It is a way to understand the human experience through one’s perception of it. Edmund Husserl is considered the father of phenomenology and, according to him, phenomenology is “a descriptive philosophy of the essences of pure experience (van Manen, 2014, p. 89). This encompasses a description of experiencing the world through reflecting on it. Max Scheler,
Edith Stein, Martin Heidegger and Jan Patocka were phenomenologists who built upon and expanded Husserl’s conception of phenomenology (van Manen, 2014; Creswell, 2013).

**Defining features of phenomenology.** There are specific features that define phenomenological research that must be taken into consideration when using this methodology. Creswell (2013) describes the defining features of phenomenological research as 1) emphasizing the phenomenon that is being examined; 2) focusing on “a group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon”; 3) including a philosophical discussion of the underpinnings of phenomenology; 4) the researcher bracketing herself out of the research by making her views transparent; 5) collecting data through interviewing; 6) following a systematic approach of analyzing data that progresses from smaller units to broader themes; and 7) ending with a discussion of the collective ‘essence’ of the individual participants’ experiences (pp. 78-79). Utilizing this structure when conducting phenomenological research, especially making clear one’s own views, will help ensure that the analysis and interpretation of the data is reflective of the participants’ experience. Employing the framework of phenomenology for this study is valuable as it creates the potential to facilitate program and policy development.

**Researcher’s role in phenomenology.** Both Lichtman (2006) and Creswell (2013) discuss the importance of the researcher’s role in phenomenology and caution that the researcher must work to set aside, or bracket, her perspective so that the study emphasizes the participants’ experiences. Lichtman (2006) discusses the challenge of the researcher suspending her personal perspective of the topic and recommends rather than setting aside one’s own beliefs, that the researcher make “explicit one’s ideas on the topic” by having the researcher write down her perspective. She explains,
In qualitative research, each idea, interpretation, and plan is filtered through your eyes, through your mind, and through your point of view…your own lens is critical…Accept that you, as the researcher, serve as the filter through which information is gathered, processed, and organized. (p. 117)

Her suggestion is to make transparent one’s views on the topic so that the researcher is aware of what might be her own biases and understands that she is not completely objective. Creswell (2013) also discusses the need for the researcher to bracket herself out of the research and recommends something similar to Lichtman’s (2006) approach in that the researcher discuss her experience with the phenomenon so as to not let “past knowledge be engaged while determining experiences” (p. 79). Despite authentic efforts to bracket oneself out of the research, the data that emerges from the research is still subject to the interpretation of the researcher, and as Lichtman says, we need to accept this in a phenomenological study.

As a qualitative researcher, I made a conscientious effort to bracket out my ideas, beliefs and opinions of the college process for first-generation Latinx college students. However, it is challenging to be completely objective in analyzing and interpreting data; therefore, the understandings, insights, interpretations and knowledge gained from the study may have been impacted by my perspective. Growing up in a middle-class white family with parents who had college degrees definitely shaped my assumptions that a college education is something that most people should strive for. I realize that this is not necessarily the best option for everyone, though, and that there are certainly alternatives to a college education that are excellent options. I also recognize that I may assume dropping out of a college is seen as a failure, though again, individuals may leave college because they recognize they
have a better opportunity elsewhere. Making these assumptions transparent certainly helped me set aside my biases so that I was better able to objectively analyze my findings.

**Participants**

Participants for this study were chosen using criterion purposeful sampling. Terrell (2016) explains that purposeful sampling “is a sample chosen ‘on purpose’ because those sampled meet specific criteria” (p. 75). The focus of this study is on the lived experience of first-generation Latinx college students, therefore, it was important to select participants whose experience would “inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). The study included gathering data through interviews with participants who are first-generation Latinx college students. According to the U. S. Census Bureau (2010), Latinxs are those individuals who identify as being of Spanish, Hispanic or Latinx origin. These individuals’ countries of origin would be Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Spain, and Spanish-speaking countries of Central, South America or the Dominican Republic. Participants were the children of immigrants to the U. S. and one was an immigrant himself. In addition to identifying as Latinx, participants were men and women who fit the definition of a ‘first-generation college student’, which are those individuals whom neither parent earned a college degree.

This study was a qualitative study with a phenomenological design. Data was gathered through interviews with first-generation Latinx college students to gain an understanding of what their lived experience as a first-generation college student was like. Four participants who identify as first-generation Latinx college students were recruited from graduates of the school where I teach, which is a private independent high school in a white affluent suburb of a major midwestern city. Interviewing students who graduated from the
school where I teach provided an opportunity for me to garner a deeper understanding of their college experience. I was asking these individuals to reflect on their college experience, which is a highly personal experience that can expose vulnerabilities and evoke sensitive feelings. Having a connection to me where some initial trust has already been established hopefully allowed them to feel more comfortable reflecting on and sharing their experiences. I used a semi-structured interview format beginning with background questions and then broad, open-ended questions, such as: *I’m interested in hearing more about how you see yourself as a Latino. As a Latino what your experience was like in high school?; What can you tell me about your experiences in high school that were helpful in preparing you for college?; I’d really like to hear about your first year in college. What stands out for you when you think about that first year?*, and following up with more specific questions, depending on the participant’s responses. The interview protocol consisted of questions that focused on participants’ educational experiences, family background, support systems, motivations to attend college, expectations for college, navigation of their Latinx identity in school, and experiences they remember from their first year in college.

The interviews were processed and coded manually, using In Vivo Coding and Process Coding for first cycle coding, and Pattern Coding for second cycle coding as described by Saldaña (2016). According to Saldaña (2016), the use of In Vivo Coding will “prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” as it uses the participant’s own words (p. 106). This is critical to my study, as I want to be able to give voice to the participants as it is their stories that are being told. I used Process Coding, as well, to identify conceptual actions such as “struggling, negotiating, surviving, adapting” (Saldaña, p. 111). I found the combination of these two types of coding helped me stay true to what the participants were saying and
added value to their stories. I also found the use of analytical memo writing to be extremely helpful in processing the interview data and allowing me to reflect on what the participants were saying, as well as helping me make connections between the participants and identify patterns and themes that emerged from the data. Saldaña (2016) argues that analytic memoing helps the researcher “reflect and expound on [the data]” (p. 45). Analytic memoing was a very powerful way for me to get through my ‘analysis paralysis’ as I began to see patterns, themes, and connections within and between the interview data. For second cycle coding, I used Pattern Coding, which allowed me to summarize segments of earlier codes, group codes together, and identify the major themes within the data. I then organized my data under the major themes and categories that I identified through my use of Pattern Coding. I carefully chose the participants’ words from the interview data to make sure that I was capturing their experiences and giving voice to their stories. Using two first cycle coding methods, analytical memoing, and one second cycle coding method helped me to parse through the data with a critical and thoughtful eye.

As noted above, since I have personal knowledge of the students and their high school background, I could not be completely objective in analyzing and interpreting data. I had more of an awareness and information regarding the participants’ preparation and readiness, as well as their family context. While I was not immersed in their student experience, it is worth noting that I was more deeply embedded in their student experience than some other researchers might be. However, I engaged in my research fully aware of this advantage and made an open and concerted effort to bracket out my ideas, beliefs and perspective.
Procedures and Data Collection

Gathering data by interviewing participants is a common instrumentation for qualitative research. Interviews provide insight into how individuals experience their lives. Fontana and Frey (2008) explain that interviewing is a “basic method of data gathering… to obtain a rich, in-depth experiential account of an event or episode in the life of the respondent” (p. 120). While the purpose is to gather information about the respondent’s experience, the reality is that interviewing is a social interaction and that the information gathered is also informed by the interviewer’s lens. Lichtman (2006) explains, “…each idea, interpretation, and plan is filtered through your eyes, through your mind, and through your point of view” (p. 117). The researcher must be aware of her role in the interview process and work to be true to the voice of the participant. Fontana and Frey (2008) argue that, “…interviews are not neutral tools of data gathering but active interactions between two (or more) people leading to negotiated, contextually based results” (p. 119). With this in mind it is important that the interviewer gain the trust of her participants and develop rapport so that the participant is comfortable sharing sensitive personal information with her (Fontana and Frey, 2008).

For this study, I used a semi-structured interview format, beginning with broad, open-ended questions, and followed up with more specific questions, depending on the participant’s responses. The interview protocol consisted of questions that focused on participants’ educational experiences, family background, important people in their support system, motivations to attend college, what their expectations for college were, navigating their Latinx identity in school, and experiences they remember from their first year in college. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and the location of the interviews was
determined by interviewee preference. The chosen venues were quiet and private locations in which the interviewee felt confident that privacy and confidentially was maintained. Interviews were scheduled over two sessions. Jacob and Furgerson (2012) recommend a follow up interview as new questions may arise with later participants. They explain, “by design, the nature of qualitative research is emergent…A second and shorter interview gives you the chance to ask early interviewees questions that may have arisen in later interviews” (p. 5). Additionally, a second interview also provides an opportunity to clarify any questions from the initial interview that the researcher might have and gives the participant time to reflect and process the interview. Thus, a second interview may provide deeper insights into the participant’s experience.

All data collected from participants was gathered with informed consent of the participant and complied with all the regulations of the IRRB. Confidentiality of the participants was maintained throughout the study by the use of pseudonyms. Participants participated in one-to-one interviews, which were tape-recorded with permission of the participant. I also took brief notes during the interviews to record key phrases. Only the researcher had access to the tapes, transcripts and field notes, which were maintained in a locked file and they were disposed of at the completion of the study.

When seeking volunteers, I provided them with information about the study, as well as their rights as research participants. Ethical standards were followed when conducting research that involves human participants. Participants gave their informed consent, their confidentiality was protected, and they were protected from harm and risks (Fontana & Frey, 2008). Participants were fully informed of the nature of this study and the process to protect confidentiality prior to giving their consent. Participation in this study was voluntary and
participants had the right to withdraw at any time during the participation process without consequence. There were no potential risks to participants in this study — physically, emotionally or psychologically. Participants’ confidentiality was protected during and after the study, with pseudonyms being used for participants throughout the study.

**Pilot Study**

I conducted a pilot study interview with a colleague from my doctoral program to receive feedback on the interview protocol. We met at the university library, where it was most convenient for my colleague. From this pilot study interview I was able to determine the effectiveness of my interview questions and the time that I should allow for the initial interview. As a result of this pilot study interview, I decided to add some questions to my interview protocol, reframe a few others, and reorder some of the questions. The pilot study interview added value to my study as I was able to thoroughly and thoughtfully process the appropriateness of my interview questions and make adjustments to the interview questions where needed.

**Data Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed soon after each interview. I checked the accuracy by listening to the interviews again while reading through my transcriptions. The notes I took were used to confirm the accuracy of the interview. In analyzing the interviews, as I read through the transcriptions, I coded key words, phrases, statements, and patterns. As described by Lichtman (2006), “the codes emerge from the data via a process of reading and thinking about the text material” (p. 164). The codes were then grouped into categories and, eventually, into themes that reflected the participants’ experiences. It is through this analysis that I worked to make meaning of the individual participants’ experience.
Summary

This chapter began with presenting the research questions for this study and then followed with explaining the research design as a phenomenological study, which will focus on interviewing participants. This allows the ‘lived experience’ of the participants to be highlighted and examined at a deep level. The description of the participants followed, then the discussion of the procedures and data collection process, and next the pilot study interview. The chapter ended with discussing how data analysis would be conducted and the limitations of the study.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

This study sought to explore the lived experience of first-generation Latinx college students and how they made sense of their first year of college. Capturing and understanding the unique experience of first-generation Latinx college students gives voice to their experience and may lead to strategies and programs to better support the enrollment, retention, and graduation of first-generation Latinx college students. Many Latinx students are first-generation college students, so understanding their experience and the factors that might impede or foster their college success is critical in order to determine how best to increase their access to college and improve their retention and completion in higher education.

The purpose of this chapter is to understand the perspective of first-generation Latinx college students and give voice to their lived experiences of going through the college process and their first year as college students. My research questions for this phenomenological study are: What is the lived experience of first-generation college students of their first year of college? What factors during high school shaped and informed the college application and admission process for first-generation Latinx college students? The chapter begins with the presentation of the demographics and backgrounds of the participants, followed by data analysis and presentation of common themes that emerged in the interviews, and concludes with results and a summary of the findings.
Participants’ Demographics and Background

The four participants are all graduates of Dewey Upper School (a pseudonym), a private independent high school in an affluent community in the suburbs of a major midwestern city. The population of the high school is predominately white, though high-achieving students of color are actively recruited from other suburbs and the nearby city to promote and fulfill the diversity mission of the high school. The participants all self-identify as first-generation Latinx college students and all are of Mexican descent. Three of the four participants were born in the United States, and one was born in Mexico. The participant who was born in Mexico is undocumented, but he has DACA approval. Two of the participants are males and two are females. They range in age from 23-25, all come from a lower SES background, and all attended a public grade school before coming to Dewey for high school. Pseudonyms were used for the participants to maintain their confidentiality. Table 1 depicts the demographics for the participants.

Table 1: Participants’ Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age at Time of Interview</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Self-Identified Nationality and Heritage</th>
<th>Educational Attainment</th>
<th>Employed and/or Student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Adriana</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Mexican American</td>
<td>Earned B.A.</td>
<td>Earning M.A. in Nursing</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Mexican American</td>
<td>Earned A.A. Currently college junior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nicholas</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Mexican American</td>
<td>Earned B. A.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Roberto</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Male</td>
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<td>Did not graduate</td>
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Adriana. Adriana was born in a midwestern city of Mexican parents who immigrated to the United States in their teens. She is close with her family, including her maternal grandparents, and she grew up bilingual, speaking Spanish and English. Her parents insisted the family only speak Spanish at home, as her grandparents do not speak English. Her father attended school through the 5th grade, and although her mother did not graduate from high school, she earned her GED. Her mother also took classes in the United States to learn English. Adriana attended a private liberal arts university in the Midwest, where she lived on campus. She transferred from there after two years to a private liberal arts university in her hometown, because financially she could no longer afford to live away from home.

Emma. Emma was born in the United States and grew up in a far northern suburb of a major midwestern city. Both of her parents are Mexican immigrants, and her father is currently working on getting his citizenship. Emma grew up bilingual and still speaks mainly Spanish with her mother and English with her father. Her father finished high school and learned a trade in Mexico, which is in the field in which he currently works. Her mother left high school before she graduated to start working and earning money to support herself and her family. Emma attended a state university in the Midwest for one semester. She left school due to several complicating factors, but four years later returned to school part-time to earn her Bachelor’s Degree.

Nicholas. Nicholas was born in a large midwestern city of Mexican parents who immigrated here with their other children. His parents only speak Spanish, but he grew up speaking both English and Spanish. He speaks Spanish with his parents, and usually speaks English with his siblings. His mother finished high school and worked as a preschool teacher
in Mexico, and his father left school in the 3rd grade to work to help support his family.

Nicholas attended a small private liberal arts college in the Midwest for three semesters and then transferred to a state university in the Midwest during his sophomore year and graduated from there.

**Roberto.** Roberto was born in Mexico and lived there until he was 10 years old when his family immigrated here. He has applied for and received DACA approval. His parents are both Mexican immigrants and he grew up speaking Spanish at home and learned English in school. He also often spoke Spanish in grade school with friends, as he said there were a lot of Latinxs in his grade school. He began switching over to speaking English most often when he started high school. His father did not finish high school, and his mother earned her GED when they moved to the United States. Roberto attended a state university in the Midwest for one semester, but left as a result of several complicated factors. He hopes to someday return to college.

