The Latina Graduate Experience at Hispanic Serving Institutions

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THE LATINA GRADUATE EXPERIENCE AT HISPANIC SERVING INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Hispanic Serving Institutions are designated as such as a result of meeting the minimum enrollment of 25% full-time, undergraduate Hispanic identifying student enrollment. Though this designation is met solely through undergraduate enrollment, there is a need for services and programming to be expanded to graduate students. This study explores the experiences of Latina graduate students at Hispanic Serving Institutions with the purpose of understanding what support participants needed to persist and succeed and what HSIs are or should be doing to better to increase student outcomes and create a culturally engaging campus community.

Keywords: HSIs, Latinas, Hispanic Serving Institutions, Graduate Students, Testimonios
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CHAPTER 1
Institutional Study

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative *testimonios* study was to identify the lived experiences of Latina graduate students at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) in urban areas and whether they feel supported in their academic journeys. In addition, this study aimed at uncovering the culturally relevant practices and supportive services offered at several urban HSIs to support Latina graduate students. As illustrated in the literature review, research has been done on related topics, particularly on HSIs, federal funding for HSIs, culturally relevant pedagogy, intersectionality, and the culturally engaging campus environments model. The student voice and perspective of Latina experiences at HSIs, particularly at the graduate level, remained largely unanswered prior to this study.

Different labels to describe student’s ethnic identity will be used throughout. Latinx is a relatively new gender-neutral, pan-ethnic label to describe Hispanic or Latino heritage. According to a survey by Pew Research in 2019, only 23% of Hispanic/Latinos had heard of the term Latinx, and only 3% of those use the term regularly. However, for inclusion, Latinx will primarily be used. Hispanic will be used when discussing the HSI designation, and Latina will be used for female Hispanic/Latino heritage students.

Hispanic Serving Institution Designation and Characteristics

Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) are unlike Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) in that HSIs were not founded with the intentional mission and vision to serve a specific student population. The student body of an HSI has become increasingly diverse, and as a result, HSIs now must learn how to serve the underserved properly. The grassroots
efforts of HSIs began in the 1980s, but they were not officially recognized by Congress until the 1990s, thanks in part to the work of HACU (Garcia & Taylor, 2017). These institutions were then allowed to compete and apply for supplemental funding to grow programs and services for Latinx students.

The amount of HSIs across the United States continues to grow. The Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) defines HSIs as institutions with at least 25% of their full-time undergraduate population identifying as Latinx. HACU also reported that in 1994 there were 189 HSIs, and in 2017 that number grew to 523. The growth of HSIs has “averaged an increase of 30 institutions per year since 2009” (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, n.d.).

Figure 1

Number of existing HSIs

HACU also keeps track of Emerging HSIs, which are defined as colleges and universities close to meeting the requirement of 25% full-time enrollment (FTE) of Hispanic students to receive the designation. According to HACU, Emerging HSIs have at least 15% Latinx student enrollment but less than 25%. More popular in states with a large Latinx population, such as California, HSIs have existed long enough to have uncovered best practices that work for closing the achievement gap for Latinx student populations. For example, California has 170 HSIs and
47 Emerging HSIs as of 2017, whereas Illinois has only 25 designated HSIs (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, n.d.). In the city of Chicago, 11 four-year private institutions are established as HSIs.

Federal Funding at HSIs

When an institution reaches 25% full-time, undergraduate Hispanic student population and receives the HSI designation, that institution qualifies to receive federal funding. Though there is no enrollment requirement at the graduate level for an institution to receive HSI status, there is federal funding HSIs can apply for to support graduate level students. There are three main grant funded programs offered by the HSI Division of the Department of Education: 1) Promoting Post-Baccalaureate Opportunities for Hispanic Americans (PPOHA), 2) Developing Hispanic Serving Institutions (DHSI), and 3) HSI-STEM. (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

Latinx Graduate Students at HSIs

A study by Excelencia in Education in 2019 indicated 9% of Latinx students earned a master’s degree, and 2% earned a Ph.D. Of the top 25 institutions where Latinx students earned doctoral degrees in 2016-17, the total degrees awarded to Hispanics was 1,544 compared to the 13,183 doctorate degrees awarded overall. Less than half of HSIs offer graduate degrees; of the 539 HSIs, only 215 offered graduate degrees. The enrollment of Latinx students in graduate programs at HSIs overall is a mere 29% (Excelencia in Education, 2019). Further research on Latinx graduate student experiences is needed to uncover challenges and address the culturally relevant practices needed by HSIs to support students.

Due to the diversity of the city and the many urban institutions in Chicago and across the U.S., there is much an institution can learn about the identity of being an HSI; what that means for the Latinx student population, and how as an HSI, urban institutions can adequately support
its Latinx students at every level in both their racial identity development and through a positive and welcoming educational experience. An adequate “servingness” mindset (Garcia & Koren, 2020) can increase retention and graduation rates for this population. Garcia & Koren (2020) state that servingness is the ability of HSIs to “educate Latinx students through a culturally enhancing approach that centers Latinx ways of knowing and being, to provide transformative experiences that lead to both academic and non-academic outcomes” (p.2).

Internal Context

Mission and History of Private Urban Hispanic Serving Institution

This study will primarily occur at a private, urban Hispanic Serving Institution; this urban HSI was founded over 130 years ago. It is a private, nonprofit institution with four colleges and 6 locations in total. The institution was founded by women, aimed primarily to serve immigrant communities. The university was quite literally based on serving the underserved and giving marginalized groups, like women, the opportunity to learn and succeed. The overall mission of this institution is to provide access to higher education and provide students with opportunities through innovative teaching, scholarship, community engagement and service excellence.

The University’s Carnegie Classification is listed as Doctoral University with Moderate Research Activity. The undergraduate instructional program is a balanced one of arts & sciences, professions, and some graduate coexistence. The undergraduate programs consist of Business, Psychology, Education, Criminal Justice, and Computer Science. The graduate instructional program at the HSI is Research Doctoral and Professional-Dominant. Currently, the majority of the institution’s student population consists of graduate students. However, with the steady growth of the undergraduate programs, growth trends show that the undergrad population may soon rise above the graduate student population (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of
Higher Education, 2014). Still, it is essential to note that though the HSIs student population consists of primarily graduate students, the undergraduate Latinx student population of over 70% far exceeds the Latinx graduate student population, currently about 15%. The HSI is also classified as an institution with community engagement through the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2014).

In 2016, the private institution became recognized as a Hispanic Serving Institution and was awarded its first Title III HSI STEM Grant through the United States Department of Education. The purpose and overall goal of Title III funding is to recruit, enroll, and graduate Latinx and other underrepresented students into STEM programs. The White House Initiative declared opportunities and advancement in STEM fields as its primary initiatives (The White House Initiative, 2010). The job market for STEM fields is growing, and people are needed to fill those jobs; tapping into the Latinx market is a strategy the White House Initiative is pursuing.

This HSI also has Title V funding through the Promoting Post-baccalaureate Opportunities to Hispanic Americans grant (PPOHA). The goals of the PPOHA grant are to increase enrollment of Latinx graduate and doctoral students to 25% over five years, provide a fellowship program with mentoring and financial assistance, provide supportive services through a resource institute, including writing support for bilingual/multilingual students, professional development, networking opportunities, and a post-doctoral experience. Prior to receiving this grant, Latinx graduate students were not being serviced at this level and these programs did not exist.

While this institution has met the designation of an HSI due to its Latinx undergraduate student enrollment, there is now an opportunity to go beyond enrolling Latinx students and grow
to embrace the identity of being Hispanic-serving. To take on this opportunity will provide an immense value to the institution's underrepresented Latinx population at both the undergraduate and graduate levels—one the institution can only discover through practice rather than theory.

Institutional HSI Characteristics

Since receiving HSI status in 2016, the institution has grown from 25% Latinx Enrollment to over 45% of full-time students at the Undergraduate College. In 2019, when the institution received the PPOHA grant to support graduate students, the institution had 15% of its graduate students identify as Latinx with the goal of increasing that number to 25% within five years. An HSI Advisory Committee was formed to guide the work of the institution as an HSI and to advance its mission of being a community and career focused Hispanic Serving Institution.

Strategic Plan

Just over ten years ago, the private HSI created its 2020 Strategic Plan. This strategic plan includes key Growth Strategies that will drive enrollment growth through 2020 and Critical Enablers to support that growth. The Strategic Plan, pictured below, has three guiding values as the foundation: they are Access, Innovation, and Excellence. These are also three of the seven core values of the university’s mission and vision. The institution is now embarking on its next 10-year strategic plan that includes an intentional focus and pillar around advancing its diversity, equity, and inclusion work. This HSI is becoming more intentional about its identity as a minority-serving institution and embedding strategies and supports in this area for students, faculty, and staff of color.

Figure 2

2020 Strategic Plan
Diversity Equity and Inclusion

Within the last five years, the institution has implemented strategic effort to organize its work and efforts around Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI). While DEI has always been a part of the innovative programs and services of the institution, it was time to be intentional about informing the community about the commitment to continue and advance this work. A Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee was formed to do just that and lead the DEI pillar of the new Strategic Plan.

Leadership and Governance Structure

“Postsecondary governance structures shape institutional priorities and outcomes” (Martinez, 2015, p. 23). Shared governance is often defined as a process where all key stakeholders at an institution, be it faculty, staff, Provosts, VPs, the President, Board of Trustees, students and or community organizations, are brought to the table for shared decision making with the priority and intended outcome of serving its diverse population of students. All key
stakeholders develop and discuss strategies to drive the mission and vision of the institution forward.

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) developed the 1966 Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities. This statement was jointly formulated “with the American Council on Education and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges,” and it “calls for shared responsibility among the different components of institutional government and specifies areas of primary responsibility for governing boards, administrations, and faculties” (AAUP, n.d.). The concept of shared governance is the inclusion of faculty and staff in the institutional decision-making process, or in some cases, the governance of specific areas related to faculty and staff.

At this private, urban HSI, a shared governance model is used. Through this model, the institution aims to advance the institution through the following actions:

- Shared decision making
- Clear lines of responsibility and accountability
- Focusing on process and results
- Being efficient and nimble
- Ensuring good communication

There are several committees and councils put in place to assist with achieving the shared governance model.

Through the urban institution’s shared governance model, the Faculty Governance Structure is how all the academic and curriculum decisions are made. The faculty senate meets to discuss the following:

- Curriculum review
- Promotion and tenure
- Student academic policy
- Faculty development and welfare
- Faculty academic support and technology

Any curriculum changes or reviews and approvals of new programs go through a committee in the faculty governance structure.

**Challenge of HSI: Retention and Persistence**

This private, urban HSI uses culturally relevant and sustaining curriculum and coaching and advising practices to increase retention efforts for underrepresented students. Both should be embedded to help students and positively impact retention and persistence rates. Graduation and retention rates can be challenging for HSIs. Graduation rates for undergraduate students are under 50%. However, the National Center for Education Statistics does not report on completion rates for graduate level students. In addition, retention rates are usually an area of concern for most Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) and are also not reported at the graduate level by the National Center for Education Statistics. Research shows that retention and persistence rates of students of color and underrepresented students are far below that of their peers, especially at predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) (McClain & Perry, 2017). McClain & Perry (2017) state that “despite college’s efforts to be inclusive, discriminatory acts still occur on college campuses” and “research has shown that campus racial climate contributes to the retention of students of color within the college”. Historically Black Colleges and Universities, where an adverse racial climate is not a factor, retain and graduate more students of color than predominantly White Institutions (McClain & Perry, 2017). The authors also share that “despite appearing diverse on the surface, many institutions exhibit covert microaggressions and
controlling images that provoke attrition among students of color at predominantly White institutions” (McClain & Perry, 2017).

