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First-Generation Latinas' Perspectives of College Involvement: A Phenomenological Study

Melissa E. Aponte
St. John Fisher College, mea04211@sjfc.edu

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Abstract

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First-Generation Latinas' Perspectives of College Involvement:

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Melissa E. Aponte

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Dr. Janice Girardi

Committee Member

Dr. Cassandra Hyacinthe

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

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Dedication

This study would not have come to be if it was not for the love and support of so many around me. First, this study is dedicated to my mother for instilling a deep love of education in me from the beginning of my existence. To my father, for accomplishing far more than was expected, given his life's circumstances. You both have taught me more than whatever there is to be read in all the books in this world. To my grandparents, Gee Gee and Kay, my angels in heaven. You taught me that scholarship is integral to success and that compassion is the maker of all leaders. I love you forever, I hope you are proud. And to my beautiful nieces, Arya and Sofía, may you always be strong, intelligent, and determined girls in this world that can be so intimidating. I hope you continue to stand for what you believe in and live the lives you dream of.

To the Gr8 Cohort 8! What a phenomenal group of educators and leaders you are. Thank you for the laughs, debates, support, and love. Especially to my group, Destined 4 Gr8ness, Merica, Jocelynne, and Sean. I am so proud to have been on your team; you will always have a special place in my heart.

To my colleagues who were just as excited about my research as I was. I want to especially thank my former supervisor, Harry Mars, for being one my biggest cheerleaders and motivators to do this work. I think you believed in me more than I did, and that can never be forgotten. To the rest of my former BMCC family, I will never know how to fully thank you for all the love you gave me throughout this journey, but know that I am eternally grateful.

I want to dedicate this study to my friends who knew how important this was to me and who pushed me forward. Your motivating words, your encouragement that I could survive, and your appreciation for the crazy journey I took on all helped me to succeed. To my "sister," Niko, and your family; thank you for taking me in and providing me with a second home so I could be closer to school.

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To my Chair, Dr. Janice Girardi – from day one, you have been so incredibly excited about my work. Your enthusiasm has not once waned, and your belief in me is boundless. Thank you for everything! To Dr. Cassandra Hyacinthe – I cannot thank you enough for taking on the role as my committee member. I am eternally grateful for your support and contribution to my work.

Finally, this study is dedicated to the women who trusted me with their stories. You were candid and honest in sharing your experiences. I thank you for that. And to the first-generation Latinas who are attending and succeeding in community colleges: this study is for you. May you continue to soar and defy the odds in your own way.

Biographical Sketch

Melissa E. Aponte is currently the Director of Student Development at Iona College. Ms. Aponte attended Ithaca College from 1999 to 2003 and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology in 2003. She attended Columbia University from 2004 to 2005 and graduated with a Master of Arts degree from the Teachers College in Higher and Postsecondary Education in 2005. She came to St. John Fisher College in the summer of 2016 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. Ms. Aponte pursued her research on First-Generation Latinas' Perspectives of College Involvement under the direction of Dr. Janice Girardi and Dr. Cassandra Hyacinthe and received the Ed.D. degree in 2018.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand how first-generation Latinas define college involvement and how they feel this involvement contributed to their successful graduation from a community college. Because more Latinas are successfully completing college than their male counterparts (Latinos), this study sought to better understand the validating and student involvement factors that allow Latinas, who are also first-generation college students, to graduate from college. Community colleges are the primary entry into higher education for this student group; therefore, the study sought to explore college involvement at this type of institution.

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The researcher uncovered eight areas that the participants linked to their level of involvement in college activities. These areas were receiving information, confidence, growth, college support, family support, peer support, continued support, and early involvement. This study makes recommendations on how institutions can make improvements in practice and create an environment where first-generation Latina students can be involved and reach academic success. The recommendations include

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peer support.

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Introduction

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Latino population represents one of the largest growing ethnic groups in the United States (Colby & Ortman, 2015). At 56.6 million people and 17.6% of the country's total population, this group is estimated to represent almost 30% of the total population by 2060 (Colby & Ortman, 2015). With this growth, Latinos have made great strides related to educational achievement. High school graduation rates and college enrollment numbers are increasing for Latino students (Bauman, 2017; Carnevale & Fasules, 2017). Bauman (2017) stated that the U.S. Census Bureau in 2017 notes:

> The growth in college enrollment among Hispanics has been especially pronounced in the last decade. After growing by 0.7 million from 1996 to 2006, the college enrollment of Hispanics went up by 1.7 million from 2006 to 2016. The result has been an overall tripling of college enrollment by Hispanics over the past two decades. (para. 6)

When compared to their male counterparts, Latinas have experienced greater educational gains (Gándara, 2015). For the academic year 2013-2014, approximately 60% of all college degrees earned by Latinos were attained by females (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017).

