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"I Tell Them Generics, but Not the Specifics": Exploring Tensions Underlying Familial Support for First-Generation Latinx Undergraduate Students

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Abstract: Families continue to play an essential role in the experiences of first-generation Latinx undergraduate students and can serve as powerful partners to support student retention and socioemotional wellbeing. This qualitative phenomenological study uses the notion of emerging adulthood to explore how first-generation Latinx undergraduate students (n = 16) conceptualize their families' role in their college education. Specifically, this study shows that while students describe feeling supported by their families, they also experience distinct and unique tensions tied to this support, which students associate with their first-generation student status. These tensions include (1) the family's unfamiliarity with college culture; (2) bidirectional behaviors of protection from stress and worry; and (3) continued family interactions. These findings, or tensions, are essential to understand and address. Doing so can improve the nature of familial support for first-generation Latinx undergraduate students by leading to better family—student relationships, family—institutional relationships, and student academic and non-academic outcomes.

Keywords: first-generation college students; Latinx students; familial support; undergraduate education; student retention

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1. Introduction

Families, including parents, siblings, and extended family members, play multiple essential roles in the educational experiences of first-generation Latinx undergraduate students; first-generation undergraduate students are the first in their families to work towards a bachelor's degree in the United States. While students learn to navigate higher education spaces and get accustomed to different academic expectations, families implicitly and explicitly provide motivation and emotional support, contribute financially, and provide academic and life advice [1–3]. Additionally, researchers have noted the importance of colleges and universities partnering with families to support students' educa tional experiences [4–6]. Thus, understanding how families can be partners in student retention efforts is essential for Latinx undergraduate students.

Latinx students are among the least likely to be enrolled in college or have a bachelor's degree [7]. In 2021, 32 percent of Latinx students ages 18 to 24 were enrolled at least part-time in college, compared to 33 percent of Black, 37 percent of White, and 58 percent of Asian Americans of the same age. In the same year, 23 percent of Latinxs ages 25 to 29 had earned a bachelor's degree, up from 14 percent in 2010. However, these numbers still lag behind Black (26 percent), White (45 percent), and Asian American (72 percent) populations [7]. While several factors contribute to the recruitment, retention, and graduation rates of Latinx students; for more, see [8–10], families can become crucial supports to sustain and improve these numbers.

Importantly, extant research also notes that familial support for first-generation Latinx undergraduate students is often nuanced and layered: while students feel supported by their families, they experience frustrations and stress, or tensions, caused by their

families' (mis)understandings of higher education. Since they are the first in their families to attend higher education institutions, their families may not be too familiar with college requirements, expectations, and culture [11,12]. This unfamiliarity may lead to intrafamily conflict and additional emotional distress for students and family members, influencing student academic performance and socioemotional wellbeing [13].

1.1. Purpose

This study aims to explore how first-generation Latinx undergraduate students conceptualize their families' role in their college education; families is broadly defined to include immediate, extended, and chosen family members. Framed by the notion of emerging adulthood, which suggests that college students renegotiate their relationships with their families, the following research questions guide this study: How do first-generation Latinx undergraduate students describe and understand their families' role in their higher education? What do they perceive influences these relationships? To avoid a deficit misinterpretation of this study, it is essential to explicitly underline that the students in this study described feeling supported by their families. However, they also experienced distinct and unique tensions tied to this support. Consequently, this study aims to identify and understand these tensions to improve the higher education experiences of first-generation Latinx undergraduate students. Doing so can improve familial support for this student population by leading to stronger family—student and family—institutional relationships, inevitably impacting student academic and non-academic outcomes.

1.2. Literature Review

Traditionally, college student development theories and frameworks placed parents at the periphery—since most students are near or over 18 when they enter higher education institutions, it was assumed that parents (and families) were adjacent to the experience. Their roles were often reduced to the financial support they provided students (e.g., paying for tuition) [14–16]. Nevertheless, research has highlighted parents and families' roles in college students' lives beyond financial assistance, including supporting their socialization [4,17]. For example, parents may consult students on what to major in or study, inform them about the importance of networking, and offer emotional support when students are stressed or overwhelmed [18–21].

Research has also noted that familial support during college is associated with positive outcomes for college students. Students who feel supported by their parents are more likely to have lower levels of psychological distress, have lower levels of feelings of loneliness [17], have an easier time socially adjusting to college, and have positive experiences making new friends [22]. Parental support is also associated with positive academic outcomes, such as higher GPAs, credit accumulation, and higher retention and graduation rates [18,23–25].

Furthermore, there has been a shift in how institutions conceive of their relationships and interactions with students' parents and families. Colleges and universities are now considering how they can collaborate with parents to support student success [18,26]. Henning [26] concluded that student–parent–institution interactions have changed from a "doctrine of in loco parentis", meaning that parents expect the institutions to take care of their children, to one of "in consortio cum parentibus", or in partnership with parents (p. 539). Thus, colleges and universities are now contemplating how to work more closely with families to support student academic success, retention, and socioemotional wellbeing. This work includes incorporating families in program development and facilitating parent–student conversations about college transitions [27].