A well-developed retention and persistence model includes four factors mentioned by McClain & Perry (2017). In addition to the inclusion of students, faculty, and staff of color, the other factors are: “updated curriculum that displays current and historical experiences of individuals of color” (McClain & Perry, 2017).

Other important components to increase retention are “programming/initiatives that support the enlistment, preservation, and commencement of students of color”. The HSI this study has taken place at has embedded initiatives and services to address retention among underrepresented students. Under the Hispanic Serving Institution designation, some of the programming and services implemented are a summer bridge program for underrepresented students entering STEM and a peer mentoring program. The fourth factor that McClain & Perry (2017) mention as to addressing retention and persistence is cultural spaces. Unfortunately, this private, urban HSI does not currently have a cultural space dedicated to students of color, but plans are in place to create such a space. These factors are all elements of student support that work hand-in-hand with increasing retention and persistence rates at higher education institutions.

**External Context**

**Political and Governmental Factors**

Governmental factors that influence institutional decision-making include a variety of government programs aimed to support student populations. For example, The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics was initially established by President George H.W. Bush in 1990 to “address the educational disparities faced by the Hispanic community”
(U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Through this initiative, the idea of designating institutions as Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) was born and resulted in funding to improve support services and programs for underrepresented students. The institution at which this study takes place is one of the over 500 institutions to reap the benefits of this federal funding.

Serving underrepresented students is becoming more and more of a need for several reasons. Firstly, it is a matter of civil rights. Regardless of race or ethnicity, all students should have access to higher education and receive adequate resources and support to be successful throughout their postsecondary journey. “The strength of America’s education system is undoubtedly connected to the academic success of Latinx. With the shift in demographics taking place in our nation’s schools, securing an adequate and equal education for all students, including Latinos, should be a priority” (The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics, n.d.). Secondly, the underrepresented student population is needed to fill the future job market (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

With that said, there are numerous resources, programs, and funding available to post-secondary institutions to help meet the need. Institutions are then putting a heavy amount of energy and focus on outreaching and recruiting this specific population of students with the hope of admitting large numbers of underrepresented, minority students. However, depending on how race is used in the admissions process, there is the great potential of violating the 14th Amendment Equal Protection Clause. The private institution at which this study takes place has admission requirements such as a 2.0 GPA, but does not use race and ethnicity as part of the admission process. The diversity of the city is what brings in diverse student representation.

**Enrollment**
According to the IPEDS data of the National Center for Education Statistics (2016), this HSI's total student population was 7,110, with 5,128 being graduate students and 1,982 being undergraduate students. There were 2,489 part-time students and 2,026 full-time students. Across the board, most university students are women, with a population of more than 5,000 (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

This HSI is growing to have an increasingly diverse student body. The National Center for Education Statics (2016) reports that the student population of White students is at 41%, African-American student population is at 25%, and Latinx at 21%. However, it grew to 25% Latinx and received HSI designation. More currently, this HSI is at 41% for Latinx students. Enrollment of graduate students is over 4,000 and represents 54% of the institution’s total student population. In addition, 60% of the graduate students are part-time while the other 40% are full-time students. There are 30 masters’ programs and 6 doctoral programs at this HSI.

The University’s degrees fall under five categories: Business and Management, Communications and Writing, Education, Health and Human Services, and Social and Behavioral Sciences. Specific degree programs include Applied Communications, Early Childhood Education, Special Education, Human Services, and Criminal Justice.

Due to the nature and history of the institution being known as the school of teachers, Education is its most popular program, especially the master’s program in Education, which has over 600 students enrolled (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). With high enrollments at the graduate level, the second most popular program is Psychology, with over 100 students enrolled. Other graduate programs consist of Business Management, Counseling, Teacher Preparation, and Education Leadership. Overall, about 17% of students in master’s and doctoral programs identify as Latinx. As for the undergraduate programs, Business is the most
popular with 145 students enrolled, and the least popular is Human Services, with only 15 students enrolled (The National Center for Education Statistics, 2016).

**External Partnerships**

In recent years, this university has been intentional about growing its external and employer partners. Some undergraduate external partners include Braven, a career readiness program for students; One Goal; Year Up; and the Hispanic Alliance for Career Enhancement (HACE), which also holds a High School College Readiness and STEM preparation outreach program called El Futuro. Its employer partners include Walgreens, Allstate, LaSalle Network, the Chicago Police Department, Hyatt Regency, and the Noble Network. The Undergraduate college continues to work hard to grow its partnership list to better support the student population.

In addition, through the PPOHA grant, establishing external community partners is one of the grant's primary activities. The PPOHA team aims to develop partnerships with community-based organizations such as El Valor, a nonprofit in Chicago serving children and adults with disabilities, Enlace, a nonprofit in Chicago committed to Community Development, and the Resurrection Project, another nonprofit in the city of Chicago working on immigration, financial wellness and affordable housing, to name a few. The PPOHA team is also working on establishing partnerships with other Hispanic Serving Institutions in the Chicagoland area to establish a pipeline from graduate to doctoral programs.

**Student Affairs**

As recently as 2020, this HSI launched a Student Affairs division. Before the launch of this division, student needs were being met through various offices such as the Office of Student Engagement. The Office of Student Engagement is one part of the Student Affairs division.
Student Engagement works towards providing personal and professional development to students through student organizations, networking, volunteer opportunities and wellness programs.

Student Engagement has numerous resources for undocumented students. On the Student Engagement website, undocumented students can learn about their rights, find resources specifically for Chicago residents, and find organizations like the Resurrection Project. In addition, Student Experience staff hold events to promote people’s rights and create awareness of undocumented students' current political climate. Moreover, they offer specific scholarships solely for undocumented students.

**Research Questions**

Beyond being Hispanic enrolling, are HSI’s living out the mission of being Hispanic Serving Institutions? Bensimon & Dowd (2012) explain that institutions need to be more than Hispanic enrolling but Hispanic serving and use intentional practices to bridge the gap. Along with the designation of being HSI come several resources and grants that can assist institutions in serving their students of color.

The researcher’s topic includes researching Latinx, specifically Latina graduate/doctoral student experience at Hispanic Serving institutions. While the private, urban HSI described in this chapter will be the primary institution for this study, the researcher is open to receive participants from other HSIs that identify as urban HSIs, public or private. The research questions are as follows:

**RQ1**: What are the lived experiences of Latina graduate students at Hispanic Serving Institutions?

**RQ2**: What culturally relevant practices and services are institutions using to best support Latina graduate students?
The researcher hopes that these research questions will bring to light specific steps and strategies to build a culture and an identity that embraces its diverse student populations for Latina master’s and doctoral students who play unique roles and require culturally relevant services and practices to increase sense of belonging and positive student outcomes.

**Study Significance**

The reality is the demographics of student populations in Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are changing. Traits of those once considered “non-traditional” students are now becoming ‘traditional,’ and underrepresented student populations continue to increase. The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) reported that “Hispanic enrollment increased in each year between 2000 and 2017, more than doubling during this period (from 1.4 million to 3.3 million students, a 142 percent increase)”. It was also reported that graduation rates for Hispanic students sit below the average, at 54%, compared to the standard of 60% for all students and there is a lack of graduation and completion rates for graduate-level students.

What institutions have done and continue to do to support Latinx students to succeed in college, specifically, Latinas in graduate programs, is an area that is worthy of further inquiry through a capstone study. There is a lack of research on effective resources to support the success of graduate-level Latina students. It is crucial for stakeholders at institutions to provide the necessary resources to help graduate Latina students succeed.

The proposed study will recommend best practices to fill support-gaps that address the needs of Latinx student populations at HSIs and encourage positive and supportive experiences. The gaps this study will address are both the use of culturally relevant supportive services at HSIs and culturally rich spaces and environments. In addition, this study aims to
uncover what supportive services offered at HSIs were the most helpful for Latinas in graduate school.

Chapter 1 Conclusion

Overall, much can be learned from this university’s established history. Yet, even with over 130 years in education, this HSI and all HSIs can continue to learn how to serve an ever-changing student population adequately. The designation of an HSI is only 30 years old. Institutions, like this private, urban university which has been around for over 100 years, yet only received HSI designation less than 5 years ago. Moreover, there is still much debate about what it means to be Hispanic enrolling versus Hispanic serving. This research aims to shed light on, explore that difference, and uncover how better to serve the varied needs of graduate-level Latina student success. This research on Hispanic Serving Institutions and the student experience may act as a source of knowledge and a basis for change for other newly established HSIs.
CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Many of the published sources include a focus on undergraduate Latinx student populations and institutional practices. While these studies offer insight into developing HSIs, they provide only partial insight to Latinx populations. A limited body of knowledge exists regarding Latinx students at the graduate level at HSIs and even more so Hispanic female populations at master’s and doctoral levels at HSIs.

The goal of this literature review is to summarize the research history of Hispanic Serving Institutions and the student experience as well as understand what the culture of servingness means; how are HSIs currently serving its students, and what supports, if any, are in place for Latinas at the graduate and doctoral level. There are focused sections on “servingness,” culturally relevant and culturally sustaining programming, students and faculty at HSIs, Hispanic female students at HSIs, graduate support at HSIs, and federal funding. Also included in this discussion are considerations from the literature on best practices for supporting Latinx students.

Literature Review Process and Strategy

The search strategy for this study began with creating an outline of components for the literature review, which helped develop the keywords used in search databases. Keywords included but were not limited to Hispanic Serving Institution, Hispanic female, Latina, best practices, experiences, culturally relevant pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy, graduate school. The EBSCOHOST and SAGE databases were searched. Google Scholar was also used to search for articles and blogs. Sources of information included journal articles, books, blog articles, and government statistics. Sources used were both published within the last five years and as well as older sources dating back to 1995 to provide the reader with a perspective on the
longevity and history, and give credit to the beginnings and foundations for practices such as culturally relevant pedagogy. As listed in the references section of this dissertation, a subset of the sources retrieved was identified as the most pertinent for this study and provided the foundation of the literature review.

**Culture of Servingness**

Garcia et al. (2020) conducted a “systemic review of 148 journal articles and book chapters”. They identified four themes to “conceptualize servingness: (1) outcomes, (2) experiences, (3) internal organizational dimensions, and (4) external influences” (Garcia et al., 2020). Twenty-two of the articles had themes focused on student experiences. Though the student experiences at HSIs are generally positive across all levels, the student experiences addressed in the literature only focused on undergraduate students. Within the student experiences addressed, an emphasis was placed on culturally relevant programs. There is intentionality from HSIs to pursue the implementation of culturally relevant programs (Garcia et al., 2020) and practices for Latinx students that will lead to persistence and student success.

A blog article by Gross (2016), from the Education Writers Association, discussed a panel event including experts from Excelencia in Education. Deborah Santiago, then the Chief Operating Officer and now the Chief Executive Officer, stated that when evaluating whether an HSI is serving their Hispanic students, they are to look as if they are retaining and graduating Latinx students and reflecting student demographics in the faculty. However, there is much more to serving Latinx students outside of student outcomes, and there is an opportunity to explore what those practices should be from the student perspective. In an essay by Garcia (2019) through the American Council on Education (ACE), Garcia argues that defining servingness at HSIs is “difficult because the HSI designation is based solely on an institution reaching a
specific enrollment threshold of Latinx students”. Garcia (2019) also states that servingness is multidimensional and, in addition to academic outcomes, can include the “development of academic self-concept, leadership identity, racial identity, critical consciousness, graduate school aspirations, and civic engagement”.

In 2015, Garcia & Okhidoi “examined culturally relevant practices at one HSI including ethnic studies curriculum and student support programs”. The authors discussed the importance of ethnic studies and embedding support programs into “core structures of the institution.” Participants interviewed for this study were a mixture of students, faculty, and staff. However, it is not clear whether support programs were studied at the graduate level. The question remains, to what extent these programs and practices are made available to Latina students at the graduate level. This literature review will address the current research on Hispanic Serving Institutions, their culturally relevant practices—or lack thereof—at the master’s and doctoral levels, and overall Latinx student experience at an HSI.

