HOW FIRST-GENERATION LATINO COMMUTER UNDERGRADUATES
PERSIST TO DEGREE COMPLETION

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By
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APPROVED FOR THE SAINT MARY’S COLLEGE OF CALIFORNIA KALMANOVITZ SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

In recent years, Latinos have experienced the highest rate of increase in college enrollment among major ethnic groups. However, because they also tend to be first-generation college students, live at home, and work, they are least likely to persist to bachelor degree completion. Using a semi-structured interview, this qualitative descriptive study explored factors that fostered persistence of 20 first-generation, Latino commuter-university, bachelor degree graduates who faced those challenges. Findings revealed that such students encounter obstacles that hinder college persistence almost immediately upon entry. Having no one to explain in advance how college “works,” they cannot adequately anticipate the academic demands and responsibilities, nor do they understand how to navigate the administrative system. They are also constantly overwhelmed at having to juggle not only work and schoolwork, but also traditional Latino family obligations required of them by parents who also do not understand what being a college student entails. Other factors, however, helped them overcome these challenges: support from parents, financial aid programs, and on-campus relationships. The most important parental support was permission for the student to use work earnings for college expenses. Financial aid programs were essential to supplement these earnings and whatever modest financial support parents might provide. On-campus relationships were a critical aspect of Latino students’ support system. Staff provided essential personal academic advising. Faculty—especially Latino faculty—offered caring personal attention and role models. Equally important were relationships with other Latino students, which provided needed information and cultural affinity. Seeing others “like me” succeed helped these students believe they, too, could persist and graduate. Educators and administrators at commuter universities can positively affect Latino college persistence by increasing students’ knowledge about and access to financial aid, offering
programs that prepare Latino students and their parents for the multiple demands of being a college student, and establishing structures designed to increase Latino students’ social and academic integration. Given current demographic shifts, improving Latino college graduation rates are not only a question of equity and social justice, but may be an important factor in the future overall health of the United States economy.
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I embarked on this academic journey in order to help make an impact on addressing the academic achievement gap. I am indebted to the Latino graduates in this study, to my dissertation committee and others who guided me through this project.

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Chapter I

Introduction

The recent explosion of the Latino population in the United States means that educational leaders are about to face a massive change in the composition of their college-aged student populations (Llagas & Snyder, 2003). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2005), the terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” are used interchangeably to represent both male and female populations of Cuban, Puerto Rican, Mexican, and South and Central American origin. An influx of Latino students will increase not only students’ ethnic diversity but also the percentage of students juggling both on-campus and off-campus demands. This is because many Latinos live at home and commute to college (Fry, 2004) due to both the Latino cultural value of family interdependence (Dayton, Gonzalez-Vasquez, Martinez, & Plum, 2004) and limited financial reserves (Fry, 2004).

Three decades of research show that students who live at home and commute to college are less likely to academically and socially integrate and, therefore, less likely to persist to bachelor degree completion (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This may contribute to the fact that despite having the highest rate of increase in college enrollment among major ethnic groups over the last decade (Santiago & Brown, 2004; Taylor, Fry, Velasco, & Dockterman, 2010), Latinos are the group least likely to persist to bachelor degree completion (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, Whitmore & Miller, 2007). To increase the number of Latino students earning bachelor’s degrees, colleges will have to develop or emphasize effective college outreach and college retention programs designed to help Latino students successfully juggle off-campus responsibilities with academic and social integration.
Literature Review/Background

The U.S. Census Bureau (2007) reports the population of the United States has reached 300 million, including 100 million ethnic minorities, of which the 44 million Latinos are the largest major ethnic group. Over the last two decades, Latino enrollment in the American post-secondary system has risen (Schmidt, 2003), increasing by 25% compared to a 2% rise for non-Hispanic whites (Santiago & Brown, 2004). But despite the fact that Latinos are the largest minority ethnic group and have the highest rate of increase in higher-education enrollment, they have the lowest rate of bachelor degree attainment among major ethnic groups (Grogger & Trejo, 2002). Latinos represent 11% of the proportion of those who earned a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 29.4% for non-Hispanic Whites (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2002).

Why Latinos choose to live at home while attending college has been attributed to a traditional Latino cultural characteristic known as family interdependence. Family interdependence is a multidimensional concept: it comprises family support, family connectedness, family honor, and the obligation for family members to subjugate their individual needs to the needs of the family (Cahin, Villarruel, & Viramontez, 1999). Historically, Latino population growth in the United States stems primarily from immigration (Pew Hispanic Center, 2006), and family interdependence is rooted in the challenges Latino immigrants face in adapting to life in a new country (Chapman & Perreira, 2005). Moreover, 67% of people comprising the recent Latino population growth have at least one foreign-born parent or are foreign-born themselves (Llagas & Snyder, 2003).

Since Latino immigrant families are collectively focused on settling and adapting in America, the development of Latino children towards independent adulthood—including their educational development—is not the focus of the family’s energy; rather, the focus is on the
family’s efforts to survive in a new environment (Chapman & Perreira, 2005). Nevertheless, the tendency for family interdependence persists among post-immigrant Latino families living in the United States, without regard to their socioeconomic status (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999). Therefore, Latino youth in the United States, in both immigrant and non-immigrant families, are likely to hold values related to family interdependence (Hardway & Fuligni, 2006).

Latinos’ adherence to the primacy of family interdependence persists into adulthood (Fuligni & Pederson, 2002) and affects their post-secondary educational aspirations. Although Latino college students attribute their motivation to go to college to a desire to please their families by excelling educationally beyond the achievements of their parents (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2005), such students also spend more time responding to family demands compared to their peers from U.S.-born families (Fuligni & Witkow, 2004; Tseng, 2004). In addition, Latinos are also more likely to choose a college closer to home (Tornatzky, Lee, Mejia, & Tarant, 2003), more likely to live at home and commute to college (Fry, 2004), and more likely to work to help support dependents while enrolled in college (Horn, Peter, & Rooney, 2000).

Research over the last four decades has produced a substantial body of sociological studies discussing why some students leave college before degree completion (Berger & Lyon, 2005). The works of several leading scholars (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993) have become landmarks in the field of college persistence and retention, and their studies are still cited by many researchers today (Berger & Lyon, 2005). However, more recent studies have challenged some of these findings, as explained in the literature reviewed in the following chapter.

In particular among these landmark studies, Astin (1993) revealed that the level of student involvement in campus interactions plays a significant role in persistence, and suggested
that because traditional residential campuses promote peer interactions, they promote behaviors supporting the likelihood of persisting in college. Tinto (1993) further explained that factors determining college departure or persistence include students’ pre-college dispositions, their interactions with others on campus, the external forces influencing their departure, and the nature of the social and integrative experience between the students and the institutions. More recently, Pascarella and Terenzini’s (2005) synthesis of research over the last thirty years found that academic and social integration continues to be positively related to student persistence.

Conversely, students with a low level of integration – which may result from external demands such as work or family responsibility – are least likely to persist to degree completion (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

To date, most studies of persistence in college have focused on non-Hispanic white students who matriculate six months after high school graduation, live in residential dorms on campus, have no family responsibilities, and attend college full-time (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This is a path in higher education that Latinos are the least likely to take (Fry, 2004). However, it appears that when Latino students are able to participate in academic and social integration, the likelihood of completing a bachelor degree increases (Arbona & Nora, 2007). For example, Latinos re-enrolling in college have credited university-based faculty mentoring (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005), learning communities (Nora, 2003), peer-group interaction on campus, and informal encouragement from faculty and campus administrators for their decision to resume their studies (Torres, 2006). In short, academic and social integration renewed their motivation.

Unfortunately, opportunities for academic and social integration are greater for college students attending residential campuses than for those attending commuter campuses (Braxton &
Moreover, residential campuses are comprised largely of non-minority students—for whom balancing social and academic interaction is the cultural norm (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). A college is deemed a residential campus when the majority of students enrolled are living in university dormitories or on-campus housing (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004). Conversely, colleges are deemed "commuter” institutions if the majority of the student body is made up of students living at home with external family and work responsibilities (Braxton et al., 2004); these features also describe most Latino students (Fry, 2004; Santiago & Brown, 2004).

Over the last three decades, the many studies of college students attending residential campuses have led to the development of several sophisticated retention models (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, only a few of these studies, and only two retention models, have focused on Latino student persistence while commuting to college (Rendón, Jaloma, & Nora, 2000; Torres, 2006). One of these models (Nora, Kraemer, & Itzen, 1997) described what influenced persistence among Latinos commuting to two-year community colleges. The other (Torres, 2006) reconfigured Nora et al.’s 1997 model to describe the factors that help Latino students commuting to four-year universities—not to persist to degree completion, but merely to complete their first year of college. Therefore, an area still to be studied would be factors to which Latino college graduates from commuter universities attribute their success in persisting to bachelor degree completion.

**Problem Statement**

Latinos comprise the largest ethnic minority group in the United States and have had the largest increase in the rate of college enrollment over the last two decades. Influenced by their cultural value of family interdependence, Latinos are also most likely both to live at home and
work while commuting to college. These factors interfere with social and academic integration and, according to several models, are likely to inhibit their persistence toward bachelor degree completion. However, most research on student persistence and college retention focuses on quantitative analysis of traditional-aged, white students attending residential campuses. Needed is research that explores what enabled those who have succeeded in overcoming these obstacles to persist to completion of their undergraduate degrees.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how first-generation Latino commuter-university graduates describe what influenced their ability to persist to bachelor degree completion in light of the multiple demands they face on and off campus.

**Research Questions**

This study is designed to explore a central question:

- How do first-generation Latino commuter-university graduates describe what influenced their ability to persist to bachelor degree completion?

Sub-questions will include:

- How do these influences compare with what Torres (2006) found for first-year students to persist to the second year in college?
- To what on-campus and off-campus experiences or support do members of this group attribute their success in persisting in college?
- What additional support might have been helpful?

The majority of research on persistence and retention in higher education has used a quantitative approach in studying traditional students attending residential campuses, resulting in models that highlighted the beneficial effects of social and academic integration (Pascarella &
When applying these leading frameworks on retention and persistence to non-traditional or minority students living at home and commuting to college, we learn that they lack these forms of integration (Rendón et al., 2000). Yet the decision either to depart or stay in college is mediated through a student’s meaning-making system, which comprises values, assumptions, and beliefs about what to expect from college (Kuh & Love, 2000), and these differ between students who reside on campus and students who commute to campus (Torres, 2006).

This study’s questions are, therefore, designed to examine how Latino commuter-university graduates describe what influenced their ability to persist—an approach that allows participants to discern and articulate their experiences and worldviews, rather than quantifying their experiences through measurements or testing a theory. From an epistemological standpoint, questions such as these, that explore how participants make meaning of their experience, are best explored through a constructivist lens, which calls for a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2003).

Significance of Study

Identifying the factors that impelled first-generation Latino graduates of commuter universities to persist to bachelor degree completion is socially and economically imperative. Latinos make up 1 out of 5 school-age children and 1 out of 4 newborns in the nation (San Francisco Chronicle, 2009). At the same time, they represent 24.3% of the overall population living in poverty, while Latinos under 18 years of age represent 28% of all people in poverty (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2002). Of those earning a bachelor’s degree, only 11% are Latino (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2002), yet by 2018, 63% of the workforce will demand a college-educated workforce (NALO, 2010). Thus, today’s 16 million Latino children and youth—92% of whom are US citizens—will soon form a crucial segment of American workers, taxpayers, parents, citizens, voters, and leaders (Population Reference Bureau, 2010).
Educational leaders must find ways to respond to the Latino achievement gap if Latinos are to play a more meaningful role in the future of this nation. College dropouts among all first-time freshmen between 2003 and 2008 cost US taxpayers 9 billion dollars (American Institutes for Research, 2010); if nothing changes, by 2050, when one-third of the total US population will be Latino (Population Reference Bureau, 2010), the cost of failed persistence could be many times greater.

College persistence and retention research is an area that is best explored among specific populations sharing similar cultural values and beliefs (Rendón et al., 2002). This study addresses the lack of qualitative research and literature in this area (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) and can be used to provide global and practical recommendations to educational leaders in order to address the Latino academic achievement gap and, in turn, poverty rates and civic participation among the largest ethnic group in the United States. The knowledge gained from this study serves to inform and improve institutional policies, supports, or offerings, by allowing design and implementation of college outreach and retention programs to take into account the influences attributed to the success of Latino students. Last, because Latino students are most likely to remain directly involved in their families and communities while attending college (Dayton et al., 2004), this study’s conclusions may be used to improve the interaction and communication between the college campus and external Latino communities. In sum, this study will add to the literature and affect institutional decisions, educational leadership, and the future of students and society at large.

**Theoretical Framework**

Many theoretical frameworks available in the field of college retention and student persistence attempt to explain why Latinos are least likely to persist to bachelor degree
completion (Rendón et al., 2000). However, this study focused on using a qualitative analysis approach to explore what influenced Latino commuter graduates to persist.

Torres (2006) designed a Social Cognitive Retention Model for Latino Students at Urban Universities to show how the variables of family status, family responsibility, satisfaction with faculty, cultural affinity, and academic difficulty are connected to academic and social integration and, therefore, affect students’ commitment to the institution and, in turn, their intent to persist. According to Torres’ model, Latino commuter students had many demands off-campus, leaving little time to socially integrate on campus, but were able to persist to the second year because of programs and mentors on campus that provided them support and assistance, helping navigate the college environment. To collect data for this study, I drew on Torres’ model to develop a semi-structured interview guide and interviewed twenty Latino first-generation commuter-university bachelor degree graduates from three public universities in the California State University system, all of whom participated in the Latino graduation ceremony in May of 2009. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed.

**Researcher’s Assumptions**

This research entails academic and cultural assumptions. This study assumes Latinos are academically capable of succeeding to undergraduate bachelor degree completion if obstacles hindering social and academic integration on campus are addressed. This study also assumes Latino college students face unique cultural challenges in the college setting for two reasons. One, Latino cultural values regarding ongoing family interdependence contrast with the culture of academia, which values development of students’ autonomy and individualism. And, secondly, unlike other cultural groups in the United States that hold family interdependence
values and beliefs, such as the Chinese-American culture, Latinos enter college with fewer financial resources and, therefore, more demands to help support the family unit.

**Delimitation/Limitation**

Delimitation narrows the scope of a study, while limitations identify any potential or anticipated weaknesses (Creswell, 2003). This study explored conditions that influenced first-generation Latino commuter-university graduates to persist to degree completion. Thus, one delimitation is the scope of its subject population: first generation Latino graduates who participated in the Chicano/Latino graduation ceremonies at commuter-type, public university campuses located in the Bay Area of California. Likewise, the study is delimited in that the subjects’ family members were not interviewed—the study relied solely on the subjects’ own awareness of their experiences as self-identified college graduates who lived at home while attending a commuter-university. Regarding limitations, the study may have limited application for second-generation Latino students or those of other ethnicities; and though these reveal factors in perseverance for those who persist, those who drop may face additional challenges not identified by a study of those who succeed.

**Definition of Terms**

Terms need to be defined in order to be understood by all readers (Creswell, 2003), especially those outside the field. Thus, the following are terms and their definitions are used throughout the study:

- Commuter-university – this term is used to define a bachelor degree-granting institution characterized as having a majority of the student body commute from home to attend college while juggling off-campus obligations, such as work or family demands (Braxton & Hirsch, 2005).
• Collectivism – a cultural orientation valuing interdependence, group harmony, and emotional attachment within a group, such as a family (Guiffrida, 2006).

• Family interdependence – a family structure that comprises family support, family interconnectedness, family honor, and the obligation to subordinate the needs of the self for the needs of the family (Cahin et al., 1999).

• First-generation college students – Students whose parents have no formal education in the United States beyond high school (Warburton, Burgarin, Nunez, & Carroll, 2001).

• Individualism – a cultural distinction in which a society values independence, competition, and emotional detachment from one’s in-group (e.g., family), and promoting autonomy and personal goals over group goals (Guiffrida, 2006).

• Persistence – the desire and action of a student to stay within the system of higher education from admission through degree completion (Berger & Lyon, 2005).

• Post-secondary institution – An institution whose sole (or primary) purpose is to provide a formal instructional program beyond the compulsory age for high school (Knapp et al. 2007).

• Normal time to completion – the amount of time necessary to complete all requirements for a degree or certificate according to the institution’s catalog; typically this is four to six years for a bachelor’s degree and two years for an associated arts degree (Knapp et al., 2007).

• Retention – the ability of an institution to keep a student enrolled continuously from first-time and first-year admission through graduation (Berger & Lyon, 2005).
• Residential campus – institutions in higher education in which the majority of students live on campus and away from home in dormitory-style housing while attending college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

• Traditional college students – for the purpose of this study, this term will refer to full-time, first-time, bachelor’s degree-seeking students, enrolled in college within six months following high school graduation (Knapp et al., 2007). These characteristics have been the focus of the majority of the literature on college student persistence (Pascarella & Terrenzini, 2005).

The following chapter (chapter two) reviews the literature studying attempts by Latinos’ to persist in higher education. It explores how family interdependence affects the Latino college experience; provides a general review of college persistence and retention studies; and examines what is currently known to influence Latino college persistence. Chapter three explains why the best approach to this inquiry was a qualitative, constructivistic design that employed purposeful sampling and semi-structured interviews to collect and analyze data. Chapter three also details how the process of analysis unfolded. Chapter four presents the results of the data, and lastly, chapter five explains how the findings deepen our understanding of Latino college persistence and provides recommendations for policies and practices.
Chapter II

Literature Review

Introduction

This study explored how first-generation Latino commuter-university graduates describe the factors that influenced their ability to persist to degree completion. Thus, this chapter provides a review of literature relevant to the challenges Latino college students face in persisting toward bachelor degree completion. The reviewed literature consists of two types: one, studies examining the nature and effect of the family obligations imposed on individual Latinos by the traditional Latino cultural value of family interdependence; and two, studies discussing developments in theoretical approaches to persistence and retention—among college students generally and Latinos in particular.

Studies in this chapter were obtained through searching a variety of databases. Academic databases searched included Blackwell Synergy, ERIC, Education FT, Ethnic NewsWatch, PsychInfo, and PsychARTICLES. In addition, more generally searchable databases and publications on Latino education and public policy were also utilized, including resources of the Tomás Rivera Institute, Pew Hispanic Center, and Public Policy Institute of California as well as publications available through Internet search engines. Major search keywords and permutations included: Hispanic, Latino, Mexican, American, immigrant, culture, bicultural, values, family, college, persistence, attrition, retention, commuter, and first-generation.

This chapter is divided into four parts. The first part is a demographic overview of the Latino population in the United States and Latinos’ status and trends in higher education. The second part explores the role family interdependence plays on both Latino children’s and Latino college students’ experiences. Part three presents a brief historical overview of research on
college persistence and retention in the United States and presents major factors found to
generally influence college persistence. Last, part four discusses the current research on what
influences Latino college students to persist.

**Latino Population and Status and Trends in Higher Education**

**Latino population in the United States.** The U.S. Census Bureau (2007) reports the
United States population has reached 300 million, including 100 million ethnic minorities. Of
these, 44 million are Latinos. Latinos have become the largest ethnic, minority group in the
United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007); immigration and high fertility rates among Latinos
are the major reasons for this (Pew Hispanic Center, 2006).

In 2002, 40.2% (about 15 million) of the Latino population was foreign-born. Among foreign-
born Latinos, 52% entered between 1990 and 2002, while 25.6% entered in the 1980s, and the
remainder entered before 1980 (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2003). Among the Latino population in
the United States, approximately 70% are of Mexican descent; 8.6% are Puerto Rican, 3.7%
Cuban, 14.5% Central or South American; and 6.5% are of other Latino origin or descent (U.S.
Census Bureau, 2005).

**Latino status and trends in post-secondary education.** Latinos’ enrollment in post-
secondary institutions has risen over the last two decades (Schmidt, 2003). This is perhaps
surprising because Mexican immigrants entering and settling in the United States to escape
poverty come with few financial resources and very low levels of education (Johnson & Hayes,
2004). However, they also seek to live the American dream (Alba, 2006), and there seems to be
some awareness of the value of education in achieving this. As a result, the number of Latinos
enrolled in undergraduate education increased 25% between 1996 and 2000 (Santiago & Brown,
2004). Latino enrollment in and graduation from post-secondary institutions is particularly
important if education is to continue to serve as an avenue to provide Latino immigrants’ U.S.-
born children a chance to break the poverty cycle. By 2010 almost half of the jobs available in
the United States will require a bachelor’s degree (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006).

As mentioned, between 1996 and 2000 the number of Latinos enrolled in undergraduate
education increased 25%, compared to 2% for non-Hispanic whites, 15% for African-Americans,
and 18% for Asian/Pacific Islanders (see increase in Appendix A). Over a recent 10-year period,
approximately 240 colleges were federally designated as Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs)
(Schmidt, 2003). HSIs, by definition, are institutions in higher education with at least 25%
Hispanic enrollment and at least half of their Latino students coming from low-income
backgrounds (Dayton et al., 2004). Because Latinos are most likely to balance pursuing a
college degree with family obligations, HSIs are located in areas with high Latino resident
populations (Dayton et al., 2004). However, despite the fact that Latinos are the largest minority
ethnic group nationwide and have the highest rate of increase in undergraduate enrollment, they
have the lowest bachelor degree attainment rate among major ethnic groups (Grogger & Trejo,
2002). Latinos represent 9.1% of the traditional-aged, first-time, first-degree-seeking students
enrolled in college, and of these students, 43% are located at four-year institutions and 57% at
community colleges (see breakdown in Appendix B). Furthermore, less than half (46.7%) of
Latino traditional-aged, first-time, first-degree-seeking students earned a bachelor degree within
six years (see Appendix C).