While these gains have been noted, there is still much progress to be made. Despite this growth in numbers, Latino college students still face challenges regarding

educational attainment. While representing 21% of all ninth-graders, Latinos only make up 13% of all high school graduates (McGlynn, 2011). When comparing academic achievement across ethnicities, Latinos are lagging (Gramlich, 2017; NCES, 2016). For example, in 2016, the Latino high school dropout rate was 10% compared to 7% Black, 5% White, and 3% Asian (Gramlich, 2017). Latinos are also not earning college degrees at rates comparable to other groups. Latinos earn 19% of all college degrees, while Whites earn 39%, Blacks earn 28%, and Asians earn almost 60% (NCES, 2016). As a report by Georgetown University's Center on Education and Workforce states:

> Even though more Latinos are going to college and are acquiring postsecondary education faster than Whites, the difference between Whites and Latinos is becoming even greater: in 1992, Latinos were 23 percentage points behind Whites and 10 percentage points behind Blacks in postsecondary attainment; in 2016, they were 29 percentage points behind Whites and 21 percentage points behind Blacks. (Carnevale & Fasules, 2017, p. 4)

One contributing factor to low degree attainment is that most college-going Latino students who enter higher education do so at the community college level, and they end their college careers there (Krogstad, 2016). The Pew Research Center (López & Patten, 2015) reports that nearly half of all college-going Latinos attend public, 2-year schools. Typically characterized by low-retention and low-graduation rates, community colleges have not yielded strong success rates in degree attainment or transfer to 4-year colleges by those students who enroll (Tovar, 2015). Jenkins and Fink (2015), working with the Community College Research Center (CCRC), stated: "Over 80 percent of community college students intend to earn at least a bachelor's degree. However, only

about a quarter end up transferring (20 percent of these students earn an associate degree or certificate first)" (p. 1).

Latino postsecondary completion rates are concerning as institutions of higher education are under increased pressure to graduate the students they enroll. The American Council on Education (Cook & Pullaro, 2010) reports that governing bodies have begun evaluating colleges and universities based upon student outcomes. The outcome measure that continually comes to the forefront is graduation rates. President Barack Obama's 2009 statement that "By 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world" (Kanter, Ochoa, Nassif, & Chong, 2011, p. 3) has added to this increased pressure to graduate more students with postsecondary degrees. While graduation rates for all undergraduate students are considered, there are groups for whom college graduation efforts may need to be better supported, such as Latinos (Kanter et al.). One of President Obama's objectives stated that the country had to "close the opportunity gap by improving affordability and increasing access to college and workforce training, especially for adult learners, low-income students, and under-represented minorities" (Kanter et al., 2011, p. 11). Research has shown that certain student groups are at higher risk for not earning a college degree than their counterparts (Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2014). These groups include first-generation college students, students from ethnic/racial minority groups, and students from non-native English-speaking households (Horton, 2015).

One group facing challenges in postsecondary achievement is first-generation college students. First-generation, or those students whose primary caretakers did not complete college, represent approximately 30% of all college students (Mehta, Newbold,

& O'Rourke, 2011). These students are typically from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, are ethnic minorities, older than their peers, and female (Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017). In addition, they may also be non-native English speakers and immigrants (not born in the United States) or children of immigrants (Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Upon entering higher education, these students face challenges completing the postsecondary degree (Stebleton & Soria, 2012; Woosley & Shepler, 2011). For example, they enter college less academically prepared and often must work to pay for their schooling and living expenses (Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017). These stressors can delay graduation or pull students away from college altogether (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006; Nora & Crisp, 2012).

Utilizing quantitative data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, Lauff and Ingels (2013) evaluated the academic achievements of a nationally representative sample of high school sophomores from 2002-2013. Of those students, 46%, who had at least one parent or caregiver with a bachelor's degree, attained their own bachelor's degree. That achievement was much higher than the 17% of their first-generation peers who earned the same degree (Lauff & Ingles, 2013).

Approximately 50% of Latino college students identify as the first in their families to attend college (Krogstad, 2016). Further, 73% of all Latinos over the age of 5 years, come from homes where their family members speak Spanish as their primary language (Krogstad, Stepler, & Lopez, 2015; Reyes & Nora, 2012). In addition, Latino college students typically come from homes with lower-socioeconomic standing than other major groups (Krogstad & Flores, 2016).

If Latinos and first-generation students continue to be undereducated, the repercussions will be felt by all of society (Mora, 2015). By 2024, Latinos will constitute almost 20% of the country's workforce (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). As Mora (2015, para.7) states: "The under-education of Hispanics has numerous labor market, economic, and social repercussions, including relatively low wages and earnings, low asset and retirement-income accumulation, reduced purchasing power, and high unemployment and poverty rate". Education pays off for individuals, but there are also payoffs to society. An educated workforce can make the country more competitive in a global economy (Mora, 2015).

To address the under-education of Latinos, this current study sought to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of nine first-generation Latina students who had successfully earned an associate degree from a community college. This study applied validation theory (Rendón, 1994) as the theoretical framework to examine if validation by the college contributed to the students' college involvement and, in turn, did the college contribute to higher levels of academic success? The researcher sought to better understand the experiences of those students who identified as both Latina and first-generation college students and who had graduated from a community college.

Studies show that the more involved and connected students feel to an institution, the better their academic success and completion rates (Astin, 1984; Hu & McCormick, 2012; Rendón, 1994; Turrentine, Esposito, Young, & Ostroth, 2012). As stated by Tovar (2015), "institutions play a critical role in creating the conditions that engage students and help them to persist and succeed" (p. 64). Further, validating students' experiences has been demonstrated to better retain students from minority and first-generation

backgrounds while enhancing their academic performance (Acevedo-Gil, Santos, Alonso, & Solorzano, 2015; Barnett, 2011; Chaves, 2006; Rendón, 1994). Thus, the researcher evaluated whether the level of engagement and degree of validation by the college could have impacted first-generation Latinas' academic success at a community college.