The identity of an HSI is also an important point to discuss as it significantly impacts the population. Garcia & Dwyer (2018) state that “scholars have been grappling with what it means to have a Latinx-serving identity,” especially as this identity is “rarely embraced or advertised” (Garcia & Dwyer, 2018). However, institutions should work towards embracing the identity. Research “suggests that actively identifying with an organization is essential because it can affect individual satisfaction (Mael & Tetrick, 1992)” (Garcia & Dwyer, 2018). This can be true for a Latinx graduate student as much as it is for a traditional undergraduate student.

Regarding equity at Hispanic Serving institutions, Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon (2015) wrote a brief to offer “design principles for equity and excellence at HSIs that can be used to assess the extent to which these institutions are truly serving Latinx students”. The principals
draw upon the Center for Urban Education (CUE) work and the Equity Scorecard that was
developed. These principals go beyond student outcomes to assess principles and practices built
on equity to serve students.

**Students and Faculty**

Gina A. Garcia is a scholar who has contributed significantly to the study of Hispanic
Serving Institutions. Garcia & Okhidoi (2015) share a case study completed at an HSI that
examined culturally relevant practices through interviews and focus groups. Some of the
culturally relevant practices discussed were the ethnic studies curriculum and student support
programs. “Specifically, the findings highlight how the Chicana/o studies department and the
Educational Opportunity Program have historically served underrepresented students and the
ways in which such programs are embedded within the structures of the institution” (Garcia &
Okhidoi, 2015). Garcia & Okhidoi (2015) offer implications for practice and policy that can be
“applicable to all institutions”. One of the themes that can be a point of training for other
institutions is “serving students through curricula”.

Gina & Okhidoi (2015) state that the “voices of Latina/o students and other
underrepresented groups have been largely excluded from the formal curricula at institutions of
higher education, even at HSIs (Cole, 2011)” (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015). The authors state that
this exclusion is harmful, and “by including a diverse perspective, the curricula has the ability to
affirm the existence of Latina/o and other underrepresented groups while validating their
experiences (Rendon, 1994)” which can ultimately lead to student success (Garcia & Okhidoi,
2015). The students’ voice is key to better understanding their experiences. Though not as
popular, the students' voice is needed at the graduate level. Gonzalez et al. (2020) examined what
the HSI designation means to Latinx college students at the undergraduate and graduate levels.
Findings emerged on a sense of belonging as a result of the presence of Latinx faculty on campus.

**Latina Students at HSIs**

The study of the experiences and needs of only graduate-level students and the experiences of female Hispanic students is a deeper layer that can be explored because Latina graduate students may have unique needs of support throughout their graduate journey. While there is much literature on women in doctoral programs (Rockinson-Szaplow et al., 2017), there is a lack of literature exploring Latina graduate students, especially at HSIs; one article between two Latina faculty (Reyes & Rios, 2005) share their experience navigating graduate school and faculty positions in higher education and shared that in graduate school, the challenge intensifies. If students are “scarce at the undergraduate level, they are even fewer at the graduate level”. In that regard, there is an opportunity to explore what is needed to encourage Latinas to continue and persist at the graduate level.

Excelencia in Education (2019) reported that Latinos were less likely to be represented among graduate degrees earned, 11% compared to 20% for all students at HSIs. Of those Latino students enrolled in graduate programs, 37% were male and 63% were female. Though Latina (female) students enroll at higher rates than Latinos, overall representation of Latinx students at the graduate level is low. Excelencia in Education also reported that at the undergraduate level, one-third of Latina female students are also caring for dependent children compared to only 18% for Latino male undergraduates. Though this data is only undergraduate focused, current data trends show that the similar can be assumed at the graduate level.

**Intersectionality**
The concept of intersectionality and highlighting the “lived experiences of historically marginalized populations” is important in the context of Latina students at HSIs (Claros et al., 2017; Dhamoon, 2011; Crenshaw, 1989). Latinas may be forced to balance the different identities’ they carry and that can be challenging. Latinas and their female identity create a complex intersectionality. Latinas are marginalized for being Latina and marginalized for being women, and all their identities and experiences of oppression influence their lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989).

Claros et al. (2017) state that “intersectionality is more than a theoretical framework. It is a vehicle for promoting social justice and change (Dil & Zambrana, 2009)” (Claros et al., 2017). Understanding intersectionality also means understanding identities. The authors quote Dill & Zambrana (2009) when stating that intersectionality “provides a critical analytic lens to interrogate racial, ethnic, class, ability, age, sexuality, and gender disparities and to contest existing ways of looking at these structures of inequality (p.1)” (Claros et al., 2017). The authors apply intersectionality in residential life because they believe there is “potential for residential life to influence positive student learning and development” (Claros et al., 2017). Understanding intersectionality and all the student identities, especially for a Latina graduate student at an HSI, is a significant part of adequately implementing culturally relevant supportive practices.

**HSI Graduate Support**

According to a study by Arbelo-Marrero (2016), doctoral student retention “remains a challenge in higher education with an average attrition rate of 50%”. Arbelo-Marrero (2016) conducted a study to analyze pre-entry variables of admission for 81 doctoral students to determine whether “significant associations existed between specific variables in the graduated and withdrawn groups.” Findings indicated that variables such as GPA, marital status,
employment, ranking of ability, and prerequisites completed prior to entry are each indicator of success for doctoral students. An interesting finding was that single marital status and part-time versus full-time employment indicated a higher likelihood of completion (Arbelo-Marrero, 2016). Therefore, Latina students who may have a partner and children and may be working full time but desire to pursue a doctoral degree are faced with increasing challenges and less likely to complete their degree. As an HSI, the designation alone holds the responsibility to adequately serve and support students coming in with added complexities.

According to Olive (2014), “motivation to seek higher education is rarely examined in Hispanic first-generation graduate students”. It can’t be stressed enough; we must commit to support graduate Latinx and Latina students to pursue and persist in higher education. A study by Olive (2014) who interviewed Latinx doctoral students in a graduate counseling program set out to uncover the motivation to seek higher education and findings revealed that participants viewed the choice to pursue a counseling degree as an opportunity “to achieve distinction, comfort, and career satisfaction and respect from others. Latinx students should be granted the opportunities, and institutions should continue to put an intentional focus on student support.

**HSI Graduate Federal Funding**

While institutions place practices to increase Latinx students’ success, the reality is that HSIs need funding and institutional capacity to provide these efforts. An article by Garcia & Taylor (2017) stated that an examination of 20 years of Title V funding “shows that 70 percent of grant recipients in the U.S. invested their funding into three activities: faculty and curriculum development, student support services, and funds and administrative management”. Evidence also shows that investing in these activities improves students’ academic achievement. To continue the upward trajectory of Latinx representation in graduate programs at HSIs and the
graduate degree attainment of Latinxs, the U.S. Department of Education developed the Promoting Post-baccalaureate Programs for Hispanic Americans (PPOHA) grant program as part of the HSI Division. The PPOHA program at the national level provides grants to “(1) expand postbaccalaureate educational opportunities for, and improve the academic attainment of, Hispanic students; and (2) expand the postbaccalaureate academic offerings as well as enhance the program quality in the institutions of higher education that are educating the majority of Hispanic college students and helping large numbers of Hispanic and low-income students complete postsecondary degrees” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The PPOHA program is the youngest of the grants in the HSI division and there is opportunity to learn from the different programs and services this can and should offer to graduate students to support their academic journey.

**Theoretical Framework**

For this study, two theoretical frameworks will be used to assist in providing focus, expose meaning, and make connections. The first theoretical framework is culturally relevant pedagogy and the second is the CECE (Culturally Engaging Campus Environments) model.

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Ladson-Billings (1995) coined the term and theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. Ladson-Billings introduces all the cultural ideas she uses as a basis for her research, such as “culturally appropriate” (Au & Jordan, 1981), “culturally congruent” (Mohatt & Erickson, 1981), “culturally responsive” (Cazden & Leggett 1981), and “culturally compatible” (Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987). Ladson-Billings (1995) recognized that many of these cultural theories lacked in their representation and understanding of the experience of African American students and other students of color. The author states that culturally relevant pedagogy is “a theoretical model that
not only addresses student achievement but also helps students accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools and other institutions perpetuate” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469). Since pedagogy is the method and practice of teaching, culturally relevant pedagogy should include ethnic studies and a diverse faculty. McClain & Perry (2017) stated how culturally relevant practices like diverse faculty showed to increase student retention outcomes at Predominately White Institutions (PWI); how much more would these practices benefit HSIs?

Paris (2012), like Ladson-Billings (1995), coins a new term, Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy. Paris (2012) writes a review on the prevalent work of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), who published the landmark article Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy. However, Paris (2012) writes that while the work of Ladson-Billings is inspiring, he questions whether the terms “relevant” or “responsive” is sufficient or really:

Descriptive of much of the teaching and research found upon them and, more importantly, if they go far enough in their orientation to the languages and literacies and other cultural practices of communities marginalized by systemic inequalities to ensure the valuing and maintenance of our multiethnic and multilingual society. (Paris, 2012)

Paris (2012) offers the term culturally “sustaining” pedagogy in its place. He believes that the term “sustaining” represents the best research and practice “in the resource pedagogy tradition” and is a term that “supports the value of our multiethnic and multilingual present and future” (Paris, 2012). In other words, it is a term that can be used even as trends continue to change. In addition, he believes that “culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster-to-sustain linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling” (Paris, 2012). The researcher argues that culturally relevant practices should be sustaining but
should not dismiss the importance of the relevance to the cultures these practices are aimed
toward supporting.

Prater (2009) also recognizes the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in the
classroom and understands that the demographics of students are changing. The “numbers of
culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students… are growing immensely,” and Hispanics
will “account for 30% of the U.S. population by 2050” (Prater, 2009). Therefore, all educators
must be culturally responsive. Prater (2009) argues that this starts with teacher educators taking
on the responsibility of preparing teacher candidates “to work in today’s diverse classrooms”
(Prater, 2009). For this to happen, teacher educators must first be appropriately trained in
culturally responsive teaching to prepare teacher candidates.

Prater (2009) cites Ladson-Billings’ (2005) research and places emphasis on the “cultural
homogeneity of teacher education faculty” and that approximately “88% of full-time faculty in
the field of education are White” (Ambe, 2006; Prater, 2009). Therefore, it is essential for faculty
to be prepared with “specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions to work with CLD populations
and integrate cultural and linguistic diversity into all courses and practicums” (Prater, 2009). To
have successful culturally responsive training, Prater (2009) argues that first, the intended
outcomes for professional development need to be established. Then culturally responsive
activities are implemented based on the intended outcomes. Three intended outcomes set by
Prater (2009) are dispositions, knowledge, and skills. Prater (2009) also recognizes that for this
to be successful, “personal and professional beliefs and practices [should] be allowed to develop
over time (Nevarez-La Torre et al., 2008) … and institutional support needs to exist”.

Nuñez et al. (2010) aim to address how “cultural backgrounds inform pedagogical
approaches toward equity”. The authors use their biographies and backgrounds along with “local
social contexts and broader systemic institutions” to show how they affect their “teaching processes for diverse students” (Nuñez et al., 2010). Nuñez et al. (2010) also use their experience in working at a Hispanic Serving Institution with many Latinx and underrepresented students to inform their work. Some of the teaching processes they address are the limiting of assumptions about students, as well as “encouraging students to consider their own personal biographies concerning the social world, welcoming student’s multiple modes of expression, etc” (Nuñez et al., 2010). They also offer recommendations based on their research to enhance “inclusivity in student learning and faculty development” (Nuñez et al., 2010).

