

Stories of Success:  
First Generation Mexican-American  
College Graduates  
by  
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## ABSTRACT

With projections indicating that by the year 2025, one of every four K-12 students in the United States will be Latino, addressing the needs of Latino students is an important question for educators. This study approached this question through an analysis of the educational life histories, stories, of successful first generation Mexican-American college graduates to understand some of the factors which helped them succeed in college.

I categorized the stories inductively into three themes: 1) stories of students and school, 2) stories of friends, family, and cultural communities, and 3) stories about race and politics. Participants' intellectual self-concept, both positive and negative, was to a great extent influenced by the messages they received from the educational system. Some of the participants took a traditional path from high school through college, while others took very indirect paths. The support that they received from special programs at the university as well as from their webs of support was crucial in their success. In addition, I found that race mattered when the participants transitioned from their majority Latino high schools to the majority white university as the participants told stories of navigating the cultural and racial dynamics of their status as college students.

The participants in my study worked hard to achieve their college degrees. "It's hard" was a phrase often repeated by all participants; hard work was also a cultural value passed on by hard working parents and family members. Stories of

luck, both good and bad, factored into their educational life histories.

Collaborative programs between secondary school and the university were helpful in creating a transitional bridge for the participants as were culturally-based mentoring programs. The participants benefitted from the culturally-based support they received at the university and the cultural and emotional support of their families. The participants' stories highlight the importance of a race-conscious approach to college going; one which begins with race and builds cross-racial coalitions. This approach would benefit Latino students and, ultimately improve the college going experiences of all students.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
TABLE OF FIGURES.....	IX
CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION.....	1
OVERVIEW.....	2
DEMOGRAPHICS - POPULATION OF YOUNG LATINOS INCREASING.....	3
LATINO COLLEGE ENROLLMENT AND COMPLETION.....	4
BENEFITS OF A BACHELOR’S DEGREE.....	7
PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE.....	10
THE RESEARCH QUESTION.....	10
CHAPTER 2 - REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	12
ACADEMIC PREPARATION.....	12
RACE AND SCHOOLING.....	17
POVERTY.....	19
FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS.....	20
KNOWLEDGE AND COLLEGE PERSISTENCE.....	23
INSTITUTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	24
CHAPTER 3 - CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK.....	26
TINTO’S LONGITUDINAL MODEL OF INSTITUTIONAL DEPARTURE.....	26
RACE CONSCIOUSNESS.....	31
POLITICAL RACE.....	33

COLLEGE-GOING LIFE STORIES .....	34
CHAPTER 4 - METHODS.....	38
OVERVIEW.....	38
CONTEXT.....	39
APPROACH.....	39
RESEARCH PLAN.....	40
PURPOSE OF THE STUDY .....	42
PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE.....	42
CHAPTER 5 - STORIES OF STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS .....	45
INTRODUCTION TO THE PARTICIPANTS.....	45
POSITIVE SELF-CONCEPT.....	49
NEGATIVE SELF-CONCEPT.....	53
STUDENT MOTIVATION.....	56
HIGH SCHOOL.....	64
SPECIAL PROGRAMS .....	72
TRANSITION TO THE UNIVERSITY.....	78
CHAPTER 6 - STORIES ABOUT FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND COMMUNITY	84
FAMILIAL WEBS .....	84
FRIENDS.....	96
CULTURAL COMMUNITIES - EDUCACIÓN .....	102
CHAPTER 7 - STORIES OF RACE, POLITICS AND THE FUTURE .....	113

RACE .....	113
POLITICS .....	121
THE FUTURE .....	129
CHAPTER 8 - DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS .....	133
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS.....	133
RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHODOLOGY .....	137
DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS .....	138
Interpretation of the findings .....	138
Relationship of Current Study to Previous Research.....	140
Implications for Practice .....	145
Theoretical Considerations .....	148
Suggestions for Future Research .....	149
REFERENCES .....	152



## TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. Educational Experiences = College Persistence .....	37
2. Participants.....	48
3. Seventh Participant .....	48
4. Themes of First Generation Mexican-American College Stories.....	133

## CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

As immigrants from the Western Hemisphere crossed the United States – Mexico border either alone or with their families seeking work in low-paying American jobs, they became caught up in one of the central issues in Arizona state politics that spilled over into national political debates (Bacon, 2008; Guskin & Wilson, 2007). While immigrants come to the United States from all of Latin America (including Central and South America), people of Mexican origin comprised over half of all Latinos in the U. S. (Pew, 2006). Nearly 10% of all Mexican citizens have lived in the United States at some point in their lives (Terrazas, 2010). Perhaps as never before, politicians, employers, educators, and neighbors debated the political, economic, and societal effects of this influx of men, women, and children on U. S. institutions and culture. Key issues of concern included heritage, patriotism, language, border security, constitutional rights, and the educational rights of immigrants' children.

Estimates indicated that in 2004 there were 25.4 million authorized migrants to the United States from all countries and approximately 12 million additional migrants who lacked immigration authorization (Guskin & Wilson, 2007). Of the unauthorized migrants, over one half were from Mexico with an additional 28% from other Latin American countries (Guskin & Wilson, 2007; McConnell & Skeen, 2009; Pew, 2006).

In 2009, the median age of the U.S. Latino population was 25.8 years old as compared with 35.3 years old for the total population of United States residents (McConnell & Skeen, 2009). This was in part due to the high birth rate for Latino women, which was projected to be 36 million Mexican-American births in the

year 2031 (Frank, R. & Heuveloine, P., 2005). It was also projected that by the year 2025, one of every four students in the United States would be Latino compared with one of every five students in 2009 (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Considering these demographic factors and the projected growth of the Latino population, a question for educators is how should we address the needs of Latino students?

### Overview

In my study I identified and analyzed some of the factors resulting in college graduation for a purposive sample of Mexican-American first-in-family college graduates. The first chapter introduces the study. This chapter provides demographic information regarding the numbers of Mexican immigrant youth in the United States and describes the context for the research. I discuss the benefits of a college education, explore both the individual and societal advantages that a college degree provides, describe my personal perspective as a researcher, and introduce the research question. The second chapter provides a review of the literature pertaining to college-going trends. The third chapter describes the theoretical framework used to analyze the data, a look at Tinto's longitudinal model of college persistence, Critical Race Theory, and Guinier & Torres theory of political race. I discuss my research plan in the methods section.

The three chapters of findings are organized thematically into narratives and analyses of a similar nature. Chapter 5 includes narratives about my participants' experiences as students and in schools while Chapter 6 examines the influences of family, friends, and cultural community throughout their educational

journey. Chapter 7 includes my participants' experiences related to race and politics and ends with a look toward the future through their eyes. In Chapter 8, I conclude the study.

#### Demographics - Population of Young Latinos Increasing

The number of young Latinos in the American educational system has increased significantly in recent years. Between 1972 and 2007, the attendance of white public school students decreased as a percentage of the total public school students from 78% to 56% while the percentage of non-white students increased from 32% to 44% (Planty, 2009). This was largely due to an increase in the population of Latino students. The number of Latino students in public schools has nearly doubled between 1990 and 2006, accounting for over 60% of the total growth in student enrollment over that period (Fry & Gonzales, 2008).

During this same time, the number of children attending school from homes where the primary language was not English increased from 3.8 million to 10.8 million, accounting for 20% of public school students. Latino students comprised more than one fifth of the enrollment of public school students in the United States (Crosnoe, 2005; Fry, 2007; Gándara, 2009). In areas of greater population density, such as California, 47% of all school-aged students were Latino (Pew, 2007). In summary, the number of Latino students enrolled in public schools in the United States almost doubled between 1990 and 2010, accounting for over 60% of the total growth in public school enrollment for that period.

This trend is expected to continue. Projections indicate that between the years 2000 and 2010 the population of Latinos under the age of 24 will increase

by 25%, while the number of Whites in the same age group will decrease by 2.1%. During this period, the percentage of Latinos between the ages of 14 to 17 will increase by 34%, while the percentage of Blacks in this age group will grow by 7% (Fox, 2005). By the year 2050, Latino students will outnumber non-Latino students (Fry, 2008).

Considering the growing numbers of Latinos in the educational system, it is important to understand the academic achievement of Latinos from elementary school to college completion. The next section will focus on the college enrollment trends and college completion rates of Latinos in the United States.

#### Latino College Enrollment and Completion

Compared to white students, Latinos have both a higher school dropout rate and lower college degree attainment. The *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001 requires that states report statistics related to high school graduation. The United States Department of Education reported the 2007 federal dropout rates for Whites, Blacks, and Latinos as 5.3%, 8.4%, and 21.4%, respectively (NCES, 2009).

There are significant intra-group differences when considering Latinos. For example, foreign-born Latinos tend to have less formal education than Latinos born in the United States. In 1997, the Census Bureau reported that 47% of Latino immigrants aged 25 and older had a high school diploma compared with 84% of Latinos born in the United States (Lane, 2001). Moreover, the percentage of Latino immigrants with a high school diploma is likely overstated; many immigrants without documentation are not included in Census data. Another

intra-group distinction is that half (50%) of all Latino college undergraduates are of Mexican descent, while 16% are Puerto Rican, and 31% are from other Latin American countries (Excelencia, 2007).

These figures suggest that the American educational system may not suitably prepare all Latino students for college entrance and success. Excelencia (2007) documented that Latino students were substantially less well-prepared for college than students from other racial groups. While the majority of all Latino high school seniors expect to go to college, statistics from a range of studies have suggested that most Latino students are not academically prepared to reach this goal (Gándara, 2009). Despite the increase in Latinos attending public school elementary and secondary schools, the U.S. Department of Education Statistics reported that in 2005, 25% of college-age Latinos were enrolled in college compared to 42% of all college-age Whites, 32% of all college-age Blacks, and 60% of all college-age Asian/Pacific Islanders, (Excelencia, 2005). Although not all high school graduates are appropriate candidates for college, the racial/ethnic disparities in college going patterns suggest a problem.

Latino students are less likely to take college preparatory courses and tests. For example, in 2007, one-third of all Latino high school graduates had taken the minimum recommended coursework for college, compared with 36% of all white students, 40% of all black students, and 43% of Asian/ Pacific Islanders (Excelencia, 2007). In 2009 the average SAT scores for Latinos were lower than any other racial/ethnic group; combined SAT scores were 1623 for Asians/Pacific Islanders, 1581 for Whites, 1448 for American Indian/Alaskan, 1383 for Blacks and 1364 for Latinos (College Board, 2010; USA Today, 2010).

Given these statistics, it is not surprising that a relatively small number of Latinos who graduate from high school matriculate into higher education institutions. In 2000, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), reported that 20% of students enrolling in colleges and universities were Latino, while 40% were white non-Latino, 30% were black, and the remaining 10% were other non-white students (NCES, 2000).

Latino students' degree attainment followed a similar pattern (Arbona & Nora, 2007). Latinos that did attend college were more likely to enroll in two year rather than four year institutions. In the fall of 2000, 58% of Latinos in post-secondary education enrolled in community colleges compared to 42% black, and 36% white students (Arbona & Nora, 2007). Attending a two year institution or a community college does not always provide students with a pathway to a four year degree. Students who begin their post-secondary educations at a community college are significantly less likely to complete a bachelor's degree than those who begin at four year institutions of higher education (O'Connor, 2009). In 2009, 25% of the Latino community college students who earned at least ten credits in their first two years of community college went on to complete a bachelor's degree. In contrast, on average 66% of students across racial groups who began at the community college finished a four year degree (Carey, 2004; Tienda 2006). Importantly, white youth who began their post-secondary studies at the community college were two times more likely than their Latino peers to complete a bachelor's degree (Fry, 2007; Tinto, 1993).

Latinos enroll as part-time college students at a rate of 51% compared to white students at a rate of 38% and black students at a rate of 40% (Excelencia,

2007; Tinto 1993). Latino students are less likely than other undergraduates are to follow a direct and traditional matriculation through college, and instead tend to utilize part-time attendance, community college, and other combinations to pursue their post-secondary degrees (Gándara, 2009).

Historically, 12% of Latino students entering the public school system ultimately received a bachelor's degree compared with 30% of students from all racial groups (Excelencia, 2007; NCES, 2009; Tinto, 1993; Yosso, 2006). Given the rapidly increasing school-aged Latino population, the educational gap between Latinos and non-Latinos is likely to increase. This gap in educational attainment has ramifications for both individuals and for U.S. society as a whole. In the following section, I will discuss some of the benefits of a college education.

### Benefits of a Bachelor's Degree

While the majority of the benefits of a college education accrue to individuals (Jenkins, 2001), researchers have identified social benefits derived from a college-educated citizenry. One of the ways to evaluate the individual and social effects of a college education is to consider the costs and benefits associated with higher education. Even considering the costs associated with remediation and other programs targeted at improving college graduation rates, Levin (2008) argued that societies benefit from secondary and post-secondary education in these four areas: 1) additional tax revenues, 2) reductions in the costs associated with criminal justice, 3) reductions in the costs of public assistance, and 4) reductions in the costs of public health. For example, Levin (2008) found



that if the number of high school dropouts was reduced by 50%, the net present economic benefit to the United States would be \$45 billion annually for a total of \$1 trillion dollars over a twenty-year period. The savings and benefits would be even greater if these individuals participated in higher education.

Other researchers have documented how reduced crime rates, improved health and life expectancy, increased quality of civic life, improved ability to use technology, and better consumer decision making are associated with participation in higher education (Fairweather, 2006). In addition, college provides access to continued learning and social diversity as well as an increase in social status (Perna, 2003).

Alternate pathways for workforce preparation such as vocational training and/or apprenticeships may be needed to ensure that adults continue learning so as to prepare themselves for the needs of the workforce. In 1988 the William T. Grant Foundation published a report highlighting the 20 million non-college bound youth in the United States, calling them the forgotten half, warning that these young people lacked the skills and knowledge that would enable them to fully participate in American society. The net job growth in the United States over the past 30 years was generated by positions that required at least some post-secondary education. This trend is expected to continue. The Center on Education and Workforce at Georgetown projects that between 2011 and 2018, two-thirds of the new jobs created in the United States will require some post-secondary education (Georgetown, 2011). Yet, while 70% of high school graduates go to college within two years of graduating high school, only 40% of Americans obtain an associate's or bachelor's degree by their mid-twenties.

Some researchers have found that college attendance improves cognitive and personality development, intellectual growth and maturity, and in the long term provides access to more fulfilling career and work options and lower rates of unemployment (Fairweather, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004). Notably, the average college graduate with a bachelor's degree will make over \$1 million more over his or her lifetime than will his or her peers that do not graduate from college (Fairweather, 2006; Perna, 2003). Moreover, the earning power of college graduates tends to increase as they earn graduate degrees.

Adult learners who re-enrolled in college to complete a degree experienced satisfaction in the knowledge they gained and the expanded career options that a college degree provided (Clark, 1992). Allowing for individual differences in experience, programs, and universities, college graduates reported an increase in written and oral communication skills, research skills, critical thinking, and self-confidence because of having earned their college degrees (Jenkins, 2001).

Given the increasing numbers of Latinos entering the American educational system, and their lower college-going rates, the gap in college attendance and degree attainment between white and Latino students will continue to grow dramatically (Kiyama, 2010; Ruppert, 2003). It is in the nation's best interest to understand this education gap and find ways to increase the college graduation rate of this increasingly large and influential demographic group. As highlighted above, a large body of research suggests that K-12 students should aspire to a post-secondary education receiving equal access to the tools they need to achieve this important milestone. In practice, achieving this goal is not easy.

## Personal Perspective

I am an educator in a secondary school in the southwestern United States. Ninety-five percent of our students are Latino; 90% of our students are eligible for reduced and/or free lunch due to their families' low incomes. I spend considerable time and effort examining curricula and learning about new educational programs and best teaching practices. I meet with students, parents, teachers, and counselors on a daily basis. My professional goal is to increase student achievement through academic rigor, relevance, and relationships (Daggett, 2008) and to create a college-going culture for all students (Gándara, 2009).

Student survey data has shown that if our students persist through high school, the majority of them will be the first in their families to receive their high school diplomas. Some of the students will go on to college and earn their bachelor's degrees against great odds. What can educators learn from the students who beat the odds and graduate from not only high school, but college as well? Is it possible to understand their keys to success? Can the insights gained from examining their experiences be used to identify ways to help educators create an educational system that helps Latino students achieve academically? Answers to these questions may help shape the future of education in the United States.

## The Research Question

In this study I seek to understand and analyze the educational experiences of Mexican-American university graduates in order to learn how they successfully completed this educational milestone. Tinto's (1993) longitudinal model of

college persistence will be examined alongside critical race theory (CRT) and the work of Guinier and Torres (2002), which looked at race as political space. I will utilize descriptive narratives of the graduates' college-going experiences elicited through interviews. Through my analysis of the participants' experiences, I will better understand some of the factors that help Latino students succeed in college.

While the socio-economic factors that contribute to the academic difficulties of Mexican-Americans in the American school system have been studied extensively, factors that contribute to the academic successes of these students in higher education have been under analyzed (Alva, 1991; Lehmann, 2007; Reid, 2008). Some of these factors include the need for better health care, subsidized preschool programs, housing desegregation, immigration reform, drop-out prevention, college access programs, and better teacher preparation (Gándara, 2009). This study seeks to understand the stories of Latino students who have graduated from college. The research findings will add to the body of knowledge about Latino educational experiences and explain some of the factors that helped them earn their bachelor's degrees.

## CHAPTER 2 - REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A review of the literature provides insights into some of the factors that limit Latino access to college and post-secondary academic success. I will first review the barriers to college that Latino students experience in terms of academic preparation, race, and poverty. Then, I will examine the experiences of Latino youth who are the first in their families to attend college compared to students whose parents are college graduates. This discussion will serve as a transition to my theoretical framework described in Chapter 3.

### Academic Preparation

One of the barriers affecting student transition to college is academic preparation. When I, as a practitioner, asked high school freshmen or sophomores if they believed that they will go to college, most told me that they planned to go to college. A student survey administered at the urban high school where I served as an administrator in 2010 indicated that 77% of the students believed they were going to college. Weiss & Fine (2004) documented that when asked, most high school students said they wanted to go to college. Likewise, Gándara (1995) observed that while most Latinos had high aspirations for educational attainment and appeared to be hopeful about their college prospects, the majority were unable to overcome generations of low educational achievement. One of the barriers affecting their successful transition to college was their academic preparation.

Indicators of a preparation gap between Latinos and students from other racial and ethnic groups begin to appear at a young age. In 2005, 59% of all white

three year old children attended pre-school, while only 43% of Latino children had begun their formal education by the age of three (Gándara, 2009). By the end of kindergarten, an achievement gap between Whites and Latinos was measurable. In 2005, 30% of white children scored in the highest quartile for reading, compared with 15% of Latino children who scored in this percentile (Gándara, 2009; Schneider, 2006). While there is considerable variation in the quality of pre-school programs, early schooling does tend to create a cognitive advantage at an early age for children and indicates a level of family support for education (Belfield & Levin, 2007).

The achievement gap persists through middle and high school. For example, in 2005, at the end of eighth grade, 39% of all white children scored as proficient in reading while only 15% of all Latino children reached the same benchmark (Gándara, 2009). Many researchers have argued that much of the achievement gap for Latinos throughout the student's matriculation can be attributed to language acquisition issues, poverty, and low teacher expectations (Anyon, 2005; Arbona & Nora, 2007; Barajas & Ronnkfist, 2007; Belfield & Levin, 2007; Berliner, 2006; Berliner, 2009; Fry, 2007; Fry 2009; Gándara, 2009; Kozol, 2005; Tienda & Mitchell, 2006; Weis & Fine, 2004).

Students who do well in early schooling are also more likely to go on to college than those who do poorly. Not only do academically successful students have a positive academic self-concept, which they carry with them through school (Pascarella, et al.1987; Gándara, 2009), but they also possess key cognitive skills such as critical thinking, and academic behaviors such as study habits and organization (Conley, 2006), which are crucial to college persistence.

College bound students with high educational expectations generally begin to make course selections and seek the experiences they need to prepare for college as early as the eighth grade (Choy, 2001; Conley, 2005). This early preparation is necessary so students are academically prepared for the higher-level courses they will need in high school to compete for college entrance and be prepared for success in college. However, many students lack academic preparation in part because they do not fully understand the importance of taking rigorous classes from a young age.

College preparation is an area of focus for educators in middle and high schools. The importance of taking a college preparatory course load, which includes AP/honors courses at the high school level, is well known. Students are 46% more likely to enroll in a four-year college if they take a rigorous course of study in high school (Arbona & Nora, 2007). First-generation college students generally take fewer rigorous college preparatory courses (Eternizing, 1996).

Irrespective of the schools that students attend, students of color may not have access to the variety of rigorous high school courses that their white classmates enjoy. Students in Advanced Placement (AP) and Honors courses in all subject areas are more likely than their peers to report feeling challenged academically. However, Weiss & Fine (2004) reported that only 27% of Latino youth enrolled in AP and/or Honors classes said that their teachers and counselors talked to them about graduation and college. These same students felt their teachers were more likely to talk to white students about their post-secondary educational aspirations.