While the research described above signals a shift in the understanding of familial engagement in higher education, higher education scholars have also pointed out its limitations regarding the experiences of minoritized student populations. For example, Kiyama and Harper [6] note that much of higher education research, frameworks, and practices center on the needs, values, and norms of middle and upper-class and White students and their families. Within this context, families of first-generation Latinx college

students may be perceived at a disadvantage: some research studies document that because they did not attend college themselves or are unfamiliar with the U.S. educational system, parents of prospective first-generation Latinx college students cannot help them with the college application and selection process [11,28]. It also contends that families are less likely to know how to support their transition to college and its academic and social expectations [11,29,30].

Challenging the deficit perceptions of families mentioned above and centering their assets and strengths, research has documented how the families of first-generation Latinx college students play an essential role in students' academic success and socioemotional wellbeing [2,31,32]. Families are engaged in students' education by providing financial and emotional support, *consejos* and life advice, and motivation when stressed or overwhelmed [2,5,33]. The literature on Latinx college students also describes the importance of *familismo*, or familism, for this student population. Familismo is a cultural value of dedication, commitment, and loyalty to family [34]. Research notes that this commitment to family develops supportive environments for students, providing them the strength to navigate higher education when unmotivated [31,35]. Students develop unique strengths within their family contexts that make them resilient when facing adversity [36–38]. Thus, research emphasizes that familial support is more influential and impactful for first-generation Latinx college students [39–42].

Families also help Latinx college students develop into young adults by scaffolding responsibilities. For instance, in their study of families of first-generation college students, Harper and colleagues [5] found that parents wanted their children to develop autonomy. They did this by encouraging their children to find part-time jobs or to contact a police officer when a student's bike was stolen. The researchers note that parents wanted to encourage their children to solve their problems. Furthermore, research from Latinx students' perspective notes that students themselves identify their families as one of their primary sources of motivation and support throughout their college trajectories [1,3,43]. In short, families formally and informally support first-generation Latinx college students.

While extant research asserts that the families of first-generation Latinx college students continue to support students in significant ways, it also signals its limitations [24,44,45]. Predominantly, this research notes that students describe their families, especially their parents, as restricted in their ability to provide concrete guidance (as opposed to emotional and motivational support); examples of this guidance include helping students choose classes, advising them when they consider changing majors, and having conversations about the need to shift study habits from high school to college [24]. For example, in their study on first-generation college students, Roksa and colleagues [24] found that students without college-educated siblings had difficulty reaching out to their parents for support when obstacles arose. Students with older siblings who had attended college, on the other hand, reported feeling more comfortable asking their parents for support. The study found that parents with multiple children in college provided students with emotional support, helped students problem-solve, and had more specific suggestions for the next steps. Furthermore, these parents were more likely to understand the importance of college extracurricular activities and social engagements. Researchers found that students with college-educated older siblings reported having more open communication with their parents about the social aspects of their college experiences (e.g., going to parties) [24]. Thus, Roksa and colleagues note the existence of what they call "family cultural capital", or a resource where the "experiences of other family members—not just one's own experience—can enhance one's familiarity with and ability to navigate social institutions" [24] (p. 566).

Research on first-generation Latinx college students also notes that they often experience cultural mismatch and shock when entering colleges and universities [13,46]. This research argues that when they transition into college, students' new identities as college students may be incompatible with their family roles and responsibilities: students must negotiate between college expectations of independence and interdependent family norms and expectations [13,31,37]. For instance, in their study of first-generation college stu-

dents, Covarrubias and colleagues [46] found that, as students experience higher education, they develop what they call "soft" and "hard" independence: soft independence includes pursuing individual interests and maturing while hard independence includes becoming self-reliant and breaking traditions. These forms of independence may clash with family norms, leading to mixed reactions from students and feelings of guilt [46]. This, then, can negatively affect students' academics and socioemotional wellbeing and their relationships with their families [31,46]. Relatedly, research has also found that maintaining family relationships and connections with their home communities is one of the most complex parts of the transition to college for first-generation college students [31].

Nevertheless, research contends that first-generation Latinx students respond to the cultural mismatch differently. Some students respond by decreasing contact with families and detaching from family responsibilities altogether [12,31]. However, other research suggests that students find ways to maintain contact and connection with their families, learning to change their communication styles with their families. Others learn to avoid discussing their college lives and academics with their families or restrict their interactions with them [29,31,37,47]. Additionally, research notes that first-generation Latinx college students who stay connected with their families also continue to hold family responsibilities. For example, students may provide emotional and financial support to their parents, help them with advocacy needs and language translations, offer physical care, and take care of their younger siblings and elderly extended family [46].

In sum, extant research shows the critical role families play in the educational trajectories of college students—they remain central to their experiences. For first-generation Latinx college students, specifically, the relationships they have with their families are complex. While families serve as a source of strength and support, they can also cause emotional distress and worry. As the research shows, these dualities can co-exist.