One significant point that Nuñez et al. (2010) address is the concept from Zusman (2005) is that:

Access to higher education is often considered to be potentially in conflict with the ideal of academic excellence. This conflict can engender a ‘deficit’ perspective that suggests students from backgrounds not historically well represented in college enrollments have weakness that must be compensated for, rather than unique ‘funds of knowledge’ (Gonzales et al., 2005) that can inform and complement their academic learning’. (Nuñez et al., 2010)

This is where the importance of students owning their personal biographies plays a role when adding and contributing to “academic excellence” and equity in pedagogical practices. In addition to owning individual biographies, Nuñez et al. (2010) touch on the importance of institutional leaders continuously fostering an environment of inclusivity for faculty and students of color to promote educational equity.

At the core of working with students through culturally sustaining pedagogy and practices and embracing the identity of being Latinx-serving institutions is diversity, equity, and
inclusion (DEI). DEI are trending qualities in the higher education space, and though trending, an area of importance that should be long lasting. Institutions are recognizing that the demographics of their student populations are changing, and there is an increase of underrepresented student populations. Therefore, institutions understand there is a great need to serve the increasingly diverse student populations. Many institutions are implementing programs and services and applying for a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) designation to qualify for funding to help serve this particular student identity. While federal funds are restrictive in supporting undocumented students, some institutions are still implementing programs outside of federal funding to help and serve all Latinx students, including undocumented students. However, many of the programs and services being put in place, both institutionally and through federal funding, are focused on Latinx-identifying undergraduate students and lack adequate support at the graduate level. PPOHA federal funding is helping to change that, but practices like culturally relevant pedagogy may be needed and beneficial at the graduate level as well.

**Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model**

In 2014, Samuel D. Museus proposed a new theory called the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) model (Figure 3). Though this model primarily focuses on undergraduate students, this study uses this model as a theoretical framework and applies it to the graduate student population. The CECE model builds off of Tinto’s theory on College Student Success and incorporates “the actual voices of diverse populations into its explanation of success in college and offers a theoretical model that can be quantified and tested for its applicability to racially diverse student populations” (Museus, 2014). The CECE model “suggests that culturally engaging campus environments (i.e., environments that reflect and respond to their cultural
communities of students) are associated with more positive student outcomes in college” (Museus et al., 2015).

**Figure 3**

**CECE Model**

In addition, the CECE model “acknowledges that external influences (e.g., financial aid, family, and employment) … shape college student outcomes” (Gonzalez et al., 2020). The focus point of the model address both the environmental and individual influences of student success in college. For example, cost of college and financial aid awards and scholarships are related to student college success and degree completion (Museus, 2014). Overall, the CECE model focuses on undergraduate students and argues that students who encounter culturally engaging campus environments will experience a sense of belonging, academic success, and more likely to persist to graduation. Though the CECE model focuses on undergraduate students, the researcher
argues this framework is applicable to graduate students as well, especially at Hispanic Serving Institutions.

The CECE model includes nine indicators. The first five are built around cultural relevance: 1) cultural familiarity, 2) culturally relevant knowledge, 3) cultural community service, 4) meaningful cross-cultural engagement, and 5) culturally validating environments. The last four indicators are built around cultural responsiveness: 6) collectivist cultural orientations, 7) Humanized educational environments, 8) proactive philosophies, and 9) Holistic support. Garcia (2016) shares that the CECE model can be used in qualitative research to “ascertain the culture of Latinx students’ educational experiences” as well as “validate students as cultural beings at an HSI and to understand what efforts need to be made to support them” (Gonzalez et al., 2020).

Of the nine indicators in the CECE model, five are more pertinent to this study. The first is CECE Indicator 1: Cultural Familiarity, which states that “the extent to which college students have opportunities to physically connect with faculty, staff, and peers with whom they share common backgrounds … is associated with greater likelihood of success” (Museus, 2014). The second pertinent to this study, CECE Indicator 2: Culturally Relevant Knowledge, indicated that institutions that “offer opportunities for their students to cultivate, sustain, and increase knowledge of their cultures and communities of origin can positively impact their experiences and success” (Museus, 2014). Graduate level Latina students at HSIs can very much benefit from connecting with faculty staff and peers and an increase in knowledge of their cultures and communities. Studying the implementation of these indicators at the graduate level can uncover their connection to completion rates and overall satisfaction with student experience. This study
aims to uncover if HSIs are implementing these indicators and if Latinas at the graduate level express the need or desire for these practices.

The third indicator relevant to this study is CECE Indicator 4: Opportunities for Meaningful Cross-Cultural Engagement, and states that access to “opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural engagement is positively associated with their success in college” (Museus, 2014). The fourth is CECE indicator 6: Culturally Validating Environments. This indicator argues that “students who are surrounded by postsecondary educators who validate their cultural backgrounds and identities will have more positive experiences and be more likely to succeed in college” (Museus, 2014). The last indicator pertinent to this study is Indicator 9: Availability of Holistic Support. This indicator states that the “availability of holistic support is characterized by the extent to which postsecondary institutions provide their students with access to one or more faculty or staff members that they are confident will provide them with the information they seek, offer the help … or connect them with the information or support they need” (Museus, 2014). As mentioned, these indicators address undergraduate populations but are important as framework in this study of Latina experiences at the graduate level.

Chapter 2 Conclusion

While literature exists on culturally relevant practices and underrepresentation of Latinx and Latinas at graduate levels, there is a clear gap on the Latina experience at Hispanic Serving Institutions. Latinas are a unique group of students; being a “double minoritized group”; a woman and a woman of color presents its challenges and barriers. In addition, being a woman can lead to many roles such as mother, student, worker, etc. This balancing act can make it challenging while trying to obtain a graduate or doctoral degree. Surprisingly, there is little to no literature around the Latina experience in graduate programs, let alone at Hispanic Serving
Institutions, schools charged with the responsibility to better support Latinx individuals. What is evident in the literature is that graduate school access among Latinx is a challenging barrier (Ramirez, 2013) and mentoring at the graduate level for Latinx students is a necessary intervention (Luna & Prieto, 2009). The theoretical frameworks chosen, represent valid frameworks with roots in equity and inclusion that can be applicable to graduate students at Hispanic Serving Institutions.
CHAPTER 3

Methodology

The establishment of Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) in the 1980s (Excelencia in Education, 2019) opened the door of opportunity to research HSIs and collect data on Latinx degree attainment in Higher Education. The research efforts of organizations like Excelencia in Education, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, and scholars like Gina A. Garcia, Ph.D. and Estela Bensimon, Ph.D., have shed light on serving Latinx students and equity practices.

In today’s world, achieving a college degree is a must to increase the chances of securing employment in a desired field of study, and some choose to continue their educational journeys and pursue graduate degrees. This is not a decision taken lightly as the road for higher education can be full of challenges as one balances life and their many roles. Even more so, students from underrepresented backgrounds pursue higher education and graduate degrees at lower rates than their counterparts. To break the data down even further, Latinx individuals are an underrepresented, marginalized group that faces many barriers and are less represented in education. Research shows that Latinx students were less likely to be represented among graduate degrees earned, and “of degrees earned, 11% of those earned by Latinos were at the graduate level compared to 20% for all students” (Excelencia in Education, 2019). More so, Latinx students only represent 2% of Ph.D.s earned compared to 4% of all students at Title IV degree-granting institutions in the United States.
Figure 4

*Latinx Degrees Earned*

![Figure 4](image)

The data shows that there is opportunity to explore the lived experiences of Latinx in higher education, particularly Latinas experiences in graduate degree programs. Latinas enrolled in graduate programs sits at 63% compared to 37% for Latino males. With that said, there is value in evaluating the lived experiences of Latinas as they navigate the journey of pursuing a graduate degree while also managing other roles they play, particularly at an HSI meant to serve the Latinx population better.

**Problem Statement**

There is a severe lack of Latinx representation and diversity in graduate programs, including at Hispanic Serving Institutions. As previously mentioned, Latinx individuals only account for an estimated 10% of graduate students and only 2% of doctoral students nationally. Though Latinas are enrolled at a higher rate than Latino males at HSIs, Latinas play many roles specific to their identified gender that contribute to a unique experience. This needs to be explored to better understand what institutions can do to support Latinas and increase enrollment and positive student outcomes of Latina graduate students. More importantly, individual stories
need to be told to gain personal insight into the need for better and intentional supportive services.

**Overview of Rationale for Qualitative Research Design: Testimonios**

There is power in storytelling. Narrative inquiry and oral history allows for a deeper understanding of Latinx individuals and their lived experiences, particularly as part of the deeply rooted history and use of *testimonios* (Beverly, 2005). According to Clandinin (2013), narrative inquiry is “an exploration of the social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences were and are constituted, shaped and enacted” (p. 18). Narrative inquiry is the collection of stories of individuals’ lived and told experiences and may also help shed light on the identities of individuals and how they see themselves. A *testimonio* is “not meant to be hidden, made intimate nor kept secret” (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012). Rather, the objective of the *testimonio* “is to bring to light a wrong, a point of view, or an urgent call to action” (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012). *Testimonios* as a methodology allows Latina researchers “to document and inscribe into existence a social witness account reflective of collective experiences, political injustices, and human struggles that are often erased by dominant discourses” (Pérez Huber & Cueva, 2012, p.393). *Testimonios* will be used as a methodology for this study to give participants the opportunity to reflect on their graduate experiences as mediated by race and gender. As stated by Pérez Huber & Cueva (2012), *testimonios* “document experiences of struggle, survival, and resistance within the context of oppressive institutional structures and interpersonal events” (p. 393). With that said, the ultimate goal of this study is to bring to light the experiences of Latina graduate students, to share a collective narrative and bring to bear a call to action to all HSIs on what practices are needed to best support this underrepresented population.
Purpose Statement

The purpose of this narrative study is to understand the lived experiences of graduate Latina students at Hispanic Serving Institutions and the needed culturally relevant practices to support them better. This study seeks to explore their experiences, uncover similarities and themes, be honest about barriers, and bring to the forefront the need for intentional and equitable support and resources to help Latina graduate students succeed. Through this study, stories will be shared, and awareness of the lived experiences of this specific population of students will emerge. Through this research, higher education institutions learn about needs of this student population and consider innovative methods and support for them. This topic is significant and worthy of qualitative study because there is a clear gap in the research and the voices and stories of a traditionally marginalized group that deserves to be shared. Their stories can begin to further inform the narrative of minoritized individuals and their success in higher education, specifically graduate programs. Their stories may play an essential role in encouraging others to value diversity and push for equity in education.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to understand the personal Latina graduate student experiences at Hispanic Serving Institutions and whether there is an adequate level of support that leads to student success and satisfaction. With this purpose in mind, the research question is the following:

What are the lived experiences of graduate Latina students at Hispanic Serving Institutions, and how are HSIs using culturally relevant practices and services to support this Latina Graduate Students?

Participant Selection and Setting of the Study
Participants will include Latinas studying in graduate programs, both masters and doctoral, at Hispanic Serving Institutions for this study. There is an opportunity to learn and explore the experiences of this underrepresented population, with the hope to better understand what is needed to increase both the representation and success rates of Latinx students. A total of at least 10 participants will be interviewed. If there is a high level of interest, the researcher will accept more participants. A select number of participants will be invited to share their experiences through an email introduction facilitated by the researcher and a mutual connection. At least five of the participants asked are current doctoral fellows in the CLAVE program at National Louis University. Afterward, a social media call-out for participants will be posted on LinkedIn and Facebook to recruit the remaining five.

The Latinas interviewed will have completed at least two terms or two semesters of their program and share their experiences within their programs as they balance their many roles. In addition, the interviewees will share their thoughts around supportive services provided to them throughout their graduate journey. The questions asked in the interview will be broken down into three categories: 1) background knowledge, 2) information challenges for Latina graduate students and 3) Internal/External support systems. Each of these categories has between five and ten questions. Each interview will be an estimated 45 minutes in length. This research is taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, all interviews will be conducted through Zoom, an online video conferencing system that allows for video, audio, and recording of interviews.

