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Understanding First-Generation Latinx Students' Experiences in a Predominantly White Private Institution: A Grounded Theory Study

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Understanding First-Generation Latinx Students' Experiences in a Predominantly White Private

Institution:

A Grounded Theory Study

A Dissertation by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Education with an Emphasis in Leadership Studies

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April 2021

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DEDICATION

Este doctorado se lo dedico a mis padres Pedro y Delmy. Mami y Papi este documento es una culminación de todo lo que me han dado, la educación y todos los sacrificios que han hecho por mí. Con esta tesis les quiero enseñar y todos mis esfuerzos para que vean que no todo fue en vano. Todo valió la pena. Les agradezco todo el amor y apoyo incondicional que siempre me han brindado. Espero haber logrado sus sueños con este doctorado también. Les agradezco también toda la paciencia que han tenido para darme el espacio para alcanzar mis metas. Se que no ha sido fácil, pero se que este punto marca el final de una etapa de mi vida y comienza otra donde se que vamos a poder gozar y crear nuevas metas y logros juntos. Los quiero mucho mami y papi.

Damarys this dissertation is also dedicated to you. You have shown me and taught me what unconditional love is. I hope this shows you anything is possible. There are challenges in any path you may choose but they are not insurmountable. I know you are too young to understand this but in time you will read this and understand. I hope you realize that if I could do it so could you! I will always be here to cheer you on and support you in all your goals too. I love you pumpkin!

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the Experiences of First-Generation Latinx Students' Persistence in a

Predominantly White, Private Institution:

A Grounded Theory Study

by Jacqueline Aparicio

Latinx student enrollment in higher education institutions has increased over the years. Despite their increased number of enrollments there is also an increase of Latinx first-generation students dropping out of higher education. Not only are they not earning a degree, but they are leaving these institutions with debt. This is a concern because students dropping out affects institutions overall graduation rates. This qualitative study examined factors that contributed to ten first-generation Latinx students' persistence and success at a predominantly White, private institution. The study used grounded theory methodology and methods to develop an initial exploratory theory. The dissertation study was part of a larger study examining the experiences of first-generation students at a predominantly White private institution in southern California. For the dissertation, the experience of ten first-generation Latinx students were examined. The study found that the participants developed and transformed through personal growth, critical awareness and resistance. The transformation and growth that occurred in their academic journey informed the participants practice that leads to service for other first-generation Latinx students at the institution.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

First-generation Latinx students are enrolling in higher education at greater numbers than ever before, with increased drop-out rates as well (Arana et al., 2011; Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Hernandez, 2000; Ishitani, 2006; Oseguera et al., 2009; Peltier et al., 1999; Pyne & Means, 2013; Saunders & Serna, 2004; Tovar, 2015). Due to drop-outs among first-generation Latinx students, there is a need for improved retention efforts with better informed programs, policies, curriculum, and interventions. A need for improved retention efforts creates a catalyst for further study of the factors that influence persistence and successful retention and graduation among first-generation Latinx students. In particular, few studies focus on the unique and nuanced experiences of first-generation Latinx students at predominantly White, private institutions. This dissertation is a qualitative study that examined first-generation Latinx students' experiences in a predominantly White, private institution and used grounded theory methodology. The responses and data collected were used to inform institutions and make real changes to programs, policies, and curriculum to better support this growing population of students.

This dissertation has five chapters that describe the design of the study, justification of the study's importance, the results of the study and its contributions to the larger body of literature and research of first-generation Latinx students' experiences. This study uses the voices, needs, and stories of the participants as a primary resource in outlining potential supports and interventions for the success of first-generation Latinx students in higher education. Chapter 1 contextualizes the retention issues of first-generation Latinx students in higher education, leading to a discussion of the current literature and the gaps in the literature in Chapter 2. Chapter 2 includes a historical analysis of past efforts to understand retention issues, models, and

frameworks previously developed or implemented. Chapter 2 will also provide a detailed rationale for why this study is essential and necessary to first-generation Latinx students' persistence and retention in predominantly White, private institutions. Chapter 3 describes how grounded theory methodology is a way to maintain focus on the experiences and voices of first-generation Latinx students. The methods aligning with grounded theory (i.e., the process of recruiting participants, gathering data, and analyzing the data) permits the authentic voices of the participants to remain true all the way through theory development. Grounded theory facilitated a more in-depth understanding of the participants' narratives in order to answer the research questions: (1) What are the experiences of first-generation Latinx students at predominantly White, private institutions? (2) What are the factors that influence first-generation Latinx students' persistence and success at a predominantly White, private institutions? (3) What are the perceived challenges? Chapter 4 will provide a discussion of the findings of the study in addition to an initial exploratory theory that was developed from the participants' voices. Chapter 5 will offer a discussion of the findings and a call to action for researchers, practitioners, policymakers, stakeholders, and educators on the retention and persistence of first-generation Latinx students.

In the sections that follow, I will describe the research problem's contextual background and the definition of the terms used for this research study. The purpose of the study, the statement of the problem, and research questions are discussed. Lastly, I will discuss the significance of the research and its potential contribution to current research gaps in what scholars know about first-generation Latinx students' persistence and retention in predominantly White, private institutions.

Contextual Background

Efforts to improve overall graduation rates of first-generation students lead institutions to focus more on retention, especially when legislative funding and the institution's overall reputation depend on those graduation rates (Aljohani, 2016; Astin, 1975; Barefoot, 2004). First-generation Latinx students have had increased enrollment in postsecondary education institutions, yet have lower completion rates (Arana et al., 2011; Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Hernandez, 2000; Ishitani, 2006; Oseguera et al., 2009; Peltier et al., 1999; Pyne & Means, 2013; Saunders & Serna, 2004; Tovar, 2015). Issues of retention and the increased number of first-generation Latinx student enrollment have compelled institutions to create supports and interventions that curb the attrition rates of first-generation Latinx students. While current research examines factors that have contributed to first-generation students' retention and academic success in higher education, the studies lack specific data on first-generation Latinx students and their experiences in higher education (Arana et al., 2011; Pascarella et al., 2004; Peltier et al., 1999; Robertson et al., 2016).

Institutions fail to retain Latinx students because many intervention efforts and programs are founded on old frameworks and models developed to advance White and Black, first-generation students. Those frameworks and models use a deficit perspective of minority and first-generation students, leading to poor academic achievements, aspirations, and lower expectations (Luna & Martinez, 2013; Samuelson & Litzler, 2016; Perez II, 2017, Yosso 2005, 2006). Yosso (2006) emphasized the importance of highlighting the Latinx sociocultural practices and traditions that have supported successful first-generation Latinx students through their navigation of the educational pipeline. The focus of educational institutions demands a shift from a deficit lens to an additive lens that values, nurtures, and acknowledges the life, familial,

and social experiences of Latinx students (Hernandez, 2000; Luna & Martinez, 2013; Robertson et al., 2016; Yosso, 2005, 2006). These sociocultural practices and Latinx traditions not only shape Latinx student's ability to navigate different settings but are also a source of capital that may not be directly related to their educational attainment in obvious ways (Robertson et al., 2016). Shifting institutional focus from a deficit perspective to an additive perspective will allow for an improved first-generation Latinx student's higher education experience, increasing their overall retention and graduation rates.

Latinx Students in Higher Education

At a macro level, it is critical to note that the intersection of racial identity and first-generation status places first-generation Latinx students at a substantial disadvantage in universities, especially at predominantly White, private institutions (Coffman, 2011; Peltier et al., 1999; Pascarella et al., 2004; Saunders & Serna, 2004). When Latinx students started to represent the largest and fastest-growing population in the United States and then increased their number at higher education institutions, researchers became interested in this population (Hernandez, 2000; Saladino & Martinez, 2015). Despite the increase in admittance rates, Latinx students' have low completion and success rates in higher education (Contreras & Contreras, 2015). Compared to White students, Latinx students are more likely to be first-generation and of a lower socioeconomic status (Coffman, 2011; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Also, Latinx students face barriers and systemic challenges, especially in predominantly White, private institutions (Coffman, 2011; Robertson et al., 2016). These students are also disadvantaged because of the lack of upward social mobility, lack of strong social networks, lower educational aspirations,

home and school responsibilities, social class, and academic preparation (Coffman, 2011; Gofen, 2009; Soria & Stebleton, 2012).

In addition to intersectionality, current models and frameworks that have been created in efforts to improve retention rates are often not culturally responsive to first-generation Latinx students; such models were developed by scholars and practitioners who examined White and Black, first-generation students in higher education (Astin, 1975; Tinto, 1975). Researchers often had sampling issues due to the difficulty of securing enough participants across all ethnicities and racial groups to create generalizable knowledge about successful retention for all underrepresented groups, including first-generation Latinx students (Astin, 1975; Tinto, 1975).

Researchers have a prime opportunity to study first-generation Latinx students in different institutional types such as predominantly White, private institutions in the current educational research climate. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported that in the Fall of 2014, there were a total of 17.3 million undergraduate enrollments, of which 3 million were Latinx/Hispanic. Between Fall 2000 and Fall 2014, Latinx/Hispanic enrollment more than doubled, from 1.4 million to 3 million (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017).

Who are first-generation students?

Defining first-generation students is complex, and scholarly attempts to explain this population has changed over time (Davis, 2010). In most research studies and programs at universities, scholars and higher education leaders have used federal definitions. Researchers have continuously defined first-generation students as students who have parents with little or no college experience, and they are usually the first member of their family to attend college (Ishitani, 2006; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Ramos- Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Vuong et al., 2010).

The federal definition used to identify first-generation students is based on the Higher Education Act of 1965 Section 402 (b), which states:

First-generation student is (1) an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree; (2) in the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree.

Overall, researchers have found that first-generation students face unique challenges and barriers that affect their retention and success in higher education. (Coffman, 2011; Ishitani, 2006; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). For instance, institutions often do not recognize the capital that first-generation students bring with them to the institution. Instead, they focus on multi-generational, White, middle-class social capital as a standard to measure a student's success knowing that first-generation students have not yet gained the same capital as their multi-generational peers (Coffman, 2011; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Pascarella et al., 2004). For instance, Soria and Stebleton (2012) stated that social capital is “privileged knowledge, resources and information” used to differentiate first-generation students from non-first-generation students. Non-first-generation students have higher social capital gained through social interaction and networks formed through the experiences of their parents and extended family.

Why Are First-Generation Students Dropping Out?

First-generation students have higher attrition rates than their non-first-generation counterparts (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco Jr, 2011; Ramos- Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Compared to the general population, their higher attrition rate has compelled college administrators to implement programs that support first-

generation students' retention. Transition issues for first-generation students are social integration, academic integration, interpersonal relationships, homesickness, academic stress, academic preparation, self-efficacy, and institutional commitment, which affects their persistence and retention (Arana et al., 2011; Davis, 2010; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Peltier et al., 1999; Woosley & Shelper, 2011). Astin (1975) found that the majority of students that were dropping out were: (1) bored in their classes, (2) leaving for financial reasons, and (3) and other personal reasons. Many first-generation students leave by their sophomore year and tend to have higher debt and leave without a degree (Barefoot, 2004; Ishitani, 2006).

Research, Models, and Frameworks Developed to Understand Retention

Efforts to understand student attrition and retention in the overall student population have been made for over 60 years (Aljohani, 2016; Astin, 1975; Davis, 2010; Tinto, 1975,1993; Spady, 1975). Othman Aljohani (2016) completed a comprehensive review of some of the significant studies and theoretical models of student retention in higher education. Aljohani (2016) describes the different eras of retention studies throughout history. The development and studies on student retention started in the 1600s, it was not until the 1960s that there was a focus on preventing student attrition. In this review of the frameworks and models developed over time Aljohani mentions Tinto's Institutional Departure Model, Bean's Student Attrition Model, the Student-Faculty Informal Contact Model, Astin's Student Involvement Model, the Non-traditional Student Attrition Model, and the Student Retention Integrated Model which have been developed to understand issues of retention.

Some pioneers in developing theoretical and conceptual frameworks on student retention are Vincent Tinto, William G. Spady, and John P. Bean. Tinto's first models and frameworks were based on Durkheim's suicide theory, which takes a sociological standpoint. From Tinto's

frameworks and models, others were developed using other perspectives (e.g., psychological, cultural, organizational economic, environmental, anthropology, and human resources) to understand attrition and retention. (Aljohani, 2016). These initial studies focused on student retention and included students that were members of the majority groups in higher education at the time, White and Black students (Tinto, 1975,1993; Spady,1975; Astin, 1975). Now with the increased enrollment of diverse groups of students with unique needs and experiences, these models and frameworks are not effective in supporting and serving diverse students (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). What was learned from the research was the importance of designing programs of support that are important, relevant, and necessary to all students (Davis, 2010; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Lowery- Hart & Pacheco, 2011).

Defining the Terms of the Study

For this study, I want to define some of the research terms used for this dissertation study. Many of the following research terms lack universal definitions and are quite nuanced:

- Latinx – a gender-neutral label for Latino/a who are people or persons from any Central (including Mexico) and South American country (Robertson et al., 2016; Torres, 2018; Trujillo-Pagan, 2018; Vidal-Ortiz & Martinez, 2018; Salinas & Lozano, 2017; Oseguera et al., 2009)
- First-generation – The federal definition is being used for this study, which states: First-generation student is (1) an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree; (2) in the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree (Higher Education Act of 1965).

- Persistence – a trait which students that continued their studies in the face of adversity and challenges (Ungvarsky, 2019)
- Attrition - the rate at which students that did not return to complete their studies the following academic school year from their initial enrollment (considering there will be students that were transfer students and have not been at their institutions for their entire academic journey) (Ishitani, 2006)
- Retention- the continuous enrollment at the same institution from year to year (Hagedorn, 2012)
- Resilience - “dynamic and multidimensional process through which individuals experience positive outcomes despite exposure to significant adversity” (Kuperminc et al., 2009; Patron & Garcia, 2016; Li et al., 2018)

Statement of the Problem

Since the 1970s, there has been a substantial demographic change in the higher education student population. There has been an increased number of Latinx student enrollment. Many Latinx students are also first-generation college-going students. Often, first-generation Latinx students put forth the effort to attain the promise of social and economic mobility for themselves and their family (Coffman, 2011). This desire to reach social and economic mobility illustrates the importance of institutions shifting their focus from recruiting to retaining students, thus improving their overall experiences in higher education, and improving graduation rates of first-generation Latinx students. Studies that explore the factors that affect first-generation Latinx students’ persistence and retention can help inform programs, interventions, and policies best suited to support and include first-generation Latinx students’ unique needs and learning styles.

Scholars have increasingly researched first-generation Latinx students' retention and persistence at public institutions due to the increased Latinx enrollment in public institutions and to determine the efficacy of federally funded programs aimed at supporting first-generation students.

First-generation Latinx students are a continually growing presence in predominantly White, private institutions (Robertson et al., 2016). With the changes happening in the demographics within these institutions they continue to have higher retention and graduation rates. The increase in first-generation Latinx student presence at predominantly White private institutions, there is a need to understand the experiences and supports of first-generation Latinx students at these institutions (Robertson et al., 2016). To better understand and support these students, predominantly White, private institutions' experiences and institutional efforts to support first-generation Latinx students must be examined.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose and goals of this study are:

- To identify factors that contribute to first-generation Latinx students' persistence at predominantly White, private institutions.
- To understand first-generation Latinx students' persistence and overall experiences at predominantly White, private institutions.

The guiding research questions for this study are:

- What are the experiences of first-generation Latinx students at predominantly White, private institutions?
 - What are the factors that influence first-generation Latinx students' persistence and success at a predominantly White, private institution?

- What are the perceived challenges of first-generation Latinx students at a predominantly White, private institution?

Significance of the Study

Institutions' efforts to increase first-generation Latinx students' retention in higher education drove my interest to examine factors that contribute to these students' persistence of the successful completion of their programs. Retaining and graduating first-generation Latinx students is a phenomenon to study because of the increased number of first-generation Latinx students enrolled in higher education institutions and the simultaneous increase in attrition among these same students (Luedke, 2017). According to a report by the Public Policy Institute of California's (PPIC) Higher Education Center, there is a shortage of college-educated workers in California. It is projected that by the year 2030, California will have a large skill gap due to not having enough college-educated skilled workers. PPIC Higher Education Center reports that to close this skills gap, there needs to be an increased number of degrees awarded by all higher education institutions in the state. The projected long-term goals are "aligning state education goals and funding with the workforce needs; expanding access to the state's four-year colleges and universities; improving completion rates at both two- and four-year institutions; providing students with information on earning potential of career pathways; and focus on increasing college readiness and improving college placement among K-12 students" (Public Policy Institute of California Higher Education Center, 2017). This report reinforces the need to develop theories that will inform scholars, educators, administrators, and policymakers on the importance of improving overall retention rates, which will improve overall graduation rates in higher education institutions.

Improving first-generation Latinx students' graduation rates makes this study necessary because many do not graduate (Arana et al., 2011; Oseguera et al. 2009; Pyne & Means, 2013). To best serve first-generation Latinx students, institutions need to provide Latinx students with opportunities to describe and talk about their concerns, needs, and experiences. Providing a space for discussion can help ensure an environment that nurtures, encourages, and supports first-generation Latinx students to persist until graduation (Arana et al., 2011; Peltier et al., 1999). Student narratives will provide institutional leaders with a deeper understanding of these students' lived realities in their programs, what is working, what is not working, and what the institutions need to implement to serve them better. There are insufficient spaces on and off-campus where first-generation Latinx students can talk about their unique and individual experiences qualitatively because previous studies have used quantitative measures that do not allow students to express and elaborate fully on specific experiences in higher education (Coffman, 2011; Lowrey-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Robertson et al., 2016). Grounded theory methodology provided me with the tools necessary to understand their higher education experiences and use their words to develop an initial exploratory theory (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014). The findings from this grounded theory study helped generate an initial exploratory theory stemming from students' voices. The findings will inform the work of higher education administrators, practitioners, educators, and policymakers in their effort to support the retention and graduation of first-generation Latinx students in higher education.

As diversity increases in higher education, there is a need to develop frameworks and models inclusive of first-generation Latinx students. This qualitative study is an effort to understand factors contributing to first-generation Latinx students' persistence and retention to develop an initial exploratory theory that uses grounded theory methodologies and methods.

Through understanding first-generation Latinx students' experiences in predominantly White, private institutions educators, administrators and researchers can help explore and advance institutional efforts to increase retention and graduation rates.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Graduating as a first-generation Latinx college student is a source of great pride for many individuals and their families. There's a special sense of accomplishment that the family gets to share. In traditional Latinx families, there is usually patriarchy, with specific gender roles and family roles, which emphasizes that each family member is interconnected and part of a whole (Leyva, 2011; Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002). The family's interconnectedness demonstrates how the first-generation Latinx college student's success is seen as a socioeconomic opportunity towards upward mobility for the whole family, not just for the individual. These students' ambition in higher education signals a sense of hope towards a better quality of life and that they can accomplish what their parent(s) could not (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2012; Pyne & Means, 2013; ASHE Higher Education Report, 2013).

Institutional Context

Institutions need to focus on first-generation Latinx students' success in higher education because of the high attrition rates despite their increased enrollment into higher education (Arana et al., 2011; Ludeke, 2017; Oseguera, Locks & Vega, 2009; Pyne & Means, 2013; Robertson et al., 2016; Tovar, 2015). The challenge for institutions is learning how to best serve and support these students through their higher education experience in ways that meet their learning and developmental needs. Increased attrition has shifted institutions' focus from recruiting to retention to improve overall graduation rates (Aljohani, 2016; Barefoot, 2014; Gonzalez, 2015; Saladino & Martinez, 2015).

As higher education institutions seek to serve all students with equal access to a rigorous, quality education, understanding student attrition has become more urgent for organizational development, as well as campus-wide efforts to better serve students of all backgrounds (Barefoot, 2004). The 1990 Student Right-to-Know Act “requires all institutions of higher education participating in any program under the Higher Education Act Title IV (student assistance: i.e., loans, grants, federal work-study) to disclose completion or graduation rates of certificate- or degree-seeking students entering those institutions (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/101st-congress/senate-bill/580>). The obligation to disclose graduation and completion rates directly affects its image (Aljohani, 2016). Disclosing graduation rates is why retention has become a concern and a priority for higher education institutions (Aljohani, 2016; Barefoot, 2004). With legislation tying students' retention to funding, institutions are more conscious of their retention and graduation rates. Furthermore, student retention has become a primary goal for public institutions because of the financial impact that it may have on the institution (Aljohani, 2016; Astin, 1975; Barefoot, 2004). For example, low retention reflects the quality of education being offered, affecting the institutions' academic and financial plans (Aljohani, 2016; Barefoot, 2004). Maintaining a positive image is a goal that can be met through increasing their retention and graduation rates. On the other hand, private institutions depend on alumni, donations, and tuition payments to develop programs and support students at their institutions (Beamer, 2011).