According to the latest census, 11% of all Latinos have a college education (Santiago &
Brown, 2004), but only 7.5% of Latinos of Mexican descent over age 25 report holding
bachelor’s degrees, compared to 26% of non-Hispanic white students who do (U.S. Census
Bureau, 2000). In particular, first-generation Mexican-Americans—those born in the United
States to immigrant parents—have made great gains in bachelor degree attainment when compared to recent and earlier Mexican immigrant groups (See comparison in Appendix D). These gains, respectively, are 8.3% for first-generation students, compared to but 3.7% for recent immigrant students and 3.1% for earlier immigrant students (Grogger & Trejo, 2002). One might, therefore, expect that succeeding generations would have even greater rates of degree attainment. However, this is not so for Latinos of Mexican descent. Both first- and second-generation Latinos of Mexican descent plateau at 8.3% and 8.8% degree-attainment rates, respectively.

There are many theories about why this Latino degree-attainment gap persists, including assessments of factors unique to Latino culture. One of the more important cultural factors, so far as Latino commuter students (the focus of this study) are concerned, is family interdependence, a family structure commonly found among Latino immigrants and particularly those of Mexican descent (Lugo-Steidel & Contreras, 2003). As we shall see, research has shown that a background of family interdependence is found to motivate first-generation Latino students to go to college (Sanchez et al., 2005) and is also a source of support among Latino college students while persisting toward undergraduate degree completion (Ceballo, 2004). Nevertheless, it also presents obstacles to social and academic integration on campus for Latinos choosing to live at home and commute to college (Fuligni & Witkow, 2004).

Role of Family Interdependence

Family interdependence. An important behavioral distinction observed among various cultures is the difference between collectivism and individualism (Guiffrida, 2006). Individualistic societies, primarily found among Western cultures (e.g., the United States and Great Britain), value independence, competition, and emotional detachment. Collectivistic
societies (e.g., Latin America and Asia) by contrast, value interdependence, group harmony, and emotional attachment within the in-group, such as family (Guiffrida, 2006). Family interdependence, as a concept and practice of collectivism, is multidimensional—comprised of family support, family interconnectedness, family honor, and the obligation to subjugate the needs of self for needs of the family (Cahin et al., 1999). Because family interdependence has been found to be a core value among Latin American cultures (Lugo-Steidel & Contreras, 2003), family interdependence is often used as a point of departure when discussing Latino families (Valenzuela, 1999).

**Family interdependence among Latino immigrant families.** Family interdependence exists among Latino families living in the United States without regard to their socioeconomic and generational status (Baer, Prince, & Valez, 2004; Fuligni et al., 1999; Phinney, Ong, & Madden, 2000). That is, it persists throughout succeeding generations, whether or not those generations remain in poverty or achieve wealth.

As the roots of family interdependence lie in the settlement process experienced by Latino immigrants (Phinney et al., 2000; Tseng, 2004), it is instructive to look at the experience of Latinos of Mexican descent, who constitute the vast majority (70%) of Latinos in the United States (U.S. Census, Bureau, 2005). Three factors explain why family interdependence persists among Latinos of Mexican descent living in the United States. First, Mexico’s extensive border with the United States makes migration between these two countries relatively easy for those with very few resources (Grogger & Trejo, 2002). As a result, Mexican immigrants often enter at the lowest socioeconomic starting position in American society (Alba, 2006) and come overwhelmingly from an agrarian background. Second, because of this background, they tend to survive by gathering collectively in agrarian, farming, or rural communities (Saracho &
Martinez-Hancock, 2004) and rely on a collectivistic family formation to adapt in their new country (Valenzuela, 1999). Third, the majority (86%) of recent Mexican immigrants enter the United States with a high-school diploma or less; of these nearly half (46%) enter with a middle-school education or less (Grogger & Trejo, 2002). Furthermore, about half enter illegally (Alba, 2006). Not only do low educational levels initially limit these immigrants’ options for social mobility, but for those who are here illegally, their status also exacerbates their continued reliance on family members for survival in a new country (Chapman & Perreira, 2005; Saracho & Martinez-Hancock, 2004).

In addition, with few or no familial or cultural models of social mobility through education on which they can draw, the focal point of Mexican immigrants’ existence is the immediate business of adapting in a new country, rather than pursuing longer-term educational achievement (Valenzuela, 1999).

Family interdependence can be seen in the structure of Latino immigrant family networks in the United States. Latino immigrant families are described as large, cohesive familial units, embracing immediate and extended family members (Baer et al., 2004). The Latino family views brothers, sisters, wives, husbands, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins as part of a close-knit family network—and all members of the family network are raised to value the obligation to provide emotional and financial support to the family unit (Cahin et al., 1999). It is, therefore, not surprising that Latino familial behaviors include participation in relatively large kin networks, usually residing in a cluster that facilitates reciprocal behavior, high levels of visitation, and the ongoing use of family members as resources for emotional and financial support (Valenzuela, 1999).
Family interdependence values among Latino youth and young adults. Because Latino immigrant families are collectively focused on settling and adapting in America, the educational development of Latino children is not a primary focus of these families’ energy (Chapman & Perreira, 2005). However, these families do consider children important in other ways (Valenzuela, 1999) and raise them to value family interdependence (Ibarra, 2001). In particular, Latino immigrant children play a vital role in familial and household activities that help immigrant families settle in a new country (Valenzuela, 1999). For example, Latino children contribute to the family’s settlement efforts by serving as tutors to younger siblings; translating for non-English-speaking family members during medical, banking, or school appointments; and taking on parent-like responsibilities in caring for younger siblings and doing household chores (Faulstich-Orellana, 2003).

Without regard to their generation or socioeconomic background, Latino youth in both immigrant and non-immigrant families hold values related to family interdependence (Fuligni et al., 1999; Hardway & Fuligni, 2006; Phinney et al., 2000). Latino youth from immigrant families spend more leisure time with extended family, and more time on tasks assisting family around the house, than do youth from European and Chinese immigrant families (Hardway & Fuligni, 2006). Latino youth from both immigrant and non-immigrant families place a high value on loyalty to help support the family—in stark contrast to non-Latino youth, among whom non-immigrants value this less than do immigrants (Phinney et al, 2000). Latino youth also believe the role of a family member is to provide support to the family, and describe the family as the most important contribution to life satisfaction—ranked above friends, religion, and money (Edwards & Lopez, 2006).
This adherence to family interdependence persists into Latinos’ young adulthood, perhaps in part because the very concept of adulthood differs between Latino and non-Hispanic white families (Fuligni & Pederson, 2002). Departing from high school, becoming of legal adult age, and transitioning to college are considered markers of adulthood in the United States (Fuligni & Pederson, 2002; Saetmore, Beneli, & Busch, 1999). These markers also bring on increased autonomy and independence (Arnette, 2003) and the opportunity to “leave the nest,” changing one’s relationship with family (Fuligni & Pederson, 2002). However, Latino parents have been found to define adulthood not in relation to independence, but rather to the contributions their children make to the goals of the family unit (Valenzuela, 1999). In contrast, non-Latino white parents define adulthood as the child physically separating from the family and becoming financially independent (Saetmore et al., 1999). College-age Latinos are found to have higher levels of familial, collectivist attitudes; more helping behavior (Fuligini, 2001); live closer to their parents; and visit family more regularly than their non-Hispanic white peers (Rudolph, Cornelius-White, & Quintana, 2005).

**Family interdependence and Latino students’ persistence in college.** Individuals with collectivistic orientations, such as Latinos, are motivated to achieve in order to meet the demands and expectations of others, especially family members (Ibarra, 2003). In this vein, family interdependence has been found to contribute to Latinos’ educational aspirations in motivating students to succeed in college (Cebello, 2004; Ceja, 2004; Phinney, Dennis, & Gutierrez, 2005; Sanchez et al., 2005; Zalaquett, 2005). Low-income and first-generation Latino students attribute their success to their parents’ emphasis on the importance of education to escape poverty (Cebello, 2004). Latino students reported their parents offering non-verbal support (e.g., allowing prioritization of homework over chores) of the students’ academic endeavors (Cebello,
2004). Latino college students also reported understanding the importance of education through their parents’ storytelling and shared-life experiences; they saw them as a form of encouragement to aspire in college (Cebello, 2004; Ceja, 2004; Zalaquett, 2005).

Indeed, family interdependence has its own way of motivating Latino students to persist in college. Sanchez et al. (2005) examined the role of individuals who provided guidance and support in the academic experiences of Mexican-American college students attending a large, urban mid-Western commuter-university. They found that the students most frequently cited their parents as having motivated them to achieve their educational goals, despite the parents’ limited education. Forms of support included cognitive guidance (giving advice), emotional support (encouragement), informational and experiential support (sharing experiences of their struggles), and modeling (students’ observations that their parents struggled as a result of not having a college education). Resourceful parents also found ways to connect their students with older adults (tutors or counselors) who had knowledge of college and could inform their children about what it takes to get through college.

Unfortunately, for all the positive benefits Latino family interdependence brings, it also exacerbates obstacles toward persisting in college. Family interdependence has been found to interfere with social and academic integration, conflict with Latino students’ educational goals (Niemann, Romero, & Arbona, 2000), and detract from their academic achievement by virtue of placing greater importance on family obligations (Tseng, 2004).

Even when Latino students attend predominantly white institutions, at which they perhaps paradoxically have a better chance of persisting (Fry, 2004), family interdependence still has an effect. Longerbeam, Sedlack, and Alatorre (2004) surveyed 2,991 college students, of which 175 (6%) were Latino, in an effort to determine what Latino students at predominantly
white institutions perceived as obstacles to their success. Latino college students were more likely to report stress due to finances, academic difficulties, and family obligations.

Moreover, family interdependence drives Latinos to choose colleges with less academic rigor or lower rates of graduation (Fry, 2004). Even Latino students’ endorsement of familial obligations is correlated with their likelihood to financially contribute to their families and live with their parents after completing high school (Fuligni & Pederson, 2002). Latino college students aspiring to careers in science and engineering were found, as a result of family obligations, to have difficulty with the idea of leaving home to attend school. This affected their college choices and, as a consequence, they enrolled in less-selective and less-research-intensive colleges (Tornatzky et al., 2003). Similarly, Fry’s (2004) exploration of Latino college pathways found that even among well-prepared Latinos, a disproportionate number enroll in colleges that have a low bachelor’s degree attainment rate because they decide to attend colleges close to home.

The surge of Hispanic Serving Institutions over the last decade has been concentrated in Latino communities, which means that students can remain at home while attending these colleges (Dayton et al., 2004). Although this may seem to be a positive factor, it may actually harm Latino students’ chances of attaining a degree, because students who remain in an environment where the cultural values concerning family responsibility are continuously reinforced struggle more to find balance between school and family obligations (Dayton et al., 2004). For example, Neimann et al. (2000) studied how Latinos’ cultural orientation (family interdependence) may create tension between family relationships and educational goals among Mexican-Americans. Latinos with high levels of ethnic loyalty (defined as an individual’s ethnic pride and perceived sensitivity to discrimination against Latinos) were found to be more likely to
perceive conflict between achieving educational goals and maintaining personal relationships with their ethnic communities.

Although family interdependence is rooted in the immigrant experience, its effect on Latino immigrant students differs in comparison to Asian and European immigrant groups (Fuligni & Witkow, 2004; Tseng, 2004). For example, Fuligni and Witkow (2004) studied the post-secondary progress of 1004 youth from two large urban high schools on the west coast (San Francisco). Their study included East Asian (China), Latin American (Mexico and Central/South America), and European immigrant students across three generations, as well as non-immigrant students. East Asian and Latino students were more likely to be among the immigrants studied. Immigrants were either first-generation students (student and both parents are born outside the country) or second-generation students (student is born in the United States but have at least one parent born outside the United States). The non-immigrant group consisted of students who were born in the United States, primarily comprising those from European backgrounds.

Fuligni and Witkow (2004) measured the students’ course grades and attitudes toward education and family obligations during their 12th grade year in high school. They found that high school youth from immigrant families possess a stronger value of general academic success than non-immigrant families. East Asian students received the highest grades in school, and Latinos received the lowest grades despite possessing equal educational aspirations as the students from European families. Youth from East Asian and Latino immigrant families reported a stronger sense of family obligation than did their peers from European, non-immigrant families. Last, within this group, first-generation adolescents possessed a stronger sense of family obligation compared to the second generation.
Fuligni and Witkow’s (2004) follow-up report (three years after the students completed 12th grade) reported that, in general, youth from immigrant families exhibited the same level of educational progress as those from U.S.-born families; however, ethnic differences emerged. Among those who were enrolled in 2- or 4-year degree programs, immigrant and non-immigrant students pursued their degrees at the same rate, achieved the same grade point averages, attended on a full-time basis, and reported similar progress towards bachelor degree completion. But East Asian youth were more likely than other youth to enroll in degree programs, to attend four-year colleges, to receive higher grades, and to be close to degree completion. Conversely, Latinos were less likely to ever enroll in any post-secondary 2- or 4-year college, and had lower persistence toward four-year degree completion.

According to Fuligni and Witkow’s (2004) study, although there was no generational difference in the rates at which youth lived with parents (during college), what surfaced was the extent to which some college students financially supported their families, as well as lived with them. Students from immigrant families were more likely to contribute financially to their families compared to American-born (non-immigrant) students. Latino students were more likely to live with their parents and provide financial support to the family. Also among those enrolled in post-secondary degree programs, although immigrant students worked at the same rate as non-immigrant students, East Asian college students were least likely to work and Latino college students more likely to work. Fuligni and Witkow also examined the association of family support and working with students’ progress in college, and found that living with parents and supporting the family financially had several negative associations. Immigrant and non-immigrant college students who lived with parents had lower grade point averages and were less
likely to persist toward four-year degree completion. Those who worked while attending college were less likely to persist as well.

A similar study by Tseng (2004) also compared 998 immigrant and non-immigrant (U.S. born) college students from Asian, Latino, European, and African- (and Caribbean-) American cultures. Tseng’s study focused on generational differences between college students from immigrant and non-immigrant families living on the East Coast with regard to family obligations. As with Fuligni and Witkow’s (2004) findings, Tseng found that Asian and Latino college students were more likely to come from immigrant families. In Tseng’s study, the majority of immigrants were Asian; others in this group included Latinos primarily from Dominican and Puerto Rican backgrounds. Nevertheless, Tseng also found students from immigrant families placed more emphasis on family obligation, spent more time meeting family demands (household and taking care of family members), were more likely to live at home due to lack of financial resources, and more likely to contribute to the financial support of the family. Unlike Fuligini and Witkow’s (2004) study, however, Tseng found that students from immigrant families had higher academic motivation than students from non-immigrant families, but there was no difference in achievement between youth from immigrant and non-immigrant families. Tseng’s study implies that academic motivation likely contributes to achievement, where family demands impede it.

Although family interdependence appears to be a phenomenon particular to immigrants, the effects seem to be more pronounced for Latino students. Latinos from immigrant families are less likely to enter college after high school, and more likely to live at home and work to help support the family. Among immigrants enrolled in college, Latinos are less likely to persist due to hours worked at a job (Fuligni & Witkow, 2004; Tseng, 2004). The effects of family
interdependence on Latino students are starkly evident in a study (Phinney et al., 2005) that assessed attitudes regarding family interdependence, motivation to attend college, and college commitment among first-year Latino college students attending a predominately minority urban commuter-university. Three profiles from this study surfaced: a “family group,” a “committed group,” and a “default group.” The family group represents students who scored high on family interdependence and academic/career motivation but average on college commitment. The committed group is made up of students who scored high on college commitment but average on academic/career motivation and family interdependence. Students in the default group are those who had average scores of academic motivation, below average on family interdependence, and very low scores on college commitment.

The profiles among each group did not differ significantly by gender, generation status, and educational level of parents. Rather, students in the family group held a strong sense of family interdependence and ethnic identity, and their motivation in attending college was to help their family. Overall, this group was more personally secure and adjusted and held a strong sense of motivation and direction. However, this group did not show a higher grade point average than the other two groups. The committed group was low on family interdependence and lowest in reporting expectations and encouragement as motivation, but had higher high school grade point averages, enrolled in more academic units in their first quarter, and its students expressed the strongest positive attitudes about being in college and desiring to complete their degree. The last, default, group was the highest in reporting it lacked a clear purpose in attending college, and had lower scores than other groups in personal motivation, commitment to college, and family interdependence. This group’s students appeared to be drifting in college and lacking a strong link to their cultural background, yet they did not differ in
college GPA from the committed group, most likely as a result of not having the additional family responsibilities of the family group.

In sum, Latino college students face a number of challenges that limit their chances of persisting in college (Horn et al., 2000). They are most likely to have parents lacking a college education (Warburton et al., 2001), come from low-income households, and to work while in college (Chen & Carroll, 2007), live at home (Fry, 2004), and endorse the cultural values of meeting the demands and expectations of others (Ibarra, 2001). However, much of the research and theory of college persistence is focused on the factors leading to persistence among students who do not live at home while in college and have few or no family responsibilities (Terenzini & Pascarella, 2005). This poses difficulties in establishing a research context for persistence among Latinos.

**Student Persistence and College Retention**

*The study of college dropouts: an historical overview.* In terms of improving retention, understanding why students leave college or stay is critical. College graduates reap the economic and developmental benefits a college degree affords; colleges and universities maintain the income that derives from student attendance; and society benefits from an educated community (College Board, 2007).

The United States’ prototypical model for undergraduate education—influenced by the British model developed several hundred years ago—is a residential college or university separating students from home and encouraging close peer and faculty relationships (Astin, 1993). According to Berger & Lyon (2005), until the early 1900s, an undergraduate education in the United States was primarily available to males from elite families. The following decades of population growth, which included key events such as the Great Depression, women’s rights and
civil rights movements, and Sputnik-inspired focus on education as a tool of the Cold War, together led to government-sponsored post-secondary funding programs, starting with the post-World War II G.I. Bill. These programs gave students who would not have considered going to college a chance to obtain a bachelor’s degree and, in turn, created a college enrollment boom in the United States, as well as stimulated the creation of hundreds of new colleges. However, as demographic trends in the 1970s led to decreases in the traditional-aged (18-22 years old) college population, attention turned to enrollment and support of diverse populations. These groups proved to have more challenges in completing undergraduate degrees, spurring concerns among college administrators as to why some students were not successful in degree completion.

Berger & Lyon (2005) also note that before the 1970s, students who left college without a degree were commonly presumed to have done so due to personal attributes or circumstances. However, as the academy’s awareness of the topic increased, so did the efforts to systemically identify causes and solutions. Over the past four decades, both the approach to the subject and its terminology continued to change—from the 1970s’ “college dropouts” and the 1980s’ “student attrition,” to “college retention” in the 1990s and the current nomenclature of “student persistence.”

To date, there is an abundance of sociologically-based studies contributing to the understanding of why some students leave college before degree completion, not to mention several academic journals devoted solely to this topic (Berger & Lyon, 2005). However, although conceptualizing college retention is contextually dependent (Hagedorn, 2005), much of the research focuses on white, traditional-age students attending college full-time at a residential campus (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) within six years from high-school graduation (Desjardin, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2002). The term “dropout” is often used to describe students who do not re-
enroll following their first year (Braxton & Lee, 2005) or have departed from college prior to meeting college graduation requirements (Hagedorn, 2005). A student who has dropped out has neither persisted nor been retained. The National Center for Educational Statistics defines persistence as a student measure and retention as an institutional measure (Hagedorn, 2005): that is, students’ actions and decisions demonstrate persistence (Bean, 2005), while institutional conditions are explained as efforts to retain students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

**Research on persistence and retention.** Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) synthesized three decades of research on college student persistence and retention, and found that the research has primarily explored the interaction between students’ academic and social backgrounds and the normative context of the college environment (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Pascarella and Terenzini discussed the factors that were found to have either a positive or negative effect on student persistence and retention. These factors are listed in Table 2.1. In general, Pascarella and Terenzini found that research continues to be consistent with what Astin (1993) and Tinto (1993) had earlier postulated on persistence and retention: when students have high levels of social and academic integration, and their college has institutional characteristics promoting it, persistence and degree completion are greater.

Furthermore, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that both between-college effects (certain college environmental characteristics) and within-college effects (students’ experiences during college) affected persistence. They also determined that the research is still dominated by studies of non-Hispanic white undergraduates attending four-year institutions as full-time students live on campus, generally do not work, and have no significant family responsibilities distracting them from college life. Unfortunately, the majority of Latino college students is most likely to work at least part-time (Horn et al., 2000), live at home with family (Fry, 2004), and
have family responsibilities (Nora, 2003). Next, I discuss the factors itemized by Pascarella and Terenzini. I highlight between-college (institutional) factors and within-college (student) factors, both difficulties inherent to the Latino student experience.

Table 1: Key Factors Affecting Overall Undergraduate Degree Completion (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Between-College (Institutional) Factors</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Type of institution</td>
<td>Four-year</td>
<td>Two-year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Opportunities for time of college entry</td>
<td>Enters college within six months following high school completion</td>
<td>Delayed/Open Enrollment entry into college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Enrollment</td>
<td>Continuous</td>
<td>Interrupted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Size of institution</td>
<td>Allows social and academic integration</td>
<td>Does not allow social and academic integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Selectivity</td>
<td>Selective</td>
<td>Non-selective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Within-College (Student) Factors</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● First-year academic success</td>
<td>Student achieves</td>
<td>Student does not achieve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Academic Intervention</td>
<td>Student participates</td>
<td>Student does not participate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Financial Aid</td>
<td>Available</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● College costs</td>
<td>Affordable</td>
<td>Not affordable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Employment</td>
<td>Student not employed or employed on-campus or less than 20 hours/week off-campus</td>
<td>Student employed more than 20 hours/week off-campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic and Social Integration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Residence</td>
<td>Student lives on campus</td>
<td>Student lives off campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Interaction with peers</td>
<td>University-based opportunities for academic or social interactions</td>
<td>Lacks either academic or social interactions on campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Interaction with faculty</td>
<td>Promotes supportive faculty-student interaction within department majors</td>
<td>Does not promote supportive faculty-student interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Commitment to institution</td>
<td>Student is more committed</td>
<td>Student is less committed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Factors affecting college persistence. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) synthesized three decades of research on factors that promote and hinder persistence. In short, between and within college factors affect persistence.

Inter-College factors.