1.3. Conceptual Framework

Building from the work of Benito-Gomez and colleagues [18], this study postulates that the theory of emerging adulthood is "a useful framework for examining how parents and college students maintain connections and how parental support can promote adjustment and retention rates during college (p. 3376)". Emerging adulthood is defined as the period between adolescence and adulthood. Developmental scholars note that emerging adulthood is different from these two developmental stages. While adolescence is a period of biological growth and development, undefined status, increased pressures, and search for the self [48], adulthood is defined by individualistic characteristics such as self-sufficiency, accepting the consequences of one's actions, and developing and standing on one's own beliefs and values (as opposed to those of close family and friends) [48,49]. Emerging adulthood, then, allows adulthood characteristics to develop, as it is a time of increased self-focus, self-discovery, and decision-making [50]. According to Arnett [51], it is a period characterized by five factors: identity exploration, self-focus, time of possibility, instability, and feeling in-between.

Applying the theory of emerging adulthood to the experiences of college students helps examine how familial support can aid students' college transition, retention, and success by scaffolding their independence [18]. According to Arnett [52], institutions of higher education "represent a social island set off from the rest of society, a temporary safe haven where emerging adults can explore possibilities in love, work, and worldviews with many of the responsibilities of adult life kept at bay" (p. 1). Within this context, emerging adults also renegotiate their relationships with their families. While family dynamics and roles do change, families still engage in different forms of active parenting throughout this period of college students' lives [27]. Furthermore, balancing separating from the family (i.e., becoming an independent adult) and maintaining connections that serve as supportive safety nets is also essential in supporting students' emerging adulthood [48,49].

Consequently, college student development theories are now considering the implications of students' emerging adulthood developmental stage and recognizing that families

play an active role in college students' education [27]. Thus, by framing this study with the theory of emerging adulthood, this study further explores and identifies what shapes emerging adulthood for first-generation Latinx undergraduate students. Specifically, it analyzes how familial relationships shape emerging adulthood for this student population.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Methodology

This study is part of a larger IRB-approved phenomenological, interview-based study on family–student relationships in a higher education context. The larger study explores how first-generation college students and their families experience students' transition and adjustment to college: students and family members (i.e., parents, siblings, and extended family members) were interviewed separately. Since this study focuses on how Latinx students describe and make sense of their families' roles in their education, the analysis is based only on data from the interviews with 16 first-generation Latinx undergraduate students enrolled in pseudonym Hawthorne University (HU) at the time of data collection.

The methodological orientations of phenomenology [53] and Chicana feminist epistemology [54] inform this study. Phenomenology underscores how different individuals make sense of the same phenomena and helps identify commonalities in their experiences [53]. In this case, the phenomenon at the center of the analysis is first-generation Latinx students' transition into and experiences in higher education. Thus, a phenomenological approach is suitable. However, traditional conceptualizations of phenomenology require that researchers "bracket" their experiences and identities or "become aware of personal bias to eliminate personal involvement with the subject material" [53] (p. 484). Instead, aligning with the tradition of Chicana feminist epistemology, I believe that my positionality, further discussed below, benefits this study. Chicana feminist epistemology notes that personal and professional experiences, the existing literature, and the analytical research process are assets to the research design [54]. Thus, phenomenology and Chicana feminist epistemology, together, serve to investigate how first-generation Latinx undergraduate students describe and understand their families' role in their higher education. Phenomenology considers students' meaning-making while Chicana feminist epistemology articulates the importance of researcher positionality [54].

2.2. Researcher Positionality

I, the primary investigator, identify as a first-generation Latina, the eldest daughter of Mexican immigrants. While I did not attend an institution like Hawthorne University, like the study participants, I was the first in my family to attend an institution of higher education in the U.S. and graduate with a bachelor's degree. I also have years of experience teaching, mentoring, and working with first-generation Latinx undergraduate students. As such, I share similarities with study participants and have insight into their contemporary contexts. This "insider" perspective informed my study design and approach [55]. I built rapport with study participants by sharing my educational journey and professional experiences. However, I also acknowledged my "outsider" position: HU is different from the institutions I attended and worked in, family dynamics vary across generations, and the current educational context is different, especially because the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted it [55]. I reflected on these realities as I collected and analyzed data using reflexive memo writing [53,55]. Memos also included interview reflections, emerging themes, and identifying data nuances.

2.3. Participants

This study focuses on the experiences of 16 first-generation Latinx undergraduate students at Hawthorne University (HU), a private university in the western United States. For this study, "first-generation college students" is defined as students who are the first generation in their immediate family to attend a 4-year higher education institution in the United States. Thus, to participate in this study, students must have been enrolled

at HU and identify as first-generation college students. During data collection, students were asked to self-identify their race/ethnicity and gender. This study is based on the data and interviews from students who self-identified as a sub-category of Latinx, including Latinx (n = 14), Mexican American (n = 1), and Salvadorean American (n = 1). The final sample consists of 9 female students, 6 male students, and 1 nonbinary student. Table 1 summarizes participant demographic information.

Table 1. Study Participants' Demographics.