Each participant will be given a consent-to-participate form. Participants will be given a choice to not participate in the study or withdraw at any time without affecting any relationships. The purpose of the research and data collection process and risks and discomforts associated with the study will be outlined.
After each interview, the participants will be given contact information to share additional thoughts that may arise when the discussion has ended. The participants will be kept updated on findings.

**Data Collection and Measures**

The audio recordings of each interview will be uploaded and transcribed in Temi, an online transcription service. After all interviews are transcribed, Dedoose will assist in data analysis of the discussions. A codebook will be developed with themes uncovered throughout the interviews. In addition, the researcher will ask the interviewees to email me any data not covered during the recorded interviews should more ideas and stories arise that they would like to share. The procedures include approval from the IRB at the institution. Once the IRB is approved, emails will be sent to the participants with detailed information on the study and the consent form. A flyer inviting participants will also be posted to a Latinx in Higher Education Facebook group.

**Researcher Role**

Throughout the interview, the researcher’s role will be to serve primarily as an active listener. Questions will be asked along the way to help with the flow of conversation, but as an interviewer, the researchers’ opinions and biases will not be shared. In addition, the questions will be formed in a way that is not leading. As the interviewer, the researcher’s role will also be to uncover repeating ideas and themes amongst participants' lived stories and experiences.

**Interview Script**

The following script will be used throughout the interviews:

*Hello, and thank you for your time. As I mentioned, my name is Melanie Flores, and I am currently pursuing an Ed.D. in Higher Education Leadership at NLU and part of the program*
requires a mini qualitative study on a topic of our choice, which brings us here today. The purpose of this interview is to learn about your unique experience as a Latina navigating your graduate journey at a Hispanic Serving Institution. With the exception of learning some background information, this interview is comprised of primarily standard open-ended questions that will allow you to go as in-depth as you feel comfortable. The topics of this interview will include a brief discussion on your personal background, challenges you may have faced with this identity, support you may or may not have had throughout your graduate studies, and if applicable, institutional supports you would have liked to receive or did receive throughout your journey from a designated HSI. Throughout this interview, I will be an active listener, so you can feel free to go as in-depth as you wish as you share your story. In order to be an active listener, I will record the meeting. The interview should last about 45 minutes, and your identity will be kept confidential. If you’d like to contact me after the interview for any reason, please don’t hesitate to reach out and contact me via email at mflores36@nl.edu.

Before we get started with the interview, do you have any questions for me?

**Interview Questions**

**Personal Background:**

1. Can you tell me your name?
2. When asked about your ethnicity, how do you identify?
3. What is your employment status?
4. Are you a caregiver? If so for whom do you care?
5. What are their ages?
6. Are you single or have a partner?
7. How far are you in your graduate program and how much longer do you have to go?
8. Where are you studying?

9. Do you know your institution is an HSI? Do you know what that designation means?

10. Is your graduate degree online, in-person or blended?

“Thank you for sharing that background information with me. I will now move on to asking you questions about your graduate journey and challenges.”

Your Graduate Journey and its Challenges:

1. Are you experiencing your graduate studies with others that identify as Latinx? If so, what is the experience like? Do you feel it makes a difference? If not, how does that make you feel?

2. If you are a mother/caregiver, do you know of any other mothers or caregivers in your program? How does that make you feel?

3. Do you have a sense of community? If so, what makes it so? What are attributes from your peers which build connections leading to a sense of belonging? What makes it great and how could it improve?

4. If any, what are some of your greatest challenges while working towards completing your graduate studies?

5. Do you work a full-time job while completing your studies, if so, what is that experience like for you?

6. If you are working part-time or unemployed, what is that experience like for you while studying?

7. How do you balance being a student amongst your other roles?
“Thank you for sharing about your journey, before I move into asking you questions about supports you received or would have liked to receive, do you have any questions for me or anything else you’d like to share about your journey that I may not have asked?”

**Supports:**

1. Do you, or do you not have any support at home or among family and friends while completing your graduate studies, if so, what does that support look like?
2. Does your institution offer supportive resources or programs to graduate students, if so, what do those supports, or programs look like?
3. Are there any supportive programs through your school's HSI designation?
4. Are there specific supports you would like to see?
5. What advice would you offer to others in your shoes that identify as a minoritized group also completing graduate programs?
6. What haven’t I asked you that you think I should know?

**End of Interview**

At the end of the interviews, I will repeat my contact information to the participants should they want to reach out and provide more information about their experiences. I will keep in contact with my participants and, once available, share findings and common themes.

**Confidentiality**

To protect and respect the confidentiality of the participants, no names will be used in the research, and the researcher will conceal the identity when direct quotes are used. The direct quotes or stories will not be connected to one particular Hispanic Serving Institution. In addition, only the audio files will be transcribed, and all digital documents will remain on a password-protected laptop.
Data Analysis

To appropriately analyze the data of this study, the researcher will first take the raw text (Auerbach & Silverstein, 1999) and create and organize the data files and transcribe through Temi. Second, the researcher will read through the transcribed interviews and pull all relevant text. Next, the researcher will enter the relevant text into Dedoose and begin to code and find emerging themes. The ultimate goal is to identify collective experiences within the stories and repeating ideas. The researcher will pull direct excerpts of the testimonios and include themes and categories in the findings.

Delimitations

Due to Latinas' unique nature and the delicate balance of managing roles like mother, employee, and student, an exciting and research worthy experience can be studied. However, a delimitation is that only one gender is being investigated. When learning the best culturally relevant practices needed to support this population, the same could or could not be said for Latino males. Another delimitation is that Latinx individuals are only one ethnicity considered marginalized and underrepresented in a pool of many more students of color that could benefit from culturally relevant practices. Additionally, urban HSIs are the only type of institutions in this study and due to the pandemic, Zoom was the only medium that could be used.

Positionality & Reflexivity

Through reflection of the researcher role, the researcher acknowledges the assumptions and preconceptions that can be brought into the research. The researcher identifies as Latina and a doctoral student, which planted the seed of interest for this study. The researcher believes that “Latinidad,” culture, family history, and lived experiences as a doctoral student and the many roles such as mother, employee, daughter, and sister directly impacted the desire to pursue this
study and shape the way the researcher makes meaning of the data. The researcher is studying Higher Education Leadership at a Hispanic Serving Institution. The researcher also works at a Hispanic Serving Institution with experience managing HSI programs to serve the Latinx population.

**Trustworthiness**

Though the researcher identifies with participants on a personal level, the researcher has framed interview questions to not be leading but rather gather the true experiences of each of the participants. In addition, the use of testimonios as a methodology by nature, ensures that the voice of the participants is the focal point in the data and data analysis and a section on recommendations by the student participants will be included. This will ensure the credibility of the study and the findings.

**Chapter 3 Conclusion**

Overall, institutions of higher education include a vast array of different student populations, and institutions with the HSI designation are on the rise. Enrollment of Latinx individuals is on the rise, but student outcomes need to improve. There is no better way to learn how than to hear straight from the students themselves that HSIs are meant to support and serve. Chapter IV aims to share the results of the study and demonstrate the methodology was followed as described in Chapter III.
CHAPTER 4

Findings

This chapter contains the results of the testimonios methodology study conducted to answer the research questions:

**RQ 1:** What are the lived experiences of Latina Graduate Experiences at urban Hispanic Serving Institutions

**RQ 2:** How are HSIs using culturally relevant practices to support Latina graduate students at HSIs?

This chapter also includes a discussion that the analysis conducted was consistent with the theoretical framework of the CECE model, culturally relevant pedagogy and shares how the study ties back to the research questions and the literature review. Additionally, this chapter includes a description of the participant sample and visuals to complement the summary. The process used to analyze the transcripts from the 11 individual interviews conducted to uncover codes and themes is described in detail in this chapter. There were five steps to coding and analysis (Auerbach & Silverstein, 1999): (a) raw text, (b) relevant text, (c) repeating ideas, (d) themes (e) theoretical constructs, as shown in Table 1 below. Constant comparison was used to distill the data further until themes emerged from the data at the levels of relevant text and repeating ideas. This chapter includes tables and graphics used to present codes and theme data and excerpts from the individual interviews used to emphasize critical themes and the resultant theory.

**Interviews and Participant Sample**

A total of 11 participants were interviewed for this study. Originally, the aim was to interview 10 participants, however the researcher ended with 11 participants with the desire to
share their stories and experience. In addition, as stated in Chapter three, a call on LinkedIn and Facebook for additional participants resulted in 3 of the 11 participants coming from HSIs outside of the state of Illinois. Each of the additional HSIs were urban HSIs located in geographic areas with high populations of Latinx residents. A brief overview of the additional institutions is included in the table below.

Table 1

Additional Institutions Participants Attended

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Public or Private</th>
<th>Urban or Rural</th>
<th>Latinx Enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cal State Northridge</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Arizona</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>26.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UC Irvine</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All levels of graduate study are represented in this participant sample, 3 (27%) master’s level and 8 (72%) doctoral level. Participants for this study were students who identified as female and Latina in masters or doctoral programs at urban Hispanic Serving Institutions. Participants completed at least two terms or were in the process of completing their second term in their respective graduate programs. Each participant was given a consent form, and the interview protocol was explained. Questions in the interviews were set up in 3 sections. The first set of questions were to learn participant backgrounds, the second set of questions were centered around the participants' graduate journey and challenges faced, and the last stage of questions was around support systems.

Interview Protocol
Interviews were conducted via zoom, a digital video conferencing software for 30-45 minutes for each interviewee, the sessions were recorded and interviewees were informed of the recording. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher reviewed the consent form with participants and clarified any questions. At the end of the interview questions, participants were provided with the researcher’s information to contact should there be further questions or to add any more insight or stories not addressed during the interview.

**Data Collection**

The 11 research interviews with Latina women in graduate programs at urban Hispanic Serving Institutions served as the primary source of research data. The demographic questions at the beginning of each interview served as supporting research data. After all interviews were complete, the relevant text was coded through Dedoose for repeating ideas and reviewed for emerging themes. Following this method, the researcher tied back pieces to the theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter 3. The original interview protocol and the subsequent interview question and changes through the course of the study are provided in *Appendix E*.

**Data and Analysis**

Transcripts were uploaded into the computer software Dedoose for analysis. Each interview was coded using the software. The coding results included 29 codes. In the next phase of analysis, grouping the repeating ideas, the researcher searched to find categories emerging from the similarities in codes to develop themes. Figure 5 includes a summary of the five steps of the data and analysis process.
After the repeating ideas were coded and organized into themes, the excerpts within each theme were then cleaned up and organized or recoded as needed. The themes and excerpts were then grouped to develop and connect to the theoretical frameworks.

**Research Study Results and Themes**

The 29 codes were grouped into 5 Themes. The Themes were (a) Student Challenges (b) Latina Cultural Standards (c) Support Systems (d) Faculty (e) The Student Voice. Each theme has several underlying categories to organize the excerpts into repeating ideas. Strong and supporting excerpts were pulled from each theme to share a glimpse of the personal story of each participant.
Theme 1: Student Challenges pursuing Graduate Programs

The first repeating idea within this theme was time management. Three participants shared their difficulty around time management:

It's really, really difficult. I give preference of my time to my job for multiple reasons, and so I'm either carving time out of my sleep or carving time out of time that maybe I would spend with family or friends. you know, and, and that's why too, I didn't go back until my children were old enough to understand what I'm doing.

Yeah, it's really difficult. I'm constantly, I feel like I have a full plate and there's always something falling off. Like if I'm going to dedicate time to moving forward, my research of like a dozen other things that are falling off my plate the next day I go and pick them up.