Type of institution. College students generally were more likely to persist if they attended four-year institutions (as opposed to two-year colleges) (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Furthermore, after controlling for other variables (parent education level, income, and pre-college academics) it was found that beginning pursuit of a bachelor’s degree at a two-year college versus a four-year institution reduces all students’ chances of degree completion by 15 to 20 percentage points. This was true for Latinos as well—44% of Latinos who began their studies at a four-year college or university obtained a bachelor’s degree, compared to just 7% of Latinos who initially enrolled in a two-year community college (Arbona & Nora, 2007).

Significantly, Latinos are more likely to begin their higher educational path at a two-year rather than four-year institution, not least because it is likely to be more geographically convenient to family residence or geared to commuter students (Fry, 2004)

Starting college immediately. Students who began their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree immediately following high-school graduation were more likely to persist than those who waited any significant period of time—more than, say, six months (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Although Latinos enter post-secondary education within six months following high school graduation at similar rates as non-Hispanic whites (Llagas & Snyder, 2003), they continue to be less likely to persist to degree completion (Knapp et al., 2007). It is unclear to what extent, if any, this is affected by family pressures. However, as revealed in a previous study (Fuligni &
Witkow, 2004) Latinos are less likely to enter college compared to other ethnic groups because they feel obligated to provide financial support to their families.

*Continuous enrollment.* Enrollment in college without interruption in attendance is a positive factor for persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students who interrupt their studies—for example, taking a semester off to earn money for the next or going on hiatus for several years to raise a child—are less likely to persist to degree completion. Latino college students are twice as likely as whites to have children or elderly dependents and more likely than whites to be single parents (Fry, 2004). Moreover, students at two-year colleges are more likely to interrupt their studies compared to students at four-year institutions (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). And first-generation students are less likely to be enrolled continuously (Warburton et al., 2001). Thus, because Latinos are more likely to attend two-year than four-year colleges (Fry, 2004) and to be the first in their family to attend college (Warburton et al., 2001), they are at greater risk of interrupting their studies.

*Size of institution.* In theory, the size of the institution positively affects persistence as it relates to social integration (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Smaller residential campuses are able to focus more on helping students integrate socially than larger campuses. However, larger residential institutions may afford students with more opportunities to integrate because of the greater diversity and number of peers with whom students may socialize. Larger institutions also provide greater opportunities for students to form subgroups, or enclaves, within the larger student body. Unfortunately, the positive effects of institutional size on social integration is irrelevant for Latinos, because regardless of the size of the institution, Latino college students are less likely to integrate on campus as a result of working off-campus (Horn et al., 2000) and having family responsibilities (Torres, 2006).
Selectivity. Admission selectivity is a proxy for academic quality (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The academic admission requirements determine a college campus’ selectivity; the more rigorous the requirements, the more selective the campus. With more rigorous requirements to enter a given college, its students are more likely to feel committed to the institution, increasing the likelihood of persistence. Therefore, attendance at a selective institution is a positive factor for persistence; attendance at a non-selective one is a negative factor (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, even the best-prepared Latinos are less likely to enter a selective college than equally prepared non-Hispanic whites (Fry, 2004). Moreover, Latinos were found to be more likely than whites to forego attending a selective college in order to live with or near their family (Tornatzky et al., 2003).

Intra-college factors. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) identified three areas related to persistence among traditional college students. The first area includes two academic factors: achievement of first-year academic success and participation in academic intervention programs. Academic factors are especially important for students who entered college with academic deficiencies or did not achieve academic success in high school. First-generation students are more likely to have entered college with academic deficiencies, and Latino college students are more likely to be first-generation students (Warburton et al., 2001). Thus, the two academic factors discussed below should be weighted more heavily for Latinos than for other students. The second area is economic – college costs and employment. The third area related to college persistence is academic and social integration and comprised of four factors: students’ residence, peer and faculty interaction, and commitment to the institution.

Academic factor 1: first-year academic success. College students were more likely to persist if they achieved academic success (i.e., good grades) during their freshman year in
college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, Latino college students are three times more likely than non-Latinos to drop out of college due to poor grades during their first year in college (Nora, 2003). Moreover, academic success in the first year of college is correlated with pre-college academic preparation courses during high school (Warburton et al., 2001), but Latinos are less likely to have participated in such courses (Nora, 2003).

*Academic factor 2: academic intervention.* Especially when first-year academic success was not achieved, students were more likely to persist if they participated in academic intervention programs during college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), first-year seminars in particular—typically designed as orientation programs for incoming freshmen, or elective courses targeted to at-risk students—were found to support persistence among all categories of students, including students living on and off campus. Other academic intervention programs credited with supporting persistence included academic advising, peer mentoring, and summer bridge programs promoting acclimatization and academic success among at-risk students.

Unfortunately, Latinos are probably unable to take advantage of on-campus academic intervention programs, because of the likelihood that they commute and work off-campus (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005). Students who commute have less access to campus resources than students who reside on campus (Maekawa-Kodama, 2002). Due to external pressures from family and the need to work, Latinos characterize their college experience as “come to class and leave”—entering the campus only for classes and leaving immediately thereafter, without time to engage in academic intervention programs (Torres, 2006).

*Economic factor 1: college costs.* Lower financial costs, and the availability of financial aid, are positive factors for persistence. Unfortunately, Latino college students are more likely to
be the first in their families to attend college and, consequently, come from low-income households with limited resources to pay for college (Warburton et al., 2001). What makes this situation more compelling is that Latinos are less likely to apply for financial aid even when they qualify to receive it (Zarate & Pachon, 2006). According to Zarate and Pachon (2006), there are several reasons why Latinos may not apply for financial aid even though they qualify. A statewide survey by the Tomás Rivera Policy Institute found that 96% of California Latino parents wanted their children to attend college, but more than 75% of Latino parents did not receive any financial aid information before their children left high school. More than half of all Latino parents and 43% of Latino young adults could not name one source of financial aid. Another reason is related to perceived costs and opportunities associated with college education. Latinos were more likely to report that attending college was associated with not being able to work and incurring debt. This survey found that Latinos are more likely to feel reticence about incurring debt for college.

Economic factor 2: employment. Working, whether full-time or part-time, decreases the likelihood of social and academic integration and negatively affects persistence. The more hours a student works, the more likely they are to shift from full-time to part-time enrollment and the less likely they are to persist from one year to the next or to complete a bachelor’s degree (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Additionally, the amount and location of employment is a factor. Working on campus, or working part-time off-campus, had a positive effect on persistence compared to full-time work off-campus, which had a negative effect (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Unfortunately, Latinos are more likely than non-Hispanic whites to work full-time while attending college part-time (Fry, 2004; Horn et al., 2000).
Academic and social integration factor 1: residence. Living on campus or in nearby campus-supported housing influences social interaction and commitment to the university, leading to an increased likelihood of degree completion (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Students living on campus are more likely to persist and graduate, as compared to students who commute. Residence halls facilitate students’ social and academic involvement with other students and faculty members. Residential students are more likely to participate in extra-curricular activities, report more positive perceptions about the campus climate, are more satisfied with their college experience, and engage in more frequent interactions with student peers and faculty. However, Latino college students are underrepresented at residential, four-year campuses and over-represented at urban commuter campuses and community colleges (Fry, 2004).

Academic and social factor 2: interaction with peers. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), “peers constitute another powerful socializing agent in shaping persistence and degree completion” (p. 418). This finding reflects the concept known as progressive conformity. Progressive conformity is valuable in explaining student persistence as a phenomenon when dominant peer groups influence the norms and expectations that shape how students should act, as well as drive changes in their values, beliefs, and aspirations, such as expectations to persist in college. Pascarella and Terenzini found peer influence is statistically and positively significant in students’ decisions to persist, and exceeded the influence of faculty interaction. Moreover, peer influence in students’ decisions to persist was found among those entering the second year of college, those with four or more years of college, and those who had achieved actual degree attainment. However, as previously mentioned, Latino students are more likely to commute
from home and work off-campus, factors interfering with the opportunity to interact with their peers (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005).

*Academic and social integration factor 3: interaction* with faculty. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) also found that student contact with faculty members outside of the classroom (albeit still in a campus setting) consistently promoted persistence and degree completion when socioeconomic, family, and academic background factors were taken into account. This process was attributed to socialization of students to the normal values and attitudes of the institution, while a bond between student and institution resulted in positive interactions with faculty and peers. However, Pascarella and Terenzini noted the majority of the studies on student and faculty interaction are suggestive not conclusive. In other words, the direct link between student and faculty interaction and persistence remains ambiguous. Studies have not explicitly explored who is initiating the interaction (faculty or students) and the types of students who are benefiting from it (for example, students who are more or less likely to interact with faculty). This is important because such extracurricular faculty contacts are less available to Latino commuter students, who may not be able to socialize with either peers or faculty in extracurricular but on-campus settings.

*Academic and social factor 4: commitment to institution.* According to Pascarella and Terenzini’s (2005) findings, students’ commitments to the institution exert an important and positive effect in shaping persistence decisions (planned and actual). Students’ academic and social engagement, through involvement and integration on campus, influences their decision to commit into the next year. Unfortunately, Latinos are more likely to attend commuter institutions, tend to be first-generation college attendees from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and often feel pressured to spend more time with family or to oversee family
matters than their non-minority counterparts (Fuligni & Witkow, 2004), leaving them less time to engage in the academic and social aspects of the institutions (Braxton et al., 2004). Torres’ (2006) study among first generation Latinos attending a commuter-university revealed that the experience of encouragement or mentoring by faculty and staff—a form of social and academic integration—had a strong indirect effect on commitment to the institution and, in turn, persistence in college.

In sum, all but two factors identified in Pascarella and Terenzini’s (2005) summary of three decades of research on traditional college persistence and retention are difficult for Latino students to achieve. The exceptions are more financial aid and mentoring relationships. It is clear that the traditional research is not particularly useful when inquiring what influences Latino students to persist to degree completion—which means that the few studies directly addressing this question become even more important.

**Latino College Persistence**

First-generation Latino college students in the United States draw from two cultural backgrounds—the traditional Latino background emphasizing family interdependence, and the broader background of American culture emphasizing independence from family (Ibarra, 2003). These two sources of influence are important to consider as we explore what factors impact Latinos’ likelihood to persist in college.

A conflict between Latino cultural values and American academic cultural values has the potential to interfere with Latino progress in higher education (Niemann et al., 2000). According to Ibarra (2001), individuals raised in a Latino culture—specifically, those of Mexican descent—are oriented to value family, relationships, and community above all else. Thus, the significance of relationships or emotional ties is embedded in the way that they perceive the world. This
worldview differs from the American culture, which values being independent and competitive and is reflected in the American academic environment. Ibarra argues that those raised with individualistic values have a cognitive style that tends to do well when relating to internally-driven tasks (e.g., tasks commonly associated with or found in American academe). In contrast, individuals raised to value collectivism value relationships, tend to be sensitive to the opinion of others, and perform better with verbal and externally-driven tasks. This paradigm resonates with current research on what influences Latino college students to persist.

**Mentors’ influence on Latino college persistence.** Mentoring, a form of faculty support, is a means to social and academic integration (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005) and has been found to directly help Latinos adjust to college and, more importantly, to persist (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005; Nora, 2003; Santos & Reigada, 2002; Torres, 2006).

Santos and Reigadas (2002) examined the mentoring process as it facilitates students’ adjustment to college among Latinos, African American, and European Americans. Students were asked to voluntarily participate in a Faculty Mentoring Program (FMP) at California State University Dominguez Hill—an urban, commuter campus identified as a Hispanic Serving Institution. Students who joined FMP were primarily the first in their families to attend college (71%), Latino (48%), and worked part-time (72%). Most of the participants (53%) met with their mentors on a regular basis (three to four times per month), whereby mentors provided them academic and social support not available in the students’ own social milieu, such as academic support and professional contacts. A survey mailed to the participants a year later revealed that as compared to African Americans and non-Hispanic white participants, Latinos experienced an increase in college self-efficacy and had better defined academic goals after joining the program. Participants who shared the same ethnic background with their faculty mentors perceived their
mentors to be more helpful in furthering their careers and personal development. In general, an increased frequency of student-mentor (whether or not they came from the same gender or ethnic background) contact positively influenced the mentoring process, resulting in higher levels of perceived self-efficacy in students, better-defined academic goals, and higher levels of commitment to perform well and meet academic obligations.

A student engagement model for Latino students. Instead of focusing on a specific persistency factor such as mentoring, Nora’s (2003) Model of Student/Institutional Engagement broadens its scope to examine what elements influence Latino students’ overall academic and social integration, which Nora terms “engagement.” Drawing on empirical research, Nora’s model posits when Latino students enter college, they bring with them a set of pre-college characteristics and a set of environmental pull factors. Pre-college characteristics include the student’s academic preparedness, financial circumstances, and psychosocial experiences, including encouragement and support from parents to integrate into college and anticipated fears related to the student’s academic and social self-efficacy. Environmental pull factors include the student’s family obligations, work, and commuting. Both the pre-college characteristics and the environmental pull factors are more likely, in the case of Latinos, to be those that hinder student engagement, and thus generally have negative influences on persistence.

Nora (2003) concludes that Latino students’ negative pre-college factors may be countered by the student’s academic and social experiences on campus. In Nora’s model, Latinos who academically and socially engage in experiences validating their educational aspirations are more likely to persist. Since Latinos are more likely to enter college with fewer academic skills than their peers, they are disproportionately enrolled in remedial coursework, and are three times more likely than non-minority students to withdraw based on their academic
performance during the first year in college. In addition, Latinos are more prone than their white peers to perceive that they are unwelcomed by faculty. Therefore, it may be more difficult for Latinos to “shake off” academic obstacles when they receive a bad grade. According to Nora’s model, interacting with professors during class in a way that helps Latino students perceive that faculty accept them, as well as validating experiences such as support and encouragement from parents and significant others, influences the students’ decisions to reconsider dropping out and make cognitive gains.

Nora’s model brings up a category of concern—Latinos’ academic preparedness for college. It’s an important factor to acknowledge. Studies continue to report (Fry, 2004; Fuligni & Witkow, 2004) that Latino students are entering college at the same rate as their white peers. However, because they are most likely to come from immigrant and low-income families, they are less likely to have the cultural capital to succeed in college (Gándara, 2000). Latino high school students are more likely to attend urban public high schools that are overcrowded, with fewer academic resources (such as well-equipped libraries and computer labs), less-qualified teachers, and insufficient counselors to help them understand their post-secondary options (Gándara, 2000).

Validating Nora’s model of Latino student engagement. Using Nora’s (2003) Student/Institution Engagement Model as a framework, Arbona and Nora (2007) set out to explore the outcomes leading to a greater or lesser likelihood of bachelor degree attainment among Latinos, comparing those initially enrolled in four-year colleges and universities versus those in a community college. They reviewed high school and college transcripts to identify demographic, pre-college, college, and environmental variables influencing persistence and

Arbona and Nora (2007) found which Latinos are most likely to transfer and persist to degree completion. They found that Latinos starting at two-year colleges who had educational aspirations toward a bachelor’s degree and were on a rigorous academic track, were continuously enrolled in college after high school, and were committed to their studies resembled their Latino and non-Latino peers at four-year colleges and, consequently, were more likely to transfer and graduate. Among Latinos taking the traditional path (Fry, 2004) to a bachelor’s degree by matriculating directly into four-year colleges six months after high school, the fact of having educated parents and college-bound peers to socialize with during high school were strong pre-college predictors for persistence. In turn, Latino graduates displayed all indicators of academic integration, such as continuous and full-time enrollment immediately following high school and comparable academic performance to their peers. The result was that only 7% of Latinos initially enrolled in a community college had obtained a bachelor’s degree, compared to 44% who began their studies at a four-year college or university. In sum, Arbona and Nora found that Latinos at community college, and those who attend four-year colleges, with academic and social integration experiences similar to their non-Latino white peers, are more likely to persist toward bachelor’s degree completion. The percentages presented by Arbona and Nora remind us of what continues to be the case as found by other studies (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Fry, 2004). However, one must question the usefulness of this analysis. We have seen that Latino college students are not likely to take the traditional path (Fry, 2005), are more likely to be enrolled in remedial courses (Nora, 2003), and have little time for social and academic integration outside of class due to off-campus demands (Braxton et al., 2004).
Torres’ social cognitive model for Latino commuter students. Torres (2006) reconfigured a retention model previously used to explain persistence among Latinos at community colleges. Torres’ study was centered on three urban commuter institutions, two of which are considered Hispanic Serving Institutions, and the other a predominately white environment. He focused on students during the spring of their freshman year who self-identified as Latino. The majority (77%) of the participants in Torres’ study were first-generation college students. Moreover, most (59%) were U.S.-born to immigrant parents. Using a mixed-methods design, Torres first looked at qualitative data to explore issues influencing the students’ decisions to stay in school, followed by a survey to inform the qualitative data. The results allowed Torres to conceptualize a retention model, the Social Cognitive Model for Latino Students at Urban Universities.

According to Torres’ (2006) findings, three themes emerged—“come to class and leave,” “unsure I could make it,” and “show me the way.” Torres used Bandura’s (1986) social cognitive theory as a theoretical lens to analyze his qualitative findings. Social cognitive theory asserts individuals have the capacity to symbolize, have forethought, learn vicariously, self-regulate behaviors, and self-reflect on their behaviors. Developing these capacities permits individuals to achieve their goals. For example, Torres’ findings revealed that three-quarters (77%) of students in his study were first-generation college students who had no role models to tell them what to expect in college. However, despite this lack, many first-generation students were able to create positive symbols about how to navigate the college maze, and what it takes to stay in college, by observing others’ behaviors. They used academic advisors and tutors—examples of symbolizing, vicarious learning, and self-regulation and self-reflection, when viewed through the lens of Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory.
The first theme is that Latino commuter students “come to class and leave.” Torres’ (2006) findings revealed Latino students at urban commuter institutions often hold multiple priorities and see being in college as one of the many commitments they maintain. Participants reported noticing various opportunities on campus to socially integrate but stated that they did not have time to engage in them as a result of external off-campus demands. When inquiring about “the college experience” Latinos also had difficulty in conceptualizing what others meant by that term. In the subjects’ experiences, the traditional views of college life were seldom applicable to students like them, who “come to class and leave;” in some cases, the students also did not see the traditional college experience as something to be desired. Torres’ study validates what has surfaced in the literature review: Latinos perceive college as something to do in addition to other demands.

Second, Latino students were uncertain they could even succeed at school. Torres (2006) found that many first-generation college students reported feelings of ambivalence, or that they were “uncertain [they] could make it,” as a result of their pre-college educational experiences failing to have prepared them for the rigors of college. However, many students who had not experienced success in high school reported doing much better in college as a result of having faculty who believed in them and finding support on campus, confirming what Nora (2003) theorized in his model. Students expressed positively changing their attitude and behavior as a result of interactions with special academic programs, mentors, or faculty members who believed in them. Torres, however, does not state how students made the time to participate in programs outside of class. And, perhaps, this lends credence to what Braxton et al. (2005) postulate in their study of what influences commuter-university students to persist—the classroom represents a major aspect of the students’ social and academic community.
Third, Latino students benefit strongly from guidance. Latino students repeatedly stated that having someone who could “show me the way” to succeed in college—whether mentors, special academic programs, and faculty on-campus, or strong ethnic support systems in their off-campus communities—was an influence that made a difference in succeeding in the college experience. Mentors, according to Torres’ (2006) study, encouraged Latino students to be in college, while other adult figures helped them create symbols to envision success. The availability of faculty was considered a major influence. In terms of support in their communities, students described their family as their central support system; however, conflicts between college and familial expectations typically emerged, as predicted by Ibarra (2001). The majority of the students reported having college friendships from peers in their community that continued from high school.

Torres (2006) noted that pre-college characteristics—a factor integral to major retention studies on residential and commuter students (Tinto, 1993; Braxton et al., 2004)—did not apply to the subjects in his study. Perhaps because several Latino commuter-university students in Torres’ study reported they were not academically prepared for college, the experience of finding connections on campus and having mentors emerged as being more important in persistence. Interacting with mentors prompted them to adapt and change their perspective about having an education and, in turn, successful behavior followed. The themes regarding “coming to class and leaving” and the “show me the way” value of interacting with campus faculty and support programs, on the other hand, did echo Braxton et al.’s (2004) commuter retention model.

Following the qualitative portion of his study, Torres (2006) utilized a survey to conceptualize a Social Cognitive Retention Model for Latino Students at Urban Universities. The quantitative results were used to test for overall data-model fit. The analysis considered the
direct and indirect effects of the latent variables of encouragement, academic integration, and institutional commitment on the students’ intent to persist.

Torres’ model included two categories of variables—exogenous and latent. Exogenous variables included family status, family responsibility, satisfied with faculty, cultural affinity, and academic difficulty. Latent variables consisted of academic integration (academic behaviors), encouragement (cultural and social symbolism – e.g., college students’ experiences centering on relational issues with faculty, family, and friends), and institutional commitment (a measure, among other things, of how important the college environment is to the student’s life). The model contends that exogenous variables affect latent variables. In turn, latent variables affect student’s intent to persist. Of the three latent variables, Torres found that only the institutional commitment variable had a strong and direct effect on the intent to persist. The variables of encouragement and academic integration were found to have a strong indirect effect on the intent to persist, but only through their direct effect on institutional commitment. In other words, Latino students who felt encouraged to succeed were more likely to report positive perceptions of feeling welcomed and satisfied with faculty influence and, in turn, committed to stay at the institution.

Torres’ (2006) findings came to conclusions about two important factors—pre-college characteristics and institutional fit—that did not align with the formal, widely accepted theoretical frameworks and retention models. For Torres’ Latino students, pre-college deficiencies were overcome with motivation and encouragement (confirming Nora, 2003). Torres’ students were not as concerned about whether or not they fit with the college environment; rather, they accepted the environment and focused on learning how to navigate
through it in order to succeed through the use of support systems available to them both on and off campus.

Summary

The literature reviewed informs us why the Latino bachelor achievement gap exists, but does little to provide answers to the question of how to close it. Major theoretical frameworks propose that Latino college students enter school with dispositions (the intention and commitment) to achieve a bachelor’s degree, but environmental pull factors associated with living at home, commuting, and working hinder Latinos’ efforts to achieve social and academic integration, and negatively affect their commitment to the institution.