**Data Analysis and Presentation of Themes**

In this section I will discuss the overarching themes that emerged from the interview data. I initially asked each of the participants how they came to choose Dewey Upper School for their high school, as all four of them were recruited to attend the school because they were students of color. As part of understanding the complexity of the first-generation Latinx college experience, I felt it imperative to understand something of the participants’ high school experience, because this certainly influenced and shaped their college decisions.

**Choosing A Private Independent High School**

All four participants are graduates of Dewey Upper School, which is a private independent high school with a predominately white, upper class student body. The school’s
mission statement proclaims a commitment to diversity and the Admissions Office actively recruits high-achieving students of diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds to create a more diverse student body. However, attending Dewey as a student of color can come with some challenges, as students work to navigate the nuances of a school that often is markedly different from their grade school experience. Adriana learned about Dewey Upper School through a scholarship foundation that provides financial and educational support to economically disadvantaged students from the Midwest city in which she lives. She explained,

I still felt very unprepared for what I was getting myself into. I really struggled at first to get into the swing of things, especially because [Dewey] requires you to do a sport...that was really difficult because I would get home...exhausted and I would still have to do homework. It kind of, at times, I still teach myself things that I felt like other students already had built some skills, like critical thinking with reading, like I still had to build that. And so, it was rough.

Overall, Adriana was happy going to high school at Dewey and said that she felt accepted and comfortable there, but she said, “I never felt like it was my school, like I, I don’t know. I was still getting used to doing things.” She hesitated asking for help from her teachers and thought that asking for help was a sign of weakness, even though teachers offered help and provided her with their office hours. She realizes now that had she asked for help she would have done better in some of her subjects, but she said, “I kind of felt like I was on my own when I was learning it, like Algebra, math was, like, I remember Geometry was very hard for me”. Adriana was not prepared to ask her teachers for help, as that had not been something
she did in grade school, and viewing it as a sign of weakness made it difficult for her to speak up about needing extra help.

For Emma, attending Dewey was more of a challenge, as she came from a town that consisted of mostly Latinxs and African Americans and going to Dewey made her feel, ...as the token Mexican in that school because it was predominantly white. And not only that, I think at some point, economically, I also just stood out, because I obviously didn’t come from a wealthy family...so I really kept to myself in that sense. While she felt she received a good education there, she struggled to fit in culturally and economically. Emma explained,

At some point, as a Hispanic kid you’re like, ‘Wow, like at some point, do they want me here because I’m Hispanic and because I make their school look more diverse, or do they really want me here because I have the, like, intellectual capabilities that they want to help me grow in?’ So, at that point, sometimes I would struggle with that there but, at the same time, it kind of did, at some point, make me feel uncomfortable. You’re like, ‘Alright, like, am I just the token Mexican in the group or do they see me as a whole?’

Emma had a couple of close friends, but did not feel connected to the school and kept a lot of her personal life to herself. She also traveled an hour to school each way, which was a further challenge to attending Dewey. Additionally, she experienced microaggressions from some of the students who targeted the way she spoke and Emma said, very poignantly, “I think I had to change a lot of who I was for some people to be accepted”. It seems that the cost of attending a private independent school that promised a better educational opportunity might have outweighed the benefits for Emma.
Nicholas also learned about Dewey Upper School through a scholarship foundation. He felt that attending Dewey helped “mold me into the person I am and...I think it was okay to get me out of that comfort zone”. He completed his application for a scholarship to attend Dewey with several friends, who were also first-generation students. He said that he thrived at Dewey, even though he had some academic challenges initially. He said that his dad especially valued Nicholas attending Dewey because “he kind of sees it as like a better place for his kids”. His parents were very excited for him to go to Dewey for high school. For Nicholas, playing a fall sport helped him transition to Dewey, as he made the varsity team as a freshman and “that kind of just, you know, upped my confidence. Helped, like, kind of what I thought, like, okay, I’m gonna be thriving here. I’ll be okay here. I’m doing good here”. Making that connection through sports provided an invaluable network for Nicholas at Dewey. He also spoke about the security and comfort level he found at the ‘minority table’ at lunch. He explained, “Something I remember a lot is lunch and, at lunch, there was definitely, like, the minority table...and I think I definitely felt comfortable sitting there at first”. He found places at Dewey where he could connect with other students, and also other students of color, and he felt that helped facilitate his transition to a predominantly white high school. Nicholas felt having a level of comfort was helpful in letting down his “shield” because, for students of color, he explained, “They also have this culture shock and they’re not in a place with people that look like them”. Attending school as a Latinx in a predominantly white school brings a cultural challenge with it that students of color must navigate, in addition to adjusting to the academic expectations.

Roberto applied for a scholarship when he was in 8th grade that would give him an opportunity to attend Dewey Upper School. His parents had learned about it
from some family friends. His grade school friends warned him that he might not fit in at Dewey saying,

It’s all white people...they’re going to bully you...you’ll be the odd one out...So, I was very cautious at first, you know, I wasn’t, I was trying to keep to myself. I’m like, alright, let’s see what happens. But I realized that, well, they were wrong.

Roberto liked the small size of the school and he also felt Dewey provided him with a good academic foundation. Attending a private independent school with a predominantly white, affluent student body presented some challenges for the first-generation Latinx students, but it also provided them some opportunities that they might not have found attending their local public school. A prominent theme that emerged from the data was the value that families and the participants placed on education.

Factors Impacting Decision to Attend College

There are many factors that inform a student’s decision to attend college and a multitude of things that must be taken into consideration when making this decision. Among these are the value a family puts on education and earning a college degree, academic preparation, parental involvement, and financial considerations.

Valuing education. All four participants shared their perspective on the value of education and the value that their families placed on education, and the impact this had on their decision to not only attend Dewey Upper School, but to pursue a college degree. For Adriana, her mother was a big influence in her decision to attend college,
as she regretted not earning her own college degree. In talking about her mother’s influence on Adriana to pursue higher education, she explained,

She’s been the one that has mostly pushed education on my brother and I because she’s always said that not getting an education was her biggest, it was like her biggest regret. She was really upset…but she had no other option. She had to start working to help her parents. And yea, she wishes, she has always told me that she wishes she would have finished her education.

Both Adriana and her brother attended private independent high schools and they both went on to earn college degrees. While Adriana said that her mom was her biggest influence to get an education, she explained that her dad also sacrificed a lot so that she and her brother could go to school. She said, “We never felt like anything was missing in our life even though, now that I’ve grown up, I realize how much they had to work for what they gave us”. Earning a college degree was important to Adriana and to her parents, and Adriana wanted to earn that degree not only for herself, but to make her parents proud of her because they had supported her and sacrificed for her in order to make that happen.

For Emma, while she said both of her parents wanted her to “push yourself to do better than what we’ve done”, her father was more of an influence on her to pursue an education. Her father had always wanted to pursue his education; he had completed high school, gone to a trade school to learn a skill, and still is continuing to pursue an education through the local community college. Emma values an education as she sees it as a path to a better life and a career. She explained that she wanted:
...to do better for myself than what my parents have done...I think that pushed me to want, just want an education, because I feel like the only way you can succeed is by having the degree, by having an education, by putting yourself forward in that sense. So, I think that’s just what always made me want to have a career, want to do something better with my life than what has just always been known to me.

Emma initially left college after her first semester due to many complicated factors, which will be discussed later, but she returned to college four years later to continue to pursue the college education she desires.

Parents valuing an education was a big influence for all four participants to earn a college degree. Nicholas explained that in his family his parents prioritized getting a college degree first over working. He said,

So, my family, my parents, always pushed education. It was never ‘go to work instead’ or ‘we need money instead’; they never made it about that. They made it solely about, you know, ‘You’re getting an education; you’re going to college and, like, that’s the plan’. And that was always the plan.

Nicholas’s parents helped their children out as much as they could, too, financially, paying for his oldest brother’s college tuition in cash. Having older siblings who attended college before him also embedded in Nicholas the idea that pursuing an education was a priority.

Nicholas and all of his siblings have earned college degrees. He spoke about the impact on him of having older siblings having gone to college,

So, I think it was just normalizing the idea that college is just what you do, you know, and you’re so young, you know, I think you just kind of follow a path — you
go to school, after school you get a job. I think college very early on became

something I knew I was supposed to do.

Nicholas had watched his older sister filling out college applications and had traveled to
her college with his dad to pick her up from school and attend her graduation. Additionally,
his three best friends from grade school were all first-generation college students whose
parents were immigrants and he said it was really important in all of their families to go to
college, “So, I think just in my social circles it was very normalized to do so”. Nicholas
grew up with having the value of an education as an important part of his family values
and, thus, his personal values.

In Roberto’s family, his parents also continuously emphasized the importance of
going to school. In speaking about his parents, he said,

They both valued education very much and, you know, they always pushed it on us,
my sister and myself. Even to this day, even though I’m working and I have a decent
job. You know, ‘Can you go back to school, get a degree?’ So, I don’t hear the end of

that.

Roberto said that he grew up with his parents always discussing with him and his sister
going to college. He believes that it is a way to better oneself and he

said, “Without a college degree it’s kind of hard to get a job here in this country. So, I know
it’s very important.” Roberto left college after one semester, which will be addressed later in
this chapter, but he spoke about someday returning to earn his degree. His parents still push
him to return, but currently he has a good job and is making a decent salary. However, he

says he still sees the value and importance of having a college education and believes that is
the path for him to have a career that he would enjoy more, such as being a teacher. The
support and values of all four participants’ families had a clear impact on their seeing value in pursuing an education and that shaped their decisions to attend college. For first-generation college students, however, this decision is something they need more support with, because even though their parents value an education and support their student pursuing a degree, they do not have the experience and knowledge to help guide their students through the process.

**Academic preparation.** As presented in the Literature Review, the rigor of a student’s secondary academic preparation is a significant factor in his/her ability to successfully manage the academic workload of college. The literature discusses that many Latinx students come to college academically underprepared and have weaker academic skills and study skills (Borrero, 2011; Hernandez, 2002; Lascher, 2008; Richardson and Skinner (1992), as cited in Borrero, 2011; Vergara & Hightower, 2006). The data from the interviews indicates that this was true for two of the participants — Adriana and Roberto; however, Emma and Nicholas indicated that they felt Dewey Upper School provided them with the academic preparation they needed to be successful in college.

Adriana said that she struggled academically at Dewey, but she felt a lot of that had to do with her hesitancy to go see her teachers and ask for help. She explained that she believed this was a cultural norm, as she also encountered other Latinxs in college who felt the same about asking for help. Adriana stated,

I was kind of hesitant to ask for help [at Dewey], and I feel like if...I would’ve, it would’ve been a little bit easier for me. But I think that has to do with, I’ve talked to a lot of kids that are Latino, and for some reason it’s harder for us to ask for help. I don’t know what it is, but I’ve talked to a few girls that are in the nursing program
that are Latinas, and for some reason that we all, I don’t know what it is, but we all find it a little more difficult to send that email ‘Hey, I’m having a little bit of trouble understanding this. Can you please help me?’

This hesitancy to advocate for herself and ask for help continued into college, where Adriana felt her biggest academic challenge was developing effective study skills and getting extra help from teachers. She told a story of doing poorly on the first exam in her Psychology class freshman year in college, and then feeling overwhelmed and unprepared for the next Psychology exam. She decided to pull an ‘all-nighter’ to study the material:

I started crying because I felt like I was gonna fail this exam and, I didn’t, I felt like I had no one to talk to about it. And, umm, I don’t know, I just, just like out of nowhere I was, like, you know what, I’m going to sit down if I have to pull an all-nighter I will, but I’m going to get a good grade on this exam. And I did that, and I actually got an A on that exam.

Following that experience, Adriana began to change her approach to preparing for exams. She explained:

That’s when I started writing everything down that I didn’t understand. I would write it down and it kind of started there, and my study guides developed and now, to this day, I will make a study guide for every exam.

Adriana would make a detailed study guide for each of her exams in which she color-coded items and annotated. She also worked on her own to develop her study skills and she is proud to say that to this day in her Master’s degree program for Nursing, she continues to employ these study strategies.
Emma felt that Dewey Upper School prepared her academically for college. She asserted:

I think the knowledge that I gained there, I couldn’t gain anywhere else...they did a good job instilling, like, how do you study, how do you get through school, like, I know it down to a T. I am like, really, I went back into college after 4 years and was like ‘I got this’.

Even though Emma initially left college after one semester, it was not because she was struggling academically—she had earned all A’s that semester. Despite some personal challenges and financial challenges that she experienced, she continued to be a strong academic student. She continued, “I loved it [Dewey] for preparing me for college...it’s not something that I would have learned...going to any public school. I think I came out more prepared than most people I think at my age”. The academic and study skills Emma learned at Dewey helped her navigate a challenging first semester in college, and continue to support her as she pursues her Bachelor’s degree.

Nicholas initially struggled academically at Dewey as, according to him, in grade school, “I never studied for something in my life”. When he got to Dewey, he was not used to studying and he said, “I think some of the worst grades I probably got were at [Dewey]”. He shared an embarrassing experience during parent-teacher conferences in the fall of his 9th grade when his dad came to school and Nicholas had to translate what his teachers said at the conferences for his dad. He was struggling academically, because he was not used to having to study for tests. Nicholas said:
I brought my dad in...First time that he’s been there. They don’t have a translator ready. So, I sit in with all my conferences as my teachers had to tell me how I’m messing up, having to relay that over here.

This was doubling challenging for Nicholas because, not only did he have to translate for his father, he had to share bad news about his academic work with him. Nicholas continued:

I still don’t think I disappointed my dad, but it was the first time that he came to school for a bad reason for me, you know. Ummm...and that kind of kicked me back into gear, and, like, really quickly.

Nicholas changed his approach to school after that, and began studying for tests. He saw an improvement in his grades, especially in math and Biology. He was excited to share that he earned a 98% on the next math test. The improved grades reinforced that studying for tests was an important skill to develop. Nicholas also felt that the writing curriculum at Dewey prepared him very well for college. He explained:

The writing, I think, was exceptional, just because you do so much of it. And I, you know, I found out about all these little things that I just never did. By the end of it, I remember I could crank out a few pages in like an hour. And by the time I got to college, it was such a big advantage. Uhh.. especially when I was kind of exploring majors. I was a history major for, like, a year I think and, just because that was all paper-based, and I was able to just write these long papers and cite my sources and go, like, through texts. And I think the writing was probably the best thing that got me prepared, that I don’t think I would’ve gotten if I had gone to a regular public high school.
Nicholas said that learning to write well and analyze texts helped him maintain a 3.0 GPA when he transferred from the liberal arts college. He felt that academically he was very well-prepared for college, and his grades in college reflected that.

Roberto also said that, academically, he felt prepared for college. He explained “I think [Dewey] did a great job for me... Academically, I was all set... I was kind of surprised at how easy it felt. It was just, you know, more high school work... more of what I had already learned”. He noted, though, that math was always his weakest subject area, and that he was required to take a math summer school course prior to freshman year beginning. However, when the class began, Roberto said they were being taught basic math skills such as addition and subtraction. Roberto explained,

And they started talking about how to add... how to subtract. I was like, ‘Okay, I know I’m bad at math, but I’m not that bad. The first class I just, I started looking around like, ‘Is this a joke?’ Are we really learning this right now?