I think I just had a really hard time balancing and like managing my time and getting things done. I wasn't used to falling behind having to ask for extensions and all that.
Another repeating idea within this theme of challenges was “imposter syndrome,” or the idea of not belonging or feeling inadequate. Two participants shared their struggle in self-doubt, “I didn't develop this academic confidence. For my doctorate, I was procrastinating to even apply because part of me felt like I wasn't ready”, while the other stated:

I think honestly my greatest challenge is ... imposter syndrome, because it, it is really hard to, again, like I'm the only one in my family who has pursued a master's degree in a while. I'm really proud of that. And I can't wait to graduate and kind of be the first in my family. It's also a lot of pressure and a lot of second-guessing myself. So, I think that's probably my biggest obstacle.

When participants were asked about the presence of other Latinas in their respective programs, many shared that there were few or none other than themselves, and a repeating idea of isolation emerged. When asked about feelings around being the only Latina, participants stated, “Sometimes it could be like very isolated. Um, but at other times I feel like it's like a very unique perspective like that I'm like helping others understand”. Another participant indicated:

Truth is that being a Latina in a doctoral program is very lonely. I couldn't say it outright because I have taught myself to be strong and only show that I am confident. Latinas are strong, you have to make yourself stronger to be able to endure the challenges of balancing work, family, and graduate school. I feel like I'm alone, I have to learn on my own, I have to seek resources on my own

Participants were also asked about feelings around managing graduate school among other roles such as employee, caretaker, or mother. The repeating idea of exhaustion was expressed by several participants sharing, “It's hard. It's stressful. I think it's stressful. It's overwhelming. And it's exhausting. I think I felt it [take] like a physical toll”.


The last repeating idea and challenge within this theme was scholarly writing. One participant shared the differences in writing at the doctoral level:

Writing got tricky for me because for my master’s, it was a lot of like, 'I think this because the data says this, and I think that because of this' and when we got into the doctoral program, a lot of us were still writing with the I, and they wanted a whole different level of academic writing where we are nowhere, like, mentioned at all in the papers.

**Theme 2: Latina Cultural Standards and their role in the Graduate Experience**

Participants continuously spoke about their upbringing as Latinas and the role their culture played in their emotional response to challenges. Three standards seemed to emerge from the interviews 1) emotional strength, 2) self-determination/motivation 3) gender roles.

**Emotional Strength**

The researcher categorized the first as emotional strength. One participant who was taught to be strong had an open and honest conversation with a faculty member and shared the following:

And when he said that I literally broke down in tears because I hadn't had a space where I felt like I could be by myself. Like I was carrying all this armor and carrying all of this, like defense, my defenses were definitely up.

Her description of having her defenses up may suggest she was taught as a Latina to be emotionally strong. Another participant studying counseling shared how mental illness was a taboo subject in her culture and family, further illustrating the emphasis of having to be emotionally strong. She stated, “Things like anxiety and depression, it’s just like, oh, well just cheer yourself up or just get over it. You know, don’t complain about things.”
Four more participants shared thoughts suggesting that their backgrounds and culture taught them the standard of being emotionally strong. The first stated, “I think part of that comes from just a personal thing, but also a cultural thing, just kind of being raised [like] just being strong, you don't give up”. Others specified:

I feel like I need to give it my all, right. Just because again, my background, you know, my parents gave it their all for me to be where I am today, you know, they gave it their all. So, it's like, I can't complain. I have to give it my all.

I've learned that because you have to be strong as a Latina. You have to be strong, you know, don't expect people to be nice to you. Don't expect people to come and help you. They're not going to.

I'm the first person in my family. So, it's a big deal, but at the same time, it's very scary because now you feel like 'I got to do a good job,' right? Like you carry the weight, you know, to your children and so on and so forth.

**Self-determination/motivation**

Related to the cultural standard of emotional strength as Latinas, is the standard of self-determination. When participants were asked what they would tell other Latinas in their shoes, they shared the following: “You have to really want it for yourself because that support might not come,” and “You have to advocate for yourself extra hard”.

When speaking on their own experiences as Latinas, the participants shared, “We've been self-motivated. It's valuable,” and “I'm a pretty determined person, so I didn't let that stop me,” and finally:
So, I've had to like really push myself to get where I'm at and to keep going. … I'm going to get this. And I want to do something with it. You know, I want to teach university. I want to keep going.

**Gender Roles**

The last repeating idea within this theme of Cultural Standards was the gender roles Latinas felt that were still imposed on them. Two participants shared stories of the roles they play at home with their families and husbands, "I often feel that a lot of the traditional things still fall on me. I think he just doesn't recognize it," and:

I think a huge piece honestly, is the gender piece. It's huge Because even though I'm married and I married late, you know, I just got married, and I don't have children. There's still this like gender role. I want my house in a certain order, and I have to find time to do that, to spend time with him because you know, you have to, you have to keep those relationships.

One participant shared her desire to go back to school for a graduate degree and was told the following by her husband, "All you need is to get a husband to take care of you".

**Theme 3: Support Systems**

When participants were asked about support systems, several categories emerged, such as family support, partner support, support from friends, institutional support both generally and as a Hispanic Serving Institution. When participants were asked if they received support from their family, they shared the following:

My family doesn't fully understand what I'm studying. There's a lot of stigma around mental health, still in my family. So even though my parents are a little bit more open to it and they see the importance of mental health, I don't think that they really get like, what
exactly I want to do. So, in that regard, it's just kind of like, oh yeah, that's, that's your thing that you do.

Two other participants shared, "My parents have been more of like emotional support," and "I feel like I do have the sense of support and for my parents, even though they don't understand the whole process".

Participants who had a partner or spouse were asked whether or not they had their support as they attended graduate school. Responses from participants were from opposite sides. One participant shared how much her partner supported her by sharing the following:

My husband stays up with me, even if he's just watching TV. He will not leave the room until I'm done with my homework. So even, you know, even though he's in something, I'll throw things at him and he'll give me his feedback. I heard him the other day literally telling his parents, ‘Oh, I'm not going to bed anytime soon. So, she finishes her homework. So, it just makes me feel that even though he's not typing, he's there, you know, he's supporting me in some way or another. So, he's actually the one that encouraged me to go back to school.

Unfortunately, another participant had a very different story, "I haven't, you know, I don't get support from family. Part of the contributing factor in my divorce from my husband is that he didn't support either".

Interviewees also spoke on the support they received from friends, and the majority of participants felt supported by their peers, stating "Most of my friends have a college education, so they understand the master's level and doctoral level. So, when I do have to do homework, they're understanding". Another shared, "We hold each other accountable. She's also the way, the
reason why it worked so well because we both want more out of our careers, and we have kind of very similar work ethics."

Lastly, participants were asked whether they felt supported by their institution. Support in writing was a dominant comment among interviewees. They shared, "Well, there's the writing help assistance with papers," "They do have some writing workshops. They have a summer writing fellowship," and "We do get a lot of support as far as like the writing''.

Due to the study focusing on Latinas attending HSIs, participants were asked whether their institution had supportive services through this designation and if they felt supported by their HSI as a Latina. Participants attending a specific urban HSI with a graduate-focused HSI grant shared they did feel supported, "Being in this fellowship with this group is, is a great sense of community and support". However, students attending another urban HSI that did not have a graduate-focused grant shared the opposite, "there's nothing that you can say, not as an undergrad, not as a master student, not as graduates. I don't; I don't see it".

**Theme 4: Faculty**

To fully understand the Latina experience at Hispanic Serving Institutions, it was essential to understand whether students felt supported by their faculty and if they had faculty of color within their programs they could rely on as advisors or mentors. Participants shared the following in regard to a) support, b) faculty of color and c) faculty mentors/advisors:

*Faculty Support*

Because our instructors work in that field, some of the instructors have similar roles as we do. So there has been a better understanding, and we're not going to penalize you because life does happen. And we all need some, you know, a little bit of grace. So, I
think had we not had that type of flexibility? I think it would have been extremely hard for me.

**Faculty of Color**

"No. I don't have any faculty of color that's teaching. I do think it would make a difference."

It makes me wonder sometimes, and I know if it's just me getting into my head, but like, it makes me wonder sometimes like if there's going to be room for me as a Latina right. ... I noticed the difference when I look at some of the classes that I've taught, and a lot of graduate students are like, oh, my goodness, you're the first Latina professor that we've had. Even though technically I'm not like a full-time professor. I don't have a doctor next to my name yet. But I noticed a difference in engagement and just their learning experiences. **Faculty Mentors/Advisors**

"I would appreciate if we had more professionals of color or at least like adjuncts or faculty of color that we could choose to be our advisors."

**Theme 5: The Student Voice & Call to Action**

Participants were asked to share what they felt their institutions should do as HSIs to support their experience and success better. Three overall suggestions were frequently repeated by participants (a) Professional Development, (b) Mentorship, (c) Build Community.

**Professional Development**

When participants asked what they would like to see, participants shared the following about professional development:[I would like to see] professional development regarding cultural identity development, or even a celebration of our identity. And how within those affinity spaces specifically just like, there's a lot of healing that needs to happen". 
But I would like to see more of that, more representation of like, I don't know, clubs or collaboratives. Yeah. Something like that. Coalition, something that brings people of either the same professional views or experience. It's something that just kind of makes it a little bit more together, for sure.

"I think opportunities for professional development". And lastly:

At my level, I would love to see a professional organization at least across, across disciplines, perhaps across positions, because as you're getting ready to, you know, pursue the next thing, what do you have in mind? What am I going to do next? What can I do next? We don't have that at a doctoral level.

**Mentorship**

Topics such as Mentorship came up frequently, and participants shared the following:

I think I would like to see just for future cohorts or just future, for students who do identify as Latin X, is some sort of like mentor or peer. I don't even know how to describe it, but basically like a peer mentor or something where, you know, students can come together and ask us those questions.

**Build Community**

Participants also shared the importance of building community throughout their graduate journeys:

I think that what's helpful in having some Latino peers is in terms of being able to talk to them about some of the personal stuff that's going on. So just kind of having that support system in that way.

So, when you're trying to find, you know, support groups or just tips and tricks, or you're just, you know, just trying to vent or just trying to be like, let me share my experience
with you, let me share my research with you. I feel like building that community at the master's level and the doctoral level, and then being a Latina, I think is super beneficial.

**Recommendations from Student Participants**

Consistent with the *testimonios* methodology, which highlights the collective experiences of participants including human struggles, experiences, and a call to action (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012; Pérez Huber & Cueva, 2012), participants were clear that Hispanic Serving Institutions should offer opportunities to build community and sense of belonging to lessen feelings of loneliness and isolation through mentorship experiences, peer mentoring opportunities, affinity groups, professional development and more faculty of color.

**Dedoose Analysis Results**

Dedoose exported a word cloud (Figure 7) to show the frequency of codes and the themes that emerged from the codes. The larger text indicate the frequency of the code and the mention of participants about the topic. The word cloud provides a unique visual to visual learners and shows that sense of community, institutional support, student advice, family support and family dynamics came up frequently by participants. Additionally, the word cloud shows that working-student-mother was not a frequent topic, nor were mom guilt or children. This analysis provides evidence that few participants were mothers with children and that sense of community was of great importance.
Theoretical Frameworks and their Connection to the Data

CECE Model

As stated in the literature review, the CECE model “suggests that culturally engaging campus environments (i.e., environments that reflect and respond to their cultural communities of students) are associated with more positive student outcomes in college” (Museus et al., 2014.
In addition, the CECE model “acknowledges that external influences (e.g., financial aid, family, and employment) … shape college student outcomes” (Gonzalez et al., 2020). Many of the indicators in the CECE model were present in interviewees' responses. For example, the indicators of cultural relevance included cultural familiarity and meaningful cross-cultural engagement. Cultural familiarity is “the extent to which college students have opportunities to physically connect with faculty, staff, and peers who understand their backgrounds and experiences” (Museus & Smith, 2014). Participants stated the importance of having peers and faculty they could relate to and connect with.

Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators and connection to experts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CECE Indicators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CECE Indicator #1: Cultural Familiarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CECE Indicator #4: Opportunities for Meaningful Cross-cultural engagement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Meaningful cross-cultural engagement “involves students' access to opportunities to engage in meaningful interactions with peers from diverse backgrounds to solve real social and political problems” (Museus & Smith, 2014). Many participants expressed the desire for a peer
mentoring experience to connect and share their research ideas and bounce ideas off each other. A peer mentor would also serve as a motivative accountability partner. Lastly, this study took place at HSIs, which address the indicator on culturally validating environments. This refers to “environments that validate students’ cultural knowledge, backgrounds, and identities” (Museus & Smith, 2014). Though many students either did not know their institution was an HSI until later in their programs, there was an expectation that the HSI should create an environment that validated their identities and experiences.

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

The second theoretical framework of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, as discussed in Chapter 2, is “a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools and other institutions perpetuate” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469). Since pedagogy is the method and practice of teaching, culturally relevant pedagogy should include diverse faculty and participants responses were consistent with the need to increase diversity of faculty and staff and felt that would improve their overall academic experience. Participants were looking for opportunities to affirm their identities while growing as graduate students.

**Table 2:**

*CRP and connection to experts*

**Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Framework**

[I would like to see] professional development regarding cultural identity development, or even a celebration of our identity. And how within those affinity spaces specifically just like, there's a lot of healing that needs to happen.

I would appreciate if we had more professionals of color or at least like adjuncts or faculty of color that we could choose to be our advisors.
I noticed the difference when I look at some of the classes that I've taught, and a lot of graduate students are like, Oh, my goodness, you're the first Latina professor that we've had. Even though technically I'm not like a full-time professor. I don't have a doctor next to my name yet. But I noticed a difference in engagement and just their learning experiences.

**Additional Data Collected**

In this research study, 9 (81%) participants were employed full-time while pursuing graduate school, 1 (9%) was employed part-time, and 1 (9%) was a full-time student who received a fellowship. In addition, 3 (27%) of students were mothers who also worked full-time while pursuing a graduate degree. Lastly, 9 (81%) of participants interviewed stated that prior to attending their institution, they were not aware of the HSI status, and 3 (27%) knew of the status but shared it did not factor into their decision to attend the institution.

**Chapter 4 Conclusion**

This chapter contains the analysis results, connects the analysis back to the research questions, and connects the findings to theoretical frameworks. Eleven participants were interviewed for this narrative methodology study. Interview questions were structured to understand the lived experiences of Latinas in graduate programs as well as gain insight on whether the Hispanic Serving Institutions they are attending are supporting their journeys.

Consistent with narrative methodology, their stories were told and shared through repeating themes. Repeating ideas were coded and analyzed using Dedoose software to discover the five themes and theoretical frameworks. The five themes resulting from this study summarize the lived experiences of Latina women in graduate degree programs and the culturally relevant supports needed to enhance their experience. While many Latinas expressed the various challenges they faced, it was more surprising that their institutions, designated as HSIs, had
minor culturally relevant support services for this demographic of students. Chapter V includes the summary for the critical analysis and discussion of the five themes.
CHAPTER 5
Discussion & Implications

The purpose of this qualitative testimonios study was to learn about and understand the lived experiences of Latinas in graduate programs at Hispanic Serving Institutions and whether these HSIs implemented culturally relevant practices to support their academic journeys better. This chapter discusses significant findings related to the literature on HSIs, culturally relevant pedagogy, and a culture of “servingness”. Also included is a discussion on connections to this study and theoretical frameworks. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study, areas for future research, and a brief summary.

This chapter contains discussion and future research possibilities to help answer the research questions:

RQ 1: What are the lived experiences of Latina Graduate Experiences at Hispanic Serving Institutions?

RQ 2: How are HSIs using culturally relevant practices to support Latina Graduate Students?

The findings for the lived experiences of Latinas in graduate programs at Hispanic Serving Institutions are comprised of five themes (a) Student Challenges (b) Latina Cultural Standards (c) Support Systems (d) Faculty (e) The Student Voice. Some factors that contributed to the themes were feelings of exhaustion, isolation, and cultural upbringings. All of these factors and more contributed to the participants' experiences and personal recommendations to HSIs to better support their needs and improve their experiences.

Interpretation of the Findings

While there were many commonalities among Latinas in graduate programs at HSIs, experiences also included variation for each individual. Each of the five themes included unique
feelings that contributed to the overall academic experience of each Latina in a graduate degree program interviewed for this study. Some participants felt supported by their partners throughout their educational journeys, and others ended up divorced during their programs. In addition, while some felt supported by family, others described that support as surface level and more social-emotional. Participants felt there was a lack of understanding from families about the difficulty and sacrifice needed to pursue a graduate degree. The themes used to categorize the lived experiences of Latinas have a depth and dimension to them as to what their experiences are and what is needed to support these individuals from the HSIs they attend. Each theme is interpreted and described in detail in the following sections.

**Student Challenges Pursuing Graduate Programs**

While many students face issues like time management while pursuing graduate degrees, some challenges described by participants were unique to them and came from cultural upbringing. Many participants described feelings of loneliness and isolation and the lack of other Latinas in their programs of study. Participants recommended their institutions implement peer mentoring programs, coalitions, or affinity groups to help combat those emotions. Given that these participants attended Hispanic Serving Institutions, HSIs must offer opportunity to build community. One particular institution the majority of participants attended offered a fellowship that was built as a cohort model where fellows met frequently with each other and their faculty mentor. Participants described this as beneficial to their experience.

As mentioned in the literature review, the culture of *servingness* that Garcia (2019) describes includes the “development of academic self-concept, leadership identity, and racial identity”. HSIs must take on the responsibility to implement opportunities for Latinas to grow in these areas, which can support in combating feelings of loneliness and isolation. Through
intentional focus groups, HSIs can be given the opportunity to understand the motivations behind Latinas wanting to pursue a graduate degree to understand and implement the proper support and culture of servingness. Olive (2014), who interviewed Latinx doctoral students in a graduate counseling program, set out to uncover the motivation to seek higher education, and findings revealed that participants viewed the choice to pursue a counseling degree as an opportunity “to achieve distinction, comfort and career satisfaction and respect from others”. Therefore, to build community and combat isolation, support services around career readiness can also be implemented. This is consistent with participant data where participants stated the desire for professional development opportunities.

**Connection to CECE Theoretical Framework**

The results of this study would agree with the literature regarding the importance of community. The first indicator of the CECE model on cultural familiarity states that when a student can connect with faculty, staff, and other students “whom they share a common background,” there is a greater likelihood of academic success (Museus & Smith, 2014). Participants sought this type of familiarity, and community and HSIs who can facilitate this process should see an increase in Latinx student outcomes.

**Connection to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Framework**

Participants spoke of challenges in completing academic papers in a timely and scholarly manner. One participant shared the many differences in writing academic papers at the doctoral level versus the master’s level and the challenging in learning to adapt to this new level of writing. Results of academic challenges in this study show the need for culturally relevant pedagogy at the graduate level. Culturally relevant ways of teaching, affirming students experiences and encouraging students to bring their whole selves into the classroom gives
participants the validation to learn and grow in challenges like writing. Participants also shared experiencing feelings of imposter syndrome while enrolled in their programs. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the classroom can create an environment where students feel like they belong and as a result, increase their likelihood of success.

**Latina Cultural Standards and their role in the Graduate Experience**

Latina participants spoke of feeling the pressure of traditional gender roles and expectations. There were expectations to take care of the home, facilitate relationships with their families and parents, and be the primary caretaker of children. This gender role expectation as female is an identity the participants were navigating while also being an employee and student. The concept of intersectionality and highlighting the “lived experiences of historically marginalized populations” was very present in the conversations (Claros et al., 2017; Dhamoon, 2011; Crenshaw, 1989). The balance of the different identities’ participants carried was challenging and came with an overwhelming sense of pressure and oppression.

The participants spoke of the challenges of navigating the traditional expectations placed on them as women who were married. An important data point to note is that married participants represented 45% of interviewees, and only 27% were mothers. The underrepresentation of this particular population with Latina students is consistent with the study conducted by Arbelo-Marrero, (2016) that marital status, employment, and families are variables related to withdrawal rates as an indicator of success for doctoral students. Single marital status individuals indicated a higher likelihood of completion.

**Connection to CECE Theoretical Framework**

According to the CECE model, precollege inputs such as demographic factors including age, race, and gender influence college factors such as sense of belonging and academic
performance. Being Latina, and female and experiencing the oppression and pressure as part of this demographic influenced the overall experiences of participants. Several participants shared the difficulty of managing the wife role in their home while in school and others stated they purposely waited until their children were older before pursuing a graduate degree, so the load was a bit lighter. Taking into account Latina experiences as women, wives and mothers and implementing the CECE model to increase sense of belonging can support their academic success.

Connection to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Framework

This particular theme connects to female experiences and therefore has no specific connection to culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom, however, validating student cultural and gender experiences and implementing that into the learning experience could provide an added component to the overall experience of Latinas at HSIs and empower Latinas to take ownership in their multiple identities.

Support Systems

Participants addressed feeling supported or the lack thereof by family, friends, partners/spouses, their institution, and through the institution's HSI designation. The support participants felt from their internal circles, such as family and friends, was surface level and more of social-emotional support. There was a lack of understanding in the intensity of pursuing graduate school and the sacrifice of time, relationships, and sleepless nights attached with it. One participant stated the desire to involve family in their academic journey’s similar to how families are involved in the high school or undergrad level through award ceremonies, orientations of family conferences.
Participants felt supported by their institutions for areas such as academic writing. Participants shared that their institutions had writing centers they could access to review papers, but participants found it challenging to get their papers done with enough time to get them reviewed and turned in by the deadline. The writing support was an institutional service however, participants stated there was a lack of support through the institutions HSI status, for example support through HSI funding. Participants either said their institution did not have HSI programming available to them or it was unknown if any HSI support existed for graduate students. Research “suggests that actively identifying with an organization is essential because it can affect individual satisfaction (Mael & Tetrick, 1992)” (Garcia & Dwyer, 2018).

**Connection to CECE Theoretical Framework**

The sixth indicator of the CECE model, culturally validating environments, suggests that such environments are related to student success and students’ sense of belonging. The designation of being Hispanic-serving indicated that a culturally validating environment is and should continue to be established to support students and is valid at the graduate level.

**Connection to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Framework**

Implementing CRP in the classroom at the graduate level can support students in their growth as strong academic writers and explore ways to integrate their cultural identity into their scholarly writing.

**Faculty**

Findings revealed a significant lack of faculty of color in participants’ academic programs. Though participants expressed the desire to see more faculty of color, they still felt supported academically by their faculty and felt more connected if they had faculty with similar
backgrounds and cultures. The results of this study would agree with the literature regarding the importance of faculty who validated student’s cultural identity.

**Connection to CECE Theoretical Framework**

According to the sixth indicator of the CECE model, culturally validating environments, all faculty who validate students' cultural background and identity can result in a positive academic experience. In addition, the first indicator of cultural familiarity states that a connection with faculty who share common backgrounds with their students is also an indicator of success. Therefore, HSIs must put the intentional effort in both training faculty in culturally relevant pedagogy and recruiting and hiring faculty of diverse backgrounds.

**Connection to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Framework**

Ladson-Billings (1995) states that culturally relevant pedagogy is “a theoretical model that not only addresses student achievement but also helps students accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools and other institutions perpetuate” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469). If HSIs are intentional and offering professional development in this area, faculty will be better prepared to teach and support students of diverse cultural backgrounds.

**The Student Voice and Call to Action**

Participants shared strategies and practices they felt would be beneficial to improve their experiences. Each of their suggestions is consistent with the literature on holistic, wraparound support. Participants spoke on mentorship, peer mentoring, professional development, and affinity groups.