The major theoretical frameworks also postulate what Latino students can do to increase their rates of persistence in college. For example, studies have recommended that Latinos’ college behavior change to resemble that of their white, non-Latino peers. However, as with most such recommendations, this is simply not practical: the literature on family interdependence informs us Latino college students from immigrant families are embedded in, and prioritize, the survival of the family unit. And because the majority of Latinos in higher education come from low-income backgrounds, living at home is also often a matter of financial necessity.

Unfortunately, research shows that it is only those Latinos who attend college as full-time students immediately after high school graduation and without interruption—the traditional path to college—who are most likely to persist to bachelor degree completion. But for a variety of socioeconomic and cultural reasons, the vast majority of Latino students are far more likely to juggle the demands of college with the obligations that accompany living at home, working, and commuting to school. However, if commuter colleges can practice new ways to foster Latino student persistence, this trend can change for the better.
How, then, to address the Latino college persistency gap in a practical way? According to Kuh and Love (2000) the decision to persist or depart from college is mediated by a student’s cultural meaning-making system, which in turn is influenced by the individual student’s primary cultural values, assumptions, and beliefs. Therefore, students whose cultural values about education are similar to the traditional Eurocentric values on which the higher educational system was founded—or are, as Bordes and Arredondo (2005) termed it, culturally congruent—will have an advantage when integrating on campus. Conversely, students entering college with a differing cultural background—such as Latinos raised in immigrant families—will be at a disadvantage, as pointed out by Ibarra (2001).

Nora’s (2003) Latino Student/Institution Engagement Model helps us understand the interplay between pre-college, college, and environmental factors. In particular, the literature on Latino family interdependence reinforces how difficult it is for Latino students to peel away from family responsibilities, as confirmed by Arbona and Nora’s (2007) study. However, according to Nora (2003) and Torres (2006), despite pre-college academic and social influences, the campus climate can encourage and support Latinos’ educational aspirations to persist.

Unfortunately, Torres’ (2006) study is one of only two models that specifically exist to describe Latino persistence at commuter institutions—with one of them being the model on community college students that Torres reconfigured. However, Torres (2006) was able to show what works to keep freshmen Latino commuter-university students in school past their freshman year—that is, institutional commitment—can be affected positively by encouragement from others and changes in the student’s academic habits.

Still, studies of persistence have not yet explored the factors that first-generation Latino commuter-university graduates describe as contributing to their bachelor degree completion.
Equally important, what can educational leaders and institutions do to increase Latino college retention? The current study explored the answer to these questions. The next chapter presents the research design and methodology using Torres’ (2006) Social Cognitive Retention Model for Latino Students at Urban Universities as a theoretical framework to develop interview questions for data collection.
Chapter III

Methodology

Introduction

Investigating what influenced first-generation Latino commuter-university graduates’ ability to persist to bachelor degree completion, as this study does, is important, considering that few studies exist on Latino college persistence beyond the first year of college (Torres, 2006). Furthermore, over the last three decades, quantitative strategies have been the most common methodological approach used to study college persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Research informs us (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Fry, 2004; Grogger & Trejo, 2002; Knapp et al., 2007) that Latinos, when compared to other major ethnic groups, are least likely to persist to bachelor degree completion because they face numerous obstacles. To date, therefore, much of what we know about Latinos in higher education describes a deficit model (Rendón et al., 2000) based on pre-college dispositions that hinder the likelihood of staying the course to bachelor degree completion (Nora, 2003). As a result, there is little research on successful Latinos and what influenced them to persist to bachelor degree completion (Torres, 2006). This study addresses the deficiency in the literature by investigating how Latino commuter-university students described what influenced their ability to persist to bachelor degree completion.

This chapter presents the methods used to explore the research question posed in this study. The central research question is:

- How do first-generation Latino commuter-university graduates describe what influenced their ability to persist to bachelor degree completion?
Sub-questions include:

- How do these influences compare with what Torres (2006) found that enables first-year students to persist to the second year in college?
- To what on-campus and off-campus experiences or supports do members of this group attribute to their success in persisting in college?
- What additional support might have been helpful?

The purpose of the first section of this chapter is to explain why the researcher’s epistemological assumptions required a qualitative, constructivistic approach. This section also explains how the research design flows out of the underlying epistemological assumptions, the chosen research questions, and the context of the study itself. The next section examines the source of the data: why, and how, purposeful, criterion-based sampling was utilized to select the unit of analysis, why a semi-structured interview format was the most appropriate method for this study, and how data were gathered and organized. The third section explains the process used to analyze the data, and I conclude with an explanation of how authenticity, trustworthiness, and reliability were addressed.

**Epistemological Assumptions and Research Design**

**Epistemological assumptions.** The best source of knowledge of what influenced first-generation Latino commuter-university students to persist to graduation is their own perception of their experiences. A qualitative approach is more appropriate than a quantitative approach when investigating individuals’ perceptions, worldviews, and experiences because a qualitative approach more effectively illuminates and interprets these subjective experiences. Moreover, since humans construct meaning about situations they experience, one way to gain access to these meanings is an interactive process between the researcher and the participants. Such an
interactive, constructivist approach allows for exploration of topics and themes suggested by the participants, rather than being limited by the researcher’s preset agenda. Accordingly, my epistemological assumptions lead to a qualitative, constructivist design (Patton, 2002).

**Research design.** Over the last three decades, quantitative strategies have been primarily used to study college persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) and persistence among Latinos (Fry, 2004; Grogger & Trejo, 2002; Knapp et al., 2007; Arbona & Nora, 2007). In contrast, this study adopted a qualitative strategy using semi-structured interviews framed by Torres’ (2006) Social Cognitive Retention Model for Latino Students at Urban Universities. Torres’ model also informed the development of the interview questions and analysis of the findings.

Although Torres’ (2006) model shows that Latinos enter college with pre-college factors likely to hinder college persistence, it also describes variables that can counter these obstacles. For example, Latinos are able to overcome feelings of ambivalence about college by interacting with teachers, special academic programs, or mentors who believe they can make it and also help them navigate the college system. We also learn from Torres’ model how academic integration and encouragement influences first generation Latino college students’ commitment to the institution and, in turn, affects their intent to persist. However, Torres’ research focuses on first-year persistence. By investigating what influenced Latino commuter-university graduates to persist beyond the first year, this study adds to the limited body of scholarly research, deepens our understanding of the subject, and supports educational leadership in the development of policies and interventions that will encourage Latino college graduation.

**Sample Selection**

This study explored the factors that influence first-generation Latino commuter-university graduates to persist to bachelor degree completion despite juggling multiple demands.
Therefore, I recruited recent Latino commuter-university graduates who entered college right after high school, worked and lived off-campus during their college years, and whose parents did not attend college.

I began the recruitment process by identifying which public commuter universities enroll the largest number of Latinos. Two public university systems in the state of California offer bachelor degrees – the University of California and California State University. Of the two, the CSU system makes a conscious effort to attract under-served communities, and it grants more than half of all undergraduate degrees earned by Latino California students (CSU Office of Public Affairs, 2009). The CSU Office of Public Affairs (May 2009) also reports that only 8% of undergraduate students live on campus, 75% work, and nearly 35% are the first generation in their families to attend college. Given the central research question in this study, I targeted the CSU system for potential participants.

Although the CSU system has twenty-three commuter-type campuses that stretch the length of the state of California from Humboldt County to San Diego County, my ease of access led me to focus on recruiting participants from three urban CSU campuses in the Bay Area of California, which I call Campus A, Campus B, and Campus C. The following (Table 2) is a breakdown of enrollment and graduation rates for these campuses as of November 2010 (www.nces.ed.gov):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campus</th>
<th>Undergraduate enrollment</th>
<th>Latinos enrolled</th>
<th>1st year retention rate</th>
<th>Graduation rate</th>
<th>Latino graduation rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>11,680</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>25,434</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>24,273</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. 1st year retention rate represents all first-time students, including transfers, within 6 years.
In early spring of 2009, I corresponded with the Dean of Student Support Services at Campus A to inquire about ways to recruit Latinos on track to graduate at the end of the school year. I was informed of the university’s policy that prohibits disclosure of confidential student information such as ethnic background to outside agencies or individuals. However, I was encouraged to visit the campus to make contact with any student-run Latino organizations.

Recalling that I had participated in a graduation ceremony just for Latinos at the end of my own undergraduate years, I questioned whether Campus A offered a similar event. It did and I therefore communicated with the Chicano/Latino Graduation Committee at Campus A to recruit potential participants. When Internet research revealed that Campuses B and C also provide students an opportunity to participant in Chicano/Latino graduation ceremonies, I contacted the Latino graduation committees at those sites.

After exchanging emails and phone calls with committee members, I was allowed to make a brief presentation at the Chicano/Latino pre-graduation informational sessions at all three campuses. The presentation introduced the purpose of my study and appealed to interested graduate candidates to complete a questionnaire (Appendix E) to indicate their willingness to participate in the study. The questionnaire, which was designed to identify information-rich participants, asked potential volunteers for contact information and to answer yes or no as to whether or not their parents graduated from college, whether they identify as Latino, are of Mexican descent, and whether they entered college immediately after high school, worked during college, or lived off-campus anytime during college. The questionnaire also asked their age and the number of years it took them to earn a bachelor’s degree. A total of twenty-six graduates from all three campuses completed the questionnaire.
From the pool of completed questionnaires, I focused on selecting participants who met the criteria for my study: self-identified as Mexican-descent, entered college during the first year following high school graduation, worked and lived off campus during their college years, and had parents who had never attended college.

I targeted volunteers who self-identified as Latinos of Mexican-descent for two reasons. First, although Latinos in the United States share cultural familial values and represent ten countries of origin—Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuban, The Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Columbia, Honduras, Ecuador, and Peru (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008) – two-thirds of Latinos in the United States are descendants from Mexico, making this population of great potential significance.

Studies (Pascarella & Terrenzini, 2005) show students are likely to persist if they enter college within six months after high school graduation and are continuously enrolled. Moreover, the U.S. Department of Education considers the traditional time frame for college undergraduates as six years (Knapp, et al., 2007). Therefore, I focused also on selecting participants who had entered college, whether part-time or full-time, within a year after high school graduation, kept continuous enrollment in college, and earned their bachelor’s degree within six years.

Lastly, given that Latinos are most likely to be first-generation college students, and live at home as well as work during their college years (Fry, 2005) I selected volunteers who fit that description at some point during their college years.

A total of twenty first-generation, Latino, commuter-university graduates were selected from Campus A, B, and C to interview for this study: six males and fourteen females.

In qualitative studies, the role of the researcher is to gather data using observations and/or interviews within a framework that allows participants to respond freely about their worldviews
and experiences related to the study (Patton, 2002). According to Patton (2002), participants’ self-reflections in the interview process is the essence of making meaning from a lived experience and was thus employed in this study as the only tool to collect data. My role as a researcher is discussed further in the section on trustworthiness.

According to Merriam (1998), there are three types of interview methods used in qualitative research—informal, semi-structured, or highly structured. An informal interview could potentially lead to extraneous issues not related to the topic, while a highly structured interview could limit or neglect relevant data. Semi-structured questions, by contrast, permit the researcher to begin with a set of prepared questions covering certain topics, while allowing other important topics to emerge during the interview. Utilizing this strategy gave participants the freedom to describe what it was like for them as they persisted in college.

This study used tape-recorded, face-to-face interviews and semi-structured interview questions to collect data. Torres’s (2006) Social Cognitive Retention Model for Latino Students at Urban Universities and a pilot interview were used as a guide. Torres’s study explored Latinos’ college experiences at three urban, commuter institutions, two of which were considered Hispanic Serving Institutions and the third a campus where Latinos are in the minority. Although significant, questions used in the interview guide in-part came from Torres’s study.

I also tested the effectiveness of the interview guide with a pilot interview. The participant was a 24-year-old first-generation Latino, and a recent (2008) bachelor’s degree graduate from a commuter-university who had lived at home and worked while attending college full-time. The pilot interview was tape-recorded and lasted about an hour. After transcribing the pilot interview, I reviewed the data, noting the questions seemed most effective, and made adjustments. The final semi-structured interview guide appears in Appendix F.
A week after the Chicano/Latino graduation ceremonies were held, I contacted the selected participants by phone and/or email to set up an interview. To accommodate their schedules, interviews were held in a variety of locations: living rooms, places of employment, and university library study rooms. In compliance with Internal Review Board ethical policies, each participant was informed about confidentiality and signed a statement confirming this agreement. I also advised participants about their rights to end the interview at any time they felt uncomfortable about any topics that emerged. Each interview was recorded and lasted approximately sixty to ninety minutes. After all the interviews were completed, I transcribed the recordings to immerse myself in the data. The combined interviews netted over 400 pages of transcriptions. The data gathered from the pilot interview was not included.

Data Analysis

One option for organizing and reporting qualitative data is a descriptive analytical framework (Patton, 2002). To prepare raw data for content analysis, both Merriam (1998) and Patton (2002) recommend first organizing the data using a coding scheme. I began by reading each transcription underlining meaningful passages, and jotting down notes and comments in the margins. Thereafter, I grouped my comments to create a list of initial categories. I re-read each transcript as many times as there were categories, while also keeping in mind that additional categories could surface.

I relied on direct quotations from participants to determine the meaning of the categories, again drawing on Merriam’s (1998) proposed guidelines to ensure that categories were conceptually constructed in a systematic and informed process based on the study’s purpose, researcher’s knowledge, and meanings made explicitly by the participants. I re-labeled some categories to more accurately capture the participants’ meanings and made sure that they
reflected the purpose of the research, did not overlap with one another, and characteristically held at the same level. Once the data were saturated—that is, the point at which no new categories emerged—I ceased preparing the raw data and moved to the next step: organizing the categories into matrices for data analysis.

I used several matrices to analyze the data. The first matrix sorted demographic profiles of each participant, such as their point of entry into higher education (community college or four-year university), whether or not they participated in a pre-college program, the types of additional obligations (other than academic), and so forth. I also employed several charts to sort the quotations from the initial coding scheme, seeking patterns that linked them to issues relevant to this study.

One matrix charted quotations that referenced obstacles each participant experienced during their college years. I organized the obstacles that surfaced into two areas—obstacles faced on-campus and off-campus. Quotations about on-campus obstacles discussed issues such as worrying about paying tuition, feeling disconnected, being uncertain about academic expectation, and so forth. Quotations about off-campus obstacles related to issues at home or work that affected participants’ college experience, such as their parents not understanding the pressures of college, the participants’ job status, the inability of their parents to contribute to the participant’s college expenses, and so forth. Another matrix sorted quotations referring to the types of support participants received on and off campus. The on-campus column included quotations regarding professors, staff, peers, and programs. The off-campus column included quotations regarding family, community, and others.

I created a fourth matrix for quotations describing participants’ thoughts of withdrawing from college and how they got beyond that. Here I charted which college year the thoughts of
dropping out surfaced, and what events led to such thoughts. A final matrix listed quotations about participants’ motivational thoughts and about behaviors participants initiated to help them adjust to college demands.

I then analyzed the matrices to compare and contrast the participants’ responses. This process allowed the opportunity to identify subcategories or unique categories, and recurring patterns. Rather than statistical significance, qualitative findings are judged by their substantive significance (Patton, 2002). Therefore, descriptions shared by half or more of participants’ experiences were grouped into a category. Descriptions shared by fewer than half of the participants were grouped into a category only if at least one third of the participants used virtually the exact wording, such as “same boat” or “come to class and leave.”

**Trustworthiness**

The credibility of the researcher affects the way findings are received because the researcher is the primary instrument in qualitative data research (Patton, 2002). Thus, the researcher’s experience, training, and perspective have the potential to affect data collection, analysis, and interpretation. My professional background enhanced the credibility of my findings because I have ten years’ experience advising high school students in how to prepare for and apply to colleges and universities. My personal background, as a Latino of Mexican descent raised by immigrant parents, and a first-generation university graduate, was also useful in establishing rapport and fostered a greater understanding during analysis. Although some details of my college career contrasted markedly from those of the participants in this study—for example, I was able to live at a residential college far from home and not work—my background also had the potential to affect how I collected and analyzed the data. Therefore, I took great care to be self-reflectively aware and, so far as possible, to prevent my personal experience from
influencing the participants’ responses or coloring what emerged in my findings. In terms of transferability, the findings in this study do not apply to a typical college experience—that is, students with college educated parents and attending residential campuses. Nevertheless, the findings have the potential to impact individuals attending commuter who have backgrounds and experiences resembling that of the participants: the first generation in their families to attend college, and doing so while working and remaining a part of the family unit.

To strengthen confidence in my findings, a member of my doctoral committee not previously familiar with my raw data reviewed selected interview transcripts and then examined my process of constructing emergent categories. Moreover, this committee member was an anthropologist whose research specialty focuses on the experiences of first-generation college students similar to those in my study.

**Summary**

The methods were effective in collecting and analyzing the data for this study. I recruited volunteers from the Chicano/Latino graduation ceremonies among three commuter-type universities. As recent bachelor degree graduates, they provided reflective descriptions of their experiences on and off-campus during their college years. After transcribing the interviews, I read each transcription repeatedly, looking for comments and quotations related to the research question. The several matrices I constructed served to organize the data into themes and categories for analysis and presentation of findings.

The next chapter presents the findings illuminated by quotations from the interviews. Three themes emerged from the findings. The first describes the obstacles the participants faced during their college years. The second identifies the support systems that enabled participants to
persist in college. And the third relates to the personal influences that motivated participants to envision success.
Chapter IV

Results

Introduction

This study explores how first-generation Latino commuter-university graduates describe what influenced their ability to persist to bachelor degree completion. The data source to investigate the research question came from transcribed, semi-structured interviews of twenty Latino graduates from three urban commuter universities. This chapter discusses what emerged from the data in five sections. The first section profiles participants’ family and college backgrounds (synopsized in Table 3). Section two provides an overview (see Table 4) of the challenges and support systems participants experienced during their college years. The third section describes participants’ challenges followed by a fourth section on support systems. The fifth section provides other influences on Latino college persistence, reasons for adjustment to college life. I conclude this chapter by summarizing and explaining how the findings address the research question.

Participants’ Profiles

The following profiles, listed in alphabetical order of pseudonym, briefly describe each participant’s family and college background.

Alicia. Raised in a Western state that borders California, near a gambling strip, Alicia attended a public charter and college preparatory high school, and has a sister two years younger than she. Alicia’s parents are Mexican immigrants and work in the hotel industry. Although her father went only as far as the 5th grade and her mother has only a high-school education, Alicia’s parents expected her to go to college.
Alicia entered a public four-year university directly after high school. She lived at home and commuted during her first year. Unhappy with the environment at the university, Alicia transferred to a CSU campus through a Western Exchange Program that offered non-residents in-state tuition prices in certain major. When Alicia arrived at the CSU campus during her second year in college, she lived in the dorms for a year prior to moving off-campus and commuting. She worked, did several fellowships during the summer, and received financial aid. She also participated in science programs for minority students with stipends to help with living expenses. Alicia majored in biology.

Carmen. Carmen grew up in an urban area and attended a public high school. She has two younger siblings, a brother and sister. Her parents are Mexican immigrants and never went beyond the eighth grade. Carmen’s mother cleans houses and her father is a landscaper. Nevertheless, they expected Carmen to go to college, so when she was in high school, they enrolled her in a community after-school program that provided the family with information about preparing for college.

Carmen went directly to the university after high school, lived at home, and worked. She was also responsible for caring and tutoring her younger siblings. During her junior year at the university, Carmen got pregnant, had a baby, and moved in with her boyfriend. She continued to attend college while taking care of her baby and her new household. Carmen majored in sociology.

Claudia. Claudia was raised in an urban area and attended a public high school. She is the first in her family to graduate from high school and go to college. She has three younger brothers, ages 2, 6 and 14. Her parents are emigrants from Mexico, have no high school education, and divorced when Claudia was in junior high. Claudia’s mother works at a factory.
and her father in construction. While growing up, Claudia was expected to care for her younger siblings, which included preparing meals, doing family laundry, housekeeping, and tutoring them. Claudia’s parents did not expect her to go to college, but neither encouraged nor discouraged her about that option. It was entirely up to Claudia whether or not to attend, but she had to find the financial means to do so.

Since fourth grade, Claudia had dreamed of going to college. During her senior year in high school, she applied and was admitted to several universities, including some prestigious ones. Her final semester in high school, Claudia’s younger brother started hanging out with troubled kids and getting into legal trouble. Fearing the path he was heading down, Claudia felt obligated to stay home to help her brother and commute to a local community college. After two years, she transferred to a university. While attending university, she continued meeting her family obligations, worked 30 hours a week, commuted to school, and also cared for her younger siblings as well as the child she gave birth to before transferring. Claudia earned an AA in Business Accounting at the community college and majored in psychology with a minor in Latin American Studies at the university.

**Crystal.** Crystal grew up in an urban area and attended a public high school. Her only sibling, a sister, is 16 years older and graduated from a university. Crystal’s parents are second-generation Mexican-Americans and graduated from high school. Her father works on a car assembly line; her mother is employed at a local elementary school. Like her sister, Crystal was expected to go to college and knew that her parents would do whatever they could to see that she went. During high school she was a member of a college outreach program called AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination).
Crystal applied to one CSU campus and a private all-girls college in the Bay Area. The CSU campus lost her application, so her only choice was the private college. Crystal lived in the dorms during the first semester, but went home every weekend (Thursday – Monday). She was unhappy at the private college and applied again to the CSU campus, but this time as a transfer student in the middle of her first year of college. Crystal’s mother stepped in to help and secured a dorm room for her at the university. After the end of her second semester, Crystal moved in next door to her parents in a duplex they owned in order to help them with the mortgage and commuted to the CSU campus. Though she used student and parent loans to help pay for college, she had to work in order to pay rent. Crystal majored in sociology with an emphasis in criminology.

**Eduardo.** Eduardo grew up in a rural farming town and attended a public high school. He has three older brothers and three younger sisters. His family emigrated from Mexico to the US when he was nine. He is the only member of his primary and extended family to go to college. Eduardo’s parents have no education beyond eighth grade and work as farm laborers.

