A Phenomenological Study of First-generation Latino Graduates of Community College and Protective Factors of Academic Resilience

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A Phenomenological Study of First-generation Latino Graduates of Community College and Protective Factors of Academic Resilience

Abstract
This study examined the reasons behind first-generation Latino students’ academic success in attaining associate degrees in community colleges in the United States, focusing specifically on academic resilience factors among this cohort. The research comes in response to the awareness that, despite the U.S.’s rapidly growing Latino population, Latinos have the lowest higher education attainment level compared to all other ethnic groups. While the structural factors behind this have been examined, there is relatively little research on the enabling factors driving Latinos, specifically those who are first-generation students, who do successfully complete higher education degrees in community colleges, their main entry into postsecondary education. In order to gain insight into the factors associated with academic resilience from the perspective of first-generation Latino students who have completed an associate degree at a community college, a phenomenological approach was employed to describe the lived experiences of these students. A purposeful sample of 10 graduates at a community college in the northeast United States was used. Data was attained by qualitative inquiry through in-depth interviews, and subsequently analyzed to help the researcher develop structural themes. The themes that emerged from the study found that perseverance, familial support, spirituality and positive interaction from others may impact the ability of first-generation Latino students to continue to persist towards degree completion. Recommendations were described to assist institutions of higher education to recognize that individual, familial, and environmental protective factors can have a significant positive impact on the academic success of first-generation Latino students in community colleges.

Document Type
Dissertation

Degree Name
Doctor of Education (EdD)

Department
Executive Leadership

First Supervisor
Janice Girardi

Second Supervisor
Carla Smith

Subject Categories
Education

This dissertation is available at Fisher Digital Publications: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_etd/232
A Phenomenological Study of First-generation Latino Graduates of Community College
and Protective Factors of Academic Resilience

By

Homiler Elie Phanor

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by
Dr. Janice Girardi

Committee Member
Dr. Carla Smith

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education
St. John Fisher College

December 2015
Dedication

Many individuals were instrumental in the completion of this dissertation study.

First, I am deeply grateful to all of the graduates who participated in this study and shared their stories of their journey with me. Your dreams, stories, and voices are the heartbeat of this dissertation. I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to meet all of you. This research is also dedicated to all the students who have experienced hardships as I have also, yet have found a way to persist towards degree completion. To any student struggling to persist, especially at the community college level, do not give up, believe in yourself, continue to have faith, and ignore ill advice. Continue to be resilient and you will persevere. There is no time limit on your journey towards academic success.

Team members of Cohort 5 at SJFC were also instrumental to my educational achievement. Specifically, Dr. Angela Green was influential in my understanding of public school systems, living a balanced life, and overcoming challenges in interpersonal relationships. Dr. Shango Blake was significant in my understanding of culture, politics, business, and leadership in my life beyond the classroom. I thank you both enormously for your continued support throughout the dissertation journey. I have truly found friends for life.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my dissertation committee members and my executive mentor. To my committee chair, Dr. Girardi, I am thankful for your unwavering support and encouragement during challenging times in this process.
and for your insightful considerations on how to approach the study. To my committee member, Dr. Smith, I am grateful for your advice on my methodology and statistics, academic writing, and constructive feedback. Above all, I express thanks to both of you for validating my work, adapting to changes midway through this journey, and inspiring me to seek more professional opportunities. My executive mentor, Paul Dillon, also aided me throughout the process. He was instrumental in helping me refine my dissertation topic and understand the work involved in being an instructor and administrator on the college level. The weekly meetings we had were certainly beneficial to my experiences during this journey.

Thank you to my brother, Gaby, who I hope to continue inspiring to be a light that shines on earth. He has great untapped potential, and it is my hope that through my successes, he may be inspired to believe successes in his life are also attainable. To my brother in Christ, Vional, it is my hope that I inspire both your spiritual and professional life so that you may become the best you can in all things. Continue to persevere through all challenges and aim high to make a difference in this world. You inspire me to be consistent with my professional pursuits. I would also like to thank my awesome father, Louis, whose leadership has instilled in me that I can always do more than what is expected. A special thanks to my mother, Gabrielle, whose work ethic, strength, perseverance, and drive inspire me to reach higher heights in both my personal and professional endeavors.

This dissertation is dedicated to family and friends close to me. Marie, Marjorie, and Diala Rene have allowed me to use their home to rest every other weekend for three years. The Rene family has always been so close to me that Marie is my other mother,
and Marjorie and Diala are my sisters, but their open arms have opened my heart even more for them. To my dear friend, LaTarsha Johnson, who encouraged me while writing this dissertation when it appeared to be an isolated and lonesome process; I thank you for being there to help me keep the end in mind and to be as resilient as you are in your nursing program.

Last but not least, all of this would not have been possible without my personal experiences. Because of the passing of my sister on February 8, 2002, I have become more resilient to hardships. Through my spiritual relationship with God, I have increased my resilience to any type of individual, familial, and environmental adversity I experience. Lord, continue to give me the wisdom to help others contextualize your love.
Biographical Sketch

Homiler Elie Phanor is currently a lecturer of business at an institution of higher education. Mr. Phanor attended Kean University from 2000 to 2004 and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Management Science and a minor in Music in 2004. He completed his Master of Business Administration with one concentration in Financial Management and another concentration in Management from Fairleigh Dickinson University in 2009; a Master of Science with a concentration in Accountancy from St. Peter’s University in 2009; a Master of Arts with a concentration in Corporate and Organizational Communication from Fairleigh Dickinson University in 2010; and a Master of Arts with a concentration in Theological Studies from Midwestern Baptist Seminary in 2013.

Mr. Phanor came to St. John Fisher College in the spring of 2013 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. He pursued his research in the Factors of Academic Resilience That Aid First-generation Latino Students Attain Academic Success by Completing an Associate Degree at a Community College under the direction of Dr. Janice Girardi and Dr. Carla Smith and received the Ed.D. degree in 2015.
Abstract

This study examined the reasons behind first-generation Latino students’ academic success in attaining associate degrees in community colleges in the United States, focusing specifically on academic resilience factors among this cohort. The research comes in response to the awareness that, despite the U.S.’s rapidly growing Latino population, Latinos have the lowest higher education attainment level compared to all other ethnic groups. While the structural factors behind this have been examined, there is relatively little research on the enabling factors driving Latinos, specifically those who are first-generation students, who do successfully complete higher education degrees in community colleges, their main entry into postsecondary education.

In order to gain insight into the factors associated with academic resilience from the perspective of first-generation Latino students who have completed an associate degree at a community college, a phenomenological approach was employed to describe the lived experiences of these students. A purposeful sample of 10 graduates at a community college in the northeast United States was used. Data was attained by qualitative inquiry through in-depth interviews, and subsequently analyzed to help the researcher develop structural themes. The themes that emerged from the study found that perseverance, familial support, spirituality and positive interaction from others may impact the ability of first-generation Latino students to continue to persist towards degree completion. Recommendations were described to assist institutions of higher education to recognize that individual, familial, and environmental protective factors can have a
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

The Hispanic population in the United States is growing steadily and is set to comprise a quarter of the total population by 2050 (Brennan & Lumina Foundation for Education, 2011). In line with this, increasing numbers of Hispanic, also termed Latino, students have been attending postsecondary institutions across the country; however, this number has not been proportional to the overall growth of this demographic, nor is it comparable with other minority groups or the majority White population. In short, Latinos are underrepresented in terms of postsecondary degree attainment and, among them, first-generation students in particular. This study employed a qualitative methodology to investigate the experiences and perspectives of 10 first-generation Latino students who have earned an associate degree from a community college, using academic resilience as the theoretical lens through which to analyze the factors behind their success.

A review of the literature revealed that those particularly at risk for early departure from college include first-generation students, students from historically underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, and students from non-native English-speaking or lower-income families (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). Engle and Tinto (2008) reported that over 4.5 million first-generation students were enrolled in postsecondary institutions in the United States, and they were nearly 4 times more likely to leave these institutions without a degree in comparison to their peers. In a further study assessing the
parental involvement of first- and second-generation college students, Hicks (2006) concluded that first-generation students had different expectations of college, demonstrated poorer academic abilities, lacked social preparation and self-esteem, and experienced more financial constraints than non-first-generation students. These disparities were compounded by differences in race, with the Latino population notably showing low levels of attainment at the postsecondary level.

The understanding of this matrix of race, generation, and structural and individual factors is of primary interest to this study, with its focus on first-generation Latino students. The interrelation of these factors was viewed through the lens of the resilience theory and, specifically, theories of academic resilience. Research in this field has found that those who come from highly stressed family backgrounds or resource-disadvantaged communities often overcome barriers that may be seen as difficult to manage (Benard, 2004). Originally, scientists theorized that resilience was a trait found in a few invulnerable “super kids,” but research on this topic has indicated that resilience is the norm for some individuals (Benard, 2004). Such research on strategies based on resilience theories guided this study, and may aid in the development of tools that increase the rate of academic success among first-generation Latino students at community colleges.

Problem Statement

According to the 2010 Census, 308.7 million people resided in the United States, of which 50.5 million, or 16%, were of Latino descent. This represented an increase of 43%, or 35.3 million, from 2000, which is 4 times the growth of the total population at 10%. However, despite this growth in the Census data, the number of Latino individuals
completing college degrees does not show similar increases, especially first-generation Latinos (Pew Hispanic Center, 2012). Among the 1.7 million bachelor’s degrees awarded in 2010, 71% were awarded to non-Hispanic Whites, 10% to non-Hispanic Blacks, 8.5% to Hispanics, and 7% to non-Hispanic Asian/Pacific Islanders (Pew Hispanic Center, 2012). In terms of associate degrees, in 2010, 66% of associate degree earners were White, 13% were African American, and 12% were Latino.

Delving more deeply into this, statistics between 1999-2000 and 2009-2010 indicated an increase in the number of bachelor degrees conferred by 26% for Whites, 53% for Blacks, 87% for Hispanics, and 51% for Asian/Pacific Islanders, and an increase in associate degrees conferred by 35% for Whites, 89% for Blacks, 118% for Hispanics, and 58% for Asian/Pacific Islanders (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012). Despite these overall increases in each group, there continues to be a clear disparity in the educational attainment between Latinos and those of other groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). This phenomenological study of first-generation Latino graduates aimed to respond to the needs of this demographic by examining in-depth factors that drive Latinos’ academic success and, conversely, key aspects that may impede their educational achievements.

This study arguably merits in-depth academic attention given the growing Latino population in the United States and its future economic potential for the country as a whole. It has been argued that if the United States does not serve this demographic to help reach the completion of degrees in higher education institutions, it will lose its ability to compete in the complex global economy (Brennan, 2011). It has been found that 50% of Hispanic students start their postsecondary education at a community college
(Berkner & Choy, 2008; Pew Hispanic Center, 2012), making it a key potential crossroads in terms of their educational outcomes. Community colleges can also be seen as a key site in which to explore the socioeconomic characteristics previously discussed, as they relate to educational attainment.

Berkner and Choy (2008) analyzed a longitudinal study by the NCES that provided information on rates of persistence, program completion, transfer, and attrition over the academic years from July 2003 to June 2006. Findings from the study indicated that 44% of low-income students attended community colleges as their first college after high school, compared to only 15% of high-income students who enrolled in community colleges. In addition, it was found that 38% of students whose parents did not graduate from college chose community colleges as their first institution, compared with 20% of students whose parents graduated from college.

As indicated by the findings of a 6-year longitudinal study by the NCES on the enrollment and employment experiences of a sample of undergraduates during the 2003-2004 academic year, only 34% of first-time, full-time students completed the associate degree within 6 years, and 25% of part-time freshmen completed the associate degree within 6 years (Radford, Berkner, Wheeless, & Shepard, 2010). The findings of Radford et al. also demonstrated that nearly half of students dropped out before completing a degree or transferring. In another study on factors that contribute to the success of first-generation Mexican American males at a community college in South Texas, Burns (2010) indicated that the achievement of Latinos is a major concern; the Mexican American completion rate was 18%, and special programs are needed to address the attrition problems of Latinos. In sum, these studies demonstrated that first-generation
Latino students who attend community college, their main mode of postsecondary education (Pew Hispanic Center, 2012), are not graduating at the same rate of other groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). However, little research has been undertaken to date on the reasons behind this and, conversely, why a proportion of Latino students do complete these degrees in a timely manner. It is partly to this gap that this study responds.

Another key disparity that has been understudied, particularly as it relates to the Latino group in the United States, is that the majority of parents of Latino students have not attained college degrees. DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, and Tran’s (2011) study aimed to provide data-driven information on more multifaceted ways of assessing institutional graduation rates by taking into account the characteristics of students that 4-year postsecondary institutions enroll as first-time freshmen. They found that 42% of students whose parents attended college graduated within 4 years, but only 27% of first-generation students graduated within 4 years. A similar study by the NCES in 2010 showed that while the graduation rate was 69% for those who attained a bachelor’s degree and whose parents earned degrees, the graduation rate was 40% for those who were first in their family to attend college (Radford et al., 2010). Again, the reasons for why Latino students within this first-generation bracket may attain these degrees, compared to the higher proportion who do not, lack examination and warrant scrutiny as a means of helping education practitioners and institutions better understand the factors that could increase the academic success of first-generation Latino students in community colleges.
In summary, the problem statement for this research focused on three key understudied elements, and the need for further evidence in each area to expand the capacity of educational institutions to support Latino students through their postsecondary educational trajectory: their lower attainment levels in associate degrees; socioeconomic characteristics informing these lower attainment levels, and how these have been mitigated towards successful attainment; and the first-generation status of Latino students as it relates to both of these elements.

**Theoretical Rationale**

The theoretical framework used to guide this study was that of academic resilience theory, as informed by resilience theory. Academic resilience theory was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study because it addresses the development of resilience specific to academic success, which is key to this research on first-generation Latino graduates of a community college. In addition, academic resilience theory was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study because resilience theory, as it was originally developed, does not address the development of high expectations and academic standards as well as opportunities for participation and contribution, and has fallen short of explaining the process of resilience that takes into account academic success factors. The following sub-sections present each of these aspects in turn.

**Academic resilience theory.** Academic resilience is the ability to deal effectively with setbacks, stresses or pressures in an academic setting (Martin & Marsh, 2008). Studies on academic resilience started in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the studies of Germain (1979), Rutter (2000), and Werner (2000). Through their individual studies, these researchers found that children’s development is deeply affected by their
interactions between the biological, psychological, and social characteristics and conditions in their family, peer group, school, and community. Similar to resilience in the field of psychology, academic resilience theory has emphasized both risk factors and protective factors that influence academic success resilience (Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009). Academic risk factors have been defined as those that have the potential to limit academic success, such as being a minority student, coming from a home where English is not the primary language, or being a first-generation student (Cerna, Perez, & Saenz, 2009; Education Trust-West, 2010; Perez et al., 2009). Academic protective factors have been defined as resources and strengths that modify risk and increase the probability of a positive outcome during a time of hardship in an academic setting when a negative consequence is expected (Education Trust-West, 2010; Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004).

Previous studies on academic resilience have used phenomenology as a research method. These include a study by Morales (2008) on the academic resilience of exceptional female students of color, and by Cunningham, Corprew, and Becker (2009) on the achievements of high-achieving African American adolescents and their future expectations. In line with this, a phenomenological method was seen as equally appropriate to this study, which explored the perceptions of first-generation Latinos who have successfully graduated and the factors that led to their success, with a specific focus on resilience factors through the lens of academic resilience.

**Resilience theory.** The basis of academic resilience theory is resilience theory. Garmezy, Masten, and Tellegen (1984) are credited with the earliest research on resilience, which studied three cohorts of children of schizophrenic mothers. Cohort 1 of
the study was comprised of approximately 200 children whose parents experienced stressful life events; Cohort 2 was comprised of a small group of 32 children who had experienced heart defects from their infancy to early childhood years; and Cohort 3 was comprised of a group of 29 children who were severely handicapped and faced the stress of leaving a special school for handicapped children to attend a regular classroom in a larger public school. Garmezy et al. conducted the study in search of signs of the development of psychopathology. They found that despite their hardships, the children were functioning well. The research focused on stress resistance, indicating that when certain protective factors were present among children, an immunity to stress was formed.

The emergence or development of the concept of resilience is generally associated with the work of Werner and Smith (1992). They conducted a longitudinal study of the impact of a variety of risk factors and stressful events on a cohort of 505 men and women who were born in 1955 in Kauai, Hawaii. As children, the men and women were exposed to familial alcoholism, poverty, and violence. The parents of most of the children did not graduate from high school and worked laborer jobs. Findings indicated that despite their adverse environmental conditions, approximately one-third of the children demonstrated positive adaptation in a number of identified areas. In order to better understand these positive adaptations, Werner and Smith identified protective factors associated with this subset of youth, categorized as the characteristics of the child, family, and environment that helped reduce the effect of hardship, and also as protective factors within the individual, protective factors in the family, and protective factors in the community, respectively.
The characteristics of the protective factors within the individual for the youth in the study included being agreeable, cheerful, friendly, responsive, and sociable (Werner & Smith, 1992). When families of the youth demonstrated protective factors, it was revealed that the increase in resiliency of the youth stemmed from having the opportunity to establish, early on, a close relationship with at least one competent, emotionally stable person in their family who was sensitive to their needs. The study also revealed that protective factors in the community that increased the resiliency of youth stemmed from the emotional support from elders and peers in their respective communities. These factors were subsequently identified as forming the foundation of resilience theory in academic research, and were applied in the present study as a useful tool to analyze both the individual and the wider protective factors that may influence the success of Latino students in earning an associate degree.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the factors associated with academic resilience from the perspective of first-generation Latino students who have completed an associate degree. Although an increasing number of studies have attempted to describe the factors that aid first-generation Latino students complete a bachelor’s degree (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004; Reid & Moore, 2008; Smith & Zhang, 2010), few studies have focused on and contributed to the literature specifically on first-generation Latino students at community colleges, which are their main entrance into postsecondary education (Pew Hispanic Center, 2012). Even fewer studies have attempted to gain
insight into the perspective of successful first-generation Latino students in order to explain which particular factors of resilience have helped them attain an associate degree.

To address this gap, a phenomenological study of 10 first-generation Latino graduates was conducted using a sample of graduates at a community college that is a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) located in the northeast United States. Specifically, the sample population consisted of graduates who have attained academic success by completing an associate degree. The aim of this research was to identify factors of academic resilience based on the lived experiences of participating graduates.

**Research Questions**

Research questions are interrogative statements that narrow the statement of purpose to specific questions (Creswell, 2013). This study focused on factors associated with academic resilience from the perspective of first-generation Latino students who have completed an associate degree.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What individual, familial, and environmental factors contribute to the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college?
2. What risk factors affect the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college?
3. What barriers or challenges do first-generation Latinos at community colleges encounter while attempting to persist toward degree completion?
Potential Significance of the Study

Marshall and Rossman (2006) believed there are three possible areas for a study’s significance: (a) knowledge in the area, (b) policy considerations, and (c) use by practitioners. This study contributes to all three areas. The findings from participants’ perspectives in this study contribute to the existing research on the collegiate experience of first-generation Latino students at community colleges. Second, the experiences of participants in this study provide insight into the factors of academic resilience that aid first-generation Latino students at community colleges to attain academic success by completing an associate degree. This empirical study examining the relationship between completing a degree and the academic resilience of first-generation students is also beneficial to college leaders, and may additionally increase funding opportunities for community colleges which serve higher numbers of disadvantaged students than 4-year institutions (Wells, 2008). Third, these findings may assist policymakers and practitioners in developing a deeper understanding of the unique challenges faced by first-generation Latino students at community colleges.

The study may be of particular interest to policymakers from the federal government, such as the U.S. Department of Education which, in 2009, offered over 47 million dollars to McNair programs nationwide. McNair programs are a branch of Federal TRIO Programs which are designed to provide educational opportunity outreach programs to motivate and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including low-income students, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Currently, the community college for this study was funded by the TRIO program under its Student Support Services Program (SSSP),
which has been in operation since 1980; therefore, findings may serve further to build the
knowledge driving TRIO.

Additionally, this study is of significance to educators who are particularly
interested in recruiting, retaining, and graduating first-generation students. It is the
researcher’s hope that the identification of the factors of academic resilience in this study
among these students may help impact the community college graduation rates of first-
generation students, and encourage educators to help first-generation Latino students at
community colleges better adapt to the college academic environment immediately upon
their enrollment. Given this potential, it is imperative that a study such as this on the
academic resilience of first-generation Latino students at community colleges is used as a
resource for both college students and administrators.

**Definitions of Terms**

The following are terms and definitions used throughout the study:

*Academic resilience* – This is a person’s ability to deal effectively with setbacks,
stresses or pressures in an academic setting (Martin & Marsh, 2008).

*Academic success* – For the purposes of this study, academic success is defined as
the successful completion of an associate degree at a community college.

*Associate degree* – “An award that requires completion of an organized program
of study of at least 2 but less than 4 years of full-time academic study or more than 60,
but less than 120 semester credit hours” (NCES, 2008, n.p.).