Roberto went to the program director and was able to withdraw from the class without any issues. He knew that his math skills were not his strongest academic area, but he did not need a remedial math class. For the fall, he registered for a different math class. However, Roberto ended up struggling with that fall math class, in part because he missed a few classes when he was ill, and he was struggling with the political news at the time, especially when it concerned the status of the DACA program. He got behind in the class and was unable to earn a passing grade. The political climate had a significant impact on Roberto’s mental health and that impacted his ability to be successful in that class. For Roberto, though, it also seemed to be his weak study skills that affected his academic success in college. He had managed to stay on top of his work in his English class and he seldom missed class, because
the professor had told them right from the start that if they missed more than three classes, they would not pass. He was doing well in that class, but he talked about procrastinating on the final paper. Roberto said:

So, he gave us like a month to do it. It’s me, so obviously, I wait until the last possible second. So, three days before it was due, or two days before it was due, I went to the library and I checked out a bunch of books. That night, that whole day and night, I spent at either skimming them or looking for information. Then, the second night, the second day and night I spent it on writing that, you know, paper. And then the morning it was due, I did like a very quick editing, very rough, and I turned it in and I got a B, I think, on it. Which is pretty impressive ’cause I had no sleep those two nights.

Roberto was very pleased with his grade on the paper, but he admitted he fell into his old habit of procrastinating. It is hard to know how much the political climate impacted Roberto’s first semester academically, but his difficulty appears to be a combination of a fraught political climate and his still developing study skills. For the participants in this study, the academic preparation they received at Dewey Upper School was rigorous, but it appears that there were shortcomings for some of the students in helping them develop self-advocacy skills and effective study skills that would have promoted their success in college.

**College counseling support.** Three of the four participants talked at length about the experience with Dewey’s college counseling department. Adriana talked about meeting with college counselors at Dewey, but she felt she needed more guidance than what was provided.
She said the counselors “were mostly focused on getting us into a college, but I didn’t know, like, what to do after”. Adriana continued,

Because there was nobody in my family except, I mean I could have, I should have asked my brother, but ummm...because he didn’t go away, like, I didn’t really; and I didn’t even think there was that much to ask. That’s the thing, because there’s been nobody else that has gone through the process. Besides, at that time, I think it was just us two that were going through the process in my whole family.

Adriana did not know what she didn’t know. She did not know what questions to ask and she felt she did not have people she could turn to for guidance. She initially had decided to attend an out-of-state university, but at the last minute was accepted off of the waiting list at a private university. She decided to go there because it was a lot closer to home and it was a smaller school. She felt she would have benefitted from more attention from the college counselors and she wasn’t sure why she did not receive as much guidance as she felt that other students were getting. She conveyed her frustration:

I didn’t know what I was getting myself into. I think they [college counselors] didn’t, I remember they didn’t really spend that much time when I would go into their office, like, and I don’t know if it was because I didn’t have the grades that other kids did, that they felt like maybe they shouldn’t focus that much. But I remember being in and out of their office in like twenty minutes, whereas the other kids would spend almost an hour in there with them.

Not having the benefit of parents who could help guide her through the process and help her determine what questions she should be asking made it more challenging for Adriana to navigate the process.
Emma had a similar story to tell about her experience going through the college process. She said,

I mean I know, like, even going through college, the college process, like, really my idea was just to go to community college. I was, like, I know economically I’m not going to be able to afford a university...I don’t feel like the college counselors really even understood that or even took the time to understand that. They kind of were just like ‘Okay, here’s the universities you’re gonna go to’.

She felt she didn’t have the support she needed nor the understanding of her financial situation. Her parents were unable to provide for her financially and also could not include their financial information on the FAFSA because they were undocumented. This added a layer of complexity to her college process, as she could not apply for financial aid because her parents did not complete the FAFSA. Emma also felt that the college counselors did not spend very much time with her or try to understand her cultural or economic background.

She continued,

We got neglected. I think they focused on, I hate to say all the rich kids, but they focused on the rich kids because, alright, they get accepted to whatever university they get into. They’re going to do well, it’s all going to be paid for through their parents, and they’ll be fine. Or whatever college, whatever, however they get through, they’ll always be financially fine. But for us, I think for [her friend], I think for myself, I mean through the Hispanic culture, I don’t think they really took in, like, where we come from, ‘We’re first-generation students here’...so it’s like, did you really take into consideration our backgrounds, where we’re coming from? Like, our economic status?
Emma turned to other teachers in the school for guidance through the college process. She was in a serious relationship with her boyfriend and wanted to stay close to home, so that relationship played a big part in her decision. She also applied for and earned a full tuition scholarship to the state university, which made it more affordable for her. The university also had the major she was considering, so that factored into Emma’s decision.

For Nicholas, as he tells it, “I was a first-generation college student, but my older siblings all going to college and there being so many of them in front of me that went to college, three of them, it was never a question of ‘Am I going to college?’”. However, deciding which college to choose required some guidance, which his parents were not able to provide and he did not turn to his siblings for direction. His parents did attend one college meeting with him but, Nicholas explained, “They didn’t really know the system and didn’t really understand kind of how all that process goes. They really put a lot of trust in me, ‘He knows what he’s doing’”. Nicholas was used to completing applications on his own, as he had done so when he applied to Dewey for high school. He wanted to apply to one of the large state universities, but was told by the college counselors he probably wouldn’t get in. He said he remembered “that the smaller schools were pushed a little more, the liberal arts schools”. He went ahead and applied to the state university and completed the application on his own. However, he made some mistakes with the application and he did not get accepted to the state university. He wished that the college counselors had provided more in-depth and direct counseling for him, because he ended up choosing to attend a college that financially he was not able to afford to continue at. He also felt unable to discuss his decisions with his parents, because they did not have the kind of information that he needed to make critical decisions about attending college. Nicholas explained,
I think it does need to be more of a conversation because there’s no one at home; I can’t go back home and ask my parents about this, because they never went through the college process. You talk to anyone else at [Dewey], they can go back to their parents like, ‘Oh, this is what my college counselor said.’ And then you’re—you as parents who have gone through the school system — are like, ‘Well, I don’t believe that, and I don’t think of this’, and they can have that discussion elsewhere. For me, that was the only discussion of college that I really had.

Nicholas relied on himself to make decisions about which college to attend and which loans to take out. He ended up transferring after three semesters from his small liberal arts college to the state university, as he was admitted as a transfer student his sophomore year. Nicholas regrets that he did not have more conversations and support from the college counselors that would have helped guide him as first-generation college student.

A common thread with the three participants who discussed college counseling support at Dewey was that there needed to be more guidance provided in the college process for first-generation students and that it needs to have a different focus than the process geared towards those students whose parents have attended college. Providing more information about the financial aspects such as the cost of college including fees, books, and other hidden costs is essential. Finding a way to include and engage the parents of first-generation students, and providing educational components for the parents in the process would help them be able to join in the discussion with their children and support them in the major decisions about college.

**Parental involvement.** Throughout the literature, the importance of working to engage families and involve parents in their child’s education process is seen as a critical
factor in a student’s academic success and college completion. Research indicates there is a correlation between parental involvement and academic success, and students perform better academically as a result of parental involvement (Dotson-Blake, Foster, & Gressard, 2009; Marschall, 2006; Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003). When discussing factors that will increase the academic success of Latinxs, the importance of encouraging parental involvement and supporting parents in culturally appropriate ways to facilitate their involvement deserves significant attention. However, for first-generation students, parents who have not attended college and gone through this process are often unaware of the college process and of the expectations and demands that attending college requires. The level of parent involvement for the four participants varied, depending in part on the participant’s relationship with his or her parents and the parents’ ability to be part of the process.

Even though Emma’s parents were supportive of her going to college, they were not involved with her college process, nor with her transition to college. Her relationship with her parents had become strained by the time she was a senior in high school and going through the college process, and she had moved out of her parents’ home. Emma explained, “I mean, by my senior year I had already moved out of my house. I was having problems with my parents...I mean my whole high school, my last year was, really, I was on my own”. When she was trying to decide whether to return to college for the second semester of her freshman year, or leave school to take a job, her parents and she were not on good speaking terms. Emma elaborated:

I think my parents would have been a big support but they, at the time, weren’t alright with me having gotten married, having left the house, trying to do my own thing. So, my parents weren’t really involved in my life at that time. I was kind of on my own. I
don’t remember really calling them, or telling them, like, or visiting them for that matter. So, if they had actually been more supportive with me wanting to go to school, I think maybe I could’ve, they could’ve helped me out more, but they were just not present at that time.

Emma made her decision about leaving college to go to work with the support of her husband. She had already moved out of her parents’ home during high school and had experienced a level of independence from them in which she was making her own decisions. Once she got married, the decisions she made affected her husband, so he was the one involved in supporting her during this time. Emma’s relationship with her parents has improved, and when she returned to school after four years, completed her first semester with all A’s, and had registered to return for her second semester, she shared this outstanding news with her parents. She said:

I think just receiving those As and being like, ‘Alright, so what classes are you taking next semester? And you’re like, ‘Whoa, now we’re actually talking about moving forward, going on?’ This is when I started to think to myself, ‘It is possible. Like, I can do this’. It’s gonna be a lot of work, but you know what, it felt like, this is, that’s the moment when I felt really proud of myself. And I think being able to tell my parents ‘Hey, I already got my classes going on for next semester. And this is what I’ll be taking I think’...That’s the first time where I really felt proud of myself and like, alright, this is it.

Emma faced some significant challenges going through the college process and once she was in college. She showed incredible resilience and grit and found she had to rely on herself
rather than on her parents. In her circumstances, her husband was more of a support to her than her parents were able to be.

It was difficult for Nicholas’s parents to fully engage in his college process in part because they do not speak English. When asked about whether his parents attended college counseling meetings, he explained,

Yea, they did come to one. But I guess they just really didn’t know about, you know, schools in the United States. It wasn’t anything they ever did. Umm, they only knew about, you know, the schools that we all went to... they were all about, you know, if you feel comfortable there, and you’re gonna be happy, they’re, like, you know, do it.

It wasn’t only that his parents weren’t able to be involved in the college process, their ability to be involved in Nicholas’s entire high school experience had been limited. They did not speak English, nor read or write it, and they did not know how to be involved in their son’s school experience. Everything they learned about the school was through Nicholas. None of the information that came home was translated into Spanish. Nicholas said:

My parents weren’t, they didn’t have the resources to be a part of that experience...I was signed up for all, they didn’t really use email. I got all the [Dewey] emails. I got all the college emails...Everything was sent to me and, then anything I felt was of importance, I relayed them to them, whether or not, you know, good or bad.

All the communication from Dewey was in English, so it was up to Nicholas to share that information with his parents. They didn’t come to parent-teacher conferences after the first humiliating experience that Nicholas and his father endured, because Nicholas decided not to tell his parents about them. He said his father did come to some of his soccer games, but he would stand alone rather than sit in the stands. He wanted to be there for Nicholas but, as
Nicholas explained, it wasn’t just a language barrier, he felt there was an economic barrier to his parents feeling included:

There wasn’t like enough, even if they had, like, a parent’s affinity group where they could meet the other Latino parents, you know, and that’s kind of like, I think, like an aspect that goes unsung is that your, your family isn’t, they can’t be a part of the experience as much as they want, or at least maybe mine is a little more extreme because they don’t speak the language. I think being comfortable around people you don’t know, or parents that you know make a lot more money and that give their kids more, you know. Ummm, my dad came to a couple of soccer games and, I don’t know if this was on purpose or not, but he wouldn’t, he didn’t sit in the stands. He like kind of stood by the, by the corner goal. And I think it was just, there was no way for them to be a part of it and to really know kind of what I was doing, or how I was doing. It was more of like, ‘You have this, right?’ And so, it was all, it was solely on me. It was like whether or not I did this or that, it was all, all on me.

Not only was there a language barrier and an economic barrier to Nicholas’s parents’ involvement, there was a cultural barrier. There was not a way for them to connect with other Latinx parents who were having the same experience. Nicholas spoke very passionately about the importance of and challenges to having first-generation families involved in their child’s educational experience:

Everyone wants to be diverse, but I think they forget about the kind of resources and the other...hurdles and things, like, that you need to overcome to be as diverse as possible, you know?...Same with, like, back to the college experience. Back to all that stuff, it’s just hard for your family to get involved.
Nicholas’s discussed that when schools promote diversity, they need to consider how to involve the family so that the student is supported by them, and that the parent’s values and perspective are included. It is important for the school to consider what it might take to make those parents of first-generation minorities feel valued and included. He discussed some of the assumptions the school personnel make. Nicholas continued:

You [the school] just kind of assume we’re all going to be each other’s support system; that’s not fair. But if you’re a family, like, you know, it goes beyond any kind of racial thing - you want that kid to succeed. The problem is that, you know, that family can be first-generation, means that family never went through this process. And so, you need to get ready to get them involved, get their opinion, and enough that he, that kid can listen, or he/she can listen, because they know that their family’s now involved and they understand.

This assumption that the minority students were each others’ support system was hurtful to those students. It is important to make sure those parents have a way in, a way to be included and heard.

Roberto’s parents were fairly involved in his college process. They attended meetings with the college counselors and were concerned about how to pay for college, asking about what Roberto’s options were for funding. Roberto’s father took him to visit one of the universities that he was interested in and they had frequent discussions at home about the importance and value of pursuing an education. When Roberto was struggling his first semester at college, he eventually elicited the help of the Latino academic support program at the university. One of the things the
counselor did that Roberto found very helpful was to bring his parents in to talk with him and Roberto about the struggles he was experiencing. Roberto explained,

So, I scheduled a meeting with him and my parents and he said, ‘Look, this is what’s going on. Right now, it’s a very tough time for him, you know...he’s just overwhelmed, that’s what it is. You know, he’s, you know, I have been looking at what he’s been up to, what he’s been doing and he’s pulling himself together, you know, but his grades are not going to be what you’re used to seeing.

The counselor was able to facilitate the discussion with Roberto’s parents and it helped that the counselor was also Latino because, as Roberto said,

He’s Latino, so he knows how to, what parents expect and, you know, how to talk to them, you know, which I think really helped as well. ’Cause my parents, you know, they were kind of disappointed in me, like, I didn’t really talk to them first...I didn’t know how to tell them.

Having a counselor who was Latinx facilitate the discussion helped both Roberto and his parents because there was a level of cultural understanding that the counselor shared that made it possible to have a difficult and supportive conversation.

**Financial concerns.** According to the literature, many first-generation students and their families often lack awareness of and knowledge about the cost of college, how to pay for college, the availability of financial aid, and eligibility for financial aid (Vergara & Hightower, 2006; Kiyama, 2010). These are all important financial concerns that must be addressed as part of the college decision process. All four participants discussed the impact that finances played on their decisions of where to go to college, whether to transfer colleges, or even whether to continue with their education.
Adriana said that during the college process at Dewey, the college counselors spoke to her about completing the FAFSA in order to be eligible for financial aid; however, she said she really had no understanding of what the different types of loans were and what her financial obligations might be eventually as far as paying back the loans. She felt that she was unprepared for completing the FAFSA and understanding financial aid. Adriana explained:

I took out quite a bit of loans because I did not know anything about that. I think, umm, my brother helped me and he’s the one that was explaining ‘You should not take out that many loans’. I was ready to just take everything. They offered me loans for the whole, like to pay for the full year, and he’s like ‘No, don’t do that... you have some grants, you have some scholarships, you know, use that and just take out as little loans as you can’. I had no idea what that meant.

Adriana said she would have liked some tutorials or workshops about completing FAFSA and the financial aid process. She applied for and received a need-based half-tuition scholarship for Latinx students that she maintained for the two years she was at her first college. However, even with that scholarship, Adriana could not afford to stay at that college after sophomore year. She transferred to a private university in her hometown, where she could save money by living at home.