Given this lack of encouragement on the part of educational professionals, it is not surprising that in 2002, 68.6% of all white students took at least one AP test, while only 9.4% of all Latino students took an AP test (Schneider, 2006). By 2009, the number of Latino students taking a AP test had increased to 15.5% compared to 59.4% for Whites. However, the low passing rate of Latino students has become an issue of concern for educators. When the AP Spanish Language test results are removed from the AP passing rate, Latino students passed at least one AP test 13% of the time, while white students passed at least one AP test 68.8% of the time. Latino students who took AP tests reported feeling better prepared for college courses than those who did not (Reid, 2008); however, in terms of achievement as measured by AP tests, it appears that Latino students are falling behind their white classmates.

Student, parent, and educator expectations are important when determining the curriculum for high school students, including the decision to staff and teach AP classes in urban, high minority schools. Opportunities to take rigorous courses and a college preparatory curriculum would be advantageous to all students regardless of race or class.

Academic preparation is important for college readiness and success. When Latino students are academically prepared as evidenced by their scores on college entrance exams, their college-going levels increase. Latino students who take the SAT, advanced math and science courses that encourage critical thinking, and participate in project-based learning in high school increase their likelihood of attending college by 30% (Conley, 2005; Schnieder, 2006). Oakes and Guiton (1995) found that while course offerings varied considerably across schools, black



and Latino students tended to be less likely to enroll in college-preparatory classes than their white and Asian peers.

Parental and peer expectations are contributing factors in student achievement. Tenth-grade students whose parents expected them to go to college and earn their degree were 33% more likely to obtain a bachelor's degree than those whose parents did not have college-going expectations (Arbona, et al. 2007). If their tenth grade students' friends held the same expectations regarding going to college, their chances of completion were even greater.

The immediate peer group in the school made a difference in how well the students would do in school. There is considerable evidence that minority students who attend primarily minority schools do not do as well as those who attend predominately-white schools (Gándara, 1995).

Students who did not have a parent, mentor, or teacher who understood and could articulate the importance of taking college preparedness classes, (Reid, 2008), were less likely to sign up for rigorous classes such as chemistry and advanced math courses (Conley, 2008). A rigorous course load generally requires students to work harder and spend more time studying, requiring a commitment on the part of their support systems (often their families) to encourage their scholarly pursuits (Nora, 2007).

## Race and Schooling

Many Latinos attend schools segregated by race and poverty.

Frankenberg, Lee, and Orfield (2003) found that the student population in public schools had become steadily less white and that Latino and Black enrollment growth had outpaced white enrollment growth. Attendance issues, mobility, and higher dropout rates added to the challenges Latino students faced in education (Fry, 2005; NHCSL, 2007). Present day segregation mirrors segregation in U.S. schools in the late 1960s, before the federal government began to push desegregation (Feinberg, 2000; Kozol 2005; Orfield 2003). Describing these new patterns of segregation, Kozol (2005) observed that low-income Latino students are in the same position as black students have been for over 100 years.

Schools with a large number of minority students are more likely to serve students of poor families than are schools that serve a majority of white students (Orfield, 2006). Minority students are more likely to attend under-resourced schools, many with a large student population, and some with above average class size (Kozol, 2005; Schneider 2006). Some studies have found that Latino students who attend larger schools tend to have lower academic performance than do Latino students who attend smaller schools (Crosnoe, 2005). Smaller schools often provide important support for academic needs and more opportunities for students to establish high quality and affirming relationships. Attending a smaller school is less likely to be an option for non-white students (Antrop-Gonzalez, 2006).

One of the daunting issues facing school administrators is the need for more Latino and bi-lingual school personnel. In 2004, for example, only six percent of all public school teachers in the United States were Latino, while Latino students comprised 20% of the students. During this time frame, 83% of public school teachers were white (Gándara, 2009; Orfield, 2006). The shortage of Latino teachers is attributable in part to the relatively low percentage of Latino college graduates.

One study suggested there was an association between Latino student failure and the shortage of Latino teachers (Tomas Rivera Center, 1993). Teachers who are neither bi-lingual nor aware of the needs of Spanish-language dominant or culturally marginalized Mexican-American youth may find it difficult to build relationships with and engage these youth in their academic work (Gándara, 2009). It is possible that non-Latino teachers minimize the relevance of the students' lived experiences on their educational pursuits (Gonzalez, 2005; Schneider, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999). Conversely, Crosnoe (2005) found that Latino students in schools with a greater percentage of Latino teachers had higher achievement rates than did students attending schools with fewer Latino teachers. The role of the teacher in student achievement is crucial.

The academic preparation of minority and poor students is often less rigorous than white students, in part because educators in urban, high minority schools tend to be less prepared (Orfield, 2006). Teachers in high poverty, majority-minority schools tend to have less job satisfaction and move from school to school more frequently. In addition, school administrators from the

superintendent to school principals tend to have shorter tenure in low-income Latino schools than in more advantaged schools (Gándara, 2009).

In contrast, many teachers in urban schools who have different racial, socio-economic, and language backgrounds than their students indicated that their racial identities was something they thought about in their classrooms. These teachers often valued the experience they gained in schools with a high minority student body (Harding, 2006; Mitchie, 2005). Therefore, it may not only be the Latino teacher who can effectively teach Latino students, but any teacher who engages in considerate and deliberate reflective practice can have a positive impact on the learning community, regardless of its demographic.

### Poverty

The United States has the highest rate of childhood poverty of all the affluent nations in the world. Over 25% of U.S. schoolchildren are poor (Berliner, 2009). Of all the children in the U.S., first-generation children from poor Mexican immigrant families are the students who face the most difficulty in accessing college and are the most underachieving racial and ethnic group in the United States (Choy, 200; Crosnoe, 2005; Fry, 2002; O'Connor, 2009; Reid, 2008; Valdez, 2008). They are also among the poorest in the nation.

Latinos are twice as likely to live in poverty as non-Latinos (Chapa & de la Rosa, 2007). For example, in inflation-adjusted 2007 dollars, in a southwestern state, 52% of Latino families made less than \$35,000, while only 17% of non-Latino white families were in this category (Robles & Olivas, 2009). Likewise, the median full year income for Latino males in 2009 was \$29,342 compared with

\$50,703 for non-Latino white males. These data demonstrate that Latino families have less money to support their households than non-Latino white families. This disparity highlights the need to discuss poverty and socio-economic factors when examining the experiences of Latinos in the education system.

The relationship between poverty and student achievement has been well documented (Berliner, 2006). The socio-economic factors and the educational consequences associated with poverty help explain why Latino students are the least likely of the major racial groups to achieve a bachelor's degree.

Gándara (2009) has shown that there is a correlation between income and SAT test scores. Latino and white students from families with annual incomes of \$35,000 or less scored an average of 857 and 984 respectively on the 2004 SAT, while Latino and white students from families with incomes over \$70,000 scored an average of 1009 and 1076 respectively on the same test.

Low-income students tend to have less access to technology than income-advantaged youth. This has significant ramifications for college-going students who are often at a disadvantage when trying to communicate electronically with their teachers and peers. A lack of access to and experience with technology can result in difficulties for students who need to use computers to contact their teachers, access web pages, view on-line grades, correspond via email, and prepare for class.

### First-Generation College Students

Many factors come into play when students are the first in their families to attend college. Background characteristics such as socio-economic status, gender,

ethnicity, and high school achievement effect college outcomes, as does being the first person in one's family to go to college (Fry, 2002; Pascarella, et al.; 2004 Tinto, 1993). Minority public school students are more likely to be the first members of their families to attend college than are white public school students (Dennis et al., 2005). A review of the data reported across a range of studies begins to explain the many challenges faced by Latino students who are the first in their families to attend college.

College achievement levels in the freshman year begin to show disparities as first-in-family college students earn an average of 18 credits in the first year of college as compared with 25 credits earned for those students whose parents possess a bachelor's degree (Chen, 2005). This lower level of student achievement in the freshman year is associated with the risk of leaving college, which is at its highest in the first year (Ishitani, 2003; Tinto, 1997).

Children of college-educated parents are more likely to enroll in a four-year college or university than a community college. This is an important distinction as students who attend a four-year institution are twice as likely to earn their bachelor's degree as those whose post-secondary education begins at a two year community college (Choy, 2001; Lehman, 2007; Thomas & Quinn, 2007; Tinto, 1997).

First-in-family college students tend to be less selective about the colleges that they attend (Nora, 2004; Tinto, 1985; Tinto, 1993). Carnevale & Rose (2003) found that Latinos were under-represented in the top two tiers of Barron's Guide to Colleges in 1995. Highly selective colleges spend as much as four times more per student than do less selective colleges and the highly selective colleges

generally meet all demonstrated student financial needs. Graduation rates are also higher in highly selective schools as is access to post-graduate schools.

First-generation college students may feel guilty about going to college as they no longer share household responsibilities with their families (London 1989). In addition, their parents may not have experienced the process of helping their children make the emotional break from their role in the families and may have difficulty guiding their sons or daughters through this aspect of going to college. Students who avoid separating from their families and remain entrenched in their commitments at home, whether partially or completely, may be less likely to dedicate all of their attention on their university experience, a factor that Tinto found as critical to success in college (Tinto, 1993).

First-in-family college students tend to make value judgments about the significance of pursuing a college degree before, during, and after the decision to attend college. At the beginning of the decision process, financial considerations often influence the practical and emotional responses of first generation college students as their parents evaluate the impact of attending college rather than working to help support the family. Attending college often adds to families' financial obligations as they negotiate the expenses for tuition, books, and the living costs associated with earning a bachelor's degree.

During college, financial limitations may also inhibit the ability of first-in-family students to take advantage of a study abroad curriculum offered by their colleges or universities. Supplementing on-campus academics, a study abroad program provides experiential learning opportunities, and increases college persistence (Kuh, et al., 2005; Villalpanda, 2004).

Finally, some parents of first-generation-college students, who have not experienced some of the economic and personal rewards that a college degree provides, may not understand the relevance of degree attainment and how a college degree may influence job choice and earnings potential. For example, Valdes (1996) found that for many Mexican-American families, the dream of becoming a small business owner was the most revered professional pursuit and was a goal that did not necessarily require a college degree. Small business owners were able to improve living conditions for their families. Entrepreneurship was a career goal accessible to all working people regardless of educational attainment or social class, which minimized the importance of earning a college degree in the traditional Mexican value system of work.

#### Knowledge and College Persistence

Some of the differences between first-generation college students and students whose parents are college graduates become even more evident when exploring the students' knowledge about college (Pascarella et al.2004). Students whose parents, siblings and/or significant role models are college graduates may enjoy the benefits that come with understanding the complicated and sometimes intimidating process of preparing for college entry, which includes taking college preparatory coursework in high school, preparing college applications, and applying for financial aid (Choy, 2001). Parents, who through personal experience understand the importance of college preparation, often have the social and financial ability to provide additional support and augment their children's studies with tutoring, supplemental extra-curricular activities, test-preparation courses,



and international travel. In addition, college-educated parents tend to belong to social networks which provide opportunities to share information about colleges with other adults.

Likewise, parents who are college graduates may encourage their children to attend their own alma maters using their first-hand knowledge of the institution to guide their child through the college process. This first-hand knowledge of the institution leads to high levels of college persistence in students (London, 1989; Tinto, 1993). The student's close relationship with a parent, sibling, or significant role model who has graduated from college provides valuable knowledge that supports the student through their educational and emotional preparation for college. Students who are first-generation college entrants must seek this knowledge from other sources.

The ability to concentrate on one's studies without distractions is another factor in college persistence. Financial considerations often determine whether a student lives on campus or at home, works during college, and if so, how many hours the student works (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Kuh, et al. 2005; Tinto, 1993).

### Institutional Considerations

Once accepted into college, the student's experiences within the institution are significant, and affect student persistence within the institution and degree attainment (Brewer & Landars, 2005; Flores, 1992; Ortiz, 2004; Pascarella, et al., 2004; Terenzini, 1996; Thomas & Quinn, 2007; Tinto, 1993.) An important consideration in college persistence is having sense of belonging and feeling comfortable within the institution (Tinto, 1993). Tinto's model for institutional

departure identified the student's background, goals and commitments, institutional experiences and (academic and social) integration as the areas that affect persistence. The chapter that follows will look at this model in more detail.

There is much to do on an institutional level to help Latino immigrant college students find success in their educational aspirations (Flores, 1992). My goal is to learn more about the individual and institutional characteristics that can lead to success in college for first generation Latino students.

## CHAPTER 3 - CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework I utilize draws from Tinto's longitudinal model of institutional departure, the LatCrit critical race theory (CRT), Guinier and Torres' ideas surrounding racial group consciousness, and an understanding of student persistence through the collection of college-going life stories (Bourdieu, 1986; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Kiyama, 2010).

### Tinto's Longitudinal Model of Institutional Departure

One of the classic theories used to analyze college persistence over time has been Tinto's longitudinal model of institutional departure (1993). Tinto's model explained and predicted college completion by examining the background characteristics of the student and the characteristics of the institution. In Tinto's model, both the student's background prior to her/his experience in college and the institutional considerations of the college and/or university influenced college completion. Tinto argued that what happened in college was a critical factor in whether or not the student persisted.

Tinto created a theory of college departure that incorporated two major theories. The first of these was the work of Emile Durkheim (1951), a prominent sociologist, who found that as individuals integrated into a social situation, they were less likely to leave the situation voluntarily. The foundation of the theory was a study in which Durkheim showed that married European Catholics in small towns were less likely to commit suicide than unmarried urban Protestant Europeans (Tierney, 1992). Durkheim found that the importance of individual social and intellectual integration and community membership were essential

elements of social existence (Tinto, 1993). Tinto used this theory to explain the importance of integration into the educational institution as a critical factor in college persistence; the more integrated a student was in university life, the less likely the student was to voluntarily withdraw from the institution prior to graduation and the more likely they were to persist and graduate.

The second theory that informed Tinto's model was the work of anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep (1960), who studied rites of passage in tribal societies. Van Gennep believed that rites of passage, or the rituals that created a bridge from one developmental stage to another, were crucial social and cultural constructs. Tinto's model suggested his belief that the college institution created a context for the developmental stages through which the individual must pass toward maturation and matriculation. Tinto specifically believed that separating from home to college, and incorporating into the culture of the institution were rites of passages that created a bridge from youth to adulthood.

Tinto believed that the ability to integrate oneself into the institution was more important than individual characteristics in terms of college persistence. However, he realized that full integration into the social setting of the college was impractical due to individual factors such as interests, abilities, and courses of study. Thus, Tinto suggested that individual membership into the college rather than full integration was a more realistic goal. He found that those institutions of higher learning which provided high levels of social and academic integration and membership also had high levels of student retention (Ashar & Skenes, 1993; Tierney, 1992). It was clear to Tinto that involvement in college was a critical factor in college persistence and that academic and social involvement with

faculty and other students was essential to academic success (Tinto, 1998). In terms of persistence, academic integration was more important than social integration.

Many educational researchers have used Tinto's model to understand and assess student persistence in college. For example, Ortiz (2004), suggested that understanding the importance of the Latino family and building a supportive web of faculty, staff, and peers while the student was in college were two ways in which the Tinto model could be used and enhanced in order to positively impact Latino college persistence. In addition, Ortiz called for the consideration of race when understanding the background of Latino students.

Brower (1992) utilized Tinto's model in an analysis of college integration and involvement and confirmed the association between conformity and positive self-image on college persistence. Brower's research confirmed Tinto's finding that freshman students who structured their involvement in the first year of college by prioritizing academic achievement over social integration were most successful in college. However, Ashar's (1993) study of non-traditional students only partially supported Tinto's model. This study of non-traditional older students suggested that other factors could affect persistence, especially with regard to non-traditional, residential and non-residential older students.

Tierney (1992) evaluated Tinto's model and found that while the model provided a good start toward a helpful framework, it did not consider the variety of contexts that existed for underrepresented students and therefore lacked the emancipatory effect needed by educational models in academia. In a subsequent analysis, Tierney (2000) critiqued Tinto's model stating that Van Gennep's theory

was insufficient for understanding the cross-cultural challenges that under-represented students encountered when attending college, and that equating college-going with tribal rites of passage was an inappropriate comparison.

Other educational researchers have examined college-going characteristics through variations on Tinto's model. Alva (1991) reviewed both background characteristics and institutional considerations for low-income Mexican-American students who were the first in their families to achieve academic success. This study found that both success in school and having a family who was supportive of the students' educational goals helped to mitigate other risk factors and led to academic success. The institutional characteristics that Alva's study uncovered as being essential to Latino student success were relational. Students reported that when professors, counselors, and administrators demonstrated an interest in them, their persistence increased. Fairness and equity in the administration of discipline were also key institutional factors in supporting successful Latino students. In summary, Alva found that fairness, relationships with educators, motivation, and the support provided to Latino students led to positive educational outcomes.

Pascarella et al. (2004), created a model that explained the effect of the institution on the students' educational aspirations. As with Tinto's model, Pascarella considered students' background experiences and familial educational attainment, secondary educational attainment, and institutional experiences in terms of first-generation college entrants. Additionally, Pascarella found that background characteristics such as first-in-family college-going, parental educational levels and income, educational aspirations, race, gender, and other factors were important in college persistence. Institutional considerations such as

college selection, whether or not to live on campus, extra-curricular involvement, socialization with peers, and work responsibilities were also important. In addition, Pascarella explored the importance of family knowledge about college and its effects on college selection and persistence.

Terenzini (1996) proposed a theoretical model similar to Tinto's, however, like Pascarella, Terenzini focused specifically on the experiences of first-in-family college students. This research, like the Tinto model, examined the family background, student pre-college traits, and the institutional context of the student, however, Terenzini's model also included such pre-college characteristics as race and ethnicity, family income, and academic preparation. This model provided a structure for examining first-in-family student persistence and degree attainment.

Subsequently, Tinto (2006) has written that while the importance of student involvement in college has not changed over time, there is a need to add more layers of complexity into the theory of college persistence by examining the effect of culture, society, and socio-economic impacts on the institution. More recently, Tinto has sought to increase the involvement and engagement of underrepresented students in college. He advocates for institutions to create structures within the learning community that connect students to faculty and other support services on campus, thus providing access to optimum involvement for all students, (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).

Tinto's model did not specifically consider the differences between minority and non-minority students in college and did not directly consider the effect of race in college persistence. The individual characteristics discussed in his model were 1) pre-entry attributes such as family background, prior schooling,

and skills and abilities, 2) goal setting, 3) institutional experiences, and 4) integration into the institution (Tinto, 1993). Tinto's model provides a structure for considering college persistence. However, Tinto's model requires that the students assimilate into the institution in order to be successful. It is up to the student to fit in. In the section that follows, I will discuss the race conscious theories of critical race theory (CRT) and Guinier and Torres (2002) and explain how I will use them as a lens through which to view the institution of college more critically to explore whether it is possible that the institution itself is problematic for Latino students.

### Race Consciousness

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a race-conscious framework (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001) used to explore and examine educational and social outcomes. Critical race theory highlights the role of racial inequality in the social structure, practices, and discourses in society and suggests that racial consciousness is normal in the social experience of people of color (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Yosso, 2006).

There are two core assumptions in CRT. The first of these acknowledges white privilege and its effect on the history of race relations in the United States. The second core assumption is that race fundamentally shapes the social, economic, and political systems of American society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Guinier & Torres, 2003; Powers, 2007; Yosso, 2006).

According to critical race theorists, color-blindness, the idea that race does not matter in contemporary American society, is problematic. Moreover, critical



race theorists argue that color-blindness perpetuates the systematic denial of racial subordination and the reproduction of social inequity, repression, and oppression, inhibiting racialized minorities from struggling against their marginalized status (Guinier & Torres, 2003). In other words, to deny white privilege is to allow Whites to continue to dominate, obscuring the existence of racial privilege and its link to power, resources, and educational inequity within society (Barajas & Ronkvist, 2007).

There are three commonly held tenants of CRT. The first is that racism is a common and ordinary experience that most people of color in this country experience and find difficult to address. The second tenant is interest convergence. This occurs when Whites promote racial equity to serve their own interests. The third tenant is that race is viewed as a social construction, without any genetic or biological basis (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001).

In this study I will focus on subset of CRT, LatCrit, which focuses on the specific issues that Latinos confront such as race, immigration status, sexuality, culture, language, accent, phenotype, and surname (Solordano & Bernal, 2001; Yosso, 2006). LatCrit race theory examines pan-American Latino experiences as well as the centrality of race and racism within education.

As described in previous chapters, Latinos are the largest and fastest growing racial or ethnic group in the United States (Gándara, 1994). Latinos are also the least educated major population group in the United States (Chapa, 1991; Villalpanda, 2004). LatCrit race theory is a framework that many educational researchers use to highlight patterns of racial discrimination against Latino students in order to analyze and address discrimination in educational institutions.