The following sections of this chapter will broadly define first-generation students and the efforts that have been made to support them through graduation. Next, I discuss the current literature concerning first-generation students and first-generation Latinx students. Then, I review research on retention efforts that will set the stage as to why it is necessary to:

understand first-generation Latinx students' experiences in more detail, increase their retention, and improve graduation rates. Lastly, I provide an overview of the unique characteristics of first-generation Latinx students in higher education and the retention efforts, broadly defined, for this specific population.

Retention Efforts Focused on First-Generation Students

While institutional efforts are focused on retention and improving students' experiences, a hurdle they face is not effectively identifying and tracking their first-generation students. There is a challenge to create a universal definition of first-generation students and determine who are at-risk of dropping out (Davis, 2010; Peralta & Klonowski, 2017). Besides identifying first-generation students, institutions find it difficult to track them because they voluntarily offer the information to institutions (Davis, 2010). Information that is volunteered at the time of applying to the institution does not guarantee that institutions will identify and serve first-generation students to ensure their retention.

Institutional efforts to improve retention and graduation rates, lead institutions to attempt to understand first-generation students' experiences to support them through graduation. Research highlighting the longitudinal experiences of first-generation college students could bring higher education institutions closer to graduating all of the students that they welcome into their community (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). With a greater depth of understanding tied to the experiences, relationships, and structures that positively support first-generation students, institutions can broaden the scope of their efforts, as they participate in the sacred experience of helping the first in a family complete college.

Since the 1960s, researchers have made efforts to develop retention models and theoretical frameworks that can help institutions, educators, and policymakers further understand

the phenomenon of attrition in higher education (Aljohani, 2016; Astin, 1975, Spady, 1975; Tinto, 1975,1993, 2012). The different models and frameworks that have been developed have focused on using various theoretical perspectives to understand attrition in higher education. The perspectives have ranged from psychological, cultural, sociological, and environmental to better attrition, persistence, and retention of students (Aljohani, 2016; Tinto, 1975,1993, 2012; Spady, 1970; Astin, 1975).

A significant issue with the theoretical models is that they were developed through limited groups of students, not representing students' full diversity in higher education (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). Another issue with some of the research on retention and persistence is that most of the research has been quantitative studies that look at particular factors and limit participant responses (Astin, 1975; Bui, 2002; Martin et al., 2014; Pascarella et al., 2004; Saunders & Serna, 2004). To fully understand the experiences that impact persistence and retention, there needs to be an opportunity for students to elaborate on their overall experience. In previous studies, first-generation Latinx students were likely to share some experiences with other first-generation students but have a unique set of capital, values, and assets different from other groups. A qualitative study using grounded theory methodology allows those previously unstudied experiences to be examined to understand further first-generation Latinx students' persistence and retention at predominately White private institutions.

Barefoot (2004) discussed how usually the job to improve graduation and retention rates is delegated to one person to lead at an institution. Delegating the task of improving retention and graduation rates makes it challenging to get support from other staff, faculty, and administrators and make it difficult to work collaboratively to improve overall retention and graduation rates. Barefoot also suggested that those efforts be an institution-wide effort where all

stakeholders (i.e., faculty, staff, administrators) in the institution are held accountable for the overall actions to retain students and increase graduation rates.

Institutions continually work to increase their retention and graduation rates but there are differences between public and private institutions. Public institutions depend on federal and state funds to design programs and interventions. Federally funded programs at public institutions have requirements that need to be met and they have policies and procedures that are implemented when services and supports are offered; whereas private institutions who are privately funded are designing programs and efforts to support first-generation students in ways they see best fit and meet the needs of the students at their institution (Beamer, 2011). Research shows that many of these programs at public institutions have affected first-generation students' experiences in higher education. Some of the efforts include more financial aid being offered to first-generation students that are not loans, building learning communities, creating safe spaces, and opportunities to make a meaningful relationship with faculty and staff (Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Venegas, 2015). Other programs have provided first-generation students with the opportunity to interact with and build a mentorship with upper-level students in many learning communities. The mentorship provides students with one-on-one guidance to help them make an interpersonal connection to enhance their overall college experience (Davis, 2010).

Research of First-Generation Students in Higher Education

Many intervention programs and supports that have been implemented to understand attrition and retention are federally funded. Others are private organizations that have created programs to support first-generation students. The problem with some of these programs is that they are reaching out to students who voluntarily self-identified as being at-risk, of low socioeconomic status, or are first-generation. The data collected freely does not guarantee that all

first-generation students will receive the support and interventions to ensure their retention and graduation. This institutional data collection practice does not take into consideration that first-generation Latinx students are a diverse and complex group. The needs of this group may need to be captured in other ways in addition to the demographic data that is collected in the admissions application in order to reflect the students' lived experiences and needs (Davis, 2010).

Individual Factors and Institutional Factors

Some of the transitional challenges that first-generation students have are social integration, academic integration, interpersonal relationships, homesickness, academic stress, academic preparation, acculturation/assimilation, self-efficacy, and institutional commitment (Arana et al., 2011; Peltier et al., 1999; Oseguera et al., 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004; Robertson et al., 2016; Woosley & Shelper, 2011). These transition issues have been observed more often in first-generation students than non-first-generation students. First-generation students attribute their academic challenges to poor postsecondary preparation, motivation, and self-efficacy, which only supports, Woosley and Shelper's (2011) list of contributing factors to first-generation student attrition.

Academic challenges have the greatest impact on student retention. Barnes & Piland (2011) found that students taking remedial courses were at a higher risk of attrition than in college-level courses. Remedial courses not only can reinforce a student's self-doubt and feelings of being underprepared but can also lengthen the time it takes to graduate. Lengthening the time, it takes to graduate and enter the workforce also leads to higher attrition rates in first-generation students (Ishitani, 2006). The pressure to quickly enter the workforce is usually a family expectation.

Students may feel the pressure to contribute to the household; this is especially true in first-generation students from low-income households. The family pressure of graduating on time to enter the workforce is an added stressor for first-generation students. Poor academic preparation forces first-generation students to take remedial courses, therefore, prolonging their time to graduation. Barnes & Piland (2011) found that students taking remedial courses were at a higher risk of attrition than in college-level courses. Ishitani (2006) emphasizes how precollegiate preparation (e.g., study skills, advanced placement classes, and career and academic advising) is extremely important and is needed as a form of early intervention in first-generation students' persistence towards graduation.

Chiang, Hunter & Yeh (2004) found that family and friends can cause added stress for students, although they are also the primary support source for students of color. Chiang, Hunter & Yeh (2004) found that Latinx students were more likely to turn to family and friends for support and help than seek support from counselors, faculty, and staff. Latinx students were especially more likely to turn to their parents. Some Latinx students' coping strategies included participating in activities of their liking, hobbies, and studying. Chiang, Hunter & Yeh (2004) also found that professional counseling services were underused by Latinx and Black students, which leads them to believe that because of the higher attrition rates in Latinx and Black students, these students do not have the proper coping strategies to transition and adapt to college.

One way institutions are trying to improve first-generation students' experience, and retention is by providing students with more financial aid options (Venegas, 2015). Venegas (2015) found that financial support is not the only factor that makes a difference in persistence to graduation in Latinx students and the type of financial aid being offered. She noted that Latinx

students showed less persistence when loans were offered than when grants or scholarships did not need to be paid back. Another important point Venegas makes is that there is not enough information and education on financial aid options being offered to Latinx students. Institutions are obligated to provide loan entrance and exit counseling sessions but do not have to inform them of other financial aid options. The lack of information being shared to the students regarding financial aid options led Venegas to suggest that institutions should focus on mainstreaming financial aid programs and Latinx students' opportunities, which is especially necessary if it impacts their persistence and retention.

The types of institutions also impact the persistence and retention of first-generation students. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), not only are predominantly White institutions highly selective of students they accept, but they also have higher overall retention and graduation rates than public institutions. Nevertheless, having higher retention and graduation rates, Latinx students have access to different campus resources at predominantly White, private institutions than public institutions (Robertson et al., 2016). Robertson et al. (2016) found that many Latinx students, while attending predominately White, private institutions report experiences of racism, discrimination, and isolation. They also add that many of the models and frameworks that have been developed emphasize assimilation, forcing Latinx students to reject their cultural heritage. Latinx students at these schools commonly report racism and racial microaggressions. For instance, in a study on racism and Latinx students' experiences at predominately White institutions by Robertson et al. (2016), Latinx students reported creating a distance between themselves and other Latinx students to facilitate the process of assimilation and be more socially accepted on campus. Despite experiencing racism and racial microaggressions, many students persist and find ways to cope with these experiences

(Robertson et al., 2016). Because of these experiences, there needs to be more research on first-generation Latinx student experiences at predominantly White, private institutions (Pascarella et al., 2004; Robertson et al., 2016). Understanding how Latinx students manage to overcome these obstacles and challenges to persist is necessary to develop more support, programs, and interventions for Latinx students in higher education.

Retention Efforts/ Programs/Research for First-Generation Latinx Students

Some of the widely recognized programs that support first-generation students are Talent Search, Upward Bound and Student Support Services. All three of these programs are also known as the TRIO program. TRIO programs were started in 1964 when the Educational Opportunity Act was signed into law. TRIO was designed to support disadvantaged students to enroll and complete their programs. The Talent Search and Educational Opportunity Centers help students gain admittance into undergraduate programs within the TRIO program. The Upward Bound College Prep program helps prepare students at the high school level for college through first-hand experiences on a college campus and by taking classes.

Other programs offered to support student retention are Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Program, Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS) and Educational Opportunity Centers (EOC). The Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Program prepares minority, first-generation students for graduate education and teaching experiences. EOPS is a state-funded program that financially supports students and focuses on retention and support of students affected by social, economic, educational, or language disadvantages. EOC is another state-funded program whose goal is to provide counseling and educate students on college admissions, economic literacy, and financial aid options for their post-secondary education.

Besides federally and state funded programs, there are other privately funded programs that offer support for first-generation students through their academic journey.

What works for Latinx Students

John C. Hernandez (2000) examined retention in Latinx college students. He specifically examined their retention, persistence, and the factors that directly affect their completion rates. Hernandez (2000) completed a qualitative study where he interviewed 10 Latinx students in-depth, and from the interviews, he found 11 factors that directly impact the college students' persistence and retention. The 11 factors are:

(1) I want to do it attitude (2) the family (3) friends and peers (4) faculty and staff (5) co-curricular involvement (6) finding a Latinx community (7) money matters (8) I'm going to make it within the environment attitude (9) environment equals people (10) personal experiences shape the perceptions of the physical environment (11) involvement as a way to break down the environment.

From these factors, Hernandez (2000) stated that what Latinx college students need to complete their academic goals is validation. He said, "validating students' desire for success and encouraging their optimistic outlook is a central theme for student retention" (p 581). Validating students and their desires for success means that it is a collaborative effort in order to improve college completion rates. Validation should come from not only faculty, administrators, and staff, but also family and friends. Furthermore, validation is more effective when coming from an individual who has a meaningful relationship with the student (Hernandez, 2000; Robertson et al., 2016). It cannot come from strangers or individuals that the student may not feel comfortable with; therefore, mentorship is important and can help improve student retention rates (Blackwell & Pinder, 2011; Davis, 2010; Hernandez, 2000; Latino & Unite, 2012; Lowery-

Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Saladino & Martinez, 2015; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). Another challenge in students finding mentorship is not having role models and mentors that they can identify with. Figueroa & Rodriguez (2015) discussed how the lack of a diverse faculty could sometimes create a challenge for first-generation students of color. The lack of diversity reflected amongst higher education staff is partly due to the lack of interest, time, and financial stability of first-generation students concerning pursuing a graduate degree. Aside from financial stability, the student's debt during undergraduate education is a limitation for first-generation students pursuing graduate degrees.

Peer mentorships also support first-generation students' retention because they can have a more trusting connection with a peer who has gone through similar struggles and challenges. Another thing that mentorship creates for students is "the safe space to utilize those moments of social, cultural and intellectual discussion as an additional source of consciousness-building and development to then embrace multiple forms of knowledge and epistemologies" (Figueroa & Rodriguez, 2015, p 26). Those social, culturally and intellectual discussions can be accomplished in mentorship type relationships that are dialogical spaces where learning can be mutual. In peer mentorship the learning can be mutual as both the mentor and mentee are both students and there is no difference of power. Power dynamics within the mentorship relations may hinder the learning experience for both the mentor and mentee. In contrast, effective mentoring practices involve mutual respect that enables the co-construction of knowledge and consciousness. Effective mentoring practices also allow first-generation students to feel supported and gain more social and cultural wealth to navigate higher education institutions.

Self-efficacy and motivation play a role in first-generation student success. Self-efficacy allows students to advocate for themselves and seek help when they need it. Students with self-

efficacy tend to do better than those that do not have self-efficacy. Many resources and services offered for first-generation students are services where the student has to know of the resources first and also be able to ask for those resources. If students lack self-efficacy, then they won't ask for help and support when they need it. This level of independence is especially true if the student has grown up in a family where the decisions were always made by the parent or guardian. The student then lacks autonomy, and while in college, is trying to find their identity without having others around to make decisions for them.

Vuong et al. (2010) discuss how many of the support services and programs are usually only for first-year students, and after freshman year, the student is left to figure things out on their own. Therefore, there is an even higher attrition rate in first-generation sophomore students. Some of the barriers and obstacles experienced by first-generation sophomore students are “achieving competence, desiring autonomy, establishing identity and developing purpose” (Vuong et al., 2010, p 51). These barriers and obstacles are related to transitioning and adapting to the new college environment. They can occur throughout a student's college experience and not just the first year of their educational trajectory. Early interventions and support can be implemented into our educational system to create a more equitable opportunity for higher education success and retention.

Need for More Research of First-Generation Latinx Students

Despite there being support programs that were discussed in the sections above, there are gaps in the literature need to be further explored, specifically those related to first-generation Latinx students. In the literature, many themes were directly associated with being first-generation students, but not specifically first-generation Latinx students in higher education.

Cultural differences make first-generation Latinx students experiences unique from other first-generation students. Additionally, the differences and complexities of first-generation Latinx students' identities, experiences, and realities demonstrate that no one model fits all or supports this group of students. Some of the complexities are that the term Latinx represents many national, ethnic, racial identities, languages/dialects, and social and class backgrounds (Oseguera et al., 2009; Robertson et al., 2016). The diversity within Latinx representation suggests a need to understand further this group of students' experiences in higher education to design programs that support all first-generation Latinx students' retention, and higher education success.

The literature review revealed one significant gap—building connections on campus could affect first-generation students in both positive and negative ways. The way it affected students depended on the student's individual experiences that were associated with first-generation student success (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Brost & Payne, 2011; Davis, 2010; Hernandez, 2000; Latino & Unite, 2012; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Woosley & Shelper, 2011). A second theme that emerged was regarding the student's intrinsic motivation, coping strategies, self-efficacy, views of him or herself and what he or she is capable of, and how first-generation Latinx students need safe spaces on campus (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Brost & Payne, 2011; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011; Saladino & Martinez, 2015; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Vuong et al., 2010; Woosley & Shelper, 2011). A third theme that emerged was creating spaces where students can develop and identify intrinsic and extrinsic factors to improve their higher education experience. Creating safe spaces is necessary to consider incorporating personal and social development and character-building aspects into the programs and interventions for first-generation Latinx students in higher education.

In addition to creating opportunities for personal growth for these students, the delivery of some of these programs also needs improvement. The way the programs are marketed and offered to students affects their willingness to participate and seek programs and supports (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011). Lowery-Hart & Pacheco (2011) found that many of the students that participated in their focus groups felt that not only did support programs isolate them from the general population of students on campus, but it “also shines an uncomfortable spotlight on them” (p.66). Another challenge to delivering these services, programs, and interventions to students is that the information gathered during the application process is offered voluntarily, which does not ensure that all students who meet the criteria receive the services and support (Davis, 2010). The delivery of support programs may create an internal struggle between their multiple and complex identities, which is why this area is also important to explore.

Another issue that has been found, aside from the delivery and marketing of these support programs, is the length of time programs will provide support. Vuong et al. (2010) discuss how the support services and programs are usually only for first-year students, and after that, the student is left to figure things out on their own. This finding also reveals that the majority of the students dropping out are in their sophomore year. This research indicates that despite efforts being made to support students during their first year, they do not receive the necessary support throughout the remainder of their studies to assure their retention and graduation.

The potential skill gap and lack of college-educated workers in California could motivate institutions to reflect and re-evaluate their retention and graduation efforts. The high retention and graduation rates of private institutions call for a need to examine and understand the experiences of first-generation Latinx students at predominantly White, private institutions.

Understanding the factors that contribute to first-generation Latinx students' persistence at private institutions can provide a more in-depth understanding of what public institutions are not doing to retain first-generation Latinx students. Understanding their experiences can facilitate the development of an initial exploratory theory that could eventually develop into a generalizable theory to all first-generation Latinx students in all types of higher education institutions.

The goal of this study is to create an initial exploratory theory that is generalizable and inclusive that can offer a better understanding of the experiences and motivating factors of first-generation Latinx students. This dissertation study is also a call to action for a more extensive study that can lead up to a theory that is more effective in supporting and improving first-generation Latinx students' persistence.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Institutions face two challenges regarding first-generation Latinx students: how to keep their promise of a successful educational experience and how to better serve them through their higher education experience in ways that serve their learning and developmental needs. Higher education institutions need to shift their focus from recruiting to the retention of first-generation students through graduation (Astin, 1975). For institutions to develop programs and interventions that can help improve first-generation Latinx students' graduation rates, there needs to be a nurturing and safe environment for these students to share their unique experiences and needs to create changes. Many research studies have taken a quantitative approach, limiting the answers and possible ways to learn and understand these students' experiences in higher education (Hernandez, 2000; Robertson et al., 2016). Grounded theory methodology offers strategies and steps to explore further, understand, and remain true to the participant's voice, perspectives, and experiences in higher education (Charmaz, 2014; Birks & Mills, 2015). Grounded theory offers steps through the data analysis process to develop an initial exploratory theory rooted in the participants' narratives to explore further and understand their unique needs and experiences (Charmaz, 2014; Birks & Mills, 2015).

Higher education institutions must improve overall Latinx students' graduation rates. Despite the increase in first-generation Latinx student enrollment, there is an even higher attrition rate of first-generation Latinx students in higher education (Luedke, 2017). For this study, I examined the experiences of first-generation Latinx students within predominately White, private institution through a qualitative study. In this qualitative study, I used grounded theory methodologies and methods to understand the experiences and factors that contribute to

the persistence and retention of first-generation Latinx students in a predominantly White, private institution. Many of the research studies regarding the retention of first-generation Latinx students take place within public institutions, but not enough research has been done at predominantly White, private institutions. One of the reasons for this is that public institutions have an added monetary incentive to improve overall first-generation Latinx graduation rates because legislation tied funding to the graduation and retention rates (Barefoot, 2004). It is necessary to examine and further understand first-generation Latinx student experiences, their persistence and retention at predominantly White, private institution because predominately White institutions have consistently had overall high retention and graduation rates.

The purpose and goals of this study are:

- To understand first-generation Latinx students' overall experiences at a predominantly White, private institution.
- To identify factors that contribute to first-generation Latinx students' persistence and success at predominantly White, private institutions.

The guiding research question and sub-questions for this study are:

- What are the experiences of first-generation Latinx students at a predominantly White, private institution?
 - What factors influenced first-generation Latinx students' persistence and success at a predominantly White, private institution?
 - What are the perceived challenges of first-generation Latinx students at a predominantly White, private institution?

The rest of this chapter will present the rationale for the study and chose grounded theory methodology and methods that were used to answer the research questions of the qualitative

study. Through grounded theory methodology, it is possible to begin to understand first-generation Latinx students' experiences and the factors that contribute to their persistence and success at predominantly White, private institutions.