*Environmental protective factor* – This refers to the internal assets of inclusion,
social conditions, access, and involvement (Barankin & Khanlou, 2007).
**Latino** – The terms *Latino* and *Hispanic* both refer to people who classify themselves in one of the specific Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino categories such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Cuban, as well as those who indicate they are of another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin. People of Spanish origin are those whose origins are from Spain, the Spanish-speaking countries of Central or South America, or the Dominican Republic. The terms *Hispanic*, *Latino*, and *Spanish* are used interchangeably throughout this study (U.S. Census, 2010).

**Familial protective factor** – This refers to the internal assets of attachment, communication, family structure, parent relations, parenting style, sibling relations, parents’ health, and support outside the family (Barankin & Khanlou, 2007).

**First-generation** – This term refers to college students who are the first in their family to complete a degree at an institution of higher education in the United States (Higher Education Research Institute [HERI], 2014).

**Individual protective factor** – This refers to the internal assets of temperament, learning strengths, feelings and emotions, self-concept, ways of thinking, adaptive skills, social skills, and physical health (Barankin & Khanlou, 2007).

**Protective factor** – This term is defined as internal and external assets, resources, and strengths that modify risk and increase the probability of a positive outcome during a time of hardship when a negative consequence is expected (Fraser et al., 2004).

**Resilience** – This term refers to “the ability to recover quickly from disruptive change, illness, or misfortune without being overwhelmed or disabled by such disruptions” (Harnish, 2005, p. 2).
Risk factor – For the purposes of this study, this term refers to the factors that reduce resistance to adversity (Smith-Osborne, 2007).

Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the ways in which this study contributes to the existing literature on the education of first-generation Latino students attending postsecondary institutions, as well as to the theoretical body of work on academic resilience. Given the growing population of Latinos in the United States, community college leaders should be knowledgeable about the issues, challenges, and successes relevant to this group that will, in turn, help them understand how to provide better services for their increasingly diverse college community.

Chapter 2, Review of the Literature, next provides a literature review of studies relating to the theory of academic resilience, Latinos in postsecondary education, first-generation students, and risk and protective factors that influence academic success. Chapter 3, Methodology, provides a clear description of and justification for the methodology, discussion on the setting and population, data collection procedures, and data analysis instruments used. Chapter 4 explains the results of the data. Lastly, Chapter 5 explains how the findings deepen our understanding of factors that aid first-generation Latino students at community colleges attain academic success. It also states the limitations of the study and provides recommendations for procedures and practices.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

Although the college enrollment rate of Latinos has the highest rate of growth among major ethnic groups over the last decade (Santiago & Brown, 2004; Taylor, Fry, Velasco, & Dockterman, 2010), they are the group that is least likely to persist to degree completion (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, Whitmore, & Miller, 2007). To increase the number of Latino students earning college degrees, colleges should understand why Latino students do not successfully persist towards degree completion and which factors influence this completion. In an effort to explore this issue in depth, this chapter includes an empirical examination of the literature on the topic of first-generation Latino students and academic success in community colleges. For this purpose, a review of relevant studies was conducted in the following areas: (a) the performance of first-generation Latino students in community colleges; and (b) first-generation students and resilience, including (1) the risk factors challenging academic success and (2) the protective factors contributing to academic success, as per resilience theory. All studies have been reviewed using an academic resilience theoretical lens selected as the guiding framework for this research, which is discussed in detail in the following section.

Academic Resilience Theory

Major contributors to the emergence of resilience theory in the field of psychology have agreed that many socially and educationally disadvantaged children often display academic resiliency (Garmezy et al., 1984; Masten & Coatswork, 1998;
Werner, 1989; Werner & Smith, 1977). In response, academic resilience theory was
developed to understand how students effectively deal with setbacks, stresses or pressures
in an academic setting (Martin & Marsh, 2008), and how it can heighten the likelihood of
academic success despite the occurrence of stressful events and environments (Morales,
2011). Examples of stressors or risk factors in an academic setting include meeting
deadlines, maintaining class attendance, exam pressure, and difficult schoolwork (Martin
& Marsh, 2006).

While many scholars have suggested that schools provide opportunities for
students to build relationships that promote resilience, not enough researchers have
studied resilience within a school or an educational context (Martin & Marsh, 2008).
However, landmark studies of academic resilience do exist, such as the longitudinal study
by Rutter, Maughan, Mortimer, and Ouston (1979) of approximately 3,000 students who
were poverty-stricken because of immigration, and who experienced urban stress, and
emotional disorders. The researchers found that high academic standards, incentives and
rewards, appropriate feedback and praise, teachers’ modeling of positive behavior, and
offering students opportunities to experience responsibility were significantly correlated
with positive outcomes. In addition, the findings supported reason to believe that the
home, neighborhood, and culture of individuals gave them leverage in persistence despite
experiencing hardships. In short, the findings of the study make it clear that schools that
have academic support systems, demonstrate better results in promoting the academic and
social success of students than schools in urban areas that lack resources.

Other landmark studies have led researchers to extract both individual and
environmental factors driving academic resilience. Gonzalez and Padilla (1997) studied
2,169 Mexican American high school students stemming from three different high schools in California. The quantitative study by Gonzalez and Padilla examined whether a supportive academic environment, a sense of belonging to school, and cultural loyalty enhanced resilience. It was found that resilient students had a much higher perception of peer/family support and placed a higher value on school and peer belonging, compared to students identified as non-resilient. This was due to the importance put on environmental factors at the high school such as teacher feedback, and integrating culture and family at the school. Peer/family support played a significant role in the academic resiliency of the students.

In a similar landmark study, Alva (1991) examined 384 tenth-grade Mexican American students who were deemed academically more successful than those of others groups, despite not sharing a similar sociocultural background. The researcher found resilient students reported higher levels of the role of protective resources such as teachers, family, and friend support, and felt more encouraged to attend college, compared to their non-resilient peers. These protective resources were categorized in three factors: (a) sociocultural, (b) personal, and (c) environmental. Later, Alva and Padilla (1995) wrote a paper presenting the conceptual framework of academic resilience of Mexican American students who were considered at-risk youth. The researchers’ conceptual framework attempted to answer the question: “Why do some Mexican American students do well while others fail, despite sharing similar economic and cultural backgrounds?” It was determined that resilience of those students who overcame adversity was related to individual protective factors that reflected attitudes, skills, and knowledge. Alva and Padilla called for more empirical research on invulnerable children.
relating to academic failure—a recommendation with which this study resonates, given its focus on uncovering similar invulnerability among, albeit older, academic students.

In addition to Alva and Padilla’s (1995) framework on academic resiliency, other significant studies have used resilience theory as a framework when examining the experiences of academically successful students (Cavazos et al., 2010; Morales, 2008; Perez et al., 2009). These studies all referenced Conchas’ (2006) study which highlighted factors that contribute to school success among 27 Black, 26 Latino, and 27 Vietnamese American students in northern California who were considered low-income and academically successful. Using a mixed method that prioritized students’ voices, Conchas sought to uncover and reveal how and why these students of color excelled in school despite limited opportunity. His findings suggested that environmental factors such as peer group relations and the collaboration of race-ethnic groups with small learning communities greatly contributed to the participants’ academic success. He also stated that institutional mechanisms and culture may impact the success of students of all backgrounds, and that it is imperative that students understand their minority profile to their advantage by confirming positive images of themselves with teacher and counselors, and other positive peer networks.

More studies that examined factors that increase academic success among first-generation Latino students have continued to evolve. Resiliency and support have been prevalent motifs in the literature on factors that contribute to the persistence of academic success among first-generation college students. In a study by Cornelius-White, Garza, and Hoey (2004) that examined 122 high-academic achieving Mexican American seniors from seven schools in south Texas, the results found that a father’s level of education, a
family’s equal use of English and Spanish in the home, and family support of students’
growth in other areas of their life had the highest correlations with academic success. In
addition to this, it was recommended by the researchers that the academic integration of
students that interconnects the classroom, the community, and the home be further
explored.

In a comparable study that sought to analyze the stories of 12 successful Latina/o
students who endured hardship which affected their access to a large urban university,
Zalaquett (2006) found that individual, familial, and environmental factors contributed to
the students’ success. The individual factors cited by Zalaquett were a sense of
responsibility toward others and sense of accomplishment. The researcher determined
that familial factors were comprised of the presence of family and friendship, while the
environmental factors were comprised of community support and school personnel.
However, since several researchers reported that first-generation students receive
significantly less emotional support from family and friends, despite the sacrifices first-
generation parents make to send their children to college (Orozco, 2008), it is important
to consider academic resilience as a possible option that can help first-generation Latino
college students increase their graduation rates, despite encountering risk factors that
limit educational opportunity (Perez et al., 2009).

Latino Students and Community College

**Community college.** Brint and Karabel (1989) highlighted the popular cultural
belief that America is comprised of individuals who have great ambition and talent to
help propel the nation. However, in the 1800s, the average American had a fifth-grade
education (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Hence, the community college was created to aid
individuals who had great ambition and talent to help propel the nation, but needed help to develop their skills. In 1892, William Harper, the president of the University of Chicago, created a division at the university that included the first two years of college being comprised of basic education, now known as general education. Undertaking this allowed room for the formation of the associate degree (Brint & Karabel, 1989). In 1901, Joliet Junior College was formed in Illinois as the first public community college in the United States. At that time, community colleges were instructed to create programs to increase the enrollment of less than average students. The hope was that this would encourage more students to enroll and help them learn or develop a skill (Brint & Karabel, 1989). Community college thus became a place where students could exchange affordable fees for skills and knowledge in a reasonable amount of time.

Today, a large number of community colleges serve underprepared students for whom more selective colleges may not be an option (Bailey, 2012). Community colleges tend to have a higher number of students who are of color, from a working-class background, and are female than the average student attending 4-year institutions (NCES, 2009). In the fall 2013 school year, the 2-year community college system enrolled approximately 12.4 million students at 1,123 institutions of higher education; of the 12.4 million, approximately 50% of these students were White, 21% were Latino, 14% were Black, 6% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and 9% were comprised of other races (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2015).

In reviewing the literature on Latino students and community colleges, research indicated that first-generation students face more challenges compared with non-first-generation students (Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; Pascarella, Person, &
Most notably, a study conducted by the NCES (2001-126) on students who were first in their family to attend college found that these students were at a disadvantage due to their parents’ lack of involvement in their education, because the parents themselves had not attained a degree and were, therefore, less able to identify with their children’s challenges in this context. As Engle and Tinto (2008) also indicated in their report documenting college success for low-income, first-generation students, these students are nearly 4 times more likely to leave an institution of higher education without attaining a degree when compared to non-first-generation students; moreover, their initial access to postsecondary education is at public 2-year and for-profit institutions where they have a reasonable opportunity to earn certificates or associate degrees. These findings arguably make it important to focus on the enabling aspects of resilience, which means that these students do carry on through to completion instead of solely looking at barriers.

**Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs).** An HSI is an “accredited, degree-granting, public or private, non-profit colleges and universities with 25% or more total undergraduate full-time equivalent Hispanic student enrollment” (Laden, 2004, p. 186). HSIs came about as a result of congressional hearings in 1983 that focused on Hispanic access to higher education (Santiago, 2006). Two major themes emerged from the hearings: (a) Hispanics had limited access to postsecondary education, and (b) Hispanics usually attended institutions of higher education that had limited funding to develop and enhance the quality of education for this underserved population. Of the 370 HSIs in 2012, 178 or 48% of the institutions were public 2-year institutions, the main source of postsecondary education for Latinos (Pew Hispanic Center, 2012), 72 or 19% were public
4-year institutions, 105 or 28% were private 4-year institutions, and 15 or 4% were private 2-year institutions (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2014). While HSIs represent a miniscule percentage of institutions of higher education, these institutions enrolled 54% of all Hispanic students in 2009-2010 (Santiago, 2011).

Students attending HSIs are more likely than students of non-HSIs to be from non-native English-speaking families, have lower socioeconomic status, be first- or second-generation immigrants, and choose a college that is adjacent to their home dwelling (Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, & Cuellar, 2008; Nelson, Bridges, Morelon-Quainoo, Williams, & Holmes, 2007; Núñez & Bowers, 2011). In addition, students of HSIs are more likely to receive financial aid, attend college part-time, commute, and work part-time or full-time (Crisp, Nora, & Taggart, 2009; Nora & Crisp, 2009; Núñez, Sparks, & Hernández, 2011). The Postsecondary National Policy Institute indicated that HSIs have marginally higher retention rates than those of the national average of Latinos in the United States in institutions of higher education: 67% to 66%, respectively. However, despite the higher retention rate, 6-year graduation rates at HSIs are 29%, which is below the national average of 57% (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2015).

HSIs are acknowledging the tools needed to help increase graduation rates of Latino students by offering more support services. In a study by Santiago (2008) of twelve 2-year and 4-year HSIs located in California, New York, and Texas that lead the nation in enrolling and graduating Latino students, it was found that the most successful institutions had ongoing evaluations of their curriculum and support services, shared data with other institutions that enrolled a large number of their transfer population, sought
resources to increase their budgets, and applied lessons learned about their Latino student population (Santiago, 2008). In short, successful HSIs attempt to be innovative and flexible, and integrate their Latino student population into their academic setting.

However, given the dominant profile of the student population of HSIs as previously detailed, these institutions have more financial and social needs than non-HSIs, but are typically underresourced (Núñez & Bowers, 2011). There seems to be a symbiotic dynamic between the lack of financial and social needs and Latino students’ achievement rates. In a national survey including data from executive leaders of 209 HSIs in both the United States and Puerto Rico, leaders cited lack of funding, low student preparedness, low student retention/success, and affordability of the students attending as key challenges that were detrimental to the success of their student population (De los Santos & Cuamea, 2010). Nearly 40% of the respondents indicated that students were significantly underprepared to complete college-level work (De los Santos & Cuamea, 2010). The risk factors cited in the study of De los Santos and Cuamea (2010) mirror the same type of risk factors first-generation students experience.

**First-generation College Students**

First-generation college students are defined as those students who are the first in their family to attend an institution of higher education in the United States (Higher Education Institute, 2014). While not a statistic calculated among most higher education institutions (NCES, 2012), findings from a 2011-2012 survey of undergraduate students enrolled between July 1, 2011 and June 30, 2012 revealed that approximately 36% of students who attended community colleges were first in their family to attend college (NCES, 2014). Further research revealed a certain level of inequality in the educational
outcomes between first-generation college students and their non-first-generation peers (Pike & Kuh, 2005). This section highlights key inequalities in this context and the factor of resilience that may help overcome them.

**Inequalities.** When compared to non-first generation college student peers, first-generation college students frequently: begin their college career in community college and transfer to a 4-year institution (Tym, McMillion, Barone, & Webster, 2005); are poorly prepared academically (Davis, 2010); maintain active family roles and responsibilities (Barry, Hudley, Kelly, & Cho, 2009; Bryan & Simmons, 2009); and live off campus, thus being less connected to campus and university life (Harvey & Housel, 2011). Furthermore, research revealed that first-generation college students are also likely to work more hours per week (Barry et al., 2009). These factors present challenges for first-generation college students who, as a result, are more vulnerable to lower academic performance and to decreasing their overall chances of obtaining college degrees (Davis, 2010; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007).

Given these challenges, first-generation students are unlikely to finish college. Strayhorn (2006) indicated that if first-generation college students do successfully meet enrollment requirements and enters a 4-year institution, they are more likely to drop out after their first semester. This affirmed studies by Gibson and Slate (2010), who investigated over 40,000 cases from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) and indicated that, because first-generation college students were served primarily at community colleges rather than traditional baccalaureate institutions, they were less likely to enroll in higher education institutions and have higher attrition rates, compared with non-first-generation college students. Moreover, given their
typically lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Bui, 2005), first-generation college students were more likely to delay college enrollment in a higher educational institution and enroll at a 2-year institution with a part-time status (Chen, 2005).

Likewise, Ishitani (2006) found that first-generation college students tended to leave college prematurely and take longer to complete their undergraduate degrees. His analysis showed that first-generation college students were 51% less likely to graduate in four years and 32% less likely to graduate in five years when compared to students who were not the first in their family to attain a degree. The longer length of time for first-generation students to complete an undergraduate degree may be due to risk factors that are economic and familial obligations that cause them to enroll as part-time students (Woosley & Shepler, 2011). Given these obligations, first-generation college students take fewer classes and tend to have lower grades through their third year when compared to non-first-generation students (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Some studies have also suggested that first-generation students usually have lower individual protective factors such as educational aspirations compared with other groups (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). This is important to know because aspirations have been a predictor of success among first-generation college students (Bui, 2005). Conversely, Hicks and Dennis (2005) indicated that while first-generation students face challenges, they are often highly motivated to feel a sense of accomplishment. Although first-generation students feel unprepared, motivation may be a factor that can help them gain the confidence needed to perform well academically (Bui, 2005). Nevertheless, despite this identified motivation, Hicks and Dennis (2005) also posited that some first-generation students recognized they may be unprepared for
the college workload compared with their peers because they may lack personal and social abilities.

Parents’ education level and a student’s previous academic achievements are also often seen to be predictors of academic success (Jury, Smeding, Court, & Darnon, 2015). However, in a study based on social class as a predictor of performance avoidance goals at a university, Jury et al. determined that social class was associated with performance-avoidance goal endorsement, and the level of social class only affected high achievers. The study noted that social class affects one’s perception of assimilating into a system, and first-generation students were more likely to experience performance-avoidance goals, compared with those who were non-first-generation. Social class is an important context to understand because it may be a contributing factor or a factor of risk for the participants of this study.

Risk Factors

There are two important concepts within the theory of resilience: risk factors and protective factors (Masten & Reed, 2002). Risk factors have been characterized in the literature as either being events driving conditions of adversity, or factors that reduce resistance to adversity (Smith-Osborne, 2007). Risk factors have been linked with genetic markers that can increase the likelihood of a specific problem (Fraser et al., 2004), and are based on statistical evidence (Fraser et al., 2004; Masten, 2007). Within academic resilience theory, risk factors do not predict or guarantee that people will have certain academic or behavior issues; rather, they increase the likelihood that these behaviors or challenges will occur (William & Portman, 2014).
According to the AACC (2015), 36% of students who are first-generation attend community colleges; 17% are single parents; 58% receive some type of monetary aid; and the employment status of the student population is 22% for full-time students who work full-time, 40% of full-time students who work part-time, 41% for part-time students who are employed full-time, and 32% of part-time students who are employed part-time. Research has suggested that the circumstances described by these statistics are risk factors for first-generation students persisting towards degree completion, and may impede or ultimately end their progress (Woosley & Shepler, 2011).

Another key risk factor that first-generation students experience in completing a degree is access to financial, cultural, and physical resources. According to the AACC (2014), 58% of students attending community colleges received aid, with 38% receiving federal grants, 19% receiving federal loans, 12% receiving state aid, and 13% receiving institutional aid. In an article that referenced the ways peer mentoring can have a positive effect on the academic resilience of first-generation students, Tucker (2014) noted that the majority of first-generation students came from low-income households, were children of immigrants, and often had a difficult time transitioning to higher education; these may be seen as risk factors in tandem with that fact that many states have reduced their education spending on community colleges (Bradley, 2011). Bradley’s report on how costlier colleges are threatening access to their institutions asserted that many students who attend community colleges are unable to pay their tuition owing to insufficient household income. Bradley further noted that it is important to settle the issue of education costs because college affordability is the key deciding factor for whether or not students who attend community college can do so: “because so many
students who seek a bachelor’s degree begin at community colleges, initiatives to improve baccalaureate completion should incorporate policies and practices that explicitly address college affordability and transfer” (n.p.). Finally, as previously indicated, it has been argued that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have greater exposure to risks in their environment that are not conducive to promoting resilience (Borman & Overman, 2004).

Community colleges face significant challenges for improving academic achievement, which remains difficult because of the low academic preparation, lower SES, and lower parental levels of education of those who attend (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). Additionally, deciding where to attend college is a risk factor for Latinos who attempt to attain academic success. Often, Latino students tend to enroll into programs where there is a higher Latino population, thus receiving a feeling of connectedness (Sullivan, 2007). Latino students tend to choose a postsecondary institution to attend based on whether they have friends and family available (Swenson, 2012). Although choosing a college based on who one knows may lead to greater connection to the college or university, hence creating a positive impact in the academic success of a student, it can also create risk factors by depriving an individual of valuable experiences and services, and cause isolation from the wider student body (Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005).

Finally, the social and cultural environment may have significant influence on whether or not a first-generation student feels able to assimilate, obtain support, and persist towards degree completion (Fischer, 2007; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007). Cushman (2007) conducted a study of 16 first-generation students around the
United States who spoke about their identity and class, and what helped them succeed. It was noted that they often felt culturally removed and perceived to be outsiders. Specifically, the study participants stated they often experienced feelings of intimidation and being academically unprepared, isolated, and judged. They also noted that survival techniques included individual and environmental protective factors such as keeping an open mind, developing a strong sense of self, joining campus organizations for minority groups, and finding and using environmental factors such as mentors among faculty staff who increased their persistence in attaining a college degree.