LatCrit race theory acknowledges the existence of race and racism in Pan-American social interaction. Therefore, in LatCrit race theory, one must discuss race when exploring the experiences of Latino students in educational systems.

A LatCrit lens provides visibility to the multi-dimensional aspects of Latino life and reveals the intersections of race, class, and other forms of oppression that may be important in understanding college persistence. The incorporation of LatCrit into Tinto's model is crucial to understanding first generation Mexican-American college success (Solarzono & Bernal, 2001; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999), adding an essential element of meaning to the model as it pertains to underrepresented students.

In addition, LatCrit race theory is well suited to qualitative research into the college-going success of Latinos as this theory intersects with other forms of marginalization. LatCrit is committed to social justice, and highlights the importance of participants' experiential knowledge. Uncovering the college life experiences of Latino students, (Solarzono & Bernal, 2001; Yosso, 2003) provides a focus on Latino students that Tinto's research lacks.

### Political Race

Guinier and Torres (2002) defined political race as an alternative to color blindness utilizing the metaphor of the miner's canary. Historically, miners brought a canary with them into underground mines; the small birds would signal their distress when the air became toxic. Hearing the sounds of distress, the miners were forewarned of the bad atmosphere in the mine before they could actually sense it on their own.

Like the miners' canary, Guinier and Torres posited that the distress realized in racialized Black and Latino communities provided an early warning sign of social problems if the larger community was willing to hear and respond to the sounds of distress. Silence on the subject of race served to suggest that the social problems of Blacks and Latinos (symbolized by the canary), was of their own making rather than due to toxicity in society (symbolized by the mine).

One example of political race in action in education was the case of the Texas Ten Percent Plan which followed the 1996 Hopwood decision leading the Texas legislature to pass a race-neutral school admissions policy in 1997. This was a pragmatic race-conscious strategy based on coalition-building that increased access to the university for both poor Whites and students of color (Powers, 2007). The kind of coalition-building across race, class and other types of differences that Guinier and Torres advocate is made possible through storytelling. Stories, and especially counterstories, become safe spaces for the shared experiences and challenges of marginalized people to be revealed; the stories are an important tool for researchers who believe that racial group consciousness increases resiliency and political effectiveness among people of color and promotes justice for all people. Therefore, this study utilized the qualitative method of narrative to elicit the college life stories of Latino first-in-family college graduates.

### College-Going Life Stories

When used in qualitative research by critical race theorists, stories, such as college-going life stories can help bridge the research gap about racially different

life experiences. The stories of people of color often challenge the stories told by the white majority, which tend to legitimize the white and middle class worldview and perpetuate inequities in the educational system (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). These are life stories that reveal the experiences of Latino families and communities that are overshadowed by the stories of the majority (Chapman, 2007). By empowering silenced people, counterstories challenge the self-blame that may result from racism (Villenas & Deyhle, 1999) and give voice to stories of shared memory and history. These stories can also create empathy for lesser-known perspectives about race and resistance from underrepresented students on the educational margins.

Storytelling scholarship within critical race theory is accepted and meritorious (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999; Yosso, 2006). Cammarota and Romero (2006) point out that Latino students are often silenced by standardized tests, rote learning, and a curriculum that does not reflect their lived experiences. Thus, a theoretical framework that uses college life storytelling to create a bridge between Tinto's model and LatCrit race theory may also be beneficial as an approach that is authentically caring and is aimed at promoting social justice in educational research. In addition, the narratives of successful first-in-family college graduates could provide powerful motivation for Latino students to persevere as resisters of racism, oppression and an educational system that too often perpetuates the academic failure of Latino students (Camarrota, 2004). This framework will provide the educational researcher with tools that can be used to challenge stereotypes about students of color and highlight how

underrepresented students negotiate their schools and learning communities (Chapman, 2007).

This is an appropriate and timely approach for an educational research project of this nature. Ortiz (2004) posits that institutions and educators must come to terms with the effect of racism on students. This includes understanding how we engage race in our educational institutions. Storytelling is one way researchers can document subtle verbal and non-verbal insults and micro-aggression directed at people of color in schools (Yosso, 2005). Critical race theory challenges educators to consider the multiple layers of racism and bias experienced by Latino students, to believe students when they report racism and/or prejudice on campus, and to proactively address racist behavior within the learning community (Ortiz, 2004; Yosso, 2005).

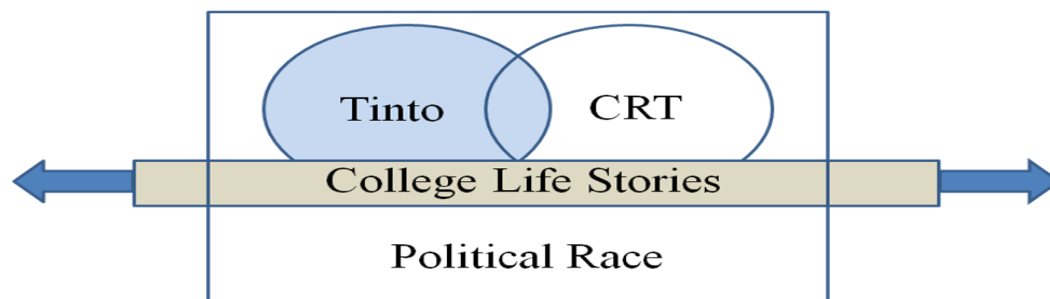
As explained in the Methods section that follows, I used qualitative research to gather the college life stories of first-generation Mexican-American college graduates. Tinto's model, CRT and political race were the lenses through which I interpreted the stories of my participants. As I analyzed these stories, I looked for evidence of both majoritarian stories and counterstories in order to create a clear portrait of my participants' college going experiences.

While there is a tension in a theoretical framework that includes Tinto's model and LatCat CRT, the work of Guinier and Torres (Political Race) creates a pragmatic bridge between the two theories and a foundation upon which Latino first-in-family college persistence can be examined. This study, therefore, will enhance Tinto's widely accepted theory of college persistence by including the

effect of race in his model as understood through the college life stories of Latino immigrant first generation college graduates.

Tinto's model focuses on integration, how students fit in, or assimilate into an institution. While Tinto's model suggests that we must understand features of the institutional context in order to predict student outcomes, CRT, LatCrit, and the ideas of Guinier and Torres regarding political race allow us to take a more critical view of those institutions, unpacking the role that institutional racism and discrimination plays in students' daily experiences at the university, and ultimately, their persistence therein. I use CRT and counter storytelling alongside Tinto's model of college persistence to help me better understand the fundamental nature of race for understanding the experiences of first-in-family college graduates.

This approach enhanced Tinto's model with a race-conscious theoretical orientation; even Tinto conceded that his model paid insufficient attention to race. As I analyzed the participants' stories, I focused on the aspects of race that were relevant to their college completion.



### 1. Educational Experiences = College Persistence

This study was designed to examine the experiences of Latino students who persisted through college and were awarded their bachelor's degrees. The

framework for the research study is called *Educational Experience = College Persistence*. This study allowed me to learn from the college-life stories of under-represented students who persevered through the educational system, and through this research method, inform praxis (Yosso, 2005).

In a 1959 speech, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. explained that the experiences of racial exclusion experienced by Blacks served as a reminder of the need to enlarge democracy to include all people. Surely the examination of the experiences of Latinos in education should serve to expand educational opportunities for all people, similarly increasing access to lifelong learning.

In this chapter, I have reviewed several important educational theories of college persistence and I have introduced the conceptual framework for this study. My research will include a collection of college-life stories and will be examined using Tinto's theoretical model of institutional departure viewed through a race conscious lens. In the chapter that follows, I will discuss my methodology.

## CHAPTER 4 - METHODS

### Overview

When evaluating the effectiveness of the American education system, it is essential that educators resist one size fits all solutions that often do not address the needs of individual students. Tyack (1974), for example, cautioned that any attempt to categorize the experience of a group tended to blur differences between individuals and subsets of the group. This is a significant reminder against the pitfalls of generalizing the experiences of any apparently homogenous group. I chose the research method of narrative inquiry as the basis of this study for this

reason. With this ethnographic form of inquiry, the stories of the individual participants were collected and analyzed and the individual stories of each participant were shared thematically (Polkinghorne, 1995). The rich, detailed descriptions of the participants' stories were used to create meaning out of the educational experiences of these college graduates.

### Context

As discussed in the previous chapters, majoritarian stories, that is, the stories of the middle and upper class majority are well-represented in education research. So embedded are these stories in majoritarian culture that they become invisible, seemingly the very fabric of the social experience. Critical race counter storytelling is the telling of the stories of racially and socially marginalized people.

In this study, educational life histories were collected from seven first-generation Latino college graduates using the qualitative research methodology of narrative inquiry. This approach is characterized by its search for dissonant views and marginalized voices, listening as story becomes a way of knowing, through the telling of stories (Hackman, 2002; Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995).

### Approach

The narrative inquiry approach to interviewing allowed for the collection of the educational life histories of the participants, which were the basis of the research. Suspending my a priori notions as to whether these would be



majoritarian stories or counterstories, the research was open to either or both. With one exception, only recent graduates of the same university in the southwestern United States were included in the sample. I defined “recent graduates” as students who have graduated from the university within the last five years to ensure that their experiences of college-going would be similar.

Participants were Mexican-Americans who had been in the United States since they were young and who were the first in their immediate families to graduate from a four-year college. Specifically, the participants selected had all begun their education in the United States educational system in pre-school or kindergarten. All of the participants were the first in their immediate family to graduate from college. I selected three women and four men to ensure that the experiences of both genders would be well-represented in the analysis.

Individual participants were identified through professionals in the field of education in the city in which the university was situated. Additionally I contacted some of the university’s academic organizations for Mexican-American students to solicit participants for the study and make introductory contacts on my behalf. Upon obtaining advised consent from the participants, the list of seven participants was finalized.

The master list of participants was maintained in Dr. Jeanne Powers’ office at Arizona State University. The list was coded with pseudonyms to maintain the confidentiality of all participants and any information that could reveal identities of the participants were maintained with the master list.

## Research Plan

Digital recorder in hand, I conducted two lengthy interviews with each participant. I asked open-ended questions which resulted in long narratives, stories that I transcribed verbatim. I provided the typed transcripts to the participants who validated the authenticity of the transcripts to ensure fidelity in the research (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995). I was intentional about the interviews being open-ended because my goal was to elicit stories rather than simply questions with answers. Each interview session began with a grand tour question such as, "Tell me about your family." Each participant was a wonderful storyteller and many of their stories were included in their own words and paraphrased in Chapter 5, 6 and 7 which comprise the findings. In addition, I took hand-written notes during each interview. My reflections on the interview sessions were maintained in my field notes.

I analyzed the transcriptions and field notes and identified themes (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). My analysis was a blend of emic and etic; inductive, not deductive, although my analysis was informed by the conceptual issues reviewed in Chapter 3. I maintained an open attitude as themes emerged (Seidman, 2006) through careful review of the transcriptions, and listening to the digitally recorded interviews.

I coded the data by printing hard copies of the transcribed interviews and highlighting the text with different colored markers. I also created note cards that corresponded with the themes I had identified, while keeping the ideas discussed in the conceptual framework in the background. This was both a categorical and holistic analysis (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) utilizing thick descriptions from the interviews, field notes, and observations.

## Purpose of the Study

The emancipatory goal of the study was to provide Mexican-American college graduates with an opportunity to tell their stories to educators and to provide insights into the particular concerns and backgrounds of underrepresented students. When individual life experiences are examined in depth, personal stories and realities are better understood by outsiders and there is greater hope for intercultural understanding and empathy (Fine, 2006; McCarty, 2002; Schultz, 2006). Additionally, the participants benefitted from reflecting upon their educational experiences and in every case enjoyed the opportunity to add their stories to the growing narrative about Mexican-American educational success.

## Personal Perspective

I have reflected upon my role as researcher and as a white woman in a study focused on Latino students. Although I did not share a common cultural background with the participants, my experiences as a bi-lingual educator serving urban high schools with high populations of Latinos gave us a common frame of reference when discussing the participants' educational experiences. In addition, my extensive travel in Latin America, including a six month research project in Costa Rica as an undergraduate cultural anthropology student, and my familiarity with the Spanish language helped me bridge the culture gap, and created opportunities for common understanding between my participants and me.

I have been married to an African-American man for over a quarter century and we have raised our bi-racial children together. In fact, my interest in

the topic of first-in-family college graduates began years ago upon learning of my husband's life history, which included being a first generation college graduate during the Civil Rights era in the United States (circa 1964), a distinction he shares with twelve brothers and sisters. My admiration for my husband's accomplishments and those of his family members who beat the odds and achieved academic success certainly piqued my interest in this subject and my desire to help create a constructive framework that helps educators specifically and society in general, replicate such success stories.

That said, I realize that I enjoy privileges and benefits from advantages in life that I have not earned because I am white (Guinier & Torres, 2003; Pappas, 1995). In terms of this research project, I struggled with the challenge of identity politics; writing for others with whom I have little in common, and found some resolution in the writings of Michie (2005) who observed:

Being a member of a privileged group does indeed make it problematic for someone such as me to write about those who are members of oppressed groups. But at the same time, I agree with Micaela di Leonardo (1997) who laments that, taken too far, identity politics "assumes a Tower of Babel in which groups can never communicate or act beyond their primary 'identities' ... This is not how human beings live or ever have lived" (P. 67) (P.11).

In this, as in everything I do, I remained centered upon one goal -- to treat my participants with the same respect that I would want a researcher to treat my own daughters. The experiences that I have gained as a white mother and wife of

“others” helped me understand, document, and analyze the life stories of these remarkable college graduates with fidelity and authenticity.

## CHAPTER 5 - STORIES OF STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS

### Introduction to the Participants

While all the participants' stories ultimately included academic achievement and the successful attainment of their Bachelor's degree, there were bumps and detours along the way. All participants attended large, mostly Latino, urban public high schools of about 2,000 students. The majority of students that attended these high schools were low socio-economic status (SES) students. The high schools the participants attended were similar to the urban high school in which I worked as an administrator, so I included my impressions or experiences as an educator in my discussion of the findings when these ideas supplemented the participants' comments.

Seven college graduates participated in the study. Some had positive elementary school and high school experiences while others did not. What follows is a brief overview of the educational life histories of each participant. I then include the details of their stories and voices in the thematic sections and chapters that follow the introduction.

The first participant was Vanessa. Vanessa's grandmother taught her to read and write in Spanish. She attended pre-school and because of this early schooling, she tested out of first grade. Vanessa was selected to be in a special program in seventh grade called the Latino Mother Daughter Program (LMDP) which was a partnership between the university and the public school district. The purpose of the program was to teach students and their mothers about college. Vanessa took Honors and AP classes in high school, and graduated with a 4.0 grade point average (GPA). While Vanessa went to the university and graduated

in five years with a degree in Psychology, she wished that she had been given more information about out of state colleges when she was in high school because she would have considered that option. At the time of the study, Vanessa was working full time and contemplating attending graduate school.

Carlos' story was similar to Vanessa's. His memories of school included many forms of academic recognition and awards. For example, he told me he was "always good in math." In third grade, Carlos was the "multiplication champion;" in middle school he was recognized for his skills in mathematics, and in high school he won the school physics prize. After graduation, Carlos went straight into the university and graduated in four years with a degree in engineering. He was working as an engineer at the time of the study.

According to Natalia, school was a big priority in her family. Natalia immigrated to the United States when she was three years old and was the only participant who was not born in the U.S. While she initially had trouble with the English language, school was never very hard for her. She remembered coming home every day and doing homework in a very supportive family environment. Natalia was still in contact with her fourth and fifth grade teachers and said she had "an amazing high school counselor." Despite lacking residency documentation, Natalia went straight from high school to the university and graduated in four years. She graduated with a degree in Family and Human Development.

Like Natalia, Monica described school as a priority in her family and she recalled having been very good at math. She graduated fifth in her senior class and went straight to the university, graduating in four years with a degree in

Marketing. At the time of study, Monica was working at a non-profit organization.

In contrast to the experiences of the participants described above, Oscar graduated from high school with a 1.7 grade point average. Two years after high school, he dated a girl who was attending college who showed him how to apply. When Oscar entered college, he had to take remedial classes in math and English in order to improve his skills. He graduated with a degree in History and was a high school social studies teacher at the time of the study.

Like Oscar, Juan was also a participant whose educational life history revealed an indirect path through college. After high school graduation, he made three unsuccessful tries at attending community college. While working the night shift full time at a grocery store warehouse, he graduated from the university with a degree in Criminal Justice.

The seventh participant provided insights that were useful to the study even though he did not exactly fit the selection criteria. Josue had received his undergraduate degree from a different university. After teaching high school English for four years, he went to graduate school at TSU. Since Josue was an outlier in terms of criteria, I included his stories only when they were relevant.

The chart which follows provides a summary of the seven participants. From this chart, it is possible to see at a glance the variety of activities, majors, role models and career goals of the study participants.



Participant	Native country	High School Clubs / Activities	College Clubs/ Activities	TSU Graduation Date	Major	Role Model	Career Goal
Carlos	US	Soccer	Internship	2009	Engineering	Father (smart, math tutor, valued education)	Engineer
Monica	US	Music Volleyball Cheerleader	TSU Summer Bridge Latino Business Students Association (LBSA)	2006	Business	Aunts (graduated from college in Mexico – had professional careers)	Mentoring Program
Vanessa	US	Latino Mother Daughter Program (LMDP) National Honor Society (NHS)	Sorority LMDP sisters TSU Summer Bridge	2010	Psychology	Author – (Gloria Anzaldua Chicana author who wrote about living between worlds)	Medicine
Oscar	US	Basketball Student Council Unitown	Resident Advisor	2006	History	Teacher (Believed in him – talked about college)	Teacher
Juan	US	Basketball	None – worked full time	2009	Criminal Justice	Uncle (graduated from college in Mexico – professional career)	Detective
Natalia	MX	Latino Mother Daughter Program (LMDP)	TSU Summer Bridge LMDP sisters	2010	Family and Human development	Father (worked hard to support family)	Nursing

## 2. Participants

Participant	Native country	High School Clubs / Activities	College Clubs/ Activities	TSU Graduation Date	Major	Role Model	Career Goal
Josue	US	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	2011 doctoral candidate	Curriculum and Instruction	Father – (attentive - steady)	College Professor

## 3. Seventh Participant

The stories flowed freely during the interviews. My open-ended questions elicited long, narratives from my participants, which were sometimes laced with

emotion. In writing the findings section, I balanced paraphrasing and summarizing with the use of the interview excerpts and verbatim transcriptions to ensure I could authentically share the stories and counterstories my participants had generously shared with me. In some instances I juxtaposed different sections of transcript, omitting questions and intervening comments that were less relevant to the discussion at hand. Longer breaks in the transcripts are indicated in the text by this symbol [...].

When I listened to the educational life histories of the participants I heard their recollections of positive and negative messages that they received from school regarding their academic talents that affected their intellectual self-concepts as students. I also heard stories of individual motivation and determination. These factors were profoundly important to the achievement of these first-in-family college graduates. This chapter will look at the participants' educational life history through their experiences as students and in school.

The remainder of this chapter explores the participants' stories of individual intellectual self-concept (both positive and negative), and motivation. Chapter 7 shares the participants' insights into friends, family, and community related to their educational life histories, and Chapter 8 discusses matters of race, politics, and a view of the future for Latino higher education through the eyes of the participants.

### Positive Self-Concept

The participants' school experiences influenced their intellectual self-concepts both positively and negatively. In this subsection, I identify several

examples of positive self-concepts that were formed based on the messages the participants received from their formal schooling.

Carlos was a participant with a strong positive academic self-concept. He knew he was smart, especially in math. This idea had been repeated to him by his father and teachers throughout his life. In the interview excerpt that follows, Carlos related the stories of academic prizes that he won from an early age that reinforced his belief that he was very good at math. I found it interesting that Carlos could recall so many of his test scores and grades. It was as if these benchmarks of ability along his educational journey inspired and sustained him through the successful completion of his engineering degree and into his engineering career.

Every summer, my dad would give me multiplication and algebra problems to solve. Then in grade three, we had these little frogs along the top of the wall [of the classroom], and they were numbered 1 through 12. Each frog was a different times table. There was a weekly test for about three months where the whole class had a minute to do as many times tables as they could. For example, when I first started, it was 1 times 1 and then you would go on to the next one. I was the only one who made it past the 12 frogs. I was the champion of multiplication. When I reached eighth grade, after about two months, the teacher said, "I feel that you are very good at math so now you can go at your own pace. Do your homework, check in with

me and go at your own pace.” So, I kind of just read, when I wanted to and even though I didn’t do much, the next year I was good at math. Like right away I was in math 104 and math 5-6, pre-calculus, then I passed the calculus Advanced Placement test which got me four credits at TSU; I got a four on that test...When I was a senior in high school, there were two classes and of the two classes, there was one student from each class selected for the [school] physics prize. I was awarded the [prize of] physics student of the year for my class because all my test scores were within the same range. There was very little variability in my scores. I had an A-, sometimes an A, sometimes a B+ or a B. I never got a C. I always showed the teacher what I could do when we were going over formulas and so he recommended me for the prize due to my ability in physics. When it came to the honors and awards night, I was awarded the prize. I still have the award at home.