Problem Statement

Latinas are now enrolling in and completing college at higher rates than their male counterparts (NCES, 2016). While Latinas are increasing their college enrollment, they are significantly less likely to earn a degree compared to other major groups (Gándara, 2015; NCES, 2016). Traditionally held gender roles, cultural expectations, and out-of-class commitments have been acknowledged by researchers as hindering college completion for Latina students (Gándara, 2015). A report by the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics states:

> Although Hispanic females are outperforming Hispanic males educationally, they are still earning less than their brothers in the labor market. And, they still have the lowest high school graduation and some of the lowest college completion rates of all women. (Gándara, 2015, p. 6)

In 2013, almost 19% of Latinas between 25 and 29 years of age had completed a degree, compared to 23% of African American women, 44% of White women, and 64% of Asian women (NCES, 2014).

Research has pointed to a number of reasons why first-generation and Latina students lag in graduation rates, including low sense of belonging at their institution (Tinto, 1993); not feeling validated (Rendón, 1994); and responsibilities outside of school, such as family and work obligations (National Women's Law Center and Mexican

American Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2009). Further, first-generation students

report feeling a lack of connection to their colleges, which may also lead to lower

completion rates (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Many of these studies have shown that the

better connected they are to their institution and the more time they spend engaged in

school activities, the more likely they are to persist to graduation (Samuel & Scott, 2014).

Much of the literature speaks about the factors that prevent Latina academic

success (Gándara, 2015). However, there is limited information about Latina students

who are academically successful and how they achieved their success—specifically from

the students' perspectives (Girardi, 2011; Johnson, 2007). Even less can be found on

Latina student involvement in college activities or programs and their persistence to

graduation (Castellanos, 2016; Delgado-Guerrero & Gloria, 2013). Literature has

revealed that first-generation students and Latinas are two of the least-likely groups to

participate in such activities, given the factors that typically prevent them from

successfully completing college in the first place (i.e., family obligations, holding a job,

feeling no sense of belonging at the college) (Moreno & Sanchez Banuelos, 2011; Tovar,

2015).

Theoretical Rationale

The primary theoretical framework that guided this study was validation theory.

However, to speak of validation, one must first acknowledge the seminal models of

student retention and persistence that preceded validation. The 1970s and 1980s saw an

influx of theoretical models created to help colleges and universities better retain the

students they enrolled. Astin's (1984, 1993) student involvement theory would become

one of the seminal models of student retention and persistence developed at that time.

Student involvement can be defined as "the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience" (Astin, 1984, p. 518). The theory implies that the more that students are involved in college, the more learning, development, and academic success they will achieve. Engaging in these opportunities "stimulates increasing cognitive complexity, leading to learning and development" (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016, p. 34) in college

In addition to Astin's (1984, 1993) work with student involvement, Tinto (1975) provided a model of student integration that helped explain college-student departure from college. Tinto (1975) argued that students who are less integrated into the college campus and culture will depart. Tinto's (1975) model of student departure postulates that college students enter higher education with characteristics that determine their ability to persist and complete their education. These characteristics determine the students' levels of integration into college culture. The degree to which students successfully become incorporated into the social and academic realms of a college determines their level of persistence and ultimate graduation from that school.

Studies employing student involvement and student departure models have helped define many factors that contribute to students' persistence in college (Kuh, 2003; Tinto, 1975; Stewart, Lim, & Kim, 2015). These factors include pre-college/individual characteristics, institutional characteristics, and social supports (Astin, 1984; Jensen, 2011; Tinto, 1975). Pre-college and individual factors include students' academic performance prior to entering college, financial background, and commitment to college (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008; Jensen, 2011). Institutional factors are those related to students' ability to become engaged in the college environment, such as

working with faculty outside the classroom or joining a student club (Jones, Barlow, & Villarejo, 2010). Finally, social supports include family or peer groups that provide support through encouragement or assistance navigating the college environment. Social support also includes students' sense of belonging and integration into campus life (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

The development and deeper evaluation of these factors further confirmed student involvement theory and the student departure model's presumptions, continually connecting students' level of college involvement with higher levels of retention and graduation rates (Astin, 1984, 1993; Delgado-Guerrero, Cherniack, & Gloria, 2014; Fisher, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008). However, these models offer an institution a passive role in integrating students. The onus is placed primarily on a student's effort to become engaged and integrated. The student involvement and departure theories assume all students in college have the opportunity to proactively engage themselves in the college culture.

A shift in college student demographics of the 1990s brought critiques and expansions of student involvement and integration theories (Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Rendón, 1994; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Torres, 1999). Critics have argued that the data for Astin's (1984) student involvement theory and Tinto's (1975) departure model did not consider students from non-dominant cultures (Rendón, 1994; Rendón et al., 2000; Torres & Solberg 2001). In addition, the models did not distinguish college experiences for those students considered *traditional* versus *non-traditional*. Traditional students enroll in college immediately after completing high school, may reside on campus, take courses full-time, and tend to be from middle-to-high socioeconomic

backgrounds, as opposed to non-traditional students who do not fit into these categories (Deil-Amen, 2011; NCES, 2015). As demographics began to change and new research emerged, it was evident that updated models to support student retention had to be developed.

Rendón (1994) was at the forefront of bringing alternate views to involvement and integration. She wanted to explore the connection between students' involvement outside of the classroom with learning and retention. While she began her research utilizing a student-involvement framework, her study revealed that there was a step preceding college student involvement, especially for those students who did not share similar characteristics as those studied in Astin's (1984) original work. Her study revealed two important findings, as expressed by Rendón Linares and Muñoz (2011):

> 1) There were stark differences in the way low-income and affluent, "traditional" students experienced the transition to college, and 2) at some point, low-income students suddenly began to believe in themselves not so much because of their college involvement, but because some person(s), in- or outside-of-college took the initiative to reach out to them to affirm their innate capacity to learn. (p. 14)

Validation theory aims to explain how non-traditional students, such as those from low-income, first-generation, and ethnic backgrounds, could be successful in college. Rendón (1994) contended that lower income, first-generation, and minority students are more likely to become engaged when others from an institution invite the involvement. This view was in contrast to student involvement and integration models (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1975) that placed responsibility solely on students to become involved. Validation is made up of six elements:

1. initiating contact,

2. influencing student's self-worth,

3. precedes development,

4. occurs inside and outside of the classroom,

5. continues over time, and

6. relies on early involvement (Rendón, 1994; Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011).