Grounded Theory Methodology

Grounded theory is an important methodology and systematic method of data analysis that guides the researcher towards theory generation. This study is important because there is a need to shift the way educators, administrators, and policymakers view first-generation Latinx students (Saladino & Martinez, 2015). The deficit lens that many educational institutions use needs to shift to an additive lens that can highlight and add value to what first-generation Latinx students bring into all learning environments on campus. These students can be seen as active and promising contributors to higher education institutions and other students' experiences through that additive lens. This dissertation is the beginning of an initial exploratory theory that highlights, values and acknowledges the different funds of knowledge first-generation Latinx students bring into higher education institutions.

The use of grounded theory as a framing methodology is important because it can be used as a systematic method to answer the research questions. Grounded theory allows first-generation Latinx students to share their higher education experiences and provides themes to arise from the data, which allows for a better understanding and identification of similarities in each participant's experience. Grounded theory offers a rigorous structure and guidance for data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Birks & Mills, 2015). The structure calls the researcher to analyze the data while simultaneously interacting with the data conceptually. Grounded theory fragments the data to create meaning through different layers and types of coding that involve different conceptual analysis levels, eventually leading to theory development. This analysis

structure highlights participant voice through the initial coding process to develop an initial exploratory theory. In this way, grounded theory provides a foundation from which I can understand, analyze, and develop an initial theory based on first-generation Latinx students' experiences.

In grounded theory, specific components distinguish this form of inquiry from others, such as collecting and analyzing data processes that co-occur (Birks & Mills, 2015). The process of analyzing the data also includes many layers of coding. For example, if the data is collected through interviews and are then transcribed, there is an initial coding that happens in the beginning. The initial coding stage is meant to fragment the data, usually through line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2014). The initial coding is expected to have many codes that allow the researcher to remain open to further exploring the code and developing categories. After the line-by-line coding, there is focused coding, which involves another conceptual analysis level between the initial codes and the data (Charmaz, 2014). Focused coding is another layer of coding that follows the initial coding. A decision-making process involves figuring out which codes make the most conceptual sense to keep because they highlight the data (Charmaz, 2014). From focused codes, categories are then developed, which are to be analyzed. With enough saturation of data, a theory is then generated. The important thing to highlight about the theory development process is that it is meant to carry the participants' authentic voice so that the researcher can organically develop a theory arising from themes found during the data collection process.

Historical Context

Grounded theory was developed by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss in the 1960s at the University of California, San Francisco School of Nursing (Charmaz, 2014; Birks & Mills,

2015). Glaser and Strauss developed grounded theory methodology after earning a grant for a four-year study where they examined death and looked at the dying experience (Charmaz, 2014; Birks & Mills, 2015). Grounded theory methodology was developed to generate qualitative studies theories rather than testing hypotheses from existing theories (Charmaz, 2014). Glaser and Strauss developed a qualitative methodology that changed the way researchers do their analysis and develop a new theory from the data by changing the way data is manipulated, coded, and analyzed (Charmaz, 2014; Birks & Mills, 2015).

Grounded theory methodology is rigorous, structured, and composed of many stages and steps simultaneously during the data analysis section to develop a theory from the data organically. Grounded theory is unique because it does not test a theory. Rather, the goal is to create a theory that reflects the data, the participants, and the phenomenon being examined (Birks and Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014). The theory is directly developed from the collected data, coded, examined, and analyzed in the study. Some of the processes happening simultaneously in a grounded theory study are collecting, comparing, and analyzing the data (Birks & Mills, 2015). Within the data collection and analysis stages, the researcher is actively coding and categorizing the data to later be further developed and explored through conceptual analysis and memoing, which are all ongoing steps through the theory development process.

Coding in Grounded Theory

Coding is pivotal in grounded theory in that through coding, the researcher starts to not only link the data but also develops a theory that is conceptually linked to the phenomenon being examined (Charmaz, 2014). In grounded theory, different coding levels determine the depth and level of conceptual analysis involved (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014). During that conceptual analysis, it is encouraged that researchers document their thought process and

decision-making process to see the conceptual analysis and flow of ideas through memoing. Memoing is meant to be used as a tool to annotate and document the entire process of collecting data, coding, and analyzing. All of which may be reported in the final presentation of the findings.

Researcher Positionality

My positionality in this study is that of an insider because I identified with my participants in different cultural aspects. Being a Latina of Salvadoran descent gives me an advantage in understanding Latino culture, traditions, and customs. I know there are variations of culture, traditions and customs from different countries of origins but there are many similarities that allowed me to relate to the participants. I am also an insider because I speak Spanish, enabling some of the conversations and testimonios to be more meaningful and informative. Some sayings or *dichos* in Spanish or English can only be best understood by someone who speaks the language, which can add richness to the interviews because some of the interviewees can speak both languages. Having the ability to speak both languages also makes me an insider. Knowing how to “code switch” between languages and between both cultures strengthens my insider positionality. Growing up in Los Angeles, where most Latinx people in my neighborhood have been Central Americans and Mexicans, makes me an insider because I may share similar stories with those who have grown up in the similar neighborhoods.

I am also aware of my affinity toward my Salvadoran history, culture, and traditions. In this study, I also understand that there are other Latinx people from other countries with different languages, cultures and traditions from those I know. I also have the understanding and knowledge that the Salvadoran culture is not the only identity I have. The life learnings and experiences I have had so far in my life have made me aware of how I am continually redefining

myself. The more I learn, and the more I collaborate with others and learn from others, the more I feel like my own identity and culture are shifting. I am also cognizant of my struggle to find my place in the United States. Being born here and raised in a Salvadoran household brings up many questions because I do not identify as an American. In Spanish, there is a term that I am okay with and identify with because of its context. I say I am *estadounidense* in English it translates as “from the United States.” There is a minute difference that is important to me because contextually, in Spanish, I am stating my identity is based on a location. In English, saying “I am American” states that I identify with the American culture which I do not.

Rationale for using Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is used to develop theories that come from the data that is collected. For this study, I developed an initial exploratory theory that can help educators and policymakers understand first-generation Latinx students’ persistence to understand the high attrition rates. While the methodology and the methods for this study are grounded theory, I am also aware many other methodologies also provide key insights to help understand the success and persistence of first-generation Latinx students in higher education. Grounded theory facilitated understanding Latinx students’ experiences and unique needs by identifying factors contributing to their persistence towards successful completion of their academic goals. Grounded theory allowed their unique experiences and voices to be illuminated and inform educators, practitioners, administrators, and policymakers on how to serve these students better. Grounded theory allows keeping my participants’ voices authentic by directly using their words and ideas to inform others and highlight their unique experiences and higher education success needs. This study is an attempt to develop an initial exploratory theory that views first-generation Latinx students as active contributors to college campuses rather than individuals that are assumed to

need extra support because of their background and the idea that they lack certain qualities, capital, skills, and knowledge (Davis, 2010).

Using Grounded Theory to Understand Retention and Persistence

The development of new theories and the flexibility of qualitative studies has inspired many researchers to use grounded theory (Birks & Mills, 2015). In some cases, professionals in higher education have used grounded theory research to develop programs, evaluations, support systems, and opportunities that directly speak to participant knowledge and experiences (Bloom et al., 2007; Hendricks et al., 1996; Chapin, 2015; Eich, 2008). Applying grounded theory to higher education settings has already proven a powerful tool for developing theory and bridging that theory into practice (Bloom et al., 2007; Hendricks et al., 1996; Chapin, 2015; Eich, 2008). Building theory and creating actionable steps forward are key components of this research study, showing that grounded theory is a strong fit for this inquiry.

Grounded theory methodologies gave me the guidance and structure that I needed to create an initial exploratory theory that can explain which factors contribute to first-generation Latinx students' persistence and highlight which are qualities they already possess. It provided an additive lens perspective that validates qualities like cultural, social, and human capital that contributes to higher education experiences and success (Hernandez, 2000; Yosso, 2005, 2006). Using an additive lens is necessary because many efforts to create models and frameworks developed have been from a deficit standpoint that only portrays first-generation Latinx students as having problems. After all, they miss certain qualities that can make them successful in higher education in comparison to their non-first-generation counterparts (Robertson et al., 2016).

Instead, institutions should serve first-generation Latinx students through an additive lens and provide appropriate support and learning environments in which first-generation Latinx students can thrive and complete their programs.

Overall, grounded theory provides a systematic way to develop a theory directly from data intentionally. It is important to recognize that you are not testing a theory in grounded theory; instead, a theory is developed from the data. Through concurrent data analysis, collection, and reflective processes, grounded theory allows participant assets and responses to lead the theory development. Although a meticulous process, grounded theory led to creating a theory that can help us understand first-generation Latinx student retention and increase institutions' overall graduation rates.

Ethical Stance

For this study, culturally responsive methodologies are used as an ethical stance that compliments grounded theory methodology. A foundational component of Culturally Responsive Methodology is the researcher positionality and its impact on the trustworthiness, relationships, power dynamics, and ethics of the research outcome and process. Examining positionality for this dissertation was important because it allowed me to understand and visualize my place within the study. It was also important to recognize and understand my own multiple identities, privileges, and roles to understand others' narratives and realities. Hogg (2014) stresses the importance of researchers examining their thinking in the study design and their fieldwork actions. She says this is about what values and rationale researchers bring to the study. It was also necessary to consider what power status the researcher had in the participants' eyes and how the power can be shared. My positionality within this study is my story and acknowledging the influence my life experiences and worldviews had on this study.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research there is a question of trustworthiness of the study to make sure that the findings are not the researchers ideas imposed on the participants or the data. Grounded theory does not test a hypothesis or uses theory to make sense of the data, instead the theory is generated directly from the data. In grounded theory methodology, it is important for the researcher to not only understand but to check their positionality and their own subjectivity. For this dissertation study, I not only have a positionality statement but also a subjectivity statement (Seen in Appendix A). I not only reflected on my own positionality and subjectivity as it relates to the study but during the analysis of the data, I did memo in order to ensure that I was not imposing any of my own judgments or experiences onto those of the participants. Stahl & King (2020) mentioned theoretical triangulation where the researcher uses theoretical frameworks to understand the findings and in the analysis of this dissertation. I recognized that I used three theoretical frameworks that informed me to make sense of the data. I used Tara J. Yosso (2005, 2006) Communities of Cultural Wealth, Urie Bronfenbrenners (1977, 1979, 1986) Socioecological Model and Friere's (2000) Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Another way I ensured the trustworthiness of the study was by doing a member check. I created a document where I reviewed my understanding of the data and the findings and asked the participants in the study to confirm that what I was understanding was true to their experience.

Methods

This dissertation study was part of a more extensive study that examined different aspects of all first-generation students' experiences. The survey was used to collect demographic data, followed by a 60 to 90-minute one-on-one interview, which included open-ended questions regarding high school college preparation, campus climate, first-generation experiences, and

plans for graduate school. The participants who identify as Latinx and first-generation students with senior class status were interviewed specifically for this dissertation study. The interviews were audio recorded, and for the dissertation study, the response to the campus climate and first-generation experience were used for the analysis. The questions for the one-on-one interviews were open-ended so that the participants were able to lead the conversation to understand further first-generation Latinx students' unique experiences and developmental needs.

Questionnaire

The Qualtrics questionnaire was emailed to the participants with the consent forms for them to read and review before meeting in person to sign the consent before the interview. The Qualtrics form was composed of 42-questions (See Appendix B). The data gathered in the questionnaire included demographic data, K-12 education questions, college experience, financial independence, family background questions and interview availability. Following the questionnaire, I reached out to the participants that reported being first-generation Latinx students with senior class status.

Interview

The participants in the study participated in one to two one-on-one interviews that were conducted in-person or over the phone. The interviews protocol used for the study consisted of 50 open-ended questions and follow-up questions (See Appendix C). The questions covered various topics like pre-college/college preparation, campus climate, first-generation experiences and graduate school questions. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and coded by hand.

For this dissertation study and the analysis of the data grounded theory methodology and methods used, grounded theory methods will be discussed in this section. In this section, I offer

some demographic data on Pioneer’s student and faculty. They will provide a better understanding and a holistic view of where the study was conducted. In this section, I will discuss who my participants were and how they were recruited. I will also discuss the coding and memoing process that was part of this study to develop an initial exploratory theory to understand the experiences and factors contributing to first-generation Latinx students’ persistence at a predominantly White, private institution in southern California.

Pioneer University

Pioneer University is a predominantly White private institution where the study was conducted. Pioneer is a small research university with about 10,000 students, of the students enrolled about 20 percent identify as first-generation and 40 percent identify as persons of color. Table 1 demonstrates the demographics by race/ethnicity of the undergraduate students at Pioneer in fall 2019.

Table 1

Table shows undergraduate students’ race/ethnicity

<u>Undergraduates Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Fall 2019</u>
American Indian/Alaska Native	10
Asian	1047
Black/African American	123
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	22
Hispanic/Latino	1180
Nonresident Alien	293

Race/Ethnicity Unknown	488
Two or More Races	573
White	3769
Total:	7505

Table 2 shows the demographic data by race/ethnicity of full-time faculty at Pioneer in fall of 2019. That year there were a total of 1,134 faculty members. Of the 1,134 faculty members, 536 were full-time faculty and there were 45 Asian professors, 11 Black/African American professors, 19 Hispanic/Latino professors and 274 White professors. 536 faculty members that were full-time reported their gender identity: 305 men and 231 women. The student-faculty ratio at Pioneer University is 13:1.

Table 2

Table shows full-time faculty's race/ethnicity

<u>Full-Time Faculty by Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Fall 2019</u>
American Indian/Alaska Native	0
Asian	45
Black/African American	11
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0
Hispanic/Latino	19
Nonresident Alien	20

Race/Ethnicity Unknown	162
Two or More Races	5
White	274
Total:	536

Participants

The participants in this study were students with senior class status at Pioneer University and identified as first-generation Latinx. The participants were recruited through purposeful sampling at different events hosted by the first-generation program at Pioneer University. The participants who volunteered for this study did not receive any compensation for their participation. There were 10 participants in the sample size and six were women and four were men. Nine of the participants were employed at the time of the study and one was not employed. Five of the participants were completing their studies in four years, three were completing their studies in three years and two of the participants were transfer students completing their studies in two years.

Procedure

The participants were asked to contact the team of researchers. Once the potential participant reached out, one of the researchers briefly explained to them what was expected of them as participants, what the study consisted of, along with an explanation of the consent forms and the link to the Qualtrics survey. In the survey, the participants noted what days they were available to participate in the study's interview portion. The surveys were then reviewed. Those who responded as identifying as first-generation Latinx students with senior status were those I

connected with and scheduled a day and time that was most convenient for them. I also let them choose a location of their choice on-campus. Many chose an office or study room in the library was used to conduct the interviews. Before the interviews, the participants were asked to sign a physical copy of the consent form. They were given the opportunity to ask in-person questions regarding the study and the process. The participants were also reminded that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time and that the interviews would be audio recorded. At the end of the interviews, the participants were asked if it was okay for further communication via email for follow-up questions or to schedule a follow-up interview.

After some of the interviews, I started to transcribe and code line-by-line by hand. I would code, categorize, and compare and analyze all the data. Comparing and analyzing all the data collected allowed me to look at overarching similarities and differences in experiences to develop an initial exploratory theory.

Member Check

In developing the categories, themes and an initial exploratory theory, I offered the themes and findings of the study for the participants to review and confirm to improve the reliability and trustworthiness of the study. Through member checking, I discussed the themes with them and sought their confirmation of my data interpretation to ensure that the participant's voice is accurately represented. Member checking ensures that I am not using my lens and world views to interpret the data to develop this initial exploratory theory. Once I had developed the initial exploratory theory, I emailed my participants and shared with them a summary of the findings and asked for feedback and thoughts on the findings via email or phone. I did this to ensure that I continued to use my participants' voices through the initial exploratory theory development process.

Once I reached data saturation, I put all my data, codes, categories, and themes together to start developing an initial exploratory theory. If other questions arose in this process or if I needed clarification, I reached out to the participants. I did this twice times in the data collection, transcription, coding, and analysis process until I reached a data saturation point where I could then analyze and develop an initial exploratory theory. Before I finalized and presented my findings, I pitched my initial exploratory theory to all 10 participants for accuracy. In this process, I highlighted and distinguished my ideas from those of my participants.

Data Analysis

As part of the grounded theory methodology, it is important to analyze and collect data continuously to become immersed in the data and have themes and theory development from the data itself. I used NVIVO to store the data and used for organizational purposes. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed by hand. All the rounds of coding, category and theme development were all done by hand. The analysis and theory development were also done by hand.

Ethical Considerations

The continuous interactions with and the analysis of the data kept me in a place where I could maintain open communication with the participants for follow-ups to explore topics further or ask questions I had for the participant. This open communication was reciprocated by making myself available to the participants for questions or resources. I am aware that because the participants led the conversations, they spoke from a place of pain or difficulty that might leave them vulnerable, so I had a list of resources available to them on campus, if they may want to seek professional help. Despite having a counseling background and the skills to help facilitate a

meaningful conversation, I will made sure to keep my role as a researcher. I made sure not to have a dual relationship with my participants by keeping my stance as a researcher.

Helping Institutions Keep the Promise to First-Generation Latinx Students

I am optimistic and hopeful that developing an initial exploratory theory while using grounded theory to develop a theory can shift the deficit lens perspective in education to an additive lens. The additive lens will acknowledge and validate students' assets and capitals that contribute to and improve all students' campus climate and experiences. With an additive lens, I hope that educators, administrators, and institutions appreciate, validate, and welcome diversity and become informed on how to serve Latinx best, first-generation students. The validation and acknowledgment of first-generation Latinx students as an addition to higher education institutions will contribute to these students' persistence towards graduation and provides them with a promising future that can ensure economic and social mobility through quality education.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter reports the findings of the interviews with first-generation Latinx students with senior class status who were given pseudonyms from Pioneer University in southern California. Higher education institutions need a better understanding of serving this growing population of students to meet their needs. Previous models and theoretical frameworks developed to help first-generation students were created with only the Black and White student perspectives in mind because of the lack of diversity within the higher education system. Additionally, as college campuses further diversify, the frameworks and models used to develop services, interventions, and support programs are no longer effective in meeting these students' needs. This dissertation study was part of a larger study that examined all first-generation students' experiences at a predominantly White private institution.

For this dissertation, I examined the experiences of first-generation Latinx students who had senior class status because they are less likely to drop-out. The literature in chapter 2 discusses how many Latinx first-generation students are dropping out of higher education; however, despite the drop-out rate, not much research has been done to explore what supported students from this population who persisted and graduated successfully. This study's focus was to explore how to improve the persistence and success of Latinx first-generation students by identifying what it is that helped them persist and be successful. Furthermore, this study attempts to develop an initial exploratory theory of successful first-generation Latinx students' experiences to inform educators and administrators how to serve first-generation Latinx students better.

This chapter presents the findings for this study's overarching question and the two sub-research questions. The overarching research question is: What are the experiences of first-generation Latinx students at a predominantly White, private institution? The two sub-research questions were: (1) What factors influence first-generation Latinx students' persistence and success at a predominantly White, private institution? (2) What are the perceived challenges of first-generation Latinx students at a predominantly White, private institution? In this chapter, I present the initial exploratory theory first and then the findings of the sub-questions. This is because the goal of the study was to understand the overall experiences of the participants and the additional findings focus more on external factors that influenced their experiences. The responses to interview questions regarding the campus climate and first-generation experiences provide insight into the overall experiences. These factors contributed to the persistence and perceived challenges of first-generation Latinx students. Turning to the specific research questions, I first discuss the three themes regarding the overall experiences. Secondly, I discuss the factors that contributed to the participants' persistence and success in this study. Finally, I will share their perceived challenges.

Sample and Demographic Background

In the study, I examined 10 senior Latinx first-generation students' experiences at a predominantly White private institution in southern California. The participants were recruited at programs and events that were explicitly offered for first-generation students. Social media and snowball sampling were also used to recruit participants.

Each participant filled out a Qualtrics form questionnaire with 40 questions. The questions ranged from demographic data, secondary education, post-secondary education, student financial independence, and questions regarding their parent's education and

socioeconomic status. After those questions, participants were prompted to fill out an availability form to schedule a one-on-one interview. At the interview, the researcher went over the consent form, clarified any questions the participant may have had, and then had participants sign the form. The interviews were between 60 to 90 minutes long and were audio-recorded.