Eduardo first thought about college during the fall of his senior year in high school, when his track coach advised him he should consider it, but had no idea how to make that happen. He learned about the admission requirements later that year, when an outreach representative from a CSU campus came to speak to students in the after-school homework club where Eduardo served as a math tutor. The outreach counselor also provided Eduardo with a waiver of the application fees. Though Eduardo applied and was admitted, his family discouraged him because they did not have financial resources to help him. Eduardo’s outreach counselor helped him apply for financial aid. With those funds, his work earnings, and a stipend from a federal program to help children of migrant farm workers, Eduardo was able to go directly to the university. Since the
closest campus was several hours away, Eduardo had to live in the dormitories during his first year in college but went home every other weekend and during school breaks to remain a part of his family unit. During the summers he continued to work in the fields picking crops with his family. When he was in his hometown he constantly dealt with gang issues. Though Eduardo initially pursued an engineering major because he loved math, he eventually settled on a major in education because he felt the professors were friendlier.

**Hugo.** Hugo, the youngest of four, was raised in a rural, farming community and is the only member in his family to go to college. His parents, Mexican-Americans, graduated from high school and are divorced. His mother is employed as a copy-room clerk at a local community college and his father is a mechanic. Hugo’s mother encouraged him to go to college, but was not sure how to support him in that goal.

The idea of applying to college came up when Hugo’s friends started talking about it during his senior year in high school. With intentions of possibly attending a university, Hugo registered to take a college admissions exam, but realized on the day of the exam that the testing site he had signed up for was located in faraway Los Angeles. Hugo was further discouraged about college because of the costs. He decided to live at home and enroll at the local community college where his mother worked. His first semester, he successfully completed three general education requirements and made contact with community counselors about a transfer program. Then, over school break, a high school friend encouraged him to forget about college and enlist in the Marine Corps. Hugo told his sergeant about his dream to go to college, so his sergeant made sure that Hugo (even during boot camp) enrolled in evening classes to work on his general education requirements on the military base. When Hugo was later shipped to Iraq, he continued to take university courses in the evening offered on the military base. At the end of his
commitment to the Marine Corps, Hugo applied and was admitted to the university. He lived at home and commuted an hour and a half each way (to and from campus), and used his G.I. Bill funds to pay for tuition. Hugo worked at a local automotive parts store in order to cover the cost of books, rent (paid to his mother), and transportation. Hugo majored in social work.

**Isabel.** Isabel was born in Mexico. Her mother and father have been divorced since she was an infant. Isabel was estranged from her mother while growing up in Mexico. Isabel’s father did not go beyond eighth grade education and works in the construction industry. He came to the U.S. when Isabel was twelve years-old, leaving her with her aunts and grandmother in Mexico, where she completed middle school and learned to speak and write English. At the age of 14, she came to the U.S. to live with her father, his new wife, and two younger step-siblings. In the U.S., she lived in an urban area and attended a public high school. When Isabel entered high school, she had the reading and writing skills to enroll in college preparatory courses. Her high school counselor encouraged her to also participate in AVID, a college-preparatory program. The AVID fieldtrips to visit colleges motivated her. Though her father neither encouraged nor discouraged her plans to attend college, he was receptive and proud she wanted to pursue her education. He worried about the costs, and agreed to let her to go to a community college. Nevertheless, Isabel was adamant about convincing her father to let her go straight to the university. When she was able to demonstrate to him that she could afford to go directly to a university with financial aid, living at home, and working, her father gave her permission to do so.

While Isabel was enrolled at the university, she was also responsible for taking care of her younger step-siblings—driving them to and from school, cooking, cleaning, and tutoring. Isabel constantly struggled to complete her course work while providing support for her family.
Her father and extended family often accused her of not caring about them when she missed family events. Isabel majored in ethnic studies.

**Jenny.** Jenny grew up in an urban area and attended a public high school. She has a younger brother in high school. Jenny’s parents, who work in a factory, are immigrants from Mexico and did not go beyond an eighth grade education. Jenny’s mother did all that she could to encourage Jenny to go to college, whereas Jenny’s father preferred that she start work after graduating from high school, to help support the family. During high school, Jenny took advantage of AP classes and participated in workshops at her school hosted by college outreach counselors. One summer Jenny and her mother convinced her father to allow Jenny to attend a week-long leadership camp for Latino high school students. Jenny’s motivation to go to college grew after attending the camp.

During her senior year Jenny applied to several universities, including some selective and prestigious choices. However, by spring semester of her senior year, Jenny decided to attend a local university because she wanted to be around to help protect her younger brother from her father (who would get abusive when he drank too much). While enrolled at the university, Jenny’s parents expected her to work to pay for her tuition and books, care for her younger brother, and attend weekly gatherings with her grandparents. Jenny majored in psychology.

**Joanna.** Joanna grew up in an urban area, attended a private, all-girls college preparatory Catholic high school. She has a sister four years older and a brother two years younger. Her father is a second-generation Mexican-American and her mother a Mexican immigrant. Her father receives disability payments due to a work-related injury in the construction industry, and her mother is a waitress. Joanna was expected to go to college. Joanna enrolled in a university after graduating from high school. Joanna managed to convince
her parents to allow her to live in the campus dormitories away from home during her first year. However, Joanna held two jobs while in college in order to afford both tuition and the dormitory experience. During her sophomore year, Joanna felt overwhelmed by having to travel to and from several jobs while juggling academic demands, so she moved back home and commuted to campus, though she still worked. She became pregnant during her junior year and had a daughter shortly after becoming a senior. Joanna majored in political science.

**Josie.** Josie and her family are immigrants who came to the U.S. from Mexico when Josie was twelve years old and settled in a rural farming community. Josie has a sister two years younger than she. Her parents never went beyond the eighth grade. After working for a time as a farm laborer, her father started working in the construction industry, which greatly increased the family income. He bought a house and Josie’s mother was able to quit working and focus on Josie and her sister. When Josie entered middle school, she was enrolled in a course to help her learn English and she was also placed in Special Education program due to a learning disability. In eighth grade, Josie was the only student in her school to earn a blue ribbon for a project she had entered in the county science fair and was also honored by the school district for her achievement. Thereafter, her case manager through the Special Ed department encouraged her to go to college and her parents were happy to support her in this regard.

Because the nearest university was several hours away, Josie had to move away from home to attend. She was also surprised to learn, when she applied to college that she was not documented—a discovery that caused her considerable anxiety. After living in the dorms for a year she got an apartment, but went home every weekend. At first, her father’s earnings in the construction industry helped pay for her education, but when that industry suffered a decrease in demand, Josie had to find a part-time job. She also suffered from depression, but found solace
by getting involved in social justice clubs dealing with immigration issues in the U.S. Josie majored in sociology with an emphasis in community change.

Juan. Juan came to the U.S. at age 15 with his parents while his older sister stayed in Mexico to attend college. His parents, who had not gone beyond eighth grade, worked in the food service industry. In the U.S., Juan attended a public high school and lived in an urban area. His parents encouraged him to do what felt right to him—work or school. During high school, he completed college-preparatory courses while learning how to speak English, and worked twenty to thirty hours a week busing tables. Juan’s high school counselor encouraged him to apply to a local university, and since he was undocumented and ineligible to apply for financial aid, helped him calculate how much it would cost for him to go to a university if he lived at home and commuted. Juan saved $14,000 from his work earnings during high school.

After Juan was admitted to the university, his parents allowed him to use his savings to pay for his education. They were unable to provide any financial support, so Juan lived at home and worked thirty to forty hours a week while in college. When he exhausted all of his savings, he relied on a community financial program called a tanda whenever he needed to borrow money for tuition. During his junior year at the university, Juan and his girlfriend had a baby. He juggled work, school, and fatherhood through the last two years of college. He majored in business accounting and finance.

Lupe. Lupe was raised in a rural farming town. The oldest of three, she attended a public high school where she participated in a pre-college program. Despite this, her family did not expect or prefer that she go to college; they preferred that she marry instead. Lupe’s parents, who attended school only through eighth grade, are first-generation immigrants from Mexico and work as farm laborers.
Lupe made the decision, against her parents’ wishes, to leave the farming community and go directly to a four-year university. Scholarships, financial aid, and a stipend from a federal program for children of farm workers made this possible. Lupe did not live in the dorms; she rented an apartment off-campus with some friends from high school. She worked part-time and, as expected, commuted home every weekend and during school breaks in order to remain a part of her family unit. When Lupe was home with family and relatives, she was constantly encouraged to quit college and marry. During Lupe’s freshman year in college, her mother gave birth to a younger sister, who died a few months after being born, Lupe spent considerable time helping her mother through this tragedy. She also had to mediate between her father and mother on the weekends when her father drank too much and fought with her mother. Lupe majored in social work.

Maggie. Maggie, the younger of two children, grew up in an urban area and attended a private, all-girls Catholic college preparatory high school. Maggie’s brother is seven years older, and lived at home while commuting to a university campus an hour away. Maggie’s parents are US-born Mexican-American high school graduates and expected her to go to college, also. Her father works as a mechanic for the city, and her mother works for the county as a medical records clerk. Before Maggie was born, her parents purchased a rental home. The income from the rental was used to help pay for Maggie’s college expenses, however Maggie’s parents also required that she work during college.

Maggie entered a distant university directly after high school and convinced her parents to allow her to live in the dormitories for her first year. She then moved back home and switched to a local community college. After a year of working and going to community college, she transferred to a university campus nearer her home. Maggie majored in sociology.
Marcos. Marcos and his two older sisters emigrated to the US from Mexico with their parents when he was 15 years old. They lived in a city and Marcos attended a public high school. Both parents had completed eighth grade. His father works in the construction industry and his mother works in the food service industry. During high school Marcos learned English and worked on credits to graduate. When he wasn’t at school, he worked at a restaurant busing tables and washing dishes. During an event his school called “Career Day,” Marcos learned that community college fees were much less than university tuition. He also learned that since he was undocumented, he would not be able to get financial aid, but would qualify for in-state (resident) fees. His parents gave him permission to use his work earnings to go to college.

After graduating from high school, Marcos lived at home and attended a local community college. Three years later, he transferred to a local university and continued to live at home, work, and commute. As opportunities for construction work started to dry up he witnessed his parents enduring formidable challenges including having to move several times; he took on a second job to help them out. Fortunately, the second job was not only related to his major—graphic design—but allowed him to work on campus.

Miguel. Miguel, the younger of two children, attended a public high school in a rural farming town. His parents, who were educated through the eighth grade, emigrated to the U.S. when he was fourteen. As a newcomer to the US, Miguel was challenged to learn English while working and attending school, however he found the time to play on the water polo team. His mother became terminally ill before Miguel graduated from high school, returned to Mexico, and passed away a few months later. Miguel’s parents neither encouraged nor discouraged him about furthering his education.
Preoccupied with the hardships of living in the U.S, working, and learning a new language, Miguel had not considered college. However, he enrolled in a community college because he wished to play on the water polo team. His coach became his mentor and encouraged him to meet with counselors to develop a plan to transfer to a university and his girlfriend helped him apply for financial aid. Miguel was also inspired by his sister who had stayed in Mexico to go to college. Miguel’s father had no financial resources to help him pay for college, but he gave Miguel his blessings and $50 before he transferred to a university several hundred miles away. During his first year at the university, he worked and lived in a hotel near the campus during the week and traveled back home every weekend to work as a caterer. Miguel graduated with a double-major in criminal justice and Latin studies.

**Raymond.** Raymond grew up in the suburbs and attended an all-boys college-preparatory private school. He has a sister two years older who went to a private school and then to college after high school. Raymond’s parents are second-generation Mexican-Americans; both graduated from high school but neither went to college. His father was trained in the Air Force as a traffic engineer, and his mother works in a clerical position in the private sector.

Although Raymond went to a high school that encouraged students to prepare for college, his parents left that choice up to him. They had hoped he would prepare for college, but Raymond, who had always dreamed of joining the military and becoming a police officer some day, joined the army after he graduated. However, he soon enrolled in evening courses on the military base to work on a college degree. He married overseas while in the military. Once his military commitment was over, he returned home to live with his family and handle visa issues to bring his foreign born wife into the United States. He also took classes during the summer at the local community college and then transferred to the university. Living at home and using his
GI Bill to pay for college was manageable, but once his wife arrived, during his junior year at the university, he had to move out and get a place of their own. He juggled work, college, and paying rent and bills. Raymond also wanted to move up the ranks in the military, so in addition to working and going to school he committed ten to fifteen hours a week training students in the ROTC program at a local private college. Raymond majored in sociology.

**Rita.** Rita, whose parents are third-generation Mexican-Americans, was raised in an urban area. When she was a senior in high school, her brother, a year older than she, lived at home and attended community college. Her parents, high school graduates, worked at a local factory. They did not expect their children to go to college, but raised them with the understanding that once they were 18 years old they had to be in school or working if they were to continue living at home. Rita was further encouraged to consider college by her brother and friends.

Because Rita was uninformed and unsure how to prepare for university admission, she followed her brother’s example and enrolled in community college. Like her brother, Rita worked to pay for her college expenses—her parents helped only with emergency funds. Once she had completed her general education, Rita transferred to a university several hours away because she wanted to experience dorm living. However she became homesick and had to work many hours to afford campus housing. She therefore transferred to a commuter-university close to her family’s home. Upon moving back home, she learned of her parents’ intention to divorce. For the next several months, Rita had not only to juggle work and school, but also help her mother get through the divorce. When Rita decided to get her own place she started working full-time and going to class only at night. After realizing how that would extend her educational program, she decided to get loans and work less. Rita graduated as a psychology major.
**Rosa.** Raised in an urban area, Rosa attended a public high school. Her parents are immigrants from Mexico who earned a living cleaning houses and landscaping; their education level does not go beyond eighth grade. Rosa has an older sibling who graduated from the university when Rosa began high school.

Like her sister, Rosa was expected to enter university immediately after high school, live at home, and commute to save money. Her parents were very strict, requiring that she work to help pay for her college expenses. Meanwhile, her older sister continued to live at home after she graduated from the university, in order to help support the family. Rosa’s social life in college consisted of chatting with people she met on the city bus en route to campus. During her junior year in college, Rosa’s sister became pregnant. After that, Rosa did most of her studying at the library because of the tensions that created in the home. Like her older sister, Rosa majored in sociology.

**Samantha.** Samantha and her younger brother were raised in an urban area. Their parents, emigrants from Mexico, have no education beyond the eighth grade and work in the food-service industry. Even so, Samantha’s parents expected her to go to college and before she entered high school, moved the family to live within the attendance boundary of a college-preparatory public high school where her cousins, who were then in college, had gone.

Samantha entered university right after high school, lived at home all through college, continued to work part-time at a bank, and helped care for her younger brother. She was not, however, responsible for housekeeping; her mother took over these duties because Samantha was in college and working. Though Samantha was legally an adult, her parents were very strict about her social life. To have social time with friends, she told her parents she had Friday night classes. As Samantha’s employment made more demands on her, she adjusted her class schedule
to attend in late afternoons and evenings. Samantha entered the university as a business major but changed to criminology.

**Sonya.** Sonya and her younger sister grew up in a rural farming town. Her parents, farm laborers, emigrated from Mexico where they attended school only through eighth grade. In middle school, Sonya had the choice of enrolling in a woodshop class or AVID (Advancement via Determination)—a college outreach program for minority and low-income students. She and her parents mistakenly thought AVID was an English support class and agreed that writing would serve her better than woodshop. Through AVID, Sonya got to visit several CSU campuses during field trips. Though Sonya attended a very small public high school, her experience with AVID in middle school led her to plan and prepare for college.

After high school, Sonya went directly to the closest university, which was two hours away, and lived in the dorms. As her parents couldn’t afford college expenses, Sonya obtained financial aid and traveled home every weekend during all four years of college to work at a local bakery; she also worked during the week on campus through a federally funded program for children of farm workers. Sonya majored in sociology.

Table 3 is excerpted from participants’ profiles: names, type of high school attended, where they began their college path (university or community college), major course of study, and additional comments. The table is organized alphabetically, by gender.
Overview

The data encapsulates the lives, on and off campus, of twenty Latino first-generation college students in pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. Participants described when and how the idea of going to college first entered their minds. They shared thoughts and experiences from the moment they decided to go to college to how they felt to finally walk across the stage as college graduates. As participants discussed each year in college, they reflected on their best and worst moments, their likes and dislikes, what they did or did not expect in their college experience, and, in retrospect, what they determined made a difference toward persisting to bachelor degree completion. The participants’ responses included moments when they felt like dropping out of
college, and what got them through these times. From their descriptions, three central themes surfaced: challenges, factors supporting persistence, and other influences that affected their adjustment to college life. Within these themes, several subcategories emerged, as shown in Table 4:

Table 4: Subcategories and Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>CHALLENGES</strong></th>
<th><strong>DESCRIPTION</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unfamiliar with College Norms</td>
<td>Students did not initially understand the responsibilities and expectations of higher education or how to navigate the college system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing Multiple Demands</td>
<td>Students had to constantly balance college demands with work and family obligations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino Family Dynamics</td>
<td>Parents’ lack of understanding of college demands coupled with their assumptions about “family interdependence.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>FACTORS SUPPORTING PERSISTENCE</strong></th>
<th><strong>DESCRIPTION</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Permission or Tuition</td>
<td>Parents allowed student to apply job income to college expenses; when possible they provided additional support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aid Resources</td>
<td>Resources on campus or in the community to help pay college expenses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Relationships</td>
<td>Relationships with campus staff, faculty, and peers that provided personal and academic advising, role models, and a sense of cultural affinity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>OTHER INFLUENCES</strong></th>
<th><strong>DESCRIPTION</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Validation</td>
<td>Milestones signified persisting in college was possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impetus to Succeed</td>
<td>Personal motivation for attaining a college education.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first theme in this chapter describes the challenges participants faced as first-generation college students—unfamiliarity with college norms, managing multiple demands, and Latino family dynamics. When participants first entered the university, they were unfamiliar with the responsibilities and expectations associated with being a college student, and they felt lost and scared in not knowing how to navigate the college system. They juggled multiple demands such as school, work, familial obligations, homework, and a commute. They also found it difficult to have parents who did not understand the pressures of attending college, coupled with the Latino cultural obligation to give primacy to the needs of the family.

However, participants also had support to help them persist in college. These included parents’ permission or consent to attend college, gift payment of tuition, financial aid, and campus relationships. These benefits thus comprise a second theme—support, from parents; financial aid resources both on and off campus; institutional relationships with professors, staff, and peers. On-campus relationships provided emotional support, guidance in navigating the college system, and a cultural connection.

The third theme refers to factors affecting participants’ adjustment to college life that, in turn, affected their ability to persist. Participants described feeling uncertain about being on the college path. However, affirmation of their progress and their drive to persist helped them continue to adjust to college life. Achieving and passing milestones, such as successfully completing a quarter, semester, or year, as well as observing other Latinos in the “same boat” made participants believe they could “do” college. They were also motivated by their personal impetus to succeed in college, derived from their desires to achieve greater financial success than their parents, and to serve as role models for other family members.
Challenges Hindering Latino College Persistence

These participants’ college experience represents the path Latinos are most likely to take in pursuit of a bachelor’s degree (Fry, 2005): entering the post-secondary pipeline as a first-generation college student, living at home, working twenty to forty hours a week, and enrolling at commuter-type campus. Unfortunately, this path also poses challenges that are most likely to cause Latinos to drop out of college (Fry, 2005). As participants in this study shared what was going on in their lives while they were in college, they described the challenges they faced in order to persist. They were uncertain of the college norms associated with being a college student: their responsibilities, what was expected of them, and how to navigate the college system. In addition, in order to make college happen they had to work and live at home. Thus, balancing work and family responsibilities with college demands was a constant battle. Moreover, the Latino cultural obligation that participants place the needs of their family ahead of their own, as well as the fact that their parents didn’t understand the pressures they were experiencing as college students, added to the challenges they faced.

Unfamiliar with college norms. According to most of the participants, the college environment was as alien as another planet. Participants were unprepared for the academic cultural shift between high school and college. Only three (out of twenty) reported attending a college orientation program prior to enrolling in college. Such programs are designed to inform entering freshmen or transfer students how the college or university system works. Worse yet, of the three who attended orientation, only one found it to be useful. The other two found the orientation unhelpful because they did not understand the information presented and did not see that it related to them. This is critical because, prior to entering college, most participants could
not visualize what the college experience would be like, and some stated they had never set foot on a university campus until their first day of school.

During high school most of the participants were surprised to learn that college was an option for them, because it was not a path their family had anticipated they should take. Thus, when participants reflected on what it felt like to finally be in college, most were humbled by the fact that they had “made it.” However, they also described feeling overwhelmed as a result of not knowing what lay ahead in this path. Accordingly, when participants described what their first semester or quarter was like, they remembered feeling lost and scared. They didn’t know their way around campus and where to get help when they needed it. For example, Claudia describes what she went through:

[One] gets thrown into this university where nobody really gives a damn about you and what you do and what you think…. It was kind of scary. I would say the first two quarters there I was lost. I didn’t know where to go if I needed [help]. I didn’t even know where the library was first of all. The first quarter I was like, “Where the hell is the library?”

Feeling lost and scared created a great deal of angst and added to the stress the participants were already experiencing as a result of having to juggle multiple demands [discussed below]. In addition, not knowing how to navigate the various obstacles college could present would often lead frustrated participants to think of dropping out—even though simple paths around those obstacles were available had they known about them.

For example, some participants almost dropped out of college because they were not aware of available support programs. Given that all of the participants struggled to afford college, having access to financial resources was crucial in allowing them to persist. Even some
participants who were aware of financial resources had no idea how to access those resources. For example, after learning his financial aid did not cover everything, Eduardo stated, “I knew there were [such things as] loans, but I didn’t know the process of getting loans.”

Other participants almost dropped out of college because they didn’t know other supports were available. Math had always been difficult for Joanna. The small Catholic high school she attended had given her the math support she needed, but she didn’t know how to obtain such support at the university. Consequently, she failed remedial math during her first year, and was devastated to receive a letter stating she could not return to the university. Fortunately, Joanna worked on campus, and when she gave notice that she would not be returning the next fall and why, her supervisor advised her to get assessed for a learning disability so that she could request to have the math requirement waived and remain at the university. Joanna had no idea such a path was available to her. Following her supervisor’s advice, Joanna was diagnosed with a learning disability, and was thereafter able to persist.