Financial issues were one of the reasons that Emma left college after her first semester. Her parents initially were unable to complete the FAFSA, due to their undocumented status, so she could not apply for any federal funding. They also did not have the ability to help her out financially. She thought that attending her local community college was her best bet economically. Emma explained, “Going through college, the college
process, like, really, my idea was just to go to community college. I was, like, I know economically I’m not going to be able to afford a university”. Emma spoke with the college counselors about wanting to attend the community college, but they did not provide her with any information about that school. She was frustrated with the process and wondered out loud about what might have been had she gone to a community college, “Had I probably taken that route, I’d probably be further in my education now”. She did not get the guidance that would have helped her make the best choice for college that took into consideration her economic status and the fact that her parents could not complete the FAFSA for her. Emma applied for and received a merit and need-based scholarship that paid for tuition for one year at a state-funded university, so she decided to attend one in the large midwestern city near her home. However, even with that scholarship money, there were other costs and fees that Emma did not know about and that were not covered by the scholarship. Emma simply did not have the money to pay the additional fees. She explained:

Although the scholarship covered some stuff, it didn’t cover like three, four thousand dollars worth of other expenses that the universities don’t tell you about. So, by the time I was also, like, I can’t financially, like, afford this, too, ’cause I was just, like, I think I’m going to have to take a break.

Emma had to make the difficult and heartbreaking decision not to return to college for second semester and to take a job working in a factory. She had gotten married to her boyfriend the summer before college began so, in addition to paying for college, they had to handle their family expenses. Emma continued:

[My husband] wasn’t making good money.... And I wasn’t working at all. And I think what I wanted to do required money, so, I was, like, okay...it was just trying to make
that decision of, like, ‘Alright are we going to continue with this and struggle even more, or are we just gonna work together...in a partnership?... It was a decision to either continue with school and know that at the end of the semester I would have another bill of two, three thousand dollars. And then what was I gonna do at that point?"

Emma decided at the end of the first semester with the additional college fees, the $300 cost of parking each semester, and the gas expenses that college was no longer an option for her. When asked how it felt to have to make that difficult decision, Emma said poignantly,

\textit{It was heartbreaking...at some point you’re like ‘Man, I busted my butt for four years in high school to get to this point?’}. To realize that I have the capacity to do it but I don’t have the financial means to be able to go through with it. So, you say ‘Alright’. Well, I think...the moments where you struggle really define the kind of person that you are. And it’s saying, like, ‘Alright. Well this is my situation, this is the hand that I was dealt. Umm, how do I make the best out of it?’

Emma made the best of her situation and took a job in a factory, so that she and her husband could make enough money to support themselves. Emma worked her way up to a managerial position and, four years after leaving college, she was able to return to earn her Bachelor’s degree.

\textit{Not having a full understanding of the cost of college nor an understanding of the responsibilities of taking out a loan were issues that impacted Nicholas}. He completed all the paperwork to apply for aid on his own, as he had done this when applying to Dewey.

Nicholas said this was the norm in his family, since his parents did not read or write English.

Nicholas said,
I wish I’d thought more about tuition costs and kind of how to pay that stuff off, ummm, because I did all that paperwork myself, at 18 years old...I feel like I never really crunched the numbers as much as I should have. I think in part, obviously not the fault of my parents at all, but they just didn’t know the school system and just how it worked, so when it was left up to me, me still pretty much being a kid, just didn’t think the consequences more out as I should have.

Nicholas was making important financial decisions pretty much on his own, as he made his decision about college. He wasn’t aware of the debt that it would lead to until he had finished his first year of college at the private university. Nicholas continued:

And I remember, just one day, it’s like I woke up from a bad dream and I, like, did all the math and I’m, like, ‘Wow, I’m gonna get out of here with like 100,000 dollars if I stay here!’ So, I transferred to [the state university].

Nicholas described this realization as an epiphany and it was the impetus for him to switch schools. He wishes he had realized this earlier, as he thinks he would have made a different decision about where he first went to college, and it would have prevented him from taking out costly loans. He did not know how to read his financial aid package and did not have any help with understanding the financial implications involved in accepting loans. Nicholas wished that he had been provided with more direct information regarding how much different schools would cost and how to read and understand a college’s financial aid package. He said, in regards to learning about the interest on loans, “I found out much later, and like in a little bit of a hard way. But I think it’s a very important conversation...I don’t think it was ever really explained to me or my family”. Nicholas explained that, especially in a situation like his where his parents did not know English and also did not have the experience and
knowledge of college expenses, it would have been helpful to have been given more information about the costs of college and the financial consequences of taking out loans.

Financial concerns played a significant role in Roberto’s decisions about college. He initially planned to take some time off before attending college to find a job and earn some money, even though he had been accepted to the state university. He has DACA approval, but that means that he is not eligible for federal grants, scholarships, or loans. He said the college counselors helped him look at programs and other scholarships that might be available to him, but he said his options were limited. Roberto explained, “Because of my situation at that point, there weren’t really too many things open for me, so that was very, you know, limited”. His parents came to college counseling meetings and asked a lot of questions about funding and available scholarships and were very involved in that process. Roberto had been awarded a $5,000 scholarship from the university, which helped with the cost, and he said, “It wasn’t a lot of money that I had to pay but, you know when you don’t have any money, like, well it’s a lot”. Even with the scholarship, though, he did not have the money to go to the university. However, he met up with one of his high school teachers in the summer and during the conversation he let his teacher know that he was putting college on hold for a year, because he needed to earn some money first. His teacher thought he might be able to reach out to a donor at Dewey to get the needed funding and told Roberto to hold off on withdrawing or deferring his enrollment. The teacher was able to secure some funding for the first semester for Roberto from an anonymous donor that made up the balance of the tuition and fees. Roberto explained:
I don’t know the full details...but I know that he reached out to, you know, some community members at [Dewey], and they were able to pay for my first semester in college. Ummm, and that’s how I ended up going.

Roberto was able to attend for the first semester, but he said it was a last-minute decision, which was unsettling for him. From Roberto’s perspective, he now felt obligated to go to college right away, even though he had been planning to look for full-time work instead.

Roberto said:

You know, when I make a decision, you know, especially when it’s something that big, I go all in with my decision. Okay, I was ready not to go to school. I was ready to find a job, get work, you know, start working, and then come back to school a little bit later. So when, when that funding was available I was, well, first, I was extremely grateful, but it’s not what I wanted to do. Ummm, it’s, I would have rather just skipped that semester and, you know, started working and then go back to school, then kind of scramble to get everything ready to go back to school...no, I wasn’t too thrilled with having to go to school. But I couldn’t, you know, really tell [my teacher] after he helped me, you know, ‘I don’t want that funding’...I couldn’t do that.

Roberto felt an obligation to go to school that first semester because of the funding his teacher had gone out of his way to secure for him. However, it was not a good way for him to start college; he had to rush to accept a spot in orientation and he did not have the money yet for textbooks. Roberto began the semester without textbooks and did not get them until two weeks into the semester. He said that he hated starting without textbooks and explained:
That really sort of threw me off...and I don’t think I really fully recovered from that later on...umm, to the point where, you know, I kind of, I was so overwhelmed by falling behind, what am I gonna do after this? You know after this semester?

The funding his teacher had secured for Roberto was only for the first semester. Roberto would not have the same opportunity for second semester, and he did not have a job to earn money that could have helped him pay for school. He also disclosed that his mind wasn’t really in college due to the uncertainty of the political climate and his worry about his DACA status. Roberto said:

I felt like things were really, really rushed and I was still trying to come to terms with, ‘Okay, well what’s going on politically? What am I supposed to do now?’ You know, after this, what’s gonna happen after, you know, uh, college? After this one semester, can I keep going?

Even though his teacher was trying to help Roberto have the opportunity to go to college right after high school, this was not a long-term sustainable option for him. Roberto knew he did not have the money to go beyond the first semester; he rushed into a decision to attend for one semester out of a sense of obligation, he started school without textbooks, and he worried about the changes in the political climate and what that meant for him. All of these factors weighed heavily on Roberto and created a very challenging situation and semester for him. It was incredibly difficult for him and he shared, “And that’s when, like, I, everything just kind of fell on me, you know, kind of, broke me in a way”. Despite this, Roberto managed to complete the semester after dropping one class. He struggled with his math class and ended up not passing it. However, he did earn an A- in his English class and a B in his Psychology class. He was dealing with a lot at the time and he felt he was letting people
down — his parents, his teacher, the Dewey community. Assumptions were made about what the right path for Roberto was, without asking him if that was really what he wanted to do. Going to school for one semester when, as he said, “That one semester was pretty much a miracle”, appears to have created more challenges for Roberto. He knew he did not have the financial means to go beyond the first semester, and that increased his worries and also negatively impacted his success that first semester.

Financial concerns can often be a barrier to first-generation Latinx students attending college. For some, it is because of lower socioeconomic status, and also because of a lack of understanding about college costs and how to pay for college. The participants in this study were not able to get guidance from their parents about financial considerations, as the parents didn’t have the experience or knowledge to successfully guide them. Looking at and assessing financial considerations for first-generation students must go beyond a white middle-class perspective to promote an understanding of what financial barriers they might encounter and what resources will more adequately support their college options.

**Documentation-related concerns.** Of the four participants, only one in this study, Roberto, had concerns about his documentation status that affected his decisions about college. He has received DACA approval, but he was not eligible for any federal funding for college. He chose to attend the state university since they had provided some funding in the way of a scholarship. However, as Roberto explained, “Because of my, you know, my status, everything was very limited, you know, scholarships, everything. It was just too limited”. His undocumented status added a financial complication to accessing federal grants and scholarships, and even applying for loans. In addition to Roberto’s status limiting his access to money, it also caused him a great deal of worry and anxiety. He wasn’t sure that he would
even be able to get a job if he did finish college. The summer before he started college he was approved for DACA, and he said that once he had his DACA approval he felt like “Okay, now there’s some kind of hope. But well, there’s no money for college. Alright, well, no big deal, I’ll just find a job now that I can actually work”. Being able to look for a job knowing he could work also made him reconsider attending school right away, especially because he needed more money to be able to do so. His undocumented status continued to worry him throughout his first semester in college, because there was an upcoming presidential election, and Roberto was unsure of what the outcome might mean for DACA recipients like him. Having undocumented status was certainly a factor in Roberto’s college decision process and also significantly shaped his first semester college experience.

**Impact of Latinx Identity**

Participants were asked how they viewed themselves as a Latinx and also how they thought others viewed them as a Latinx. Adriana feels a deep pride in her Latinx heritage. She stated, “I am so proud of being a Latina, especially getting my Master’s. I was reading a statistic, I think it’s like 4% of Latinas, not just like Latinos, like women, get their Master’s.” She said that she loves her culture and that she is “never ashamed of saying that I’m Latina, that I speak Spanish, that my parents are who they are. I’m actually very proud of that”. She explained that she worried as a Latina at Dewey Upper School that it would be difficult for her “in terms of people accepting me as a minority...but at [Dewey] I never had that issue, luckily. I don’t think anyone ever was rude to me just because of my class or my ethnicity”. However, her closest friends during high school were her Latinx family friends from her neighborhood. She said she had her high school friends that she would see at school during the week, and that she “...had my friends outside of [Dewey] that, umm, we all, our parents
were from the same area in Mexico, and those are the people, those are the friends that I still keep in communication with”. She also explained, as mentioned earlier, that she felt her difficulty asking for help in high school and college stemmed from her Latinx heritage. Adriana said, “I think it has to do with me seeing my parents, my dad never likes asking for help. He never, I think they see it as a sign of weakness, especially men. Latino men see it as a sign of weakness”. Asking for help was something she worked to overcome when she was in college, because she needed to do that to be able to succeed.

When asked how she sees herself as a Latinx, Emma said, “Well, I am proud of where I come from, my heritage. I love being Mexican. I’m 100% Mexican...I love it! I mean, I think our food is great, the culture is great”. One thing Emma does not like about Latinx culture is what she calls the “macho stance” in which the man is the head of the household and the woman is expected to take care of the house and the children. She feels this is “very old-school based” but that it “still is very alive in our culture”. Emma is resistant to this “machismo” in Mexican culture and she says she is “breaking the mold”, as she expects equality in a relationship. When asked how she thinks others see her as a Latinx, Emma discussed that she thinks others may see her as a stereotype, but she said that she has fit many of the stereotypes that people perpetuate of Latinxs at some point in her life. She explained:

I think, umm, as a young Latina some people expect me first to be a dropout, a college dropout. At some point I was, I fit that stereotype. Ummm, you’ll get married young. I did get married young. So, I fit that stereotype. You’ll have a child, like, before 21 or at a young age. I fit that stereotype as well. You’ll end up working in a factory; I end up fitting that stereotype as well. So, I feel like they just perceive a lot
of these, like, I mean there’s a stereotype — you’ll have a million children, you’ll be a house [wife], you’ll be domesticated. I think, at some point, I fit all of these stereotypes. And, at some point, I think I saw myself in that way as well, turning into that mold, and I think other people saw it as well. But, umm, I think that’s why I think, little by little, breaking the mold.

Despite having fit some of the stereotypes of Latinx women, Emma is actively working against that stereotype. She has returned to college and she has a managerial position at work. She continued, “I’m working to change that perception”. Emma discussed that in high school she felt as though she were the “token Mexican” at Dewey and she kept more to herself because, as she stressed, “I felt culturally, to some point, unaccepted, or just used”. Her Latinx heritage is very important to her and she did not feel that it or she were valued when she was in high school. She explained how, as a Latinx in the real world, she is working to define herself:

I think being Hispanic, being a female, I think those are things that people really, that you struggle with sometimes because, you know, sometimes you might be discriminated against. I mean for both - being a female and being Hispanic. And I think you just have to push extra hard to try to be accepted or even given opportunities.

Emma clearly pushes ‘extra hard’ to both embrace her Latinx heritage and to ‘break the mold’ of the stereotypes that she says have defined her at different points in her life.

Nicholas sees his Latinx identity grounded in his family values. He stated, “I think it has a lot to do with...my family...talking to my parents in Spanish, kind of the respect I have for them and how much I call back home and make sure that they’re okay.” Nicholas
minored in Spanish in college because, although he knew how to speak and understand it, he didn’t know how to read or write it well. It was part of his journey in “trying to figure out my heritage”. He said he is curious about his heritage because, as he explained,

I was that close to being just a Mexican boy in Mexico...so I just wanted to dig in more, I kind of wanted to learn more, just because I think, I think there’s certain things in that culture that I can relate to a little bit more, whether it be their values, ummm, whether it be different beliefs of, you know, ‘Children of the Sun’ and how we kind of take power from that. We feel a lot better, like, in sunlight.

Nicholas’s Latinx heritage and identity are very important to him; he discussed, though, that in high school and college, most of his friends were white and he found himself trying to fit in with them. He shared that in high school he went through a period of,

...trying to figure out who I was as a person and ummm, I feel like I really didn’t hit my stride on kind of who I was and what I wanted to be until, like, my senior year in high school. And I felt very much more comfortable in my skin and a little less self-conscious about things. And I think it was just, you know, me being thrown into such a different circle of people and, you know, people I’m just not used to interacting with.

As Nicholas transitioned to college he found himself struggling again with his identity and how he fit into a social group in college where most of his friends were white. He joined a fraternity that included most of his soccer teammates and he said, “I think I kind of reverted back to not really knowing who I was and what I was doing”. He told a story of going on a cabin weekend with his fraternity and taking turns sharing life stories. He elaborated,

I think mine was just so different at the time that I didn’t really feel too
comfortable, like, saying, you know, like speaking too much on it, because it was so
different than like how everyone else grew up.