**Protective Factors**

In addition to risk factors, resilience researchers have documented that protective resources can interrelate with existing risks to increase positive behaviors (Davey, Eaker, & Walters, 2003; Haase, 2004; Rew & Horner, 2003). Protective factors refer to the internal and external assets, resources and strengths that modify risk and increase the probability of a positive outcome during a time of hardship when a negative consequence is expected (Fraser et al., 2004). Specifically, protective factors generally refer to personality characteristics and environmental resources that aid in preventing an individual’s maladjustment (Smith-Osborne, 2007).

The categorization of protective factors by Barankin and Khanlou (2007) included individual factors, family factors, and social environmental factors. Perez et al. (2009) conducted a quantitative study on 104 undocumented students in high school, community college, and universities by using academic resilience theory to understand how undocumented youth achieved academic resilience even while encountering institutional and social prohibition. The study indicated individual protective factors, such as being
identified as gifted during their early education and coping with distress, as key reasons for why they achieved academic resilience. Family and peers (i.e., social and familial factors) were also studied, with the finding that the students’ academic success came from both personal and environmental factors, despite experiencing high risks. More specifically, students who were at high risk for academic failure due to factors that first-generation students experience, such as high employment hours during school, and low parental education, reported higher levels of academic success than students with lower levels of personal and environmental factors. Both individual and environmental protective factors played a significant role in the students of the students.

In another study, Braswell (2010) sought to describe, understand, and explain why some first-generation learners continued to persist despite facing risk factors. The researcher studied the lives of five African American women who were between the ages of 33 to 47 and attended various postsecondary institutions across the United States, using MacKinnon-Slaney’s 1994 model of Adult Persistence in Learning (APIL) as a basis to examine the personal, environmental, and institutional problems that may affect the persistence of first-generation learners. All students were employed full-time and had experienced hardships such as death of parents, and work stressors. The study concluded that the primary reason for the persistence of the five African American women was a sense of responsibility to act as a role model for their children. Other reasons included familial and environmental protective factors, such as influences and positive interaction from others such as encouragement.

**Individual factors.** According to Barankin and Khanlou (2007), individual factors are comprised of temperament, learning strengths, self-concept, emotions, ways of
thinking, adaptive skills, and social skills. The researchers also stated that the combination of each young person’s individual traits and learning gained through experiences provided by their family, school, and community additionally helped to shape their resilience and the success with which developmental transitions occurred. An example of research which examined individual protective factors is Morales’ (2008) qualitative study of 31 female and 19 male low socioeconomic college students of color in a predominantly white higher education institution. A major theme that emerged in this study’s findings was that academic success evolved owing to the participants’ individual efforts. Despite the opposition of success to reach academic success, the obstacles experienced were seen as motivators to success for these students. The challenges increased their self-confidence, and work-ethic to succeed.

**Familial factors.** Familial factors refers to the strengths that a family has and the challenges it faces over a period of time (Barankin & Khanlou, 2007), entailing a range of dynamics such as attachment, communication, parenting style, parenting relations, and support outside the family. In the context of first-generation Latino students, given that their family (and cultural) values dictate that they uphold familial importance and responsibilities as a priority, it may therefore prove challenging for them to manage these responsibilities while also attempting to complete a degree (Espinoza, 2010). Espinoza documented this in a study examining the strategies employed by Latina doctoral students to balance family relationships with the demands of school, indicating that family relationships are a key influential factor in the academic success of Latina students. In addition, the students deemed it important that institutions of higher education find ways
to integrate family support into their system to minimize conflict between the school and home life of the students.

In general, existing data have strongly indicated that the main factors behind achieving academic success for first-generation students are family characteristics and the presence of counselors and positive influences at school (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Gofen (2009) suggested a shift in the thinking of the perspective on first-generation students by arguing that these students do not succeed despite their limited family background; rather, they succeed due to the resources their families offer. He further noted that parents’ attitudes towards education play an integral part in the academic achievement of first-generation students, as much as their interpersonal relationships and family values. Although research has illustrated that Latino parents have inadequate knowledge of certain intricacies of the college process, their informal contributions and moral support can still influence the college success of their children (Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006).

**Environmental factors.** Barankin and Khanlou (2007) described environmental factors as including both physical environments and social environments, specifically comprised of social conditions, inclusion, access, and involvement. They also indicated that these social environmental factors influence both individual and family resilience factors. Research on the predictors of Latino students’ academic success showed that these factors play a significant role. Conchas’ (2006) study examining the institutional and cultural factors in an urban high school attended by low-income, high-achieving, Black, Latino, and Vietnamese students demonstrated how school structures and practices contribute to immigrant and native minority students’ confidence. His findings suggested
that environmental protective factors such as healthy race-ethnic and peer group relations, with small learning communities, greatly contributed to the participants’ academic success.

In a similar study, Cavazos, Johnson, and Sparrow (2010) explored Latino college students and the coping mechanisms they used to overcome institutional barriers in their environment. The researchers interviewed 11 Latino college students who had successfully completed a degree at an HSI. They found that these successful Latino students coped with the challenges presented in college by: (a) practicing positive reframing; (b) accepting that challenges are part of the process; (c) engaging in positive self-talk; (d) focusing on their final goals, (e) using low expectations as motivation to succeed; (f) self-reflecting on their life experiences; (g) being proactive in educating themselves, and (h) seeking support when faced with difficulties. Cavazos et al. subsequently built on these findings to examine how the same student population at this HSI developed a sense of resilience. Their findings suggested that strong beliefs and high expectations around education held by the students’ family; motivations to gain economic stability and help their community; and the values of hard work, perseverance, and self-belief allowed for these 11 students to develop five factors that have been shown to increase academic resilience, namely (a) high educational goals, (b) support and encouragement from parents, (c) intrinsic motivation, (d) internal locus of control, and (e) and high self-efficacy.

In another study by Broussard (2009) on the factors that limit college opportunity for 222 aspiring first-generation college students and the impact of school counselor intervention on increased college opportunity, environmental factors such as the guidance
of school counselors were identified as helping to motivate students in persisting towards degree completion. The two themes that emerged from the study was that school counselors were identified as helpers, and the self-regulation of the students helped determined their academic achievement. Specifically, the results revealed that environmental factors such as school counseling programs and activities increased college opportunities by 67%.

**Chapter Summary**

This literature review discussed potential challenges that first-generation students, including the Latino group, may face at postsecondary institutions; it also elaborated on the factors potentially driving their resilience to persist and complete their degrees. As Engle and Tinto (2008) indicated in their report documenting college success for low-income, first-generation students, this population is less likely to attain a college degree than a non-first-generation students; moreover, because the majority of first-generation students are children of immigrants, they have a difficult time transitioning to institutions of higher education (Tucker, 2014). Being a first-generation Latino student may be seen as a risk factor to completing a college degree (Bradley, 2011). To decrease the effect of risk factors, protective factors can increase positive behaviors (Davey et al., 2003; Rew & Horner, 2003).

The studies included in this chapter suggested that the more resilient the student, the greater the likelihood the student will succeed academically (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In addition, the literature reviewed emphasized the importance of understanding the protective factors that increase students’ academic success. From this, it becomes
evident that academic resilience is a crucial protective factor for first-generation college students, and this can be developed through life experiences.

The next chapter presents the research design methodology using the phenomenological reduction method, as prescribed by Moustakas (1994) and summarized by Creswell (2013). Academic resilience theory was used as a theoretical framework to develop the interview questions for data collection.
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the factors associated with academic resilience from the perspective of first-generation Latino students who have completed an associate degree at a community college. An increasing number of studies have attempted to examine the academic success of first-generation students in postsecondary institutions (Lightweis, 2014; Pelco, Ball, & Lockeman, 2014; Petty, 2014). However, few of these studies have examined the factors that lead to the academic success specifically of students who: (a) are first-generation, (b) are Latino, and (c) have graduated from a community college. To address this gap and understand better the phenomenon from the participants’ perspective, the researcher conducted a phenomenological study of 10 first-generation Latino graduates at a community college located in the northeast United States.

Currently, much of what is known about Latino students in higher education is based on cultural factors alone without regard to individual, familial, and environmental factors that aid their academic achievement (Rendon, Novack, & Dowell, 2005). Consequently, there is little research on what factors influence first-generation Latino students to persist to complete an associate degree at a community college. Previous studies have used the academic resiliency theory to understand the factors that have assisted first-generation college students in realizing their goal of completing a college degree (Fraser et al., 2004; Morales, 2008; Perez et al., 2009). These studies specifically
focused on risk factors and protective factors that influence academic success. This study focused on risk and protective factors but also explored how and to what extent the factors of academic resilience impact the academic success of first-generation Latino students at community colleges.

Specifically, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What individual, familial, and environmental factors contribute to the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college?

2. What risk factors affect the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college?

3. What barriers or challenges do first-generation Latinos at community colleges encounter while attempting to persist toward degree completion?

This study used a qualitative method to address the research questions. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2010), the qualitative research method is suitable for gaining an in-depth understanding of the events in which a phenomenon occurs. Since it is this in-depth understanding that the current study hoped to gain among a small number of individuals, rather than statistical analysis enabled by a quantitative approach, a qualitative approach was employed because it provided an opportunity to gather information through the lived experiences of each participant (Creswell, 2013). Further justification of this approach was evident through the literature review, which revealed frequent use of a qualitative approach when studying academic resilience among low socioeconomic status high school students (Driscoll, 2006); undocumented Latino students (Perez et al., 2009); and low socioeconomic students of color from a variety of
racial and ethnic backgrounds (Morales, 2011), among other relevant studies that were examined.

Employing a qualitative methodology provided the opportunity to explore and understand, in a nuanced and subjectively meaningful way, how Latino students define and understand risk and resilience as related to their own realities, without presupposing their meanings (Schwandt, 2003). This was enabled via an interpretivist qualitative approach: phenomenology.

Phenomenology is a study of human lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994), describing the meaning of the lived experiences of individuals with regard to a particular phenomenon being examined (Neuman, 2013). The cornerstone of an interpretivist approach such as phenomenology is the belief in a fluid, multifaceted, and relative reality and, most importantly, the meanings construed by different actors in human interaction (Black, 2006). The phenomenological design, therefore, was appropriate for this research study because it allowed the researcher to capture in-depth structured life experiences of participants in a conscious descriptive manner from a first-person point of view, as has already been done in similar studies in the field.

For this study, the phenomenological reduction method, as prescribed by Moustakas (1994) and summarized by Creswell (2013), was used to discover the themes of the lived experiences of first-generation Latino students that helped them reach academic success. This method prompted the researcher to seek to know more about the experiences of the individuals researched regarding the phenomenon, and later attach meanings to those experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Crucially, this approach enabled the overarching aims of this research to be embedded in the methodology by understanding
the perspectives of first-generation Latino students and examining the meanings they
themselves assign to phenomena such as resilience, academic success, and risk, rather
than perpetuating the norms of how these are typically ascribed to them.

Research Context

This qualitative study was conducted in a community college with an enrollment
of approximately 9,000 students, of which approximately 5,000 are of Latino descent.
Ten graduates who were selected for this study: (a) were Latino, (b) completed their
associate degree in either fall 2014 or spring 2015, and (c) were first in their family to
complete a college degree. The community college used for this study was a
comprehensive public 2-year urban institution with two campuses located in the northeast
United States. Statistics of the year 2013-2014 from the NCES Integrated Postsecondary
Education Data System (IPEDS) indicated that the institution being studied has a diverse
student body, comprised approximately of 55% Latino, 15% African American, 10%
White, and 7% Asian American/Pacific Islander students.

Research Participants

The participants selected for this study were Latino graduates of a community
college who were the first in their family to attain a degree. Only those who agreed to
participate in the study, and who graduated with an associate degree between the fall
2014 and spring 2015 semesters at the community college where the study was
conducted, were selected to participate. Guided by the phenomenological approach, the
selection of participants of the phenomenon was carefully monitored throughout the
process (Creswell, 2013).
**Participants.** According to Neuman (2013), the decision about the sample size of a qualitative study depends on several factors: the degree of accuracy required, the degree of variability in the population, and the number of different variables to be examined simultaneously in the data analysis. One hundred twenty-seven questionnaires were completed by graduates of the fall 2014 and spring 2015 semesters. During the fall 2014 and spring 2015 semester, the college reported 750 graduates, of which 35% graduated in the fall of 2014 and 65% graduated in the spring of 2015. Twelve questionnaires were identified as not usable because they were not completed in full.

While the researcher is not using a quantitative approach, it is important to note the response rate was approximately 17%. Of the 127 participants, 65 graduates, representing 51%, were identified as meeting the criteria for the study. Twenty-four of the 65 graduates agreed to participate in the study. Neuman (2013) noted that when a study involves a homogeneous population, the sample size will be smaller. Generally, phenomenological researchers interview “from 5 to 25 individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 81). Moreover, given that phenomenology can be seen as an approach drilling down to specific information from a more general starting point, it is important to have small sample sizes in order to stay true to the purpose of the research—that is, to prioritize giving voice to lived experiences at a deep, probing level rather than potentially diluting the meaning of the data from a larger sample size merely to address issues related to representativeness, which may arise when conducting mainstream qualitative research (Creswell, 2013).

In light of these contentions, for this study, of the 24 graduates who indicated they were interested in participating in the study, 10 participants were selected by using
homogeneous group purposeful sampling. The researcher selected the 10 graduates based on a randomized sampling using Excel. According to Creswell (2013), the sample in a qualitative study must be carefully selected to ensure the participants have experienced the phenomenon under the study. The researcher carefully selected the participants through answers provided from prescreening questionnaires (Appendix A).

Table 3.1 presents a summary of the characteristics of those who completed the questionnaire. The number and the percentage for each characteristic are listed. The majority of graduates identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino (70%). Black or African American made up 20%; White, 9%; Native American or American Indian, 1%; and Other, 1%. Of the 127 graduates who completed the questionnaire, 91% indicated their mother had not completed a degree of higher education, and 95% indicated their father had not completed a degree of higher education. In addition, 73% of participants indicated they were first in the family to complete a college degree, while 27% stated they were not first in the family to complete a college degree.

As Tinto (2008) indicated, first-generation students often stem from low income households. In addition, research shows that of those who attend community colleges, 41% of part-time students are employed full-time, and 32% of part-time students are employed part-time (AACC, 2015). The statistics of the backgrounds of the respondents mirrored this. Eighty-two percent of the respondents indicated their household income was below $40,000, and 88% of the respondents of this study were employed at least part-time while attending college. The participants who were selected for this study reflected this with a rate a 90%.
Although the majority of respondents (49%) indicated they were raised by single mothers, the majority of the participants (60%) of this study stemmed from two parent households. Sixty-six percent of the respondents were parents while attending college, and 45% were either married or divorced. However, of the participants interviewed, only 2 (20%) participants had a child, and 1 (10%) participant was married or divorced while attending college. The respondents’ ages at the completion of their associate degree were between the ranges of 18-50. The majority, representing 35%, age of the graduates were between 18-21. Approximately 65% of the graduates were between the age of 22-40, and 1 (10%) participant fell between the 41-50 age range. Percentages do not include participants who did not complete the entire questionnaire.

Table 3.1

*Characteristics of Respondents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity origin (or Race):</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American or American Indian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age:</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-21</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-25</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest Degree Earned by Mother:</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No schooling completed</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary School (K–5)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School (6–8)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school (9-12) or the equivalent (for example: GED)</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college credit, no degree</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate degree or higher</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest Degree Earned by Father:</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No schooling completed</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary School (K–5)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School (6–8)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school (9-12) or the equivalent (for example: GED)</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college credit, no degree</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate degree or higher</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest Degree Earned by Graduate:</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Associate degree</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master degree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Childhood Household:</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single Parent—Mother</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Parent—Other</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Parent—Mother and Father</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent:</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status:</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not married</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.1 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employed full-time</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed part-time</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending school and not working</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of work and looking for work</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household Income</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than $20,000</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,000 to $39,999</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,000 to $49,999</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000 to $64,999</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$65,000 to $84,999</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$85,000 to $99,999</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100,000 or more</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester Completed Degree</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2015</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First in Immediate Family to Complete Degree</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interested in Participating in Interview</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. n = 127*

**Recruitment procedures.** To select study participants, the following steps were conducted:

- Step 1: Distribution. The prescreening questionnaire (Appendix A) and letter of introduction (Appendix B) was distributed via email by the researcher to 750 students who either graduated in fall 2014 or spring 2015.
• Step 2: Online Platform. The prescreening questionnaire was sent through a link from Qualtrics provided by the community college in which the study was conducted.

• Step 3: Response. When the students received the email with the link to the survey (Appendix A) and the letter of introduction (Appendix B) from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the institution being studied, they had the option of completing the prescreening questionnaire.

• Step 4: Selection. Once the prescreening questionnaire was completed, 10 individuals were selected randomly from the pool of alumni who met the following criteria: (a) were Latino, (b) completed their associate degree in either fall 2014 or spring 2015, (c) were first in their family to complete a college degree, and (d) agreed to participate in the study. In order to create a random sample to select participants, the researcher copied and pasted the list of graduates who fit the selection criteria into column A of a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Then, in column B, the researcher used the random number generator function within Excel to randomize numbers between zero and the number of total possible participants listed on the sheet. Afterwards, the researcher sorted both columns, which assigned random numbers to each possible participant. In doing this, the list was rearranged in random order from lowest to highest numbers. Finally, the researcher chose the first 10 names in the randomized sorted list.

• Step 5: Contact. After the prescreening questionnaire was completed and 10 graduates were randomly selected, the researcher emailed an informed consent
form (Appendix C) to those who stated they would like to be a participant. When the qualified candidates responded with their contact information, the researcher contacted them by phone. The researcher was able to make contact, either by phone or mail, with the first 10 graduates selected for this study. The purpose of the contact was to verify that each participant met the characteristics of the research, and to answer any questions the participant had about the study. Through a phone discussion with the first 10 graduates selected, the researcher verified that all graduates met the criteria for the study.

**Confidentiality.** Confidentiality is critical in research relationships (Stiles & Petrila, 2011). Researchers must ensure the information obtained through the study is used for research purposes only (Creswell, 2013). In addition, researchers must consider the effects of the long-term use of participants’ personal information. Neuman (2013) noted that researchers have a legal obligation to ensure the information collected is protected and not compromised. The letter of consent form (Appendix C) included a confidentiality disclosure that was approved by the IRB of the institution being studied. Both the participant and the researcher signed the consent form. To ensure confidentiality, the data from the participants were categorized by alphanumeric coding as opposed to by name. Notes and all interview materials were locked in a safe at the college in which the study was conducted to ensure their security for three years. Audio recordings and transcribed data were placed in a password-protected cloud storage application and will be maintained for three years following the interviews.
Informed consent. The participants signed an informed consent form that outlined the purpose of the study and the procedures of the interview (Appendix C). The informed consent form explained how the researcher will maintain the participants’ confidentiality. Additionally, participants were informed that once the transcriptions were complete, they would be authorized to review their transcripts. The researcher explained to the participants that they will be allowed to take breaks during the interviews whenever they needed. Moreover, they were informed that there was no cash stipend for their participation in the data collection process.

In addition, participants were informed that they are allowed to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. Withdrawing from the study could be completed in person, in writing, by phone, or by email. If a participant chose to withdraw from the study, he or she would be replaced with another eligible participant. The replacement of a participant would also have been selected randomly from the pool of applicants who fit the study criteria. All participants were required to read and sign a consent form indicating their voluntary participation in the study. The researcher explained the consent form to all of the study participants during the time an interview was scheduled.

Instruments Used in Data Collection

The first tool used to collect the data was a prescreening questionnaire (Appendix A) that was utilized to select study participants. Following this, interviews were conducted using an in-depth, semi-structured interview questionnaire (Appendix D) to collect information about the participants’ lived experiences of their academic success. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, conducted by the researcher himself, allowed him to ask additional questions based on the participants’ answers, thus building in the
necessary flexibility to point out unforeseen factors that the interviewer may not have anticipated (Creswell, 2013).

The researcher conducted these interviews based on an interview guide he had developed (Appendix D). All interviewees agreed to be audio recorded so that their vocal emotions could be captured. Participants had the option of declining the use of audio recording for the interview through the informed consent form (Appendix C). In addition, the researcher took extensive notes during each interview. Participants were asked to read, sign, and return the informed consent form before interviews were conducted. The actual data collection process did not start until after the researcher obtained approval from the IRBs at both the institution being studied and the institution granting his doctorate degree.

Table 3.2 presents the interview questions that were developed to capture the graduates’ perceptions of the factors that influenced their academic success at the community college in which the study was conducted. Table 3.3 illustrates the mapping of the interview questions to the research questions of the study.