[...]

One of my first tests put me moving in the direction of my engineering career, because the teacher said “you should become an engineer because you are good in math and calculus, you are one of my best physics students and you should try it.” And so I went on the TSU website, and that was the college I was interested in. It was a challenge.

There were a lot of nights when I had physics homework when I just wanted to quit but then I would keep on going and going and reading, reading, reading, reading, until I would get the answer and then, I would think if I could just concentrate more, that nothing was impossible; hard, but not impossible. [...]

At the University I don't think I ever got B's in a math class. In Calculus 4, I got an A+, in Calculus 3, I think I got an A- or a B+, one of the two, and in Algebra I got an A. In differential equations, I got an A+, I think that was it. All of [my classes] had math, but these were the ones that were just math. Physics is not hard, once you know the formulas, it's thinking of the formulas that make it hard. (Carlos)

Vanessa was an "A" student in high school and achieved her Bachelor's degree in 2010, majoring in Psychology. The following excerpt demonstrated the importance of a family member in her education as she related that her grandmother taught her to read and count in Spanish. She also attended pre-school, which is a very important factor in student achievement (Gándara, 2002). Due to these factors, Vanessa was ahead of her peers in her learning and tested out of first grade. Vanessa graduated from high school at 17 years old – the age at which she began her university studies.

I lived with my grandma ... I think she taught me how to read and write numbers in Spanish. When I went to school I

tested out of first grade and went into second grade. We moved here from California when I was seven. We moved to a house and lived there 15 years. I don't remember a lot of kindergarten or second grade, but I lived right next door to my pre-school and I could walk there. I always liked school and I was always very smart and was always in advanced classes and honors classes. (Vanessa)

I found it noteworthy that Vanessa stated, "I was always very smart." Her self-concept of being a "smart" student began with testing out of first grade and was further enhanced by her successful completion of honors and advanced placement classes in high school and a college degree.

Monica graduated fifth in her high school senior class of over 300 students having earned A's and B's in her honors and Advanced Placement (AP) classes. She and a handful of students in the honors and AP classes would study together at the State University library on weekends, and reported feeling this made them feel "cool." Vanessa also took honors and AP classes, which helped her earn a 4.0 grade point average. These examples of grades, scores, and advanced courses were prominent in the memories of several participants.

### Negative Self-Concept

In middle and high school, honors classes are intended to be more rigorous and college oriented than are regular classes. At the schools where I have worked, when a student is recommended or nominated for honors classes it is generally

considered an honor. Students who take honors classes in high school receive a weighted grade for these courses, which often moves them up in their schools' grade point average rankings and may increase their opportunities for college admissions and scholarships. Josue, unlike several students in this study, had a memory of having been an average student in high school. Josue recalled an important discussion about taking advanced courses in the sixth grade with an unfortunate and inexplicable outcome.

We had to pre-register at the end of sixth grade, so we met individually with the counselor from the middle school in the janitor's closet. That was the only office space that they had at that time. So we sat there and the counselor told me that I had been nominated to take honors English, and I said "OK." I don't know what happened but I never ended up taking that class. I ended up taking regular classes the entire time through high school. I don't remember if I didn't tell them or if my parents did. I remember I was always seen as a good kid. I never got into any trouble. My grades may not have been the best but I never got into trouble so I know that my parents got good remarks about me. I don't think that anybody ever saw me as standing out in any sort of way, I was just your typical, average, run of the mill kind of student, and I don't think there was anything special or exceptional about me. (Josue)

I wondered if Josue's self-concept as being an average student might have been different had that counseling session in the janitor's closet resulted in him getting on the honors/AP track that day. While Josue's story had a happy ending, namely, college degree attainment and graduate school, how many other students had missed the opportunity to take rigorous courses through apparent breakdowns between the guidance and registration departments at their schools?

Oscar's story also included a scheduling mishap, demonstrating that sometimes seemingly mundane incidents in schooling can have a dramatic effect on students' intellectual self-concepts and result in students getting off track.

Because I was bi-lingual, I never learned the meaning of something in English and Spanish. I didn't master either language. I remember in kindergarten one day something happened and there were too many of us in one class and not enough of us in another class. I was in the bi-lingual class for Spanish speakers and our teacher asked us if we wanted to go to Ms. Garcia's class (which was an all English class). I and my cousin raised our hands because we wanted to go to Ms. Garcia's class and so we got selected to go. When I got up one of my friends jumped up on top of me and I swung at him and I fell. My punishment was not to go to the English class. These days my cousin doesn't speak Spanish that well, but his English is phenomenal – perfect almost.

[...]



In fifth grade they threw me into an English class and I didn't speak English at all. I remember the day they moved me – they sat me next to a Black kid and he didn't like me and called me a wetback. I knew that nobody liked me. I remember reading and I thought I read well. When it was time to choose what book I was going to read, I would never be given the high level one and I would never understand why. The teacher would always give me one level down and I would wonder about that. I would try my best to read everything perfectly at that level, and I would wonder what I was doing wrong. I tried and I thought I was good at it but I guess that I wasn't that good. (Oscar)

From kindergarten through high school, Oscar's self-concept was that of a student that was held back. He felt the "punishment" that he received in kindergarten resulted in the loss of five years of English language learning during the most critical years for language acquisition. As a high school teacher, Oscar was passionate about mentoring students and helping them develop their own positive intellectual self-concepts.

### Student Motivation

I discovered stories of motivation, perseverance and tenacity as participants related their educational life histories. Sometimes their stories mapped neatly onto a key majoritarian story in the United States, the narrative of

the self-made individual, as if the participants had pulled themselves through their educations with sheer grit and determination. However, when I listened carefully, I heard counterstories therein, such as the amazing support of family, culture or community. As a high school administrator, I had often worked with unmotivated students, trying help them find the motivation to study and work hard in school. Given my professional experiences, the motivation I heard in my participants' stories resonated with me.

The participants in this study were the first in their families to graduate from college. None of the participants had family members with firsthand knowledge about the process of going to college. Attending college was not expected or demanded of them. In four of the seven cases, the participants' parents, teachers, and friends would have understood if they had chosen not to go to college. This was the case with Juan's parents.

While Juan fit the parameters of participant criteria, I had not anticipated the story of a recent college graduate who waited twelve years and made three unsuccessful attempts to go to college before graduating with his bachelor's degree. I found his story of motivation and tenacity to be interesting and inspiring. Juan's father's death in 2002 was a pivotal event in Juan's decision to attain a college degree; as he recounted this in the interview it brought tears to his eyes.

I graduated from high school in 1996 and got married...Before I went to college my wife would ask me "what are you going to do?" That was my first motivation. During the time that I was in [college] I had two more children which was my second motivation...I wanted to set

the example for my kids... I always liked academics from the get-go. I was in bi-lingual classes back in the day when there were bi-lingual classes until third grade... Through the rest of elementary I really liked academics. When I got home from school my parents didn't have to tell me to do my homework. In high school I got a little sidetracked and hung around the wrong crowd...I still graduated on time...but I didn't graduate with the 4.0 that was my initial goal.

[...]

I finished high school and...here in America, you go off to college... I registered [at Central Community College] and within two weeks I was back home. [My parents didn't speak English, and they were unaware of how things were done in education.] I was lonely [at the community college] and I was like, "where's my mom?" So I [went home] and got a job as a dishwasher at the Mountainside Resort. For some reason I always had it in my mind to start from the bottom and for me, being a dishwasher seemed like an honorable job where I could say I was a dishwasher and I could set the example for my brothers or my kids one day. So I got a job as a dishwasher. It was funny because in this job they were all immigrants, one from Haiti, one from Russia, one from Guatemala and everyone was from

somewhere else. I was the only American citizen and the kitchen crew was like “what are you doing, why are you here?” I said, “I wanted to learn how to wash dishes and now I know how to wash dishes.”

[...]

I applied to [several Community Colleges] and it was the same thing. I applied, and I got there the first day and dropped out...My father passed away in 2002 and that's when I started really thinking about what I was going to do. So I used [that] as my motivation and the following year...I went back to school. I applied at Green Glen Community College...I remembered I had an interest in law enforcement and I started taking classes in law enforcement. I did my general courses at GGCC and then I transferred to TSU West and in three years I finished. It was great. I finally graduated in 2009 [from college] after all kinds of events in my life; the birth of my kids...By no means did I get straight A's...I was working 40-50 hours a week, trying to have a home life with my wife and kids and going to school. Now when I think about it, I don't know how I did it. The only explanation that I come up with was that my dad passed away because I would always talk to him when I was having trouble...or break down in tears because it was so hard and I would think about him not

being there. Especially the last year when I knew that I was finishing up. I knew that he was not going to be there physically and I wasn't going to be able to hug him and tell him what I did. I know that he's watching and he saw everything and it was really gratifying and at the same time hard to go through that.

[...]

Graduation was a big thing. Only six people could go because I only had six tickets so I took my mom, my brothers, one of my brother's wife, and my oldest daughter...they sat in their section and I sat with my class.

It was a good thing that they sat like that because if I had sat with my family we would have been crying during the whole thing...I was going through everything that happened [in my mind] and what I went through to get to that day and then finally, finally, I was done...Right now what I am focused on every night is to do first grade homework, third grade homework, and high school homework with my kids. I have to help them out. (Juan)

Throughout this story, I found myself wishing that Juan had received mentoring or guidance from professionals at the high school or community colleges he attended. Juan wondered whether he would have been more academically successful if he had received academic counseling in high school.

His story was not likely to be repeated by students who go through their educational institutions without academic guidance.

Juan reported that he had brothers and extended family members who admired his accomplishment but had chosen not to follow his college-going example. Other participants similarly remarked that their educational life story had not influenced their brothers, sisters, and cousins, many of whom did not choose to attend a college or university. However, my participants described how they intended to ensure that their own children would attend college.

Monica was an energetic participant who was passionate about mentoring young Latinos. Monica stated that she had always been very independent and credited that trait to her mother, a woman who "wore the pants in the family," was a homemaker and had raised two children in a country where she still did not speak the language. Although Monica's story initially resonated with me as the majoritarian story of a self-made woman, I came to appreciate the extraordinary story of support and love she received from her mother who had helped her be successful.

According to Monica, it was hard on her family when she moved to another city and attended TSU living in the dorms in conditions that her very "neat mom" found to be unsatisfactory. During her first year of college her mother would "come up and bring [her] Tupperware after Tupperware of frozen meals that would last for a month, stocking [her] with groceries" so that her mom knew that Monica was eating well.

Monica's description of separating from her parents the summer before she began her university studies highlighted how motivated she was to go to TSU.

Many high school students that I have worked with have been unwilling and/or unable to make the decision to go to a college away from home, especially if their parents did not support their college choices. Monica's mother ultimately supported her decision to go to school in another city, kept her refrigerator stocked with groceries and brought her home cooked meals.

I remember when I applied to TSU - I found out after I got in that I didn't have to worry about tuition or books the first year, and room and board. I don't think my parents ever believed me until the day before I was going to go that I was really going. I think they heard me but they were like, "yeah, yeah, but when the time comes, you're not really going to leave," and then I did.

[...]

The summer bridge program at TSU was really rough for my parents. This was a six-week program. They dropped me off in the dorms and that night was really hard for my mom. She cried and would call me all the time. She was a little at ease because the program had rules, like we had to be in our rooms by a certain time and we had a schedule every day. But we were only allowed to go home two of the six weekends and our parents had to come check us out, so she took advantage of the two weekends that she could come and I could go. My mom hated the dorms and how small and grungy they were – I lived in Cocopah which

was the oldest dorm at the time – now they are really nice, but she left crying and couldn't believe where I was living and she said “it is time for you to come home, this is not the place for you, you had everything you needed at home.”

(Monica)

Monica's mother and father divorced after she graduated from high school and at the time of the interviews, her mother was living with her in a house that Monica had purchased with her own resources. A determined and independent mother had raised a very motivated daughter; both were very proud of the daughter's accomplishments.

Carlos, the engineering student, described taking care to ensure he did not get distracted from his studies while living on campus. In one of the best examples of motivation in the participants' stories, Carlos approached his studies with an individuality and seriousness that was essential to his successful completion of his engineering degree.

In high school a lot of my friends were in study groups. But I didn't really do that. When I had to study, I would get the book and I would write down what I was reading and what I was learning. I would do this for a few hours by myself. When I am writing, it is like double studying because I read it and I write it and so I'm reading it, but I am remembering what I am reading because I am writing it too. That's what I would do. I read a couple of hours; repeat it once, twice,



three times, whatever I have to do and then reviewed it at school. That is what helped me more than study groups.

The groups sometimes had a lot of chit chat. (Carlos)

All the participants who were not attending graduate school at the time of the study reported that they planned to pursue graduate degrees and continue their educational journeys. Even after college graduation, the participants' intellectual self-concepts and individual motivation continued to sustain them as they challenged themselves to grow intellectually and become lifelong learners. In the next section of this chapter, I share stories about: 1) high school, 2) special educational programs that were essential to the participants' success, and 3) transition to the university – a critical aspect of Tinto's model (1993).

### High School

All of the participants graduated from public high schools in urban southwestern cities in the United States. Interestingly, the type of high school attended was not part of the selection criteria for the participants, yet the high schools that the participants attended were very similar. All of the students attended high schools enrolling more than 2,000 students, and all of the participants' high schools were majority Latino schools. Likewise, the high schools were all Title I high schools, meaning that over half of the students came from low income families. State test score data suggested that all of the high schools were average schools. What were the participants' perspectives from their high school days? Did they feel that their high schools prepared them for college?

As an educator, some of the stories that the participants recalled from their formal schooling were discouraging. A common thread running through their stories was that they felt they were inadequately prepared for college. I was also disappointed to learn that these college graduates had not received more guidance and encouragement from the educators in their elementary and secondary schools. The following excerpts provide examples of the participants' recollections of school. Because the excerpts are very similar I have linked them together with multiple asterisks to separate the storytellers.

I heard a study when I was at TSU that said that the best university system is in the United States but that the worst high school system is in the U.S. I don't think they do a good job preparing students. My school was one of them. Not so much because of the teachers, but because of the atmosphere, the population, the lack of motivation. In high school it is more about popularity and what shoes you have on, oh yeah, I know this person, I go to these parties. Little by little the teachers start giving in and thinking, "Well if he doesn't care, I'm not going to care." Like some of the professors at TSU, they are like, "I don't care if you are going to care or not." I guess because of the neighborhood and a population that's not...there's not much of college enthusiasm or motivation. A lot of it has to do with culture.

(Carlos)

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My school had a large Latino population, and a lot of students were taking remedial courses. Only a handful of students took AP classes or the honors classes. So when I got to college there were people who were pulling all nighters, and I was, like, “what is that?” because I had never had to study for ten hours at night, or cram for finals. It may be about the level of attention the teachers are paying or the passion of the teacher, I don’t know but there is a difference. I even notice it with the kids we work with now. There are kids who are in the same grades taking the same classes and then there are kids who are just a lot more prepared than others and it’s not their fault. It’s what is being offered to them. (Monica)

\*\*\*\*\*

I didn’t learn how to write a paper or an essay - nothing really. I actually cheated my way through high school. I remember in my math teacher’s class, I changed my grade in the grade book. I was lucky... Not too many of us made it. I was too embarrassed to admit that I didn’t know what I was doing. I didn’t even know where to start. I honestly tell people I don’t know how I graduated from high school – I had a 1.7 Grade Point Average. I had a lot of absences. I don’t remember taking any tests. I don’t remember doing

any work. I remember being absent a lot. So when I got to college I didn't do too good the first couple of years. It was hard at first because I had never written a paper... I had to learn everything that I didn't learn in high school. I had to take high school math in college and it didn't count towards my credits, and I had to take a lot of those math classes. I had to take high school English and had several tutoring classes just to get through. (Oscar)

Vanessa really wished she had known how to pursue opportunities to attend out of state universities and it appeared from her story that she would have benefitted from having some guidance in that area in high school. Josue told me that no one in high school ever encouraged him to go to college. Here are excerpts of their stories.

I think teachers should be like, "Hey, counselor, next time she comes in you should ask her what she wants to do." No one even asks you, "Do you want to go to college? Do you want to go out of state? What do your parents think of you going to college? Financially, how is it, are you going to need help?" If they had given me something, some sort of assurance. I know that there are too many kids for one teacher but they don't do extras - people don't go a little extra for that one person - if I would have had that one piece

of information it might have opened my eyes [to the possibilities of going out of state]. (Vanessa)

\*\*\*\*\*

I had two counselors in high school. The first one asked me what classes I wanted to take for my junior year and that was the only time I ever saw her. Then I ended up with another one who had one foot out the door. It was her last year and so I never saw her. I saw her once to help me register for my senior year and that was it. I never was told by any teacher that I had or a guidance counselor, no one ever told me to go to college. No one ever discouraged me from it but no one ever encouraged me individually to go to college. No one ever said “go to college, educate yourself.” I remember they had recruitment fairs and they would bring in various universities from around the city to come in and offer information but I was never nudged to go in any particular direction. Those things just didn’t happen to me. Whether they happened to friends of mine or even my sister, I don’t know. No one ever encouraged me to go to college. (Josue)

Oscar discovered his lack of knowledge about college when he made friends with college bound high school students in student council as a junior in high school. In my experience as an administrator, the junior year is quite late in

the four-year cycle of high school to become adequately prepared for success in college.

When I was a freshman or sophomore in high school, I didn't know what universities were. Whenever TSU would be playing basketball, I would be confused because I didn't know who they were – I thought it was like a USA team. I never understood what was going on – I was like, what is this? I didn't know about college until I was a junior in high school when my friends who were in student council started talking about their Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and Pre-Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT) and the letters they had written and where they had applied to and I was curious about what they were talking about. Before high school I was just a kid from the neighborhood and none of them – black or Mexican – none of them ever talked about going to college. But when I was in student council they had a lot of white kids who were in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program and they were all about their grades and all about college and I was unaware of what they were talking about. It was kind of embarrassing when they would ask me and I would have no clue, I didn't know where I was going, I didn't even know what an SAT was. (Oscar)

While lack of access to college-going information was an issue that several participants discussed, Natalia had a different experience. Natalia had a high school counselor who worked very hard to help her to go to college. Not only was Natalia the first in her family to attend college, but since she lacked documentation of legal residency, her search for scholarships was very difficult. I considered Natalia's successful experience with her high school counselor a model for the type of guidance that high school students should receive from their high school counselor.

I still talk to my high school counselor. She came to my graduation. I have a lot of appreciation for her because thanks to her I was able to apply to scholarships and get into the university. She helped me tremendously because at that point, I didn't have a social security number and I didn't have money to go to school. My parents were like, "you have to get good grades so that you can get a scholarship to go to school because we can't pay anything for school." So I met with my counselor and she knew my situation and she knew there were these private scholarship funds. Beginning my junior year we started looking at scholarships the things that I could apply to and every month we would go through files of scholarships. She was like, "you can apply to this one" and she would help with my personal statement, she was just on it, and junior and senior year we were applying to college. (Natalia)

Private scholarship funds were the only source of financial support available to immigrants who did not have social security numbers at the time of the study, because these funds did not rely upon state or federal dollars. Sifting through the scholarship options and finding solutions for undocumented students took skill and determination on the part of the guidance counselor and student. In this case, it was evident that the support of her high school guidance counselor was key to Natalia's ability to go to college. Even after the state law changed in her freshman year and a state proposition made it unlawful for the state university to honor the scholarships they had awarded to undocumented students, Natalia's ability to find private scholarships made it possible for her to complete her Bachelor's degree.

Monica and Josue questioned whether the educators in the high schools they attended had high expectations for their students.

Students need to be exposed to college information and the expectation should be set. I hate the saying "college is not for everybody" because a lot of people will push back and say "you are trying to shove college down all these kids throats but college is not for everybody." I've had teachers tell me "I think some of my kids are going to do a vocation, some kids are just going to go to a community college, and a four year university is not for them." I agree to the extent that I've experienced this in my own family, but in no point would I have told my brother, "you know I don't think that



college is for you.” If someone figures that out for themselves, that’s how it should be. I don’t think anybody should plant that seed in any kid’s mind because it gives them a cop-out. They think, “Well, college is just not for me so I’m not even going to try.” So when people say that, it really irks me because it’s not for them to decide; it’s up to the student to decide. It happens a lot more with Latinos and it happens a lot more with girls. A passion of mine is working with parents and working with girls and letting them know that the girl can get as high a level of education and can be as independent and as successful as any brother.