Nicholas found himself trying to fit in with this group of friends and changing who he was to
be accepted. He explained,

I kind of felt like I had to assimilate to this new group of friends that I had, even
though they were my friends before this whole fraternity thing. Like, I did feel like I
had to, like, kind of make my switch over to kind of be more like them.

The college he initially attended had a predominantly white student body and most of his
fraternity brothers were white. Nicholas said, “I started, like, kind of forgetting who I was
and what I valued and things like that”. Despite this negative experience, Nicholas said he
sees considerable value in it because it helped shape who he is and it was the tipping point
for him. He said, “I think it was, maybe not necessary, but I think it was important to...kind
of mold me into who I am, because now I’m much more confident and I kind of like who I
am and what I did.” Nicholas also says this was when he began to realize he did not like
being at the school he was attending and that he wanted to transfer. He also shows his
resilience and his pride in his identity as he said,

Who cares that I was different. Now, like, I appreciate my differentness. And I
appreciate all of the little things that make me very different from other people. And,
just, that assimilation thing is just so off for me, like I just, I don’t care anymore.

Nicholas feels that having the opportunity to attend public and private schools and
universities— a grade school with majority Latinx student body, a high school with majority
white student body, a private liberal arts college and a large state university —has allowed
him to see two different worlds and figure out where he fits into them.
As Roberto explained, how he thinks about his Latinx identity is “complicated”. He stated, “I value traditions and, you know, I know who I am, but I’m just trying to, I don’t know, be somebody without really being labeled, if that makes any sense”. He said that when he was at Dewey Upper School that, “I kind of just wanted to fit in, be one of the kids, you know, be just another student. And I felt that, you know, my advisor at that time... they kind of wanted me to embrace my Latino identity”. Roberto said the efforts on the part of faculty to support his Latinx identity actually made him feel more isolated. He was in an advisory that was mostly minority students and he referred to it as “the ethnic advisory”. He explained,

I wasn’t a fan of that. I felt isolated from the rest of my classmates...I felt like I was trying to fit into the school and at the same time, you know, it felt like the school was kind of pushing me to the side.

The school’s intentions were to provide students of color with a support group, like an affinity group but, as Roberto explained, this made him feel excluded rather than included. He continued, “I think that was kind of my issue, like, you know, throughout high school. I was just trying to fit in, just kind of be my own person”. Roberto felt that the school was trying to support him based on who they thought he was. However, he felt they highlighted his Latinx identity and “pushed” it on him. He told a story of when a Spanish teacher tried to get him to join in a school presentation for a class he was not enrolled in. He explained,

...one other memory that I remember, that is in my mind, umm, we were going to Morning Ex and, I think it was AP Spanish that were going to do some kind of presentation or they were going to sing some kind of song, and one of the
Spanish teachers, you know, she saw me and she handed me one of these, like, the lyrics of the song. I’m like ‘I don’t know the song!’ Just cuz, you know... I speak Spanish, you know, like, are you just telling me ‘Hey, join the group cuz you’re Hispanic’, like, I don’t know...like, ‘Oh you speak Spanish? Yea, join the stage’. It’s like, No. I mean, yea, I speak Spanish, but so what, you know? Leave me, let me be my own person.

It was challenging for Roberto to just ‘be his own person’, as teachers saw him as Latinx and thought that should be an important part of him to support. He said no one ever asked him what he wanted or needed as far as supporting his sense of his identity. He said that people at Dewey made assumptions about him because he was Hispanic, for example, that he should know the lyrics of a song because it was in Spanish. He said, “Back then, those kinds of things, like, bothered me”. Roberto said that by senior year in high school he,

...realized, like, who I was and not really to pay attention to any of that, you know.

Like, okay, I’m just going to be who I am without having outside sources influence me. But at that time, it was way too late, you know.

Roberto shared that his conflicting feelings about embracing his Latinx identity continued into his first year of college. He had a Latinx friend from college who wanted him to join a club for Latinxs and Roberto explained,

Okay, I know I’m Latino, but I don’t really want to talk about it...you know, I had just left that time in high school where I wanted to kind of be my own, and they’re like ‘Oh, you should do this’.

Roberto said that he thinks his feelings and experience are unique in that, “I’m Latino, but not that I don’t want to embrace it, I just don’t want that to define me. Or I don’t want it to be
the only thing that people see about me, you know? He said that coming from his grade school where so many of the students and his friends were Latinx, he had embraced that part of his identity. However, when he went to Dewey, which is predominantly white, he said he realized, “I can just be Roberto, and I liked that...I don’t have to be Latino 24/7”. As Roberto said, the way he feels about his Latinx identity is complicated. It certainly shaped how others saw him, how they treated him, and what they expected of him. He saw his high school experience as a way for him to just ‘fit in’, but he felt pressured by others to own his Latino identity. Transitioning to college, even though it was a more diverse student body, Roberto just wanted to be himself and not be identified or judged by his heritage.

For each of the participants, their Latinx identity is an important part of who they are and how they view themselves. Their identity has also impacted and shaped their educational experiences. Attending a predominantly white high school as a Latinx student created some challenges for the participants with being accepted and fitting in, with teachers’ perceptions, and with making social connections. Their Latinx identities continued to impact them in college, and the participants had varying perceptions of their identity as a Latinx in their educational settings in high school and college and the impact it had on them. Murrell (2008) discusses the importance of including the culture and identities of students of color in school curriculum and culture and this is something to consider to truly promote students of all backgrounds so they are academically and socially engaged, feel valued, and find the success they strive for.
Encountering Challenges

Each of the four participants described challenges that they faced during their first year in college. These ranged from lack of knowledge about the college experience, accessing resources, feeling pressure to succeed, to adjusting socially.

Lack of knowledge about college experience. Two of the participants discussed the impact that not really knowing what to expect in college had on them when they first started their freshman year.

Adriana said she felt unprepared for college because she did not know what to expect. She explained, “I just didn’t know what college was until I went. ’Cause I’ve never, no one in my family - my brother went to college, but he didn’t go away for college...so, I didn’t know what to expect”. She said that she really didn’t have any expectations for her freshman year. Adriana explained, “I was a little lost at first.” She said she did not know what it meant to declare a major, or what prerequisites were and that she “had no idea what was going to happen”. Even though her brother had attended college ahead of her Adriana felt going away to college was different and she didn’t rely on him to answer questions, in part because she didn’t know what questions to ask.

For Emma, transitioning to college presented a “culture shock” for her. She stated, “The experience for me was, it was just a cultural shock at first. Yeah, it was like a whole new different world”. The bigger university and the more diverse student body was overwhelming at first. She had been used to a small school, “like being in a small class”. She said that it made her question who she was and how she would fit in. She explained, “I started saying, like, well ‘Who am I?’ in this big group of people, and I think I started to question, like, how will I stand out with so many people?”. Adjusting to a large state
university with a diverse student body was challenging and Emma said at one point, “I just kind of got lost”. Emma said the experience initially made her reflect on her identity and think about who she was and what was she capable of. For first-generation students, who often have no one at home to help them understand and anticipate what college will be like or to provide answers to questions they don’t even know to ask, transitioning from high school to college can be overwhelming and challenging.

**Self-advocacy/Accessing resources.** Knowing who to ask for help and when to ask for it can present a challenge to college success. Three of the four participants discussed their experiences with learning to self-advocate and accessing campus resources. Adriana discussed her hesitation to ask for help when she didn’t know how to navigate the university. She did not reach out to her advisor and relied more on her roommate’s mother, who had attended her university. She said, “I probably should have used my advisor a little bit more, because on our campus website it always tells you who your advisor is”. Her roommate’s mother was accessible and helpful and she also worked on campus, so Adriana found her to be a good resource. She was also hesitant to reach out to professors for help when she was struggling initially. She learned that there were extra sessions with the teaching assistant and finally decided to go for extra help. She explained:

> I didn’t go to that at first, because it was optional and I was a freshman and I made bad decisions; but I remember after that first exam, I started going to that on Monday mornings...They were also offering that for Psych and I didn’t go to that at first, either. But after seeing the results, after seeing how much it helped with Biology, I started doing that for both classes and I ended up doing well.
This experience led Adriana to become more of a self-advocate and she recognized the benefits of asking for help.

Emma said at her state university there was a commuter support organization, but she said that she didn’t get involved with it, because she had been a commuter in high school and felt she knew how being a commuter worked from that experience. She said she met with the college counselors from the Hispanic cultural center, but she found it a challenging and judgmental experience, rather than a supportive one. She explained, “So, they did have a big support group...they offer like scholarships and everything. So, I talked to a lot of the women there, which I was pregnant at the time, and many of the women were just high-strung.” She did not find this a helpful resource and it added stress to an already stressful time.

Roberto initially advocated for himself when he felt he was misplaced in a math class that required him to take a summer school course. Once he attended the class, he realized it was far below his ability and he petitioned the program director to change the math placement, and he did get moved from it. However, he hesitated to advocate for himself when he began to struggle academically and he avoided asking for help initially. When he was struggling with his math class first semester, a woman from an academic support group reached out to him, but he avoided her. He explained, “I didn’t want to deal with it. That’s, it’s always easier to, you know, ignore something, right?” It wasn’t until a friend pushed him to go that he finally spoke with her. She helped him strategize and got him to talk to his teachers about how to turn around some of his classes. At his university there was also a support program for Latino students, and the woman from the academic support program connected him with the head of the Latino support program. Roberto said initially he was
hesitant to go to the Latino support program for help until things hit a critical level. He explained,

I think again it was that whole ‘Look I just got out of a place that, you know, wanted me to embrace my being Latino. I’m not about, like, to jump into another one right away...I was still trying to kind of form my own identity, so that’s why I didn’t really go there right away.

He had learned about the program at orientation, but was conflicted because he felt he needed to establish his “own identity before going to these programs”. However, once he did connect with the head of the Latino support program, Roberto found it helpful, especially as the head of the program was Latino himself. Knowing who and how to ask for help and being a self-advocate can be an additional challenge for first-generation Latinx students in transitioning to college.

**Pressure to succeed.** All four participants discussed feeling pressure to succeed in college because of being the first, or one of the firsts, in the family to attend college. For some of the participants, they also felt pressure to succeed because of worrying about being a disappointment.

Adriana and her brother are first-generation college students, and her brother went to college before she had. Adriana talked about wanting to succeed in college because of the sacrifices her parents had made for her. She said, “I realize how much they had to work for what they gave us. Umm, and because of that, because of that, I think that’s my biggest motivation to go to school and to do something that would make them proud”. Adriana’s mother also regretted not earning her own college degree and that is another reason Adriana wanted to earn her degree.
Emma discussed feeling pressure from the counselors at the Hispanic cultural center at her university when she was struggling during her first semester. She had lost the baby in her first trimester and missed a week of school, and she went to see them for help. She explained what happened,

So right away, the women were just really high strung, they were like ‘You gotta represent as a Latina in this community. You can’t be weak and you gotta show what you have. And I’m like ‘Oh you know, I’m human, too’.

She did not find them to be empathetic and she felt pressure as a Latina woman to keep going despite having miscarried, driving almost an hour each way to school, and struggling financially. She also worried about disappointing the people who had supported her going to college if she decided to leave school. She elaborated,

Like, I think at that point I might have, at some point, I think I lost what I wanted for myself. And I think at that point, I didn’t talk to [any of her high school teachers who had helped her] because I was like ‘I’m such a disappointment for them’ and I just didn’t want to be that. So, from that moment I just shut myself, and I had to go through this trouble of finding myself again.

Emma coped with the disappointment of leaving college after one semester by isolating herself for awhile. However, she continued to have the goal of returning to college one day because it was still something that she very much valued.

Nicholas also discussed feeling pressure as a first-generation student to complete his college degree. He said,

I also think when you’re that young and you’re gonna be a first-generation Latino student, there’s, like, also a, there’s a pressure. There’s like, you know, for some
reason or another you made it out of the rest of us. And if they don’t find success early in the classroom and they have nothing else to, like, grab on to, I mean it’s very easy to lose yourself.

He felt it was important to involve a student’s support system early on to help them find success in the classroom, and that getting the student’s family involved in the process would also help promote success for first-generation students.

Roberto discussed the pressure of being the first in his family to go to college, and the example he expected to set for his sister. He said,

You know, I always had been the example setter for my sister... it’s like she always looks up to me. ’Cause she’s always followed in my footsteps, she looks up to me. And so, you know, I’m like, OK well, I’m going to go to college. I’m going to graduate. She’s going to follow the same steps.

Roberto felt the pressure to succeed and also felt the worry of disappointing those who had supported him. When he decided to leave college after the first semester he talked about worrying about disappointing his parents and former teachers. He said, “I feel like I’m going to disappoint them, disappoint, you know, everyone that’s helped me get to where I am”.

This worry added to the challenges he was dealing with first semester and he said, even though he felt like giving up, “I felt obligated to finish strong” because so many people — his parents and teachers — had helped him get to college.

Social connections. Several of the students discussed social challenges they encountered during their first year of college. Emma spoke about the challenges she had trying to figure out where she fit in socially. She had gotten married the August before starting college and was pregnant. She had a very different mindset about attending college
than most of the freshmen she met. She explained that she, “kind of kept to myself, so I was just like, ‘Alright go to school, do your thing, go back home, relax’. She found that being married, she had different intentions for going to school than did most freshmen. She continued,

I made friends, but at the same time, you could also tell the level of maturity was so different. I was like, umm, ‘Alright, I’m married, I’m pregnant, this is it for me’ and people were like ‘We’re here to party, we’re here to have fun, make new friends.

Emma had already experienced a different level of independence and freedom and she found it difficult to relate to most other freshmen. She said,

A lot of them, really, it was their first time really just branching out from the norm of maybe their high school and feeling more independent. I think at that point, too, I had already kind of just been more independent. So, I think they really were just trying to figure things out.

For Emma, college was not really about the social experience. She had many other things to deal with and socialization was not a priority. She said, “I wasn’t social. I really didn’t, ummm, I don’t know. I feel like I really just didn’t make the most out of it because of my situation”. Being married, traveling a long distance each day, juggling classes and homework, and dealing with a pregnancy were important factors that Emma prioritized in order to manage her college experience. Adding in socialization was not something that she wanted to take on then.

Nicholas, in particular, talked about the impact that being Latinx had on his social adjustment and also the impact that the college drinking culture had on him. He had joined a
fraternity and found the social aspect of it rather “weird”. He felt he had to assimilate to fit in. Nicholas explained,

I think I just lost myself in it for a little bit and I was just, like, it was just kind of, I think, it was almost like assimilating again. And I think I found myself in a new space, and I’m like ‘Okay, this is kind of what I have to do and who I have to be to be in this space.

He said he became more concerned about the social aspect of college than the academics, and trying to fit in was very difficult for him. He had not been a drinker in high school, and that social aspect of college brought some new challenges as Nicholas explained,

So, I think I just was never really that big of a drinker and I think when, you know, when I joined the fraternity, it was just kind of like, it just all hit me very hard. I think, like, I just wasn’t really prepared for it. And then, ummm, like mentality-wise, it was a small liberal arts school, still very white...I think I would...notice the difference even more when I started drinking.

The social aspect of the college Nicholas attended, especially the culture he was exposed to in his fraternity, was one of the reasons he decided to transfer. He stated, “I think the move, in general, even when I made it like half-way through, was probably one of the best things I ever did”. He said the summer before his sophomore year that he really did not want to return to college. Nicholas said,

I remember, like, feeling a legitimate fear, like I was legitimately scared to go back. And go back to doing like all the things...I was doing, like drinking and getting in trouble. I remember, like, very vividly, like, being in [the] basement and we were all
—we had hung out all summer, you know — and just being like, ‘Dude, I don’t want to go back. At all’.