Additionally, like most of the students at their commuter-type campus, participants would arrive just in time for class and then have to leave immediately afterward, because they had to work and/or adhere to family demands. They perceived this experience of being disconnected from college life as normal because most of their peers did so as well. But because participants were unfamiliar with college norms, they did not realize that meant they would be expected to carve out time to meet with professors outside of class for additional support. Moreover, they did not understand that unlike their high-school experience, college assignments and projects were done outside of class—and that they were expected to make time for those as well. Finally, participants discovered they also had to make time to meet with counselors in order to register for classes, choose a major, and learn both the registration process and which classes were
needed to graduate. These, they said, were unexpected tasks and responsibilities they did not realize were expected of college students, and for which they were unprepared. A further unexpected challenge was to also juggle multiple demands.

**Managing multiple demands.** Students enrolled in a traditional residential college environment are likely to have college-educated parents who not only have exposed them to college norms, but also have the means to help their child pay for college (Nora, 2003). These residential college students are most likely to live amongst their peers in dorms and walk across campus to attend class. When they are not in class, they remain on campus much of the time, enabling them to socialize with college peers, including in clubs and other organizations; meet with professors; and study in the quad, residential halls or library. In short, a traditional residential campus offers an environment that supports persistence (Terenzini & Pascarella, 2005).

Participants in this study described their college years very differently. Their experience required that they constantly juggle work and family responsibilities with college demands. Balancing multiple demands produced a great deal of stress, causing some to consider dropping out of college. Additionally, their responsibilities outside of class cut into participants’ study time, which hurt their academic performance.

Although most of the participants reported receiving some form of financial aid, it was never sufficient. Eduardo described his reaction when he learned that his financial aid package did not cover all of his expenses:

They called from the main office, and they said I still owed $3000 and something. I was like, “How? I have financial aid.” And she said, “[It] didn’t cover everything….” My
parents had no money] to help…I questioned what was I doing [in college]…I remember that night I was crying. I was crying because I didn’t want to [drop out of college].

Work was therefore essential for these students to stay in college. They had to pay college costs, cover their own living expenses, and help to support their family. Most participants struggled to pay tuition and sometimes questioned whether going to college was something they could afford. In many cases they worked because their parents had not anticipated the need to save for college costs. In addition, most of their parents struggled to make ends meet; getting financial support from their parents to cover their costs of living—let alone college expenses—was rarely an option. Most of the participants also stated that their parents were not willing to borrow to pay for college, for fear of the family or their child going into debt. Thus, working became a vital source of funds to pay college expenses. Because participants relied so heavily on this income, it meant that work time was never something participants could compromise in favor of study time. As Jenny described, “I needed the constant income coming in because I needed tuition.”

In addition to using their work earnings for college expenses, participants also worked in order to cover their living expenses. Earnings were used for basic living expenses, such as rent, gas, food, utilities, and car insurance. But work earnings would also be used to help support the family when necessary. Most of the participants described how their immigrant parents practiced traditional Mexican customs, which included the cultural obligation that children place the needs of the family before their own. According to the participants, who had grown up socialized in a communal environment, watching their parents struggle to make ends meet during their college years made it very difficult or impossible for them to detach themselves from the collective needs of the family. Marcos elaborates on the dilemma of paying for school or helping his family—a conundrum that weighed heavily on him:
The whole money issue…was always there…Struggling for money to pay the rent. That was heavy on me because I really couldn’t help [my parents] pay for rent because I need[ed] to pay for my books. So this idea was always in the back of my head…either [pay for] my education or help my family. Always trying to balance the two.

If working was necessary in order to go to college, then so was living at home, which imposed additional demands on participants’ time. For most participants, living at home and commuting to campus was both a way to afford college as well as a cultural obligation to remain a part of the family unit. But Latino family dynamics [discussed below] meant that just as with work time, participants had no choice but to find some way to incorporate their family duties and spending time with family into their already busy schedules.

Working and attending to family needs were responsibilities participants were not able to compromise in favor of school. They were constantly faced with having to juggle these multiple demands as best they could. This added to their existing stress of being unfamiliar with college norms. Trying to “do it all” took a toll on them: most participants said the only time they thought seriously about of dropping out of college was when they felt overwhelmed by having to manage work, school, and family demands. For example, Claudia recalled:

I don’t want to do this anymore because it was all too much. It was too much work. [I had to work from] 4 in the morning ‘til 10:30, 11 or 12. Then go to school. And then around 3, 4 pm, pick up my little brother and my daughter and then go home and try to cook something really quick before my mom would get there so she can have something to eat. And then get the baby ready to go to bed. Help my mom clean the house. And then study. And then sleep a little bit. And then start the routine all over again.
Some underscored the pressure of having to make time for family or family events as being the most stressful and the specific impetus that made them think of dropping out. This pressure was generally due to the Latino cultural obligation to spend social time with the family, thus complicating the participants’ already busy schedules. Jenny describes how this additional responsibility often made her feel like dropping out:

I remember coming home so tired…[and then becoming even more so] from having to deal with my family. Having to cater to them [socially] for a while and [then] having to do my school [work]. Sometimes that was so overwhelming. [That’s when I thought.] “I don’t want to do [college] anymore.”

The other effect of managing multiple demands was the negative impact on participants’ academic performance. Whether participants entered the university right after high school or transferred from a community college, they felt prepared for the academic rigor of college. They were surprised to find the greater challenge was balancing multiple demands so that they had enough time to do their required schoolwork. Hugo explained:

That was [the] challenge. How much I can afford to put into this class or that class or that assignment? And how much will I have left over to give to my girlfriend, [to] work. It was just trying to balance it all out…Yeah, that was more stressful than doing the work — balancing time.

As a result of being pulled in many directions—home, school and work—participants’ academic performance suffered because time to do homework was the only time they felt they were able to compromise. As Raymond explains:

Academically, I started doing poorer. I started doing worse because… I didn’t know how to manage [my wife], the relationship, school, work, ROTC. I couldn’t time manage...
The last challenge that emerged from the data was Latino family dynamics: having parents who did not understand college academic demands, coupled with the cultural obligation of putting family needs first.

**Latino family dynamics.** When participants spoke about the relationship between home and college life, they described how difficult it was that their parents did not comprehend the pressures of attending college. Participants said they got little (if any) sympathy from their parents when they were stressed by trying to juggle everything. Participants understood that because their parents had never attended college, they were unable to imagine what that meant in terms of academic pressures. One participant recalled that when he felt stressed about final exams or major school projects, his parents dismissed his situation, pointing to the greater challenges they faced, as farm laborers:

> When I was stressing out about finals, [my dad would say], “It’s just school. Why are you stressing out? It’s just going to class and reading. What’s so hard about that?” I think because my parents [felt college is] probably much easier than working in the fields. And I’ve done both [kinds of] work—physically, [working in] the fields is worse, much worse.

Similarly, Samantha recalled a time she was struggling to complete a school project. “My dad was like, ‘What’s wrong with you? I don’t understand why you are crying over some measly tests or assignment. Just do it.’” Another student, Carmen, also felt frustrated when her parents made comments such as, “You should know how to do this. You were born here. You were raised here. You went to school here. You shouldn’t be struggling.” These parents’ only
experience with the American educational system had been their children’s high-school years and, like their children, they didn’t understand that the shift from high school to college entailed new and greater demands on students’ time.

Since they did not understand what their children had to deal with as college students, these parents continually pressured participants to honor the often time-consuming obligations demanded by Latino family culture. Participants described their home lives as filled with responsibilities other than homework and housework—that is cooking and cleaning. They also had to take care of other family members, including picking up younger siblings from school, watching over them for extended periods, and making sure their younger siblings got their homework done. Claudia, for example, summarized her home life as holding a book in one hand and doing laundry with the other.

In addition to family obligations at home, there were often unavoidable social obligations with extended family. Jenny noted:

There were instances where I told my family, “I can’t go [visit grandpa]. I have too much homework. I need to get some sleep.” But they didn’t really understand what I was going through, so they made me go....

But despite all the challenges, from being unfamiliar with college norms to managing multiple demands and Latino family dynamics, the participants were able to persist to degree completion. They ascribed this to several kinds of support they received during college.

Factors Supporting Latino College Persistence

When participants described what enabled them to address some of the challenges they faced in order to persist to degree completion, three subcategories emerged: parental support, financial aid resources, and campus relationships. Parents provided support through permission
to attend or some, usually limited, assistance in helping their child pay for college. Financial aid resources included assistance from government-sponsored programs and community networks. Relationships with campus staff and peers provided participants with information on how to navigate college life, someone to talk to about personal issues, encouragement to get involved and cultural affinity.

**Permission or tuition.** Throughout the interviews, participants reflected on when the thought of college had first entered their minds, how their parents had felt about their goal to go college, what motivated them to persist, and when the thoughts of dropping out of college surfaced. From these descriptions, a notable difference that emerged was whether or not there had been a familial expectation that the participants would go to college. All of the participants had at least one parent who supported their decision to go to college. However, the type of parental support the participants received depended on whether or not there was a familial expectation that they would attend.

Where there had been no familial expectation that participants would attend college, they described their parents’ support as “permission”—both to attend college and to make it a priority in their lives. That is, the primary support these students received from their parents was the consent to continue to live at home while attending. This support also provided a way for the participants to make college happen financially. A crucial element was these parents’ relaxing of the familial obligation to contribute financially to the family. Instead, participants were able to use their work earnings to pay their way through college while they lived at home, sometimes rent-free but not always. For example, Marcos described his predicament:

> My dad wasn’t able to help me [with college expenses]. He told me, straight away, "I won't be able to pay for your school, but I will let you live in my house without charging
you. You don’t have to pay for anything: housing, rent, food. That money is for your college education.” [This] was a big help... I only had to worry about tuition and books. Another example is Isabel. When Isabel was in high school, she dreamed of entering a university right after high school, but her father felt it was financially more reasonable for the family if she attended a community college. After Isabel found the resources to attend a university, and could show him that having a job and financial aid grants meant she would not have to rely on her father to help cover college expenses, she was able to convince her father to give her permission.

There were other participants, like Claudia, whose parents were able to help her pay for community college costs but could not afford to help pay the increased costs once she transferred to a university. So she had to make it feasible by getting a job:

[My mom said], “Your dad is giving me this amount of money.” It was enough to cover tuition, for my books at [community college], but it wasn’t enough to go to [the university]…So I got a job. Despite having to take the new job, Claudia was still expected to continue taking care of her younger siblings and do household chores:

They never really said, “Congratulations, you’re [at the university].” It was never really like that. It was just, “You want to be there—then study, work your butt off.”…My job for them was to help them out [at home].

Critically, where there was no familial expectation that the participants would attend college, the parents did not provide direct financial support in the form of parent loans. This may have been because they were unwilling or unable to do so, or because they did not know about the possibility.
The other type of parental support participants described was more direct. Where there was a familial expectation that the participants would go to college, parental support took a different form: tuition. In these cases, the participants’ parents were described as going to any length to help the participants pay tuition or find money for college—including taking out parent loans—and thereby allowing the participants to focus on their studies at home. For example, Carmen’s father, who had enrolled her in a pre-college program in her community during high school, accompanied her to scholarship interviews and took a second job to pay for costs not covered by the scholarships. Carmen was still required to work in order to have money for transportation and living expenses. Carmen recalled that:

My opinion was pretty much never asked. I was just always told you have to go college and this is what you need to do to get there...I had two scholarships which pretty much paid for all of my tuition [and] the summer before school started, [my dad] got a second job so he could pay for [books].

Other parents applied for student or parent loans in order to pay for participants’ college expenses. For example, Maggie said:

[College] really wasn’t [optional] for me...It was a given that [I would go to college]. [My parents] said that my education is very important and they would go to any length to pay and if [getting loans is] what they needed to do [they would do so] because they knew that it would come back to them once I got a job.

Other parents not only ensured college expenses were covered, but also helped in other ways. Some excused participants from having to worry about domestic duties, or—mothers in particular—took over the participant’s household responsibilities. Others described how their
parents made it a point to provide an area at home so that their participant had space to study. Samantha describes her reasons for not dropping out:

I never thought of dropping out…[because] my parents would have never allowed it. They would have said, “What? You’re in college and you’re going to drop out? Uh-uh [No]. You better figure out a way to do it.” So I [couldn’t] disappoint them and I think that’s what I always wanted, their approval…so me dropping out was not an option.

And note the type of support her parents provided: parent loans.

They were okay with [loans]. They were used to it. [They’d say,] “We have a mortgage, car payment, [we will] always be in debt.” I was only in charge of doing the dishes and my own room. I [didn’t] have to do [other] household chores because of [homework and my job]. My mom was really understanding in that aspect. She’d say, “It’s okay. Just concentrate on school.”

Given that all of the participants reported their parents were not in a position to cover all of their college expenses, having another source of funds, such as parent loans or parent jobs to supplement the money from students’ employment, could be a critical ingredient in participant persistence.

**Financial aid resources.** Despite their parents providing permission or tuition to go to college, participants also described how helpful it was to have financial programs or resources to turn. Government-funded financial aid programs, such as federal and state grants and student and parent loans, are available to eligible students to help pay for college. Many participants described how significant that support was even when they didn’t cover all of the costs and expenses. Some participants relied only on grants (money that does not have to be repaid, generally provided to students from low-income families), while others who did not qualify for
grants took advantage of student and parent loans. Sonya, for example, did not qualify for grants but made use of student loans so she would not have to burden her parents for tuition. Others relied on federally funded programs like the GI Bill or CAMP. The GI Bill is a program that provides a college stipend to those who served in the military. CAMP (College Assistance Migrant Program) is a college support program for students from migrant farm-working families. Sabrina described how CAMP provided her with a monthly stipend for her first year at the university, which she used to pay her rent.

In general, the participants described how they were able to struggle through their financial hardships to make ends meet while in college. In most cases, a combination of working, living at home, and receiving some form of financial aid made it possible for them to eke out sufficient funds to last through each term. But those who did not have the option of government assistance had to be more creative.

Undocumented residents were not eligible to apply for any form of government-funded financial aid programs and turned to their community or friends for help when necessary. For example, Juan, an undocumented resident, saved $14,000 by working full-time during high school. This money was sufficient through his second year in college. However, for his third and subsequent years, he did not have sufficient funds to continue. In desperation, he turned to his Latino community and participated in a program called a tanda.

According to Juan, a tanda is a self-funding, forced-savings and borrowing system. Ten people agree to contribute $100 a week for 10 weeks. This creates a pool of $1000 each week over the course of 10 weeks. Each individual contributing to the pool gets to withdraw $1000 from the pool once within the ten weeks. The benefit of the tanda is that Juan chose to receive
his $1000 during the week tuition was due, which was much earlier than he could possibly have saved it by himself. Juan used this system several times to be able to pay his tuition on time.

Having permission or tuition to attend college, as well as succeeding in the struggle to find additional financial resources to help pay for college, all positively influenced the participants’ ability to persist. Additionally, the support received from people on campus also made a difference.

**Campus relationships.** When participants expressed what they had to endure to persist, they described feeling lost, disconnected, overwhelmed, and exhausted with having to juggle multiple demands, not to mention the pressures of Latino family dynamics. All of this led to thoughts of dropping out. Fortunately they developed relationships on campus that were vital in helping them overcome these challenges and, consequently, their ability to persist in college. These campus relationships included supportive professors, counselors and advisors, mentors, and student peers.

Supportive professors were those who, beyond merely teaching the participants, were helpful and understanding of the participants’ situations. For example, they provided assistance in the transition to college by answering questions about majors and general education requirements. They encouraged participants to join campus organizations and apply for research programs and fellowships. And they invited participants to come to office hours, not just for academic support, but also to talk about anything that was on their minds. Even more significant to the participants, these professors noticed them, recognized them, greeted them in the halls and walking across campus, and were likely to stop and ask how they were feeling. These professors also asked about their families, made themselves available as a resource on campus, and, in most cases, culturally connected with students.
Perhaps most importantly, supportive professors were those who appeared to understand and care about these students and their personal situations. They often “checked in” to find out how the participants were doing and feeling. Essentially, supportive professors were those who reached out to participants on an individual, personal level. Carmen described the support she received when she learned she had become pregnant:

If I missed any assignments, if I didn’t go to class she was on top of me. She would [find me at the end of another] class because she knew . . . my schedule. So she knew [every] class that I had a break so she pulled me aside [and explained] what I had to do.

Another participant, Sonya, described how meaningful it was to have professors that paid attention to things other than schoolwork. For example, she highlighted professors who made the time to check in on students’ lives outside of class—who saw and connected to them as individuals: “They would ask, ‘How’s back home? How are your parents doing? How are the chickens and the cows?’ And it was a different relationship.”

Encountering such supportive professors, counselors, advisory staff, and mentors provided a tremendous sense of relief. In essence, as campus authority figures who were personally interested in participants’ situations, who understood the pressures imposed on them, and who lent a sympathetic ear to their troubles and hardships, these people played a critical role: a surrogate campus “family,” a source of support for the participants that their families were unable to provide.

An important point that emerged from the data was that most of the professors described as supportive also provided a cultural connection, as most were from Ethnic Studies or Mexican American Studies department. All but three participants majored in social sciences (e.g., social work, sociology, political science, psychology, criminology, Latin studies, and liberal sciences),
and close to half of the participants majored or elected to minor in Ethnic Studies or Mexican American studies. Most also gravitated to courses taught in these departments as electives. For example, Sonya minored in Mexican-American studies partly because she found the Chicano professors especially understanding of her situation. “They were the teachers I would go and talk to.” Though Marcos majored in graphic design, he started taking Ethnic Studies classes because “the teachers were more open. They would take you in and get to know you personally.”

Certain counselors and advisory staff on campus were similarly supportive. They helped participants learn college norms, the responsibilities and expectations of being a college student, and how to navigate the college system. This included directing them to campus resources, showing them how to schedule classes, and tutoring them. For example, Juan’s counselor told him, “I’m just [going to] keep [guiding] you on how to sign up every quarter, which are the best options, best teachers.’ [She made it] really easy for me to pick classes…to [learn] how the system works.”

Many participants also had difficulty navigating the college financial-aid system. For one student, the most meaningful support occurred when the staff member administering a jobs program responded personally and empathetically, rather than bureaucratically, to a glitch in his application:

So I got all the paperwork done but [one piece] didn’t go through. And she felt really bad [because] she knew I needed money. After a month she [accepted my time sheet] and said, “You know what, it’s no fair because you’re ready to work and I know you’re motivated.” She just signed it and I got my check.
Aside from professors, advisors, and counselors, there were also mentors on campus who served as a cultural connection for the participants. Some provided understanding, and others provided direct support. For example, many of Joanna’s co-workers on campus were also Latinas, and she noted how comforting it was to work around people who understood her plight. She described how her co-workers and even supervisors talked about how difficult it was to have strict Latino parents: “Even though we weren’t the same age, we all had similar experiences. I think that made it…very nurturing. They reminded me of people in my own family.”

Peers—fellow students—were another major area of support—particularly other Latinos. They provided assistance and direction in navigating the college system, including how to apply for financial aid or where to find tutoring. For example, Eduardo was ready to drop out of college after learning that his financial aid did not cover everything, but was able to stay because a friend informed him about student loans and how to apply:

So my friend, a Latina, she said, “Just get a loan.” I knew there were loans, but I didn’t know the process of getting loans. She shared which loan she got and she [showed me] the application. So [I went to] the financial aid office.

Peers also provided encouragement when thoughts of dropping out surfaced. For example, Jenny describes the emotional support she received from a friend:

I remember after my first semester, I didn’t know if I could do [college]…I remember saying to one of my friends, “Maybe [college] isn’t for me.” [She replied,] “Jenny, you’re one of the best students that I ever known; maybe you just can’t handle stress very well. Right now you’re not seeing the big picture.”

The support from these campus relationships was very helpful to overcome the challenges participants faced. They were challenged by not being familiar with how the college
system works as well as not having the support at home to help them understand how the system works. Given their limited time on campus with respect to managing multiple demands, having access to people on campus who understood the goals they were trying to achieve while working and commuting made a significant difference. What also helped them persist were motivational influences.

**Other Influences Supporting Latino Persistence**

According to participants, adjusting to college life while managing multiple demands and dealing with Latino family dynamics was not an easy task. Being unfamiliar with how the college system works created a sense of uncertainty about whether or not they had the ability to handle college. However, when participants described what helped them adjust to college life, they pointed to receiving encouraging signs that validated their progress, and they reflected on their own personal reasons for persistence.

**Validating experiences.** These were signals that helped participants believe they could go on despite the many obstacles they encountered. Achieving each milestone and witnessing other Latinos in the same circumstances both persist, and finish, were crucial in this regard.

Completing the first quarter, a semester, or another year of college encouraged participants, reinforced their desire to go on, and demonstrated that completing a college degree was within their abilities. Whether simply passing all of their classes, celebrating a good grade, or just personally reflecting on what it had taken for them to get through to that point, such milestones provided a sense of accomplishment that enabled participants to believe that persisting was possible. Thus, believing that they could persist helped to ensure that they would persist. As Raymond stated:
Obviously I should have done better [the first quarter]. I could’ve done better, but I did pretty well for having everything that was thrown at me. I was pretty impressed with myself. I was like, “Wow. I can really handle [college].”

Similarly, Isabel described:

What I really liked about that first quarter was that I was able to balance academics, work and sorority. Because that’s kind of how it was throughout college—being able to balance my time…I think just accomplishing my [first] year there [let me know] that I could “do” college.

Such experiences were not only part of a self-reinforcing positive cycle—once this milestone had been reached, the next seemed more doable—but once participants believed they truly could “do” college, they often decided to become even more invested in the college experience. They intentionally adopted tactics likely to lead to persistence such as adjusting study habits, improving time management skills, and getting involved on campus. These tactics were further validated when participants earned better grades and reduced their stress levels, or met other Latinos like them who provided support or served as role models in navigating the college system.