Name	Year	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Field of Study
Olivia	Freshman	Female	Latinx	STEM: Health Sciences
Luna	Senior	Female	Latinx	Humanities: Creative Writing
Oscar	Junior	Male	Mexican American	STEM: Health Sciences
Sara	Sophomore	Female	Latinx	Business Administration
Abigail	Junior	Female	Latinx	Social Sciences: Education
Daniel	Sophomore	Male	Latinx	Social Sciences: Peace Studies
Eva	Junior	Female	Latinx	Social Sciences: Education
Alex	Sophomore	Nonbinary	Latinx	Social Sciences: Sociology
David	Sophomore	Male	Latinx	Business Administration
Victoria	Sophomore	Female	Latinx	Social Sciences: Political Science
Mia	Junior	Female	Latinx	Broadcast Journalism
Justin	Junior	Male	Salvadorean American	STEM: Physiology
Ruben	Senior	Male		Business Administration
Jessica	Junior	Female	Latinx	Social Sciences: Education
Giselle	Junior	Female	Latinx	Social Sciences: Political Science
Eric	Freshman	Male	Latinx	Television and Production

2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Each study participant was interviewed twice using a modified version of Seidman's [56] three-interview protocol. The first interview was an introductory interview where students were asked questions about their experiences as first-generation college students, their transitions to HU, and their lives as college students. Participants were also asked about their relationships with their families, family responsibilities, and different support systems. The theory of emerging adulthood also framed these questions. The second interview, which took place within two weeks of the first, asked participants to reflect on their college experiences and make meaning of their support systems, including familial relationships. Interviews ranged from 46 to 125 min, were conducted via Zoom, and were audio-recorded. They were transcribed verbatim and uploaded to the qualitative data analysis software NVivo for the analysis. Reflexive memos written during data collection were also uploaded to NVivo.

Data analysis procedures combined Moustakas' [57] steps of a phenomenological data analysis with Deterding and Waters' [58] flexible coding analytic procedure, which notes that empirical qualitative research is in dialogue with existing theory and findings from previous studies. As such, the first step of the data analysis was to identify every statement in which participants described their experiences navigating their college education while balancing family relationships and responsibilities. This step is also referred to as "data horizonalization". The second step consisted of applying analytic codes to this data set. Analytic codes were created using memos written during data collection and initial transcript review. I also used the theory of emerging adulthood to code these data. Consequently, codes included "emotional support", "hiding information", "cultural mismatch", and "family responsibilities". Open coding was also conducted during this step to identify student–family interactions not captured in the memos or those based on the reviewed literature. Codes during this phase included "emotional protection" and "student–parent interactions". Subsequently, codes were refined, and similar codes were grouped and examined, moving beyond descriptive codes to codes that implied a relationship. In other words, codes were grouped into "meaning units". For example, the codes

"emotional protection" and "hiding information" were recoded as "students protecting parents" because participants explained that they did not fully disclose all their academic and college-related stresses to their parents to not worry them.

Based on these meaning units, descriptions of the experiences were summarized, such as the one just provided. Moustakas [57] refers to this stage as "textural description". This was followed by "structural description", which details how participants experience the phenomena. To construct this "how", I sought to identify all possible meanings, seeking divergent perspectives within the data and varying the frames of reference (e.g., comparing and contrasting how students described their experiences with the phenomena across the two interviews). In the case of the "students protecting parents" code, participants expressed both guilt and relief in hiding information from their parents. At this stage, colleagues reviewed my analysis of the data to ensure consistency, which served as additional data triangulation [53]. Lastly, I developed the "essence" of the experience for participants—taking the textural (what) and structural (how) meanings of the experiences and developing a description that exemplifies the experiences of the study participants. These "composites" became the three tensions presented in the findings. These tensions are, as Moustakas [57] describes, a reduction to the "essentials" of the experiences. The examples presented below are representative of the sample unless noted otherwise.

2.5. Trustworthiness

Following the traditions of qualitative research, different processes were established to account for validity, reliability, and trustworthiness. The verification strategies proposed by Morse and colleagues [59] were applied to the methodological design to ensure data reliability and validity. This included ensuring methodological coherence (i.e., considering how method and approach are appropriate for the research question), an appropriate sample, and the concurrent data collection and analysis. Similarly, the abovementioned multi-stage data analysis process increases reliability or "construct validity" [58] (p. 731). Additionally, member-checks with study participants took place during a third informal interview one month after interview 2. During this conversation, I reviewed themes from the first two interviews and asked clarifying and follow-up questions to ensure no misinterpretations of meaning-making during the data analysis [56]. While the informal interview was not recorded, I took notes and wrote analytic memos after each. I also referenced these memos and those on my positionality throughout the data analysis. I paid particular attention to any projection of my personal experiences onto the findings. I consulted colleagues if I believed this was the case.