Validation occurs in two domains within the college setting: the academic domain and the interpersonal domain. In the academic domain, faculty and administrators affirm students' abilities to be successful in school. In the interpersonal domain, faculty and staff create meaningful relationships with their students, taking an interest in their academic accomplishments and achievements (Rendón, 1994).

Validation theory has been a framework for numerous studies (Colorado-Burt, 2015; Nora, Urick, & Cerecer, 2011; Torres, 1999) that confirm its place among retention models. For example, Barnett's (2011) quantitative study conducted at an urban community college revealed that validation by faculty led to higher rates of integration, sense of belonging, and academic success. Barnett's data included a diverse sample of 333 students, of which 61% were female, 76% were non-White, and 38% who attended high school outside of the United States. The study also revealed that Latinos and female students were found to benefit most from validating experiences. Thus, Barnett suggested "that while all students benefit from validation by faculty, Hispanic students and women may be most likely to respond to faculty validation by continuing their studies at the institution; perhaps they could be targeted for extra attention by faculty" (p. 112).

Taking suggestions from previous research, this current study utilized validation theory to explore if validating factors at the community college level affected the degree to which first-generation Latina students became involved in college. Further, the researcher sought to learn how that involvement could have supported academic success. The researcher wanted to understand women's perspectives of involvement and how they were involved in college. The researcher intended to continue Rendón's (1994) work related to validation theory in order to discover what the impact of student involvement may have had on first-generation Latinas' academic success. It is through the lens of validation theory that the researcher explored the phenomenon of successful attainment of the associate degree for first-generation Latina community college students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how first-generation Latinas define college involvement and how they feel this involvement contributed to their successful graduation from a community college. While some researchers have explored what factors support the academic success of first-generation college students (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Lightweis, 2014; Pelco, Bell, & Lockeman, 2014; Petty, 2014), there are limited studies exploring the aspects that support academic success. This is true specially regarding the success of students who (a) are first-generation, (b) are Latina, and (c) have graduated from a community college (Girardi, 2011; Johnson, 2007), especially regarding involvement and best fit with an institution. Specifically, this study explored the experiences of first-generation Latina students who successfully earned an associate degree through the lens of student involvement. The researcher conducted a

phenomenological study of first-generation Latina graduates from a community college located in the Northeast United States to address this gap in literature.

Studies have discovered several factors that contribute to Latinas' academic success (Girardi, 2011; Johnson, 2007). Among these factors, student involvement and level of validation play a positive role in degree completion. Johnson (2007) studied the contributing factors for academic success among Latinas who graduated from a community college. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, Johnson surveyed over 200 women to uncover what factors supported them toward graduating from a community college located in southern Texas. Johnson (2017) found academic integration, social integration, institutional commitment, goal commitment, support by significant others, campus-based aid, and serving as role model contributed to their academic success. Girardi's (2011) study also found these factors to contribute to Latina academic success in earning an associate degree. In addition, her study uncovered two additional factors contributing to Latinas' academic success: culture and economics. Girardi's qualitative study utilized a phenomenological approach that involved in-depth interviews with 11 Latinas who earned associate degrees from an independent college in an urban area of New York. In both the Girardi (2011) and Johnson (2017) studies, social engagement, or integration, was one of the factors found to contribute to Latina academic success. As Girardi (2011) stated in her findings:

> Several of the women had started their academic pursuits at other institutions but did not persist to graduation. The women's reasons for breaking from their other institutions pointed to college environments that did not give them a sense of belonging (p. 147).

Many of the factors that support Latinas also apply to first-generation students. Engle, Bermeo, and O'Brien (2006) conducted a qualitative study of first-generation college students to uncover what factors supported them while in school. The study, conducted in Texas, included 135 first-generation students who were invited to participate in focus groups. All participants had taken part in a pre-college program and were attending 2- and 4-year colleges all over, Texas, at the time of the research. All students identified as low-income and/or first-generation college students. The researchers found that first-generation students, like Latinas, need academic support, to be socially integrated into college, and have access to financial aid. Engle et al. (2006) concluded that parents of first-generation students should be more heavily involved in the college-going process, and invited to be engaged in their students' experiences. Support from college staff was cited as an import factor relating to students' social integration and academic success. Engle et al. (2006) stated that positive relationships with staff helped students stay motivated and encouraged in school. The authors pointed out that students "were able to develop relationships and trust with program staff because they felt how much the staff cared about them" (p. 37).

While all factors contributing to Latina and first-generation college student success are valued, it was the goal of this study to explore more deeply how student engagement, specifically, affects Latinas' academic success at the community college. Student engagement was viewed through the lens of validation theory. The researcher sought to understand if validating experiences in a community college affected first-generation college students' level of involvement in college. The researcher hopes that the information collected in this study will be utilized by colleges to better serve their

first-generation Latina student population. In addition, it was the goal of the study to contribute to the literature regarding the needs of first-generation Latinas' engagement in higher education so that this segment of the college population receives the support necessary to help them earn a college degree at a higher rate than they are now seeing.