(Monica)

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I can remember, I was in an English class in high school and I can remember the day the teacher told us in our 10<sup>th</sup> grade year that the people at the district office were telling her that they were being told to just let us pass, “Just let them pass.” I remember that clearly to this day. Anyway when I became I teacher, I heard that same thing too, not from people above me, but I heard it (Josue).

### Special Programs

As previously explained none of the participants had parents with firsthand knowledge of the complex process of becoming college ready and

applying to college. In the absence of family members who had deep knowledge of the college going processes, most students needed help from adults who understood the steps they needed to take for college acceptance and completion. These processes included taking the right high school courses (and getting good grades), filling out complicated financial aid forms, writing personal statements, applying to college, and applying for scholarships.

For some of the participants, finding college going support and caring teachers was a matter of luck. For others, there were systems in place that provided special programs which increased the possibility of making these connections within pre-university experiences. Three special programs will be discussed in this section. These are 1) a high school empowerment program called Unitown, 2) a college readiness program called the Latino Mother Daughter Program (LMDP), and 3) a summer program for incoming freshman called the TSU summer bridge.

When working with low-income youth, the role of teacher and educational institution often extended beyond teaching and learning and into the lending of social support to students. Some of these programs and interventions worked to interfere with the reproduction of class, race, and gender inequality (Stanton-Salazar, 2001) in low-income students' educational experiences.

Unitown was a version of a program called "Anytown," a 50 year-old national youth leadership training program that focused on diversity, empowerment and building self esteem in youth. Oscar's mentor, a teacher whom he called "Dad" was the coordinator and sponsor of the Unitown camp at his high school. The teacher was also the student government advisor. The following

excerpt of Oscar's memories of Unitown and a student government retreat were examples of experiences that made a significant difference in Oscar's self image. The recollection of these camp experiences brought tears to his eyes during the interview.

Because I always hung out with black people from my neighborhood, to Mexicans I was a traitor. But what saved me was that I was selected to be in Unitown. I went there and for the first time I spoke out about how I felt about my race and heard other people speak out. People accepted me and I came back [from camp] with black friends, Asian friends, white friends, friends in special education, disabled friends and 80 friends from different places....because of Unitown I had the confidence that I could talk to whoever I wanted to and that exposed me to different things. That helped a lot. Then we had a student government state conference. There were white kids, Black kids, and Mexican kids from all over the state. They had this activity called a "Board Breaking" where they brought a piece of wood and the kids drew on the piece of wood what their goals were. Then [the leader] had them draw what was stopping them [on the board] and she came in dressed in a karate outfit and told the kids, "Ok we are going to break the boards." The kids were like, "what do you mean; we're going to break the boards?" There were 15 – 20 kids in a group and each group

supporting the kid that was trying to break the board. The kids were screaming and you could see the energy that was in there. There was a girl who was terrified of being killed – her cousin had been working at a hamburger stand and someone robbed him and shot him. She was still terrified of that. They took her on the stage and she started talking about what had happened and she drew it all on the board and they said, “We’re going to make you break it.” Everyone was crying and they gave the girl the board and she took off her jacket and she broke it! Those kinds of activities to kids, they mean a lot. I remember when I [went on stage]. I remember they made put a Rebar on my throat and the leader made this other kid [who eventually went to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology] put a Rebar on his throat too. We were looking at each other and the leader said “I know you guys have been through a lot and you deserve to hug and I want you to hug each other.” Well, there was this Rebar at our throats that was stopping us from hugging and she said “I want you to know that there is nothing stopping you, I want you to walk toward each other and hug.” And the 100 kids in the place were yelling and we walked toward each other and the Rebar bent and we hugged. And to us that was the spark, that boost of confidence. Then someone told us, “You are amazing.”

Sometimes I wonder “has anybody ever made you feel like you were amazing? Amazing, you know?” People tap kids on the shoulder and tell them they can do anything but I don’t think they’ve ever had that stage where they are motivated internally like that. I think about that a lot.

(Oscar)

When I asked Vanessa to describe the difference between high school and the university, she said that the university was “completely different” because there weren’t many Latinos on campus, and the Latino Mother Daughter Program (LMDP) helped her fit in. Once she found herself in the Latino niche, she made friends.

The LMDP really helped Vanessa make the transition to the university and ultimately finish her degree by helping her find her way in that “huge university” and making her feel welcome. Through LMDP she met other multicultural students who supported each other. She commented, “We raised each other up.” Both Natalia and Vanessa made special mention of the program director of the LMDP, whose door was always open when they were students at the university and who really helped with them advice and support through their university experiences. Vanessa also participated in a math and science honors program, which gave her extra credit and experience living in the dorms. This was a comfort to her as she transitioned from high school to the university, as she knew where she was going to eat, and how to find her way around this large university.

Another special program that provided support for participants as the high school students transitioning to college was the TSU Summer Bridge program, a program several participants attended in the summer before their freshman year at the university. Natalia related that it was during this six-week program that she had the “amazing” experience of living on campus – it was the only time she lived on campus. For the remainder of her university experience she lived off campus. The Summer Bridge program got Natalia off to a great start because she met other students and became familiar with the campus before the entire student body arrived. Monica also attended the Summer Bridge program. As she remembered:

That session was an introduction to the university. We had an English class, a biology class and a University 101 class. We had upper-class residential aides who lived with us. It was a great experience because I got to be on campus and learn my way around campus and build a relationship with a great group of friends who are still friends of mine now. I think it made a huge difference because my freshman year when I was struggling with the academics, I had the social support. We had classes, Biology and English in the summer, and that was all great, but I think more than anything it gave me a group of people that I knew I could rely on because we had had this six week experience together. I was one of three out of my class who went to TSU and I didn't know anyone there from high school. I met all my friends brand new and so my friends were like me,

they were one of the few that came from their high school, they were Latino, and it was really comfortable because I had this really close group of friends who are still my friends today. Ten years I have the exact same group of friends as I had when I started school. (Monica)

Having been given a glimpse into the K-12 experiences of the participants, it was interesting to consider some of their recollections of the university. Stories about their university experience are threaded throughout the subsequent sections, but here I focus on the overall impressions of the participants' as they transitioned from high school to the university, as this was a critical aspect of college completion (Tinto, 1993).

### Transition to the University

The University that the participants attended was one of the largest in the United States with over 55,000 students enrolled. I conducted several of my interviews on the main campus and several at an auxiliary campus. All but one of the participants had attended the main campus.

On one of the days that I went to the main campus, it was uncharacteristically cold, rainy, and windy. My first challenge was to find a place to park. My second challenge was finding the Student Union where we had agreed to meet. Running late, I tried in vain to make up time as I drove across campus looking for a parking place. There were people everywhere. Pedestrians, bikes, and skateboards as well as vehicular traffic made driving across campus in the

rain slow-going and frustrating. Walking the cold and windy block from my parked car to my participant interview – with just 1 hour of time allowed on the meter –was stressful and rushed. The coffee shop where we met was packed full of people, but luckily Monica had saved us a table and we were able to talk. I had to agree with Vanessa, whose first comments about the university were about its sheer size.

It's huge. There isn't one person who knows all of the buildings – it's huge! The first year I had to have a bike. High school was a piece of cake for me because I had friends and I was involved in a lot of activities, and the school was smaller. In high school, I knew some of the teachers and they knew me. When you get to the university, there is this whole little world there where you can basically live there and never come out. The teachers don't know your name unless you talk to them every day or are failing and even then they don't know your name. Especially in those Intro classes where there are 400 students. They don't even know who you are. In Psych 101 we had 400 students. I hated going to those huge classes. I don't even see the point. I might as well just stay home and read the book. They're not teaching you anything different than what you could read. They don't even know who you are. I really wish I would have gone to another school. It's not that I didn't like TSU, and I'm glad that I got my degree but I think that if I



hadn't been so attached to home and I think I could have gone to an Ivy League school but I was too scared to leave the state – which now I kind of regret, but it all worked out.

(Vanessa)

While Vanessa described TSU as a good school, she had wanted to go to medical school and TSU didn't have a pre-medical undergraduate degree program. Vanessa received her Bachelor's degree in Psychology and at the time of the interview was still trying to go to Medical school. More guidance in the college selection process might have helped Vanessa not only attend college out of state, as she had wished, but also helped her find a school with the degree program that fit her long term career goals. Similarly, as a freshman, Monica started college as in engineering major program because she had cousins who shared her aptitude for math who had become engineers. Fortunately Monica found an excellent mentor in her junior year and was able to change her major from accounting to marketing – a major that she described as a better fit.

My freshman year, not knowing, not ever having experienced college life or having a mentor to talk to about what to do, what not to do, how many classes to take, what classes to take in college, it kind of hit me that freshman year. My first semester wasn't the greatest in terms of academics. I was always great in math. Since I had some cousins that had gotten engineering degrees, I thought, OK great, I will be an engineer. I was taking engineering classes

and it wasn't until about 5 semesters in that I got involved in an organization called Latino Business Students Association – LBSA – with a roommate that I had who was a business student. I was an engineering student and she invited me to LBSA. I got involved with the advisor and a great professor who was a mentor, and they provided guidance for me at the university. I thought “hey there are other things besides engineering, and I don't have to stick with this.” I remember going into the LBSA office in tears saying “I think my life is over, I don't want to be in engineering anymore.” (Monica)

Interestingly, Carlos also began college with the goal of becoming an engineer. He told me that only 25% of the students who started college in the School of Engineering completed their engineering degrees; he was understandably proud of his accomplishment. Carlos' hard work and the assistance of a helpful professor were key to his success as evidenced by this excerpt from his story.

I had classes where the professors were like, if you have to re-take it, re-take it [and didn't really care], but I had a professor where I had been having trouble with prime value, future value, present value, and the worth of money and I would go in at least twice a week. I would study, study, study, study, and [in the end] I didn't have to take the final because on the midterm and the test before the final, I got

good grades and so it didn't matter what I scored on the final I would still get an A. I give 90% [of the credit] to my professor because she was there a lot. She was on every problem step by step, making sure I understood them, working with me. (Carlos)

I talked to Carlos about his transition to the university and his view on his ability to fit into the environment. Carlos, who spoke the language of engineering and math with students from all over the world, said he liked the atmosphere at TSU. It was a calm and friendly place. Compared to the neighborhood where he grew up, which he described as the "hood," and Jalisco, Mexico, where he sometimes visited family, he said he felt safe at the university. Carlos enjoyed going out in the middle of the night, and walking the streets of the university town knowing that he would be safe. He said that it was a fun environment where he did homework during the week and then partied on the weekend. Carlos seemed to be happy majoring in math and engineering at the university and achieving his goals as an independent learner. Carlos' experience overall at TSU was very positive and he began his career as an engineer immediately after graduation.

Oscar's first day of school at TSU was a little rocky, but overall, his experience at the university was positive. His path to the university included an unsuccessful start at a community college and ended with a Bachelor's degree in History. Oscar continued his education at TSU to pursue a Master's degree. Oscar's poignant recollection about his first day of college is one with which anyone who has ever felt awkward can empathize.

I can remember the first day of school [at TSU]. I wore new shoes and a new outfit and everybody there had on flip flops. I looked like a dumbass with a new backpack and a box of pencils. Everyone else had a notebook and here I was with a brand new everything. I woke up early to wear my new outfit because I didn't know what everybody else was going to wear. In high school, the first day of school everybody got all spruced up and in college people aren't looking at the shoes, you are there for a reason and I learned that really fast. And I remember the first time I thought about ditching and my friend was like, "you paid about \$800 for that class," and I hadn't thought about that so I didn't [ditch]. It was nothing like when you go to community college. I remember when I went to the community college it was like high school but when I went to the university, I was by myself. I would see people and they would say "meet me at lunch." I had never met a friend at lunch and I was like, "cool!" (Oscar)

This chapter has focused on the participants' educational journeys as high school and university students. The next chapter will provide insights into their families, friendships, and community and how these networks informed their educational life histories.

## CHAPTER 6 - STORIES ABOUT FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND COMMUNITY

During the interviews, participants spoke about supportive families and friends as well as how they were influenced by their cultural communities along their educational journeys. The support that the participants received from culturally-based programs and organizations as well as from their families and cultural communities was crucial to their success in college. This chapter explores their stories.

### Familial Webs

Stanton-Salazar's (2001) research showed that familial groups, called "webs," were important in overcoming the negative forces that low-income Latino youth often faced. He found with immigrant Latino students, the likelihood that students would have at least one family member (kin) within their immediate geographic vicinity to help and support them was less likely than it was for their English-speaking colleagues. Stanton-Salazar found that the proximity of family was an important protective factor for Latino youth. My findings were consistent with Stanton-Salazar's findings. Each of the participants had at least one, and in most cases many more, kin who were present in their lives throughout their educational journeys. While some kin were more supportive than others, each had family members living in her/his geographic vicinity and spoke of her/his family support with understanding and some level of appreciation.

For example, Monica was especially close to her mother. Her parents divorced after she graduated from high school, but she was deliberate about saying that she grew up in a two parent home. Monica's parents were both from

large families in Mexico. Her father finished third grade and her mom graduated from high school and started college in Mexico. Although Monica's mother did not finish college, she received some teacher training in college and taught children before immigrating to the United States. Monica said her mother was her hero. Several of her aunts had graduated from college in Mexico and had successful careers, so Monica knew from personal experience the importance of having female role models. She was passionate about mentoring and being a role model for girls who might follow in her footsteps.

Teaching has always been a passion of my mom's so even when we were in school she would be the teacher's aide or the mom that helped or the mom that would come and do all of the labor intensive stuff for the teachers like putting together packets...I remember my mom was the mom that volunteered. If teachers ever needed packets made or arts and crafts assembled or anything like, Mom was always there. When I started fourth grade, my sister was in school as well, and my brother was starting part time kindergarten or pre-school, and so Mom would literally hang around the school all day. She would take him to the library at the school. Then she would hang out at the school until we were out and then walk us all home. We walked to and from school a lot; our house was fairly close, and so I remember walking to school with my mom and then

walking back home. The first thing we did when we got home and was eat and then we did homework

[...]

At TSU, I was the poor student. I had enough to cover school, books, and room and board, but I never had the money to go on vacations or spring break like some of my peers. My parents would never give me money. Instead of saying, “here’s couple of hundred dollars for the month,” they would say, “I’m going to come up there and buy you a couple hundred dollars worth of food and stock your fridge because we know that if we get that covered everything else should be OK.” So they would bring me groceries and make sure I ate and that my fridge was stocked and that would be their way of helping me out, so I didn’t have to spend money on groceries. They would never give me money to spend. My mom never told me that she wanted me to be a doctor or a lawyer or this or that, there was never a discussion on that. When I chose engineering she was really excited, like, “wow, my daughter is going to be an engineer,” but the goal for me was to get a higher education. I could do whatever I wanted as long as I got my degree. I could go into anything. I was never pressured into being a doctor or a lawyer. I don’t think that I experienced as many of the obstacles as the kids I work with or my

peers because I did have that mom who would say “you’re going to do it, we will support you 100 percent.”

[...]

Not everyone has that type of mom and dad. There was an eighth grade girl that was doing great in our (mentorship) program. Our eighth grade program meets once a month on a Saturday and I was trying to transition her into our high school program. That would have meant that she would meet with us twice a month instead of once a month. She asked me to talk to her dad and explain to him why she needed to come one more time a month and I said “yeah, I will talk to him.” So I [met with him and I said] “so-and-so would like to transition to our high school program which will meet twice a month now,” and he said, “OH GREAT, NOW ONE MORE TIME A MONTH SHE GETS TO GET OUT OF HER CHORES.” That just irked me. I was like “oh, gosh, really?” That is what some of our kids have to face. So it’s a struggle; we work not only with the students but the parents. I think the university is doing a lot better in providing those transitional services and guidance and building those supportive networks in the school and those communities in the dorms. That’s exactly what our kids need. As long as they know that the resources are



there, I think we'll continue to see the numbers [of Latinos] in higher education grow. (Monica)

The participants seemed to have given a great deal of thought to the ways that their parents had prepared them for success. It was interesting that each reflected on her/his parents with a forgiving eye, that is, none of them were resentful or angry about their upbringing. My questions did not seem to stir up new thoughts, rather they seemed to bring out ideas they had already thought deeply about. For example, Vanessa talked about the culture clash between what she learned at school versus what she learned at home.

There is a book called "Borderlands." I love that book. It is about living in between two worlds. We think we live in one [world] but in our minds we live in two because we have to navigate between the world we are living in now and the world that our parents are living in. There are no [real] borders but we are two traditions and two cultures clashing into one person. It makes it really not hard, and makes it more difficult to navigate our everyday life because of this clash of cultures. We are collectivists and we are not individualistic, so when you grow up in an individualistic society and our parents grew up in a collectivistic society there are clashes between what you learned at home with what you learn at school. (Vanessa)

Vanessa was born in the United States, and as a citizen, she said she felt that she was pushed by her parents to get an education because the opportunity was available to her as a citizen. She had access to financial aid, scholarships, and grants from the university that immigrants who lacked residency and citizenship did not. Her parents had a seventh grade education and wanted her to go to college. She said “everyone really pushed me.”

Three of the seven participants reported that their parents had strongly encouraged them to go to college. Monica, Carlos, and Vanessa each said that their parents expected them to go to college and would have been very disappointed if they had not earned their college degrees. Services and networks provided by the university sometimes provided a link between the familial web and university support systems. For example, several of the female participants and their mothers were involved with the Latino Mother Daughter Program at the university. Another program that connected families to the University was the University Dream Academy.

Vanessa and her mother participated in the university’s Latino Mother Daughter Program (LMDP) beginning in seventh grade when she was nominated to be a participant in the program. This program helped her mother understand what the college experience was going to be like for her daughter, and connected Vanessa with mentors when she arrived at the university. Vanessa’s younger brother, a seventh grader, continued to benefit from his mother’s willingness to learn about college preparation when Vanessa’s mother participated in the University Dream Academy, a partnership program between the university and the public school which targeted first generation families. The six to eight week

program was designed by the university to provide information to parents in the community about how to prepare their children for success in college. The program taught courses to parents on such topics as the importance of high school course selection, transcripts, grades, scholarships, and the financial aid process with the goal that informed parents would have the knowledge they needed to help their students navigate through the complex college going process. In addition to the support that her mother would offer her brother, Vanessa saw her own role as a sister to be involved in his college preparation, adding her own first-hand university experience to the growing familial web of college knowledge.

He's already the smartest at his school right now. My mom is already going to a program for him, the University Dream Academy. And even though she went through all that with me, it's like a refresher course to try to help him out. Of course, I'm going to be like, "Did you do this? Did you do that? Have you looked at this? Have you looked at that? You are 13, buddy, and you'd better get started at getting A's because you are not going to go to a state school, you are going to go to a better school." I'm not being pushy about it because I think if I'm really pushy, he will be like, "screw you," so I'll say "here's a paper you might want to read." The thing is that he really likes to hang out with me and so I try to make it fun. We go paintballing, or whatever, and every time that we do go out, I try to say, "Have you thought about [college]? How are you doing in school? Do you like

your teacher”? I try to meet his teachers. This year I want to make sure that meet all of his teachers to see if he’s doing all right. So I think that being involved in that sense, I think that my talking to him will give him some sort of idea that maybe he should think about that. He’s smart so as long as he keeps it up so I take him out and we go do stuff.

(Vanessa)

This level of family involvement in the educational process can make a difference. In my work I have seen the impact that parents and family members who were involved in their children’s education had on students’ class schedules, teacher selection, homework completion, and learning. I encouraged Vanessa to stay involved with her brother’s educational choices and school work to ensure accountability on the part of her brother’s educators and emphasize to him his right to a high quality education. While her parents could certainly advocate for the young man, as a college graduate who knew the educational system, Vanessa would also have a significant impact on her brother’s educational journey.

Likewise, I recently participated in a Unitown event at the high school where I am an administrator. I learned from the students and the facilitator that for many first-in-family high school students, the pressure from parents to be the first in their families to graduate from high school and go on to college can be very intense and hard for the students to bear. However, I sometimes work with students and families in which college attendance and graduation is not a priority. This was the case with Josue, Oscar, Juan, and Natalia. While they reported that

their parents were happy that they had gone to college, they said their parents would have been satisfied if they had not.

Both Oscar and Josue talked about the way that luck factored into their educational life histories and each of them commented that they could have easily become “a statistic.” Josue related a story about shopping with his mother in high school and passing the baby clothes aisle. His mother had talked about him having a baby with his girlfriend; he did not really know if she was kidding or if she was longing for him to have a child so she could be a grandmother. Josue ultimately waited until his thirties to have a child, a decision he characterized as extremely rare “in his culture.” Josue said that “this [teenage pregnancy problem] is a huge issue for us, culturally.”