3. Results

During interviews, participants expressed with great pride, understanding, and empathy that their families supported them in their higher education pursuits in the best ways they could. Most shared that their families, including their parents, siblings, grandparents, and extended family members, were happy and proud that they enrolled at Hawthorne University—they were proud that they were working towards a higher education degree. However, participants quickly pointed out that their families, particularly their parents, were limited in understanding their college lives. While they felt supported, they also expressed frustration and disappointment when their families could not truly understand their experiences and demands as college students. Giselle, a junior majoring in political science, captured these feelings:

> I wish that I could just sit down and have them listen to everything that I actually do and learn about all the cool things that I am doing. I wish that I could tell them and they would understand and know that part of me. But I have this idea in my head that they wouldn't understand, or they don't care. So, I'm just not going to really tell them about my experience. I tell them generics but not the specifics.

Like Giselle, most study participants believed that they could not honestly share all of themselves, their experiences, and their frustrations with their families. They explicitly

noted that their status as first-generation students framed this feeling. Thus, participants experienced different tensions in their relationships with their families as they transitioned into college, navigating a new space and learning environment and developing into young adults. Tensions described included families' unfamiliarity with college culture, students and families trying to protect each other emotionally, and students' continued responsibilities within their family units. These tensions are elaborated on below.

3.1. Tension 1: Families' Unfamiliarity with College Culture

As previously mentioned, participants were hyper-aware of the ways their first-generation college student status shaped their families' understandings of higher education and the nature of their relationships with them, including academic and social expectations. While they were sympathetic to this and valued their families' support, particularly their parents', they expressed frustration with misunderstandings and miscommunication caused by their families' unfamiliarity with college culture in their contemporary context.

Participants wished their families were better familiar with the academic expectations they experienced at HU. They shared that their parents did not understand that the reading and writing they were assigned significantly increased compared to their high school classes. They also noted that the weight of their assignments and exams was more significant to their grades—they needed to ensure they performed well to maintain high GPAs. Thus, participants described how their stress levels were often tied to academic expectations. Because they were concerned with their academic performance, participants shared that they developed anxiety, stress-induced hives, headaches, and hair loss. Additionally, they felt their families did not fully understand why they were so stressed and worried about their academics. As Alex, a sophomore sociology major, shared:

> I would really like them [parents] to understand the stress thing. That it is not something you can really just get out by running or something. Stress isn't really something you can just get rid of easily. When they're not understanding, that can be even worse on me because I feel more alone and that nobody understands me. So, I really wish that I could tell them on a deeper level how I feel and how stressed I am.

For Alex, academic stress led them to develop severe anxiety attacks. When they shared this with their parents, they told them to ease the stress by running or doing other physical activities. As Alex shared, "It is not that easy". They wanted their parents to show empathy and understanding about their anxiety and stress instead of generic advice.

Another frustration students expressed was their families' perceptions of their time management or availability. Participants shared examples of their families' assumptions about their time availability: family members wondered what students were doing with all the "free time" they had between classes. Justin, a junior physiology major, explained that his mom was accustomed to his high school schedule, which included six classes, Monday through Friday. When he started college, his parents wondered what he was doing with his time—he only had classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays. He had to constantly remind them that he was busy doing homework, studying, and working part-time on the other days of the week.

In addition to misunderstandings and miscommunication about the nature of college classes and their scheduling, participants also shared that their families did not understand the need to be consistent and intentional about their time management. For Sara, a business administration sophomore, this was incredibly frustrating because she had worked so hard to figure out how to balance her school, extracurricular activities, and her part-time job. She was also a commuter student, living at home with her family. Her transition into HU had been difficult—she was not used to the increased reading and homework expectations and had to learn different study methods. Additionally, she wanted to be involved in student organizations to meet new people and make new friends. After a challenging first year, she believed she had figured out the class load and study skills and had improved her time management skills. By her second year, she knew, as she noted, "how to be a college

student". Using the block scheduling technique, she learned from a time management workshop that it worked best for her. With that technique, she blocked and dedicated time in her calendar for classes, work, studying, and socializing.

However, Sara's mother did not understand how the block scheduling technique worked. If she saw her at home, taking a break, Sara assumed that her mom probably thought she did not have much schoolwork to do. For instance, one weekend, there was a family party Sara had not been privy to. When she told her mom that she would not attend because she had to study for final exams, her mom was upset—she had seen her daughter hanging out with her boyfriend the day before. Her mom wondered why she had not studied then. Sara explained:

> I have a plan for the week in my head, but she doesn't see that. I had planned to study that specific day, so I didn't think of doing that [studying] the other day. I needed a break and time with my boyfriend. But she doesn't see the importance of that.

Sara ended up not attending the family party. While this upset her mom, Sara was unwilling to change her study schedule, mainly because final exams were essential to her grade. Upon sharing and reflecting on this example, she expressed frustration with her mom for not fully understanding her intentional scheduling.

Participants also shared that their families did not understand the social elements of college. In other words, students felt their families needed to see the importance of investing in a social life and social networks. As David, a sophomore majoring in business administration, described, "My family has these expectations of me as being like this perfect college student and I just go to school and stuff, right? But there's like a lot more to going to college than I think that they realize". He explained that he experienced different transitions: moving from home to a new state, learning to take care of himself, and trying to make new friends. He continued:

> I feel like I wish that they understood. Like when my mom is like, 'What are you doing out at this time?' Like, 'Mom, I'm trying to make friends, that's what I have to do. It's a part of being here.' So, I don't know. I just wish they were more [understanding]. And it's not like they are trying to control my life since I'm here. I just wish they understood that there's more to it than school.