**Validity.** Validity is essential in establishing the truthfulness or credibility of the research findings (Neuman, 2013). Triangulation was used as a form of validation for this research study. This is a process of validating data from different sources, types of data, or methods of data collection in descriptions and themes in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). Triangulation is essential for establishing dependability in order to reduce the bias of the researcher (Neuman, 2013). In this study, triangulation occurred via examining the different modes of data collected, that is, through interviews, audio recordings, and field notes.
### Table 3.2

**Interview Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Sub-questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>How have your relationships with your family, college friends, faculty, and/or staff influenced your college experience?</td>
<td>a. From who did you receive the most academic support in college?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Are there support systems that were not mentioned that assisted you in completing your degree?</td>
<td>a. If yes, what are the biggest sources of support in your efforts to stay enrolled and persist toward degree completion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Why do you believe you have persisted to completing your degree?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>If you were giving advice to future first-generation community college students who are Latino, what would you tell them?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Explain how your education prior to college prepared you for college.</td>
<td>a. Was there a person or persons who encouraged you to attend college?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>How would you describe your academic experiences at the institution where you studied?</td>
<td>a. Did you experience any academic challenges at the college? b. How have you sought to address these challenges?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Have you encountered barriers or challenges as a college student to persist toward degree completion? If so, what was the barrier (s) or challenge (s) that you encountered?</td>
<td>a. How did these barriers affect you as a student? b. Were there specific times in your academic career when you considered leaving? If so, what did you do to overcome that challenge? c. Was there anything you tried that you did not find helpful? i. What has worked in these times? ii. What has not worked in these times?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 3.3

**Interview Questions Mapped to Research Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What individual, familial, and environmental factors contribute to the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college?</td>
<td>1. How have your relationships with your family, college friends, faculty, and/or staff influenced your college experience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a. From whom did you receive the most academic support in college?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Are there support systems that were not mentioned that assisted you in completing your degree?</td>
<td>2a. If yes, what are the biggest sources of support in your efforts to stay enrolled and persist toward degree completion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Why do you believe you have persisted to completing your degree?</td>
<td>3. Why do you believe you have persisted to completing your degree?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. If you were giving advice to future first-generation community college students who are Latino, what would you tell them?</td>
<td>4. If you were giving advice to future first-generation community college students who are Latino, what would you tell them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What risk factors affect the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college?</td>
<td>5. Explain how your education prior to college prepared you for college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5a. Was there a person or persons who encouraged you to attend college?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. How would you describe your academic experiences at the institution where you studied?</td>
<td>6a. Did you experience any academic challenges at the college?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6b. How have you sought to address these challenges?</td>
<td>6b. How have you sought to address these challenges?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What barriers or challenges do first-generation Latinos at community colleges encounter while attempting to persist toward degree completion?</td>
<td>7. Have you encountered barriers or challenges as a college student to persist toward degree completion? If so, what was the barrier (s) or challenge (s) that you encountered?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7a. How did these barriers affect you as a student?</td>
<td>7a. How did these barriers affect you as a student?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7b. Were there specific times in your academic career when you considered leaving?</td>
<td>7b. Were there specific times in your academic career when you considered leaving? If so, what did you do to overcome that challenge?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7c. Was there anything you tried that you did not find helpful?</td>
<td>7c. Was there anything you tried that you did not find helpful?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7ci. What has worked in these times?</td>
<td>7ci. What has worked in these times?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7cii. What has not worked in these times?</td>
<td>7cii. What has not worked in these times?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reliability. Reliability refers to the degree to which study results are independent of unintentional occurrences in the research (Neuman, 2013). In this study, reliability was achieved through extensive documentation of each stage of data collection, the research methodology applied, and any interpretation attached to it (Neuman, 2013). The use of field notes and audio-recorded interviews increased the reliability of the data collection process; audio recordings of the participants’ responses decreased the potential loss of data. The transcription of the audio recordings enhanced dependability and reliability (Creswell, 2013). To confirm that the interview instrument was reliable, pilot testing completed by professors other than the researcher in the institution where the study was being administered was conducted. In addition, a transcriber was contracted to transcribe all audio recordings.

Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

Shank (2006) stated that data analysis is the most difficult and most crucial aspect of qualitative research. Therefore, as a phenomenologist, the researcher should proceed with the task of analyzing data using a specific, structured method (Creswell, 2013). The structured method that informed the researcher for this study were the steps of phenomenological reduction, as prescribed by Moustakas (1994) and summarized by Creswell (2013). The results were evaluated for patterns stemming from the experiences and perspectives of the participants.

Step 1: Organizing and initial review of data. The researcher analyzed all phenomenological data by listing every expression related to the data (Moustakas, 1994). Joffe (2011) indicated that using two independent coders ascertains reliability in calculating correspondence between two applications of codes. It is assumed that having
multiple perspectives of the data results during the process of analysis is more accurate (Joffe, 2011). Consequently, the researcher used a second coder who helped him develop themes from the responses. The second coder, who holds a Ph.D. in English, was a faculty member in the college in which the study was conducted and was familiar with the phenomenological research methodology. The presence of the second coder enhanced the validity and reliability of the interviews, audio recordings, and field notes. The researcher summarized the study to the second coder so that the coder was aware of its specifics.

**Step 2: Transcription.** The researcher and the second coder reviewed the transcribed interviews within Microsoft Word that were collected through the audio recordings. They compared the transcribed data to their field notes as an additional measure of reliability.

**Step 3: Coding.** This key step involved extracting the themes and patterns that emerged from the participants’ interviews regarding their lived experiences of academic success at the community college. Holton (2010) noted there may be some difficulty in the coding process for novice researchers. Additionally, Bergin (2011) warned that qualitative studies can be a complex and inconsistent process if researchers are not careful during data analysis. Possible deficiencies in this study included, but were not limited to, missing information, data overload, first impressions, and uneven reliability (Bergin, 2011). To deter such disadvantages, the researcher used a second coder who was experienced in conducting phenomenological studies. Having a second researcher to help in the analysis aided the researcher in organizing and analyzing the data efficiently (Creswell, 2013). Moreover, it allowed for the systematic coding of relevant key themes.
as they appeared, thus helping to store and make sense of complex qualitative content (Scott, 2011).

Both the researcher and the second coder developed themes and entered the information into Microsoft Excel, which helped with analyzing the unstructured data through the use of query and visualization tools. In total, 131 statements were analyzed and coded for theme development. Within these statements, the researcher identified 26 themes. These themes were mapped to two risk factors and four protective factors. The researcher and second coder considered each coded statement with respect to its significance for a description of the individual participant’s lived experience, a strategy known as horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). Subsequently, the researcher highlighted significant statements, sentences, and quotes to determine invariants or constants, and to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). If some statements were vague, insignificant, or repetitive, the researcher had the option of eliminating these from analytical consideration (Moustakas, 1994).

**Step 4: Reduction and thematizing.** This step involved developing clusters of meaning (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Independently, both the researcher and second coder organized clusters of significant terms into themes reflecting the participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994). They used the data to construct a textural description of the participants’ experiences in reaching academic success. In addition, they used the participants’ statements to construct structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). After both the researcher and second coder had compiled their own analyses, they compared themes and notated differences for review, again building on the reliability of the research.
Results were evaluated for patterns stemming from the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Coding was conducted by extracting themes and patterns that emerged from the participants’ interviews regarding their lived experiences of academic success at the community college. Open coding was used to “open up the data to all potentials and possibilities contained within them” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 160). Raw data were reviewed thoroughly, grouped, and then labeled for the concepts identified in the data. Then, the codes were synthesized into themes related to properties and dimensions. These themes were sufficiently defined so they could be clearly communicated to others. Once the themes were refined, examples of themes and possible subthemes were extracted from the data. These themes and excerpts from the data were synthesized into a qualitative narrative that is next present in Chapter 4, Results.
Chapter 4: Results

This study sought to describe the factors that led to academic success at a community college of 10 first-generation Latino students. The study focused on the analysis of the responses of first-generation Latino graduates to examine the relationship between academic resilience and factors that lead to their academic success. The factors stem from individual, familial, and environmental categories.

The participants of the study were first-generation Latino graduates from a community college in the northeast United States. The community college used for this study was a comprehensive public 2-year urban institution. The college is also a Hispanic Serving Institution because 25% or more of the total full-time undergraduate students were Hispanic. Statistics of the year 2013-2014 academic year at the institution illustrate that the student population was 55% Hispanic. The participants of this study graduated from the community college either in fall 2014 or in spring 2015.

Qualitative research is a process in which researchers use a theoretical lens to view a study and learn the meaning participants ascribe to a problem. This particular study used a phenomenological design method of qualitative research in order to understand the deeper meaning of protective factors and its relationship to academic resilience and how it is transmitted to first-generation Latino students. In order to provide rich and detailed information to answer the research questions of this study, individual in-depth semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data
This study explored the perceptions of the participants within an organized interview process that allowed the researcher flexibility to ask exploratory questions.

According to Neuman (2013), interviews are used to learn more about what others think about things that cannot be observed. To supplement the interview data, the researcher took extensive field notes that included information about what he observed or thought had occurred. In addition to interviews to collect data, a prescreening questionnaire was used to collect demographic data (Appendix A). A prescreening questionnaire was used to identify first-generation Latino graduates who were eligible to participate in the study. The questionnaire was designed using typical questions asked on college admission applications at institutions of higher education. The questions were useful for documenting general information about the respondents and describing their characteristics.

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the factors associated with academic resilience from the perspective of first-generation Latino students who have completed an associate degree at a community college. Further, this study sought to describe what risk factors affect the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college, and what barriers or challenges do first-generation Latinos at community colleges encounter while attempting to persist toward degree completion.

This chapter begins with an overview of the research questions, followed by the major findings, descriptive data and brief biographic accounts of each participant, and a thematic analysis that describes common themes related to the participants’ individual
experiences. The conclusion of the chapter presents a summary of results and explains how the findings address each research question.

**Research Questions**

Three qualitative research questions were developed to understand factors associated with academic resilience from the perspective of first-generation Latino students who have completed an associate degree. Guided by research questions, this study investigated how academic success can be achieved for first-generation Latino students at community colleges. The research questions were:

1. What individual, familial, and environmental factors contribute to the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college?
2. What risk factors affect the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college?
3. What barriers or challenges do first-generation Latinos at community colleges encounter while attempting to persist toward degree completion?

**Data Analysis and Findings**

This section provides the major findings of the study, and both a statistical snapshot and brief biographic information of each of the 10 participants to familiarize the reader with their background. Following each biography, the first research question is discussed.

**Major findings.** This research study was built on the assumption that first-generation Latino students in community colleges are at risk of not completing their degree. As discussed in the literature review, there are risk factors that reduce resistance
to adversity in an academic setting, but there are also protective factors that may increase the probability of positive outcomes during times of adversity. The categories of the risk factors include: under preparedness and social and cultural environment. The categories of the protective factors include: individual, familial, and environmental protective factors. The summary of the major findings presents the themes of these categories.

**Risk factors.** First-generation Latino students typically face a variety of challenges throughout their academic career which may include, low-income, familial responsibilities, academic difficulties, work commitments, transitioning to college, and culture differences. Each of these challenges affect the academic achievement of this student population. The most significant risk factor in the study were within the social and cultural environment category. This category mainly included institutional barriers to education which stemmed from being in an academic setting. In addition, culture, and being a low-income individual also had a contributing factor to challenges the academic success of these students.

One of the institutional barriers to academic success of the participants was tutoring. Although tutoring was said to have helped one graduate cope with his academic challenges, four students believed that it was a barrier to their academic success. Likewise, one student noted a professor being an aid during her academic career, while several others indicated that their professors were barriers to their academic success. These findings are connected to why many of the participants felt a lack of social and academic preparedness when entering college. Six of the 10 students who participated in the interview stated that they felt academically unprepared for college because of either their high school setting, or because their family lacked the knowledge of how the college
system works. However, some students believe they have become resilient because of their negative experiences.

What was surprising was that, although each of the participants in the study came from a low-income family, they did not pose financial issues as an area of great concern that hindered their academic success. This is partly due to the fact that many of the parents were used as financial support of the participants while in college. The recurrent theme across the interviews was a lack of academic preparation and a lack of social and academic integration into the college setting. Because of this, many of the graduates felt that attaining the degree was more difficult than what it should have been, and felt socially disconnected from the institution in which they graduated.

**Protective factors.** Despite the challenges the participants of this study encountered, they took a variety of actions to successfully counter them. The findings illustrated that the participants shared strong personal desire and motivation to succeed through their academic careers because of their own self-determination, their family, their spirituality, or others, despite many challenges. The most important factor contributing to the academic success of the students was perseverance. Students frequently said in their own words that a belief in one self, determination, and self-discipline played a significant role in their academic pursuits.

**Individual protective factors.** Students recurrently stated that their academic success stemmed from their perseverance, their spirituality, and their own personal desire to succeed. These individual protective factors played a significant role in their academic pursuits by helping them overcome their challenges. Consequently, through their adversity, the participants developed the resilience needed to persist. For instance, for
one participant, the cost of education was not a risk factor, however, it was a motivating factor for him to succeed. This was true for many participants. The family expectation for the participants to graduate to become financially stable provided extra motivational incentive for participants to complete their degree.

The main contributing factor for the persistence towards academic success for these participants was perseverance. In this study, perseverance was described as the persistence in continuing to work towards degree completion despite experiencing hardships. Each of the participants in this study identified a strong self-motivating factor that kept them in college and persisting to degree attainment, even when difficulties arose. For all of the participants, personal motivation to persevere was a key factor that made them resilient towards completing their associate degree.

Another contributing factor to the academic success of the participants was spirituality. In this study, spirituality was defined as having an attachment to religious values or matters of the spirit beyond outer appearances. Some participants mentioned their faith in God and prayer as being reasons why they continued to persist. The role of spirituality within the lives of the participants to become resilient helped promote a sense of hope, a sense of coherence, and social support during their hardships. For one student, prayer was a ritual that was completed before exams in order to feel a sense of social support.

Personal desire to succeed to graduate was also a contributing factor to the academic resilience of the participants. Several of the respondents spoke of a deep desire to graduate to start their careers, and to better support their families. Despite being first-generation college students, the participants in the study maintained qualities of
perseverance with a willingness to succeed in life. A contributing factor to this for many of the students was experiencing a sense of spirituality.

Familial protective factors. The second most important factor to the academic success of the graduates was familial support. The participants felt a sense of support from various family members, including spouses. Most of the students discussed their decision to enroll in colleges with their parents. Despite the lack of knowledge of the education system of the parents, many of the graduates said their parents provided motivation for them to succeed. In addition to motivation, some students indicated financial support from their parents. Graduates who had family or friends inform them of the college process indicated that the positive influence increased their personal desire to succeed in a college setting.

Based on the frequency of themes in Table 4.2, participants relied heavily on parents as a source of motivation. When participants cited reasons for wanting to complete college, they often stated the desire from the parents to want them to complete college was a major contributing factor for them persisting towards degree completion. Findings from this study support other studies which indicate that family support is an important influence in encouraging academic resiliency. Clearly, relationships within the family appear to be to have a positive influence to the academic success of first-generation Latino students in community colleges.

Environmental protective factors. Another important theme repeated during the interviews included positive interaction from others. Support from co-workers, and administration, faculty, and staff with in the high school or college of the graduates led to their academic resiliency and encouraged their persistence. Some students, to gain
greater support, used college services offered by tutors, and college office hours by faculty, and academic mentors. This study’s findings also indicate the importance of life experiences. Universities and colleges can benefit by creating a campus atmosphere, which can encourage institutional-student relationships. Research suggests that such positive interaction can enhance feelings of support to first-generation students at community colleges. During their academic careers, when the graduates were able to find any resources that may help their academic success, they took advantage of the resource and often found them to be effective. In fact, one graduate noted that his advice to first-generation students is to take a lot of advice from others. However, it must be noted that half of the participants tried to use resources at the college site, but did not find them to be helpful to their academic success.

It is quite evident from the findings that positive interaction from others increased the perseverance of the graduates to accomplish their academic goals. Generally, the participants determined appropriate actions that worked to their benefit. They maintained contact with those who they deemed as positive influences to their academic success, understood their own shortcomings, and tried to use resources that would help them through their academic challenges. The results of this study support research that showed protective factors as positive influences of academic resilience, which can provide support to buffer students from academic failure. Apparently, much of the support arises from individual and familial protective factors.

**Unanticipated results.** There are findings that were not previously identified in the literature. This unanticipated result of the study was the major finding that spirituality had a significant effect on the graduates. Graduate 3 described the
significance of prayers when he stated, “I use to pray before every exam, just so I could complete this degree.” When the graduates were asked what support systems, that were not mentioned prior, that are the biggest sources of support in their efforts to stay enrolled and persist toward degree completion, God was mentioned as the most significant source of support. In addition, when the graduates were asked how their barriers while pursuing their degree affected them as a student, half of the participants indicated that prayers or their trust in God helped them continue to stay resilient throughout their academic career. Exploring the relationship between spirituality and academic success of first-generation Latino students in community college may help students, parents, and college administrators find ways to increase the academic resilience of this demographic.

Identification of themes. Relying heavily on the interview transcripts, the researcher analyzed them through the process of open coding. Following the transcription of the interview, the researcher and a second coder interpreted the participants’ experiences to identify themes. Then responses from the interview were coded and sorted in appropriate tables in Microsoft Excel according to themes. Microsoft Excel was essential for analyzing the data for each research question in this study to identify characteristics of participants.

The interviews focused on the meaning the participants have given to their lived experience of achieving academic success in the community college in which they graduated. In order to better understand the meaning behind their experiences, the researcher used the open coding technique to identify themes that were covered in the review of literature. The researcher was able to categorize the themes into either risk or
protective factors. In this study, the term risk factor refers to factors that reduce adversity (Smith-Osborne, 2007). Risk factors were subdivided into two factors: (a) under-preparedness, and (b) social and cultural environment. Protective factors were also sought to be analyzed in this study, which refers to the internal and external assets, resources, and strengths that modify risk and increase the probability of a positive outcome during a time of hardship when a negative consequence is expected (Fraser et al., 2004). Protective factors were subdivided into three categories: (a) individual, (b) familial, and (c) environmental. The descriptions of the themes are presented in Table 4.1.

**Frequency of themes.** Findings revealed a list of emerging themes and its categories and its frequencies in Table 4.2. One hundred thirty one statements were analyzed and coded for the development of 26 themes. A total of 52 themes were mapped to the category of individual protective factors, 31 to social and cultural environment risk factors, 24 to familial protective factors, 18 to environmental protective factors, and 6 to under preparedness risk factors. Theme frequencies determined the categories and its classification. The frequency of statements helped the researcher conclude the importance of each factor as a deterrent or an encouraging factor to the academic success of the graduates. Frequencies of the themes showed that being academically underprepared and a lack of social and academic integration were risk factors to the participants, but perseverance, familial support, spirituality, and positive interaction from others helped counter those risks.
### Table 4.1: Categories and Descriptions of Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category and Theme</th>
<th>Description of Categories and Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perseverance</strong></td>
<td>This refers to the persistence in continuing to work towards degree completion despite the difficulty in reaching hardships. Individual protective factor refers to the internal assets of temperament, learning strengths, feelings and emotions, self-concept, ways of thinking, adaptive skills, social skills, and physical health (Barankin &amp; Khanlou, 2007).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lack of Social and Academic Integration</strong></td>
<td>The lack of success in an academic environment due to issues at the institution and its staff and faculty, assimilation to environments, employment, having a family, and economic barriers. Social and cultural risk factor refers to a characteristic at the biological, psychological, familial, community, or cultural level that reduces the positive outcome of a negative event.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Familial Support</strong></td>
<td>This refers to the academic and social support of family members, spouse, friends, classmates, and other close individuals who offer positive support. Familial protective factor refers to the internal assets of attachment, communication, family structure, parent relations, parenting style, sibling relations, parents’ health, and support outside the family (Barankin &amp; Khanlou, 2007).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spirituality</strong></td>
<td>The attachment to religious values or matters of the spirit such as praying, meditation, or overall faith in God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive Interaction From Others</strong></td>
<td>Interpersonal actions from others outside the family characterized by caring, kindness, respect, and trust during one’s time of adversity. Environmental protective factor refers to the internal assets of inclusion, social conditions, access, and involvement (Barankin &amp; Khanlou, 2007).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Under preparedness</strong></td>
<td>State of feeling overwhelmed because of a lack of preparation to reach academic achievement in a college setting. Risk factor refers to the factors that reduce resistance to adversity (Smith-Osborne, 2007).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Individual factors were highly significant in providing the participants with strength during times of adversity to complete their associate degree. A total of 52 statements can be mapped to individual protective factors. As noted in Table 4.2, overwhelmingly, perseverance can be seen in 36 statements that were coded. Perseverance refers to the persistence in continuing to work towards degree completion despite the experiencing hardships.

Lack of integration emerged as the second theme with the most influence among the participants. The lack of integration is a social and environment risk factor that referred to the lack of success in an academic environment due to issues at the institution and its staff and faculty, assimilation to environments, employment, having a family, and economic barriers. Of the 131 statements that were mapped to themes, 31 statements were mapped towards the lack of social and academic integration.

Familial support was referred to as the academic and social support of family members, spouse, friends, classmates, and other close individuals who offer positive support. Familial support was mentioned 24 times and was the third most mentioned theme. Parents’ encouraging words, their emotional involvement, and high expectations served as protective factors throughout the participants. In addition to parents, friends and spouses were a major contributing factor to the academic success of the participants.

Spirituality was a surprising finding. In this study, spirituality referred to the attachment to religious values or matters of the spirit such as praying, meditation, or overall faith in God. Spirituality was mentioned 9 times during the interviews and was the third most influential factor the participants indicated aided them through their academic journey, and fourth most influential factor overall. Spirituality protected the
participants from risk factors in their prevalent environments, and prayer was often used to cope with challenging circumstances such as exams.