Research Questions

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), research questions should be "open ended, evolving, and nondirectional" (p. 137). In qualitative research, these questions should provide the space for the investigator to delve deeply into the phenomenon without assuming any cause-and-effect relationships (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study focused on the implications of college involvement from the perspective of first-generation Latina college students who successfully earned an associate degree. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do first-generation Latinas define their engagement with the institution?

2. What factors impacted the degree of involvement by first-generation Latina students at this community college?

3. To what degree of importance did first-generation Latinas perceive college involvement had an impact on their academic success?

4. How did first-generation Latinas perceive the level of institutional support as impacting their academic success?

5. To what degree did relationships with faculty/staff support academic success for first-generation Latinas?

Potential Significance of the Study

A study's significance indicates its importance for various stakeholders who may utilize the results to enact change or improve services (Creswell, 2014). In addition, a study may contribute to a gap in the literature related to the problem. This study intended to address both areas. The study aimed to learn how first-generation, Latina college graduates perceive college involvement and its impact on their academic success. The results of this study will add to the current literature about college student involvement, specifically for underrepresented and marginalized student groups. In addition, the study focused on the community college setting, which faces challenges with retaining and graduating students (AACC, 2015). Finally, the viewpoints from first-generation Latina graduates will provide insight into how to better engage these students and better support their educational attainments.

Leaders from higher education may also find the results of this study to be helpful as they seek to increase funding and create programming to support first-generation and ethnic minority student groups. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2017) reports that 36% of community college students enrolled for credit-bearing courses identify as being first-generation students. This study may help community college leaders address the needs of such a large percent of their student base.

This study may also be of interest to government agencies that provide funding to higher education. The U.S. Department of Education's Title V program to support Hispanic-serving institutions (HSI) could find value in this current study that advocates for continued support of Latino college students. The federal government's definition of HSI is "not-for-profit institutions of higher learning with a full-time equivalent (FTE)

undergraduate student enrollment that is at least 25% Hispanic" (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities [HACU], 2016, para 1). The HACU (2016) reports there are 472 institutions of higher education that fit this criterion. It should be of great importance both for the federal government, providing support to these institutions, and to colleges that Latina student success is achieved (Santiago, 2011). This study may better inform college practices to ensure this goal is reached.

Finally, careers requiring at least an associate degree are anticipated to increase by twofold over the next 20 years (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2016). In response to this, President Barak Obama, in 2009, put into place the American Graduation Initiative, which proposed an aggressive goal for community colleges: graduate an additional 5 million students by the year 2020 (McGlynn, 2011). If this goal is to be met, the college achievement gap for first-generation and Latino students' needs to be minimized (Santiago, 2011). This current research can assist community colleges in better retaining and graduating these students to ensure they are ready for career placement and advancement in the years to come.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined for this study.

Academic Success – the successful graduation from a community college and attainment of an associate degree.

Associate Degree – an academic award "granted for the successful completion of a sub-baccalaureate program of studies, usually requiring at least 2 years (or equivalent) of full-time college-level study" (NCES, 2016, para. 4).

College Involvement/College Engagement – activity in a higher education institution that (a) is an investment of psychosocial and physical energy; (b) is continuous, and the amount of energy invested varies from student to student; (c) aspects of interaction may be qualitative and quantitative. What a student gains from being involved is directly proportional to the extent to which the student was involved. Academic performance is correlated with the student involvement (Astin, 1984).

First-Generation College Student – an individual, enrolled at a higher education institution, whose parents/guardians did not graduate from college with a degree.

Latino and Latina – an individual of

Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race. . . . People who identify with the terms "Hispanic" or "Latino" are those who classify themselves in one of the specific Hispanic or Latino categories listed on the decennial census questionnaire and various [U.S.] Census Bureau survey questionnaires – "Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano" or "Puerto Rican" or "Cuban" – as well as those who indicate that they are "another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin." (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018, para. 2)

Persistence – the continued enrollment and attendance of a student in a degree program leading toward the completion of the program. Persistence can be used interchangeably with *retention*.

Retention – the institution measurement of students enrolling and re-enrolling in degree programs, leading to graduation from that same institution. Retentions can be used interchangeably with *persistence*.

Validation – the action of making students feel important and that they matter at a higher education institution and how this feeling impacts their involvement in campus activities.

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the problem facing first-generation Latina students' academic success at the community college level. This study utilized the student involvement and validation theories as frameworks from which to learn how first-generation Latinas perceive college involvement in relation to their degree attainment. Latino students are enrolling in higher education at increasing rates (Krogstad, 2016). It is hoped that the results of this current will be of great importance to those leaders who can improve their services to these students and improve degree attainment.

An overview of related studies and research are discussed in Chapter 2. This review of the research touches upon: (a) retention issues in higher education, (b) the community college, (c) first-generation college students, (d) Latinos in higher education, and (e) student involvement and validation theories. In Chapter 3 the research design, methodology, and analysis are reviewed. An exploration of the results and findings are discussed in Chapter 4. Finally, in Chapter 5 the findings, implications, and recommendations for future research and practice are provided.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Introduction and Purpose

By the year 2060, the Latino population is predicted to represent approximately 30% of all United States residents (Colby & Ortman, 2015). As their numbers continue to rise, it is no surprise that Latino enrollment in colleges and universities will also continue to climb (Gramlich, 2017). Moreover, Latinas are going to college in record numbers, outpacing their male counterparts in college admission (Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2014). However, Latinas are still significantly less likely to earn a degree compared to all other major ethnic/racial groups. Only about 20% of Latinas between the ages of 25 and 29 years hold a college credential, compared to 44% of White women and 64% of Asian women (NCES, 2017). While studies have explained the reasons for such low attainment levels (Mehta et al., 2011), it is the goal of this study to understand if student engagement contributed to the academic success for first-generation Latinas who graduated from a community college.