Table 1 presents demographic and background information for each participant and offers pseudonyms, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, and years at the institution. It also shows whether they were full-time or part-time students, their employment status, family economic background, the family structure they grew up in, and their parent's/s' or guardian's/s' highest education level. The participants in this dissertation study were four males and six females. Of the 10 participants, Daniel and Erika were transfer students, and Jorge was in a dual enrollment program in high school, so they all had previous college experience before attending Pioneer University. Erika was not only a 34-year-old transfer student, but she was a parent who did not graduate from high school and then participated in a community program that offered vocational training through the local community college. Antonio reported his family's economic background as affluent/upper class. Valeria chose not to report their family's financial background. Jorge, Jose, and Erika were reported as middle class, whereas Marcela, Sonia, and Daniel identified as working-class, and Rosa and Ariana reported their family's economic background as low income. Again, all participants had senior class status and were in their last year at the interview time.

Table 3

Table showing participants' demographic information

Pseudonym, Gender, Orientation, & Age	# of yrs. at Pioneers University	Full-Time/ Part-Time Student Status	Employment Status	Family Economic Background	Family Structure: Parent's/s' Guardian's/s' Highest Level of Education
Rosa, Woman, Heterosexual, 21	4	Full-Time	Currently Employed	Low-Income	2 parents, (no formal education)
Jorge, Man, Heterosexual, 21	4	Full-Time (Earned an AA while in HS)	Currently Employed	Middle-Class	2 parents, (both earned a HS diploma/GE D)
Marcela, Woman, Heterosexual, 21	4	Full-Time	Currently Employed	Working-Class	Single Parent, (High school Diploma/GE D)
Ariana, Woman, No Response, 22	3	Full-Time	Currently Employed	Low-Income	2 parents, (1 earned a HS Diploma/GE D, 1 has no formal education)
Jose, Man, Heterosexual, 21	4	Full-Time	Currently Employed	Middle-Class	2 parents, (both earned a HS diploma/GE D)
Sonia, Woman,	4	Full-Time	Currently Employed	Working-Class	2 Parents, (1 has some

Bisexual/Pan /Poly/Ambi, 21					high school education, 1 has some college education)
Daniel, Man, Bisexual/Pan /Poly/Ambi, 24	2	Full-Time (Transfer student, did not earn AA)	Currently Employed	Working- Class	Single parent, (no formal education)
Valeria, Woman, Heterosexual , 21	4	Full-Time	Currently Employed	No Response	2 parents, (1 earned a HS Diploma/GE D, 1 has no formal education)
Erika, Woman, Heterosexual , 34	2	Full-Time (Graduate d with an AA)	Not Employed	Middle- Class	Single parent, (no formal education)
Antonio, Man, Heterosexual , 20	3	Full-Time	Currently Employed	Affluent/ Upper-Class	Single parent, High School Diploma/GE D

Transformation Through Personal Growth, Critical Awareness and Resistance

The three overarching themes, in the findings about the experiences of first-generation Latinx students at a predominantly White, private institution reveal how challenges, stress, and transformation defined their experiences through personal growth, critical awareness, and resistance. Personal growth, critical awareness, and resistance led the participants to reflect, which informed their practice, guiding them towards action and service for other first-generation Latinx students, their families, and communities.

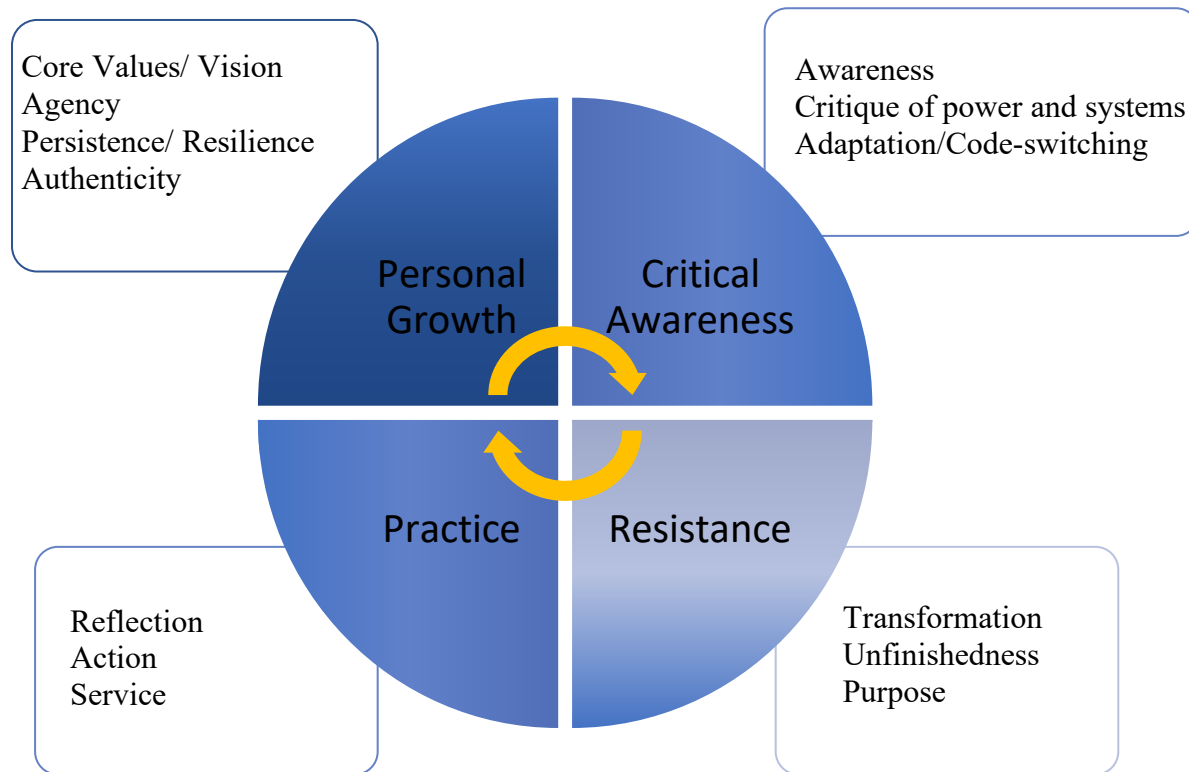
The first theme that arose was personal growth that occurs throughout these students' academic journey. All 10 of the participants recognized that they were responsible for their future destiny. Upon enrolling and starting at Pioneer University, seven students quickly realized that they were on their own and had to be self-reliant to be successful. The remaining three participants learned that early on. Jorge learned this lesson in high school while dually enrolled in the community college, and Erika and Daniel learned that at the community college they attended before transferring to Pioneer University. As I interviewed, it became clear that the journey towards graduation was where the participants learned more about themselves, their identity, social injustices, economic inequities, and the cultural differences between them and most Pioneer students. Additionally, nine participants also mentioned differences between them and their peers in college preparation, privilege, and capital and described how these differences influenced and shaped their college experience. By noting these differences and learning new information in their academic courses, it revealed that the participants developed a critical awareness.

The participants' critical lens developed via academic and social experiences attributed to shaping resistance in all participants. Nine participants mentioned how they were more assertive and confident because they had learned more about being their most authentic self and learned about the social injustices and inequities that affected them personally and the Latinx community. Nine participants mentioned how they occupied many spaces that were not meant for Latinx students but continued to persist and work towards graduation. Along with their newfound traits and confidence came a sense of social responsibility to help other Latinx be successful and persist because they also felt a sense of responsibility to challenge stereotypes and statistics around Latinx students. Each of the 10 participants had unique experiences, but they all

had a shared story of transformation and leadership development from personal growth, critical awareness, and resistance.

Figure 1

Figure of framework developed from the data



Theme #1: Personal Growth

Personal growth was one of the themes that arose from the data. Personal growth was demonstrated by four major characteristics revealing how each participant experienced growth. Personal growth was demonstrated by the development of the participants' self-reliance/agency, persistence, aspiration and hopes, and resilience. In Figure 2, there are four characteristics of personal growth common in all the participants' stories. Under each of the characteristics, there are examples of what actions demonstrated that characteristic. For example, self-reliance/agency was evident when participants recognized that they are in charge of creating their future and

figuring things out because they cannot rely on family to know how to help. Persistence was another trait that was refined in the participants through continuous hard work, knowing when to ask for help, and recognizing that they had to graduate to take advantage of their opportunities. Aspiration and hope motivated them to keep persisting towards graduation because they were achieving the goal they had. They also envisioned a future with more opportunities, independence, success, and social and economic mobility. Additionally, resiliency developed because they continued to bounce back from challenges and setbacks. The participants managed to develop resiliency through trial and error, acculturating, adapting, and code-switching to navigate the institution's systems successfully.

Figure 2

Figure showing characteristics and examples from the data



In the following section, I will provide anecdotes and stories the participants shared with me that demonstrate their personal growth during their academic journey and how it led to finding their most authentic selves with stronger core values and vision, persistence, resilience, and agency.

Ariana

Ariana is a 22-year-old woman from a low-income background and would soon be graduating soon and would complete her education at Pioneer University in 3 years. When I asked her to describe the campus environment and how it affected her experience in school, Ariana described how at the beginning of her academic journey at Pioneer University, she was constantly questioning whether she fit in on-campus and tried to find her community by attending different club meetings. However, she still had a hard time finding a group she felt like she fit in. Eventually, she started a film club on campus that was more academic and felt comfortable in that environment with others she was familiar with or had seen in her classes. When I asked her if she felt like she fit in in school, she said, “No, I feel like there's so many different levels in which, I don't fit, but I feel like over time... I'm too tired, and it gets too tiring to be self-conscious all the time.” She attributed a lot of her feelings of not fitting in to being an introvert and there not being enough diversity on campus to find people to which she could relate. Despite those feelings, she recognized how she has gained confidence and is more assertive. She said that newfound confidence and assertiveness are helping her carry herself differently and feel indifferent about whether she fits in or not, and she knows that that will help her in the future. She said,

I have grown and it's been this process of learning, because I'm first-gen. It doesn't really bother me because it is kind of true that I am learning and getting better at just being a student and learning to be assertive. And it's because I'm first and I didn't have to do all of these things before.

Having evolved from a quiet and shy person to a person who was informed about social issues, that empowered her to continue having those conversations with like-minded people in a casual environment like the film club she started. The new confidence and assertiveness came from

recognizing that she could do the work and could tell she was getting better by working hard and seeing results in the quality of work she was producing.

I was kind of shy and I didn't know what I was talking about ...because that's how I felt... I was too scared to approach things, and to be critical and to be assertive and take control of the material. But now it feels like I've done so much work that I don't think that I need the encouragement of like, "oh, you're doing well" [professor speaking] like you just keep getting better and better because I know that I'm getting better and better. So it doesn't feel like I need to be validated by the professors. ... because I'm first-gen and I'm still trying to figure out because unfortunately, I figured out it's a process and no one is going to become a great writer just overnight.

During the interview, I asked, "How and when did you become aware of your identity as a first-generation student?" Ariana shared with me how the college courses themselves helped her learn more and develop a stronger identity, making her more aware of social issues and injustices. She developed a stronger identity the further along she got into her studies. She mentioned how the courses she took allowed her to learn about social issues that affect her different identities in one-way, shape, or form. She said:

Identity didn't start forming for me until, my sophomore year when I was learning ... I felt like I didn't know anything coming into college because I don't even know my own history, because no one talks about identity when you're all the same, we're all marginalized. It's like, Who's going to discriminate against you? You know? like there isn't some sort of hierarchy because you're all at the bottom.

This quote demonstrates her identity development and how the new information she learned made her more critically aware of social issues. Critical awareness is the second theme of this study that developed from the participants' experiences.

Marcela

Marcela is a 21-year-old woman raised by a single working-class mother who has been highly involved in Marcela's education. Marcela's mother attended events on campus whenever Marcela believed it would be a safe space for her mother and where her mom would meet other parents. Marcela's mother would sometimes volunteer to serve as a panelist at events for first-

generation students on campus. When I asked Marcela to describe the campus, its environment, and how it affected her experiences, she mentioned how she struggled her first year because she did not see many people of color on campus. Because of the lack of people of color on campus, she became more conscious about who she was. She questioned whether she was filling a diversity quota and that's how she had been accepted and questioned if she belonged at Pioneer University. Marcela described these feelings of insecurity in the following quote:

I started overthinking it so much. ... Like, I felt when I first walked onto campus, [she asked herself] am I being too Mexican right now? Because I didn't feel like I could really be myself ... I stopped speaking Spanish when I got here. I stopped dressing like with certain things that I would wear like, I didn't want to wear hoop earrings because they're gonna think I'm ghetto. Or I'm not gonna listen to Spanish music cuz they're gonna think... like little things like that. So, I feel like my first year, I felt like there's constantly people judging me for who I was or what I identified as...

Marcela was dealing with how she appeared to others who weren't Mexican, but she also had a hard time making friends that understood her experience. She felt like whenever she would make those connections with people who didn't share her experience or background, she constantly explained things. She mentioned a time where she was short on tuition and, as a result, was stressed and worried. Her friends voiced that she could ask her dad for the money, not knowing that her mom was a single parent, and her father was not in the picture. She said:

I befriended a couple of girls, and they're all white and I felt the struggles that I was going through, they had no idea. Like one semester, I was very short for tuition. And then I was crying about it, stressing about it and they would be like just asked your dad. ...my dad is not in the picture. But to them that seemed foreign. So, I don't want to explain everything to every other friend that I had... I feel like I talked about it very freely, like I'm an open book, but to them, I felt like I didn't want them to see me as, oh, my poor friend. ...And it was just kind of weird, I always felt weird about it. So, I exclude myself out of that group.

In this instance, Marcela felt like it would take too much energy to explain things to those who did not understand or did not relate to her experience. So, she removed herself from that group to find a sense of community through the first-generation program on campus. In this community,

she met others that she could relate to, and eventually, with these new friends, started the Latinx club on campus. Another way that Marcela demonstrated her growth was through her changed views surrounding success. I asked her, “How would you define success?” In her response, she reflects on how she thought of success as having money to financially take care of her mom and family during her freshman year. Since then, her idea of success has evolved. She said, “I think before when I came in as a freshman, my view of success was money. And it was just taking care of my mom. ... And it still is, but it's more to the extent of like, I want... fulfillment”. Success to her now is working in a place that not only brings fulfillment, but it is also a place you are happy to go to work regardless of the pay. She said:

For me, success is being in a job, or being in a place where, I'm just happy, you know? I like being part of this program... I love doing this. I love being available for people to come talk to. Like, that brings me so much joy that I want to be in a job that, I wouldn't mind not getting paid to do. ...And I think right now like I'm in a place where, I want to help out the first-gen community the best that I can, the most that I can.

Marcela's journey began with having difficulty relating to those who were not of a similar background which made her feel misunderstood. She knew enough to navigate the university and find her community, eventually establishing a club with her friends where they all had similar economic and cultural backgrounds. There is a level of growth and understanding that happens over time within an individual to understand the control and power in shaping their experience. Marcela's change is also evident when she redefined success. Not only does it demonstrate her level of maturity, but it also shows how she has strong core values and a vision for her future.

Sonia

Sonia is a 21-year-old bisexual woman from a working-class background that had tuition remission because her mother worked at the university. When I asked Sonia to describe the campus environment, she said she didn't feel like she needed to hide her cultural background but

felt like she stood out from her peers, especially freshman year. She mentioned how the way she used to dress made her feel out of place, especially because she got a lot of attention from others on campus. Eventually, she changed the way she dressed. Sonia explained how she felt out of place:

I would say that my first year, I felt really freaking weird. But I'm proud of younger me for sticking to it because I loved it. I remember this one time... A girl, I didn't even know her...I was in the piazza, and I think I was just sitting, reading or something. She comes up to me, and she's like, "Oh, I'm sorry to bother you. I just want to say that I see you around, and I love your style. I think you're so cool or whatever." And I was like, "Oh, thank you." It was a compliment, and in my head, I was like, but I look so different from other people.

Sonia felt like she stuck out, and eventually, she changed the way she dressed. Aside from changing her clothing and eventually not caring whether she fit in or not, she took charge of her education and researched classes and professors with whom she'd like to take classes. When I asked her to describe the classroom environment and how the classroom environment affected her experience in school, she said:

The classroom environment is awesome. I was also very picky about my professors. I remember looking through classes; I made it a point to look up the professors and just learn a little bit more about them before deciding on taking the class or not. I think that was super helpful, too, because I, for the most part, I was with professors with who I thought that my values aligned with...

Knowing that she wanted to take classes with professors who shared her values and examining class content, she demonstrated how she was in complete control of her educational journey.

Sonia was informed enough to know what classes she could take, reflecting the level of maturity and confidence she developed to control her education.

Valeria

Valeria is a 21-year-old heterosexual woman whose father was a small business owner who had no formal education, and her mother earned a high school diploma or equivalent. In

Valeria's journey, she didn't mention how she had to hide her cultural background; however, she shared how she felt limited in her ability to speak Spanish and felt as if she wasn't her true self because she had to adapt and adjust to her setting to try to fit in. Valeria discussed how she missed cultural familiarity but learned how to adapt to her new environment:

And you want to feel at home or because of that shift from high school to here, all of my friends have always been Hispanic and it's easier to be yourself around people who understand. It's like that feeling of you have to kind of shift to adapt. But it's not like my values or my like culture is not coming through. Like, I'm a big Spanglish speaker at home with my friends, but then at school, it's like I can't, and it's not that it's bad or anything... It's exciting when you're able to speak Spanglish around someone when it's not so common in the setting. Or even little things such as bringing candy to the class. Like in high school ...we would bring candy for other students like a presentation or whatever. It would be like tamarindo candy or something like that. But for here, they're not gonna like that. So, you bring Snickers, or it's just a lot of like knowing the difference and trying to adapt to like where you are.

Valeria's personal growth took shape through adapting, code-switching, and acculturation. In this quote, Valeria shared how vital she believed language is in making connections and building meaningful relationships because she could not do this on campus given the lack of diversity. Besides adapting and code-switching, I asked Valeria how she learned that higher education was important or necessary? She reflected on how her parents have instilled in her the importance of education, especially because of the opportunities that come with having one. She has used her dad's story and different memories to motivate her to graduate and become a teacher in the future. She said:

He would remind me often. He would keep emphasizing education a lot. And he emphasizes it in a way...anything can be taken away from you, but your education and what you have learned cannot be taken away from you. And so, he always emphasized that even when I was... I literally have vivid memories of being in second grade and doing my homework and then my dad coming home late and reminding me and keeping me motivated to continue doing that homework, or whatever. The importance, of being educated, so that you have opportunities and so he would make it a point to mention that you don't have to have a college education to be successful or whatever, because that's his story. He's pretty successful and he's able to do all of this stuff for his kids even though he had no education, but it's really rough for him.

Valeria's experiences demonstrate how aspiration and hope helped her be resilient. Valeria stated, "we don't belong in these institutions," in her reference to the representation disparities of Latinx students attending schools like Pioneer University.

Daniel

Daniel was a 24 year-old man who transferred from community college and would be graduating after two years at Pioneer University. A Spanish-speaking single mother raised Daniel without formal education while also unable to read and understand English. Daniel shared how he felt that it would be a struggle to share his writing with his mother. He used that as motivation to aspire to be a good enough writer in Spanish so his mother could understand his work. He said:

My mom can't read, and that's always been a struggle. Even when we were growing up, if I ever got a note home from school, I'd have to read it out loud and then roughly translate it. Going into writing... when I realized I wanted to write for a living, it was always just kind of like, "Man, she's not going to be able to understand this." I can try to translate it, I can rewrite the whole thing in Spanish, but it's not going to have the same feel as it would originally. And I mean honestly, that's my goal in the future at some point to be a good enough writer that I can write something that I love in Spanish and to have the same kind of weight.

Daniel's realization that his mother would not be able to read and understand his written work made him aware of his identity as a first-generation student. When I asked Daniel, how he had dealt with the stress of being a first-generation student in a predominately White institution, he said it was a lot of venting to his friends and finding ways to bring his home culture to campus. He mentioned how he eventually became comfortable in practicing his cultural norms inside the classroom. He said, "I'm not going to stop. I just don't want to lose any of my culture. So, it encourages me more to just keep bringing it back in. And I'm going to eat a homemade burrito in class because I'm hungry, and you guys are going to smell the onions..." Daniel shows how he

makes it a point to try to hold spaces to integrate both cultures in a predominantly White institution. When I asked Daniel how he thinks his identity has played a role in his experience as a student, he responded:

In my mom's words, it's made me hungry ... It makes me feel like I don't have that many backup plans after this. So, I should go all out right now [work hard]. Because I can't be like, "Oh, someone else is going to fix this for me, or someone else is going to work this out for me." It's like, "No, I have to be the one who makes my own future because I can't wait for it to be made for me."