Positive interaction from others was the fifth most common theme among the participants. In this study, positive interaction from others referred to interpersonal actions from others outside the family characterized by caring, kindness, respect, and trust during one’s time of adversity. Specially, participants experienced positive interaction from both their place of work and the community college they attended. The total mention of the statements relating to this positive interaction is 8, which include positive interaction from co-workers (3), administrators (3), faculty (1), and staff (1).

Under preparedness is the state of feeling overwhelmed because of a lack of preparation to reach academic achievement in a college setting. Although under preparedness of academic work in a college environment was only mentioned 6 times and was the sixth most recurring theme, when the participants were asked in question 5 to explain how their education prior to college prepared them for college, they mentioned that they felt unprepared for college. This means that 60% of the students did not feel academically prepared for college before they entered.

The frequency of themes highlighted a number of risk factors and protective factors that were highly influential in the participants’ ability to be academically resilient in the community college in which they graduated. Overall, perseverance was the most common factor and major protective factor that was the recurring theme across the interviews, and the lack of integration was the second most common theme and major risk factor. Specifically, frequencies of Table 4.2 suggest that although a student may experience a lack of social and cultural integration in an academic setting, that
Table 4.2

*Categories and Frequencies of Factors and Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category (Frequency)</th>
<th>Theme (Frequency)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual Factors (52)</td>
<td>Perseverance (36)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>God (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal Desire (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social and Cultural Environment Risk Factors (31)</td>
<td>Institution (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Factors (31)</td>
<td>Faculty (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assimilation (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employment (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Having a family (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familial Factors (24)</td>
<td>Family (15)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friends (4)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Classmates (1)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Spouse (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive support system (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Factors (18)</td>
<td>Place of work (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Degree Navigation Program (1)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Faculty (1)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Administrators (3)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Staff (1)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institution (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Life experiences (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education in other institutions (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Literature (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under preparedness Risk Factors (6)</td>
<td>Academically unprepared (6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
perseverance is the most influential factor that may help mitigate the risk factors first-generation Latino students in community colleges experience.

**Participant profiles.** One hundred twenty-seven prescreening questionnaires were completed by graduates of either the fall 2014 or spring 2015 year at the college in which the study was conducted. The completed questionnaires represent 17% of the 750 distributed. The researcher used email and phone to first have an initial contact with respondents before they were interviewed. Of these 127 respondents, 65 graduates were identified as meeting the requirements to participate in the study, of which 24 graduates agreed to participate in the study. Ten graduates were selected to participate in this study.

Fifty percent of those who participated in the study were between the ages of 22-30. Ten percent of the participants indicated that the highest degree earned by the mother or father was middle school (6-8), while 80% of the participants indicated that at least one of their parents had completed high school. Six participants indicated that they came from a two-parent household; two indicated they were raised by a single parent, their mother; and two more indicated they were raised by grandparents. Two of the 10 participants indicated that they were parents while attending college, and only one of the 10 participants were married. Ninety percent of the participants were either working full- or part-time while in college. Despite this, the household income of two of the participants was less the $20,000, four participants indicated their household income was between $20,000 to $39,999, and another four participants indicated their household income was between $40,000 to $49,999.
The participants of this study were Latino but represent eight different countries of origin which may be one of the specific Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino categories as indicated by the U.S. Census Bureau. In addition, the 10 participants who were selected for the study were first-generation graduates, and had graduated in either fall 2014 or spring 2015. The following profiles, listed in numerical order of pseudonym, briefly describe each participant’s family and college background.

**Graduate 1.** Graduate 1 was a 22-year-old Dominican woman who was raised in a two-parent household in an urban city neighborhood approximately 10 miles away for community college study site. She was not married and had no children. While enrolled in the college, she worked part-time and her household income was between $40,000-49,000. Graduate 1’s family expected her to attend college in order to set an example for her younger brother and sister. When she was in high school, she was enrolled in a gifted and talented program which enabled her to complete college-level prerequisites. Graduate 1 majored in early childhood education.

**Graduate 2.** Graduate 2 was a 32-year-old Colombian woman who was raised in a two-parent household in Colombia. Her and her parents migrated to the United States when she was 7 years of age. She was not married and had no children. Both of her parents completed high school and consistently supported the idea of Graduate 2 completing a bachelor degree in the very near future. After high school, Graduate 2 went directly to the closest university, which was two hours away, and lived in the dorms. However, she dropped out because of poor academics after two semesters. While attending college, she was employed full-time and paid most of the bills of the household.
She lived with both of her parents and had a combined household income of $40,000-49,000. Graduate 2 majored in psychology.

**Graduate 3.** Graduate 3 was a 21-year-old Cuban man who was raised in a two-parent household in an urban neighborhood. He was not married and had no children. He is the younger of two children and attended an all-boys preparatory high school. The household income of Graduate 3 was $20,000-39,000. He lived alone, but because his parents owned multiple rental properties, they used the rental income to help finance his education. Graduate 3 changed his major 3 times because he was not guided on what to choose. Both of his parents had attained high school diplomas and encouraged him to at least complete a bachelor degree. Graduate 3 majored in criminal justice.

**Graduate 4.** Graduate 4 was a 30-year-old Guatemalan woman who was raised in a two-parent household. She was not married and had no children. The idea of applying to college arose when friends of Graduate 4 started talking about doing so during her senior year in high school. Her household income was between $20,000-39,000 while she was working full-time and attending school part-time. Although she was discouraged about college because of its cost, she continued to seek ways to attend school because her parents valued education. Both of her parents completed high school education and took pride in helping their only daughter complete her education.

Graduate 4 majored in accounting.

**Graduate 5.** Graduate 5 was a 33-year-old Puerto Rican man who was raised in two-parent household in a northeast suburban area. He graduated from a public high school before taking a year off from applying to colleges so that he could save money and figure out which major he should choose. He married overseas while in the military.
Once his military commitment was over, he returned home to live with his parents, wife, and child. He was employed full-time as a customer service representative and his household income was between $40,000-49,000. In addition to his full-time employment, Graduate 5 trained students in a Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) program in a local college. Both of Graduate 5’s parents completed high school. Graduate 5 majored in chemistry.

**Graduate 6.** Graduate 6 was a 24-year-old Colombian woman who was raised in a single-parent household. She was not married and had no children. Graduate 6 was raised in an urban area and attended public high school in the southeast. Both of her parents are second-generation Colombian Americans. Her father receives disability payments. Graduate 6 was employed part-time in a grocery store while attending school full-time. Her household income was between $20,000-39,000. During her last year in college, she felt overwhelmed by having to travel to and from work while juggling academic demands. The highest level of education her mother completed was eighth grade, and the highest level of education the father completed was high school. The high school counselor of Graduate 6 encouraged her to apply to the community college study site. Graduate 6 majored in computer science.

**Graduate 7.** Graduate 7 was a 24-year-old Dominican man who was raised in a two-parent household. He was not married and had no children. He decided to live at home and enrolled at the local community so that his monthly costs would remain low. He was employed full-time while attending school full-time. His household income was less than $20,000. He was born in the Dominican Republic where he lived for 13 years until he started high school in the United States. He lived in an urban area and attended a
private high school. Graduate 7 was adamant about attending a 4-year university, but because he worried about financial support in those types of institutions, he enrolled in a community college. During college, he was responsible for taking care of his three younger siblings by driving them to and from school, cleaning, and helping them with their homework. His mother completed high school and the highest education level his father completed was seventh grade. Graduate 7 majored in special education.

Graduate 8. Graduate 8 was a 28-year-old Honduran woman who was raised in a single-parent household. She was not married and had no children. Though she used student and parent-plus loans to help pay for college, she had to work full-time in order to pay rent, her car note and other household expenses. Her household income was between $20,000-39,000. She is the only member of her primary and extended family to go to college, although both of her parents completed high school. Though Graduate 8 initially pursued being a chemistry major because she loved science, she eventually settled on a major in business administration because it appeared easier to complete.

Graduate 9. Graduate 9 was a 21-year-old Honduran woman who was raised in a two-parent household. She was not married and had no children. She was out of work at the time of the study and her household income is less than $20,000. Graduate 9 was raised in the same city in which the study was conducted, and also attended grammar school and high school there. She is one of eight siblings, none of whom have completed a degree. The highest education her parents completed was high school. Her parents do not speak English. At the community college study site, she had participated in programs for minority students that distributed stipends to help students with living expenses. Graduate 9 majored in psychology.
Graduate 10 was a 24-year-old Peruvian man who was raised in a two-parent household. He was not married and had no children. While attending college, he continued meeting his family obligations, worked 33.5 hours a week, commuted to school, and also cared for his two younger siblings. His household income was between $40,000-49,000. Both parents of Graduate 10 completed high school outside of the country. His mother worked in a factory and his father owned his own travel agency. It was entirely up to Graduate 10 whether or not he would attend college, but he had to find the financial means to do so. Graduate 10 majored in liberal arts.

Table 4.3 displays the demographic information provided for each of the 10 participants.

Table 4.3

Characteristics of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity Origin (or Race):</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colombian</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuban</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominican</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemalan</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honduran</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peruvian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-21</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-25</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>2</td>
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</table>
Table 4.3 (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest Degree Earned by Mother:</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle School (6–8)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school (9-12) or the equivalent (for example: GED)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest Degree Earned by Father:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle School (6–8)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school (9-12) or the equivalent (for example: GED)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Childhood Household:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single Parent—Mother</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Parent—Mother and Father</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not married</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Status:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employed full-time</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed part-time</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of work and looking for work</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household Income:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than $20,000</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,000 to $39,999</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,000 to $49,999</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester Completed Degree:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2014</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2015</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Research question 1.** Research question 1 asked: What individual, familial, and environmental factors contribute to the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college? Interview questions 1, 1a, 2, 2a, 3, and 4 were constructed to answer research question 1.

**Interview question 1.** Interview question 1 asked: How have your relationships with your family, college friends, faculty, and/or staff influenced your college experience? The pattern developed from the responses was these relationships provided positive influences for the students ($n = 10$). The major positive influence was their families’ support through pushing them on and supporting them ($n = 8$). The additional positive influences included: their friends ($n = 2$), classmates ($n = 1$), and faculty and staff ($n = 1$). Regarding staff, it is important to note that Graduate 10 reported a negative factor, stating,

> As far as the faculty, for the faculty they pretty much didn’t care, so if it wasn’t for class, then you really didn’t see too much of your faculty staff, unless you went to the office hours, pretty much, for that college experience.

Some of the specific responses for each student are presented to illustrate their feelings related to factors contributing to their academic success. Graduate 3 stated:

> My family really helped me push through. I know they didn’t get past high school, but they helped me keep motivated and let me know that I could do anything I put my mind to once I tried my best, you know?

Graduate 2 also reported:

> As far as family, not that many of my family went to college, so the few that did go to college, kind of, influenced me. They were like, you should finish, even
though you’re a little bit older and behind, you should go back to school and finish. Then as far as friends, a lot of people were younger than me in school, so it just was inspiring that they had, like, a direction and were so much younger than me, so I wish, like, I had that kind of direction when I was that age.

Similarly, Graduate 5 responded, “Well, my relationship with my family, they always saw the potential in me at the high school to go to college. No one in my family graduated from college, or understood what college was.”

According to Graduate 6:

They influenced it a lot, I had a lot of support, especially from family—my mom in particular—supporting the whole time while I was in school, she was encouraging, pushing me when I didn’t want to go to class. She basically helped me to focus on the outcome of it.

Lastly, Graduate 7 reported:

My relationships with my classmates or my fellow college students and faculty, because they were able to understand what I was going through as a student, and some of them were willing to sit down and provide examples and insights in order to make my journey what it was at the college.

Table 4.4 displays interview question 1 and the frequency of responses by extracted themes.
Table 4.4

Thematic Response to Interview Question 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question 1</th>
<th>Pattern and Themes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How have your</td>
<td>Pattern: Positive Influence</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relationships with</td>
<td>Theme: Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>your family, college</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>friends,</td>
<td>Parents—pushed, saw potential</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>faculty,</td>
<td>Mom—encouraged, helped me to focus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and/or staff</td>
<td>Friends—inspired, understand what I was going through</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>influenced your</td>
<td>Classmates—able to understand, provide examples and insights</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>college experience?</td>
<td>Faculty/Staff</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive report</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative report—did not care</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Graduates 1, 2, 5, and 10 reported multiple themes.

**Interview question 1a.** Interview question 1a asked: From whom did you receive the most academic support in college? The pattern developed from the themes was family ($n = 9$). That is, participants seemed always to refer back to their family when answering this question. Themes extracted from the pattern included: parents ($n = 7$), mother ($n = 2$), and wife ($n = 1$). Additional themes derived from the responses included academic support ($n = 3$), including department head ($n = 1$), principal ($n = 1$), and mentors ($n = 1$). Lastly, a couple of graduates reported friends ($n = 1$) and being a self-motivator ($n = 1$) as providing the most academic support in college.

Because many of the graduates indicated they did not receive adequate academic support from the college, they often sited other support systems which contributed to their perseverance to become more academically prepared. For instance, Graduate 2 reported, “The most academic support I would say was my family.” Graduate 3 also
stated, “I think my parents. Not so much people at my school, I guess my parents.” In addition, Graduate 9 reported, “Would have to say my family, they were there the most.” Despite the lack of social and academic support for participants at the college, Graduate 4 described that:

The most support I received, I would say, would be from my department head, who was over at the English area. Because he definitely saw a lot of potential in me, helped me to see potential in myself, and he pushed me to do a lot more than I ever thought was possible, as a student, especially as a returning student, married with a family.

Lastly, Graduate 10 mentioned:

Honestly, personally I’m a person that I self-motivate myself. I didn’t go to college to make friends and party; it was a job at hand and the党ing and everything could come later. So I pretty much self-motivated myself, plus I knew that it’s an investment that I’m taking on myself by taking a student loan and going to college.

Table 4.5 displays interview question 1a and the frequency of responses by extracted themes.

**Interview questions 2 and 2a.** Interview questions 2 and 2a asked: Are there support systems that were not mentioned that assisted you in completing your degree? If yes, what are the biggest sources of support in your efforts to stay enrolled and persist toward degree completion? The pattern developed was yes (n = 9). Themes extracted from the pattern included: God (n = 4), manager at work (n = 1), degree navigation program (n = 1), advisor (n = 1), co-workers (n = 1), friends from other universities
Table 4.5

*Thematic Response to Interview Question 1a*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From whom did you receive the most academic support in college?</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme: Family</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wife</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic Support</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Department Head</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentors</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Motivator</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Graduate 5 and 6 reported multiple themes.

(n = 1), and parents (n = 1). In addition, a single graduate (n = 1) reported no, there were no other support systems that were not mentioned.

The following specific responses illustrate the students’ ideas of their support systems. Graduate 1 stated, “Whole Foods manager. She is another one that kicked my ass, pretty much throughout the whole experience that I was at school.”

Also, Graduate 2 mentioned:

The Degree Navigator. That’s really all I needed because it tells you the requirements that you need, and it tells you, like, you put in what classes you were thinking of taking and it tells you if they match degree or not. It, kind of, keeps you on track.

Graduate 4 reported:

The biggest source in that would be God. Because there were many, many days where it was pretty much impossible, on my own, for me to accomplish things and do things, but God was always with me the whole time.
Similarly, Graduate 6 reported, “I would say it was my faith in God, and praying, and encouraging myself that pushed me to finish my degree.”

Also, Graduate 8 said:

If I’m being completely honest, Jesus Christ. I’ve got to say that, because I feel, like, there was no real true guidance. Although I had the influences, I didn’t have the guidance, and honestly it was a lot of praying and going to church.

Table 4.6 displays interview questions 2 and 2a and the frequency of responses by extracted themes.

Table 4.6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question 2 and 2a</th>
<th>Pattern and Themes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are there support systems that were not mentioned that assisted you in completing your degree? If yes, what are the biggest sources of support in your efforts to stay enrolled and persist toward degree completion?</td>
<td>Pattern: Yes</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theme: God</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Manager at work</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Degree Navigation Program</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advisor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Co-workers</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friends from other Universities</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Graduate 5 reported multiple themes.*

**Interview question 3.** Interview question 3 asked: Why do you believe you have persisted to completing your degree? The major theme extracted from the response to this question was love and support of family (n = 4). Additional themes extracted were: having a desire for a better future (n = 3), self-motivation (n = 2), belief in self (n = 1), remaining focused on goal (n = 1), passion and desire to finish college (n = 1), and achieving dream job (n = 1).
Some of the specific responses reveal what the students believed kept them persisting to complete their degree. Graduate 1 reported:

I continued, not only because of my friends pushing me, but also because I wanted to better myself. I want to become—I’m not saying school is going to make you become a better person—but I want to become a well-rounded person, I want to have knowledge and pass as many subject that I can. And, if I can help people along my path, then I’ll do that.

Also, Graduate 4 reported:

Because I worked hard and I believed that I could, and I had the support of people who also believed that I could, people who, a lot of times, were rooting for me, rooting for me behind-the-scenes and I didn't even know it.

Graduate 9 added:

Because I feel I was focused. That was my goal, and I stuck to it. It helps that I had the support from, you know, from my family and church. I had the push from them, but mostly I just stayed focused. I wanted that degree bad, and I stuck with it.

Another response from Graduate 6 had similar feelings:

Because it was something that I really, really had the passion, the desire to complete. I wouldn’t have wanted my degree if it weren’t because of that. I had to persevere through all of the personal things and other issues that I was going through, to finish.

Table 4.7 displays interview question 3 and the frequency of responses by extracted themes.
Table 4.7

Thematic Response to Interview Question 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question 3</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why do you believe you have persisted to completing your degree?</td>
<td>Theme: Love and Support of Family</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Having a desire for better future</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Motivation</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Believed in self</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Remained focused on goal</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Passion and desire to finish college</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To achieve dream job</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Graduates 5 and 9 reported multiple themes.*

*Interview question 4.* Interview question 4 asked: If you were giving advice to future first-generation community college students who are Latino, what would you tell them? The major theme extracted from the response to this question was to persevere (n = 4). Additional themes included: take any advice you are given (n = 1), do not stand in your own way (n = 1), make sure it is what you really want to do (n = 1), surround yourself with positive individuals (n = 1), do it early while you are young (n = 1), and stay focused (n = 1).

Some of the following responses reflect what the students felt about advice they would give to others. Graduate 1 reported, “Go for it, and don’t stop, just keep going. Money comes and goes, don’t worry about it, you’ll find a way. If the will is there, you’ll find a way.” Graduate 2 also stated:

Don’t give up, no matter how long it takes. Even if you have to take, like, two classes at a time, it’s still better to do that and finish, than just always wonder if you could finish school. Keep trekking along.
Graduate 3 mentioned, “Whatever you're given, whatever somebody tells you, take that advice because they've been there before.”

Graduate 4 stated:

I would to tell them that if this is what you really want to do, then the only thing really standing in your way is yourself. Because, I know from me that with me being a returning student, that's what kept me from coming back for a long period of time.”

Graduate 8 said:

Go, and do it early. So I’m about to be thirty, and typically, you know, you’re doing a bachelor around twenty-one, twenty-two. So just go, don’t get distracted, don’t let what’s out there stop you. Get it out of the way and take advantage of their youth, and the opportunity that they might have, maybe they don’t have kids. It’s a struggle to work for school and have a child. So, to just take advantage of the fact that they’re still young enough to do it.

Table 4.8 displays interview question 4 and the frequency of responses by extracted themes.

Summary of research question 1. Research question 1 sought to determine what individual, familial, and environmental factors contribute to the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from a community college. The results showed that there is a positive correlation between individual, familial, and
Table 4.8

Thematic Response to Interview Question 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question 4</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you were giving advice to future first-generation community college students who are Latino, what would you tell them?</td>
<td>Theme: Persevere</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Take any advice you're given</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Don’t stand in your own way</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make sure it's what you really want to do</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Surround yourself with positive individuals</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Do it early while you're young</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stay focused</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

environmental factors and the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from a community college.

Interview questions 1 and 1a asked: How have your relationships with your family, college friends, faculty, and/or staff influenced your college experience, and from whom did you receive the most academic support in college? Through these interview questions, it was determined that familial relationships help the most to cultivate the college experience through the “pushing” of family members. Eight out of 10 graduates reported that familial relationships were the main contributing factor from which they received the most academic support in college. Other familial factors that helped influence a positive college experience emerged from friends. Friends of the graduates were noted as sometimes being inspiring, especially because they know what challenges the graduates often experience while in an academic setting. It was stated that environmental factors did not have a positive influence on the graduates. For example, Graduate 3 indicated that a faculty member was known for having a “don’t care attitude towards the students.” The negative factor from faculty, as an expected source of environmental protection to the college experience, reduced interaction between the
Graduate 3 and faculty member. Despite the negative report of a faculty member, staff members helped to reinforce a positive college experience. As Graduate 7 noted, “My adviser always made time for me.”