Nicholas returned for his sophomore year, but immediately began making plans to transfer for second semester sophomore year. When he transferred, he still joined a fraternity, but it was one that had a ‘dry house’ on campus —no campus drinking permitted.

Roberto made some connections his first semester, but he said some of the Latinx students he met were involved with Latinx organizations that he did not want to be part of. He met a Latinx who asked him to come to a Latinx club meeting with her. That was not something he was interested in because he had just gone through a high school period trying to sort out how he felt about his Latinx identity. He said, “You know, I had just left that time in high school where I wanted to kind of be my own and they’re like ‘Oh, you should do this’. I’m like, ‘Huh. Again? You know?’”. He said, though, that it was this Latinx that pushed him to get help from the academic support program and encouraged him to speak with the counselor there. He also stayed connected with a high school friend who was attending the same university and he said, “That kind of helped, you know, kind of ground me”. They would meet up in between classes to talk and that was a good connection for him.

Connecting socially for Roberto was hard, in part, because of the size of the university. He said he missed the small group setting of Dewey Upper School. Even though he did not participate in the Latinx clubs at the university, he did appreciate the diversity and the availability of Latinx support groups. He explained, ‘I liked [the university] for that one semester, ’cause I felt like there were a lot of groups that could kind of understand what I was going through’. He eventually did use the support of the Latino support group to help him speak with his parents about leaving college.
Each of the participants encountered a variety of challenges during their first year at college and found ways to navigate them, however, not always successfully. Despite encountering these challenges in regards to not knowing what to expect, difficulty accessing resources, feeling pressure to succeed, and socialization the participants all found varying levels of success within their first year as a first-generation college student.

Experiencing Success

Each of the participants shared moments from their first year of college where they found success and felt proud of their accomplishments. They also discussed the supports that helped them achieve their successes and help them overcome some of the challenges they faced.

Adriana told the story of when she was struggling in her Psychology class and she was worried she would fail the exam during her first quarter. She did not have a consistent study routine and ended up pulling an “all-nighter” to prepare for the exam. She earned an A on the test and Adriana said, “I will never forget that moment”. This inspired her to begin creating study guides for her classes to prepare for exams. Additionally, she met with the teaching assistants for her Biology and Psychology classes and raised her grades in both classes. The study skills she developed during that first semester have continued to benefit her during her classes for her Master’s degree.

Emma had found academic success her first semester at the university, despite a difficult miscarriage, missing a week of school, a long daily commute, and financial worries. She earned all A’s that first semester — a significant and impressive accomplishment. But really, what Emma is most proud of is returning to college four years later and persevering — not only completing her first semester, but registering for second semester. She said she
was proud of “...going back the second time of my first year. I think finishing off the semester, I was hesitant to go back, because I didn’t want to end up dropping out after one semester again”. Emma worried that she would not be able to return for second semester, much like she hadn’t been able to four years earlier. She continued,

As soon as I finished my first semester, it was like, ‘It is possible to do this! I can do it...even with all of my life, with life happening around me. I think, I think just receiving those A’s and being like, ‘Alright, so what classes are you taking next semester? And you’re like, ‘Whoa, now we’re actually talking about moving forward, going on?’ This is when I started to think to myself, ‘It is possible. Like, I can do this’.

Emma had begun to accomplish what she first started out to do. She returned for her second semester in college. She recognized that it would continue to be hard, but she was up to the task. Emma asserted, very confidently,

That’s the moment when I felt really proud of myself. And I think being able to tell my parents ‘Hey, I already got my classes going on for next semester. And this is what I’ll be taking I think’. That’s the first time where I really felt proud of myself and like, ‘Alright, this is it’.

Returning to school was a risk for Emma, because she worried about not making it beyond the first semester again. But it was clearly something that she valued and she was determined to earn her degree. Once she registered for second semester, she was able to put her first semester —the one where she wasn’t able to return for second semester —behind her. She knew she would be able to persevere now and persist in her college education.
Nicholas was able to recount several times where he felt proud of his success. He explained he had loved history in high school and had done well in those classes. When he got to college, he considered majoring in history and he said,

When I started taking those first kind of Intro history courses...I was just, like, killing it. I was one of the kids that always raised his hand. The teacher, when it went silent, kind of like gave me a look like ‘You got this one?’ So, that was really good. I remember feeling really good about that.

He felt his classes in high school had prepared him well and also had instilled a love of history in him. He also found success on the running track. He had gone to college as a track athlete, but the coach who recruited him had left the school, so the new coach did not know who Nicholas was. Nicholas said he did not have a strong kick so he was placed in a slow heat on his first meet. He told a story of how the whole team came running out to cheer him on after the first lap in this heat, and he mistakenly thought it was because it was a close race and someone was on his tail. He related,

Oh, there must be someone hot on my tail, ’cause it must be, like, a good race. So, I like really start booking it and making my second way around and I, like, finish and I look behind me, and there’s no one there! And I’m looking around, and I look at the time I just ran, OK!...The only reason I kicked it up a notch was because I saw my teammates running towards me, so I’m like, OK, this guy must be, like, right here. So, after that I started practicing with the A team.

Nicholas felt good about this achievement and stated, “I think it was just proving myself, and kind of like me still staying in that mindset, like, ‘This is what I came here for. This is what I
came here to do, you know?’ For Nicholas, showing he was an academically strong history student and a competitive athlete were two areas where he found success in college.

Roberto also recounted finding success during his first semester in college. He had placed into a higher-level English class and he earned an A- in that class. He felt very proud of earning a placement in that class, but also of the fact that, as he said, “I did very well in that class”. He also was proud that, even though he had struggled in his Psychology class, that he was able to manage the extra credit well enough to raise his final grade to a B+. This was a subject matter he had always enjoyed and he said, “I was, like, I felt good about myself. Like, okay, I got this done, you know? This is a subject I like; this is helping me”. He also felt good about the fact that he advocated for himself. He met with the teacher and asked to do extra credit. He explained, “I love that subject...I mean, it wasn’t hard for me to do it. I’m like ‘Okay I gotta get it done. I’ll do it’. I felt happy about that. Roberto didn’t always work consistently in his classes, but he knew he was capable and when it came to meeting the demands he did so. He felt proud that he was able to earn good grades and that he was also able to turn things around in a difficult situation. All four participants related stories of successes they experienced during their first years in college and these successes helped them adjust their ways of doing school, gave them motivation to persevere, and instilled or restored confidence in their academic or athletic potential. Accessing support systems or finding support networks also contributed to the participants’ success, either by guiding them or by celebrating their successes with them.

Support Networks

All four participants discussed the different networks where they found support on their college path. The various support systems that the participants discussed were their
families, friends, student support organizations, and faculty members, both high school personnel and college. Three of the participants also discussed the importance of self-reliance to manage some of the challenges they faced.

Adriana said that she had support from her friends, her family, and from some teacher assistants. She also relied on herself to figure out how to navigate the college landscape. One of Adriana’s most important supports was her roommate’s mother, who had graduated from the same university and also worked on campus. Adriana said, “I talked to [my roommate’s] mom, who had gone to [this school]. I talked to her a lot, because she worked on campus...I would go and talk to her; we all would”. Having access to a parent who had attended the same university and who was also right on campus was a good support network for Adriana. When Adriana was trying to figure out her finances for college, her brother was supportive and gave her good guidance. Her had gone to college before her, so he knew something about the finances and was able to help her make better economic decisions. Adriana said that she also depended on her friends a lot for support. Although she did not initially go to her professors for help, when Adriana started to struggle in her Biology class, she began to attend extra sessions offered by the teaching assistant for her class. She found this support very helpful and she then began to do the same thing for her Psychology class. The extra sessions for both classes resulted in improved grades for Adriana. She also relied on herself, as reported earlier, when Adriana began to develop her own study guides after pulling an ‘all-nighter’.

Emma was married and living with her husband when she started college. For her, the biggest supports were several of her high school teachers who helped her make some financial decisions and lent emotional support to her when she was facing challenges during
her first semester. She also relied on herself to deal with challenges. However, when Emma returned to college after four years, and re-enrolled as a freshman, she found that her experience greatly helped her to navigate the college process. She had experience, and confidence, and felt she knew what she needed to do this time. She explained,

   I think I just knew the right questions to ask this time. I think I was just more, like, ‘Alright, I’m being more proactive’. With me not being hesitant, like, ‘How does this run? Where am I supposed to go? At what time do I show up?’. I think I was more, like—I will bug people with a million questions till I know what I want to know. I think that was the only way I was able to be. Like, I felt more secure this time.

Emma was very motivated to return to college and determined that it would be a different experience this time. She had a job and also had her own tax documentation to use to complete the FAFSA. She explained, “I could do it with my, all my work, all my tax documents, and everything”. She was very proud of being able to manage the finances herself and to be her own advocate this time. She was given a grant that covered all her tuition and fees, so financially it would not be a struggle for her to pay for college. Her challenging experience her very first semester in college proved beneficial in guiding her to know what questions to ask and who to ask, and she had the confidence to persevere in order to get the answers she needed.

   Nicholas said that although his parents were definitely supportive of him, “They were very hands off...I think that because they didn’t really know the system and didn’t really understand kind of how all that process goes”. He said his parents supported him with anything he needed and would answer any questions they could, but they didn’t directly initiate conversations with him about college. He said it was his group of friends, his social
circle of like-minded students who was his biggest support system. All of them were first-generation college students and children of immigrants, so they managed completing college applications together. He said, “I think it was definitely more my social circle that helped a lot”. Nicholas explained that since he was in 7th grade he and his friends completed scholarship applications together as well as high school applications. He found this to be a very beneficial support system, as he and his friends supported each other and helped each other out, especially when going through the application process for high school and college.

He elaborated,

I think that helped me kind of have a dialogue with someone for the first time, just kind of like how we felt about, like, different aspects that our immigrant parents couldn’t do. And we would, me and [my friend] filled out the [scholarship] application together. I remember we did it together, you know.

Having a group of friends who were sharing the same experience was a significant support system for Nicholas and one that he relied on. Nicholas also relied on himself for support and he had confidence in his ability to make decisions. He told the story of filling out the financial aid application for high school, and helping his parents complete their taxes. He said,

I think it’s something that I experienced throughout my whole educational experience, is with applications and things, I helped it. I did them by myself, at that young of age. I remember when [the admissions director] wanted me to fill out the FAFSA, or something like that, I’d never done before. And I did a lot of things like that for my parents, their taxes and like, that was all me. That was something I learned to do at a very young age.
Because Nicholas had been handling responsibilities since he was young, when was deciding to transfer colleges, he made that decision on his own. When asked if he talked it over with his parents, he said,

   Nope. Did it solo. I think I’ve always, I’ve had to do it from the beginning, you know...I’ve just been doing it for so long, and I think that probably even also contributes to my parents being like, ‘Okay, I think he’s got it’. ’Cause I’ve always just kind of handled it myself.

He explained to his parents his rationale for transferring — that it would be cheaper, he would be closer to home — and they were supportive of his decision, but he made it by himself. Nicholas relied on himself to make an important decision, but he also said that he didn’t think there was anyone who would understand what he was dealing with. He said,

   Who would really, who would I be able to talk to about that? And I’m sure there are other kids who had challenges, like, with the same kind of thing — not really knowing their place in the school and stuff like that — but I think I didn’t feel like I had anyone that understood it, like that, you know.

Nicholas was confident in relying on himself and his circle of friends for the support he needed. He said with conviction, “I think I did have the right support system”. His combination of a tight-knit like-minded group of friends with similar backgrounds, a family that supported his decisions, and confidence in relying on himself was a solid support network for Nicholas.

   Roberto continued to have a support network of teachers from his high school, and he said that his family always supported him during the college process and college. He said there were several organizations that offered support at his university — both for academic
support and support for Latinx students. He also found that when he reached out to his professors when he was struggling with his Psychology class, they were very supportive of him. Roberto told the story of how he finally reached out for help from one of the organizations who had contacted him when his grades were suffering. He explained,

I remember I got a letter from some new group that was, you know, beginning to form at [the university]... She’s like ‘Look. We only send these letters to students who are struggling in either math or English and we, you know, my job is to help you out so you can, you know, pass this class.

They had sent him a letter based on his midterm grades and offered to help him. However, Roberto avoided going for help until a friend pushed him to go. He was at the center with his friend and mentioned the letter from the woman. Although he did not want to go speak with her, he said, “So [my friend] made me [go]. I went in and then we started talking. You know, it was a great decision”. Roberto knew he was at the point where he couldn’t manage his challenges by himself and he did need to talk to someone. It proved to be very helpful for him. Roberto continued,

Once I told her what I was going through, she really helped me out. She’s actually the one who got me in touch with [the head of the Latino support program], like directly. She said go talk to him directly. I’ll set up a meeting for you. She’s the one that told me about my parents, this is how you gotta approach it...and this is what you have to do. And then obviously, [the Latino support group head] ...helped me out. Talked to my parents, like this is what’s going on.

Meeting with the woman from the academic support program was the catalyst for Roberto to get some of his courses back on track, and to inform his parents of the difficulties he was
experiencing. She encouraged him to talk with his math professor and his Psychology professor and helped him prioritize things. With her support, he was able to advocate for himself. He said,

I approached my TA, I approached the math professor. I’m like, ‘Okay, this is, I’m struggling; I need your help. And, you know, I went to my Psychology TA and my Psychology professor, I’m like. ‘Okay, this is what’s going on. But I’m back. What do I need to do?’.

The Psychology TA, in particular, was very helpful and gave Roberto extra credit work that would help him raise his grade, and he followed through on it. Additionally, the academic support woman set up a meeting for Roberto with the head of the Latino support group, who then facilitated a discussion with Roberto and his parents about the challenges he was having, what he was doing to get back on track, and also about his decision to leave school after the first semester. Roberto did not know how to talk with them himself. He explained, “I didn’t think I could tell them you know. I didn’t know how to tell them”. Roberto realized that he waited until things became critical before he responded to the support that was offered. He knew there were support organizations that he could help, but he put off asking for help. He also said that he found a support network from teachers he had connected with in high school and, even after he left the university after his first semester, one of the high school college counselors continued to reach out to him with information regarding online classes he might be interested in. He stated, “I never lost that support system, even though, like, I wasn’t there anymore; I had graduated. I still had somebody to talk to over there”. For Roberto, the support networks at his university provided him a considerable amount of support. The academic support program helped him advocate for himself in his classes and connected him
with the Latino support group. He was aware of the Latino support group from early on, when he attended orientation, but he hesitated reaching out to them for support initially. His parents were also very supportive of him, but Roberto did not share with them that he was struggling because he didn’t know how to tell them. It was the support of the Latino support group that enabled him to discuss with his parents that he was having difficulty.

Having a support network is critical to finding success as a first-generation student in college. For each of the participants, their support network was as unique as they are. First-generation students do not always know what questions to ask or where to go for help and having peers, or faculty, or organizations that are supportive and provide information can help facilitate the transition to college. Additionally, one must be willing to ask for help and advocate for oneself, so that one can avail themselves of the support that is offered.