Daniel used his mother's story of migration as motivation to ensure that he takes advantage of all the opportunities he has to change his family history and to create a better future for him and his family. Like Daniel, all the participants mentioned how they felt they were changing their family history and creating a better future.

Jorge

Jorge is a 21-year-old man who is second-generation Mexican American and whose parents earned a high school diploma or equivalent. Jorge mentioned how he found a community of friends his sophomore year because he was a commuter student during his first year, making it more challenging to make friends. His friends who were also commuters started the Latinx club to create a social space for Latinx students. He discussed the creation of this club by stating:

We ended up setting a climate and an actual space for Latino students to be on campus. And even [for] students who are interested in Latino culture. We're Latino students that don't really fit in with all the other clubs. Because where are our people with our similar experiences? And you kind of see it, like if you would go to the club meetings, you can kind of see every student comes from a similar socioeconomic background and a similar cultural background, whether it's slightly more whitewashed or less, you know?

Creating a space for Latinx students to meet their needs was a sign of adaptation, acculturation, and resilience because the students navigated the institution and found ways to meet their own needs by creating an organization that provided support and helped them adapt to college. When I asked Jorge about what cultural resources have helped him succeed, Jorge said:

That was also something I was involved in because I know there's problems going on with the Latino community. And I wanted to be more involved in that. So that was kind of a way for me to step away academically because obviously I'm learning all stem. And it was like, Okay, let me look at this more social-political club. That's not really culturally social, but it's more focused on politics and social issues. And so, I did that for a little bit, and I feel like that helped me kind of build a different layer of confidence because I've always been confident, like, I could go talk on stage. I could do other things. But obviously, I was just never socially aware of issues going on. Yeah, sure. I know there's problems. I was just never informed enough. And I feel like that gave me a different level of confidence that I applied to my classes and learn how to navigate the university.

Jorge also shared how at the beginning of his academic journey, he attended various clubs' meetings to meet his different interests and got involved with a group on campus that was socially and politically involved, not just locally but nationally. He said he attended those meetings to get informed and know more about the politics and social issues regarding the Latinx community. Understanding the complexities of his identities, roles, needs, and taking the initiative to meet those needs, demonstrates his agency, persistence, and resilience which is evidence of his personal growth.

Antonio

Antonio, a 20-year-old man from an affluent/upper-class background, provided a perspective that despite having a different socioeconomic background some of the experiences are similar to other Latinx students. When I asked him if he thought his identity played a role in his experience as a student, he didn't think so because he looks White. He is half White and half Spanish and mentioned that due to his appearance looking different from "stereotypical" Latinx features, no one suspected him of being first-generation. He explained:

A lot of people look at me, and they don't think (I'm a) first-generation college student Hispanic. I'm coming from a divorced household. I don't think I'd fit the stereotype. But, I'm really proud of my identity. Because when I tell people that they're like, "what!?" And I was like, Yeah, I got barriers, but I don't make excuses. I'm overcoming them. Like, look at me. I don't need to listen to society. So, it makes me feel really proud that I'm making my own legacy, trailblazing.

Antonio embraced his first-generation identity, but it was still very new to him. When I asked him when he became aware of his identity as a first-generation student, it had only been about a year since he learned of that part of his identity. It became clearer that he was different when he applied for internships and was getting rejected from top accounting firms and reached out for help and later learned about imposter syndrome. Antonio elaborated on how his challenges on receiving an offer from an accounting firm made him realize that he did not have the same networks and social capital compared to others who were not first-generation.

That was like a really big notification, I guess when I saw where I was coming from versus other people, who like, you know their parents might have been accountants, they might know people in the industry already where I was just trying. I'm here just trying to figure it out.

After finding out about his first-generation identity, he shared how he was initially ashamed but later learned to embrace it and be proud. Antonio described his experience embracing being first-generation and using that as a motivating factor to work towards his goals.

Because, you know, initially, I was a little ashamed of being a first-generation student, you know? I thought that I was less than them [non first-generation students] because my parents weren't educated. You know? but then I came to the realization and said, You know what? We go to the same college I earned my way in here. You know? ... And then I was like, "You know what? I'm proud of being first-gen." And it was something I just found and it was something I could grow from.

As a more affluent first-generation student, Antonio's experience demonstrates that being first-generation is a similar experience no matter one's socioeconomic background. One of the significant differences between Antonio and his less affluent peers is that he could rely on friends' parents for help and guidance. In contrast, the rest of the participants did not have resources and guidance outside of school. Antonio came from an upper-class background and attended prestigious private schools before, but he managed to get as far as he did with his friends' parents' help. His friends' parents had graduated college, so he could rely on their

guidance to get to college and be successful. After learning of his first-generation identity, Antonio began to attend events for first-generation students. He learned about the similarities he had with other first-generation Latinx students at Pioneer University through his interactions with other Latinx students who were also first-generation college students.

When I meet like... other Hispanic kids because there aren't as many, and having you know, all the commonality like I believe on the *chancla* or whatever...it'll be things like that where I'm able to connect with them. And that's really... it's really refreshing to me because it's something I don't really get to express as openly.

Antonio's academic journey was different from other participants in the sense that money was not a stressor. Some of his biggest challenges were not having the opportunity to connect to others who were first-generation, and culturally, he could not express his Spanish side openly in other spaces on campus because nobody suspected him being a first-generation Latinx student. Unlike his first-generation peers, Antonio learned of his first-generation identity further along his academic journey, but it was something he learned to be proud of and realized that being first-generation did not mean he was going to fail; instead, he said, "I'm making my own legacy, trailblazing."

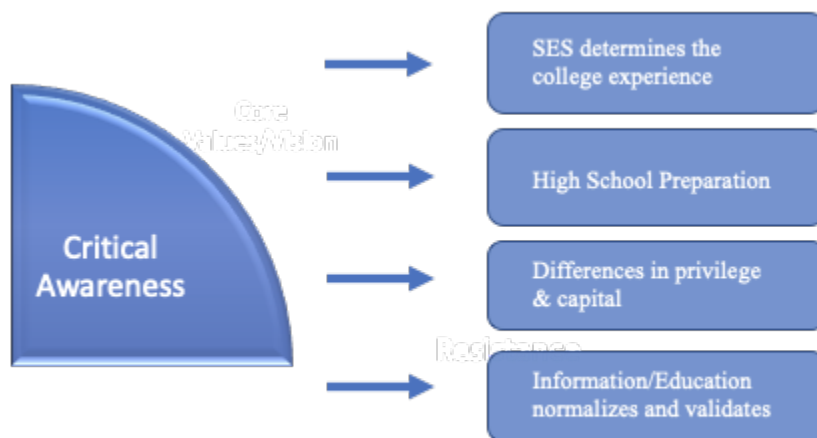
Theme # 2: Critical Awareness

The second theme in analysis of the data was the concept of critical awareness development in the participants' academic journeys. The participants' development of their most authentic selves also led to the development of their own agency, strong core values and vision, persistence, and resilience, which played a part in their critical awareness. In developing critical awareness, the participants became more aware of the social injustices and inequities in their experiences and lives. The participants noticed how their secondary education placed them at a disadvantage from their peers who had a better-quality education. Additionally, participants saw how their socioeconomic status shaped their college experience as well as their work experience.

Participants also noticed the differences of privilege and capital because of their difficulty navigating the institution. In acknowledging and becoming more critically aware, students recognized that they needed to be self-sufficient. Therefore, the participants took ownership of their education and knew that they could create the spaces and experiences they wanted and needed. In taking ownership of their education and navigating the institution, these students learned to adapt and code-switch. Figure 3 shows the four most common examples of how participants demonstrated their critical awareness. Almost all participants mentioned how socioeconomic status shaped and determined their college experience. All the participants explained how learning new information in different topics validated parts of their identities and noted the differences in privilege and capital with those who weren't first-generation.

Figure 3

Figure showing examples of critical awareness from the data



In the following section, I will share some of the experiences and moments in which the participants demonstrated critical awareness in their academic journeys.

Erika

Erika is a 34-year-old woman who was a transfer student and a mother. Erika shared a story where she demonstrated how she started to notice what it meant to be a non-traditional first-generation student and how it made her realize her positionality at this predominantly White institution. When I asked her how and when she became aware of her identity as a first-generation student, she said:

I didn't realize the impact of being a first-gen. Like how important it was until I got to [Pioneer]. But I always knew I'm a first-generation student. I'm not just a first-generation student. I'm a first-generation non-traditional student. And I was aware of that at SAC, I was able to form that identity at SAC, but it didn't really impact, or I wasn't able to see it from a different lens until at [Pioneer]. Something I recall my very first semester at [Pioneer], my first class was like at 8:30 in the morning, and I was there like 15 minutes, 20 minutes early. And there was already other students in class, and they were talking amongst themselves, I can hear the conversation. And this one girl says, I just can't wait to be done. And then the other person replied, "Yeah, I know". And then the conversation just kept on going. And she's like, "my mom, you know, she kind of pressures me because, at my age, she already had three masters". ...I'm just like, Oh my gosh, wow. That's amazing. And I'm thinking to myself, my mom has a master's in making tamales. ...I'm here, thinking I'm a badass doing my undergrad. You know? and then your [students in her class] mom and your dad have like PhDs galore to give out you know? Here I am trying and so like those kinds of things, you know we're what made me realize my position, my positionality at [Pioneer] and it helped really understand what being a first-gen was. ...Those are things that I was like, wow, I really don't fit in here.

Erika, in this instance, noticed how different her experience was from other students in her class. She realized how earning a college degree was normal and expected of other students, but for her, it wasn't. And so, it was a big deal for her to be close to graduating with a college degree, given that she had not graduated high school. It was a moment where she learned how different she was from others and felt like she did not fit in. She noticed these other students talking about their parents being college graduates and in professional careers; meanwhile, she was raised by a single mother with no formal education who would sell food and clean houses to make a living to support her four daughters. Later in the interview, I asked Erika how her economic status

influenced her experiences among her peers. Erika mentioned how she was interested in studying abroad but had to talk to her partner to figure out how she would pay for the travel course.

Unfortunately, when she finally went back to try and secure a spot, the class was full. She said,

I was trying to do a study abroad course. And I came home, and I talked [about] it with my partner, and I told him, “you know, I think this is a great opportunity. It'll give me a good insight into the whole college life. I get to travel with a bunch of students maybe help me establish [a] network or become more part of Pioneer”. And he's all like “yeah, go for it. How much or what do we need to do?”. Well, it costs a \$2,000 down payment. ...And then I'm like, we can do it. I'll go help my mom sell food. We'll find a way; we can do it. We can do this. He's like, “Yeah, go for it”. And then like, not even two days later, they're [university staff] was like, “Oh, it's full”. And I was like, “wait, what? Like how is this possible?”. And when I was talking to the person that was organizing it. He's like, Oh, yeah, students give deposit that same day.

It's situations like the one Erika was in that highlight the privilege and socioeconomic differences between middle-class and upper-class members. Also, it reaffirms how privilege and socioeconomic status shapes and influences the college experience of the student. Erika could not travel abroad because she did not have the money with her to reserve a spot. It would be a collective effort that would take time for her and her family to come up with the class deposit, but she missed out on that opportunity because of her economic background.

Ariana

Ariana was a 22-year-old woman of a low-income background who discussed the difficulties of being first-generation and how frustrating it can be because of her socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status affects first-generation students' college experience and the career preparation they receive while in college. Ariana portrays the effects of socioeconomic status by sharing her frustrations of not doing summer internships for free to get college credit because of added and unforeseen expenses. Ariana knew that being low-income and having to commute to an internship would cost money and interning for free would not help cover the cost of transportation. She said:

It kind of feels like the stress is also coming from, am I paying so much money to be here...is my shyness or my lack of resources is going to be the thing that prevents me from getting a good job? And then just having to come back home and just work, a minimum wage job, wherever. Because I did that over the summer, like two years ago, I was home because I can't do an internship, I don't have a car. I can't go to LA. Everything is in an office twice a week. You can't just like not go into work for an internship. And so I thought who's going to take me? How am I going to get there? If it's not paid, I'm spending more money to uber there. And if it's paid, then I don't get college credit. But I can't afford to not get paid and have to spend money to go, so I mean, I have to sacrifice the college credit for the experience of it all, you know?

Ariana's quote exemplifies the difficulty of deciding whether to give up college credit for money or earning money and not receiving college credit without the guarantee of having a job at the end of the internship. When I asked Ariana how she learned that higher education was important, she shared how her sister attended college and felt like she needed to follow in her footsteps. For her, a college education was a status symbol and would equate to more success. Ariana now says she doesn't "associate college with success" and sees others who did not go to college and are successful. She believes success can be achieved at any point, but the lack of resources for low-income first-generation students makes it difficult to succeed. She says:

It doesn't feel like college has given me the tools to be successful or makes me feel like I'm on the path to success, if anything. It just feels like I'm on the path to getting knowledge and being confident in myself. ...Like, at the end of the day, if you don't have the physical resources and the money, it feels like success is really still very... like in the traditional sense. Like, it's only for a certain type of person or like a group of people. And so, I don't equate college with being successful, or being able to get success. It's just difficult because, I want to, and I feel like I could if I tried harder if I did this, but there's always something that's holding me back. There's always something that people don't think about when everyone's getting an internship. I don't have the resources to even get to the place ...where you can get the job. If you're here and they like you, you can get a job with them. It's like I can't even get to that place and work for free for them. So how am I going to be successful if I don't have the internship? So, I just feel like I'm not doing enough because I don't have the internship, or I don't have the volunteer experience somewhere... So, it's like, success is only going to come when you go through this path. And what happens when you have this obstacle that prevents you from getting to the next step and then to success?

Ariana became aware of the limitations, obstacles, and challenges she was facing because of her socioeconomic background. Recognizing the social inequities and injustices demonstrates how Ariana developed critical awareness through her experiences in college.

Jorge

Jorge, a 21-year-old man who was the second generation born in the U.S. of working-class family background, described noticing class inequities and injustices and how socioeconomic status affects even one's physical health. He describes intentionally creating a class project that involved eating healthy and working out because it would make him accountable for his health by having him do well on the class project. When I asked him in what ways his economic status influenced his experience among his peers, Jorge said:

So, you can choose to work out, eat healthy and do all that, but then it depends on money. My parents, they can't always cook for me and buy me healthy foods. Or even give me money to go out and do it myself. So, the way I see it is if you come from a more upper-class family, you don't have to get a work-study job. You can just do your classes so that instantly takes out roughly 12 to 18 hours a week that you're not working, and what can you do with that extra time? Well, now you can go to the gym... Now you can cook for yourself and go to the grocery store and buy your own ingredients, and you're cooking healthy meals. And now you have a little bit bigger confidence because now you feel okay with your body image, and now here you are with all this extra time, and despite doing all of that, now you still have all those extra hours to do your homework and be on top of your academics.

Besides talking about not having enough time to cook and workout, Jorge went on to talk about how expensive and costly nutritious meals are and how that added another limitation to being healthy. He said:

From the background, I come from, it's not easy to buy healthy foods. It's not easy to find the time to work out when I'm busy working, class, and then homework... But I do feel like if you're from an upper class, why are you going to need to work a steady job? You're going to ask your parents for an allowance... or buy the healthy food that's already made.

Jorge shared how he noticed how socioeconomic status influences where and how you spend your “extra” time. In his experience, having to work and go to school made it difficult to take the time to eat healthier and be healthier, but those who are from a higher economic class don’t have to work and can focus more on their academics and health and choose healthier meals.

Marcela

Marcela, a 21-year-old woman raised by a single mother, learned about the importance of speaking up and standing up for herself. She quickly learned this after having a negative experience with a professor. She learned that she had to speak up for herself because nobody would. This negative experience was something she had never mentioned to anybody before because she said she was “embarrassed.” I asked her how her identity played a role in her experience as a student. She shared with me:

I would say like as a woman, I feel like I see myself very represented in terms of like the population [students]. Like, I feel like I always see more girls in my classes than I do guys. So, I feel like I've never felt inferior... But I will say that there is like one situation [with] a professor. I was asking him if he can bump my 89 to an A. And he was like, “Will that make you a better mother?” I was like, why does it matter? You know what I mean? Like little things like that... I was just like, “well, it won't make me a better mother, but it will make me more competitive for my grad school applications.” And that was my quick thinking. And then I was just kind of like, okay, I stood up for myself, and I was proud of myself for that, because I've never been in an experience where I had to. ... I haven't interacted with this professor ever again. Yeah, I got goosebumps because I actually...I've never told anybody that, because I was so embarrassed like how dare you say that?

Marcela mentioned how she felt like she was represented in the student population as a woman but felt attacked as a woman of color by that professor. She also said she wondered if that same professor was “Racist too, or has associations for me, but I feel like throughout the class he showed little things that are microaggressions ... but like never specifically prying on one person”. Recognizing the professor’s microaggressions gave her power to understand that they are a reflection of who the professor was and his beliefs and had nothing to do with her.

Valeria

Valeria, a 21-year-old woman, mentioned how she became more aware of the colorism on campus by her cousin's experience at Pioneer University. She mentioned how having different skin tones affected the interactions you have with others on campus. Valeria is a white-passing, first-generation Latinx student but mentioned how her cousin is not and how she shared that she feels isolated and alone on campus. Valeria said,

Like for me I have light skin so I could essentially pass and not feel ostracized. My cousin has darker skin, and she feels even worse than me because she's like, "no one looks like me or anything". ...The way I keep myself going and I tell them [her brother and cousin], the opportunities here are amazing, just remind yourself of that. Because it's not that we don't deserve those opportunities as much as everyone else.

Sonia

Sonia is a 21-year-old bisexual woman who shared how she felt like becoming more informed and educated about the diaspora of sexual orientations and identities, normalized her own identity and helped her come out. Sonia shared how her place of employment helped her strengthen her identity. She said:

I was exposed to more identities like sexual orientations, gender identities. Even queer culture in general. I was exposed to all of that because of the friends I made in these organizations. And then also because I started working at the Cross-Cultural Center. These are terms that I had never heard before and I had never been around so many people that were so open and so sure of themselves in whatever way they identify. I'm bi and I was working at the Cross-Cultural Center when I came out. I knew that I was before, but it didn't become a normalized thing to me until I was around all these people. And I started learning about all these different terms and what pan [pansexual] was and just a whole bunch of things.

Being a college student helped her become more informed which facilitated the development of her critical awareness. This new knowledge gave her the power and awareness to take ownership of her intersecting identities. Sonia was able to strengthen her intersecting identities through her employment on campus and by attending events and taking advantage of campus resources that

may not have been available to her had she not attended college. Another experience that influenced Sonia's development of critical awareness was from some of her interactions with others in the classroom. Sonia mentioned an instance where she was first exposed to a conservative viewpoint in a class. She said,

We were talking about immigration. This was my sophomore year, and this is when they were kicking homeless people out of the Santa Ana riverbed. ...And I don't know how the topic came up, but we were talking about immigrants and about homeless people. I think there was going to be a homelessness conference soon or something. And then my professor, I guess, tried to play devil's advocate... He said something along the lines (of)... "Why don't we just give everyone an I.D. card and you would need to have an I.D. to go to school, to go to the grocery stores? Literally to do any functional part of your life, you would have to present an I.D." ...which I thought was really dystopian and horrible but besides the fact. He was talking about that. And he was like, "Yeah, that would just be a simple answer." And then the guy two seats next to me, who I had already, based on his side comments he made, I already figured I didn't like him. But whatever. He raised his hand, and he was like, "Well, if we're going to talk about making things easier then we should just completely kick everyone out or we can just kill them or get rid of them." And I was literally so shocked.

Sonia was not only shocked at what this student had said in class but was in shock at the fact that this student was someone that was her age or close to her age and was comfortable enough to openly share his opinion in a classroom setting.

These quotes are some examples of the experiences it took for participants to notice the social inequities and injustices on campus. These events exposed the participants to what they may experience in communities that are different from their own neighborhoods. The exposure to different views and experiences can happen when first-generation Latinx students attend college and informs them on how to navigate those situations. They are no longer at home where everyone looks like them, sounds like them, or shares similar cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. It is in these situations where the "blindness" comes off and they start to recognize the differences and injustices that are systemically in place that affect the Latinx community.