Interview question 2 sought to determine if there are support systems that were not mentioned that assisted the graduate in completing their degree. Individual protective factors were identified. The key individual factor were the graduates trust in God. In addition, familial protective factors were key resources to the graduates’ realization of intrinsic or internal motivation. These resources included parents, co-workers, and friends from other community colleges. The environmental protective factors that helped to increase intrinsic individual protective factors emerged from co-workers, software systems that aided a graduate to navigate through the course scheduling process, and academic advisors who provided motivation and self-determination to the graduates. Although familial and environmental protective factors facilitated in enriching the intrinsic motivation of the graduates, the key protective factor to their persistence towards degree completion was their faith in God.

Interview question 2a sought to explore protective factors that had the highest influence of positive academic support for the graduates to stay enrolled and persist toward degree completion. The graduates reported receiving the highest academic support from their faith in God and their family. As Graduate 7 stated, “I felt like sometimes God is all I really had. If it weren’t for Him, I don’t know if I would have completed the degree.” In addition to faith in God, familial protective factors laid foundation for academic support. Family support derived from parents, mothers, friends, and a wife. It is important to mention that there were environmental protective factors
that provided support to the graduates. Graduates who mentioned having support outside their family stated different environmental support systems that helped them persist. The support systems an academic advisor, co-workers, and friends at other universities who shared the same experiences.

Interview question 3 asked the graduates the reason why they have persisted to completing their degree. The perseverance of the participant was the major finding that arose when the participants were asked this question. Protective factors, namely, individual and familial, provided basis for development of persistence towards personal, career, and economic and professional goals. Personal desire, self-motivation, and love and support from family increased the graduates focus on academic goals, and their desire to complete their associate degree to attain a better economic and financial future. Individual protective factors influenced persistence to desires for a better future associated with an associate degree through the increase of self-motivation and self-determination, a belief in self, personal passions and faith in God, and personal goals.

Interview question 4 sought to explore what advice a graduate, who has achieved academic success, would give to a future first-generation Latino community college student. The major theme that arose was that one must cope with the challenges in academic settings through perseverance, and continue to associate with others who have a positive influence in their lives. In addition to individual and familial factors, Graduate 9, whose parents did not speak English, stated that, “Knowing who to speak to in the college, and about the system in place is important. Find someone whose language you can understand and who understands you.”
Protective factors have been defined as internal and external assets, resources, and strengths that modify risk and increase the probability of a positive outcome during a time of hardship when a negative consequence is expected (Fraser et al., 2004). As highlighted in the review of literature, studies indicate that social and familial factors can help increase the academic resilience of students despite their experience to high risks (Perez et al., 2009). In addition, individual efforts (Morales, 2008), and institutional and cultural factors contribute to the success of students (Conchas, 2006). The results of this study mirrored this. While participant narratives revealed adversity during their academic career, they also recognized that individual, familial, and environmental factors help mitigate risk to academic success.

Research question 2. Research question 2 asked: What risk factors affect the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college? Interview statement 5 and interview questions 5a, 6a, and 6b were constructed to answer research question 2.

Interview question 5. Interview question 5 stated: Explain how your education prior to college prepared you for college. The major theme extracted from the response to interview question 5 was that students were not prepared for college (n = 5). Additional themes extracted included: Advanced Placement (AP) classes in high school (n = 1), life experiences (n = 1), education experience in the Dominican Republic (n = 1), transferring to a better high school (n = 1), and the brochure from the college (n = 1).
Some of the specific responses that follow relate to how the graduated felt their education prepared them for college. Graduate 1 reported:

I wasn’t. I pretty much went blindly into it, I wasn’t prepared. In high school you’re used to information given to you. In college you actually have to work your ass off to get it, you have to do it yourself. There is no one that you can go to and be, like, “Oh, I need help, can you help me?”

Graduate 3 also stated:

I don’t really think I was prepared for college, but I was always a hard worker, so I honestly didn’t feel like I was ready for college, and only went to college because I wanted to play baseball in the future; if it wasn’t for playing baseball in future, I would never have gone to college.

Graduate 5 mentioned, “I don’t really think high school really prepared me too much for college. It’s really different from . . . College and high school are totally different, so . . .”

Lastly, Graduate 4 mentioned:

For me, I would say, I guess the experience in life kind of really prepared me for college, in so many ways. I was just prepared by life, and just knowing that the only way to get this done, if you really want to complete the race, is to really just run the race with (blinders), and not really focus on what anyone else was doing.

Table 4.9 displays interview question 5 and the frequency of responses by extracted themes.
Table 4.9

**Thematic Response to Interview Question 5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question 5</th>
<th>Pattern and Themes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explain how your</td>
<td>Theme: Was not prepared for college</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>education prior to</td>
<td>AP classes in high school</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>college prepared you</td>
<td>Life experiences</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for college.</td>
<td>Education experience in Dominican Republic</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transferring to a better high school</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brochure</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interview question 5a.** Interview question 5a asked: Was there a person or persons who encouraged you to attend college? The major theme that was developed was family ($n = 12$). Included in family were: mother ($n = 4$), father ($n = 2$), aunts ($n = 2$), husband ($n = 1$), brother ($n = 1$), grandmother ($n = 1$), and entire family ($n = 1$). Additional themes extracted included friends ($n = 2$), co-workers ($n = 1$), wanting a better job ($n = 1$), and guidance counselor ($n = 1$). It is also important to note that Graduates 2, 4, 5, and 6 reported multiple themes.

Some of the specific responses related to persons who encouraged the students are presented. Graduate 3 stated, “I would somewhat say my brother. My mother used to talk highly of him, so I wanted to have the same thing, even though he didn’t attend or finish college.” Graduate 5 mentioned, “Yeah, my mother, my grandmother, my aunts, all my family; like I said, they saw potential in me.” Graduate 6 also mentioned, “I had my mother, and my father before he passed away, especially.” Graduate 10 stated, “My Dad, honestly. He gave up his studies when he had me young to support and put food on the table.” Lastly, Graduate 1 reported, “My guidance counselor.”

Table 4.10 displays interview question 5a and the frequency of responses by extracted themes.
Table 4.10

*Thematic Response to Interview Question 5a*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question 5a</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theme: Family</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aunts</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brother</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grandmother</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entire family</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Co-workers</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wanting a better job</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guidance counselor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Graduates 2, 4, 5, and 6 reported multiple themes.

**Interview question 6.** Interview question 6 asked: How would you describe your academic experiences at the institution where you studied? The theme that developed was positive experience ($n = 6$). Included in the pattern of positive experience were: loved it ($n = 4$), was a stepping stone for future ($n = 1$), and encouraged a love for school ($n = 1$). Additional themes included rollercoaster ride ($n = 4$), party scene ($n = 1$), and challenging ($n = 1$).

Some of the specific responses related to academic experiences at the community college are presented next. Graduate 1 stated:

I loved it, it was so fun, besides my statistics professor that would check on me every single day. Besides him, it was just, like, everyone, every single professor I came across—putting my statistics professor aside—made everything fun.

Additionally, Graduate 2 mentioned, “Oh, I love the college, I took a lot of classes, and I don’t know how helpful they were, but certainly they were interesting.”
Graduate 5 said, “It was challenging. I would say at the very least it was very challenging. But in a way I liked that, because it, kind of, pushed me harder to work harder.” Graduate 6 stated, “It was challenging. I would say at the very least it was very challenging. But in a way I liked that, because it, kind of, pushed me harder to work harder.” Graduate 7 mentioned, “Of course, yes. My academic experience at the college, I would say, is as a stepping stone for where I’m aiming right now.”

Table 4.11 displays interview question 6 and the frequency of responses by extracted themes.

Table 4.11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question 6</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How would you describe your academic</td>
<td>Theme: Positive experience</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experiences at the institution where you</td>
<td>Loved it</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>studied?</td>
<td>Was a stepping stone for future</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experiences at the institution where you</td>
<td>Encouraged a love for school</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>studied?</td>
<td>Rollercoaster ride</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Party scene</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenging</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interview question 6a.** Interview question 6a asked: Did you experience any academic challenges at the college? The pattern that was developed was yes (n = 8). Included in the pattern of yes were: statistics professor (n = 1), working full-time (n = 1), underdeveloped study habits (n = 1), missed deadlines due to personal life (n = 1), personal issues (n = 1), fitting in with the generation of students (n = 1), procrastinating (n = 1), and hard classes (n = 1). Additional themes included no (n = 2).

Some of the specific responses related to academic challenges included the following. Graduate 1 mentioned, “My statistics professor.” Additionally, Graduate 2
stated, “My only academic challenge was that I had to work full-time while I was going to school, because I needed cash.” Graduate 4 mentioned, “Yeah, I would say the biggest challenge for me was always major deadlines. Because when I was working full time, having a family at home, it was always those major deadlines to get things done.” Graduate 6 stated, “Truthfully, a lot of it was very stressful, again, and I was having so many personal issues that that was really, really affecting my focus on focusing on my studies, so it was very, very, very stressful.” Lastly, Graduate 8 mentioned,

Academically, no, I was always a straight A student, it came easy to me. I just went, I’ve always been a bookworm, so I was comfortable in college, I was never intimidated by any other person that was there. I was always just very quiet and to myself, just went into class.

Table 4.12 displays interview question 6a and the frequency of responses by extracted themes and developed pattern.

Table 4.12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question 6a</th>
<th>Pattern and Themes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did you experience any academic challenges at the college?</td>
<td>Pattern: Yes</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statistics Professor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Working full time</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Underdeveloped study habits</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Missed deadlines due to personal life</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal issues</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fitting in with the generation of students</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Procrastinating</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hard classes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Interview question 6b.* Interview question 6b asked: How have you sought to address these challenges? The theme developed was remained motivated not to quit \( n = \)
10). Included in the pattern of remained motivated not to quit was: got everything done in advance \((n = 2)\), did not give in \((n = 1)\), picked up jobs when available \((n = 1)\), focused on homework more \((n = 1)\), studied hard and did homework \((n = 1)\), positive support system \((n = 1)\), gained confidence \((n = 1)\), and took summer classes \((n = 1)\).

Some of the specific responses related to addressing challenges in community college included the following examples: Graduate 1 said, “I just didn't give in.” Graduate 2 reported, “Well, I tried to pick jobs where I could, kind of, study while working. So I worked out the writing lab, and I had another job at the movie theater which I could basically do homework the whole time, so that was good.” Graduate 4 said, “Most of the time, maybe ninety-eight percent of the time, I just made a smart plan for how to tackle it, early on and get things done in advance, when possible.” Graduate 5 mentioned:

I really studied hard. I did all the assignments, I never skipped homework. I would never be out, if I was, probably only one time throughout the whole semester. I wanted to make sure I took a lot of notes, tried to read some of the chapters. Just really worked hard, studied a lot, sacrificed a lot of weekends studying.

Graduate 6 reported,

Okay, yes. While at school, again, I had to deal with the death of my father, and not only my dad, but a couple of days later my grandfather died. So with all of that, I had to take care of bills, being homeless for a few months, he passed away, had to deal with death and also had to deal with sickness in my own body, and also parenting my other parent, my mom, being sick.
Table 4.13 displays interview question 6b and the frequency of responses by extracted themes.

Table 4.13

**Thematic Response to Interview Question 6b**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question 6b</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How have you sought to address these challenges?</td>
<td>Theme: Remained motivated not to quit</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Got everything done in advance</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Did not give in</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pick-up jobs when available</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focused on homework more</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Studied hard and did homework</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive support system</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gained confidence</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Took summer classes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Graduates 5 and 6 reported multiple themes.*

**Summary of research question 2.** Research question 2 sought to determine which risk factors affected the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college. The results showed under preparedness as a major theme of risk factor for this demographic. Under preparedness suggested that first-generation Latino graduates had to work harder and develop a do-it-yourself attitude to bridge gaps in not being ready for further education or employment. The graduates stated they felt underprepared for several reasons and cited some of these possible causes: (a) lack of preparation in high school, (b) lack of faculty aid, (c) undeveloped study habits, and (d) lack of interest in pursuing an associate degree. The results showed that first-generation Latino graduates lacked psychological preparedness to pursuing an associate degree. The graduates who felt prepared thought they were because of their
experiences in AP classes in high school, positive life experiences, educational experiences in other countries, and an overall good high school experience.

Moreover, the results showed that risk factors among first-generation Latino graduates were reduced by protective factors. Individual and familial protective factors helped reduce risk factors through perseverance, and motivation and encouragement from family members such as fathers, mothers, aunts, husbands, brothers, and grandmothers. Individual protective factors were evident through: (a) self-motivation, (b) faith in God, and (c) the personal desire to reach academic success. Familial protective factors were evident through: (a) familial member’s advice related to the academic success of other family members who had acquired associate degree; (b) perceived potential of family members and motivation to pursue academic potential; and (c) push factors from parents who desired to complete associate degree programs but quit to address family-based issues (e.g., working to meet the family’s financial needs). Additional themes that were derived were based on environmental factors, which provided encouragement and motivation. These factors were noted as being the friends, co-workers, and guidance counselors of the participants. In addition to the role familial protective factors and environmental protective factors played in positively influencing the graduates, individual protective factors played an even greater role through personal desires for a better job.

Another risk factor to the academic success of first-generation Latino graduates was based on their academic experiences at various community colleges they had attended. Family members facilitated in how the participants perceived having fun in academic success and being resilient. Individual protective factors helped the students to
cultivate positive academic experiences due to the perceived role of academic persistence as a “stepping stone for the future.” However, risk factors to academic success and resilience emerged from (a) challenges to persistence and (b) lifestyles such as party scenes that distorted students’ capacity for academic success and academic resilience.

The participants experienced academic challenges that were associated with environmental protective factors, including a statistics professor (faculty member) which resulted into perceived difficult classes and possible failure to cope with challenging assignments. In addition, factors presented academic challenges that were evident because the participants: (a) worked full-time, (b) felt the challenge of underdeveloped study habits, (c) missed deadlines due to personal life, especially lifestyle factors and party scenes, (d) faced personal issues, and (e) lacked social and academic integration which created challenges characterized by little or no social and academic fitness. These factors presented both academic and financial challenges such as lack of funds. To alleviate financial pressures, 7 of 10 graduates chose to work full-time, which increased their pressure to meet important deadlines and intensified the likelihood of lacking social and academic integration.

The participants addressed key challenges to academic resilience and success through an interplay of various protective factors. However, individual protective factors provided the most reliable method for reducing challenges to academic persistence. The participants had self-motivation to persist towards academic success. The self-motivation was driven by goals for academic success, which appear to be personal or individual obligations. Various participants had internal coping abilities for academic resilience, which they attributed to early planning and preparatory planning to address challenges to
academic resilience and success. Whenever the participants faced financial constraints, they sought available jobs to solve their short-term financial constraints. At the individual level, the participants had self-motivation and self-determination to focus more on academic performance, working hard, and completing summer classes to cover for missed classes due to working full time. Individual protective factors prevailed in managing challenges of the participants when they acknowledged and accepted their weaknesses, especially academic underpreparedness and learning the value of planning to achieve academic resilience.

Environmental protective factors also helped the participants manage challenges, especially school support systems that helped them strengthen their psychological resources to persisting and realizing their scholastic goals. Environmental protective factors helped reduce their challenges to persist by creating opportunities for social and academic integration. This helped the participants to accept their characteristics as a source of weakness and to work hard to achieve academic success and resilience, despite barriers/challenges associated with their characteristics. Support systems also helped the participants become acclimated to the community college and find a sense of social belonging and academic fitness—which are essential for academic resilience at the individual level. Therefore, although individual protective factors influenced their realization of academic resilience, environmental protective factors played an important role in helping these participants find social and academic fit. This shows an interdependence of protective factors within first-generation Latino graduates towards achievement of academic resilience.
Research reveals the importance of mitigating risk in academic settings (Masten & Reed, 2002). In this study, risk factors were defined as factors that reduce resistance to adversity (Smith-Osborne, 2007), and can often be linked to genetic markers (Fraser et al., 2004). The participants of this study displayed risk factors of the lack of social and academic integration, and under preparedness, which may have stemmed from being a first-generation student, Latino, and a student who attends a community college (Inkelas et al., 2007). While the risk factors the graduates experienced created hardships, the graduates were able to assimilate, obtain support, and continue to persist towards degree completion (Fischer, 2007; Inkelas et al., 2007).

In a study by De los Santos and Cuamea, it was discovered that nearly 40% of the respondents indicated that students were significantly underprepared to complete college-level work (De los Santos & Cuamea, 2010), but as indicated by Morales, the risk may increase the likelihood that a student will self-will themselves to continue to persist towards the completion of a degree (Morales, 2008). This study mirrored these findings. While 50% of the graduates indicated that they felt unprepared for college, their status as first-generation Latino students did not stop their intent to persist.

**Research question 3.** Research question 3 asked: What barriers or challenges do first-generation Latinos at community colleges encounter while attempting to persist toward degree completion? Interview questions 7, 7a, 7b, 7c, 7ci, and 7cii were constructed to answer research question 3.

**Interview question 7.** Interview question 7 asked: Have you encountered barriers or challenges as a college student to persist toward degree completion? If so, what were the barrier(s) or challenge(s) that you encountered? The pattern that was developed was yes (n = 8). Themes extracted from the pattern included: myself (n = 3), cost (n = 2),
being a minority (n = 1), conflicting work and school schedule (n = 1), working full-time (n = 1), having a family (n = 1), death of father (n = 1), and professor (n = 1).

Some of the specific responses relate to encountered barriers or challenges are presented: Graduate 1 stated “myself.” Graduate 6 stated, “Sometimes I felt like I was my worst enemy.” Graduate 2 reported, “I think cost is a barrier. I think it's very hard to pay for school, for some people, for some people it's easier.” Graduate 5 mentioned, “I guess going to school full-time and working full-time, plus having a family is, kind of, too much to handle sometimes.” Graduate 9 said:

The only barrier or challenge would be certain professors. Some of the professors wasn’t as helpful as others. So when it came to it, some professors were too hard, too strict, they didn’t really think what would be beneficial to my career. It would be nothing pertaining to the career, but that would be my only, you know, challenge.

Graduate 10 mentioned:

I can’t say any other obstacles besides personal. Of course everybody wants money, so having a part-time job and trying to manage school and social life, that’s just a balance of the timing, pretty much. But other than that, I can say pretty much everything else was pretty much laid out on the campus I was at.

Lastly, Graduate 4 stated:

I think just understanding the college system and what is expected of me. I don’t think the school really gave me a good idea of what to expect in classes, other than the syllabus they gave us. I think we had one seminar class that gave us the basics, but it didn’t seem like it was enough.
Table 4.14 displays interview question 7 and the frequency of responses by extracted themes and developed pattern.

Table 4.14

Thematic Response to Interview Question 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question 7</th>
<th>Pattern and Themes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have you encountered barriers or challenges as a college student to persist toward degree completion? If so, what were the barrier(s) or challenge(s) that you encountered?</td>
<td>Pattern: Yes</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theme: Myself</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being a minority</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflicting work and school schedule</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Working full time</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Having a family</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Death of father</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Graduate 5 reported multiple themes.*

**Interview question 7a.** Interview question 7a asked: How did these barriers affect you as a student? The theme that was developed was faith (*n* = 5). Themes extracted from the responses included: led them to trust in God (*n* = 1) and to pray (*n* = 4). Additional themes extracted from the responses included: wanted to give up (*n* = 1), finally understanding the college process (*n* = 1), surrounded self with same race (*n* = 1), separated school, for work, and from home life (*n* = 1), and would feel like a waste of time (*n* = 1).

Some of the specific responses on the effect of barriers are as follows. Graduate 1 reported, “Whenever I see that things aren’t going my way, I give up.” Graduate 2 mentioned, “I think just understanding the whole college process, okay, so you take a major, or two majors, and okay, you have to do A, B, C, D and then you can, you know, complete the degree.” Graduate 4 reported:
I would say the favor of God, because I worked with supervisors at one point that were unwilling to work with me, but it always happened to where they kind of had to, or they weren’t happy to do it, but they kind of had to.

Graduate 5 stated, “I tried to focus on where I was at, so if I was home with my family I focused on that, at work I focused on work, at school I focused on school.”

Graduate 6 mentioned, “I had to pray and still try to complete my degree.” Graduate 9 reported, “It basically, it made me feel like it was a waste of time, you know. I mean, at the stage that I’m at, I mean, I need somebody that’s going to help me.”

Table 4.15 displays interview question 7a and the frequency of responses by extracted themes.

Table 4.15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thematic Response to Interview Question 7a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview Question 7a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did these barriers affect you as a student?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interview question 7b. Interview question 7b asked: Were there specific times in your academic career when you considered leaving? If so, what did you do to overcome that challenge? Themes extracted from the pattern included both yes (n = 3) and no (n = 6). Additionally, one graduate reported leaving for a year before returning to college.
Some of the specific responses related to leaving are presented. Graduate 1 reported, “No, I was just there to go to class.” Graduate 3 mentioned, “No, there was nothing.” Graduate 5 stated, “I was highly motivated this time around, so there were times when the work was really hard and I even thought to myself maybe I can’t make it, but I always tried to stick to the positive side of things, like, just try your best, try your best.” Graduate 9 reported, “Yeah. After talking my family, they helped me see, like, I’m near the end so just hold on, it don’t matter.”

Table 4.16 displays interview question 7b and the frequency of responses by extracted themes.