The following literature review describes research addressing the areas of interest and relevance to this study. Creswell (2014) stated the literature review "shares with the reader the results of other studies that are closely related to the one being undertaken" (p. 28). The following review of literature looks at studies in five subject areas related to Latinas and academic success. The first area explored is retention in higher education. A review of the historical challenges faced by colleges and universities to retain and graduate students are discussed. Second, the researcher highlights the literature regarding

Latino college students and the studies that have been conducted about this group. Third, first-generation college students are defined and the special needs they face when entering higher education are explored. Fourth, the community college is discussed, as it is the primary gateway to higher education for Latino students. Fifth, student involvement theories are defined and justifications for their use in this study are explained.

Topic Analysis

The following sections provide an analysis of literature related to retention in higher education, community colleges, first-generation college students, Latino college students, and college student involvement theories.

Retention in higher education. Institutions of higher education have increasingly been charged with inadequate efforts for retaining and graduating the students they enroll. Such charges have come from both the federal and state levels, with significant financial sanctions attached to motivate institutional compliance (Coley, Coley, & Lynch-Holmes, 2016). This pressure is felt strongly at the 2-year colleges. According to the National Student Clearinghouse (NCS) Research Center (2015) Completion Report, the 6-year completion rate for students who began at public, 2-year institutions and who completed their credentials at the same college was 26%. The disturbingly low graduation rate among community colleges is a misfortune for the students who, each year, leave higher education without ever earning a credential. In today's economy, a college credential has become an essential prerequisite to gaining access to many career paths.

While the overall college dropout rates continue to decrease, going from 10.9% in 2000 to 5.9% in 2015 (NCES, 2017), colleges face challenges in retaining groups that drop out at much higher percentages than others. These groups include Blacks and Latinos, who drop out at rates higher than their White counterparts at 6.5% and 9.2% versus 4.6%, respectively (NCES, 2017). College persistence and degree attainment are still obstacles faced by those students who do not come from backgrounds that readily support postsecondary completion. Such students come from lower income families, have language barriers, and are the first in their families to attend college (Duranczyk, Higbee, & Lundell, 2004). Engle and Tinto (2008) found that:

> Low-income, first-generation students were nearly four times more likely – 26 to 7 percent – to leave higher education after the first year than students who had neither of these risk factors. Six years later, nearly half (43 percent) of low-income, first-generation students had left college without earning their degrees. Among those who left, nearly two-thirds (60 percent) did so after the first year. (p. 2)

Even when controlling for background factors prior to entering college, such as financial resources, college preparedness, and out-of-school obligations, the study found that these students still lagged in graduation rates (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

To address their attrition rates, colleges and universities have created various programs to support students in persisting in school. Many of these efforts have been grounded in Tinto's (1975, 1988, 1993) college departure model. Tinto's (year/s) model of student departure postulates that student retention in higher education requires high levels of social and academic integration. Tinto argued (1988) that student departure

from college is linked to those experiences in college that are formally organized by the institution (i.e., classes, extracurricular programs) and informal interactions students had (i.e., making friends, speaking with instructors after class). The theory suggests that retention is also strongly linked to students' commitment to the institution, career objectives, and academic goals.

Critiques of the model (Museus, 2013; Nora, 2002; Rendón, 1994) argued that it presumes students from the non-dominant population must integrate into the college culture at the expense of their own population to be successful in college. Most of Tinto's (1975, 1988) work around retention was based on studies whose respondents were predominantly White males. Even his later publications, which that expanded the theory to include minority and female students, did not take into consideration the challenges of integration for these student populations (Tinto, 1993). As a result, alternatives to the departure model were offered.

One such model is Nora's Student Engagement Model (Nora, 2002; Nora & Ramirez, 2006). It offers an alternative theoretical framework for college student retention. It postulates that some "environmental factors exert a 'pulling away' or a 'drawing in' of students into the academic and social campus environments" (Nora & Ramirez, 2006, p. 2). As a result, college students are challenged by multiple factors that can hinder or support their academic success. These pulls can include variables such as off-campus employment, part-time status, family commitments, financial difficulties, and commute time to school (Nora & Ramirez, 2006).

Another primary factor affecting college retention are the types of interactions students have with college personnel (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Habley &

McClanahan, 2004; Rendón, 1994). For example, Rendón (1994) found that for students

of marginalized groups to feel connected to an institution, they needed someone to

acknowledge them and invite them into the college culture. As a result of her findings,

Rendón developed the validation theory. The theory postulates that feelings of validation

and students' connections with members of the college community facilitate students'

transition into the institution and help support academic success. Rendón's study

collected data via interviews with 132 first-year students from a variety of institutional

types, such as "a predominantly minority community college in the Southwest; a

predominantly White, residential, liberal arts college in a middle Atlantic state; a

predominantly Black, urban, commuter, comprehensive state university in the Midwest;

and a large, predominantly White, residential, research university in a middle Atlantic

state" (Rendón, 1994, p. 35).

    Barnett's (2011) quantitative study, utilizing validation theory to study student

success, found that "faculty validation and academic integration each significantly

predicted intent to persist" (p. 215) for community college students. Barnett surveyed

333 students at a diverse urban community college in the Midwest United States.