Oscar’s mother immigrated to the U.S. without immigration documents from a small town in the mountains of the Mexican state of Chihuahua when she was 16 or 17. She completed the seventh grade in Mexico. None of his mother’s family members in Mexico finished high school. Oscar said that his mother did not understand anything about the United States educational system including what a credit was, what graduation requirements were, or what the SAT test was. While he had a cousin whose father had researched the U.S. educational system, his mom had not done so and Oscar was on his own to take care of his education. Oscar noted that in his family, academics weren’t valued and “if academics are not valued in a family, the students are going to struggle alone.” During high school, Oscar routinely went to Mexico over holidays or during the summer often returning a week or more after school had started. According to Oscar, this practice contributed to his perception that he was always behind in school.

Some of the participants described their parents as ambivalent about their college goals. This excerpt from Juan demonstrated his deep reflection he tried to understand why his father did not have high educational expectations for him.

I think if expectations were higher there would have been a lot more [success in education]. My dad had a brother who went to school and was an engineer in Mexico. My uncle would tell me that my grandpa wanted my uncle to go to school. My uncle studied away from home and when he came home from school, my grandpa would sit him down and be really interested in what he was studying. I thought that was weird because my dad wasn't like that. I thought if my grandpa was like that with one of his kids, why did he give my dad the choice of whether or not to get an education, but not his other son? Maybe my grandpa thought he made a mistake with my dad [his eldest] in terms of his education and didn't want to make the same mistake with the next boy. None of the girls went to school. My uncle was the youngest so maybe through all that my grandpa learned he said "no, no, no, this kid is going to go to school. I made the mistake with the older kids and this one is going to go to school." This is just what I came up with as far as an explanation of why my dad was like that. He's not here and I can't ask him. Now that I am older, I have so many questions that I would like to ask my dad and even my

grandpa but they're not here. Someday I will ask them but I have all these questions and I wish I could have the opportunity to ask them now. (Juan)

Finally, I was interested in Oscar's perspectives on the education of his younger siblings. Oscar had twin sisters who were high school seniors and were not on track to go to college. Oscar had been a teacher in the high school that they attended and yet, in his view, it was his mother, a single parent, whose role it was to establish the type of family setting that would be conducive to his sisters' learning and college education. Remembering Vanessa's mother and her connection to the university through the Latino Mother Daughter Program (LMDP) and the University Dream Academy, I realized that Oscar's mother was an example of parent who had not been able to make the connection to the university and was unable to provide support for her daughters' educational aspirations even though her eldest son was a college graduate.

When it comes to college it falls back on my mom to guide them through it. Academically they never put the effort into it; it's just the habits we have at home. We don't eat together, we don't have a desk. We have a TV in every room. My mom can't really supervise and there is no routine. I remember watching TV and wanting a desk with a lamp where I could do my work. I never had a room growing up; it was shared with family. My room didn't even have a door, so I never had privacy. I never had that desk

with a lamp. I had a bed, a dresser and TV on top of the dresser, so I never had that place to go study and my sisters never did either. People were always coming over to the house - there were people there all the time. My mom didn't say, "Hey, you need to study, while we're out here having fun," that never happened. We had to come outside and play with the kids that they brought so that they could talk. We never had the right environment; we didn't have a good academic home environment and I don't think [my sisters do] either. They have bad habits, they don't study, it's just not important. Mom cares about us and I don't think that my high school life was a reflection of her lack of caring. I think she cared all the time, but she was tired all the time, didn't have the time, and wasn't aware. With my sisters now, she's tired and can't get a grasp of it – she never will be assimilated very well to the culture. (Oscar)

This glimpse into the home setting is one that educators should consider. Some students simply may not have the wherewithal to find space and time after school to study. What are the homework implications for students who do not have the physical or emotional space at home to study?

Oscar made it clear that his mom cared about him, but as a single parent she had to work hard to keep her children fed and in a home. In the absence of a father, Oscar relied upon the influence and support of his uncles until he met a



teacher his junior year in high school. This teacher became his mentor and Oscar referred to him as “Dad.” This teacher’s influence on Oscar was life changing; the details were discussed in the previous chapter.

This chapter thus far has included stories of parents and siblings. There were many more stories of the familial web, as all of the participants in this study were fortunate to have parents, uncles, cousins, and extended family in their familial web and in their immediate geographic vicinity throughout their educational journeys. Their educational life histories also included stories of friends, which are explored in the section that follows.

### Friends

Just outside the familial web was the participants’ network of friends. Stanton-Salazar (2002) referred to geographical and segregated low-income urban neighborhoods in which the reality of racial marginalization in American society was evident. The participants in my study grew up in racially segregated neighborhoods and as a result they attended racially segregated schools. They talked about their friendships throughout their educational life histories. Most of their high school friends did not attend college.

Carlos, the engineer, said he had friends from everywhere including the “hood” and the university. He explained that in college, math and engineering were universal languages that transcended accents and enabled him to communicate with Mexicans, Anglos, and people of all nationalities at TSU. His high school friends that had not gone to college were just beginning to see his signs of success (like a nice, new truck), and they expressed regret at their own

decisions not to go to college. Carlos noted that the key to his success was that he knew his priorities. He had not been influenced by friends who thought he was a “nerd” for going to college.

Vanessa commented on the racial differences between her friends outside of her high school, her lunchtime friends and her friends from her academic classes and activities in high school. Her “outside friends” were Latino while her friends in Honors/AP classes and National Honor Society were mostly white. The dominance of white students in these rigorous programs was especially interesting considering that the majority of students in Vanessa’s high school were Latino. According to Vanessa, about a quarter of the students in her honors and AP classes went on to college after high school, an indication that for the majority of students in her school attending college was not an outcome of taking these rigorous classes.

Vanessa was still in contact with a friend who had been unable to go to the university because she did not have a social security number and was unable to qualify for financial aid. Vanessa was encouraging this friend to go to community college one credit at a time because it was the only way that her friend could afford to attend college. In this excerpt she described her friend’s situation:

We were friends since third grade and she didn’t go to college. One of the reasons was that she wasn’t legal from here; she was born in Mexico and didn’t have residency or citizenship at all so that was a barrier. She was going to go to a community college because TSU was too expensive and her parents had two other kids to take care of and you know,

for a lot of people, college just isn't a priority – going out and working is a higher priority. I think parents have different priorities and it shows how their kids follow through with their education and follow through with their own personal lives. Now, we get together and it's like, "How are you doing? Where are you working?" If she had (documents) she would have gone to college. She's going to community college now and working and trying to finish up. (Vanessa)

In the case of Vanessa's friend, "finish up," meant that she was trying to finish an Associate's degree. Her friend was still years away from completing the Bachelor's degree that Vanessa had already been awarded.

In a similar conversation about friends, Natalia talked about not knowing how to encourage or motivate friends of hers in high school to pursue academic excellence. She said that she had been fortunate because in her senior year, she was accepted into TSU and her plans to go to college had been secured. According to Natalia as her senior year in high school came to an end, many of her friends who did not have plans after high school emotionally closed down and were hard to talk to. What might otherwise be a happy milestone, high school graduation, was a frightening change for many students. Natalia even suggested that some students would rather have stayed in high school another year instead of graduating and having to go out in the world to discover what they were going to

do with their lives. Oscar had a similar perspective when he told me, “They have nothing except their friends.” At the end of the senior year, many of these friendships ended.

While Monica worked with youth to inspire them to reach for bigger goals, this excerpt from Natalia’s story was a sad reminder that some youth never even make it through high school due to unexpected and sometimes violent circumstances. She described how she valued every moment she spent with her friends and reminded me that some neighborhoods were not safe places for children to live.

Whenever I see someone that I graduated from high school with and I know they are OK it is a relief that they are alive. That’s so good. Even though they didn’t get to finish their education, just knowing that someone you graduated with is still alive is good enough for me. My senior year one of the seniors died before graduation – he was shot at work. He was one of the two students shot at a hamburger stand. He didn’t get to finish [school] with us. It was really, really sad. Then after graduation I heard that another student died [I don’t know how] and that was so sad. I went to school with these people and they died! So when on Facebook all these people are like, “Hey, it’s good to see you it’s good to see that you are alive!” I know what they mean! I hope I can see a lot of my classmates at my 10 year class reunion. When I started my senior year in college, there were a lot more

students from my high school going to the university, and it is slowly increasing. It was so awesome to see more people from my high school make it that far; it was just great seeing more people from our high school at the university.

(Natalia)

I was an administrator in the high school attended by the second student killed in the hamburger stand shooting and I remembered the tragedy well. Natalia's comments were a reminder to me that although several years had passed since the shooting, the memory was still fresh for his friends and peers and remained in Natalia's thoughts about her friends and her community. While she said that it was great to see more members of her community at the university, just seeing her friends alive was enough of an affirmation for her.

Oscar graduated from high school over 10 years ago. As a college graduate and high school teacher from within the community, his perspectives were interesting. Oscar talked about the differences between his neighborhood when he was growing up and his current experience in the neighborhood as a teacher. The interesting points of this excerpt were: 1) his perspective that there were fewer gangs in the present than in the past and that this was a positive change in the community; and 2) that the blending of Latino students over time to include those who were born in the United States and recent immigrants made it hard to tell "who was who."

I remember back when I was in high school there were the paisas, the kids who looked Mexican. You could tell [they

were immigrants]. Then there were kids that had the tennis shoes and had the swagger. Now kids blend. You can't even tell who the gangsters are; they are like chameleons - they have adapted. Back in the day I could tell you who was in the gang by what they were wearing. Now bloods wear blue, Cripps wear red; as long as they can look good and still be who they are. Now in high school, you wouldn't know who was what. Some kids keep [their immigration status] from each other unless they are really comfortable with it - that is huge for them. You can't tell who is what anymore, they are all just Latino. I remember being in elementary school. If you were bi-lingual other kids didn't talk to you. It's not in pop culture [anymore] to identify yourself as in a gang. I guess that is a positive improvement. Before we had all these kids who wanted to be in gangs and had to do a little extra to prove themselves. That was little scary. I remember I wanted to prove myself so I dressed and I acted a little extra gangster, and I would talk gangster and pick up all that stuff only because every else did. These days you will see a kid wearing Dickeys [pants] and a hair net and talking gangster and you want to say, "Hey Dude, don't you know your gang is gone? It's disappeared!" When I was growing up it was like 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Well, 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue is no longer there. That is now a Mexican neighborhood and

the Blacks have moved even farther out. Ninth Street used to be a gang and now it's a condo community. The gangs are gone. You'll see some of them who are still gangbangers and you'll be like "it's just because their brothers were the ones that initiated the gangs." (Oscar)

None of Oscar's friends from elementary school went to college. Some of his friends had spent time in jail. He related that his freshman class in high school had 950 students and that this large class size had been a matter of pride for the school administrators. According to Oscar there were 330 students in his graduating class; he wondered what had happened to those 620 students who started high school with him but did not graduate. I found it interesting that Oscar remembered these statistics. None of Oscar's friends went to college and he reported that none of his friends really cared that he graduated from college; that attending college was not in "their nature."

#### Cultural Communities - *Educación*

"In my culture, in our culture" were phrases that my respondents used often during their interviews. These phrases signaled a form of learning that took place in the family outside of the formal school curriculum. Gonzales, Moll and Amanti (2005) called this type of learning, *educación*; Yosso (2006) described these types of cultural knowledge in terms of community cultural capital. Some of the ways that *educación* was transmitted from parents to children were through the sharing of *dichos* (Spanish sayings), familial attitudes toward work, and the

language that was spoken in the family home, Spanish. Stories about *educación* are shared in this section of the chapter.

I knew from my experience as a Spanish teacher that there were many charming sayings, called “*dichos*” in Spanish that people used to capture and communicate cultural wisdom. We use these types of saying in English as well. These are sayings such as “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” or “a stitch in time saves nine.” As a Spanish language teacher, I used these Spanish *dichos* to teach vocabulary and reinforce grammar, so I knew quite a few of them before I began my study.

When I conducted the interviews, I thought it would be fun and interesting to see if my participants had been taught any *dichos* by their family and community hoping that the use of the *dichos* might reveal *educación*. All but one of the participants readily recalled at least one *dicho* that they had heard repeatedly from their parents as they were growing up and expressed that the meaning conveyed by the *dicho* had influenced their decision making and choices. The *dichos* brought out stories of *educación*.

Three participants recalled the *dicho* that translated “tell me who your friends are and I’ll tell you who you are.” In this excerpt, Josue explained the *dicho* and its influence on his life choices.

Yes, I can think of one right off the top of my head. It is “*dime con quién te juntas y te digo quien eres.*” “Tell me who you spend your time with and I’ll tell you who you are.” My mom told both my sister and I that right from the beginning, as far back as I can recall. That always stuck with



me. You know, in terms of making sure that I was smart in the choices that I made in terms of who my friends were. I think I told you that me and my friends were pretty good at staying out of trouble? Well that was one of the things – you know I could have picked friends that were constantly in trouble, but I didn't. I was very quiet, shy, and reserved so I picked friends who were like me. It is still a part of who I am. I associate with people who are like me, who have similar interests and social habits. That one has always stuck with me and I think that I will pass that one along to my son. I think it is very, very true. (Josue)

Monica said that her mom would tell her “*el hombre llega....la mujer lo deja.*” The man goes as far as the woman will let him). She explained that this *dicho* was about respecting yourself as a woman - as long as women knew where to draw the line, they would be respected by men. She said that her mother said this *dicho* often. Here Monica explained this in her own words.

It was always very much giving yourself respect as far as a woman In the Mexican culture that's really big. You are a lady so you have to respect yourself. You have to put yourself out there and have manners and be educated. As far the as the male/female role there was never an excuse not do to your chores at home. Yes, you had homework and you had to do that first but your role was also to help Mom clean

and do your room and clean the house. Maybe for my brother, it was not so much. We would help him clean – he was the youngest – but it was more that the girls cleaned and he would help my dad outside. I think growing up my sister would get upset because my brother got to do a lot more things than we got to do because he was a guy but then I think my sister and I kind of paved the road and we got a lot more than he did. (Monica)

Monica and her Mexican-American friends would use *dichos* with each other. For example, Monica would said she would say *primero cae un hablador que un cojo*, (the one who talks a lot will fall before a one legged person will fall) to mean “take your words back” within circles of her closest friends.

The question of *dichos* brought a smile to Natalia. She recalled that not only had her mom used a *dicho* with her often but that she had turned the tables on her mom recently and used it back on her! In this excerpt, she explained a *dicho* that reminded me of “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” or “a stitch in time saves nine.”

*El huevon trabaja dos veces.* (The lazy person works twice.)

When (Mom) first told me that I did not know what it meant, and then growing up you started to realize that if you didn't do something right the first time, you would eventually have to go back and do it all over again. So it

really stuck to me, *el huevon trabaja dos veces*. I remember the other day my mom did something and she didn't do it right and so she had to go back again and re-do it. I said, "*el huevon trabaja dos veces*" and she was like "*ay, sí,*" so now it was being said to her! There are a lot of other Spanish dichos that come up at random when something happens. I can't remember them, but that one always stuck to me. At school I remembered that one and I was like, I have to do this right because I don't want to have to do it again. I guess in my culture and the way my parents grew up they always worked really hard for what they wanted and so even if they didn't get to finish school, they still worked hard to get what they had. So you were to be respectful of what people did, their parents, and the work they put into it. (Natalia)

In addition to the lessons transmitted through *dichos*, the values of hard work and respect were at the heart of another story that Natalia told about her father. Natalia said that her father always taught his children to do their best and to take care of their belongings, their shoes, their clothes and their books. This story is full of cultural lessons that Natalia's parents passed on to their children and informed Natalia's choices and behaviors through her educational life history.

When we went to school we only had one pair of shoes, one pair of socks, one uniform, you know the complete set, and we only wore it to school. The moment we got home we

changed into our old clothes. We took very good care of our shoes and from wearing them so much if they got a hole, we would fix it. So in my life we always took very good care of everything we had. To this point it's a crime for us to write in a book or to highlight anything in a book. My dad said books were expensive when I was growing up said he hated it when he saw books that were all highlighted. My dad said "I don't like people to write in books, books are like treasures to me." He told us if we borrowed books we had to make sure to return them in the same condition or better condition that when we received them. So taking care of our stuff was a really big deal, especially books. He would say "*cuidan muy bien los libros porque no crecen en árboles*" – "take good care of the books because they don't grow on trees." The main thing was books – taking care of our books – not taking things for granted.

I remember once my dad found a box full of books – an encyclopedia set of Disney. We still have it. My dad brought it home. The books were old. Apparently, a little kid had had them because they were written all over with crayon and pencils so we all sat down together and we started erasing every single book. We would clean the pages and erase everything that we could erase. I still have them in my room. I haven't read them or anything but they are there. My dad

found them in the *basura* (the trash). He said “*para mi es un crimen – como un choque,*” “for me it is a crime, a shock” to have thrown the books away and so he brought them home and we cleaned them up. So my dad always brings books; he’ll find them in the trash or someone will leave them somewhere he always brings the books to the house. Growing up my dad taught us everything. Taking care of yourself, being good to other people. I saw how my parents struggled in life. Listening to their stories is inspiring and makes you want to work harder to get the things that you want. They worked so hard to get to where they are, I can also do the same thing. (Natalia)

This reference to hard work leads to a prominent theme in the participants’ *educación*. Work was a prominent reality in each family. When asked about heroes, Juan said that his dad was his hero because he was very hardworking and responsible saying, “We never missed a meal, we always had food in the house and the bills were always paid.” His dad was a skilled handyman who knew how to do everything around the house.

While Juan described himself as not as handy as his dad had been, he said he was able to fix just about anything in his house. He worked hard as well, working a full-time night shift in grocery store warehouse the entire time he attended the university. He said hard work was a cultural value that he learned from his family. Juan also described how he wished that going to college had

been something his dad had valued to the same extent that he had valued hard work.

My participants' parents cleaned houses, worked as custodians, instructional assistants, and did odd jobs. They often held jobs that did not require that they spoke English, and some of their jobs did not require social security numbers. But all of the parents worked. The parents of my participants worked hard and they passed this value, ethic, and *educación* to their sons and daughters. An excerpt from Carlos described the realities of the world of work in his family.

My community, the Mexican culture as a whole, has this image of a woman that a woman is more about cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the kids. It has evolved now and everyone has to work because things have become more expensive - there has been a change. They think, "Now she can work, but we don't necessarily need her to become some kind of professional." But in my family, my dad didn't care if you were a guy or a girl, just "go to school, there is your future." So my sisters were always very busy doing homework, homework, homework. In my family, there was always food, but there were things we did without – things we wanted and needed.

[...]

There are a lot of challenges and opportunities, some women don't know how to take the opportunity. Some just don't have (an opportunity) because they are forced to leave

school to support the family because they are legal (have social security numbers) and their parents aren't so they have to work. Only someone like me can understand both sides of it. I'm over here and I'm over there. I can understand the circumstances. (Carlos)

When Carlos said this, I wondered if he was really saying that *I, as the researcher* could not really understand the circumstances that many Mexican immigrant families face. I'll never know. But I definitely had firsthand knowledge of high school students who worked 40 hours or more a week to help support their families because they had the residency or citizenship documentation that allowed them to work legally.

All of the participants were bi-lingual; fluent in English and in Spanish. Some of the participants' parents spoke some English, but all communicated with their families in Spanish. An example of the effect of being bi-lingual was shared by Monica who told her story of the Latino Convocation when she graduated from the university. Her family was able to understand the ceremony because it was done in both Spanish and English. As Monica recalled:

My graduation was at Wells Fargo Arena. I did my college ceremony with my mom and dad and brother and sister. The huge Latino convocation is the one the whole family came to. I found it very important that I do that convocation because it was bi-lingual and my mom could understand it. She didn't understand a lick of the college graduation

ceremony because it was all in English. My Latino Convocation was great – I was able to write her a message in Spanish. Everybody talked in Spanish, there were Mariachis, and it was really exciting. I liked it a lot. They do one every spring and every fall. The spring one is always larger – it's a lot Latino families and their tradition. You all get little serapes to wear with your cap and gown and you are able to do a small message to your family when you go up to the podium. (Monica)

After the convocation, Monica's parents had a big celebration for her at a neighboring hotel. They rented a ballroom, and 100 of her family members attended the party which included dinner and dancing. Monica said it was like a *quincinera*, the Mexican coming of age celebration for girls turning 16, or even a wedding. Her parents had carefully saved the money for this big event so that they could share the celebration with their entire family.

Carlos told the following story about the advantage of being bi-lingual. At the end of his educational life history and in his first job as a college graduate, he found out that he had a tremendous advantage because of his language skills.

Knowing another language is already double. When I was at Boeing, and my manager was white, every single time when there was a Power Point, or they needed a translator, they had me do it. After a period of time, when they needed a Power Point, my manager just handed me the stuff and said



“you do it,” and you know what, if you create the Power Point slides in Spanish and English, you get the credit!

(Carlos)

This chapter has included stories about family, friends, and the effect of the participants’ culture and community on the participants’ educational life histories. The last chapter of findings is about race and politics, with a look toward the future.