Summary

This chapter focused on the perceptions of first-generation Latinx college students and explored how they experienced and viewed their first year of college. The data culled from the interviews with four first-generation Latinx college students allow the reader to develop an understanding of the participants’ experience going through the college decision process in high school and the phenomenon of their first year in college. The participants shared their thoughts, feelings, concerns, and perceptions about their first-year college experience in order to give voice to that lived experience and provide insight for the reader into this personal phenomenon. The interview questions were designed to understand the process and factors that guided the participants in their college choices, to explore the impact of their Latinx identity on their educational experience, to examine the challenges and
successes they experienced, and to understand the impact of their support networks on their educational experience.

The interviews were coded using In Vivo Coding and Process Coding for first cycle coding, and Process Coding for second cycle coding. The topics that the interviews focused on provided data on several categories: choosing a private independent high school; factors impacting the decision to attend college; the impact of Latinx identity; challenges encountered by the participants; successes the participants experienced; and support networks in the participants’ lives. Themes that emerged from the analysis included: valuing education; academic preparation; college counseling support; parental involvement; financial concerns; documentation-related concerns; lack of knowledge about the college experience; self-advocacy/lacking resources; pressure to succeed; social connections.

Included in this chapter are the individual lived experiences of Adriana, Emma, Nicholas, and Roberto who shared how they felt about attending Dewey Upper School, the level of academic preparation they had for college, the support they had from college counselors and the level of involvement their parents were able to have during this process. The participants also discussed the various factors impacting their college choices and the impact their Latinx identity had in shaping their educational experiences. Participants addressed the challenges and successes they encountered during their first year in college and the impact of their individual support networks. The purpose of this study was to highlight the experiences and voices of the participants and to provide rich data that illuminates the experience of first-generation Latinx college students.

The next chapter, chapter five, will examine and analyze the results of the collected data, discuss the findings and how they relate to the literature, and propose recommendations.
in terms of programming that might better support first-generation Latinx college students
leading up to and during their first year in college.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This study sought to give voice to the lived experience of first-generation Latinx college students and how they made sense of their first year of college. Four participants who identify as first-generation Latinx college students were interviewed to delve into their first year in college and to explore the process that got them there in order to better understand how to support the enrollment, retention, and graduation of first-generation Latinx college students. The research questions guiding this phenomenological study are: What is the lived experience of first-generation college students of their first year of college? What factors during high school shape and inform the college application and admission process for first-generation Latinx college students?

This chapter will discuss the major findings, what is important to understand, and what can be learned from the interview data. It will also draw connections to the literature on first-generation Latinx college students regarding the factors impacting their college process and their college success, and make recommendations for developing supportive programming to promote college access and retention for these students.

Discussion of Findings

Challenges of involving Latinx parents. Including parents in the educational decisions of their child is critical to a student’s academic success and facilitates the transition to college. The family has an impact on how a student values education and his or her pursuit of higher education. Parental involvement is a significant factor in a student’s educational success and persistence. However, the level of involvement of the parents of the participants...
in the college process and during their first year of college varied and was limited in comparison to the involvement of their white counterparts. For one of the participants, Emma, her relationship with her parents was strained at the time she was going through the college process, so even though her parents valued education, they were absent during most of this process. She made most of her own decisions and attended college meetings on her own. For the most part, the school was unaware that Emma was not living at home and not having any discussions with her parents about her plans post-high school. Nicholas’s parents did not speak English, so he was responsible for translating for them. Additionally, written information was not provided in Spanish for his parents and because they had not attended college they did not understand the process or how they could participate. For this participant, everything from the school was always communicated to his parents through him. This limited their involvement with the school and their son’s school life throughout his entire high school experience. He chose not to tell them about parent-teacher conferences because he had felt humiliated at his first one and, once he realized they were not mandatory, he did not want to have his parents attend. He said that in addition to there being a language barrier, there was an economic barrier to his parents’ involvement as well, and his parents were not comfortable coming to campus and attending events because of their economic status. Although Nicholas’s parents were not a presence at his school, they had high aspirations for him to go to college; however, as he had explained, ‘there was no way in for them’. Roberto’s parents speak English and Spanish and they did attend the college meetings with him. They participated by asking questions about financial aid and Roberto also visited one local college with his father. When he was struggling academically and emotionally during his first semester in college, he eventually reached out to the Latino support center to
get help telling his parents about his challenges. He did not know how to tell them himself, and the head of the Latino support center was very helpful with breaking the news to his parents and talking about what the next steps should be. The head of the center was Latinx himself, and this was important as he understood the parents’ perspective as a Latinx.

Yosso (2005) discusses familial capital using the lens of CRT and explains that this component is one way in which Latinx families convey their values and shape their children's goals for pursuing an education. Familial capital, which “refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition”, is a commitment and connection to family and community and it is through these networks that individuals’ “emotional, moral, educational and occupational consciousness” is influenced by their family and their commitment to them (p. 79). Besides the cultural wealth found in familial capital, Auerbach (2006) discusses ‘familism’ —putting one’s family as a priority — as a concept that “has traditionally shaped Latino family relationships and socialization” (p. 278). Family values “around education often reinforce the sense of mutual obligation among family members” (p. 278). Parents’ desires for their children to pursue an education in order to have a better life can be a powerful force in shaping a child’s educational goals.

Including families in the college process is key to successful engagement and retention for Latinx students (Hernandez, 2002; Laden, 1999; Vergara and Hightower, 2006). For Latinx students, transitioning to the culture of higher education can present unique challenges, but if the school engages the families and embraces the cultural wealth found in familial capital and the cultural value of familism, that can ease the transition for students and promote a more successful college experience. More outreach needs to be done to
ensure these parents have a voice in their student’s education and that their perspective and values are considered and included. This entails developing cultural competency and welcoming parents in by providing outreach in dual-language communication and including translators in meetings.

Waiting to engage with parents until a student is beginning the college process might be too late; this is an outreach that should begin in the admission process to the high school. Dotson-Blake, Foster, and Gressard (2009) argue for developing school-family-community partnerships and promoting cultures of ‘equal engagement’. They also recommend professional development for educators that focuses on cultural competency so faculty and administrators can more successfully engage with Latinx parents. Kiyama (2010) discusses valuing the ‘funds of knowledge’ that Latinx families have and drawing on those contributions while helping build a culturally respectful partnership to engage parents. Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, and Perna, (2008) argue that the school needs to take the initiative to reach out to the parents and find ways to connect them to the school and get them involved and this means understanding and valuing their cultural perspective. Valuing the input and engagement of first-generation Latinx students’ parents in the child’s educational experience means schools need to develop cultural competency in order to better understand the cultural perspective of Latinxs, engage parents early on in the process, provide information to families in Spanish, and build on the funds of knowledge the parents possess.

**Complexity of Latinx identity.** All of the participants discussed the importance of their Latinx identity and the impact it had on them in educational settings. Their identities shaped their experiences in high school and in college and they had varying perceptions of that impact. Castillo, Conoley, Choi-Pearson, Archuleta, Phoummarath, and Van
Landingham (2006), posit “ethnic identity is an important variable to include when examining college persistence attitudes because it may influence the way the student perceives the environment” (p. 268). The participants clearly took pride in their heritage, with Nicholas minoring in Spanish in college so that he could improve his grasp of Spanish grammar and writing. All of the participants also mentioned concerns or worries about fitting into the culture of a white high school when they attended Dewey Upper School and shared how they tried to best navigate it. Two of the participants said they felt they were viewed as the ‘token’ Mexican at school or in their friend group. Adriana felt her Latinx heritage was one of the reasons she did not ask for help in high school or even initially in college. The participants shared stories of their challenges with trying to ‘fit in’ and assimilate to the culture of their schools or their friend groups, with Emma explaining she felt she had to work harder as a Latina to be accepted and Nicholas saying he felt he was forgetting who he was in his efforts to be more like the white boys in his fraternity. Each of them had to figure out how to manage the different cultural expectations during their educational experience and to maintain their identity in the process.

The participants had to determine how to navigate two different cultures and this presented each of them with different challenges. The literature discusses these challenges. Borrero (2011) states,

The cultural experiences that many Latino students navigate daily are both complex and multi-faceted. Not only do they experience different linguistic worlds between home and school, but they may be the first from their families to attend U.S. schools and learn about the cultural expectations that define schooling here. (p. 24)
Often there is pressure to adapt to the white cultural values of the American educational system, at the expense of one’s own cultural values. This can be an added challenge and complication for first-generation Latinx students. This was Nicholas’s experience as he tried to fit in with his fraternity brothers and he felt as though he lost himself for a time. Castillo, Conoley, Choi-Pearson, Archuleta, Phoummarath, and Van Landingham (2006) assert there is an expectation that, “the student must adapt to the cultural norms and values of peers and faculty in the university and abide by the formal and informal structural requirements” of the university (p. 267). Nicholas decided to transfer from his university during his sophomore year after he realized he did not want to return to his previous behaviors and the fraternity lifestyle he had been living. Not only did he feel as though he was losing himself, he did not like the drinking culture he had been trying to fit in with. I find this to be an example of the protective nature of Latinx culture and the cultural value of familism. According to Valdivieso-Mora, Peet, Garnier-Villarreal, Salazar-Villanea, and Johnson (2016) familism is a protective factor where an individual feels an obligation “to take one’s family into consideration when making decisions” because the family connection and values are a priority (p. 2). Nicholas is very connected to his family and values his relationship with them and his Latinx culture. The struggles he encountered at his private college had a lot to do with who he was culturally and what he valued. Once he realized he was moving away from what was important to him and compromising his identity, he made the decision to leave what was a toxic environment for him.

Castillo, Conoley, Choi-Pearson, Archuleta, Phoummarath, and Van Landingham (2006) recommend that universities develop programming that incorporates “culturally informed engagement models” to support Latinx students. This idea is supported by the
research conducted by Arana, Castañeda-Sound, Blanchard and Aguilar (2011) who found for some Latinx students that “creating a shared cultural experience for Hispanic students seems to offer familiarity and emotional support” (p. 248). One way to do this is to move away from the expectation is that it is the individual’s responsibility to assimilate or integrate into the culture of the school. Promoting systemic change that develops culturally sensitive programming and provides professional development on cultural competency will improve the cultural congruity between the Latinx cultural values and the school’s cultural values and validate the first-generation Latinx student’s ethnicity and identity.

Roberto’s experience and how he viewed his Latinx identity was, as he said, ‘complicated’. He did not want it to be what defined him, yet many people made assumptions about him and what he needed based on his Latinx identity. He felt attending Dewey gave him an opportunity to not have his Latinx identity first and foremost and he just wanted to fit in with the rest of the student body. However, he felt that his teachers imposed his identity on him and expected him to embrace it, without ever asking him what he wanted. In trying to support him they were doing what they thought was best for him —based on their own perspective. Murrell (2008) discusses this complexity of identity and posits in his situated identity framework that this “tension between individual representations of self and the ascriptions made of the individual by wider society is called positionality” (p. 37). He describes identity as “an amalgam of identity roles and patterns” and sees the individual as a combination “of many, sometimes conflicting, self-understandings and self-expressions” (p. 37). This dimension of positionality brings clarity to how Roberto saw himself as Latinx. Within the predominantly white, upper-class student body of Dewey, Roberto did not want to have to embrace his Latinx identity. In the environment of Dewey, he chose to present
himself as an individual where his racial identity was not his most significant identifier. His hope was to fit in and to assimilate; however, others seemed to see him first as Latinx and made decisions and assumptions about him based on that. In situated-mediated identity theory, an individual’s identity is not a static concept, but rather is shaped by the social situations in which they engage. An individual may present himself differently within different contexts. However, how Roberto wanted to position himself in that context was not necessarily how others positioned him and this led to tension and frustration for him.

Many of the teachers at Dewey are white and from middle-class backgrounds, and therefore their positionality is a factor in how they interact with students. As a white middle-class woman myself I have a different perspective than a first-generation Latinx student. Murrell’s (2008) situated identity framework posits that this framework applies to teachers as well as learners because of the idea that identity is fluid and is impacted by the social situation. It is important then, that teachers do their own identity work to understand their biases, attitudes, and values that affect their own positionality. He discusses the importance of teachers developing cultural competence, and argues, though, that in this framework cultural competence “is the ability of a person to be a cultural learner” (p. 159). Having an openness and willingness to develop culturally competent skills is critical for teachers to support all students, and this means being culturally sensitive and working to understand one’s own positionality.

Importance of culturally sensitive understanding. The participants all shared stories of the impact of their Latinx identity on their educational experience at Dewey and in college. Some of the challenges they encountered had to do with how others perceived them racially or culturally or when others made assumptions about them based on how they looked
or spoke. Some teachers at Dewey made assumptions about what they thought was best for the participants based on their own white middle-class perspective and their perceptions of the predominantly white upper-class student body. In Roberto’s situation, one of his teachers offered to help fix his situation of not being able to attend college due to lack of financing and found a donor to cover Roberto’s first semester’s tuition. He then felt obligated to attend for the semester that was paid for, even though he had planned to work and save money to start college at a later date. The donation was not sustainable and there was no long-term plan for Roberto to be able to continue beyond the first semester. What was deemed helpful from the perspective of the teacher was actually a burden to Roberto. Emma said that she stood out economically and culturally at Dewey and it was hard for her to fit in. She did not feel connected to the school and, as she said, she felt she had to change herself to be accepted. She experienced microaggressions from some students and she felt as though she were the ‘token Mexican’. She never had a sense of belonging at Dewey. Nicholas said that his parents couldn’t be as involved as they would have liked to because language was a barrier, but they also felt uncomfortable because of economic and cultural differences. He said there was not a way for them to be involved or included. He also resented the assumption that the minority students would get their support from each other, which he felt was unfair. For these participants there was only one perspective that seemed to be valued and there was not a level of cultural understanding or cultural sensitivity that helped the participants feel accepted or understood culturally.

Much of the literature discusses building educators’ cultural competency in order to effectively work with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. While Murell (2008) discusses how important it is for teachers to develop cultural competence, he also uses the
phrase “cultural learner” (p. 159). I think that as educators we need to go beyond cultural competency and become cultural learners; this concept is known as cultural humility. Cultural humility originated within the medical field and is discussed in a seminal article by Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998) in which they argue for physicians to develop and practice cultural humility with their patients and families, as opposed to cultural competence. Cultural competence implies a mastery or expertise, whereas cultural humility is a “process of self-reflection...and commitment to a lifelong learning process” (p. 119). Along with the aspect of self-reflection, the authors discuss the two other components of the concept of cultural humility: to remedy power imbalances and to develop mutually beneficial partnerships. Cultural humility will promote collaboration as educators demonstrate that they value what Latinx students and their parents bring to the partnership and that they can learn from each other. Hook, Davis, Owen, Worthington Jr., and Utsey (2013) present four studies that examine psychologists’ development of cultural humility. While the concept originated from the medical field, its application to the education field is warranted and relevant. The authors argue that:

Therapists should not assume that they understand the client’s cultural background or experience based on therapists’ prior knowledge, experience, or training. Rather, therapists should partner with the client to explore the client’s cultural background and experience...This attitude of humility may be especially important to the development of a strong working alliance with a client who is culturally different. Furthermore, engaging a culturally diverse client with an interpersonal stance of humility may attenuate the tendency for therapists to overvalue their own
perspectives and worldviews, instead of joining with the client to explore the client’s perspective and worldview. (p. 9)

While this study was done with therapists, the concept is an important one for educators who are working to develop cultural competency in order to more effectively partner with students of various cultural backgrounds. According to the authors, an individual practicing cultural humility will focus on interpersonal behaviors, ask questions to understand the other’s cultural background, express interest in their perspective, and be open to what their needs are, rather than presenting oneself as the expert and imposing one’s own perspective.