**Connection to CECE Theoretical Framework**
Their recommendations are consistent with CECE indicator 9: Availability of Holistic support, which suggests an association of positive levels of success. According to Museus & Smith (2014), this indicator and evidence “suggests that when students are not always expected to hunt down the information and support, they require on their own, but rather can access one or more institutional agents that function as conduits to broader support networks on their campus, those students are more likely to succeed in college” (Museus & Neville, 2012).

Lastly, the results of this study connect with the literature and fourth indicator of the CECE model: Opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural engagement (Museus, & Smith, 2014). This indicator states that access to “opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural engagement is positively associated with [student] success in college. This includes purposeful and meaningful interactions with peers that can “lead to higher levels of learning” (Museus & Smith, 2014).

**Connection to Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Framework**

Participants are looking for opportunities to celebrate their academic accomplishments, share with their peers and have their cultural identity validated and embraced. The Latina Student Voice theme of the findings indicate a strong argument for culturally relevant pedagogy and practices to be implemented into their overall academic experience.

**Implications for Practice**

Based on the findings, this study suggests that Hispanic Serving Institutions have the opportunity to implement policy and practice typically focused on at the undergraduate level and expand to the graduate level. Notably, the results of this study indicate a need for mentoring and coaching at the graduate level at HSIs. At the institution this study primarily takes place, undergraduates are assigned a coach that supports students in registering for classes and offers
social-emotional support as they navigate their undergraduate journeys. Participants at the graduate level expressed the desire for mentoring or coaching through the dissertation process and navigating challenges, such as time management and academic writing.

In addition to increasing the representation of diverse faculty at the graduate level, findings made it clear that faculty at the master and doctoral levels should be trained and participate in professional development around culturally relevant pedagogy. Such training and professional development would create engaging learning environments in the classroom and validate students' cultural identities and experiences.

Lastly, HSIs should pursue federal funding such as the Promoting Post-baccalaureate Opportunities for Hispanic Americans (PPOHA), which would support the creation of programming at the graduate level. Such federal funding can create scholarship opportunities for Latinx and underrepresented students and implement programs and support that build community and faculty mentorship opportunities for Latinx students. This would also create an opportunity for Latinas who, according to this study, were the only Latinas in their program to meet other Latinas in other programs to support a sense of belonging.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

While a qualitative testimonios methodology was the right choice for this study and offered the opportunity to hear from students themselves on what they need to succeed, interviews and other qualitative research tools are not necessarily designed to capture all the facts. This study could be more robust if a mixed methodology study and included quantitative research. A survey with statistical analysis, such as focusing on the key finding of mentoring for graduate Latinas, may provide more evidence to support the experiences discovered through qualitative research tools. Additional topics that need closer examination include the
underrepresentation of mothers in graduate degree programs and variables that either limit enrollment or result in withdrawal rates in masters’ and doctoral programs.

Limitations that can be considered are the geographical areas HSIs were located. While participants came from several different HSIs, a limitation is that the HSIs came from different states and a more structured approach, such as only urban HSIs in the City of Chicago may have offered a greater depth of findings. While others may argue that a limitation to this study may be the researcher’s close connection to the study, both as a student and employee at a Hispanic Serving Institution, the researcher argues that the close connection ensures trustworthiness and validity to the study's findings.

**Recommendations**

The researcher recommends that institutions place intentional effort and marketing strategy to bring awareness to the HSI status of the institution and the benefits to which students are entitled to and should expect due to the HSI status. Many participants did not know before enrolling in their institution that it was designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution. Participants who attended the primary institution in this study only learned of the status through programming under the PPOHA grant. For institutions without this type of federal funding, most graduate students remain in the dark of the support, if any, available to them at this level. As a Latina graduate student at a Hispanic Serving Institution, the researcher can relate to emotions of loneliness, isolation, and unawareness of support available.

More importantly, should the lack of support, or awareness not be addressed for Latinas in graduate programs, specifically in education programs, there will continue to be a lack of representation of Latina leaders. If Latinas, feel unsupported in their academic programs, the likelihood of completing their programs decreases. As the findings show, Latinas are self-
motivated and willing to sacrifice sleep and time with family to pursue their educational and career goals. Their self-determination partnered with proper HSI support, can open doors for real systemic change.

The researcher also recommends educational training and workshops for leaders of this institution about what it means to be a Hispanic Serving Institution. Leaders should market this designation on the homepage of their websites and in all outreach and enrollment material and what services are available to improve the overall experiences and academic outcomes of the Latinx population on their campus.

While the researcher recognizes that many of these recommendations carry a cost, there are steps that can be taken immediately at low to no cost for a Hispanic Serving Institution to support Latina graduate students. As participants stated, a group or coalition of Latinas would benefit their student experience. Institutions could offer an existing space for this group to meet and support the development of such group. In addition, celebrating important Latinx events such as Hispanic Heritage Month will help create an engaging campus environment and validate Latina student experiences.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the lived experiences of Latinas in this study could be described as isolating, challenging, and lonely, but the importance of securing such an achievement and being the first in their family to do so outweighed the negative. The themes uncovered in the findings; (a) Student Challenges (b) Latina Cultural Standards (c) Support Systems (d) Faculty (e) The Student Voice were connected to the frameworks and findings provided evidence of their need at the graduate level. The Latinas interviewed were determined and self-motivated individuals. Their cultural upbringing that taught them the value of emotional strength and the concept of
“tough-skin” was instrumental to their continued success within their programs. Institutions that embed the theories listed above and implement them in their graduate-level programs should see an increase in positive student experiences, increased student academic outcomes, and an environment where students report a sense of belonging with the motivation to persist and succeed. As a Hispanic Serving Institution, it is the university's responsibility to support all Latinx and underrepresented students at all levels and consider the complex identities they carry and the influence on their lived experiences to support them at every step, leading to success.
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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCRIPT AND QUESTIONS

Interview Script

The following script will be used throughout the interviews:

Hello, and thank you for your time. As I mentioned, my name is Melanie Flores, and I am currently pursuing an Ed.D. in Higher Education Leadership at NLU and part of the program requires a mini qualitative study on a topic of our choice, which brings us here today. The purpose of this interview is to learn about your unique experience as a Latina navigating your graduate journey at a Hispanic Serving Institution. With the exception of learning some background information, this interview is comprised of primarily standard open-ended questions that will allow you to go as in-depth as you feel comfortable. The topics of this interview will include a brief discussion on your personal background, challenges you may have faced with this identity, support you may or may not have had throughout your graduate studies, and if applicable, institutional supports you would have liked to receive or did receive throughout your journey from a designated HSI. Throughout this interview, I will be an active listener, so you can feel free to go as in-depth as you wish as you share your story. In order to be an active listener, I will record the meeting. The interview should last about 45 minutes, and your identity will be kept confidential. If you’d like to contact me after the interview for any reason, please don’t hesitate to reach out and contact me via email at

Before we get started with the interview, do you have any questions for me?

Interview Questions

Personal Background:

11. Can you tell me your name?

12. When asked about your ethnicity, how do you identify?
13. What is your employment status?

14. Are you a caregiver? If so for whom do you care?

15. What are their ages?

16. Are you single or have a partner?

17. How far are you in your graduate program and how much longer do you have to go?

18. Where are you studying?

19. Do you know your institution is an HSI? Do you know what that designation means?

20. Is your graduate degree online, in-person or blended?

“Thank you for sharing that background information with me. I will now move on to asking you questions about your graduate journey and challenges.”

Your Graduate Journey and its Challenges:

8. Are you experiencing your graduate studies with others that identify as Latinx? If so, what is the experience like? Do you feel it makes a difference? If not, how does that make you feel?

9. If you are a mother/caregiver, do you know of any other mothers or caregivers in your program? How does that make you feel?

10. Do you have a sense of community? If so, what makes it so? What are attributes from your peers which build connections leading to a sense of belonging? What makes it great and how could it improve?

11. If any, what are some of your greatest challenges while working towards completing your graduate studies?

12. Do you work a full-time job while completing your studies, if so, what is that experience like for you?
13. If you are working part-time or unemployed, what is that experience like for you while studying?

14. How do you balance being a student amongst your other roles?

“Thank you for sharing about your journey, before I move into asking you questions about supports you received or would have liked to receive, do you have any questions for me or anything else you’d like to share about your journey that I may not have asked?”

Supports:

7. Do you, or do you not have any support at home or among family and friends while completing your graduate studies, if so, what does that support look like?

8. Does your institution offer supportive resources or programs to graduate students, if so, what do those supports, or programs look like?

9. Are there any supportive programs through your school's HSI designation?

10. Are there specific supports you would like to see?

11. What advice would you offer to others in your shoes that identify as a minoritized group also completing graduate programs?

12. What haven’t I asked you that you think I should know?
APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent Observation Interview

My name is Melanie Flores, and I am a doctoral student at National Louis University. I am asking you to participate in this study, “The Latina Graduate Student Experience at HSIs”, occurring from March 2021 to April 2021. The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of Latinas in masters and doctoral programs at Hispanic Serving Institutions. This study will help researchers develop a deeper understanding culturally relevant practices and supportive services that can contribute to an enhanced experience and positive student outcomes. This form outlines the purpose of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant.

By signing below, you are providing consent to participate in a research project conducted by Melanie Flores, doctoral student, at National Louis University, Chicago.

Please understand that the purpose of the study is to explore your lived experiences. Participation in this study will include:

- 1 individual interview scheduled at your convenience in the winter and spring of the 2020-21 academic year.
  - Interviews will last up to 45 min. and include approximately 20 questions to understand your experiences at an HSI and the practices and resources available to you
  - Interviews will be recorded, and participants may view and have final approval on the content of interview transcripts

Your participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time without penalty or bias. The results of this study may be published or otherwise reported at conferences and employed to inform culturally relevant practices at HSIs but participants’ identities will in no way be revealed (data will be reported anonymously and bear no identifiers that could connect data to individual participants). To ensure confidentiality the researcher will secure recordings, transcripts, and field notes in a locked cabinet in her home office. Only Melanie Flores will have access to data.

There are no anticipated risks or benefits, no greater than that encountered in daily life. Further, the information gained from this study could be useful to the National Louis University and other schools and school districts looking to initiate or refine culturally relevant practices.

Upon request you may receive summary results from this study and copies of any publications that may occur. Please email the researcher, Melanie Flores a to request results from this study.

In the event that you have questions or require additional information, please contact the researcher, Melanie Flores,

If you have any concerns or questions before or during participation that has not been addressed by the researcher, you may contact Dr. Ignacio Lopez email the co- chairs of NLU’s Institutional Research Board: Dr. Shaunti Knauth; email: ; phone:
Thank you for your consideration.

Consent: I understand that by signing below, I am agreeing to participate in the study The Latina Graduate Student Experience at HSIs.

My participation will consist of the activities below during March-April of 2021:

- 1 Interview lasting approximately 45 minutes each

_________________________ Participant’s Signature  
_________________________ Date 

_________________________ Researcher’s Signature  
_________________________ Date
APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear Potential Participant,

The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the study titled “The Latina Graduate Student Experience at HSIs”. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with any department, instructor or National Louis University. The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of Latina masters and doctoral students at Hispanic Serving Institutions. There will be one interview for about 45 minutes in length consisting of about 20 questions. I will be the only individual involved in data collection and your information will remain confidential and anonymous.

Do not hesitate to ask any questions about the study either before participating or during the time that you are participating. I would be happy to share my findings with you after the research is completed. However, your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way and only I as the researcher will know your identity as a participant.

There are no anticipated risks or benefits, no greater than that encountered in daily life. The expected benefits associated with your participation are the information about your lived experiences may be beneficial to HSIs with a desire to improve practices and resources for underrepresented populations.

If you design to participate in this study, please sign the consent attached electronically as a PDF or type your name and a copy of the consent form will be given to you to keep. We will also review the consent form before our zoom interview should you have any questions.

Sincerely,
Melanie Flores