## CHAPTER 7 - STORIES OF RACE, POLITICS AND THE FUTURE

### Race

While many of the participants' stories made references to race and culture, there were some instances when the participants expressly mentioned issues related to race. For example Monica said that she believed that an Anglo student who had a similar socioeconomic background as a Latino student would have a "leg up over a Latino student because the Latino student had to figure out how to assimilate."

Natalia said that when she began studying at TSU, people thought she was Asian. They were surprised when she spoke Spanish fluently. Monica, Natalia, and Josue talked about similar experiences as students at TSU. In the excerpts that follow, the participants described in their own words some of their impressions of the racialized context of the university. Intellectual self-concept, individual motivation, and community support were all factors that helped the participants get to the university, but once there, sometimes race mattered when it came to "fit" (Tinto, 2000). Again, the excerpts are separated with multiple asterisks to indicate a change in participant storyteller.

So when I came [to TSU] and I didn't look Hispanic I wasn't automatically characterized as Latino. I didn't have an accent as some of my friends who were more American than me do who also happened to have a darker skin color. There is just a different perception on those people. I've been able to see both sides because I don't look Latino. I grew up here, I've spoken English since kindergarten, I'm

100% fluent in Spanish as well, and so people are thrown back when I start speaking Spanish because they don't think I speak Spanish. People are like, "no way." (Monica)

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My first year at TSU they thought I was Asian. Are you Asian? Filipino? I was like, "no, I am Mexican, and I speak Spanish." And they were like "What?" Spanish was my first language and then English. It was hard my first year because I remember everyone was blond and I thought, maybe I should dye my hair blond and get a tanning product because I wanted to try to fit in. Whether you like it or not, you stand out because there are just so few of us. Usually the people who speak Spanish at TSU are the workers who clean. From my freshman year to my senior year there have been more of us but at first whenever I heard someone speak Spanish I was like, "who's talking - where are you?" Now it's progressing and there are more. You walk from one class to another and you hear more Spanish. It was hard because I wanted somebody to talk to and usually I would talk to the janitors or cafeteria workers. There were not very many people like me there. (Natalia)

Latino students comprised about 10% of the undergraduate student body at TSU, a stark contrast to the participants' high schools that were over 90% Latino.

Natalia said that when she compared TSU compared to her high school experience, there weren't many "people like her there." Likewise, the university from which Josue received his bachelor's degree was 75% Latino. He described how he felt when he arrived at TSU as a graduate student and teacher.

I feel like I stand out here [at TSU]. A lot. Back in my hometown, everyone is Mexican, so I'm a dime a dozen, I look like everyone else. I used to teach at 7:30 in the morning when I got to TSU. So there were mornings where I would get to my office at 6:45 and at that point in the day the only people who are around are the janitorial staff. I was walking to my office one day and I was in my office and I had to make some copies. I was walking down the hallway and one of the custodial workers was there. I'd seen her on campus before and she had always said "hi" and that's it. I'd never spoken to her in Spanish. She comes up to me and starts speaking to me in Spanish, asking me for advice about a problem that she has with a superior, just out of the blue. I'm thinking, "Why are you coming to me for this, why not someone else in your organization? What exactly about me makes you feel comfortable to come up and speak to me in Spanish?" Those types of things happened to me all the time there, those things never happened to me growing up. At TSU, whenever someone speaks to me I am seen as Mexican. I'm seen as bi-lingual and even my Mexican

students at the community college tell me, I am the only Mexican teacher they have ever had. I didn't understand those things until I came here. Back home everybody looks like everybody else. I can tell that the minority students want that connection. They are my favorite students. I love them. Not that I don't love my TSU students, but with my TSU students, I am the professor. My community college students see me as one of them, and so they come up to me and talk to me in Spanish and they ask me questions about how my day is going and they joke with me in Spanish. I think that they definitely need that connection. My wife sees that. She is the only Mexican-American teacher in her department at Moravia High School. She is amazed that her students want to spend time with her at lunch – they want to sit with her and eat or they want to come in during the morning. She asks me, “Why do they want to come and do this with me,” and I'm like, “I think it's because you are Mexican.” Because it's the Mexican kids who want to be around her, talk to her, be near her. I know that they need us. The students need to see someone like them. The research says that the students do better academically if there is someone who is working with them that is somewhat like themselves. Getting more people to want to be teachers is a tricky thing. I say this culturally. We are not told to go to

college. We just aren't. Secondly if we do go to college, it is not to teach. We don't do that, we don't go to college to teach. We go to college to be engineers or nurses or lawyers but not to become teachers. We just aren't programmed to want to go back into school. (Josue)

Oscar described how much he liked the university. He enjoyed learning and did not ditch classes as he had in high school. He thought it was "cool" to meet people for lunch and live in the dormitories. However, as much as Oscar enjoyed his university experience, he related a painful memory as he passionately described a discussion about affirmative action in one of his introductory classes.

I have a horrible memory of TSU. We were in a 101 level social studies class and there were about 200 students. The professor had brought up the issue of financial aid and a lot of the majority students were unhappy in the class that minority students got financial aid and they didn't. One of my best friends, Scott, didn't get anything and his family was poor, he said, and he didn't get any aid. So I said to everyone in the class, "if you are getting financial aid and you got a grant and you are a minority stand up." And I stood up and one other kid stood up. There were two of us. Now, that's saying something. If all of us that they offered [financial aid] took it they would have to stop. They are offering it to us because a lot of us will never get to that

level. We will never get to that level because we have a mom who is addicted to drugs and she doesn't tell her kid to go to school because it is 2:00 in the morning and she's playing around or out doing something else. Who knows what she is doing? I'm sure all of you had parents who cared and who knew what you were doing who told you what time to go to bed, because I'm sure you didn't do it on your own. I'm sure if your mom told you that you could stay up until 2:00 in the morning you would do it, you would have, you all would have. If your mom had said it was ok to do that, if it was ok for your girlfriend to come over, you would have. In our community we had families who didn't care for their kids, but don't worry about it, there's two of us and there's a hundred of you. There was a heated argument that day, but there were only two of us that day. In that whole university we think we all get financial aid, and no, we don't. I think [financial aid] is to compensate. I don't know if it levels the playing field, and I don't know if you can level the playing field. (Oscar)

I end this subsection on race with a story from Juan. In this story, Juan related that he recalled feeling that being a minority was an advantage at time because he was able to understand things that Anglo students could not

understand. In this ethics class, Juan understood the professor's point that the Anglo student never seemed to understand.

In my ethics class in humanities and other classes I knew more about the information that some of the other students in the class. I don't know if it was because I was Latino or because of my cultural background, but I did feel that I understood the professor. For example, there was a professor who looked Anglo and later it turned out that he was Native American. He told a story about how he went to play golf once with three other Anglo individuals. They were playing golf and one of them started telling jokes like, "There was this Mexican this black guy ....." He told had told [his golfing buddies] that he didn't appreciate those kinds of jokes, and they were like, "Why should this joke bother you?" He told them that he was Native American and they were like, "Oh man," like he had given them a really good left hook. He mentioned that in class [to tell us to be] careful around other cultures when telling a joke. This was one of the first things that he shared with us. One of the Anglo students said he was in Europe last summer and he remembered being in a coffee shop and there were a couple of people who were talking about Americans. As an American he said he didn't care. If they wanted to talk badly about Americans he didn't care and he just chose to ignore



it, so why couldn't the professor just ignore it? The professor said that the student might choose to ignore it, but it was still there and if you didn't speak out and tell people that they were insulting you, you were letting it continue. The student said he didn't care and he would ignore it. The professor said people could be hurt by [words and jokes] and now [that you had had this class in ethics] you could tell them so in a civilized and educated manner. I knew where the professor was coming from yet others couldn't understand because they didn't go through the stuff that I went through when I was younger. (Juan)

Race and racism was something that Juan could understand because he had experienced it himself. He felt a connection with the professor that the Anglo student did not understand. Likewise, as teachers, Josue and his wife also experienced a special connection with their Latino students. When Oscar had tried to explain affirmative action to his 100 level social studies class, he realized the very small minority – two people – that he was a part of in that class. The connection the participants felt through race, language, and culture was a consistent, recurring theme throughout the study and it has appeared throughout these findings. While the participants did not all experience race in the same way as each other, they did experience a connection to

other Mexicans. The connection was one of language, phenotype, and culture. I will discuss this in more detail in the concluding chapter.

### Politics

At the time of this study, residency and citizenship status varied greatly within Mexican-American communities in the southwestern United States. Public schools were open to school aged children, regardless of immigration status. Immigrant students attending these schools had a wide variety of personal circumstances. For example, students who lacked residency documents might fear deportation, or be unable to access scholarship and federal financial aid. The citizenship status of the individuals within a given family might vary. For example, a student who was a U.S. citizen may have undocumented parents and siblings. An undocumented student might have siblings who were U.S. citizens.

This was the case in Natalia's family. She and her parents were undocumented until her senior year at TSU and her brother, who was born in the United States, was a citizen. In this excerpt, Natalia's recalled the dilemma that many students without documentation experience as they tried to write their college and scholarship applications and fulfill their educational aspirations.

You are all excited and you fill everything out and then you get to that question. It asks you "are you a U.S. citizen" and you are like "great, I can't apply to this." I remember when I was looking through scholarships I would meet all the qualifications and then I would get to that one question, and then I knew I couldn't apply to that one, I had all the other

qualifications but then they would get to that question. It is hard, you have that hope that maybe I can do this one and they won't ask me for my social security, its school, after all, but then they do ask. It's hard. (Natalia)

This particular obstacle sometimes seemed overwhelming to even the most optimistic student or educator. At the time of this study, the political questions surrounding immigration reform were very unsettled. The state legislature was debating laws that challenged the right to birthright citizenship granted by the U.S. Constitution, and calls for border fences dominated the media. High school students had staged walk-outs, leaving school mid-day to go to the state capital and protest what they viewed as anti-immigrant legislation. Vanessa, a U.S. citizen, born in California, described her perspective of the situation:

At the Latino Convocation at TSU, there were a lot of kids who were illegal but who managed to get through college. We actually had shirts under our gowns that said "you want to ask me for my papers, I'll give you my college degree." That was a big deal at the convocation just because here are all these kids that are illegal are graduating and no one is taking that into account...who's going to hire them with E-verify, even though they have a degree, which only 11% of Americans have? I can't even express how ridiculous that sounds to me. They're just going to have to move out of state. I was hopeful for the DREAM Act, when I was younger. I went to the rallies for five years but it didn't do

any good. These kids have been here since they were two months old, or five or six or seven or eight and they have better grades than other people then why not at least give them opportunities? (Vanessa)

Carlos described the frustration that young people felt about the differences between friends based on where they were born. For example, Carlos had a friend who achieved a very high score on his SAT test but did not receive the Latino National Scholarship because he did not have a social security number. His friend had been brought here by his parents when he was six months old. Had this friend been born in the United States, his life would have been entirely different, he would have received this large and prestigious scholarship and would have gone to college. Ultimately, a student who was born in the United States but scored 100 points less than Carlos' friend was awarded the scholarship.

The long excerpt that follows is Natalia's story of becoming a United States resident. I was reminded of Josue and Oscar's belief that luck had played a part in their stories of success. I felt that Natalia was very lucky. She had immigrated to the United States with her parents when she was three years old. This was the only home she had ever known. She received her residency just a few months before she turned 21. She was a senior in college. Had she turned 21 before receiving this important document, and been deported, she would have had to remain in Mexico for ten years before she could have applied for residency. She shared this unforgettable story with me.

I kept thinking “what if I get deported, I won’t get to come back.” Most people are like, “yay, I’m going to be 21” and I’m like “I don’t want to be 21.” What if I get deported, oh gosh.” I didn’t look forward to being 21 at all, not at all.” [About getting residency documentation]. After your month and year comes up they send you a whole packet of things you have to fill out. There is so much information, and you want to make sure you fill it out correctly, so you hire a lawyer to fill out everything because if you do it wrong you get pushed back. So we had to pay someone to get all of our paperwork done. You send it out and once they see that everything looks right, they send you a letter. They send you to get fingerprints and you have to go get your fingerprints and you pay for that too. Then you wait to see that you don’t have a criminal background and you are like, “I haven’t done anything wrong, I just crossed the border!” After the fingerprints you wait and then they send you for an interview. You go to the interview and they tell you to take all the documents that you think they might need, birth certificates and stuff like that. It was funny because my mom brought so many things. Since the year that we got here she started collecting everything – bills, diplomas, everything. We have boxes put away of everything since we arrived, bills, everything that you can think of is all saved by

year because they wanted proof that you were indeed here. So all our electric bills, water, gas, and everything from years and years ago and so we took all this stuff. When we went in there and passed through the detectors and we waited. Then you go in and take the oath. They are recording you and the camera is right here [inches away from your face] and it makes you more nervous and they ask you questions. In our case, they started with my dad. We were petitioning through my aunt, so they had to make sure that indeed my dad and my aunt were brother and sister from the same mom and dad, so they asked all these questions to make sure that you are who you are. In the middle of the interview this alarm went off in the building that supposedly something caught on fire and so we were all evacuated from the building and we had to wait until the fire fighters came in and checked everything. We waited outside an hour until they cleared everything up and then we went back. They started drilling my dad and my aunt with questions. When they finished, my dad they went to my mom and they asked her all kinds of questions. Then they asked me questions like, what is your name. They asked, me “are you paying out of state tuition” and I said “yes” and that was it. The weeks prior to that I was memorizing dates and names, my grandma’s birth day and birth year, my dad’s

and my mom's, my family information. I was memorizing dates and months and freaking out because there was so much that they could ask me. I was preparing for everything and they only asked me five questions. My dad was super nervous – he forgot his mom's name - he couldn't think. I was like, "come on dad, calm down, it is going to be OK." Then they said, "OK, it looks like everything is in order, congratulations," and they gave us the paper and it said "congratulations and blah blah blah." Several weeks later they sent a work visa and that's when I got my state ID. That day, I went back to school and I told my friends, "OK, I'm a resident now, I guess I got it!" I wish that they would find a way to shorten the time or make the process a little bit better, while they [immigrants] are waiting all that time give them a work visa. The moment you put in the petition, social security gives you a work number, but you can't use that to work. You have to use that number to file your taxes. How is that? They make us wait all that time, you can't legally work but they want us to fill out this tax form.

(Natalia)

Natalia's life changed that day. She was able to finish her senior year at TSU with federal financial aid at the university. Her dad was able to get a job "in air conditioning," meaning a job that could be obtained legally that was not

outdoors in the desert heat but inside, in air conditioning. Natalia was also able to seriously consider a career in nursing or in the medical field because she would be able to obtain the certifications she needed to work in those fields. She and her family no longer experienced the pressure and stress of constantly worrying about being deported. I found it amazing that she had been able to concentrate on her studies at the university with these additional pressures. Natalia had done the right thing, because while she was waiting for her residency documentation she had gotten an education. Now she had both a college degree and legal residency. Her story was an inspiring reminder to never give up. As Monica commented:

It is your job to prepare yourself because what if that day comes and you are not prepared? Then you are proving people right. So we tell our kids that all the time. Go to school. And some kids are like, “Why, I won’t be able to work after college, I’m undocumented, I can’t work after college, I can’t get a job,” but we tell them to go to school for the next four years, you don’t know what’s going to happen over the next four years and if you can’t get a job once you have graduated, go to school and get a graduate degree. I think it’s a bright future. (Monica)

The participants did not articulate a consensus opinion on immigration. As Monica’s excerpt indicates, she did not want her mentees to use immigration as an excuse not to get an education. She did not believe in walk-outs or marches and did not want to get into a



discussion of politics. Josue felt that the political climate would improve over time, but thought that change would come very slowly, taking as long as a generation for real reform and equal access to education to be realized. In contrast, Oscar felt there was a need for additional walk-outs and marches, believing that if the general public were made aware of the immigrants' struggles, they would change their voting patterns. Monica had participated in marches and protests, and wondered if her activism had made any difference.

Carlos warned that the cartel violence in Mexico was making its way into the United States. He voiced concern about the drug violence mentioned in music, and knew young adults who had chosen working for a drug cartel over going to college. Natalia was still getting used to the idea of being a legal resident, having lived for 18 years as an undocumented immigrant. She expressed her wish that the immigration process were not so long and arduous, remembering that her family waited 18 years for their legal residency all the while working, paying taxes, and keeping records so that one day, their dreams of being legal residents would be realized.

The difference in perspectives about immigration held by my participants was interesting but not surprising as there was diversity within this small group of first generation Mexican-American college graduates. Their predictions of the future for Latinos were also diverse, varying from hopeful to concerned.

## The Future

The participants in my study were educated, motivated, and involved in their communities. They anticipated further challenges for Latinos due to immigration politics, racism, and economic insecurity. They were willing to participate in the democratic process and desired to give back to their communities. In their roles as teacher, parent, brother, sister, mentor, leader, and in their careers they were already influencing the next generation of Latinos.

Monica spent her days working with youth as a mentor and leader, helping her mentees make their college going goals a reality. She was optimistic about the future for youth, and cautioned the youth in her program not to let political rhetoric distract them.

I think that there are a lot of people paving the road for our youth; there are a lot more programs being put in place. Our country has recognized that the minority is going to be the majority so I think the future is very bright for Latinos, I think people are finally recognizing that not only are we as capable as anyone else but that we bring additional qualities, we bring an understanding of a different culture. We bring in the ability to speak multiple languages; we bring in the ability to manage our time. A lot of these kids don't grow up in affluent homes and so they have to help their parents. They work on weekends, or after school, they go to school, a lot of our kids are holding jobs in high school and

supporting families even before they get a degree. The country, companies, organizations are all recognizing that we are an untapped resource and it's only to our benefit to help these youth succeed because they are the future of our country. (Monica)

Natalia sometimes struggled to be optimistic, and hoped for immigration reform that would help students who wanted to get their educations become residents. Josue felt that Latinos needed to find ways to promote themselves and remove the stereotypes that haunted them. The participants all agreed that education was key to a bright future and that their own children would not have a choice as to whether or not they would get a college education.

I listened to the participants who were parents themselves reflect on their views about their influence on the next generation. For example, reflecting on his own educational journey was an enjoyable experience for Josue. He talked about his wife and his considerations for his young son's educational future. His wife was the first in her family to graduate from college and was working as a teacher in an urban high school. Arguably, he wanted his son to enjoy advantages that he and his wife had not had when they went to college.

You know, my son has resources. He has two parents who are behind him, pushing him, caring about his education and I figure if he were to ever end up in the university, he would be able to offset any problems he would have in

school. But he's unique, not every kid is going to have that, you know? That's a difficult thing to consider. (Josue)

Another father, Juan, would have liked to start graduate school, but was too busy helping his four children with their homework so that they would be able to get good grades and go to college. He described the process he was using to ensure that his 16 year old daughter would be college ready when the time came.

I'm already preparing [her] stuff for colleges and universities. My daughter is going to go to college – she is ready and prepared to go to college. That is my focus. It's not about a choice. It's going to be very difficult for one of them to tell me that they don't want to study. Before I give up there will be quite a lot of speeches. If I have to walk them to TSU they are going to have to go to get the taste of it. They will have to give me one semester...before they give up they will give me one semester. (Juan)

Juan, who graduated from the university when he was thirty-two, related that he wished that his dad had given him a “kick in the butt” and made him go to college. In contrast to his father, Juan was involved in his own children's education. I found real hope for the future in this last excerpt as a hands-on father described a sweet, simple moment in family communication.

...you can also teach your kids to never be satisfied. My six year old brings home straight B's and I'm like “those B's can be A's really easily. Look how that one C just here that

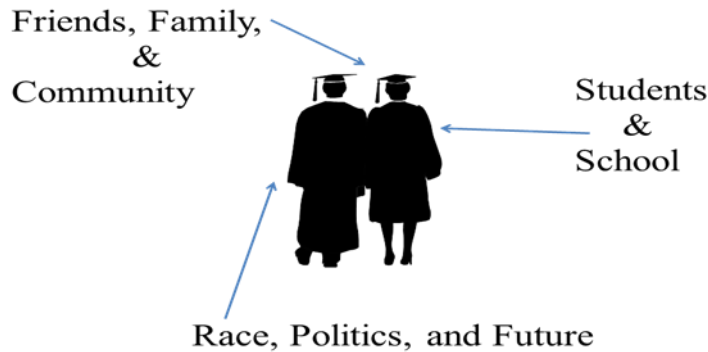
could be a B.” My nine year old brings home one or two B’s and I’m like “what happened here?,” and she’s like “I don’t know.” I say “B’s are good, but they look so much prettier when they are all A’s.” I look at my six year old and say “look at her straight A’s,” and the other child is like, “she’s only in first grade!” and I say “you can do this too.” They need the motivation. (Juan)

The chapter that follows will explore the implications of the findings.

## CHAPTER 8 - DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### Summary of Findings

In this final chapter of my study, I will begin by briefly summarizing the findings from the previous chapters. I will then restate the research question and review my methodology. Next I will discuss my interpretation of the findings and the relationship of the study to previous research. Then, I will explain the theoretical implications of the study. The final section of this chapter will include implications for educators and suggestions for additional research.