Table 4.16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question 7b</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Were there specific times in your academic career when you considered leaving? If so, what did you do to overcome that challenge?</td>
<td>Theme: No</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Did leave for a year, then went back partly because of family</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interview questions 7c, 7ci, and 7cii. Interview questions 7c, 7ci, and 7cii asked:

Was there anything you tried that you did not find helpful? What has worked in these times? What has not worked in these times? The pattern developed was yes (n = 6).

Themes extracted from the responses included: tutoring (n = 4), online classes (n = 1), and trying to force friendships (n = 1). Additional themes extracted include no (n = 4).
Some of the specific responses related to trying helpful activities are presented next. Graduate 1 mentioned, “No, I was just there to go to class.” Graduate 3 said, “No, there was nothing.” Graduate 4 reported, “Okay, this is a strange one, but trying to forge friendships, for me, was not really helpful.” Graduate 7 mentioned, “Not that I can relate of. I believe every single thing that I tried at the college had contributed to the final completion of this degree.” Graduate 8 stated, “I remember taking a biology class and I was struggling with that, and we sat down with tutors, you know, but I didn’t feel that they helped in any way.” Lastly, Graduate 6 responded, “I went to tutoring, but it didn’t really help.”

Table 4.17 displays interview questions 7c, 7ci, and 7cii and the frequency of responses by extracted themes and patterns.

Table 4.17

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions 7c, 7ci, and 7cii</th>
<th>Pattern and Themes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was there anything you tried that you did not find helpful? What has worked in these times?</td>
<td>Pattern: Yes</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theme: Tutor</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online classes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What has not worked in these times?</td>
<td>Trying to force friendships</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No help at institution</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Summary of research question 3.** Research question 3 sought to determine what barriers or challenges do first-generation Latinos at community colleges encounter while attempting to persist toward degree completion. Interview question 7 sought to identify if the graduates experienced any barriers or challenges as a college student to persist toward degree completion, and if so, what were the barrier(s) or challenge(s) that
they encountered. The results indicate that 8 of the 10 graduates experienced a barrier or challenge that may have hindered their persistence towards degree completion. Although the challenges graduates experienced were diversified, the major finding was that they attribute their challenges to their lack of integration in the college setting and to their own shortcomings to things they believe they could have controlled. This resonated with Graduate 4 when she stated, “My parents gave me all I needed to succeed, but I didn’t realize how good I really had it. But the school wasn’t of much help either.” Likewise, Graduate 6 mentioned, “I could have done a lot more than what I did, really. But I felt like the school didn’t really help.”

Although insignificant, another barrier or challenge to persistence was a lack of financial resources, which made first-generation Latino graduates seek work opportunities wherever possible. For the graduates, working full-time created conflict with school schedules, thus, predisposing a secondary barrier to academic persistence. More specifically, Graduate 10 stated, “I worked 33.5 hours and my parents and I combined income is maybe about $45,000. It’s not enough.” Similarly, Graduate 8, whose household income was between $20,000-39,000, stated, “The cost of college made it difficult for me. I switched my major because of it.”

Interview question 7a sought to describe how the barriers or challenges of the academic careers of the graduates affected them as students. The major finding of how the barriers or challenges affected them as students is that it increased their perseverance and faith in God. Other reactive responses to barriers or challenges included a desire to withdraw from the associate degree program. Graduate 6 stated that although she “Wanted to give up at times,” her withdrawal desires from the associate degree program
were decreased by “surrounding herself with the same race” so that she “felt comfortable.” It is important to note that 7 out of 10 graduates demonstrated a positive reaction to the effects of their challenges. In addition to increasing their faith in God, another positive factor that arose from challenges the graduates experienced was being able to “finally understand the college process.”

Interview question 7b sought to determine if there were specific times in the academic careers of the graduates when they considered leaving, and if so, what did they do to overcome that challenge. The major finding was that because of the graduates’ self-determination, support from family, and trust in God, they have not considered leaving college. However, it is important to note that Graduate 2 indicated that she left for one year because of poor academics, then returned back to school in a community college because she deemed it a better fit to allow her to take care of household responsibilities. All four graduates who indicated that they have either left or considered leaving the community college, reported family as being the reason why they continued to persist towards degree completion. More specifically, Graduate 7 stated, “There were times when I wanted to drop out, but I knew that it would disappoint my family.” Similarly, Graduate 4 mentioned that, “My parents really encouraged me to never give-up, because they knew I could do it.”

Interview questions 7c, 7ci, and 7cii sought to describe if there was anything that the graduates tried that they did not find helpful, what has worked in those times, and what has not worked in those times. Six of the 10 graduates indicated that there are things they have tried that were not found to be helpful. The main theme was that
tutoring was insignificant to the academic success of the graduates. Graduate 10 further explains why he believed the tutoring did not help most students when he stated:

The tutoring at the college is mainly from students who just took the class themselves and happen to get a good grade in it. They don’t seem qualified to teach. They seem like they just do it for money.

Other responses included attempting to complete online courses but receiving a failing grade, and trying to force interpersonal relationships but not receiving the friendships they envisioned.

Current study findings are supported by research identified in Chapter 2 which revealed that community colleges face significant challenges in improving the academic achievement of its students because first-generation status has been found to influence the intent to persist negatively, and low academic preparation, lower SES, and lower parental levels of education also adversely affect the academic resilience of students (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). However, despite these risk factors, the graduates demonstrated that student-faculty, student-staff, and student-peer interactions are important helped them to continue to persist.

Furthermore, research revealed that first-generation college students are also likely to work more hours per week (Barry et al., 2009). Seven of the graduates worked full-time while working on their degree, two worked part-time, and one was unemployed but looking for work. Despite Bradley’s (2011) report that costlier colleges are threatening access to institutions of higher education, and Tucker’s (2014) findings that the majority of first-generation students come from low-income households and they may have a difficult time transitioning into college because of it, the participants did not
indicate that the cost of education played a significance role in not completing their degree. Rather, they indicated that the lack of financial resources encouraged them to continue to persist.

**Summary of Results**

Chapter 4 presented the research questions that guided this qualitative phenomenological study. It also presented the data gathered by the researcher in conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten first-generation Latino graduates of a community college in the northeast United States. From the data gathered, findings to their academic success of the graduates emerged. The findings that emerged answered what risk factors are present when first-generation Latino students attempt to attain an associate degree, and what protective factors are needed so that they deter these risks and reach academic success.

The first research question determined whether, if any, individual, familial, and environmental factors contribute to the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college. The findings suggested that individual and familial protective factors provided the most influence on the academic success of the graduates. More specifically, there was a significant relationship between perseverance, spirituality, and familial support, and academic success.

The second research question sought to determine if there were any risk factors that affected the academic success of the graduates. Overall, there were similarities in answers, suggesting that the graduates felt unprepared for college and felt a lack of being social and culturally involved in their academic environment. There was also a significant relationship between individual and familial support and academic success to
withstand risk factors that may have affected the academic success of the graduates. Eight of the 10 graduates experienced some form of challenge while enrolled at the college site which stemmed from individual factors of a feeling of under preparedness, and environmental factors such as fitting in with the generation of students and missing deadlines due to personal life. However, the individual protective factor of continuing to remain motivated not to quit was a contributing factor to the academic reliance of the graduates.

The third research question addressed if there were barriers of challenges the graduates experienced in their attempts to persist toward degree completion. It was found that the graduates did experience barriers or challenges. However, these barriers or challenges were mainly from the college institutional setting. The lack of social and academic integration into the college environment was the major barrier to their academic success. On the other hand, perseverance, familial support, and faith in God helped increase their motivation during their challenging times to continue to persist. Because of four protective factors, namely, perseverance, familial support, spirituality, and positive interaction from others, the graduates were able to persist towards academic success.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

According to the 2010 Census, 308.7 million people resided in the United States, of which 50.5 million, or 16%, were of Latino descent. Despite these data, the number of Latinos completing college degrees does not show similar increases, specifically to the demographic of first-generation Latino students (Pew Hispanic Center, 2012). Students whose parents have not completed a college degree are at risk to drop out after their first semester in college (Strayhorn, 2006). Consequently, once enrolled, first-generation students are 51% less likely to graduate in four years and 32% less likely to graduate in five years when compared to students who are not the first in their family to attain a degree (Ishitani, 2006). Although an increasing number of studies have attempted to describe the factors that can aid first-generation Latino students to increase the probability of degree completion (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004; Smith & Zhang, 2010), few studies have focused on and contributed to the literature specifically on first-generation Latino students at community colleges, their main entrance into postsecondary education (Pew Hispanic Center, 2012).

First-generation Latino students face numerous risk factors, which include being academically unprepared, and low socioeconomic status (Nevarez & Wood, 2010). Additional stressors first-generation Latino students face include difficulty in assimilating and obtaining support to persist towards degree completion (Fischer, 2007; Inkelas et al., 2007). Given this information, it is imperative that constituents within institutions of
higher education become familiar with the risk factors of this demographic. It is even more essential to consider the protective factors that can be used to have a deeper understanding on how to help first-generation Latino students attain a college degree. In response to these data, it was the intention of this study to focus on the factors that aid the academic success of first-generation Latino students in community colleges.

Academic resilience theory was used as the theoretical framework that provided the researcher with the lens with which to frame the research. This study used a phenomenological research design to interpret the findings. Using this design was the most appropriate for this study because it allowed for an exploration of a particular phenomenon from the perspective of its participants based on their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). The research design aided in the analysis and development of patterns and themes gleaned from the participants’ narratives. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to assist the graduates with sharing their experiences. The participants included 10 Latinos who were the first in their family to complete a college degree and who graduated from a community college either in the fall 2014 or spring 2015 semester.

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the factors associated with academic resilience from the perspective of first-generation Latino students who have completed an associate degree at a community college.

Three research questions guided this study:

1. What individual, familial, and environmental factors contribute to the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college?
2. What risk factors affect the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college?

3. What barriers or challenges do first-generation Latinos at community colleges encounter while attempting to persist toward degree completion?

Two risk factors and four major protective factors emerged from the findings to these research questions. Research questions 2 and 3 identified risk factors that affect the academic success of first-generation Latino graduates. The risk factors were under preparedness and lack of social and academic integration. The risk factors were organized by two categories of risk factors: under preparedness, and social and cultural environment. Research question 1 identified protective factors that contributed to the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college. The protective factors were perseverance, familial support, spirituality, and positive interaction from others. The protective factors were organized by three categories of protective factors: individual, familial, and environmental.

The study’s findings support and extend research on the risk factors, the protective factors, and the challenges that first-generation Latinos at community colleges experience while attempting to complete an associate degree. The results arguably make it important to focus on the protective factors of academic resilience for first-generation Latino graduates at community colleges, and can provide insights for administrators, educators, students, and other constituents who are interested in increasing the academic success of first-generation Latino students in community colleges.

This chapter first presents the implications of the findings of this qualitative study. Next, the limitations of the study are discussed and recommendations for changes
Implications of Findings

The findings in this study suggested that although a student may experience risk factors and other barriers and challenges in an academic setting, individual, familial, and environmental protective factors may play a significant role in the academic resilience of first-generation Latino students. This phenomenological study was based on the lived experiences of 10 participants who were first-generation Latino graduates of an associate degree program at a community college in the northeast United States. Two risk factors emerged from the in-depth semi-structured interviews with the participants: (a) under preparedness, and (b) lack of social and academic integration. In addition, four major protective factors emerged: (a) perseverance, (b) familial support, (c) spirituality, and (d) positive interaction from others. The themes, as indicated through the rich textual descriptions, suggested a number of important implications of findings. This section takes a closer look at each of these themes and identifies how the themes helped answer the research questions.

Risk factors. In this study, risk factors referred to the factors that reduce resistance to adversity. As noted by Table 4.2, two themes were identified as being risk factors to the academic success of the participants: (a) under preparedness, and (b) lack of social and academic integration.

Under preparedness. A theme that was revealed through the analysis of the data was that under preparedness was a risk factor to the academic success of the participants. In this study, under preparedness was the state of feeling overwhelmed because of a lack
of preparation to reach academic achievement in a college setting. The theme responded to the research question:

2. What risk factors affect the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college?

When the participants were asked how their education prior to college prepared them for college, 50% of the participants indicated they did not feel prepared for college. Often noted as the reasons for this are the lack of social and academic preparation, a lack of knowledge from the families to help them navigate through the college process, and a lack of guidance from the college in which they graduated. During their challenges in the college setting, 60% of graduates tried ways to feel more prepared during their academic career, such as tutoring and seeking the help of professors. However, tutoring was deemed not helpful by four of five participants who experienced it, and 20% of the participants indicated they felt as if the professors at the college hindered their academic success.

Although tutoring services were not helpful for four of five graduates, community colleges should continue to offer tutoring programs, particularly for Latino students because community colleges, their main entry into postsecondary education, often enroll a large number of unprepared students (Bailey, 2012). Research has shown that increasing academic services for this demographic may decrease the effect of risk factors, such as under preparedness, and increase positive behaviors (Davey et al., 2003; Rew & Horner, 2003).

**Lack of social and academic integration.** In this study, the lack of social and academic integration was defined as the lack of success in an academic environment due
to internal and external factors such as place of residence, education, employment, socioeconomic, culture, and personal issues. The theme responded to the research question:

3. What barriers or challenges do first-generation Latinos at community colleges encounter while attempting to persist toward degree completion?

The results indicate that 8 of the 10 graduates experienced a barrier or challenge that may have hindered their persistence towards degree completion. In fact, 20% of the participants stated that they felt no help at all from the institution, especially from faculty and staff at the college. As referenced in Table 4.2, staff being a barrier or challenge to academic success was mentioned 4 times while the faculty was mentioned twice. Another challenge that the participants experienced was that the online class did not appear helpful as another medium in which to learn. Because of these challenges, one graduate stated that she tried to force friendships to better assimilate at the institution as a means to cope with the experiences. Although this did not help the graduate, another graduate indicated that fostering friendships with students in other colleges helped her navigate through the college process.

It is important to note that although there were many barriers and challenges that relate to the institution in which the study was conducted, participants mentioned 7 times that they believed they were their own barrier to success. Several noted lack of motivation, and the desire for a personal life as reasons why they did not integrate well into the college setting. It is also important to note that 90% of the participants were either working full- or part-time. Of those, 33% stated that employment slightly hindered their academic performance, but did not play a significant factor.
Many first-generation Latino students stop attending class when they encounter stressors (Knapp et al., 2007). Moreover, when the climate of an institution is not welcoming, Latino students tend to experience greater stress and a feeling of alienation from the college community (Cavazos, 2010). Therefore, in order to achieve academic success, Latino students must feel comfortable discussing questions and issues in their college environments to faculty, staff, and administrators. Clearly, the availability and accessibility of institutional support are important for Latino students (Broussard, 2009). To retain Latino students, as argued by Conchas (2006) and as seen in my study, faculty, staff, and administrators who are knowledgeable about the influence that social and academic integration has on students, are needed so that first-generation Latino students are able to persist towards degree completion.

**Protective factors.** The graduates became academically resilient because of the following themes: (a) perseverance, (b) familial support, (c) spirituality, and (d) positive interaction from others. These themes responded to the research question:

1. What individual, familial, and environmental factors contribute to the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college?

**Perseverance.** Within the context of this study, perseverance referred to the persistence in continuing to work towards degree completion despite experiencing hardships. Hicks and Dennis (2005) posited that some first-generation students recognized they may be unprepared for the college workload compared with their peers because they may lack personal and social abilities. Because half of the participants felt unprepared for college, three indicated that their most significant challenge was to
overcome their own short-comings. This finding may be a result of many first-generation Latino students graduating high school unprepared for college (Dennis, 2005). Other barriers or challenges that some of the graduates experienced were: (a) being a minority, (b) cost, (c) conflicting work schedule, (d) working full-time, (e) having a family, (f) death of a father, and (g) a professor.

The most important factor in the coping of these challenges by the participants was their own perseverance. Table 4.2 showed that some form of perseverance was mentioned 36 times during the interviews. This finding is further reflected in the statement by Graduate 10 when he said, “My greatest motivation was myself.” It is important to note that the parents of Graduate 10 did not encourage him in the same manner of the other graduates had indicated, in fact, it was entirely up to Graduate 10 if he wanted to attend college. Although some participants mentioned themselves as being a barrier to their own success, through the results of this study, it can be noted that perseverance helped the graduates cope with hardships during their academic career. In short, perseverance was a significant factor to the academic resilience for this group of participants.

Familial support. In this study, familial support referred to the internal assets of attachment, communication, family structure, parent relations, parenting style, sibling relations, and spouse relations as means of support. Apart from individual motivation and spirituality, graduates consistently placed factors of academic success relating back to families. Familial support was the second most mentioned protective factor relating to academic success. Students cited their families as a major reason for their academic success in college. In response to the opening interview question, “How have your
relationships with your family, college friends, faculty, and/or staff influenced your college experience,” 100% of the graduates responded in a positive manner. Graduate 3 indicated that “Family was really big for me in graduating.” Graduate 1 further responded that “I think my family pushed me to succeed.” Some students identified family as the primary influence to their academic success, but one graduate focused on the efforts her mother. Graduate 6 stated:

They influenced it a lot, I had a lot of support, especially from family—my mom in particular—supporting the whole time while I was in school, she was encouraging, pushing me when I didn’t want to go to class. She basically helped me to focus on the outcome of it.

With regard to the first research question, data from this study indicated that family support aided first-generation Latino students in community colleges to persist towards degree completion. A common theme throughout the data, which increased the academic resilience of the graduates, was familial support. An example of this was through the consistent encouragement of the family members. Encouragement from family members was shown as a common way for parents and other family members to support the academic pursuits of the graduates. This finding resonates with a previous landmark study which found that resilient students reported higher levels of protective resources when they received encouragement and familial support (Alva, 1991).

Familial support was identified as having made it possible for these first-generation Latino graduates to achieve academic resilience due to positive relationships they had with familial protective factors. The protective factors played a critical role towards reducing negative outcomes. These findings on familial factors differed from
findings from Orozco (2008) that indicated first-generation students received significantly less emotional support from family and friends, despite the sacrifices first-generation parents made to send their children to college. Familial support helped this group of graduates increase their academic resilience towards degree completion.

**Spirituality.** In this study, spirituality was referred to as having an attachment to religious values or matters of the spirit beyond outer appearances. Spirituality was found to be a significant factor to the academic resilience of the graduates. Besides their own perseverance, spirituality was the main individual protective factor for graduates when asked what other factors offered their biggest support. Graduate 6 reported that her spirituality helped her push through the degree. Similarly, Graduate 4 indicated that it would have been impossible for her to complete the associate degree without God. While this theme was mentioned less than perseverance, it is important to note that this was the third most significant protective factor that led to the academic success of the students as indicated by the frequency of the themes in Table 4.2. Forty percent of the participants stated that tutoring was a hindrance towards the facilitation of their learning. To counter this, participants often leaned on their own self-determination and their spirituality to cope with the challenge.

**Positive interaction from others.** Environmental protective factors refer to the internal assets of inclusion, social conditions, access, and involvement (Barankin & Khanlou, 2007). In this study, most of the environmental factors did not have a significant influence on the academic resilience of the graduates. In fact, three participants considered leaving college, and one participant left a university setting for a year but then decided to complete her college education in a community college setting.
The study of Ishitani (2006) mirrored these findings when it was found that first-generation college students tended to leave college prematurely and take longer to complete their undergraduate degrees.

Despite the negative reports by several students regarding the faculty and staff at the college, several graduates indicated that department heads, faculty, academic advisers, and friends aided them throughout the academic career. In short, positive interaction from others constituents outside the family of the participants increased their academic resilience. In this study, positive interaction from others was defined as interpersonal actions from others outside the family characterized by caring, kindness, respect, and trust during one’s time of adversity. Multiple graduates reported feeling inspired because their friends knew what they were going through, and one graduate indicated being most influenced by a classmate who was able to provide insight through the academic journey.

Even with the external barriers and challenges the participants experienced during their academic journey, when the graduates were asked how they would describe their academic experience at the institution where they studied, six participants indicated they had a positive experience. More specifically, Graduate 1 stated, “I loved it so much I think I would do it again.” Similarly, Graduate 7 indicated it was a great stepping-stone to other parts of both her academic and professional careers. However, four graduates indicated specifically that it was a roller coaster. Graduate 4 explained further what she meant by this: “It was like a roller coaster. One minute the professor says one thing and the next, he says another.” Graduate 8 mentioned the same thoughts when she stated:
“Sometimes things over here are out of whack. One day the portal is working, then the next day it’s not. It’s like a roller coaster ride.”

Eight of the 10 participants of the study indicated that they experienced some form of challenge at the college study site. Three of the eight participants indicated that professors, fitting in with other students from other generations, and hard classes were deterrents from attaining their degree. It is necessary that first-generation Latino students have support networks in place to help increase the academic resilience of the graduates. Possibly, as landmark studies have suggested, creating an atmosphere of social belonging will help students feel welcome, not lonely, and may in turn, help them fit into the cultural setting on campus (Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997).