Like other participants, David wanted his family to understand the importance of developing a support system in college. This included making the time to make new friends.

3.2. Tension 2: Emotional Protection

Another tension that emerged from the interviews was that both students and families tried to protect one another for the sake of the other emotionally. In other words, students shared that they had experienced their families keeping information from them so as not to worry them. At the same time, students also shared that they kept information or details from their families.

For example, a sophomore political science major, Victoria, believed she had a good relationship with her family. While moving out of state to attend HU, she constantly communicated with her parents and two younger sisters. Yet, when she returned home for winter break, she learned that her father had a severe health scare: he was hospitalized for a couple of days due to heart concerns. By the time Victoria returned home, her father was doing better. When her sister accidentally mentioned the incident to Victoria, she was both alarmed and furious. When she confronted her parents about not sharing this information, they said they did not want to worry her. They wanted her to focus on her schoolwork and final exams. However, Victoria was frustrated because that was not the first time her parents hid information. She shared:

> They say that they don't want to tell me things because they don't want to worry me. But that kind of worries me more. I'll hear things [from my sisters] and I'll be like, 'When did this happen? Are they okay?' And they tell me that they

> didn't want me to worry or hurt me. And it's like, I feel like I should know that this is happening because it feels like an important life event. But it kind of feels like it's up to me to know things that are happening, even though I'm not there sometimes. So that has been like a point of tension.

Victoria explained that she knew her family did not tell her about her father's health scare because they did not want to worry her. She understood this to be an expression of love and care. However, she felt that she had the right to know. After such an experience, Victoria always doubted when her parents told her everything was okay at home. This doubt, then, led to a constant state of worry, concern, and stress. Giselle, who also experienced similar tensions with her parents, where they intentionally hid information from her not to worry her, shared that this was the most significant stressor in her college life:

> I mainly worry about back home because here I feel very much in my own world, and it's sometimes it's nice, but sometimes I feel just disconnected from my family and what's going on back home. So, I'd say that's probably the bigger stressors.

Like Victoria and other students, Giselle shared that she was sometimes on edge when she talked to her family: she often questioned how honest they were with her. This created additional stress for her.

Participants also acknowledged not being completely honest or transparent with their families about their own issues. They shared that they intentionally chose not to tell their parents about things such as health issues, stress-induced anxiety attacks, and concerns over academic probation. One of the most cited reasons for these behaviors was that they did not want their families to worry about them. For example, Justin did not tell his parents about being placed on academic probation. He explained that his first year had been tough. The transition to HU and its academic demands had surprised him. He felt shame when he was placed on academic probation after failing two classes. Yet, with the help of an advisor, he was determined to get out of academic probation. When his parents asked him about his classes or grades, he told them everything was going well. When asked for his reasoning behind his decision not to tell them the truth, he shared:

> It is not like I wanted to lie to them explicitly. I did not want them to worry without having a real thing to worry about. Like, I had a plan to get out of it [academic probation], and the plan was working. I changed study habits, I went to the tutoring center, all that stuff. My grades were getting better. So, I told them everything was okay because it would be okay. I think that if I was not getting better, if I did not get out of probation, then I would have to tell them. But there was no need to worry them just yet.

For Justin, not disclosing his academic probation to his parents was a form of protection from worry.

Other students shared that they intentionally hid their stress from their families because they did not want them to think of them as struggling students. For example, Abigail, a junior majoring in education, shared that she had always been a great student—her primary and secondary teachers had always praised her academic abilities. She knew that this made her parents proud. "In fact", she shared, "that is one of the main reasons why they came to this country [the United States], to give me the opportunity for a better education". As the daughter of Mexican immigrants, she explained that she had grown up believing that a college degree would help her with upward social mobility. Thus, she always made sure to try her best in school. Moreover, up until transferring to HU from community college, school had been manageable for her. She explained:

> Before here [HU], I mostly got A's. Even at [community college], I did really good. And then, bam! I got here [HU] and school was hard. All of a sudden, I was getting some Cs. And that was stressful. I was scared of letting my parents down. So, I don't want them to see the aspect of stress and anxiousness that I feel. But it's also because I just don't want them to see that side of my college experience.

> I want them to think like, "Oh my gosh, university was like a walk in a meadow, it was totally perfect". But in reality, behind the scenes, it's a bloodbath.

When asked to elaborate on her fears of letting her parents down, Abigail explained that she did not want them to worry about her academics. She wanted them to continue to think of her as a "good" and successful student. She also admitted that she felt guilty when struggling with school: her parents had sacrificed so much for her and all she had to do was obtain her college degree. Thus, she intentionally chose to hide her stress and anxiety as much as she could.