Selected students were enrolled in a required introductory English class that served as a

representative sample of students attending the college. While the selected students did

represent the overall college student population in most categories (race, gender, and

age), they did not represent the overall college student population in terms of credit load.

Most students at the college attended part-time (less than 12 credits), but the study

participants were predominantly full-time students. This is important to consider as

studies have shown that part-time students are more likely to depart college than full-time students (NCS Research Center, 2017).

Castellanos and Gloria (2007) found that familial support, along with validation from college staff, were important to supporting Latino student academic success. The researchers indicated that family is a strong Latino value, and replicating this type of structure on a college campus can ease the transition and improve the retention levels for these students. This is an example of "cultural congruity" where there "is the fit between students' personal and institutional values, which prompts their interpersonal connectedness and subsequent cultural validation within their university environment" (Catellanos & Gloria, 2007, p. 391).

Sometimes Latino students create family-like structures of their own. Delgado-Guerrero and Gloria (2013) studied Latina sororities and indicated that these organizations were "built specifically upon a core Latino value of *familismo* or family (p. 363). The quantitative study included over 100 Latina sorority members who attended predominantly White institutions in the Midwest United States. Students completed an online survey that assessed levels of psychological, social, and cultural support as they related to the students' persistence in college. College retention was strongly linked to the students' own views about the college environment. Having a Latina-specific organization where the students felt welcomed and understood was critical to their persistence in school. The Delgado-Guerrero and Gloria (2013) stated, "As Latina undergraduates access and create networks of support, feeling comfortable, feeling welcomed, or even having a sense of home within the educational environment through the sorority is increasingly important" (p. 374).

American College Testing (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004) issued a policy report that identified the academic and non-academic factors most affecting college student retention. The researchers reviewed over 400 studies that had been conducted the United States and were related to college retention. Of those studies, 109 were selected for deeper evaluation and a meta-analysis technique was used to identify which non-academic factors had the strongest connection to retention in college. The researchers suggested that colleges can help students improve academic performance by providing ways for students to become engaged in social support groups and student organizations. Further, the study found that for those students who identify as first-generation, who do not have a mastery of the English language, and who are from an ethnic minority group, social integration is critical (Lotkowski et al., 2004).

A qualitative study by Martin (2015) found that students who departed college after the first year indicated very low levels of campus involvement or engagement. The study was conducted at an urban, midsized, public 4-year university in the Midwest. The study included first-year students who were enrolled in required general education coursework in the fall of 2013 and the spring of 2014. Over 600 students provided narrative responses to survey questions over the course of the two semesters. Of those students, 144 did not return to the college for a second year. The focus of Martin's (2015) study was to evaluate the responses of those 144 students who departed. The student demographics for the 144 non-returning students consisted of 34% men and 66% women. Most participants were 18- (55%) or 19- (35%) years old, and they identified themselves as "White (49%), Black or African American (27%), Hispanic or Latino (6%), Asian (4%), American Indian or Alaska native (1%)", Native Hawaiian or other

Pacific Islander (1%), 3% reported their race as *other*, and 10% selected *multiple races* (Martin, 2015, p. 180).

Of the 144 students, only 9% had positive social interactions through college involvement activities. Martin (2015) found that "students wrote more negative stories about school-related events than they did positive ones and exhibited low levels of campus involvement or engagement" and "three of the study's demographic groups— women, students of color, and first-generation students—represented notable percentages of nonreturners" (p. 176).

Community colleges. With their open-access policies, affordability, and proximity to students' homes, community colleges provide a gateway to higher education that may otherwise be limited to many people living in the United States (Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Nunez, Hoover, Pickett, Stuart-Carruthers, & Velasquez, 2013; Sy & Romero, 2008). The community college appeals to many students because of these characteristics. While providing access to a postsecondary education, community colleges have also become many students' final academic destination. They either drop out before completing a credential, or they never move on to complete a 4-year degree program (Nunez et al., 2013). The Teachers College's Community College Research Center (2015) states:

> Over 80 percent of community college students intend to earn at least a bachelor's degree. However, only about a quarter end up transferring (20 percent of these students earn an associate degree or certificate first). Only 17 percent complete a bachelor's degree. (p. 1)

Being placed in remedial coursework is one hindrance for many community college students. Lacking the academic skills to move directly into college-level classes results in delays in credential attainment (Melguizo, Bos, & Prather, 2011). In 2013, the NCES stated that about 68% of students at community college are required to take at least one remedial course. Of this percentage,

> only 28 percent of community college students who take a developmental education course go on to earn a degree within eight years, and many students assigned to developmental courses drop out before completing their sequence and enrolling in college-level courses (CCRC, 2014, p. 1).

The CCRC (2014) explained that many students face extensive remedial sequences, needing more than two courses to move onto credit-bearing classes. The CCRC analyzed over 50 community colleges and found that extensive remedial course series are exceptionally *leaky*. Requiring students to complete numerous remedial classes prior to them moving onto college-level, credited courses generates numerous opportunities at which students can withdraw from the sequence, thus preventing them from ever entering college-level coursework.

Another significant obstacle for community college students is balancing family obligations with school responsibilities (Rankin, Katsinas, & Hardy, 2011). A report by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR; 2018) indicates that the largest percentage of student parents are attending public, 2-year community colleges. IWPR also reports that the percent of public 2-year colleges with on-site childcare has decreased from 53% in 2004 to 44% in 2015. With decreasing support for childcare, it has become even more of a challenge for these students to successfully complete a college credential.