#### 4. Themes of First Generation Mexican-American College Stories

While all the participants had successfully graduated from college, and their stories were indeed stories of achievement and success, they were by no means the stories of whiz kids who did everything right on a educational journey full of empowerment, accomplishment, and rewards. These stories were much more interesting and complicated than I could have ever predicted.

Three major themes emerged from the research: 1) stories of students and school, 2) stories of friends, family, and cultural community, and 3) stories about race and politics. These themes provided the organization for the findings into

three chapters. I identified the themes inductively as I analyzed my data although my analysis was also informed by the concepts and research I outlined in my conceptual framework. I will very briefly discuss these categories in this section for the benefit of the reader.

Each participant described how she/he felt about her/his own intelligence. I incorporated these stories into the subtheme in the first chapter of findings, Chapter 5, “Stories of Students and School.” Participants had received strong positive and negative messages about their intelligence along their educational journey. Most of these messages came from the educational system itself, in terms of prizes and awards, being advanced a grade, or placed in a particular class. The participants revealed these messages to me in reflections such as “I was always smart in math,” or “I was your average, run of the mill student.”

The participants all attended similar high schools in urban southwestern cities in the United States. Their educational experiences were varied and were described in this chapter as well. For example, one participant had a fourth grade teacher who made a considerable impact on her, yet this was the only teacher in her K-12 education that she described as having an impression on her. Another participant talked about an extraordinary counselor who went the extra mile and helped her pursue private scholarships and get into college despite her immigration status.

When the participants transitioned to the large university that they attended and from which they graduated, there were surprises. Some participants changed their majors, while others learned that the university did not have the programs or activities that interested them. One participant had been surprised

when he, an avid soccer player, had learned there was no soccer team at the university. He exclaimed to me, “When I got to TSU, there was no team!” It troubled me that the participants had appeared to know so little about the university that they chose to attend. In my professional opinion, the activities and programs offered by the university was something that their high school or university counselors should have made sure the prospective freshmen students had understood.

The educational life stories of many of the participants surprised me. While I had tried to suspend my a priori notions as I conducted the research, I admit that I was surprised when I heard some of the stories. For example when I asked one participant at what point he first knew he was going to go to college, he responded, “two years after high school graduation.” I was surprised by this answer. Another of the participants had graduated from the university when he was 32 years old and a father of four, after three unsuccessful attempts at different community colleges. These counterstories opened my mind to the possibilities of alternative pathways to successful college completion.

Chapter 6, “Stories of Friends, Family, and Cultural Community” also emerged from the research as it became clear that none of the participants could have graduated from college alone. While at times their stories of motivation and determination seemed like majoritarian stories of independent self-made people, listening to the counterstories helped me see the extraordinary extra support that some students received from their familial webs. Whether it was family, educators, mentors, or support groups, other people were involved in the journey that had helped the participants achieve their goals. All participants looked back



upon the influence and support of their parents and families with forgiving and understanding eyes.

In this chapter I also included life lessons learned from parents and family. Some of these were described in the section *educación*, which translates to “education” in English, but conveys a meaning of cultural education, family values, and heritage. In this section, the participants and I had fun with the Spanish sayings, called *dichos*, which parents used to teach life lessons. For example, one participant’s mother always said to her, “*el huevon trabaja dos veces*,” which means, “the lazy person works twice,” or, “hard work pays off.” This *dicho* had taught the participant the importance of doing things right the first time.

In the final chapter of findings, Chapter 7, “Stories of Race, Politics and the Future,” I included stories about the participants at the mostly-white university listening for the extent to which race had mattered in the educational experiences of the participants. In this interesting section, one participant shared her story of having received her immigration documents just months before turning twenty-one while she was a student in her senior year at the university. Other students shared stories about phenotype and speaking Spanish.

At the end of this chapter, I shared the participants’ predictions for the future for Latinos. Most felt the future was bright for Latino generations to come, but were aware of the many political, social, and economic obstacles they faced, predicting that positive change would come slowly, perhaps in their children’s generation.

## Research Question and Methodology

By the year 2025, one out of every four school aged students in the United States will be Latino compared with one out of every five students in 2009 (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Given current population growth rates, Latino students will outnumber non-Latino students by the year 2050 (Fry, 2008). The high school dropout rate for Latinos was four times higher than for Whites at 21.4% in 2009 (NCES, 2009). And, in 2009, only 12% of Latino students who began school in the United States would complete a Bachelor's degree compared with 30% of the overall U.S. population. Given the individual and societal benefits associated with completion of a college degree, such as increased lifetime earnings, health, critical thinking, and reduced crime, incarceration, poverty, and illness, it is in the nation's best interest to increase the number of Latino college graduates (Fairweather, 2006; Gándara, 2009; Jenkins, 2001; Levan, 2008; Perna, 2003). In this study I sought to understand and analyze the educational life histories of Mexican-American college graduates, and highlight some of the factors that helped them earn their bachelor's degrees with the hope that this knowledge would help educators understand how to increase the number of Latino college graduates.

The participants were Mexican-American college graduates who had been in the United States since they were school aged or younger. They began their educational journeys in the United States educational system. Six of the participants were the first in their immediate families to graduate from college, and had recently graduated from the same university

In the process of identifying possible interviewees I met a seventh participant, Josue, who was also the first in his family to graduate from college from a different university but was a graduate student at TSU. Josue's story provided an additional texture and insights that were invaluable to the study. Therefore, ultimately I selected seven participants; four men and three women and conducted the interviews.

## Discussion of the Results

### *Interpretation of the findings*

"It's hard!" This was the phrase that was repeated to me over and over by the participants. This is my first interpretation of the findings. If we want to know why there are relatively few Latinos graduating from college, the answer is because "it's hard." If we want to know how a person who lacks immigration documentation can graduate from college, the answer is "it was hard." If we wonder how an immigrant who is the first in their entire family can graduate from college, "it's hard" is an accurate and appropriate reply.

Similarly, several participants credited their achievement to luck. "I was lucky I didn't get someone pregnant in high school," stated one participant, realizing that his life would have taken an entirely different path had that happened. Another participant pointed out all the instances in his educational life history where he felt that fate or luck had stepped in and kept him from becoming a statistic. One of the participants received her residency documents just months before her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, a lucky break because had she turned 21 before she was

awarded these documents, she would have had to return to Mexico for ten years for the immigration process to start over!

There were unlucky instances throughout these life stories as well such as having been misplaced in classes throughout school, or not having a good counselor or caring teacher. So luck cut both ways in these stories; I saw examples of both good luck and bad luck in the educational life histories of the participants. It was also notable that the theme of luck was such a strong theme in the participants' stories, which would be an interesting topic for further study. The participants' own emphasis on luck in describing their accomplishments suggests that despite their hard work and talent, they still see their successes as a matter of chance and perhaps do not take those successes for granted in ways that more privileged students would.

While the participants shared common stories in terms of intelligence, schooling, motivation, community and culture, each story and each individual was quite different. I began the study hoping to learn the stories of individuals as I agreed with Tyack (1974) who said that there was no "one size fits all solution" in education. While some of the participants went through their formal educations on a very direct path beginning in pre-school and going straight through the university, others took very indirect paths, some spending time in community colleges, and others beginning the university as adults. When I developed my participant criteria, I had not expected that six or seven people would have had such different pathways to successful college completion. Therefore, this study confirmed to me that there are many solutions to the research problem and that we, as educational professionals should never, ever give up on helping students

who desire to go to college achieve that goal. After all, despite countless barriers and obstacles, the participants in this study never gave up!

The stories were wonderful and the participants were happy to tell them. The participants reflected to me that the interview process was a positive experience for them. They were surprised to receive the verbatim transcriptions and were pleased to have copies of them for their records. The stories were interesting and important narratives that revealed the obstacles and hard work that it took for the participants to graduate from college. Through these stories, the voices of Mexican-American college graduates are incorporated into educational research, as positive reminders that academic achievement is possible even against great odds.

#### *Relationship of Current Study to Previous Research*

This study of first-in-family college graduates revealed some instances of extremely involved parents and other instances where parents were not very involved in their childrens' formal education at all. For example, one participant said "everyone pushed me" to go to school, while another participant had a single mother who did not have time to be involved in her children's formal education.

However, parent influence on the informal education (*educación*) is a characteristic of Latino/a parenting that is evident in culturally specific interactions and expectations by parents (Gonzalez, 2005; Valdez, 1996) and is an asset that should be recognized and utilized in the formal education system. The stories of families and cultural community revealed many of the cultural lessons that had been communicated in families through actions, interactions, and passed

along through *dichos*, Spanish sayings. A work ethic was very clear in these stories and it was through hard work that the participants overcame barriers and successfully completed college.

Beyond academic preparation, developing or expanding cross-cultural inter-institutional interventions in the K-16 grade levels (Olivia & Nora, 2004) that create a pathway from primary and secondary levels to the tertiary level can help prepare additional students for college. In these stories, mentoring programs were a key factor in creating a pipeline to college. The Latino Mother Daughter Program (LMDP) at TSU was especially powerful as it began in the seventh grade and provided support for the participants and their mothers through high school and university. I also found that the TSU summer bridge program was very helpful for the participants. In this program, incoming freshmen took an English class and a Biology class to get ahead in their studies in preparation for their freshmen year. They were also able to stay in the dormitories, enabling them to become familiar with the university and make new friends before the actual freshman year began. The summer bridge program gave them a head start to college.

The K-16 model requires innovative collaborations between non-traditional communities determined to close the gap in degree attainment, and a commitment to social justice that extends beyond institutional borders. For example, the University Dream Academy was a program hosted by TSU and held at area public middle and high schools designed to help urban parents to gain more knowledge about the college going process. This support program was

helpful to the participants in my study as were other targeted programs such as the Latino Business Student Association and the Latino Mother Daughter Program.

Other universities have developed summer programs for parents to attend with their children and have developed parent-to-parent networks (Ortiz, 2004, see also Kiyama, 2010). Institutions must overcome funding issues and demonstrate their commitment to help students become connected to the college. It is essential that funding is available to create an environment focused on fostering student resiliency rather than simply deficiency remediation (Macias, 1995, Gonzales, 2005, Yosso, 2005). Much can be done to create multi-aged, ethnically similar communities of scholars which link students, family, mentors, tutors, and faculty members with the purpose of creating positive college experiences (Macias, 2005; Ortiz, 2005). Academic outreach programs such as Upward Bound, MeCha, TRIO, and others (Macias, 2005) are examples of programs that are available to Latino students in order to provide additional support. Another type of educational alternative is the “School as Sanctuary Concept” which focuses on the “establishment of high-quality, interpersonal student-teacher relationships, the racial/ethnic affirmation of its students through culturally additive curricula, the maintenance of a psychological and physical safe space, and a family-like atmosphere where everyone knows each other well in order to support each other in academic and personal pursuits” (Antrop-Gonzales, 2006, p. 3). In my study, I learned firsthand how important these cultural support programs were to the students and their families.

Institutions that recognize the importance of their Latino students design curricula that engage students experientially. This approach is valuable to help

students understand how their Latino/a identity can enhance their learning and academic success, and confirm to these students the value of their life histories (Macias, 1995; Ortiz, 2004, Villalpando, 2004). This includes providing students with classes that teach the history of migration and Latino studies, as well as providing on campus opportunities to socialize with other Latinos.

The participants described how few Latinos were at TSU when they started as freshmen. They related stories about the joy of occasionally hearing Spanish in the hallways and classrooms. Loneliness and isolation may affect the social interactions of Latino first generation college students. Institutions can help students overcome these by creating mentor programs, providing interesting and meaningful on-campus activities for students, and developing innovative programs to help create a bridge from family to college.

A 2005 study of interventions at the University of Tennessee (Brewer, 2005) which provided career exploration and counseling support services to low income first generation college student indicated that the effect of this intervention was favorable; the negative effects of economic disadvantage were somewhat overcome by the interventions. A 2007 international study of first generation entrants found that when interventions targeted “first generation” as a characteristic, and provided these students with support, students were more successful (Thomas & Quinn, 2007). Based on their findings, Thomas and Quinn argued that curricular and pedagogical changes that would create more flexible higher education structures were necessary and also highlighted the need for additional research on the experiences of first generation college students, affirming the importance of this study.



Experiential learning includes coursework that allows students to use their unique talents and the knowledge that they bring to the university to create solutions to problems and create student-directed programming (Teranshini, 2007; Ortiz, 2004). Service learning programs that allow students to use their funds of knowledge (Gonzales, 2005, Teranshini, 2007) to go into the community and provide community service are other examples of experiential learning opportunities. Studies of high quality service learning programs have reported that students experience an increase in self-confidence and relationships while linking learning to educational objectives. Such programs not only provide transformational learning opportunities for students, but help communities as well (Kretchmar, 2001).

Study abroad programs are experiential learning opportunities which may help students in many ways (Kuh et al.2005; Teranshini, 2007; Vallalpanda, 2004). Latino students who studied in Latin America described self identify development through gains in self confidence and ethnic identity as they learned about themselves through the lens of a different country. Self-concept is a crucial variable in the educational process (Pascarella, 1987) and the positive effect that studying abroad may have on student self confidence and worldviews should be accessible to Latino college students. Relationship development was strong in students who studied abroad, as they bonded with their host families, their professors, and classmates in ways that are less prevalent (Teranshini, 2007) when at home on the main campus. Relationship development is a key component of both Tinto's college persistence model (1993) and political race (Guinier & Torres, 2005); study abroad seems to strengthen relationships for students.

Faculty relationships and a positive view of diversity have been correlated with success in college, (Allen, 1985), two outcomes which may result from studying abroad. In addition, study abroad is a positive factor in college persistence (Kuh et al., 2005). However, study abroad programs can be expensive, and not all students are able to take advantage of them. This is an example of an area that colleges must address in order to allow full participation by all students so that those from lower socio-economic status are able to benefit from the many advantages of such programs (Pascarella, 2004).

### *Implications for Practice*

One of the things that I learned in this study was that what took place at school was only part of the participants' success stories. As an educator, I may have over-estimated the importance of traditional schooling on the students' education in my mind! Of course, the implication of this realization is that educators need to seek out opportunities to impact urban Latino students' college-going beyond those that the traditional school house model itself provides.

It is important to note that the participants in my study were the exception. As I began to search for participants, there were not many first-in-family, Mexican-American college graduates in the community. As an educator, it is important to learn from their stories, and put into practice policies and initiatives that will enhance the odds for more Latinos to successfully graduate from college. As a nation, we can't wait for "luck" and "hard work" – we must do more to ensure that this growing segment of the population is college educated. We must listen to the sounds of distress from the miner's canary (Guinier & Torres, 2002).

My appreciation for culturally based mentoring has increased as a result of this study. More specifically, practitioners should increase the opportunities for younger students to develop mentoring relationships by intentionally putting in place programs and structures that bring successful college graduates and former high school students back into schools to mentor younger students. The most effective influence on a high school student may come from a former student who can relate to current students. Practitioners should search for organizations within the city that are already providing mentoring and leadership support and engage these organizations energetically. The Latinos in my study knew the importance of mentoring and were all rigorously involved in “giving back,” and helping others through their educational journeys.

Educators must also be intentional about explaining to students the advantages of a college education in order to increase their motivation. Students and their families should be armed with information that spells out exactly why a college education provides important long-term benefits such as increased lifelong earning, improved health and life expectancy, better consumer decision making, and access to the majority of the new jobs that will be created in the United States in the near future (Fairweather, 2006; Harvard, 2011; Levan, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004; Perna, 2003.) Educators should not assume that first generation families know enough about the benefits of a college education to make it an expectation and a priority. It cannot be a choice. It is very hard to reach this educational milestone without commitment and support from school personnel.

Within the school, it is critical that all educators believe in their students and articulate their belief in them unceasingly. Sadly, there were very few instances where participants reported that their teachers and counselors inspired them or believed in them. For example, Josue said, “no one ever told me I should go to college.” He is about to finish his doctoral degree! In some cases participants reported a single counselor or teacher that they connected with, but they did not report that their teachers, overall, as a learning community, believed in them. The messages that we, as educators, send to our students must be positive ones. After all, educators and educational system itself are important factors in the intellectual self-concepts developed by students as they matriculate.

As an administrator, I was troubled by the scheduling mishaps experienced by several participants. Correct placement in classes is fundamental to learning and preparation for college. Loss of placement in an English class in kindergarten cost one participant five years of language learning and he felt that he “never mastered the [English] language.” Another inexplicable mis-placement took a participant off the “college track” of honors and Advanced Placement (AP) classes. In addition to doing more, we must do the work of school well. These mistakes should not have happened.

Finally, there is a tension between some of the conclusions I have drawn as researcher and my role as a practitioner. My findings could be interpreted to mean that the work of schools is without merit. That is not the case. I believe that collecting and analyzing these stories of success as told by the participants has influenced my role as practitioner. One story demonstrated that a dedicated and resourceful high school counselor could make a difference by helping an

immigrant student find scholarships. Another showed that educators who believed in a student positively impacted his or her self-concept. And stories where the participants showed great perseverance tell us as practitioners to never give up on our students, no matter how difficult their situation may be.

### *Theoretical Considerations*

Tinto's longitudinal model of institutional departure, (1993) was a useful starting point for me to think about college persistence in this study. However, this model became problematic because it required the student to assimilate to college, to "fit in" in order to be successful. The model did not account for the starts and re-starts that I found in my participants' educational life histories, nor did it consider the variety of contexts and challenges that existed for these underrepresented students (Tierney, 1992; 2000).

The participants benefitted greatly both from the culturally based support that they received at the university in terms of social and academically based Latino organizations, and the emotional, spiritual and cultural support of their families (Yosso, 2006). The lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT) was useful in understanding the educational life histories of my participants; therefore their counterstories of cultural community became a significant theme in the findings. In my participants' educational life histories, I also heard counterstories to Tinto's model as the participants related how they had remained deeply involved with their cultural community all the while attending and successfully completing the majority-white university.

While there was a tension between Tinto's model and CRT, it was helpful to understand that the participants were navigating (and sometimes struggling) through a racialized space at the university, (Guinier & Torres, 2002; Yosso, 2006), where both the institution and race mattered. While a more radical approach to institutionalized racism is a legitimate theme found in critical race theory, the counterstories indicated that a race conscious approach to college going, such as political race (Guinier & Torres, 2002) which begins with race and then addresses the needs of communities of color by building cross-racial coalitions can be a pragmatic compromise within CRT (Powers, 2007).

#### *Suggestions for Future Research*

If race matters in the education of Latino students, what should be the role of the school regarding race? Should schools seek to minimize the harmful effects of institutionalized racism on students by a) openly discussing the reality of race at school (Lewis, 2007) and b) recognizing the values and knowledge that immigrant Mexican youth bring to school by incorporating biculturalism and bilingualism into the curriculum (Gonzalez, 2005; Yosso, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999)? If schools were to invite immigrant parents into the process of preparing their children for college, would the results be more positive and would more children begin to benefit from the opportunities of a college education (Michie, 2005)? If schools more directly engaged issues of race and culture, would Latino students experience a more relevant curriculum and more fulfilling relationships with their teachers? These are excellent examples of questions that require more study.

Any of the themes or sub-themes that I uncovered in this study could be researched in greater depth. For example, one participant and I agreed that a study on the effect of teen pregnancy on college completion in the Mexican-American community would be an important study. As he said, “this is an important issue for us, culturally.” An entire study could be done around the *dichos*, or sayings that Latinos use to pass along meaning. That would be a very fun study; one that would reveal cultural information about the *educación* that students receive outside of their formal schooling.

Likewise, would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study and evaluation of some of the programs which helped my interviewees. Analyses of the Latino Mother Daughter Program or the Latino Business Students Organization would certainly yield interesting insights. These programs were invaluable to the participants in the study. How many other students have taken part in these programs? What is the percentage of the participants in these programs who completed college? What percentage of first-in-family college students graduate without the additional support of these culturally based programs? These questions would be fascinating for further research.

Any study that focused on programs for Latino parents would be beneficial. The University Dream Academy was one program that was being used in the city where this study took place. Has this program been effective? Does this program effectively convey college going information to parents? What information do parents need in order to help their children?

What about the issue of placement in classes? Three of the seven participants had been misplaced into classes based on scheduling mishaps or a

discipline issue. How many students are misplaced either in classes that are too hard, or too easy? What tools are available that would help administrators make sure that their students are accurately placed? Are Latino students more often misplaced in classes than are other students? To what extent does English proficiency influence student placements?

Obviously, given the growing number of Mexican-Americans in the educational system, there are many areas for future research; this research is urgently needed as the achievement gap between Latino and white students continues to increase. The overarching lesson that I learned from this study is to never, ever give up on finding educational solutions that will help all students achieve academically. I hope the stories found in this study will inspire other educational researchers, practitioners, and students to keep going - even when “it’s hard” and with or without “luck.” It won’t be easy, but the work is essential.



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