Having a sense of accomplishment helped the participants get past their thoughts of dropping out, as well. When participants talked about why they stayed the course, many felt that considering the amount of time and energy they had invested, leaving school would have meant that all they had gone through would be in vain. Moreover, the fact that they were “here already,” that is, had already achieved the accomplishment of being able to reach the university level or persist through a semester or year, meant that quitting would squander that accomplishment for them. For example, Marcos explains his reason for staying:
I went through [too much] trouble for me to stop. What am I going to do with all these classes that I took? There’s no paper that says [I’m] a professional. No, I would just kind of lose it all and live on stand-by…I knew I needed to just keep going.

In addition to these validating experiences, participants noted that role models motivated them to persist as well.

Participants found role models amongst two groups of people they encountered: fellow students and graduates, including professors. Participants were both comforted and inspired when they realized there were other students like themselves facing similar challenges—as one participant put it, they were all “in the same boat”—but who nevertheless were persisting on the path to finish college. For example, Manuel was never able to participate in clubs on campus because of his commute and job. He described how he would learn what other students were going through as they chatted briefly in the parking lot right after class, on their way to work or family responsibilities. He acknowledged the relief of knowing other students were subject to the same stressors:

Just relating to other kids on campus. Other students going through similar things, having no time to read, all my time going to school and work and all that…I wasn’t the only one experiencing the stress.

Implicit was the thought that if other students were able to handle those stressors, the participants could as well. Carmen found such a role model in her sibling who was a few years ahead in school:

I didn’t know if I was going to be able to make it through [college]. But then…I thought, “If [my sister] can do it, I can do it.” So I just pushed myself.
Participants also found role models in Latinos they encountered who had completed their degrees. Whether recent graduates, faculty, counselors, advisors, mentors or other staff, they were undeniable proof that persistence was possible for Latinos. For example, Eduardo’s Mexican-American studies professor was inspirational to him, “I had somebody in front of me that was Latino and had a doctorate – that was just amazing.” In particular, the shared cultural connection provided avenues for participants to learn that their role models’ degrees had often been attained despite cultural and academic challenges similar to those the participants were facing. The obvious implication was that if their role models had succeeded, the participants could too.

**The impetus to succeed.** When participants reflected on when the idea of college first entered their minds, why they persisted year after year, and what it felt like to finally achieve their bachelor degrees, the impetus to succeed surfaced as a major motivating factor. There were two elements to this: participants were motivated to succeed by the desire to attain better economic opportunities than their parents and they also wanted to serve as role models for other family members.

The desire for the economic success that accompanied a college degree was a strong personal motivation for all of the participants, perhaps unsurprising because of their families’ limited economic circumstances. For example, one participant’s family worked in agriculture, picking grapes. Early on he learned this was not something he wanted to do as a living:

In the summers and the weekends, sometimes [my parents] would take us [with them to work.] It was tough working 10 hours, sometime 12 hours, during the day. The conditions were not always favorable. Sometimes it would rain. Sometimes it was hot. I just knew I didn’t want to do that for the rest of my life. My uncles were doing it. My
older brothers were doing it. So the idea of college and doing something else really seemed like something I [wanted to do].

Others spoke of their parents’ sacrifices in order to provide their children with the opportunity of a higher education—an opportunity the parents had never had. Juan said:

My [parents] supported my studies...they just didn’t know how to give me the tools. [But they] gave me the motivation….To know that my parents suffered [economically] throughout the year and they can’t [be promoted] in their company just motivated me to do what I need to do for my family.

In addition to economic advancement, some participants were motivated by a desire to someday serve as a role model to other family members. Claudia exemplifies this group. The oldest of four, she was not only the first in her immediate or extended family to go to college, but she was also the first in her family to graduate from high school. Claudia said her motivation for persisting in college was that she “wanted to be that person in the family that everybody could look up and say, ‘Wow. She did it. She has a college degree.’”

The decision to persevere in college compelled participants to make academic or personal adjustments in their lives. Some self-reflected on what was or was not working in their path to succeed, while others relied on campus relationships to help pull them through thoughts of dropping out. Participants also described how they developed a schedule to manage their time better, compromising, if necessary, their social life and/or work or sleeping hours.

Summary

The participants interviewed in this study were first-generation Latino college students who attended and graduated from three separate commuter campuses. From the participants’ descriptions of their college experiences and their paths to degree completion, three central
themes emerged: the challenges participants had to overcome in order to persist; the systems that provided support along the difficult path; and other influences that affected their adjustment to college life.

The first theme was the challenges participants faced. As pictured in Figure 1, participants were unfamiliar with college norms, and when they entered the college environment they felt lost and scared, did not anticipate the academic and cultural shift between high school and college, were unprepared for the responsibilities expected of college students, and did not know how to navigate the college system. Participants also had to manage work and family responsibilities along with college demands. Work and family obligations often pulled them away from their studies and caused a great deal of stress. Unfortunately, prioritizing college over work and family responsibilities was not a choice. Working was the participants’ financial lifeline to staying in college by paying their living expenses and helping support their families.

The final challenge participants faced was Latino family dynamics. Their parents did not understand the pressures they faced as college students and continued to pressure their children to remain a part of the family unit and prioritize the needs of the family over college demands. These included time-consuming tasks such as household duties, taking care of other family members, and spending social time with family. As a result, when participants had thoughts of dropping out of college, it was most often in response to feeling overwhelmed in managing multiple demands, and their academic performance suffered as well.
Participants credited the support systems of the second theme, as pictured in Figure 2, with helping them overcome those challenges and thus to persist. Parents who had not expected their children to go to college supported participants with the permission to live at home and use part of their earnings to pay college rather than support their family’s expenses. Parents who had expected their children to go to college supported participants with financial help to pay tuition. Participants, themselves, also utilized financial aid programs or community networks that supplemented their earnings to help pay college expenses and campus relationships. A second type of support was found in on-campus relationships with faculty, staff, and peers—most often those who shared their cultural background. These relationships were vital in helping participants learn how to navigate the college system, and in providing a surrogate campus “family” that understood the stress they were experiencing and responded empathetically.

The third theme pointed to other factors that encouraged their adjustment to college life and motivated persistence to degree completion despite the challenges they faced. There were two key reasons for staying the course: validating experiences and personal reasons. Validating experiences included both periodic affirmations that they could “do” college, after all, as well as seeing other Latinos persist in similar circumstances. Such experiences fed a positive cycle of self-reinforcement. Finally, participants were motivated by personal reasons to succeed. Many
participants spoke of their desires to have better economic opportunities than their parents had and to serve as role models for their family members.

Figure 2: Factors supporting Latino college persistence

- Parent permission or expectation
- Financial resources
- Campus relationships
- Signs validating college experience

The next chapter expands on the current findings by deepening our understanding of Latino college persistence and providing recommendations to educators and future researchers.
Chapter V
Discussion & Conclusion

Introduction

The central research question for this study is what influenced first-generation Latino commuter-university graduates’ ability to persist to bachelor degree completion? To address the research question, twenty Latino first-generation bachelor degree graduates from a commuter-university were interviewed.

Three key themes emerged from the findings. One theme illuminated the challenges participants faced during college. Latinos were unfamiliar with college norms, struggled to manage multiple demands, and were challenged by the effects of Latino family dynamics. As first-generation college students, participants were not familiar with the demands and expectations that come with being a college student, yet they embarked on the college path while working and commuting from home. Juggling work and family demands with a college life they had minimal understanding of proved to be very challenging. Moreover, their parents were unable to understand the pressures they faced and continued to impose familial obligations on them that interfered with their college responsibilities.

The second theme described the types of support participants received: from parents, financial aid resources, and on-campus relationships that helped them to persist. Parents gave permission to make college happen or helped their child find ways to pay for college. Because their families did not have the resources to pay for college, having access to financial aid programs to supplement their earnings from employment helped cover college expenses. Participants also described on-campus relationships as very helpful. They gravitated towards professors that provided a personal connection. These professors went beyond teaching the
subject matter. They also inquired about the participants’ lives outside of class, gave them knowledge of how the college system works, and encouraged them to drop by during office hours for help on any matter. Peers on campus also lent emotional support and guidance on navigating the college system. Staff members also showed support through cultural connections or understanding challenges they faced.

The third theme revealed two reasons that students persevered and adjusted to college life despite facing several challenges. Achieving milestones and related experiences validated the idea that students could successfully manage going to college, while observing the persistence and subsequent graduation of other Latinos in the “same boat” proved that a college education was attainable for Latinos like them. Moreover, the personal impetus for attaining a college degree, for example the sacrifices their parents made as immigrants, kept participants motivated to stay the course and finish their degrees. Support factors coupled with other influences caused participants to adjust to college demands.

This chapter expands on the findings in two sections. The first section explains how the study’s results deepen our understanding of Latino college persistence by examining the landscape of factors that cause Latinos to consider dropping out of college and addressing the factors that enable them to persist to degree completion. It then offers recommendations for changes in policies and procedures based on this analysis. The second suggests future research questions and reflects on my own journey as a Latina in higher education.

**Latino College Experience**

This study adds to the research by illuminating two aspects of Latinos’ pursuit of a bachelor’s degree: the specific challenges they face and the factors that enable them to persist.
When Latinos enter college, they feel as if they have travelled to another planet. Latinos embark on the college path with little or no “social capital”. Students with social capital for college come from households with college-educated families that expect and prepare their children for the college experience, and provide the means so that the students can prioritize college instead of work and/or family obligations (Nora, 2004). Conversely, most Latinos begin college with no idea of what is expected of them as college students or how the college system works, and their financial situation requires them both to work to pay for school and live at home to reduce costs. As a result of being raised with a collective worldview, Latinos who live at home are required to prioritize the needs of the family over their own, causing conflicts with their school responsibilities. As they struggle to manage competing demands from work, family, and college, they feel overwhelmed, leading them to consider dropping out.

As first-generation college students, Latinos encounter obstacles as soon as they set foot on a university campus. Latino students, as well as their parents, are unaware of the responsibilities and expectations that come with being a college student. Being unfamiliar with these college norms, Latino students assume that they can work and live at home during college and maintain the study habits they had in high school. They do not conceive of or plan for the time outside of class required to succeed—to do extensive library research, meet with professors, and take care of administrative details, such as register for classes. Not anticipating these additional time expenditures required by this new world they know so little about makes their college path even more challenging.

Unaware of the responsibilities and expectations of college life, Latino parents and students generally do not anticipate the costs to attend college; even if they do, they are most likely not able financially to save or pay for college. In order to afford college, Latinos must live
at home to reduce costs, and work to bring in extra income. Although Pascarella and Terrenzini (2005) report that working while enrolled in college decreases the likelihood of social and academic integration and, in turn, can negatively affect persistence, working, for Latinos, is a means to achieve a bachelor’s degree.

Living at home reduces costs for Latinos, but like working, it also negatively impacts college persistence. Because Latino parents and students both presume college life to entail no greater demands on students’ home life than high school did, parents continue to expect students to prioritize family obligations over their own needs, including their school responsibilities. This cultural imperative often conflicts with college demands, creating both an emotional and academic challenge.

Latino college students are likely to feel blind-sided by the realization that they must manage college, work, and family demands, all while forging an unfamiliar path. They do not anticipate these challenges because they were not aware college meant having to grapple with the expectations of two competing worldviews. Raised in a Latino culture that values a collectivistic worldview (Ibarra, 2002) Latino students have always accepted their obligation to adhere to the needs of the family. Prior to college, their loyalty to the needs of the family was rarely an issue, as the demands of high-school homework and family time were manageable. Once they entered college, however, they came face-to-face with an academic culture whose norms are based on an individualistic worldview. The academic norms of post-secondary education require students to prioritize college demands in order to persist. Trying to balance demands from competing worldviews causes dissonance and stress. Replacing one worldview with the other is not the issue—or an option—for Latinos. Rather, they are challenged by the need to balance these uncompromising and competing demands within a college environment they know little about,
while they are unable to spare the time to step back and learn how the system works. Not knowing how to approach this challenge, Latinos feel overwhelmed, leading to thoughts of dropping out.

Ibarra (2001) examined the conflict between Latino cultural values and American academic values. According to Ibarra, individuals raised in a Latino culture are oriented to value family, relationships, and community above all else. Ibarra contends that individuals socialized to value collectivism value relationships and tend to be sensitive to the opinion of others. Thus, how Latinos perceive the world depends in large part on the significance to them of relationships and emotional ties. Ibarra’s findings are congruent with both the challenges and sources of support cited by the participants in this study. The Latino family dynamics, as described by participants, demanded that they prioritize family obligations over college demands, negatively affecting persistence.

Fortunately, by drawing from a sample of Latinos who succeeded in managing these competing demands in order to persist to degree completion, this study illuminates ways that Latinos have nonetheless persisted to degree completion. Latinos need to know how they (or their parents) can afford college, develop a system to balance competing demands, find a supportive network on campus, and identify personal reasons to be motivated to persevere.

**Capitalizing on Latino persistence.** Not knowing how to manage competing demands from work, family, and college while forging an unfamiliar path causes these students to have thoughts of dropping out of college. However, despite facing a plethora of challenges Latinos do persist. This study shows Latinos persist because they:

- Figure out how to financially afford the college path;
- Create a system to help them balance multiple demands;
• Form alliances with people on campus who not only care and understand what they have to endure to persist, but also support them in navigating the college system; and

• Find personal reasons to feel motivated to persevere.

**Affording life and college.** Participants in this study, who came from households with families that were generally not prepared to pay the costs of higher education, experienced stress from worrying how to pay for college. Though earnings from work and permission to live at home during college is important, more is needed to cover educational and living expenses – and Latinos are unlikely to ask their family to go into debt or for extra money to cover tuition. Therefore, figuring out ways to afford college without compromising the needs of the family is critical in enabling Latino college persistence. Awareness of readily accessible student loans and government funded financial programs is vital for Latino college students. This echoes Pascarella and Terenzini’s (2005) finding that two economic factors are likely to increase a student’s ability to persist in college: low financial costs and the availability of financial aid.

**Balancing competing demands.** Latinos must also figure out how to balance college with family and work demands. Some Latinos are able to devise a system during their first quarter or semester, while others take as long as a year or two. Once Latinos determine how to manage competing demands, it is crucial that they incorporate other aspects of college into their lives, such as joining clubs and making time to meet with professors. Such activities open up greater opportunities to develop on-campus relationships outside of class, through which they learn to conform to American academic culture, gain knowledge on how the college system works, and experience cultural affinity—all of which encourage persistence.

**Finding a supportive network on campus.** For Latino students, a college campus can seem like another planet; therefore, finding sources of comfort and familiarity is instrumental to
their persistence. Since Latinos enter the college path with little or no social capital to aid their navigation of the college system, limited time to explore the college environment, and few academically experienced role models in the Latino community, Latino college students find on-campus relationships especially valuable. Individuals who understand their plight and who are in a position to provide the emotional support and guidance that the student’s family cannot consist of empathetic professors, staff, and peers on campus—particularly those who share a similar cultural background. This strategy is also supported by other research (Torres, 2006; Nora, 2003) on Latino college persistence in particular and college persistence in general (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Essentially, Latinos in this study were able to capitalize on their communal orientation by contacting people on campus who provided comfort and understanding.

Professors and mentors as well as peers have a powerful influence on college persistence. Peer support, as noted by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), can be attributed to the concept of *progressive conformity*, whereby dominant peer groups help shape student norms such as the expectation to persist in college. Latinos enter higher education not knowing what to expect in the college experience, which might reasonably increase their susceptibility to progressive conformity. At the same time, Latinos are arguably less susceptible because they have little time to socially integrate on campus due to juggling multiple demands. Yet after they adjust to college life, they do engage with their peers by getting involved on campus. In doing so, participants in this study met peers who helped them navigate the college system and who demonstrated that juggling multiple demands is part of the commuter-college experience. Latinos are likely to persist by observing peers who are “in the same boat” yet managing to stay in college and eventually complete their degrees — an experience they can emulate.
The importance of campus connections surfaced in other studies. Braxton et al. (2005) reported that commuter-university students are likely to persist when the classroom represents a major aspect of the students’ social and academic community. Torres’ (2006) Social Cognitive Retention Model for Latino Students at Urban Universities also found that Latino students emphasized that having someone — whether a mentor, faculty, or otherwise — advise them on how the college system works made a difference in succeeding in the college experience. Nora’s (2003) Model of Student/Institutional Engagement also found that Latinos who felt welcomed on campus were more likely to persist. According to Nora’s model, both support and encouragement from significant others, and interacting with professors in a way that helps Latino students perceive faculty as being accepting toward minority students, positively influence the students’ decisions to reconsider dropping out—as well as help them to make cognitive gains. Similarly, though participants in this study entered college faced with challenges likely to hinder college persistence, but these challenges were offset by support from professors, advisors, mentors and peers on campus, particularly Latinos. Students attributed their persistence in part to professors and other staff who addressed student needs beyond the curriculum—especially those, most often Latinos, who saw them as individuals and made them feel welcome in this alien environment by inquiring about their families and community.

Research on Latinos’ efforts to manage dual cultural systems generally focuses on Latinos attending residential campuses and is specifically related to how bicultural identities are developed (Benet-Martinez, Leu & Lee, 2002). However, according to the participants in this study—Latinos attending nonresidential campuses—bicultural identity issues did not surface for them. Perhaps this was because they experienced few challenges to their Latino identity, given that they lived at home and spent little time in the “other” world of college. Moreover, once
they adjusted to campus life, the participants in this study integrated socially and academically primarily with other Latinos on campus. For example, they gravitated towards majors such as Mexican-American studies and classes taught by Latino professors. They also joined Latino-centered clubs and organizations, such as MECHA, Ballet Folklorico and Latina sororities. Thus, this study suggests, Latinos who remain a part of their Latino community at home and also create or join a culturally supportive Latino-oriented network on college campus, do not appear concerned to develop a bicultural identity.

**Fostering personal reasons to persevere.** This study drew from the theoretical framework for Torres’ (2006) retention model for Latino students at urban commuter universities, which showed that Latinos feel uncertain about handling the rigors of college. By contrast, the participants in this study rarely questioned whether they could handle the academic rigors of college. Rather, they questioned whether they could handle juggling family, cultural, and work responsibilities with college demands. As Hugo explained, “trying to balance [relationships, work, ROTC, and class assignments] was more stressful than doing [college work].” In addition to the supports described earlier, other factors in overcoming these challenges were validating experiences that signaled they could do everything else and handle college, too, and personally motivating reasons that give them the impetus to complete, no matter what. Motivators and validation alike inspire Latinos to adjust to college life by adopting behaviors that lead to college persistence.

This discovery is significant because learning how to juggle multiple demands while developing relationships on campus and learning how the college system works takes time, and meanwhile, Latino college students need signs to let them know they are heading in the right direction, as well as a purpose to keep them moving forward on that college degree path.
Milestones, such as successful completion of the first term in college or a positive report card, serve as validating experiences that prove to students that they can be successful, even given the various obstacles with which they must contend. Students’ impetus to succeed and be college graduates springs from the two desires: for greater financial achievement than that of their parents and to be a role model for family members. Validation and desire combine to produce the drive to adjust to college life by incorporating behaviors, such as social and academic integration, that support college persistence.

**Recommendations**

This qualitative study explored how Latino commuter-university graduates persisted to bachelor degree completion while living at home and working, a path Latinos are most likely to take in pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. The findings are timely because they focus on the most prevalent population of Latinos in college: those who entered as first-generation college students right after graduating from high school and successfully achieved a bachelor’s degree within six years, currently considered to be the normal time period (Knapp, et al. 2007).

Unlike their residential college peers, the participants in this study succeeded despite facing a plethora of challenges. They commuted to and from work, school, and home; they had to learn how to navigate the college environment, find ways to pay for college, and figure out how to balance competing demands between school, family, and work. The following recommendations, which may positively affect Latino college persistence, are presented from two complementary perspectives. The first focuses in the short term: providing programs and activities targeted to Latino students and their families. These include preparing Latino students to make the cultural shift that college requires; counseling them on ways to manage multiple demands; increasing Latino parents’ understanding of what college requires; provide Latino
students with validating experiences; and creating opportunities for them to experience cultural connections. The second, a longer-term initiative, is to modify institutional attitudes of colleges such that Latinos can feel welcomed and supported in any major course of study and to modify high school advising in ways that will better prepare Latino students for college demands.

**Short-term: targeted programs and activities.** According to the CSU Chancellor’s 2008-2009 Student Academic Outreach Program Report, the CSU system spends about $59 million dollars on K-14 academic outreach programs. This includes costs to fund college outreach programs across the state that cater to underrepresented and minority students by preparing them to enter the higher educational system, such as CAMP, MESA, GEAR-Up, and Upward Bound. But these programs are no longer adequate. For the first time in our country’s history, the current generation of high school graduates will not be as well educated as their parents’ generation (NALO, 2010). Moreover, by 2018, 63% of the jobs in the workforce will require a college degree (NALO, 2010). Even though Latinos make up 25% of the total college-age population and are entering college at a much higher rate than other major groups, they are the least likely to persist to degree completion. Therefore, college administrators and educators need to focus programs on Latino college persistence.

**Preparing for the academic-cultural shift.** First-generation Latino college students are rightly encouraged to pursue their college aspirations. But they do so while working and living at home—both because it is financially necessary and because they don’t anticipate that college will involve significantly greater multiple demands than their high-school experience led them to believe they could handle. This study, as well as my experience working as a high-school college counselor for over a decade, informs us that Latino high school students are ill-prepared to go to college while holding a job and at the same time learning how to navigate the unfamiliar
system and culture. Institutions can therefore better support Latino college persistence by specifically addressing the cultural shift from high school to college.

While it would seem that colleges could simply provide more orientation programs directed to this population, according to this study, Latinos made little use of such programs. Instead, they relied on campus relationships, particularly personal relationships with Latino professors, mentors, and peers, to show them how the college system works and where to find help when they needed it. Thus, a more successful college orientation program might need to feature Latino faculty, staff, peers, and materials that specifically address the Latino college experience and its challenges in a way that engages the incoming students on a personal level. In the absence of such a program, it is recommended that high-school and college administrators consider methods other than general-purpose orientation programs to teach Latino college students about the significant difference between high school and college cultures and about how to navigate the college system.