Theme # 3: Resistance

Acknowledging all the social inequities and injustices, motivated the participants to work towards graduation and to start creating spaces and challenging structures of oppression. All of the participants resisted against the college norms and expectations others may have of first-generation Latinx students by occupying spaces that weren't meant for them. Many felt like they needed to be their most authentic self so that others can see more first-generation Latinx students throughout campus. If they are proud of their many identities, then they can start to set a tone on campus of diversity that is welcoming to Latinx students. Eight of the 10 participants mentioned volunteering or working on campus. At least four of the 10 participants mentioned being one of the original founders of the Latinx club on campus. Others decided to take on more leadership roles in their clubs and at least seven of the 10 participants were mentors for underclassmen. Those in leadership positions could not have taken those roles if they were not assertive and confident which were traits developed throughout their college journey as mentioned in the first theme.

Culturally and socially, first-generation Latinx students are resisting stigmas and stereotypes by attending college. First-generation Latinx students embark on their academic journeys with the promise of socioeconomic mobility, not knowing that they are the pioneers in changing their family history. They are not attending college for socioeconomic mobility but also to change stereotypes, statistics, and their family history. Figure 4 shows examples of how the participants demonstrated resistance. In their resistance, there was a transformation, discovery of purpose, and gained understanding of being a life-long learner. All of the participants mentioned that being successful was something that was constantly evolving, not a destination. All of them mentioned success as being in motion. It is setting new goals and reaching new goals. In

reaching goals they set, they are resisting by going against the norms and paving the way for others like them to occupy systems and spaces that are not designed for first-generation Latinx students to succeed.

Figure 4

Figure showing examples of ways of resistance from the data



The following section shows how the participants developed and became more critically aware, found their purpose, and learned to accept continual growth to be successful, also learned to apply their knowledge in new settings and environments.

Valeria

Valeria mentioned how she wants to be a bilingual teacher because her father had received very little formal education and had instilled in her the importance of an education.

When I asked her how and when did she know a higher education was important or necessary,

Valeria said,

I've always known that education was important from a very young age because of how hard I saw my dad working and because seeing him without a proper education...it saddens me...I'm sorry (emotional). And because I come from that history...that's why I want to become a teacher. I want to be able to provide that for other people. It has always

been instilled in me from a very young age... an education is so important...And I knew that I couldn't let him [her father] down because of how hard he works for me, you know?

In this part of the interview, Valeria was talking about how all her life, she noticed how her father a successful small business owner struggled because he only had a second-grade education, doesn't speak English and works long hours. Witnessing this pushed her to want to become a teacher which she was already other way as part of a program where she is dually enrolled in undergraduate courses and graduate courses.

Sonia

Sonia also described how she brought some of her home culture on campus while she had on campus jobs that provided her with the opportunity to put on events on campus. She described how she would bring different artists that she was familiar with to introduce to the campus culture and how she enjoyed seeing members of the predominate culture on campus enjoy the events she would organize. Sonia said,

For me growing up, I used to spend a lot of time going to backyard shows in East LA and North Orange County. And I was like, "Aww, look. I'm bringing this other world [ska band] onto [Pioneer]." And it was cool because most of the people that went to the opening ceremony were either my friends or older white people, like community members. But they were vibing. They were into it. I was like, "That's awesome." They were super into it. That's awesome. I also remember any time I got to organize an event, like with the CCC or MEChA or whoever we were collab'ing [collaborating] with at the moment, I always tried to include obviously performers. But if I knew somebody, I have a lot of friends who are artists, so I would always try to ask if they would be a part of it. And usually they would. So that was cool. The events that we put on were usually just my friends. And that was awesome to be able to put something on for the entire campus to see.

Sonia used her opportunities of employment to plan events on campus to bring in other cultures to campus. Another form of resistance came up during this study was when the students shared that when they couldn't find the spaces in which they felt comfortable or had an opportunity to grow socially they took matters into their own hands and created those spaces, many in the shape

of a club on campus. At least 4 of the participants in this study talked about being one of the founding members of the Latinx club on campus.

Jorge

Jorge was one of those founding members of the Latinx club. Jorge mentioned how when he and his friends put together this group they had to decide on a new name because the original name of the club was taken even though the club had not been active. Jorge said,

We ended up setting a climate and an actual space for Latino students to be on campus, and even students who are interested in Latino culture because we're Latino students that don't really fit in with all the other clubs.

Jorge and his friends wanted a safe space for those that shared similar experiences as him to interact and share cultural practices. The Latinx club was a more social club for other to learn from each other's culture and for those who had an interest in the Latinx culture.

Ariana

Ariana at the beginning of her academic journey struggled to find a group that she shared similar interests with. Ariana mentioned how she visited many different clubs, and none felt like they matched what it was that she was looking for. She said for an introvert it was so difficult to actively participate in clubs that were heavily social, so she started a film club on campus that was more academic. Ariana said,

And so, I would try to go to different clubs. Like I remember freshman year, I went to a bunch of different clubs. I went to the Hawaiian club, and I was like, this isn't for me. ...And that's okay. I don't fit in here. ... I feel like it's just hard to fit in. But it doesn't feel like it's an obstacle. ...I have my own club now. So, I mean, a lot of people don't go to it, but it's a film club. And I like what we do, it's more academic.

Erika

Erika, a non-traditional Latinx first-generation student, discussed how she would remind herself to keep working towards graduation by reminding herself that she was “holding space” for other Latinx students. Erika would tell herself,

You gotta keep pushing forward because you're, making this normal. Like next year, maybe five years from now there's gonna be more people like you here at [Pioneer]. More representation of your identity because you held yourself...you're holding space for so many identities, you know? It has helped me push through. It has helped me not give up. I don't want to be a statistic, you know?...Where people like me are drop-outs.

Rosa

Rosa mentioned how she worked on her senior research project where she elaborated on her hopes for her future work. Rosa mentioned, “Work in like education reform and make sure that all students regardless of race, or socioeconomic background, have the opportunity to have equal education...” And within that research she said she also focused on Hispanic voter retention and participation, which demonstrates how she had developed that critical awareness and was conscious of what efforts needed to be implemented to help progress Latinx communities.

Transformation Leads to Actions and Practice

The transformation that occurs during the academic journey of first-generation Latinx students informs their actions and practice. The actions and practice of first-generation Latinx students is informed by their personal reflection of their journeys. Almost all of the participants in this dissertation study at one point or another during the interviews mentioned how they had not realized how much they had endured and overcame too soon graduate. It is a realization that is empowering and reminds them of the growth they have had throughout their college experience.

Personal growth takes shape in the form of identity development which led to an awareness of the differences between them and other non-first-generation students. They mentioned how their socio-economic differences shaped their college experiences and determined the opportunities they were presented with and took. Noting those differences motivated Latinx first-generation students to reach their goal of graduating. They used their aspiration and hopes to motivate them to graduate. The critical awareness that was developed along with those aspirations and hopes helped them realized that they were pushing against systems of oppressions and creating change not only in their immediate families but also in their home communities by claiming their space in the university. Many did this by becoming the founding leaders of the Latinx club or taking charge and creating clubs that met their own needs and helped create their own communities where they could openly share their experiences and feel like they were understood. They also demonstrated resistance by volunteering on campus, being authentic, assertive and confident. They used the ability to challenge and change Latinx stereotypes as motivation to persist to graduation.

Additional Findings

In the process of earning a bachelor's degree there is a sense of responsibility that is developed, a responsibility to their family and community. Students mentioned how they felt like they needed to be successful and graduate as a form of repayment for the parents' sacrifices and changing their family history, as well as honoring family values. Others mentioned how their families used a cautionary tale to keep them motivated to keep persisting throughout their schooling. They mentioned how their families used storytelling as a way to remind them of the financial struggle of living paycheck to paycheck or working labor intensive jobs in difficult

working environments to support and motivate through challenging times in the process of obtaining a higher education.

In this dissertation study, the overarching question focuses on the overall experiences of first-generation Latinx students at predominantly a White private institution and the overall experience is a very personal one that is true and unique to each individual participant. The additional findings are more examples of external and internal motivating factors and a critique of the institution. The first sub research question focused on the factors that influenced their persistence and success and the second research question focused on the perceived challenges of the participants.

In the next section I will present the first sub research question findings. The question was: “What are the factors that influence first-generation Latinx students’ persistence and success at a predominantly White, private institution?” In the data analysis, I found 7 factors that influenced first-generation Latinx students to persist that were present in all 10 participants’ interviews: (1) previous knowledge, experiences and capital (2) Family and community responsibility (3) achieving the goals they set (4) resilience (5) self-reliance and agency (6) adapting and code-switching (7) support systems.

Previous Knowledge, Experiences and Capital

Previous knowledge, experience and capital influenced the participants to persist because they had varying degrees of experiences that made them more comfortable using resources available to find the answers they needed. All 10 participants mentioned knowing that they had to look online for answers, or some had previous college experiences that helped them navigate at Pioneer. Jorge mentioned being enrolled in a dual enrollment program while in high school where he was taking courses at a local community college before entering Pioneer. Jorge said, “I

feel like middle college helped me a little bit with feeling a little bit more comfortable being on a college campus. And then I just feel like I've always had a level of confidence where I've been in school for so long, that if I don't know how to do something, I'm going to find out. Whether it's looking at the website, whether it's talking to somebody, so I know pretty basic college stuff like registering and all that stuff is really easy". Daniel and Erika were transfer students that also shared similar experiences as Jorge and knew that they if they did not mobilize, they would not find the resources and supports necessary. Erika mentioned how she made it a point to visit different offices on campus and ask about programs of support she utilized at the community college at Pioneer. Erika said, "I think the first week I just walked into any and all offices asking for Do you have EOPS? do you have programs? or what type of programs are you offering? or just looking for that space where I could hear or find out experiences from others..." These were stories that demonstrated how the participants utilized capital, skills and knowledge gained from past experiences to mobilize through a new institution.

Family and Community Responsibility

Family and community responsibility was another factor that influenced Latinx first-generation students' persistence. The feeling of being the ones responsible to change their family history or making sure that their parents' sacrifices do not go in vain were enough to motivate them to persist. Many talked about it in a way that seemed almost like a debt they had to their parents because it was their way of repaying them for their sacrifices and efforts. For example, Ariana mentioned not letting her parents down because of everything they have done to help her; she said, "I just want to make sure that I never let them down because they've put so much effort into helping me, then I've got to make sure that whatever effort they gave me that I never take that effort for granted".

Erika also mentioned feeling that the goals she has reached so far are influencing her sisters. Besides mentioning how she was holding space for other Latinx first-generation students, also mentioned how she is the oldest and felt she needed to set a better example for her sisters that also did not graduate from high school. Erika said, “As you know, I didn't finish high school and they [sisters] didn't finish high school. But my experience in school has allowed them to see the importance that it has on us to go to school...what I’ve done, reflect on them and them wanting to do the same has been very very positive”. Jorge also mentioned how he felt like he needed to set the example for his siblings as well, he said he worked hard because of them, Jorge said “... I kind of have to push myself because I am first-gen, I have to set the way for my siblings, I have to graduate...”.

Achieving the Goals, They Set

Achieving the goals that were set was enough motivation to keep going for many of the participants. Many of the participants defined success as setting goals and reaching those, and eventually setting new ones. Jorge explained this when he said,

You set a goal for yourself, but success has different degrees. So, I would consider myself successful after graduating from college, so I graduated, I did it, I feel successful, but I'm not done yet. I feel like there's never an end to success, it's like, okay, I graduated high school, I'm successful”, but now I got into college, that's another success, but now I'm actually in college, and now I graduated, that's another success. And now it's like, get a job, and work and be happy at that job, and get enough money to provide for myself, but also give back to my family. I don't feel like I'll ever truly feel 100% successful, but I feel like that's the point because once you feel 100% successful, you feel like you're done. But I don't feel like you should ever feel that you're done. I feel like there should always be a goal after that goal. So, it's always like you continue.

It is the awareness that there is progress and success with goal setting and reaching those goals that keeps them motivated to succeed. Antonio mentioned that his identity as a first-generation Hispanic student was something that was challenging. Still, he was also proud of his identity; he said, "Yeah, I got barriers, but don't make excuses. I'm overcoming them. Like, look at me. I

don't need to listen to society". Achieving goals for many of the participants is not just for themselves but also for their families and to help others along the way.

Resilience

Resilience is something that is internally developed; it like a muscle. Persistence is the endurance or stamina that a muscle can withstand, which is only developed through consistency. Resilience and persistence go hand in hand, and it is proven through these successful first-generation Latinx students' experiences. They were all able to bounce back from their own unique challenges and stories and persisted until graduation. Resilience was evident in many of the participants' willingness to learn through trial and error. When asked how they learned to navigate the university, many said through trial and error. Marcela had several stories where it demonstrated her resilience. One of the anecdotes that she shared with me was that her freshman year, she took a chemistry class and had a really difficult time with it and would ask questions and asked for help, but the professor did not help her, but she noticed he helped others. She said she retook that chemistry class with another professor who was also first-generation, and she kept in touch with that professor and her last year, the professor told her that she shared Marcela's story about how hard she worked and went from an F to a B in the class. Marcela said:

She said, "I tell people your story. Like people that are struggling, I tell them about you. And I tell them how much you hustled and how much you did." because I went from F to a B. Who does that? like my dumb ass did that... And to me that meant the world to me. I always remember that class when I'm struggling. Cause I was like if I did chem and I sucked at it. I can do this class. So I always think back to her.

Working hard and studying demonstrates how Marcela managed to bounce back from the difficulties of the chemistry class. Like Marcela all the participants demonstrated their ability to overcome challenges and obstacles to reach their goals.

Self-reliance and Agency

Self-reliance and agency were other factors that contributed to their persistence and success because in their academic journeys they realized that if they did not do it or put in the work nobody would do it for them. This was also evident when all the participants work either to find answers for themselves and ask for help only when it seemed urgent or took it upon themselves to ask for help and ask questions. Others demonstrated this by taking control of their education by being intentional and learning about professors and their courses before signing up for them. Sonia mentioned how she took courses with professors whose values aligned with hers she said, “I was also very picky about my professors. I remember looking through classes, I made it a point to look up the professors and just learn a little bit more about them before deciding on taking the class or not”. When I asked Sonia who else contributed to her success, she said, “...I guess myself. I couldn't have done it if I didn't actually do it”.

Adapting and Code-switching

Adapting and code-switching are other factors that influence their persistence because the ability to adapt and code-switch helped them “fit-in”. Valeria mentioned how she felt like she needed to “omit” parts of herself that were not relevant in that moment. Valeria said:

I try to adapt, or I... It's like changing yourself in a way to make yourself relatable in that situation. So, this part of my identity is probably not relatable, so I'm going to omit. ...But I know it's not going to be a place where I could share all those things. So instead, I try to bring out the parts of my identity that would relate to whatever is going on in that situation with that group of people.

Jorge mentioned how he felt like he had to highlight or bring out different characteristics at different times depending on who his audience was. For example, he shared:

I feel like I do a good job of jumping between my different circles and knowing how to act. Knowing my audience, because my dad has always done a good job of teaching me know your audience, like know who you're talking to. Because each person deserves a different level of respect. And so, it's like you need to know who you're talking to. And I

feel like I've just always... since whenever he told me that, I feel like I've always known people are different, so you talk to them differently.

Support Systems

Support systems are important in the persistence of successful first-generation Latinx students because their academic journey is very lonely because many people at home do not understand what they are going through. The majority of the participants mentioned having more social supports like academic or professional fraternities, peers and their families. The academic and professional fraternities offered the academic and professional resources they need to advance in their fields. The participants also mentioned that their peers were also a resource and support system because they could understand and relate to their experiences but also share information and resources. The families of the participants were also a support system but they couldn't understand exactly what is was they were going through but their families support (i.e.: financial and moral support) was important for them to persist and reach their goal of graduating.

Antonio mentioned his mother being his "rock," and she was also taking college courses and sit together and do homework together. Erika mentioned how her partner contributed greatly to her success because he took it upon himself to support her and their son financially in order for her to continue and finish her education. Erika said, "My partner, he's been an amazing support. I really don't feel like without him I could have done it because he's taken on that huge responsibility a huge financial responsibility of taking care of myself, himself and our kid all by himself."

Jorge talked about how his mother would help him with meal prep or send meals with his younger sister. Jose, Ariana, Antonio, Valeria, Marcela, and Rosa talked about how their parents supported them financially. Support comes in many shapes and forms that continued to push the students to persist. Marcela and Rosa would ask friends to check-in on them, and they would

check-in on others. Marcela mentioned how she took it upon herself to make connections and build a network of people she would meet because of what her grandfather told her once. She said, "... he [said] you need to make those connections and you need to be kind and you need to be caring because people will help you. When you think that that doors closed, God will open it for you, but you also need to have those connections with people..."

Factors that Influence Persistence

Factors that contributed to the success of these 10 participants were tied to the 3 overarching themes of the study: personal growth, cultural awareness and resistance. The seven factors that contributed to the participants' success found in this study were (1) previous knowledge, experiences, and capital, (2) Family and community responsibility, (3) achieving the goals they set, (4) resilience, (5) self-reliance and agency, (6) adapting and code-switching, (7) support systems. The majority of the factors that influenced their persistence and success were intrinsic factors that were either developed throughout their lives subconsciously or came to light during their academic experiences in college. The previous knowledge, experiences, and capital they brought with them to the institution were all skills and knowledge transferable to their academic journey from past experiences and events. Achieving the goals, they set, resilience, self-reliance/agency, adapting, and code-switching were also intrinsic factors that they used as motivation. The family and community responsibility, and support systems were extrinsic factors that helped them persist toward graduation.

The Perceived Challenges at a Predominantly White Private Institution

First-generation students usually are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and typically attend underperforming secondary schools that are underfunded. Financial stress, lack of connections/relationships on campus, feelings of not being understood, and doubts. After

careful analysis of the responses, I answered the second sub-research question, What are the perceived challenges of first-generation Latinx students at a predominantly White private institution? I found 7 challenges that this group of participants perceived as important to highlight and discuss because they can inform practices and programming on campus: (1) Lack of diversity in the student body, faculty, and staff, which made it difficult to make connections, (2) Differences in capital and privilege determined their college experiences, (3) Lack of transparency in the institution, (4) Not enough guidance for long-term success, (5) Financial stress and limitations beyond tuition, (6) Lack of access to information that is offered at events on campus, (7) Difficulty feeling like you belong.

Lack of Diversity

Lack of diversity in the student body, faculty, and staff was challenging for the participants because they usually felt misunderstood. Alternatively, they felt that they could not connect with others whom they felt "just do not get it." Marcela mentioned how her freshman year, she was short on tuition money and was upset crying, and her roommates, who were from more affluent backgrounds, told her to ask her dad. Marcela's father is not in the picture and felt like she did not have the energy to explain things and did not want others' pity constantly.

Marcela also shared an incident with a professor who clearly did not understand the importance of earning a better grade. When Marcela asked him if he could round her 89 to an A, he asked her if that would make her a better mother. These experiences made Marcela very conscious about herself. Valeria mentioned how hard transitioning to the university was for her cousin of darker skin tone. She said her cousin felt almost invisible because other students would not approach her, and she felt alone because there were not many students on campus that looked like her. Sonia mentioned how she felt so strange being on campus her freshman year because of

how she dressed. She said she felt that everyone on campus dressed the same or fit into a mold that she did not fit because of her music and dress preference. When I asked the participants how many of the faculty and staff, they knew were first-generation or of color, none said more than 5. This clearly shows the need for more faces and people that Latinx students can relate to and look up to. Jorge was fortunate to find out that one of his professors graduated from the same high school as his mother and grew up in the same neighborhood as his and was now teaching at a university after working a corporate job for a while, and he said he was a role model for him.

Difference in Capital and Privilege

Differences in capital and privilege made the experiences of many of the participants difficult because many times, they felt that those difference directly impacted their college experience. Erika mentioned how she wanted to go on a study abroad course but could not sign up because she did not have the money right away to secure a spot. She also mentioned a conversation she heard between students her very first semester at the university in one of her classes and how hearing them talk about their parents' educational experiences made her take notice of the space she was in; she stated: ...my first class was like at 830 in the morning, and I was there like 15 minutes, 20 minutes early. And there were already other students in class, and they were talking amongst themselves, I can hear the conversation. And this one girl says, I just can't wait to be done. And then the other person replied, Yeah, I know. And then the conversation just kept on going. And she's like, my mom, you know, she kind of pressures me because at her age, she already had three masters. And I don't know what, and I'm just like, Oh my gosh, wow. That's amazing. And I'm thinking to myself, I'm like, my mom has a master's in making tamales. That's like, you know, like, wow, you know, I'm here, thinking I'm a badass doing my undergrad. You know, and then your mom and your dad have like PhDs galore to give

out, you know? as, you know, lunch money and here I am trying to and so like those kind of things, you know we're I guess what made me realize my position.