3.3. Tension 3: Continued Family Responsibilities

Another source of tension participants identified was rooted in their continued family responsibilities. Regardless of their living situations (i.e., living on-campus or living at home and commuting), all participants described some level of continued family responsibilities. These ranged from helping parents financially (e.g., paying the cellphone bills, helping with rent, and buying groceries) to mentoring younger siblings and extended family members with college applications to having household responsibilities such as cooking and cleaning. They also described their roles as advocates and translators for their parents. Students with parents who were uncomfortable speaking English or interacting with bureaucracy in organizations such as healthcare insurance companies would serve as proxies, helping their parents navigate these institutions. Participants were also caretakers of their own children, younger siblings, and aging grandparents.

For Luna, a senior majoring in creative writing, her family responsibilities centered on caring for her younger siblings. As the eldest in her family, she described herself as a "second mother" to her two sisters and brother. She shared, "I've always kind of been a second mother to my siblings. So, I've always felt like that was my sense of duty to my siblings in their education, which I don't think I've done a great job". Since her parents were always busy working, Luna was responsible for monitoring her siblings' education, ensuring that they were doing well in school. Because of this, she often attended meetings with their teachers and counselors. However, since she is the oldest sister and not the parents, she felt she had no authority to tell her siblings what to do. Moreover, this caused tension with one of her sisters. She explained that her sister struggled with school, often getting in trouble for ditching classes or not doing her assignments. She shared:

> So, me and Erika [sister] have always had a very, very, really tough relationship, even till this day. I think I'm trying to heal from the relationship that we've had because it's always been like constant arguments and constant disagreements with her. I've had to go to so many meetings during her senior year of school just so she could graduate. It's been really tough.

Because her parents could not attend school meetings, Luna commuted from the HU campus to her hometown (the commute ranged between 1 and 1.5 h, each way, depending on traffic) to visit her sister's school. These trips and meetings, she shared, were not only physically exhausting (she often had to wake up early if she wanted to miss the morning traffic) but also emotionally draining. Luna felt she had to be strict with her sister, leading to fights. When she asked her parents to support her in being more demanding with her sister, she felt they did not have her back. Thus, she was often exhausted when she returned to the HU campus. She shared, "Sometimes I wonder if it is fair. Are other students in my classes dealing with these same things? It just feels very tough sometimes". Luna knew that she had her academics and classes to also worry about. Being in this predicament, balancing her academics and family responsibilities was frustrating for her.

For Jessica, a junior majoring in education, family responsibilities entailed parenting and taking care of her son, who was eight years old at the time of the interviews. While she acknowledged that she had significant support from her family, especially her mother and aunts, she was the primary caretaker of her son as a single mother. This added responsibility makes her an outlier compared to other study participants—she was navigating juggling

her schooling, part-time jobs, and parenting. For her, attending HU did not only entail transitioning into an unknown educational context, where she had to learn how to be a successful college student, but it also consisted of figuring out how to balance this with her role as a parent. She said, "Being a first-generation student–parent is a whole different game. It's like being asked to play soccer and football at the same time. While you're learning the sports and their different rules, it's a lot". Additionally, Jessica shared that she wanted to be present not only in her son's education (e.g., attending school events and parent–teacher conferences, and helping him with his homework) but also wanted him to feel that she was invested in his overall wellbeing. She wanted to take him to soccer practice, meet his school friends, and enjoy time with him at local museums and community events. However, figuring out how to balance this and her education was a constant source of stress. When asked how her identity as a student–parent influenced her education and wellbeing, she shared:

> At times I feel guilty because I don't get to spend as much time with my child as I would like to because I have homework to do. I have projects. And I don't know, I feel like sometimes, they [children] can get resentful and be like, "Why are you going to school?" But my son, overall, he's very supportive. It is just kind of hard trying to juggle everything because I know a lot of students don't have that extra responsibility to take care of.

Jessica also mentioned that HU was not a very student–parent-friendly place. For example, the university did not have accessible childcare on campus, and most undergraduate courses were scheduled during her son's school hours. As a first-generation student–parent, who also commuted, Jessica's family responsibilities often clashed with her student responsibilities.

4. Discussion

This study explores how first-generation Latinx undergraduate students conceptualize or make meaning of their families' role in their college education. Specifically, this study shows how, for these students, emerging adulthood may be influenced by their identities and experiences of being the first in their families to attend college in the U.S. These experiences create unique tensions they must contend with as they balance academic, personal, and social responsibilities.

Most study participants reported feeling supported by their families. They believed that their families were proud of their educational accomplishments and wanted them to achieve their academic goals successfully. Thus, a foundational premise of this study reflects existing research on the families of first-generation Latinx undergraduate students: families continue to play an essential role in their college education [2,5,31,32]. However, as existing research has shown, first-generation Latinx undergraduate students also experience challenges transitioning into and navigating higher education while balancing family responsibilities [13,31,37]. Specifically, research has noted how the first-generation college student identity significantly shapes how students and their families understand and experience higher education. In other words, because they are the first in their families to navigate higher education, just as students learn what it means to be a college student, so are their families, especially their parents [2,5].