**Impact of limited college knowledge.** The participants reported that they spent less time meeting with the high school’s college counselors than did their peers; they needed more guidance from the college counselors; their parents were not very involved in conversations with the counselors; and they were frustrated with being dissuaded from schools to which they thought they should apply. Additionally, they didn’t necessarily ask questions that might have facilitated their college process and college choices because they didn’t know what to ask, and they felt they could have benefited from more financial guidance.

The first-generation students needed a different approach from college counseling than did their white counterparts. The participants needed to rely more on guidance and information from the college counselors than did students whose parents had attended college, as the parents of the first-generation students did not have experience with the college process themselves. As Nicholas explained, “I can’t go back home and ask my parents about this, because they never went through the college process”. Counseling the first-generation students in the same manner as students whose parents have attended college
does not provide them with enough information, support, and guidance to make the best
decisions for themselves. They actually need more time with the college counselors than non
first-generation students, and there needs to be outreach to the parents to help educate them
about the process and include them in the college conversation.

The literature shows that ‘college knowledge’ — knowing about the “prerequisites,
paths, processes, and milestones” to move successfully through the college process — is an
essential component for parents to support their children in this process (Tornatzky, Cutler,
& Lee, 2002, p. 3). However, college knowledge is lower among parents from low
socioeconomic classes and Latinx immigrant parents, even more so when language is a
barrier (Tornatzky, Cutler, & Lee, 2002; Engle, 2007). Providing college counseling that
does not take into consideration a student’s cultural and economic situation falls short of
ensuring that first-generation Latinx students have all the necessary tools to make informed
choices. Developing cultural fluency is recommended for counselors to help bridge “the
communication gap between schools and families of Latino students” (Hurley & Coles, 2015,
p. 6). Focusing on outreach to Latinx parents and providing college conversations in small
group settings with other Latinx parents and their students would take into consideration
Latinx values such as familism (Tello & Lonn, 2017; Hurley & Coles, 2015). It is crucial to
understand the cultural backgrounds of first-generation Latinx students to effectively engage
them and their parents in important college conversations. Providing information in dual-
language, including translators in the conversations and meetings, and beginning college
planning in 9th grade are ways to engage parents and also to more effectively support first-
generation Latinx students in the college process (Hurley & Coles, 2015). Using the same
college counseling approach for first-generation Latinx students, who often are from lower-
income families and whose parents lack college knowledge, as is used with non first-generation students from upper-income families does not necessarily meet the needs of these students. Considering professional development to develop cultural humility and partnering with local state university’s Latinx support programs could provide much needed information to more effectively understand and support the unique needs of these students.

Additionally, the literature discusses the challenge of the transition to the college campus for first-generation students. Galina (2016) states, “First-generation students must learn not only the content of their classes but the social rules and roles of academia. Even the vocabulary of college—words like ‘registrar,’ ‘bursar,’ and ‘GPA’—may be completely unfamiliar to these students” (p. 4). There is an assumption that everyone knows college terminology and understands its culture, but that is the perspective of non first-generation individuals looking at it through their lens. In addition to academic and social adjustment to college life, first-generation students “confront obstacles with respect to cultural adaptation. This is due to differences between the culture (i.e. norms, values, expectations) of their families and communities and the culture that exists on college campuses” (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 21). Latinx first-generation students can feel isolated on college campuses due to the expectation that they have to adapt to the traditional culture of college. Tello and Lonn (2017) argue that they have to “negotiate overt and covert norms that assume prior knowledge or familiarity with the culture of higher education” (p. 355). Providing more information about transitioning to college during the college application process would benefit these students. Spending time visiting college campuses earlier than junior year might help with this adjustment. This would also give students an opportunity to ask questions they might not have thought of otherwise. Engle (2007) says that first-generation students have
described the discontinuity between the culture of their families and communities and college campus culture as “worlds apart” (p. 35). Including information about coursework, college vocabulary, what to expect when going to college, challenges with cultural dissonance, and discussing coping strategies and how to access resources will facilitate the transition and adjustment to college life for first-generation Latinx students (Engle and Tinto, 2008). Providing college information early on, including parents in information sessions, and visiting colleges starting in 9th grade are all ways to develop a first-generation college student’s college knowledge and help ease the ‘culture shock’ that many of these students experience.

**Challenges of financial literacy.** The participants in this study all discussed concerns about financing college. They struggled with completing the FAFSA and understanding their financial aid packages. They did not understand the financial impact of student loans and accrued interest. They were unclear about the full cost of college that included books, supplies, transportation, and other fees. They said they did not have direct conversations with counselors about whether they could actually afford college or not. One participant was frustrated that she was not supported with her conclusion that, financially, community college would be her best option. Another participant’s undocumented status made him ineligible to receive any federal money, making it very difficult for him to afford college.

Financial issues are often a barrier to successful completion of college and for each of the participants it was a factor in either leaving college before completing their first year or transferring schools for a more affordable option. Providing more in-depth financial information during the college process would have benefitted each of the participants. This aligns with Hurley and Coles’s (2015) report that financial aid information and scholarship
information should be “an area of added emphasis in practice for counselors working with Latino students” (p. 17). The students in this study had expected more information would be provided about college financial aid opportunities, and they needed it. Engle and Tinto (2008) recommend providing workshops for Latinx students and their parents to give more in-depth information about financial aid and the FAFSA. This should include discussing “options for covering the cost of attendance at four-year institutions, including the prudent use of loans” (p. 4). Not having enough information about the cost of college and financial aid options is cited by Kiyama (2010) as a concern for Latinx families. She recommends having “in-depth discussions beyond the costs of college and into the financial aid application process and the requirements for maintaining aid” with parents so they had clarity about the costs and options to pay for college. Hurley and Coles (2015) discuss that students with undocumented status face other challenges in securing financial aid. They are not eligible for federal funding, but there are also concerns “sharing information about their immigration status and their finances as required to apply for financial aid” (p. 21). This adds a layer of complexity and worry about applying for financial aid and is an additional barrier to paying for college.

**Difficulty accessing support networks and resources.** A supportive network of family, friends, school personnel and school resources is critical to ensuring college success for first-generation Latinx students. The transition to college is a challenging time for many students, but for first-generation Latinx students it can be even more so because of lack of college knowledge and cultural discontinuity. Supportive friends and family are important and helpful resources, but knowing about campus support resources and accessing those are also essential components of successful college transition.
The participants all reported a reluctance to reach out to school personnel and organizations. For some, they relied on siblings or friends or other outside connections for advice and guidance. Adriana said that her brother helped her make decisions about loans and her roommate’s mother was instrumental in helping Adriana navigate the college landscape. She did not use her academic advisor other than for a few email exchanges, although she said she should have used her more. However, Adriana found the support helpful when she started going for extra sessions with the TA in both Psychology and Biology. Nicholas said his groups of friends were a big support for him and he also relied considerably on himself, and Roberto still relied on some teachers from his high school. Roberto had initially avoided availing himself of the support from the academic center when they reached out to him. However, when his friend pushed him to go, he said, “It was a great decision”. The representative helped him get some courses back on track and guided him with how to approach his professors and also someone from the Latino support center. Roberto also found the representative from the Latino support center to be helpful. He helped Roberto find a way to talk to his parents about his struggles and also about his plans to leave college after the semester. Emma did reach out to the Hispanic support center but felt the counselors were judgmental and harsh and not supportive to her. She was very dissatisfied with the center, as she felt pressured to tough out her situation and she did not feel supported. However, when she returned to college after four years, she felt having gone through what she did first semester, she was better armed to ask questions, to press for answers, and to advocate for herself in a way she wasn’t able to do the first time.

I think for the participants the hesitancy to reach out beyond themselves or family for support could be rooted in their culture, as Adriana said it might make her look weak. Two of
the participants navigated high school and made decisions on their own and functioned more independently, so they seldom availed themselves of resources. Depending on themselves was their norm. It could also be a lack of knowledge about those resources and what they might be able to provide in terms of support that prevented the participants from reaching out. Research indicates it is not unusual for first-generation students to be “less likely to be engaged in the academic and social experiences that foster success in college, such as studying in groups, interacting with faculty and other students, participating in extracurricular activities, and using support services” (Tinto & Engle, 2008, p. 3). They might have less information about these resources and how to access them because of a lack of college knowledge. Tello and Lonn (2017) recommend that counselors on college campuses have a more active presence and do outreach to first-generation students. They suggest timing that outreach for when students are most vulnerable, such as when the first enter college. Tornatzky, Macias, Jenkins, and Solis (2006) posit that colleges are more successful connecting first-generation students with support services if they “leverage the strengths of Latino culture and family dynamics...using peer and group-based support systems with Latino students” (p. 12). They explain this has been effective in engaging first-generation students at several high-performing college that have fostered “Latino student study groups, peer counseling and professional societies” (p. 17). Having organizations and resources to support first-generation Latinx college students is a necessity, but it is not enough. Conducting active outreach to these students, informing them about resources early on, including Latinx students in the development of programming so that it embodies their culture, and using peer support or mentoring to help connect with students will facilitate
them responding to and accessing valuable resources that can lead to persistence in a college education.

**Implications for Future Practice**

This qualitative study sought to explore the lived experience of first-generation Latinx college students and how they made sense of their first year of college. The purpose was to give voice to the participants who are first-generation Latinx college students in hopes of better understanding the factors that impact and shape their college experience. Illuminating their perspective and highlighting their insights is key to understanding how to better support first-generation Latinx students in their pursuit of higher education. Implications for practice are presented in this section that were drawn from the findings of this study. The college experience of first-generation Latinx students is shaped by their high school experience and the process they go through in high school as they aspire to pursue higher education. Therefore, the recommendations focus on future practices at both the high school and college level.

**Culturally congruent outreach to parents.** Some of the participants’ parents didn’t come to college counseling meetings or even attend school events very often. There wasn’t an easy way in for these parents, whether it was a language barrier or a cultural barrier or an economic one. Providing outreach to parents in ways that are welcoming and that validate Latinx cultural values is recommended — at both the high school level and college level. Providing school communication and college information in both English and Spanish is an effective way of partnering with Latinx families. It tells parents that ‘you matter - we want you here’. Providing translators at events and meetings will facilitate communications and develop connections. Creating small groups of Latinx parents for conversations about
colleges and the college process will not only provide critical information but it will also provide an affinity support group. Developing an understanding of Latinx culture amongst faculty and counselors will also facilitate this process.

**Development of cultural humility in faculty and counselors.** The participants all discussed the impact of their Latinx identity on their educational experiences and the challenges of navigating two cultures. There is an expectation that the Latinx student adapt to the culture of the school and the norms of the faculty and peers. However, research shows that developing culturally informed programming will facilitate the transition to educational settings for Latinx students. Providing professional development for faculty and administrators on cultural humility will improve the cultural congruity for those students. It will also help faculty more effectively support all students and truly embrace the concept of diversity.

**Culturally responsive mentoring.** The participants did not mention having a mentor or mentoring programs, but the literature emphasizes the benefits of mentoring for students and the family. Vergara and Hightower (2006) examined the mentoring program at the University of La Verne for first-generation Latinx students. Mentors are alumni, faculty, staff members, or older students who work closely with students supporting them throughout college. Connecting with a mentor helps ease the transition to college for first-generation students and helps them navigate the college landscape. A mentor can help the student avail himself of campus resources, connect with groups and organizations, answer questions about majors, and connect them socially. Programming for culturally responsive mentoring in high school for first-generation Latinx students could include study groups of Latinx students that evolve from the students and model Latinx culture. It could also include peer-to-peer
mentoring that helps students connect with teachers, avail themselves of resources, and develop strong self-advocacy skills. Developing culturally responsive mentoring programs at both the high school and college level is recommended to support the transition to the educational environment and help the student integrate into the community and culture of the school.

**Early exposure to college process and financial aid workshops.** The participants discussed having limited conversations with the college counselors and that not all of their parents were involved in all of the conversations. They also discussed the challenge of completing the FAFSA and even knowing how to read their college financial aid packages. It was difficult for the participants to ask questions of their parents about the college process, since that had not been their parents’ experience. They often didn’t know what questions to even ask. Their visits to college campuses were limited, in part by finances and in part by not knowing this was something they should be doing. It is recommended to start this process earlier—perhaps in 9th grade—and include the parents in the process to help develop college knowledge for both the student and the parents. Additionally, providing more in-depth financial aid information about completing the FAFSA, applying for scholarships, taking out loans, and work-study options will provide much needed financial information to determine the affordability of college. This will also help facilitate a partnership with the parents and foster culturally congruent support for the family.

**Fostering success, resilience, and persistence.** Murrell (2008) calls for incorporating the cultural legacies of students of color into the educational system of America, so they have equal access to educational opportunities as their white peers and work towards creating “identity-enabling school environments to promote identities of
achievement” (p. 35). By considering recommendations such as implementing culturally congruent outreach to parents, promoting the development of cultural humility in faculty and counselors, providing culturally responsive mentoring, beginning exposure to the college process earlier, and offering in-depth financial aid workshops, we can move towards educational environments that embrace multiple identities and culture, foster academic success, build resilience, and promote persistence towards one’s aspirations.

Limitations

Due to the small size and unique characteristics of the sample for this study, the results might not be able to be generalized to all first-generation Latinx college students. Nonetheless, this study provides relevant insights and considerations that can be used to develop programming and practices to support first-generation Latinx college students in successfully pursuing a college degree.

Summary

This chapter examined the major findings and the themes that emerged from the interview data of this study of the lived experience of first-generation Latinx college students and how they made sense of their first year of college. The research questions guiding this phenomenological study are: *What is the lived experience of first-generation college students of their first year of college? What factors during high school shape and inform the college application and admission process for first-generation Latinx college students?* The participants in this study very generously shared the challenges that faced and the successes they celebrated during their educational journey. It is important to hear their voices, validate their stories, and honor their accomplishments so that we can develop educational
programming and policies that will ensure equity in education for all individuals and support first-generation students in the attainment of their goals.
REFERENCES


*United States Census Bureau*. Retrieved from


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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

• As a non-Latina, I’m interested in learning more about supporting Latino students in their education process; whatever you can share with me will be helpful. I’d like to ask you questions about your experience in high school and college that will help me understand the Latino experience and that may help us do a better job preparing Latino students for college.

• Tell me about your background -
  o Where were you born?
  o Where did you grow up?
  o Who was in your family when you were a child?
  o What language did your family speak at home?
  o Tell me more about your what your life was like growing up.

• Tell me about your parents’ backgrounds
  o Where they were born
  o Where they grew up?
  o What are some stories your parents tell about their educational experience?

• Tell me how you see yourself as a Latino.
  o How do you think other people see you as a Latino?

• As a Latino what your experience was like in high school?
  o Is there a story about your high school experience as a Latino that you can share with me?
• What can you tell me about your experiences in high school that were helpful in preparing you for college?

• As a Latino, how do you think about college?
  o Tell me about key experiences that led you to want to go to college.
  o Tell me how you went about the process of deciding to attend college. What were your hopes for college?
  o Tell me about the important people in your life and how did they feel/think about you going to college.

• Tell me about your first year in college.
  o What stands out for you when you think about that first year?
  o How did you see yourself at this point?

• Who were your friends in college?
  o Tell me a story about what their experience was like being Latino in college.

• Describe a time in your first year of college when you felt very proud or successful.
  o Were there any specific people and/or resources that you found helpful at this time?

• Describe a time in that first year of college that was challenging for you.
  o How did you handle this challenge?
  o What support was available to you to deal with these challenges?

• What haven’t we talked about that you would like to add?

• Have we missed something that you think is important?

• Let’s schedule our follow-up interview soon….