Many of the participants also mentioned not having money for spring break vacations like their peers, and many mentioned taking notice of all the name-brand attire and cars other privileged students had on campus. Jorge mentioned how many of his classmates in a computer programming class who were of more affluent backgrounds mentioned how they had been programming for many years, and Jorge was there learning and working hard to learn the material for the first time. These are just some examples of the things many participants noticed and made them realize their positionality. It also made them also notice the disadvantages they had because they had to work harder than others to pass classes and graduate.

Institution's Lack of Transparency

Lack of transparency in the institution made it challenging for many participants because resources, information, and programs were not visible and available. Many felt like they would go on a wild goose chase to find answers and end up being bounced around from office to office and department to department. Ariana mentioned this when she talked about how she once had a hold on her account and could not sign up for courses, she said, "...going through like every single person, and they're like I'm not really an expert in this, like you should go talk to... I had one interaction where I went from one desk, financial aid to the business office, just literally two desks down... And I was literally just going back and forth."

Not Enough Guidance

There was not enough guidance for long-term success because as the participants were approaching the end of their academic journey, there were so many upcoming changes that made them question their readiness for those changes. Some would have wanted more guidance on

money management, financial literacy, and time management skills useful life skills for long-term success. When asked how her first-generation identity played a role in her experience as a student, Sonia mentioned not being informed about some of the resources available on campus that made her experience in college more difficult; she said,

I think it has made my experience a little harder just because I didn't know where to go to ask for help. I didn't have a resume until my junior year, and I had already been working jobs. I just didn't have a resume until my junior year. I didn't know that we had a Career Center. ...I also just found out that my political science department has their own career person for poli sci who doesn't even work at the Career Center. She works in the poli sci building. I didn't know that until literally a week ago because I got an email for a senior resume networking workshop and I went to it.

Financial Stress and Limitations Beyond Tuition

Financial stress and limitations beyond tuition were other challenges. Many of the participants had scholarships that helped with tuition and dorm expenses, but many still needed more financial help beyond tuition and dorm expenses. The financial stress forced some to have multiple jobs at the same time. Sonia said she was a full-time student at one point in her academic journey and worked 3 jobs despite having tuition remission; she said, "Because I have tuition remission. And then everything else I need to pay for, I work two to three jobs usually. Right now, I only have one. But throughout my college at varying times, I had two or three jobs." Many mentioned not being able to study abroad or even consider studying abroad because of the added expense that came with traveling. Rosa expressed her feelings of guilt because her parents took out loans for her to attend the university, and it was because of that guilt she did not study abroad; she said:

Studying abroad. I know, I could have done it if I wanted to. If I'd worked and looked for scholarships and look for that financial support. I feel like it could have been an option but I still would have felt guilty. Traveling abroad for an entire semester, not working and having to ask my parents for money like I always feel guilty of that and I think that's why I don't look for those opportunities, like traveling or doing other things like experiencing other trips or whatnot. I always go back to me feeling guilty. Like I'm already in school and my parents have taken out loans for me which I am going to repay but I always end up feeling guilty about it.

The stress and financial limitations shaped and influenced nine of the 10 participants' experiences. Antonio did not have the added financial stress and limitations that the other participants had but still worked in the family business while going to school full-time. The financial stress and limitations beyond tuition are not considered by institutions and are real when there are other financial obligations and responsibilities that first-generation Latinx students experience during their academic journey.

Lack of Access to Information

Lack of access to information offered at events on campus was challenging when many of the participants had different reasons for not attending events. Many were in class or at work and felt like the information shared at those events was not readily available for access after the events. Moreover, when that information was offered, sometimes they could not make it to the events because of work or class. Ariana said then when she said she would see the list of events that she was interested in attending and could not make it; she said, "I feel like I was going through the list and the email. And I was like that class during that time, I can't go I have work. And so, I was gonna go to the financial literacy, but I was like, the class like, I can't do it. So, I

mean, it sucks". This was a challenge because some of the information was necessary to their academic success.

Feeling Like You Don't Belong

Difficulty feeling like you belong is another challenge because of their interactions with other faculty, staff, and students. The college experience is not just an academic one but a social one and not being able to relate to others makes it more evident that you do not belong. Some of the participants mentioned how socially it was challenging to make connections outside of the classroom. For some, it was because they were not on campus often enough. After all, they were commuter students, or they worked after class. Jorge mentioned experiencing this his freshman year because he could not afford to live on campus his first year, but his social life took off his sophomore after receiving a scholarship to live on campus. Many participants shared that they felt most comfortable and understood at events that were specifically for Latinx students or first-generation students; this was also true because many of the Latinx events were also first-generation, so it was the same students in both settings.

Summary of Perceived Challenges

Attending a predominantly White private institution as a Latinx first-generation student is full of challenges. The 10 participants in this study shared their experiences and were able to come up with 7 of the most common challenges they had experienced. The 7 most common challenges were: (1) Lack of diversity in student body, faculty and staff which made it difficult to make connections (2) Differences in capital and privilege determined their college experiences (3) Lack of transparency in the institution (4) Not enough guidance for long-term success (5) Financial stress and limitations beyond tuition (6) Lack of access to information that is offered at events on campus (7) Difficulty feeling like you belong. These challenges shift a focus from the

students and shifts the focus to the systems and institutions in place that are not built to welcome or serve Latinx first-generation students. Many of these challenges could be removed if there would be changes in the educational system and social systems that place Latinx first-generation students at disadvantage. Many could be addressed by providing more opportunities for people of color to enter these systems and institutions, not only as students, but also as leaders and educators. If there were a better understanding and acknowledgment of these challenges by the institution they attend, they would receive a more well-rounded experience as Latinx first-generation students because the institution would not only view them as students, but as human beings with lives and challenges outside of the institution.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation study was to examine the experiences of first-generation Latinx students at a predominantly White, private institution and to identify the factors that contributed to their persistence and success. The majority of the literature available focuses on the negative experiences of first-generation Latinx students in higher education. Often a deficit perspective is used when it comes to first-generation Latinx students. This dissertation study was an effort to shift the deficit perspective to a more additive lens for first-generation Latinx students and highlight their success. In this study, I offer an asset-based perspective that highlights students' past experiences and values the capital that they bring to the institution. Successful first-generation Latinx students are a phenomenon that I want to shed some light on through an initial exploratory theory.

There were three research questions in the dissertation study: one overarching research question and two sub-questions. The research questions for this study were:

- What are the experiences of first-generation Latinx students at predominantly White, private institutions?
 - Which factors influenced first-generation Latinx students' persistence and success at a predominantly White, private institution?
 - What were the perceived challenges of first-generation Latinx students at a predominantly White private institution?

There were 10 participants in this dissertation study who were identified as first-generation Latinx students and had senior student status. Four of the participants were males, and six were females. All 10 participants were enrolled full-time in the same institution; nine of the

participants also worked. There were also two transfer students in the sample of participants; one of the transfer students was a parent. Nine participants described their socioeconomic background as low-income, working-class, or middle-class, and one of the participants came from an upper-class, more affluent background.

Chapter 5 comprises five parts, the theoretical framework used, a summary of the findings, a discussion of the results, the limitations of the study, and my recommendations for future research and practices. First, I will discuss the theoretical frameworks that informed me and help me understand and identify the factors contributing to the participants' success and experiences. Second, I will provide summary findings and discuss the results of the study. Thirdly, I will talk about the limitations of the study. Lastly, I will share my recommendations for future research and practices.

Theoretical Frameworks

Identifying factors contributing to first-generation Latinx students' persistence and success was guided by previous insight. The findings of the study were advised by several theoretical frameworks, such as Urie Bronfenbrenner's Socioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979), Tara J. Yosso's community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005, 2006), and Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 2000). Bronfenbrenner's Socioecological model, communities of cultural wealth, and pedagogy of the oppressed helped understand first-generation Latinx students' experiences in higher education. Bronfenbrenner's socioecological model was useful because it provided a framework for understanding the impact of different social systems on students and their views of themselves and their place within each system. It situates the analysis on the location or the area where the social development and interactions are occurring and how they affect the participant. Yosso's understanding of community cultural

wealth provides a framework that speaks to Latinx and Chicanx students' specific experiences. Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed provides a framework to identify particular experiences in the students' academic journey that led to the participants' transformation.

I have referred to Bronfenbrenner's, Yosso's, and Freire's theories in this study because they offer a unique lens that can add meaning and complexity to the existing understandings of first-generation Latinx students' persistence and success. In particular, they offer a contrast to a field that usually looks at first-generation Latinx students through a deficit perspective. These theories permit an understanding of first-generation Latinx students in ways that focus on the cultural and social abundance of what they bring to higher education institutions. These theoretical frameworks help highlight how their capital and support systems help them grow, navigate and reach their educational goals.

Socioecological Model, Communities of Cultural Wealth, and Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Bronfenbrenner's socioecological model describes different communities and interactions that impact human development as layers within an individual's community context (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1986). Bronfenbrenner's socioecological theory explores the impact of the different relationships and networks within each social system in an individual's social development. He suggests that an individual cannot be understood without an insight into their interactions with the different systems in their environment (Arana, Castaneda-Sound, Blanchard & Aguilar, 2011). Bronfenbrenner uses five systems to understand the different contexts in which social development occurs. The five systems are (1) microsystem, (2) mesosystem, (3) exosystem, (4) macrosystem (5) chronosystem. The five systems that Bronfenbrenner's socioecological model explores gave me a map to identify which social systems influenced the participants' academic journey.

Tara J. Yosso developed the conceptualization of community cultural wealth in response to a deficit model that is regularly utilized when investigating students of color. Yosso outlined six forms of community cultural wealth to highlight the capital that more often than not goes unnoticed and unacknowledged in our educational systems (Yosso, 2005, 2006). The six forms of community cultural wealth described by Tara J. Yosso are (1) linguistic capital; (2) navigational capital; (3) familial capital; (4) social capital; (5) aspirational capital; (6) resistance capital. Yosso's community cultural wealth provided the language and concepts to identify the types of experiences, knowledge, and capital that students utilize to succeed. Yosso's framework is directly related to first-generation Latinx students and helped create themes and their relationship. Community cultural wealth permits the identification and values of different cultural practices, traditions, and views specific to Latinx and Chicanx culture. It provided frames of reference to determine the capital first-generation Latinx students had before entering the university and how they utilized it to navigate multiple socioecological systems.

Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed has two stages in the process of liberation (Freire, 2000). The first stage is the reflection, which is where the "unveiling of the world of oppression" happens in the transformation of the individual (Freire, 2000, p. 54). The second stage is action, where actions lead to service for the greater good of all people. Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed and its two stages advised me in the identification of the changes and transformation of the participants and personal growth. Pedagogy of the oppressed helped me notice that they were not just going through a realization of social injustices but also transforming and resisting in order to create change.

Summary of the Findings

The three themes in this study revealed how the participants' experiences were defined by personal growth, critical awareness, and resistance that informed their practice. The development of the participants informed them enough to want to serve others to ensure their success. Many served others by taking the lessons in their academic journeys and passing those lessons down to other first-generation Latinx students and in their communities.

Personal Growth

In the participants' transformation and experiences in this study, the first theme that was developed from the data was personal growth. The participants strengthened their identity, beliefs, and core values to demonstrate personal growth. Their identity, beliefs, and core values were strengthened by the knowledge acquired in their classes and college experiences. Part of that identity development is the inner turmoil that occurs when integrating themselves into the college environment. They run into the dilemma of whether to assimilate or acculturate. This process of identity development is emotional but one that is also empowering. It is a self-reflection and adaptation process where they take their capital and past experiences in life and use them to navigate through their institution and unfamiliar systems. In their personal growth and identity development, there is also a sense of responsibility, self-reliance, and agency that develops because they realize that they are on their own and have to rely on themselves to attain their academic and professional goals and complete their degrees.

Many first-generation Latinx students use their parents' life stories and experiences as motivation. Still, students also feel a sense of obligation to make their parent's sacrifices worth it in the end. It's a feeling of responsibility to change the family history and make sure that their parents know that the sacrifices they made were not in vain by earning a college degree with the

promise of social and economic mobility. Aspiration and hope continue to drive Latinx first-generation students to persist and graduate. But to persist, they also need to be resilient.

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from setbacks and challenges, whereas persistence is the act of continuing after a setback (Kuperminc et al., 2009; Patron & Garcia, 2016; Ungvarsky, 2019). I have found that resilience and persistence go hand in hand when it comes to first-generation Latinx students graduating from college. Resilience is internally developed; it is like a muscle that is rebuilt or enhanced from the constant tear and recovery process. Persistence is the endurance or stamina that the muscle can withstand, which is only developed through consistency. It is that endurance and the ability to recover that helped the participants in this study.

Critical Awareness and Resistance

Aside from the personal growth and development that occurred in their academic journeys, first-generation Latinx students begin to notice how their high school education did not provide them with the same experiences as other students from more affluent backgrounds or students who are not first-generation. They become more aware of how socioeconomic backgrounds also affect their college experience. The participants mentioned how some students apply to study abroad without hesitation or consideration of costs. Some participants needed time to talk to family and gather the money for those travel abroad expenses. Others notice how these students drive luxury cars, dress in designer clothing, and carry expensive bags. There are substantial economic, cultural, and social capital gaps that predetermine what they can and cannot experience in college. Others start to notice how those who are not first-generation students have the social networks and cultural capital that gives them the impression that they do not have to take their studies seriously because their parent owns a business or are well

connected and can still get the internship or job they need to succeed. The awareness of inequities in the quality of education and social inequality drove these first-generation Latinx students to aspire to uplift their families and communities by graduating and serving other first-generation Latinx students along the way to then ensure the success of others. The students persisted and succeeded as a form of resistance in a system that is designed for others to succeed. They resisted by navigating and occupying spaces, graduating, and becoming successful individuals that look to empower and inspire others to do the same. In their transformation, they become pioneers of change and leaders, not just for their families but for the Latinx community.

Discussion

Often when Latinx first-generation students first set foot in college, they are like a deer caught in the headlights. They are in shock, startled, and frozen in fear as they embark on a journey that is not familiar to them and has little to no guidance once they are in college. The transition to college is a process and a transformation that is happening as they continue with their studies. They come into an environment where they are no longer the majority or do not feel comfortable. All participants in this study utilized past experiences and knowledge to inform them to find community and navigate new spaces.

Attending college is the beginning of a transformation that is not acknowledged because, most of the time, first-generation Latinx students are in a state of stress and self-preservation throughout their college experience. Often, they are in shock and learning how to navigate a space that nobody in their family has navigated before but eventually learn to cope, navigate and graduate. The change in environment removes a blindfold and exposes them to a greater diversity of cultures and perspectives that are not like those in their communities. First-generation Latinx students' backgrounds are usually made up of individuals who share the same

cultural experiences and socioeconomic status. It is almost as if they grow up in a bubble, not knowing what is outside of their communities because their families have stayed around what is familiar and comfortable. The grade schools they attend don't have high expectations for them because those schools are used to pushing students out like a conveyer belt, where their goal is to have students assist to classes, graduate and enroll in college. They often prove to their teachers and administrators that you can memorize facts and that you are a good test taker, which is enough for you to graduate. Oftentimes, educators and administrators have low expectations of first-generation Latinx students, but in those communities, some students are high achievers and are continually researching and figuring out the educational system and setting higher educational goals and challenging stereotypes that others may have of them.

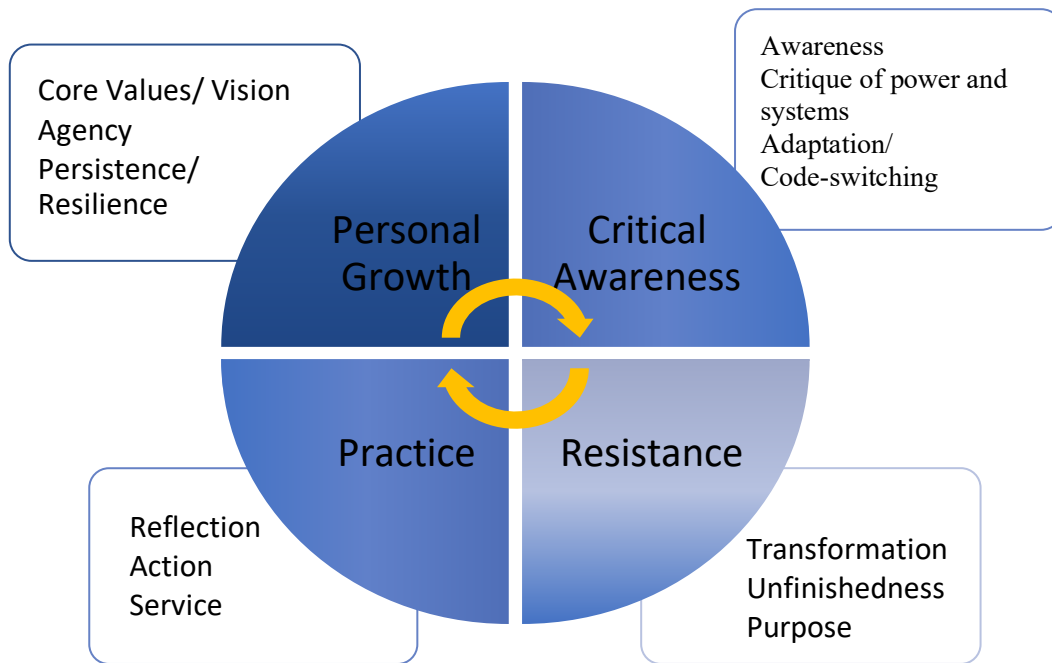
Pursuing a post-secondary education not only provides them with the foundations to pursue a career or graduate education, but it is a sign of hope and economic and social mobility for the student and their family. Attending college is a journey of transformation that is motivated by the desire to graduate. The willingness to graduate also pushes the students to be highly independent and try to figure things out on their own because there is nobody in their families or communities that they can ask for help. Attending college also exposes them to another reality that would not have been apparent to them had they stayed in their homes and worked a labor-intensive and demanding job in the comfort of their communities. For example, a reality that was uncovered among the participants in the study was the impact social and economic status has on their overall college experience. Many were not able to travel abroad because they could not afford it, guilt of not being able to work while abroad and some did not have the money right away to pay a deposit to reserve a spot in the class before it was full.

Despite the emotional and mental turmoil surrounding the journey towards graduation, first-generation Latinx students end up with a strengthened identity, beliefs, and core values that contribute to their transformation and success. The new knowledge and experiences propel them forward to continue navigating systems that are typically not meant for first-generation Latinx students. In the end, the students have a clearer understanding of systemic and social injustices. They are aware of differences in privileges and capital and how they affect their academic and life experiences. First-generation Latinx students attend college unaware of the transformation that will occur in their journey.

In figure 1, I presented the transformation of the 10 participants in this study involved three specific areas of growth: personal growth, critical awareness, and resistance. The fourth quadrant in the figure is practice. The practice is a result of the development of personal growth, critical awareness, and resistance. In practice, there is a reflection piece that leads to action, which leads to service. All the participants mentioned wanting to serve their communities and other first-generation Latinx students to ensure their success. The arrow in the circle shows action or flow. From the participants' stories and views of success, it is evident that there are a constant evolution and change in success to reach new goals in life. The participants were aware that part of success is being life-long learners that cycle through personal growth, critical awareness, resistance, and practice in different settings and stages in life.

Figure 1

A figure of a framework developed from the data



Limitations

The limitations of this study are sample size, and the study took place at one institution. The findings in this study are accurate to the unique experiences of the sample size. On a larger scale, this study could strengthen the generalizability of the themes and additional findings. I also am aware that this does not mean it is representative of all first-generation Latinx students because the sample size was 10. The study researched the experiences of first-generation Latinx students at one institution in southern California; the experiences may vary from state to state and institution to institution. Another limitation was not investigating more in-depth the context of the institution where the study took place. The study could also have considered the experiences of first-generation Latinx students of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. And

could have explored the experience of other first-generation students of diverse cultural and social backgrounds.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several areas of research that need further exploration. An area that needs further exploration is a comparative study of first-generation students and their non-first-generation peers to understand the differences in privilege and the educational systems' inequities. Having the perspective and experiences of both groups can solidify and highlight the needs and the systemic disadvantages in place for first-generation students. Another study that can provide insight is on the impact economic and social class on the experiences of first-generation Latinx students. There could also be a comparative study between different countries of origin between first-generation Latinx students to further understand their experiences. Another study could also explore the difference between second and third generation Latinx students and those first-generation Latinx in this country. Another area that needs to be explored is the nuances of the experience of diverse first-generation Latinx students by race, types of institutions, sexual orientation and identity, etc.