Therefore, this study presents a more nuanced and in-depth conceptualization of how students experience their families' roles in their college education. Specifically, it presents three tensions first-generation Latinx undergraduate students experience while balancing, (re)negotiating, and navigating their relationships with their families as they transition to and through their higher education trajectories. These tensions include the family's unfamiliarity with college cultures and demands, a desire to protect one another emotionally, and continued family responsibilities. As research notes, it is essential to understand these perceptions and experiences as they may impact how students understand their college education, ultimately influencing their academics, socioemotional wellbeing, and retention [18]. As such, this study offers an essential insight into the lived experi-

ences of first-generation Latinx undergraduate students and perceived influences to their development into adulthood.

As this study shows, students' families were unfamiliar with college culture, including academic expectations, time commitments, and the social elements of college life at Hawthorne University. While students understood why their families, especially their parents, did not thoroughly understand the different expectations of college (as opposed to high school), they described how misunderstandings created stress for them. This finding builds on the existing literature on the experiences of first-generation undergraduate students by detailing how students perceive their first-generation identities impacting how they experience their families' role in their higher education. Furthermore, it also notes how this identity is experienced by Latinx students specifically [24,44,45].

Another significant finding is the role of communication, either miscommunication or the lack of communication, between students and families and its perceived impact on students' understanding of their families' role in their higher education. Students reported knowing that their families were intentionally hiding things from them such as health scares and financial worries. While they understood that their families did not want to worry them so they could focus on their studies, they knew their families were not candid with them. This perpetuated a cycle of worry and stress rooted in mistrusting their families, especially their parents. Similarly, students disclosed engaging in similar behaviors: they were not completely honest with their parents about their stress levels because they did not want to worry them. These findings contribute a more nuanced understanding of student–family communication for Latinx first-generation college students. While existing research notes that miscommunication between students and families can lead to stress and conflict [29,31,37,47], these findings identify a specific reason behind such communication or miscommunication patterns: concern for emotional wellbeing.

Furthermore, some participants shared that they intentionally chose not to disclose their school-based stress to their families because they did not want them to think of them as struggling students. They wanted their families, particularly their parents, to believe that they were doing fine at HU. They did this partly because they wanted their parents' sacrifices to be worth it [60]. In other words, they noted that they felt guilty when struggling at HU because their parents had worked hard to help them get there. This finding resonates with existing research on the family guilt first-generation college students experience [31].

Findings also reflect the continued responsibilities first-generation Latinx students have with their families. As extant research notes, first-generation and Latinx undergraduate students maintain strong ties, connections, and responsibilities with their families [46]. This study details how these responsibilities may influence students' academics and socioemotional wellbeing. Additionally, it shows that students, regardless of housing context (i.e., living on or near campus or commuting from home), may continue to have significant caretaking responsibilities that inform their higher education experiences [24,46]. Students in this study wondered if non-first-generation college students did not have to worry about the academics and wellbeing of younger siblings or their own children. Again, this shows how emerging adulthood for this student population includes overlapping responsibilities.

Ultimately, several vital implications emerge from this study. In terms of higher education practice, colleges and universities must consider how the tensions identified in this study may impact student retention, academics, and socioemotional wellbeing. In particular, student affairs offices must develop policies and programs to alleviate the perceived impact of these tensions on students. First, programming targeting the families of first-generation college students needs to demystify college culture, norms, and expectations. This can address tensions caused by misunderstandings of what college entails. Second, programming also needs to help students and families understand the concept of emerging adulthood and the reality that family dynamics will change during college. This may ease some of the tensions caused by students and families hiding information from each other. For example, workshops and panels should be offered during orientation to introduce families, particularly parents, to the academic demands of college and its social

aspects. Additionally, these programs must be culturally and linguistically appropriate: the information shared must be distributed in ways that will not overwhelm families. Third, colleges and universities must acknowledge that first-generation Latinx undergraduate students maintain family responsibilities. As such, they need to ease students' experiences, balance multiple responsibilities, and institutionalize resources specifically for students who are caretakers. This can be in the form of additional scholarships and other forms of financial support (e.g., gas gift cards, food pantries), mental health services (e.g., therapists), and on-campus childcare.

While this study identifies and unpacks three distinct tensions described by first-generation Latinx undergraduate students, it is limited in scope to the experiences of students at one private institution in the western United States. Future research should build from these findings and further investigate how students in different contexts (e.g., diversity in geographic location, institution type) experience familial support. Additionally, student characteristics should also be further accounted for. For example, the sample consisted of only one student–parent. As her experiences showed, her role as a mother added another layer of complexity to her family dynamics and experiences as a first-generation Latina college student. Building from the findings of this study, future research should explore how first-generation Latinx student–parents, including fathers, balance parenting with their educational transitions and experiences.

5. Conclusions

The tensions identified in this study help develop a more nuanced understanding of the higher education experiences of first-generation Latinx undergraduate students. As this study shows, emerging adulthood for this student population may be significantly influenced by their first-generation college student identities and their relationships with their families. Tensions identified include family's unfamiliarity with college culture, bidirectional behaviors of protection from stress and worry, and continued family interactions. It is essential to consider and address these tensions to further support these students' retention and academic and socioemotional wellbeing. Doing so will help students succeed and develop, foster, and sustain stronger familial ties.

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