Through environmental protective factors, some students were able to navigate through the college system because of faculty, staff, and a software system that helped students move through the requirements of their degree program. However, the same environmental factors that aided some graduates did the opposite for others. Therefore, it is vital that all constituents involved in a student’s academic career, such as parents and other family members, friends, faculty and staff members, and college administrators, be aware of the risk factors that first-generation Latino students encounter that may deter the academic success. The information gathered for this study calls for partnerships between colleges, students, and families which may help the degree attainment for Latino students.

**Implications for practice and policy.** The findings of this research have implications for (a) knowledge in the area, (b) policy considerations, and (c) use by practitioners. As college faculty, college administrators, and policymakers encounter
challenges to help first-generation Latino students persist to attain academic achievement, it is imperative that programs be developed to help this demographic of students. This section will provide implications that emerged from the findings of this study.

**Knowledge in the area.** Academic resilience theory emerged as a response to factors that influence the low educational outcome of minority and low-income students (Perez et al., 2009), and has been used a framework to examine disadvantaged groups (Cavazos et al., 2010; Morales, 2008). Despite the recent studies, there has been little research, using the lens of academic resilience, to understand what protective factors aid first-generation Latino students in community colleges to continue to persist towards academic success. There has been even less research on both positive and negative effects of academic support, such as tutoring, in the college setting. Forty percent of the participants stated they received tutoring during their academically challenging times at the college, but it was not helpful. This finding may add to the body of knowledge of research that academic support services may aid students, but also may cause a hindrance to their academic success if the staff within the support services are not well equipped to help disadvantaged groups.

An unexpected finding of this study was that a significant relationship exists between spiritually and academic success. Based on the frequency of the theme of spirituality mentioned within the interviews, the findings of this study suggested that this should be an area to be further explored, especially with students who stem from backgrounds that have been considered at-risk to not completing a degree. More studies of this demographic, particularly regarding spiritually as a protective factor of first-generation Latino students, will help college administrators know what tools are needed
to help foster an environment of success for these students, and those of other
disadvantaged groups. The additional studies may help articulate various aspects of
individuals’ experiences with spirituality, and help to measure its effectiveness with first-
generation Latino students. Better understanding the relationship between spirituality
and academic success may help first-generation Latino students in the development of
academic resilience.

**Policy considerations.** A common theme throughout the study was that students
felt underprepared for college, but received significant encouragement from their
family to continue to persist. In fact, 50% of the participants stated that they felt
underprepared for college. These findings compare to the review of literature that
indicated that first-generation college students need more assistance than their non-first-
generation peers (Martinez et al., 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004). In addition, as illustrated
in Table 4.2, the college site and the faculty and staff were mentioned as a barrier or
challenge to the academic success of the participants 16 times. Because family played a
significant role in the academic success of these participants, institutions of higher
education should provide support services that reach both parents and students. In this
study, 73% of the respondents were first in their immediate family to complete a degree.
Therefore, to mitigate the feeling of under preparedness for first-generation students at
community colleges and increase the protective factors that foster success of this
demographic, a change in policy on what programs are in place at the college should be
pursued. A program at the community college that is based on building stronger support
systems between college administrators, students, and parents should be considered.
**Use by practitioners.** Not being aware of the level of commitment needed to succeed in a college setting was a risk factor that resonated with half of the students interviewed. This finding was congruent with Woosley and Shepler (2011) who found that those who were first-generation and attended community college were at risk with not being prepared for college, which may have ultimately affected their end progress towards degree completion. The findings in this research may help practitioners better understand the main factors behind the achievement of academic success for first-generation students. This study may also aid professors and other academic support services in having a better understanding of the positive and negative effects that may arise from their influence in an academic setting. In addition, it may provide practitioners with better understanding of the importance of the presence of counselors and support programs at Hispanic-Serving Institutions.

Hindering the persistence of first-generation students could continue if attaining knowledge in the area of this demographic, explaining the policies and procedures of the college environment to practitioners and families, and providing information about academic integration and increasing the likelihood of success of this demographic do not take place. This study provides student affairs practitioners and other administrators with reasons to socially integrate first-generation Latino students and their parents into better understanding the systems at their college.

**Limitations**

This study acknowledged the need for further research on what protective factors of academic resilience help first-generation Latinos graduate at a community college. Despite efforts to minimize the limitations to this study, some were still present.
Geographic limitation. This study investigated protective factors that aid first-generation Latino graduates achieve academic success at a community college at an HSI located in the northeast United States. Thus, this study was limited in geographic scope. Not all data from community colleges in the northeast region or from any other state were included in this study. In addition, data from public and private universities, contemporary colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and liberal arts campuses were not included in this study. There may be differences in both the educational practices and policies, and the experiences of first-generation Latinos among these other types of educational institutions. As a result of these geographic limitations, the findings may not be transferrable to other first-generation Latinos attending other colleges.

Cultural limitation. Although Latinos are a diverse group, this study did not distinguish among the dissimilar subdivisions within this population. The participants selected for the research study were not comprised of one specific ethnic group within the Latino ethnicity. The 10 participants represented eight different Latin countries: the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Cuba, Guatemala, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Honduras, and Peru. If this study had narrowed the focus to one specific group, different results may have been found.

Sample limitation. Although the data of the lived experiences of the participants studied here are valuable, other constituents could have been interviewed to add to the findings of this study. For example, the responses of family members and friends, who were often mentioned as a significant source of motivation for some participants, could offer a different perspective of additional challenges that the participant experienced.
while in college or may provide additional advice to first-generation Latino students seeking to reach academic success in a community college.

**Researcher bias.** Because objectivity is an essential facet of qualitative research, researchers must examine methods and conclusions for bias (Creswell, 2013). As a first-generation student who comes from a family of low socioeconomic status, and who has experienced some of the same risk factors that have been documented in this study, the researcher understands that his set of values cannot be completely removed from the research, and may impact the findings of this study in unknown ways. In order to counteract the potentially biasing effects of the past experiences, the researcher asked a second coder to help conduct the open coding analysis of the interview data. Though researcher bias can never be completely avoided, the presence of the second coder enhanced the validity and reliability of the interview data, and helped keep researcher bias at a minimum.

Despite these limitations, this study addressed a key limitation of many studies related to the low graduation rates of the Latino student population. It also focused on a framework that centers on resilience in an academic setting and on an important student population. Moreover, it examined a student population in an academic setting where most Latinos start their academic careers (Berkner & Choy, 2008; Pew Hispanic Center, 2012). In sum, addressing the limitations of this study for future research will enable more investigations of how first-generation Latino students, through protective factors, are able to increase their likelihood of academic success.
**Recommendations**

The recommendations offered in this section emerged from and responded to the student data discussed in Chapter 4, Results. Administrators in higher education are constantly seeking ways to increase the retention rates for all students, especially those from disadvantaged groups. It is the hope of the researcher that the recommendations presented in this section will provide suggestions for college administrators to create programs that better support the needs of first-generation students in community colleges. Recommendations for further research are also highlighted.

**Orientation programs.** Although Latinos usually attend institutions of higher education that have limited funding to develop and enhance the quality of education for this underserved population (Laden, 2004), an orientation program for this demographic should be an investment of community colleges. The orientation program would be designed to ensure student success and would be required by all students. Activities within the program would include students meeting with faculty, advisers, and counselors, as well as assistance with financial aid, academic and tutorial support, and support services beyond ESL programs. Several participants of this study were a part of programs that increased their academic resilience. Graduate 1 attended a gifted and talented program which enabled her to complete college courses while still enrolled in high school; Graduate 5 served in the military prior to completing his degree in a community college; and Graduate 9 participated in programs for minority students at the college study site which distributed stipends to help students with living expenses.

Although these students felt they were more prepared for college because of the experiences, five of the 10 students indicated they did not feel prepared for college.
Graduate 10 further noted that “If someone mentored me in a program or if I had someone to go to for help to understand the college portal, my life would have been a lot easier.” Bui (2005) stated that first-generation students are often not prepared for college. Therefore, having an orientation program in place may help better prepare first-generation students towards academic success.

**Welcome programs.** Community colleges, the main mode of postsecondary education for Latinos (Pew Hispanic Center, 2012), should create programs that aid the social integration between the parents and the institution. For the parents of the students, being welcomed on campus to participate in parent and family programs will be encouraging for the students. In fact, the findings of this study indicated that, with the exception of God, parents had the biggest influence on the graduates towards the completion of their degree. Cornelius-White et al. (2004) indicated a high correlation between family support of students’ growth and academic success. Therefore, parent involvement within on-campus activities may increase the academic resilience of this demographic.

**Institutional support.** Training staff and faculty who work with the parents of the students of this demographic have been shown to help motivate students towards degree completion (Broussard, 2009). Graduates in this study indicated that faculty, staff, and administrators caused several barriers and challenges to their academic success. One of the barriers was the lack of social and academic integration. The graduates faced barriers to their social and academic integration due to discontinuities between the culture of their families and the culture that existed on the college campus. This caused intense stress on the graduates. However, the graduates also said the supportive relationships
they developed with faculty, staff, and administrators helped them continue to persist towards degree completion.

It has been shown in studies, such as that of Gonzalez and Padilla (1997), as well as in this study that familial support has an effect on student motivation to persist towards degree completion. Additional research has shown the assimilation of first-generation students can be aided or impeded by the level of support available at home and the institution in which they are enrolled (Cornelius-White et al., 2004). Therefore, it is vital that a program that trains faculty, staff, and administrators to better help the cultural transition of the students be implemented. Faculty, staff, and administrators engaging in professional development would assist them in learning new ways to support both the parent population and the first-generation Latino student. In addition, at the college site of this study, no procedures were in place to classify students as either first- or non-first-generation students. If institutions of higher education begin to create procedures to document this demographic information, institutions will be able to more effectively address the needs of this diverse population.

**Recommendations for future research.** The findings of the study suggested the need for future research beyond this study. Within this section, several recommendations are made for further research.

**Spirituality.** When the graduates were asked in interview question 2a what were the biggest sources of support in their efforts to stay enrolled and persist toward degree completion, God was extracted as the major theme. In addition, when it was asked in interview question 7b how they overcame the challenge of wanting to leave college, it was found that because of the faith in God of the graduates, they continued to persist.
There is literature that has referenced individual factors contributing to a student’s success; however, there is little research that has referenced the relationship between spirituality and academic performance. Considering this, there is great potential for future research within this area.

**Parental support.** The data from this study have demonstrated the positive outcome that may arise from the influence of parental support. When the participants were asked in interview question 1a from whom they received the most academic support in college, 9 of 10 participants answered their family. More specifically, when this question was asked, parental support was mentioned 8 times, and spouse was mentioned once.

The participants also mentioned that the lack of understanding of their family of the college process was a risk factor in their completion of the degree. Graduate 4 mentioned, “I know my family means well, but they just don’t understand the process.” Similarly Graduate 1 stated, “If my family knew as much as the kids with parents who went to college, I probably would be a lot farther.” Since first-generation students often uphold familial importance as a priority (Espinoza, 2010), further understanding of the correlation between parental support and academic success should be explored.

**Tutoring.** When the graduates were asked in interview question 7cii if they tried anything they did not find helpful, they answered tutoring. Of the six graduates who stated they tried support systems at the college to help them with their studies, four of them noted that they tried the tutoring support department, but it was not helpful. Because of this, it is suggested that more research be conducted to help college
administrators find ways to educate their staff and faculty on innovative ways to tutor this demographic.

Conclusion

Latinos are the fastest growing population in the United States (Brennan & Lumina Foundation for Education, 2011), yet because they often stem from highly stressed family backgrounds (Benard, 2004), they fail to graduate with a college degree at the same rate as other groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). To address this gap, a phenomenological study of 10 first-generation Latino graduates was conducted using a sample of graduates at a community college, their main mode of postsecondary education (Pew Hispanic Center, 2012), that is a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) located in the northeast United States.

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the factors associated with academic resilience from the perspective of first-generation Latino students who have completed an associate degree at a community college. Specifically, the study examined the lived experiences of 10 first-generation Latino graduates and what protective factors helped them overcome barriers or challenges they encountered during their academic journey in a community college.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What individual, familial, and environmental factors contribute to the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college?

2. What risk factors affect the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college?
3. What barriers or challenges do first-generation Latinos at community colleges encounter while attempting to persist toward degree completion?

Most of the available literature identified negative factors that influence the low rate of academic success of first-generation Latino students (Fraser, 2004; Martinez et al., 2009; Tym et al., 2005). This study, however, focused on the positive factors that aid this demographic attain academic success through the use of academic resilience theory. Through the lens of academic resilience theory, two risk factors and four protective factors were identified that may increase the academic resilience of first-generation Latino students. Specifically, the risk factors were under preparedness, and lack of social and academic integration. The protective factors were perseverance, familial support, spirituality, and positive interaction from others.

Findings support previous research on risk factors, and the importance of protective factors among first-generation Latino students in community colleges (Davey et al., 2003; Haase, 2004; Saenz et al., 2007; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). The findings of this study suggested that, despite the presence of risk factors, the 10 participants reached academic success because of individual, familial, and environmental protective factors derived from their lived experiences. The result of these interactions was the coping ability to deter hardships from having a negative effect on their academic success.

The participants of this study indicated that not only did they derive much of their inspiration to succeed in college through their own personal motivation, but much of their inspiration was derived from their families. Findings indicated that families of first-generation students are heavily invested in the education and support of the participants. In addition, while families of the graduates have encouraged them to continue to persist
towards completion of their degree, because of the lack of knowledge of college systems, families have not provided good advice on how to continue to persist. The role of environmental factors in influencing the degree completion of the graduates was insignificant. Although some positive influences such as software systems helped in understanding what courses to complete, academic advisement, and tutoring, these factors were only mentioned a few times.

While it is important to understand the experiences of the graduates who participated in this study, it is also important that institutions of higher education, that are aimed at supporting the academic achievement of first-generation Latino students in community colleges, implement procedures and programs to support the issues this group often encounters. These issues can be addressed by first-year orientation programs, welcome programs that include family members, and the continuing education of faculty and staff members who have direct contact to the adjustment of the academic setting for the student. Overall, there is no single recommendation that may eliminate all barriers that first-generation Latino students encounter in a community college. However, this study identified the risk factors that may cause barriers to a student’s academic achievement, and protective factors that the participants experienced that helped them overcome barriers they have encountered. The identification of these protective factors may help other first-generation Latino students become or continue to stay resilient in an academic setting, despite their hardships.
References


Appendix A

Prescreening Questionnaire

1. Ethnicity origin (or Race): Please specify your ethnicity.
   □ White
   □ Hispanic or Latino
     What country? ________________________
   □ Black or African American
   □ Native American or American Indian
   □ Asian / Pacific Islander
   □ Other ________________________

2. What is your age?
   □ 18-21
   □ 22-25
   □ 26-30
   □ 31-40
   □ 41-50
   □ 51 or over

3. What is the highest degree or level of education that your mother has completed?
   If status is unknown, please state the status of your primary caretaker.
   □ No schooling completed
   □ Elementary School (Kindergarten-5)
   □ Middle School (6-8)
   □ High school (9-12) or the equivalent (for example: GED)
   □ Some college credit, no degree
   □ Associate degree or higher
   □ Unknown
4. What is the highest degree or level of education that your father has completed? If status is unknown, please state the status of your primary caretaker.

☐ No schooling completed
☐ Elementary School (Kindergarten-5)
☐ Middle School (6-8)
☐ High school (9-12) or the equivalent (for example: GED)
☐ Some college credit, no degree
☐ Associate degree or higher
☐ Unknown

5. What is the highest degree or level of school that you have completed? If currently enrolled, mark the highest degree received.

☐ Associate degree
☐ Bachelor’s degree
☐ Master’s degree
☐ Professional degree
☐ Doctorate degree

6. What best describes your household growing up?

☐ Single Parent – Mother
☐ Single Parent – Father
☐ Single Parent – Other
☐ Two Parent – Mother and Father
☐ Two Parent – Other
☐ Other ______________________

7. Were you a parent when attending school?

☐ Yes or ☐ No

8. What was your marital status when attending school? You may choose multiple answers.

☐ Married
☐ Widowed
☐ Divorced
☐ Separated
☐ Not married
9. What was your occupation status when attending school?

☐ Employed full-time
☐ Employed part-time
☐ Attending school and not working
☐ Out of work and looking for work
☐ Out of work but not currently looking for work

10. What was your total household income when attending school?

☐ Less than $20,000
☐ $20,000 to $39,999
☐ $40,000 to $49,999
☐ $50,000 to $64,999
☐ $65,000 to $84,999
☐ $85,000 to $99,999
☐ $100,000 or more

11. Have you completed an associate degree in either the fall of 2014 or the spring of 2015 semester?

☐ Yes or ☐ No

12. Are you the first in your immediate family, consisting of your parents, siblings, children, or primary caretakers to complete a degree at an institution of higher education?

☐ Yes or ☐ No

13. Would you be interested in participating in an in-depth interview?

☐ Yes or ☐ No
Appendix B

Qualtrics Contact Request

Dear Student,

I am a doctoral student at St. John Fisher College completing a dissertation study entitled:
A Phenomenological Study of First-generation Latino Graduates of Community College
Graduation Rates and Factors of Academic Resilience.

I am contacting you to request your participation in my online survey that may lead you
to being selected for my research study.

At the conclusion of these questions, you may be contacted. I hope you will consider this
interview request seriously, because it is important for me to hear your stories.

The benefit to participating in this study will be knowing that you have helped educators
and students learn what resources were used to help you navigate towards the completion
of your associate degree.

Please feel free to contact me at XXX-XXX-XXXX or email me at XXX@XXX.edu if
you have any questions before answering the questions in the online survey.

Thank you for your time.
Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

Dear Participant,

I am a doctoral student who is in pursuit of a Doctor of Education in Executive Leadership at St. John Fisher College. You are asked to participate in this study because you are a first-generation graduate who is of Latino descent, and have graduated with an associate degree either in fall 2014 or in spring 2015. The Institutional Review Board at St. John Fisher College has approved this study. There is no penalty for not participating in this study.

Title of the Research Study:

Investigator:
Homiler Elie Phanor.

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the factors associated with academic resilience from the perspective of first-generation Latino students who completed an associate degree.

Participation:
Your participation will involve completing a face-to-face semi-structured interview. The interview process should take between 60-90 minutes to complete. The interview will take place in the fall of 2015 either on or near the college from which you have graduated.

Risks:
The level of anticipated risk is minimal, as you may become uncomfortable answering some of the questions.

Benefits:
The benefit to participating in this study will be knowing that you have helped educators and students learn what resources were used to help you navigate towards the completion of your associate degree.
Compensation:
You will not be reimbursed for your time and participation in this study.

Audio Recording:
To aid the researcher with the accurate documentation of the participants’ responses, interviews may be recorded using an audio recording device. You have the right to disallow such recording without penalty. Please select one of the following options:

I consent to audio recording:  ☐ Yes  ☐ No

Confidentiality:
To ensure confidentiality, each participant will be assigned alphanumeric codes for identification purposes. Consent forms will be protected in a locked safe at the college for three years. Audio recordings and transcribed data will be kept in a password-protected cloud storage application for three years following the interview.

Participant Rights:
You can decide to be a part of this study or not. Once you start, you can withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer any questions from the study. You have the right to view your responses to questions of the study. You have the right to be informed of the results of the study.

Questions/Comments:
If you have any questions about the research study, please contact me by e-mail: XXX@XXX.edu or by phone at XXX-XXX-XXXX. For questions about your rights as a study participant, or any concerns or complaints, please contact St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board via e-mail at IRB@sjfc.edu.

Signature and Acknowledgement:
By signing this form, you agree that you understand the nature of the study, the possible risks to you as a participant, and how your identity will be kept confidential. When you sign this form, this means that you are 18 years old or older and that you give your permission to volunteer as a participant in the study that is described in this consent form.

Signature of the participant _____________________________ Date ____________
Printed name of participant _____________________________ Date ____________
Signature of the researcher _____________________________ Date ____________
Appendix D

Semi-structured Interview Guide

Research Question 1: What individual, familial, and environmental factors contribute to the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college?

1. How have your relationships with your family, college friends, faculty, and/or staff influenced your college experience?
   a. From whom did you receive the most academic support in college?

2. Are there support systems that were not mentioned that assisted you in completing your degree?
   a. If yes, what are the biggest sources of support in your efforts to stay enrolled and persist toward degree completion?

3. Why do you believe you have persisted to completing your degree?

4. If you were giving advice to future first-generation community college students who are Latino, what would you tell them?

Research Question 2: What risk factors affect the academic success of first-generation Latinos who have graduated from community college?

5. Explain how your education prior to college prepared you for college.
   a. Was there a person or persons who encouraged you to attend college?

6. How would you describe your academic experiences at the institution where you studied?
   a. Did you experience any academic challenges at the college?
   b. How have you sought to address these challenges?
Research Question 3: What barriers or challenges do first-generation Latinos at community colleges encounter while attempting to persist toward degree completion?

7. Have you encountered barriers or challenges as a college student to persist toward degree completion? If so, what were the barrier(s) or challenge(s) that you encountered?
   a. How did these barriers affect you as a student?
   b. Were there specific times in your academic career when you considered leaving? If so, what did you do to overcome that challenge?
   c. Was there anything you tried that you did not find helpful?
      i. What has worked in these times?
      ii. What has not worked in these times?