Figure 5

Figure showing recommendations

System	Institutions	Educators
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Education Reform• Financial Literacy• Coping Mechanisms /Strategies• Accessible Information• Additive Lens	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strategies for Success• Accessible Information• More Diversity (Staff, Faculty & Students)• Outreach & Guidance• Inclusive Campus Climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Culturally Competent• Additive Lens• Informed with resources• Safe- Spaces• Not tokenizing minority students

Systemic Recommendations

The results of this study reveal the challenges that first-generation Latinx college students experience, highlighting the need for systemic change in K-12 colleges and universities.

Therefore, it is recommended that the educational system prepares and educates students for long-term success. The educational system needs to prepare students for long-term success by utilizing their strengths and goals to guide them into a track that will result in success. The educational system needs a major reform that makes the opportunity to receive an equitable education to students of all backgrounds. If all students receive the same quality education across all communities and socioeconomic backgrounds, it will provide the same opportunities for success, but that is far from the truth in our current educational system. Students with more affluent backgrounds have better college preparation than those in urban settings. Based on my

lived experiences, I know this because I am a product of this unjust educational system. I had the opportunity to attend both private and public schools before my higher education, and I saw the difference in teachers' and parents' attitudes and expectations. This is informed by my experience of witnessing schools push students to attend college, making them believe that they cannot be successful in life if they do not attend college. I argue that this is far from the truth. I offer a different perspective. When there are students who are not interested in school, the schools have an opportunity to offer training in different trades to prepare the students for the workforce. Besides preparing students with skills and knowledge, the findings reveal a need for schools and colleges to support students' mental health and learning different coping mechanisms and strategies that they can utilize in their day-to-day life in and out of school. Information needs to be more accessible to all students and their families. Students and families need to be informed of the different paths to success that may be better suited for them in time. Earning a higher education is a financial investment that can lead to debt if the student is not committed to devoting the time and work it takes to earn the degree.

Recommendations for Institutions

Institution's efforts to understand student experiences should start with acknowledging that students do have lives and responsibilities outside of school that may create more challenges in reaching their educational goals is looking at students as humans. Institutions need to implement better policies that lead to better programs, interventions and supports that address students' needs in a more humanistic way. Once the institutions start to look at students in a more humanistic way, policies can be implemented that can ensure their success. Institutions can begin by hiring more faculty and staff of color and change the student demographics to reflect the diversity in our country, which can, in effect, change the campus climate and make it a more

inclusive space. Institutions also need to do more outreach and provide more guidance, especially with first-generation Latinx students accustomed to navigating the challenges of attending college independently. Independence is good as a representation of self-reliance and agency, but it can also lead to isolation and challenges that could be avoided or eased with others' help. It is essential to acknowledge and understand the different nuances of the students' experiences in higher education. For example, the institutions may have first-generation Latinx students: foster children, single parents or parents, non-traditional students, caretakers who have financial obligations to their families. The list is endless, but it is not until institutions start to view first-generation Latinx students as people and not a problem or an anomaly; institutions will not provide the appropriate supports to ensure the students' retention and success.

Recommendations for Educators: Implications for Practice

Educators also need to inform themselves more on the unique needs and experiences of their students. Using a more humanistic perspective to understand their needs and experiences should inform educators on how to best serve each student. Using an additive lens and culturally competent practices can help create safe learning environments that can support their personal growth. With those culturally competent practices, there also needs to be changed in engaging students of diverse backgrounds in the lessons. Creating culturally relevant lessons can help strengthen their identities and be their most authentic selves in the classroom. I recommend creating a culturally relevant curriculum but warn educators not to use those culturally diverse lessons to utilize the tokenize the student. Educators should also be well informed in the resources available on campus and around the community to refer students to the appropriate avenues to receive support.

Conclusion

Institutions make promises to students of success. Still, it is exceptionally challenging for institutions to deliver programs of support and interventions that meet first-generation Latinx students' needs. There are nuances to first-generation Latinx students' experiences that can create challenges that are not apparent right away. Those nuances are real and valid even when they don't make sense to administrators, policymakers, and educators. Nuances exist in each first-generation Latinx student that make it more challenging for them to succeed and graduate. Through this study, I have had the opportunity to share some of the unique experiences of first-generation Latinx students at a predominantly White, private institution and shed light on each participant's evolution and transformation.

First-generation Latinx students go into post-secondary institutions with no frame of reference, role models, or guides. They are in for a rude awakening as they transition to college that leads to exploring their own culture and communities through coursework. Some participants took charge of their education and chose culturally relevant or important courses for their personal growth. In these courses, they gain the language and knowledge to begin to identify aspects of their lives and history, validate their challenges and successes, and recognize how many of those challenges exist because there are systems put in place that make it more difficult to reach individual goals. Once they have strengthened and validated all the complexities of their own identities and experiences, they reflect on injustices and look for ways to resist those systems and pave the way for others to come. They are inspired to continue to make a presence and change the same systems that continue to leave them out. Ultimately, first-generation Latinx students transform and become leaders and catalysts of change in different systems, families, communities, and the world.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Subjectivity Statement

I am an educated, first-generation Latina woman of Salvadoran decent. I have broken many societal and cultural stigmas and standards that follow Latin Americans. Being born and raised in Los Angeles, has given me the knowledge and skills about navigating my way through many different situations both good and bad. Growing up in a Spanish speaking home created a language barrier for me when the state of California changes their laws to English only in the classroom. The biggest challenge came when I transferred from a public school to a Catholic private school. My acceptance into the Catholic private school would be based on my ability to improve my English and some math skills over summer school.

Being challenged and forced to prove myself to schools and programs has been something that has presented itself many times throughout my academic journey. Proving myself in order to be given an opportunity is something I learned early on in my life. I was 7 years old when I had to prove that I could improve my English language proficiency, to keep my spot in the Catholic private school. At the time I didn't understand why I had to do but I knew that it was extremely important to do well in school because my parents constantly reminded me and told me how important it was for me to attend that school. I remember them telling me that a Catholic private school education was better than a public-school education and that it is what they wanted for me and my future.

In my application process into a Catholic high school, there was an entrance exam that needed to be taken not only for acceptance but for placement for English and Math classes. This time I didn't place poorly in English but ended up taking remedial Math. I didn't know that it was remedial Math, but it later affected me and my progress through the math sequence for

college applications. In the college application process, it is required that you prove yourself to be worthy of an opportunity to study in that institution. I know everyone has to go through this process, but I felt I had to try even harder because I felt that graduating from a public high school would make me a weaker candidate. At the age of 15, I became my mother's caregiver and decided that for my junior and senior years I would have to attend a public school out of consideration for my father. He had become the sole provider of the family and I felt I had the responsibility to help by giving up a private and expensive education to help relieve some of the financial burden on my family. I ended up graduating from an urban underperforming, and underfunded high school that was close to home. Despite the changes in the quality of education I made sure that I would challenge myself and make sure that I had good grades in order to attend college.

After high school I attended UCSD where it was a huge transition and challenge to adjust to the demands of college. I had such a hard time academically in college that I've also had to prove that I am worthy of a second chance after I was academically disqualified because I was on academic probation for too long. In graduate school you have the GRE and application to also prove to the admissions committee that you are worthy of an opportunity to attend that program despite not meeting the minimum GPA requirement from my undergrad. My academic trajectory has not only been challenging but it has shaped my identity as an adult now.

I vividly remember the day I decided I wanted to go to college. It was in the 5th grade at the UCLA campus. We had gone there on a field trip for some event that different Latinx students on campus had set up for us. I remember at the end of the day not only had I fallen in love with the campus but I saw so many Latinx students that I saw myself being one of them in the future. I went home that day and told my parents that I wanted to go to college and that

UCLA was the school I wanted to go to. My parents just told me that I could do whatever I set my mind to and that I would figure it out along the way on how to get there and they would be there to support me in whatever way they can. My parents realized that they had no idea on how to guide me to get there but they always pushed me to ask for help or guidance from teachers. I knew I had their support, and I knew I had to figure it out if I wanted it my dream of being a college graduate a dream come true.

For as long as I can remember my parents have always told me, “Usted es Salvadoreña” (You are Salvadoran). It wasn’t until my junior year of high school when I transferred to a public high school, that I realized that there were cultural tensions between different Latin American countries. I learned that Mexicans and Salvadorans didn’t really get along. Junior year was the year I transferred out of the Catholic school system because my mother had fell ill and I felt like I needed to relieve some of the economic burden by moving to a public school. My dad had become the sole bread winner in the family and the last two years in the Catholic school were the most expensive because of all the Junior and Senior activities that were to come. I had a scholarship and many of the staff there wanted to find more help for me to stay but in the end decided that it would be easier to alleviate all economic burdens of a private school education by going to a public high school. It was there were I started to realize that not all schools were the same and that teachers and staff didn’t have the same expectations and passion for their students.

I quickly found this out when I took my PSAT exam and had no idea what my scores meant and the college counselor without knowing me just told me that with those scores I would not make it into any college. It felt like my heart was ripped out of my chest when I heard those words. Somehow, I managed to not cry and waited until I got home to cry and tell my parents of the news. My parents were so upset and angry that instead of the counselor encouraging me to

try harder she just shut me down like that. They asked if I could talk to anybody else on campus and I told them that she was the only college counselor on campus. That is when my mom told me that if I wanted to go to college then I needed to swallow my pride and let go of those feelings of hurt and continue to ask her for help. My mom said she needed to see that I was serious and that I had excellent grades and that I was determined to go to college. It was the best advice my mom could have given me in that moment because I persisted and continued to ask for her help and once, she realized that I had excellent grades she offered more help and became more available to help me. Others in her office also came to know me by name and also offered me their help and support. I would be pulled out of class when college recruiters would come on campus or they would inform me of scholarships that would become available. Thanks to their efforts I learned of the Gate Millennium Scholarship and am now writing this dissertation.

After high school, I decided to attend the University of California in San Diego (UCSD) where I faced a huge culture shock and a lot of self-doubt. I not only stood out for being a Latina, but I also felt I had to try to fit in. It was my first time away from my home, and San Diego was like a whole new world for me. I felt threatened and belittled by a lot of my classmates. I remember sitting in my first computer science class and students were asking questions and did not understand what they were saying. I knew they were speaking English, but they were using words I had no idea what they meant. That is when I started to question myself and my abilities and even wondered if I even belonged there. I was even told by one of my classmates that I was given the opportunity to attend UCSD because of Affirmative Action and not because I was academically capable of attending. I was hurt but I knew that being a Gates Millennium Scholar also meant something and that that alone made me stand out from other students. Being a scholar gave me the confidence to continue to persist and strive towards graduation. During my time at

UCSD, I faced some of the most difficult challenges in my life, my health, academic challenges and being my mother's part-time caregiver and the family's only English speaker always added more pressure to keep pushing forward. I remember using my parents as a motivation to keep fighting because I did not want to go home embarrassed and defeated and have to let them know that I couldn't make it. Despite those challenges and obstacles, they have shaped me to the strong Latina woman scholar I am today.

Furthering my education from a bachelor's degree has also helped me understand more of my upbringing, relationships with family members and my own culture. I have learned more about being a Latina through classes and class projects that I have intentionally chosen to be some way somehow be related to El Salvador. This is especially true in my master's program. In my master's program, I worked on a Spanish bilingual bicultural certification. In that program, I cross examined my own family experience and upbringing with understanding of culture and the dynamics of the Latinx family. In that class I got the opportunity to explore the gender roles and expectations of Latinx families. I learned about beliefs that most Latinxs have and the importance of stories and other forms of communication. I also learned about how to work with immigrant families and youth. And how to assist their transition and process of acculturation or assimilation to the United States. I learned about my process of developing my own identity as Salvadoreña Estadounidense (Salvadoran American), born and raised in Los Angeles.

In self-exploration, I discovered how I had been acculturated because I have not rejected my Salvadoran culture. Still, I have also adapted aspects of what I think is part of the American culture. I have sort of combined aspects of both cultures, which have created my understanding of my own identity. I have learned that gender roles and expectations have made me want to be more independent. For example, traditionally women usually leave or move out of their parents'

home after they marry. I left my parents' house at 18 years of age to go to college, but despite not living there, I know that when I visit my parents, I must recognize and respect their traditions, customs, and cultural expectations should follow. By honoring my parents' Salvadoran way of being, I am showing them respect. I have recognized my "own code-switching" and have recognized my identity development through my advanced educational training. I have had opportunities to explore and try to understand my own identity development and my own worldviews in my adult life.

Appendix B

Survey Questionnaire

Demographic Data

Q2. Please identify your race/ethnicity:

American-Indian or Alaskan Native Asian or Pacific Islander

African-American/Black

Latinx/Hispanic

White

Other

Q3. Please enter your date of birth:

Month

Day

Year

Q4. Please identify your Hometown:

Q5. Gender Identity

Woman

Transgender Gender

Queer

Man

Q6. Sexual Orientation

Asexual

Bisexual/Pan/Poly/Ambi

Gay/Lesbian

Heterosexual/Straight

Q7. For the purposes of matching survey responses to the interviewee, please provide an e-mail address that will subsequently be converted to a non-identifying code for analysis:

Q8. Which High School did you graduate from?

Q9. What city was your High School located in?

K-12 Education

Q10. During middle or high school, did you participate in any college prep programs? (Select all that apply)

AVID

Gear-Up Adelante Upward Bound

Other

Q11. If you did not participate in any college prep program, please indicate why:

My school did not provide any of these programs

I am unsure if my school provided any of these programs

I did not qualify for any of these programs

Other

Q12. Did you take any advance placement courses in high school? If yes, list which courses you took:

College

Q13. Please indicate your current grade level in college: (If graduate student, what program?)

Freshman Sophomore

Junior

Senior
Graduate Student

Q14. How many years have you been enrolled in your current institution?

Q15. Are you a full-time or part-time student?

Full-time

Part-time

Q16. Did you attend a Community College before enrolling at the University? If so, please list the name(s) of the community college you have attended.

Q17. Did you obtain an Associate's degree when you were at a Community College?

Yes

No

Q18. What is your current GPA?

Q19. Please indicate your current cumulative GPA:

Q20. Please indicate your academic major:

Q21. Please indicate your academic minor(s) (if applicable):

Q22. Are you a DACA Recipient or a DREAMER? (Please indicate)

Yes

No

Q23. What is the highest level of education you hope to obtain?

High School Diploma

Some College

Bachelor's Degree

Master's Degree - Please indicate major/discipline

Doctorate or Juris Doctor (Law) - Please indicate major/discipline

Other (Please Specify)

Q24. Are you the first person in your immediate family to attend college?

Yes

No

Q25. Please indicate what career you hope to pursue:

Q26. Please list any clubs, organizations, sports teams, and/or organizations you are currently involved in.

Financial Independence

Q27. Are you currently employed?

Yes

No

Q28. Are you employed on campus or off campus?

On-Campus

Off-Campus

N/A

Q29. Are you eligible to receive the Pell Grant?

Yes

No

Q30. Please indicate your current resident status:

With Parents/Guardians

On-Campus

Off-Campus/Renting

Q31. According to your FAFSA, would you be considered financially independent?

Yes

No

Family Questions

Q32. What is the primary language spoken at home?

Q33. Please indicate the family structure you grew up in:

Two Parents

Single Parent (Please Specify which)

Caregiver

Other

Q34. Are you currently in, or have you ever been in, the foster system?

Yes

No

Q35. If applicable, please indicate your father's/guardian's occupation

Q36. If applicable, please indicate your mother's/guardian's occupation

Q37. If applicable, please indicate your father's/guardian's highest level of education obtained

No formal education obtained
Some High School
High School Diploma / GED
Some College
Bachelor's Degree (please indicate major)

Master's Degree (please indicate major)

Doctorate or Juris Doctor (Law) (please indicate major) Q38. If applicable, please indicate your mother's/guardian's highest level of education obtained

No formal education obtained
Some High School
High School Diploma / GED
Some College
Bachelor's Degree (please indicate major)

Master's Degree (please indicate major)

Doctorate or Juris Doctor (Law) (please indicate major)

Q39. Please indicate the estimated household income of your family (include all earners in your household)

Q40. How many people are in your household? (Who lives in your primary residence?)

Q41. How you would classify your family's economic background:

Low-Income Working-Class Middle-Class
Affluent/Upper-Class

Interview Availability

Q42. Please select the time(s) that you would be most available to meet, in-person or virtually, for an interview. You will be contacted by one of our research members to schedule a meeting around your availability.

	Morning	Afternoon	Evening	Night
Sunday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Monday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tuesday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Wednesday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Thursday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Friday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Saturday	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

First-Gen Interview Questions

Pre-College, College Prep, Transition Questions

1. Did you participate in any college prep programs in high school or middle school such as AVID, Gear-Up, Adelante, or Upward Bound? Did your high school provide these programs?
2. If so, do you believe that these programs adequately prepared you for the demands of higher education?
3. How did these programs affect your understanding of what college life is like?
4. What was the recruitment process like for these programs?
5. What were the expectations of these programs?
6. What specific help did the program provide (i.e. writing workshops, college application assistance, campus tours, etc.)?
7. If you were in charge of the program, what would you change in order to improve efficiency?
8. If you were not involved in a college-prep program like AVID, Gear-Up, etc., how did you get prepared for college?

Campus climate

1. Describe the campus environment. How do you think the campus environment affects your experience in school?
 - a. Examples include student demographics, location of the university, feelings of inclusiveness
2. Describe the classroom environment. How do you think the classroom environment affects your experience in school?
 - a. Examples include the diversity of the curriculum, teaching styles, types of class discussions, classroom demographics, faculty identities, etc.

3. Describe your relationship with faculty? In what ways do you interact or engage with your faculty?
4. Do you feel like you fit in at school? Why or why not?
 - a. What do you do to fit in? What behaviors or activities do you engage in to fit in?
5. How and when did you become aware of your identity as a first-gen student?
6. How do you think your identity has played a role in your experience as a student? If so, how?
 - a. Do you think race has played a role in your experience as a student? If so, how so?
 - b. Do you think your economic status has played a role in your experience as a student? If so, how so?
 - c. Do you think gender identity has played a role in your experience as a student? If so, how so?
 - d. Do you think your sexual orientation has played a role in your experience as a student? If so, how so?
 - e. How do you think your status as a DACA or Dreamer has played a role in your experience as a student? If so, how so?
7. How do you think other students on campus view, first-generation students?
8. How do you think faculty and staff view first-gen students on campus?
9. In what ways do you respond to the perceptions that students and faculty may have of you?
10. How have you dealt with the stress of being first-gen on a PWI?
11. In what ways has your economic status influenced your experience amongst your peers?

First Gen Experience

1. How would you define success?
2. How did you learn that higher education was _____(important, necessary/matters, etc.)
 - a. Who helped you understand that higher education was important (e.g. Parents, teachers, mentors, peers, siblings)?
3. What do you think has contributed to your success?
 - a. How has your family contributed to your success

- b. How have your teachers (k-12 and university) contributed to your success?
 - c. Who else has contributed to your success?
 - d. What programs or resources have supported you the most?
 - e. What cultural resources do you think have helped you to succeed?
 - f. How did you learn how to navigate the university?
4. In what ways have you been in contact with a faculty member or staff that was a first-generation student?
 - a. Follow up: How many of your faculty or staff do you know that are first-gen?
 5. Many students feel like they have to straddle two different cultures when they come to college. In what ways do you feel like you have to navigate differences between your home culture and college culture?
 6. Are you currently involved in any first-gen program activities or events?
 - a. If so, what do you see as the benefit of your involvement with first-gen program?
 - b. If not, what are some reasons why you are not involved with first-gen program?
 7. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your higher education experience that I did not ask?

Graduate School

1. What is your knowledge of graduate school and what it entails?
 - a. Follow up: What do you think are the types of activities that graduate students engage in?
2. Are you interested in pursuing a graduate degree after completing your bachelor's? Why or why not?
3. What does a graduate degree represent to you? Your Family?
4. Who would you indicate is an inspiration / motivating factor to pursue a graduate degree?
5. What do you believe a graduate degree would allow you to accomplish in the future?