**Managing multiple demands.** Another recommendation concerns how best to help current and prospective college students juggle multiple demands. Informing Latino students that they will face this challenge is an initial step, as participants often mentioned that “living in the fast lane” and having to “come to class and leave” were among their biggest surprises about college life. Even more effective at promoting persistence would be to teach Latino students strategies for managing these multiple demands. One such strategy, especially for students who are commuting and working, is to leave an hour or two between courses for study time on campus or for academic and social integration, such as meeting with professors, mentors, or peers.
High school administrators and counselors can also play an important role. For example, in my role as a college counselor at a public high school, in the fall of each year I instruct and assist between five and six hundred seniors in applying for college financial aid and the steps needed to matriculate at four-year and community colleges. I also encourage students who will be living at home during college to enroll concurrently in a community-college course during the spring semester of their senior year in order to familiarize themselves with the college environment and begin to learn college norms—while at the same time balancing multiple demands similar to those they will encounter when they matriculate. As an added bonus, this enables them to embark on their college path virtually for free, reducing their future college costs. I also advise these students to get involved on the community college campus and seek out or create a support system there. These initiatives are, of course, suggested to all graduating seniors, but a focus on Latino students could be even more effective.

**Increasing awareness among Latino parents.** College administrators could help Latino parents better understand the demands college makes on their children. The participants in this study emphasized the frustration they experienced when their parents imposed socio-cultural obligations on them that made it more difficult to juggle the obligations of home, work, and school.

For most of these parents, the model for student engagement is what they observed when their children were in high school. College, by contrast, requires that students take a much more time-consuming role in such activities as deciding on a major, negotiating course schedules, and meeting graduation requirements—activities that were either not required in high school or were handled largely by high school counselors. Participants were also surprised to find that study habits that were adequate during high school were less effective in college. Unlike in college,
high-school teachers frequently remind students during class when assignments are due; teachers also have the flexibility and discretion to allow students to turn in late work or redo quizzes and assignments. Moreover, when high school students run into academic problems, in most cases teachers and counselors work together with parents to develop solutions.

In college, it is the student’s responsibility to understand the professor’s syllabus and meet deadlines, and professors are generally not inclined to negotiate requirements such as due dates. Moreover, if students encounter problems, they must make time outside of class to meet with professors and/or locate the resources on campus that can help them address the problems. Finally, the time requirements for college homework are far greater than in high school and fewer assignments are completed during class time.

Working and living at home is part of the college experience for most Latino college students, and as a financial reality it is unlikely to change. Programs aimed at helping parents understand these factors are likely to contribute to Latino persistence.

**Providing validating experiences.** This study found that validating experiences motivated participants to persist. Each quarter or semester milestone successfully achieved reassured them that they were on the right track and renewed their sense of commitment. Institutional programs designed to periodically acknowledge student achievement could enhance this affirmation. At the same time, an “early warning” system might alert a struggling student’s advisor earlier than the final grading period, so that remedial action could be initiated.

Another important validation was meeting other students similar to themselves who were either persisting or had graduated, thus affirming that their own dreams could be realized. Programs featuring Latino professors, staff, or prominent Latino graduates who can speak about their college experiences, the challenges they faced, and how they overcame them can connect
with students at a personal, cultural level. They provide “living proof” and inspiration that Latinos can persist and graduate. Other models can also be helpful: administrators can be creative in displaying profiles of “typical” successful minority students in their last year of college, including the number of hours they work, their chosen major, their motivations to get a college degree, and how they manage multiple, competing demands. Participants in this study were especially motivated by the success of those whom they perceived as being “in the same boat.”

College educators and administrators can also support Latino college persistence by increasing opportunities for Latino students to build relationships with professors and other potential mentors. This might include finding ways to acknowledge the additional time and effort expended by faculty who consistently engage with these students on a personal level, since these participants reported that was key to feeling supported. At the same time, programs might be initiated that help professors and staff develop a greater understanding of the plight Latino college students face and how they might be more accessible to or supportive of these students.

Creating opportunities for cultural connection. Cultural affinity plays a significant role in Latino college student persistence. Institutions could increase opportunities for Latino students to connect with those who understand the cultural challenges they face and their need to feel a sense of kinship. Administrators might organize systems of cultural peer mentoring or encourage—and fund—greater outreach on the part of campus cultural programs.

Longer-term: changing institutional attitudes.

Creating cross-campus welcome. The outlook of future job growth in our economy is changing due to the demands of living in a technological society (Bartsch, 2009). For example, occupations that require college degrees in engineering, computer, math and science continue to
grow more than twice as fast as occupations outside of these respective fields (Lacey & Wright, 2009). Yet only one out of the twenty participants in this study selected a major in biological science. Of the remaining nineteen participants, two selected majors outside of social sciences (business finance and graphic design) while the others chose majors in the social sciences primarily because they had made personal connections with, and gained support from, the professors in those fields, many more of whom are Latino. Improving the ratio of Latino professors in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) departments is clearly a long-term goal, and one that—ironically—is dependent, in large part, on graduating more Latinos with STEM majors. This underscores the importance of attracting more Latino students to these fields and then taking appropriate steps to encourage their persistence. Given the aforementioned projections for growth in Latino population, ushering more Latinos into physical sciences and technology may be a significant contribution to the future health of the nation’s economy.

It is also important for faculty across campus to realize that cultural understanding is a responsibility shared by all, from Ethnic Studies to Physics, and Sociology to Geology. Likewise, the Latino student preference for the social sciences should not be construed as natural or ineluctable. Since Latinos are communal and work well when feeling personally connected to their professors, it behooves administrators from all departments to provide training for staff and faculty in how to make that connection, thus capitalizing on the strengths Latino students bring to college.

_Counseling more effectively._ Another long-term change may involve a shift at the high school level. When prospective college students apply to residential college campuses such as the University of California and private colleges, these institutions look beyond test scores and grade point averages to the student’s involvement in extra-curricular activities. This
involvement demonstrates not only that students are “well-rounded,” but that they have successfully juggled academic responsibilities with other demands. Because commuter-type institutions that Latinos are most likely to enter, such as the California State University system, do not stress extra-curricular activities, high school counselors do not emphasize these when advising students toward college admission. Were they to shift their thinking on this point, Latino students might arrive at college better prepared to handle the multiple demands that await them.

**Summary**

A critical factor in supporting Latino graduation rates is the continued—perhaps expanded—funding of college outreach programs, such as Outward Bound and MESA, and pre-college programs, such as AVID, which encourage Latino student to apply. At the same time, educators need to devote more attention to persistence while continuing to build enrollment numbers. This includes preparing Latino students, especially those designated first-generation, for the dramatic differences between the high school and college environments. These differences are not merely academic, with college being more demanding; they are also cultural. Because Latinos are communal, they need to feel a kinship with their instructors and fellow students. Rather than limit their time on campus exclusively to class attendance, Latino students need greater opportunities to study and socialize with their peers through orientations, clubs, and organizations. Such organizations can also provide models or connect them with mentors in the form of successful Latino students or professors from the entire range of academic fields.

But Latino students should not have to wait until a college orientation program to hear a successful Latino student, professor, or professional address their needs or inspire them to pursue a college degree. High schools can expedite the process by inviting such role-models to meet
their juniors and seniors. It is also important that advisors and educators explicitly reach out to Latino parents, many of whom have no way of anticipating how much more college will demand of their children even beyond the heightened academic requirements.

Attending a commuter college places a premium on the capacity of Latino students to manage multiple responsibilities—family and community obligations, job, financing their education (while in many cases also contributing to the family’s finances), and the time spent commuting between home, work, and campus. Therefore, high schools must better prepare college-bound Latino students for the stressful reality of managing competing tasks and obligations. High school counselors and parents need to understand that it is not academic pressures per se that may make persistence difficult for Latino college students. Rather, it may be the inability of these communally oriented students to adjust to the alien, individually oriented culture of college, exacerbated by the demands of family, work, and commuting that cause these students to withdraw.

Finally, colleges can foster long-term attitudinal shifts within their own campuses that are more likely to lead to paths of study not typically chosen by Latino students. The tendency of Latino students to major in the social sciences does not stem from a lack of innate talent or potential for law, business, or physics. Rather, it is Latino students’ cultural needs for community and personal connection that are currently most readily met by majoring in fields like sociology or ethnic studies. By enlightening deans and professors about these culturally-based tendencies of Latino students, colleges and universities may encourage new initiatives or modifications of current practice that would better support these students. At a minimum, they can begin to bridge enrollment gaps in STEM and other fields by having representative
professors address these students at orientation programs in order to dispel the notion that they cannot experience community or cultural integration outside the social science classroom.

**Closure**

**Recommendations for future research.** This study explored how first-generation, Latino commuter-university graduates described what influenced their ability to persist to bachelor degree completion while juggling family and work with college demands. The findings present a snapshot of their experience, on and off campus, in pursuit of completing their bachelor’s degree. This study illuminated the challenges Latinos face causing them to have thoughts of dropping out of college and it also identified the support systems that helped Latinos persist. Based on the findings from this study, I suggest the following recommendations for future research.

The first recommendation for future research is to address how first-generation, Latino commuter-university students are informed about the challenges they are likely to face if they live at home and work during college. Participants in this study described feeling blind-sided because they had not realized how college demands were different than what they had successfully managed in high school and how much time was required, from their daily lives, to be a college student. Even those who had access to local community colleges and universities either in geographic proximity or via the Internet entered their college years not fully understanding the academic demands. Since the overwhelming majority of first-generation Latino college students are likely to juggle multiple demands by living at home and working during college, it is important to know more about how and when they are informed of what college will demand of them. Can institutional efforts at the high school or college level help bridge this gap in their knowledge?
Even so, this study found that despite feeling overwhelmed with the task of managing college, work, and family demands, participants were motivated to stay in college once they began to believe college was possible. They attribute this positive outlook to achieving various milestones and observing other Latinos “in the same boat” persist to degree completion. Therefore, another meaningful research topic is to explore these and other possible motivational supports. What factors or experiences help these students believe they will succeed? Might institutional efforts aimed at affirming their progress or foregrounding the experiences of other successful Latinos be effective?

This study also informs educators of the academic challenges Latino college students face who have to work in order to afford the college path. When participants described feeling overwhelmed due to multiple demands, homework was most likely to be neglected because work-for-pay was essential in order to meet their tuition and personal living expenses and, given cultural expectations, family demands could rarely be avoided. Therefore, a third potential research area is to explore how Latino families finance education. What are their perceptions and understandings regarding financial aid? How are first-generation Latino college-bound students, and their parents, informed about financial aid programs? Can institutional programs or practices improve Latino understanding and acquisition of financial support?

Finally, this study detailed the ways in which the time constraints faced by Latino college students who work and live at home are make it difficult for them to utilize academic support programs. Instead, they rely on their peers and professors for support during class. Another possible research theme would be to explore how commuter university students currently utilize academic support programs outside of class time and what institutional arrangements might make these programs more available or useful.
In sum, the recommendations for future research focus on the major issues to address Latino college persistence. Since Latinos are most likely to be first-generation college students juggling multiple demands it is imperative to explore how we are preparing them for the challenges they will face. If Latinos are personally motivated to stay the course by reaching milestones and observing others like them persist, then exploring how colleges validate their experiences is also imperative. Much of the stress Latinos face is in response to affording the college path; this is why exploring how Latino families are informed about financial aid programs is also important. Lastly, if Latino commuter university students come to class and leave, educators must explore how campus support programs might be structured more effectively to meet their needs.

**My journey.** When I went to college I entered the post-secondary system as a first-generation, Latina raised by Mexican immigrant parents. I was also challenged by the task of prioritizing college demands with the Latino cultural obligation to help support my family. Twenty years later, as I reflect on the findings presented in this study, I am both disappointed and optimistic about our progress toward addressing the Latino higher education achievement gap.

I am disappointed that the cognitive dissonance these students face from competing demands between the Latino and American academic worldviews has changed little, if at all since my college years, both within the family and in the wider society. As a child of Mexican immigrants I was never expected to go to college. This was not a decision, but an inevitable reality of our circumstances. My family’s priority was survival. Furthermore, no one in my immediately or extended family had ever gone to college so the only avenue to help me realize this dream was my high school.
At the beginning of my senior year, I made an appointment with my high school counselor to find out how to enter a university. He said that since no one in my family had been to college and I was not academically or financially prepared, I should consider marriage or joining the military. I learned on this day that people like me are not supposed to go to college.

Nevertheless, I was persistent enough to enroll in a community college. There I met Miguel, whose parents were also immigrants—the first Latino I had ever known personally who was pursuing the dream of higher education. He was not only a role-model, but he showed me how to apply for financial aid, register for classes, apply for housing, and transfer to a university. Without this experience I doubt that I would have found my way along the path that has led to my becoming a high school counselor and now, to earning a doctoral degree.

As I listened to the stories of the participants in this study, I heard echoes of what I endured to persist in college. I too felt the college environment was another planet in comparison to my Latino community. Like these students, I suffered feeling lost, disconnected, and unfamiliar with college norms. I was also torn by the Latino cultural obligation to place the needs of my family ahead of my own. Although these times were rare for me, because I had moved away from where my family lived, they caused a great deal of stress. It was therefore disappointing to realize that so little progress has been made and that still today, first-generation Latino college students deal with many of the same struggles I experienced twenty years ago.

Nevertheless, I am also encouraged that these participants, and no doubt many others at the Latino graduation ceremonies I attended, were able to persist and succeed, despite challenges that in many cases exceeded my own. Though they entered a world they and their families knew little about and bore great responsibility to help their families survive, yet they persevered. They were often compelled to prioritize the needs of the family before their own
individual, academic needs and unlike most college students at residential campuses, had to worry whether they would earn enough to continue paying tuition. Many worried about midterms and finals while helping their parents through financial hardships. They struggled to get their own college assignment turned in on time while helping their younger siblings with homework assignments. In some cases, their efforts to encourage younger siblings on the college path pitted them against gangs in their neighborhoods. When there were not enough hours in the day to pay attention to their own studies, they sacrificed sleep hours to get homework done. When they lacked money to pay tuition, they increased their work hours, further limiting their access to the support programs that may have been available. They rarely saw light at the end of the tunnel and often questioned whether or not college was possible. But, despite everything, their dreams of a better life for themselves, their family, and their community made them struggle on “carrying the boulder uphill,” and complete their degrees. This is a reason for great optimism.

Considerable research has focused why Latinos do not persist. Now, thanks to the participants in this study, we have a deeper understanding of what actions educators might take to encourage and support these students to succeed. During the interviews, as participants described the challenges they faced in college, I pressed them on what kept them going. Given what they were up against to stay in college, why did they persist? In the end, it was a combination of their internal drive for a better life and the supports they found or were able to create in their environment. We educators can affect both of these factors. We can encourage young Latinos to dream; we can also develop great cultural understanding of the Latino experience, and programs and structures based on that understanding, to help those dreams come true.
References


Appendices

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PERCENTAGE OF INCREASES IN UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT

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Appendix A

Percentage of increases in undergraduate enrollment
(Santiago & Brown, 2004)

Chart 1: Percentage increases in undergraduate enrollment by ethnic group, 1996-2000

- Non-Hispanic whites
- African-Americans
- Asian/Pacific Islanders
- Latinos
Appendix B

Institutional Breakdown on Latino College Students (Knapp et al., 2007)

Chart 2: Institutional Breakdown on Latino college students

Traditional-aged, first-time, first-degree-seeking students:

- 57% of Latinos at community colleges
- 43% of Latinos at 4-year institutions

Non-Latinos (90.9%)
Latinos (9.1%)
Appendix C

Latinos by Degree Completions
(Knapp et al., 2007)

Chart 3: Latinos by degree completion.

Traditional-aged, first-time, first-degree-seeking students:

- Non-Latinos (90.9%)
- Latinos (9.1%)

48.7% of Latinos earned a bachelor's degree within 6 years
53.3% of Latinos did not earn a bachelor's degree within 6 years
Appendix D

Rates of Mexican-American bachelor degree attainment (by generation) (Grogger & Trejo, 2002).
APPENDIX E

Chicano/Latino Graduate Student Questionnaire

ATTN: Chicano/Latino Bachelor Degree Graduates of 2009
I am a Latina first generation, college graduate currently working on a doctoral dissertation and need to interview Latino/a Bachelor Degree Graduates for my study on the Latino College Experience. The interview will be held at the end of the semester and lasts about an hour.

If you would like to contribute to research on the Latino College Experience, please email the information below to:

Connie Dominguez
educ8ting@gmail.com

Name: ___________________________ Gender: Male/Female
Email: ___________________________ Phone Number: __________________

Are you Latino/a? YES or NO
Are you of Mexican-descent? YES or NO
Did you enter college right after high school? YES or NO
Did you work at least part-time during college? YES or NO
Did you live off campus (at home) anytime during college? YES or NO
What is your age? ___

How many years did it take you to complete your bachelor’s degree? ____
Did your parents graduate from college? YES or NO

CONGRATULATIONS AND THANK YOU!
Appendix F

Questions for Semi-structured Interviews

**PRE-COLLEGE**
 WHEN DID YOU FIRST THINK YOU MIGHT GO TO COLLEGE? [WAS ANYONE INVOLVED IN HELPING YOU COME UP WITH THAT IDEA?]

WHAT WAS IMPORTANT [TO YOU] ABOUT GETTING A COLLEGE DEGREE?

IN WHAT WAYS WERE YOU ENCOURAGED TO GO TO COLLEGE?

IN WHAT WAYS WERE YOU DISCOURAGED?

HOW DID YOU DECIDE WHERE TO APPLY FOR COLLEGE?

WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO ATTEND THE CAMPUS YOU GRADUATED FROM?

RIGHT BEFORE YOU WERE READY TO START COLLEGE, WHAT THOUGHTS DID YOU HAVE ABOUT WHAT COLLEGE WOULD BE LIKE?

DID YOU FEEL READY FOR COLLEGE? WHY OR WHY NOT?

WHAT DISCUSSIONS DID YOU AND YOUR PARENTS HAVE ABOUT YOUR COLLEGE PLANS?

WHAT CONVERSATIONS DID YOU HAVE WITH YOUR PARENTS ABOUT PAYING FOR COLLEGE?

**FIRST YEAR**
 WHAT WERE YOUR INITIAL REACTIONS ABOUT BEING IN COLLEGE? HOW DID IT FEEL?

WHAT WAS THE FIRST QUARTER/SEMESTER LIKE?

WHAT WERE YOUR BEST MOMENTS?

WHAT WERE YOUR WORST MOMENTS?

BESIDES GOING TO CLASS, WHAT ELSE DID YOU DO WHEN YOU WERE ON CAMPUS?

WHAT ELSE WAS GOING ON IN YOUR LIFE BESIDES COLLEGE?

WHAT DID YOU DO WHEN YOU WERE NOT AT SCHOOL?
HOW DID YOU SPEND YOUR TIME AT HOME?

HOW DID YOUR PARENTS FEEL ABOUT YOU BEING IN COLLEGE?

DID YOU FEEL YOUR PARENTS OR FAMILY UNDERSTOOD WHAT YOU DEALT WITH AS A COLLEGE STUDENT? WHY?

LOOKING BACK, WHAT WERE YOUR BEST ABOUT THE FIRST YEAR?

WHAT WERE YOUR WORST MOMENTS?

WHAT HELPED YOU GET THROUGH?

SECOND YEAR

BETWEEN YOUR FIRST AND SECOND YEAR IN COLLEGE, DID YOU EVER HAVE THOUGHTS ABOUT NOT RETURNING TO COLLEGE? WHY?

WHAT MADE YOU CHANGE YOUR MIND?

DURING YOUR 2ND YEAR IN COLLEGE, DID YOUR LIFE AT SCHOOL OR HOME CHANGE? IF SO, IN WHAT WAYS?

DID THESE CHANGES AFFECT HOW YOU FELT ABOUT BEING IN COLLEGE? IF SO, IN WHAT WAYS?

LOOKING BACK, WHAT WERE YOUR BEST ABOUT THE SECOND YEAR?

WHAT WERE YOUR WORST MOMENTS?

WHAT HELPED YOU GET THROUGH?

FINAL YEARS IN COLLEGE

DURING YOUR LAST TWO (OR THREE) YEARS IN COLLEGE, DID YOU EVER QUESTION WHETHER OR NOT YOU WOULD FINISH? WHY?

WHAT WAS HAPPENING IN YOUR LIFE, DURING YOUR LAST TWO YEARS IN COLLEGE?

WHAT DO YOU THINK WAS KEEPING YOU IN COLLEGE THROUGH THESE LAST TWO OR THREE YEARS?

HOW WAS YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR FAMILY WHILE YOU WERE CONCENTRATING ON SCHOOL?
DID SCHOOL EVER INTERFERE WITH FAMILY LIFE?

DID FAMILY EVER INTERFERE WITH SCHOOL LIFE?

**NOW, AS A COLLEGE GRADUATE**

WAS COLLEGE WHAT YOU EXPECTED OR IMAGINED IT WOULD BE LIKE? WHY?

WHAT DO YOU THINK MADE IT POSSIBLE FOR YOU TO FINISH COLLEGE?

OR WHO/WHAT WOULD YOU GIVE CREDIT TO?

IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WISH YOU COULD HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY (OR KNOWN ABOUT) TO MAKE YOUR COLLEGE YEARS BETTER?

COULD OTHERS IN YOUR LIFE (AT HOME OR SCHOOL) HAVE DONE TO MAKE YOUR COLLEGE LIFE BETTER?

DO YOU RECALL PROFESSORS THAT REACHED OUT TO YOU OR OTHER STUDENTS?

DO YOU RECALL ANY LATINO PROFESSORS THAT REACHED OUT TO YOU OR OTHER STUDENTS?

WHAT WOULD YOU RECOMMEND TO FUTURE LATINO COLLEGE STUDENTS LIVING AT HOME AND WORKING TO HELP THEM FINISH?

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE THE UNIVERSITY TO HELP STUDENTS LIKE YOU STAY IN COLLEGE?

ANY FINAL COMMENTS YOU WOULD LIKE TO MAKE ABOUT YOUR COLLEGE EXPERIENCE?

THANK YOU!