Further, many of these parents are single and women of color (IWPR, 2018). As the

IWRP (2017) states:

> Single mothers have low rates of college degree attainment: as of 2015, just 31
>
> percent of single mothers ages 25 and older held a bachelor's degree or higher,
>
> compared with 54 percent of comparable married mothers and 40 percent of
>
> comparable women overall. (p. 3)

While many students who attend community colleges may be parents, they are

also more likely to be Latinos and Black (Ma & Baum, 2016; The National Center for

Public Policy and Higher Education, 2011). Data from the College Board (Ma & Baum,

2016) found that Latino, first-time, full-time students are "disproportionately represented

in the public two-year and for-profit sectors" (p. 5), with 56% of Latinos and 44% of

Black college students in community colleges. To emphasize those numbers, Bailey and

Jacobs (2009) stated that "there are, for example, more low-income African American

and Hispanic students at Bronx Community College alone than there are in the entire Ivy

League" (p. A18).

First-generation students. Approximately 30% of all college students identify

as first-generation (Mehta et al., 2011). As the first member of their family to attend an

institution of higher education, these students face significant challenges and barriers

when it comes to earning a college degree (Barone, McMillion Tym, & Webster, 2004;

Mehta et al., 2011). As the first in their families to attend college, these students cannot

depend on their families to help guide them through the college-going process (Gloria &

Castellanos, 2012). These students are more likely to represent some of the most

underprivileged groups attending college. Engle (2007) described them:

"Demographically, first-generation students are more likely to be female, older, Black or Hispanic, have dependent children, and come from low-income families than students whose parents have college degrees" (p. 25). While these independent characteristics already place challenges to achieving postsecondary success, combining them with first-generation status only further limits degree attainment for many of these students (Mehta et al., 2011).

First-generation status often has a negative impact on college attendance and persistence (Hudley et al., 2009). In their quantitative study utilizing a national sample, Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) compared over 1,000 first-generation college students to over 3,000 continuing-generation students (CGS), or those students who had parents who graduated from college. The researchers sought to compare first-to-second year persistence rates for each cohort. They found that the intersection of first-generation status with race, class, and/or gender further inhibited college persistence. These characteristics did not hinder academic achievement as much for the continuing-generation college students. Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) stated: "Being a Hispanic first-generation student, a lower income first-generation student, or a female first-generation student, made first-to-second year persistence more problematic. In contrast, none of these variables were related to persistence for CGS" (p. 418).

Studies have indicated that prior to ever entering college, first-generation students have low levels of self-efficacy (Gibbons, Borders, Wiles, Stephan, & Davis, 2006), believe they will have less of a chance of being admitted to college (Gibbons & Borders, 2010), and earn lower scores on math and science exams (Horn & Nunez, 2000) than their peers. These pre-college factors may prevent them from ever entering college. To

understand this phenomenon better, Reid and Moore (2008) conducted a qualitative study of 13 (six male; seven female) first-generation students who had all graduated from an urban high school. The students were enrolled in a 4-year university in the Midwestern United States. All students were African American or immigrants. Two of the immigrant students were from Ghana, and one was from Haiti. The participants were selected via a purposeful sample, as the researchers wanted to interview only first-generation college students who had graduated from an urban high school. Out of a possible sample of 1,000 students at the university, the final 13 were chosen. Reid and Moore found that the level of pre-college preparation was instrumental in college success. Many of the students interviewed in the study could point to teachers or administrators in high school who provided them with resources that helped the students enter college. The researchers emphasized the importance of helping students better prepare for college by aiding them with college applications, standardized exam preparations, and college-level coursework, such as advanced placement courses. Even though many of the students said they did receive some level of support, they did not feel as adequately prepared to succeed in college compared to their peers who either did not come from an urban high school and/or were not first-generation college students.

In addition, first-generation college students often find themselves in remedial coursework, which is usually non-credited and delays degree attainment (Atherton, 2014). These students are usually enrolled part time, largely due to the need to have a job (Warburton, Bugarin, Nunez, & Carroll, 2001); feel less prepared for college (Reid & Moore, 2008); and, usually because of the above reasons, their academic performance is low (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Not surprisingly, these issues

often lead first-generation students to drop out of college completely or delay degree attainment (Gibbons, Woodside, Hannon, Sweeney, & Davison, 2011).

Studies have been conducted to better understand how first-generation college students can be successful despite the challenges they face entering higher education. One such study was conducted by Gist-Mackey, Wiley, and Erba (2018). The researchers in this study employed a qualitative approach to hear from first-generation students, themselves, what mechanisms they utilized to first enter college and then navigate the college environment. The study included interviews with 28 first-generation students who were in their first semester at a large, public, predominantly White state institution in the Midwestern United States. The college enrolled a little over 18,000 students per year. Of the 28 study participants, only two were White, and the remainder of the participants were of ethnic/racial minority groups (Black, Latino, Asian). The male-to-female ratio was exactly 50% for each gender.

Gist-Mackey et al. (2018) had three objectives in pursuing their study. First, they wanted to learn what sources of support first-generation college students received prior to entering college. Second, the researchers explored how these students received support once arriving at college. Finally, the study examined how first-generation college students could serve as a support for each other. The interviews with participants revealed that first-generation students rely heavily on social support to help them navigate the transition to college. Such sources of support came from high school counselors who aided the students with the application processes. Once on campus, students found informational supports, such as academic advisors, financial aid counselors, and faculty members, who helped them navigate college culture and

processes. In addition, becoming involved in social activities with college peers helped integrate these students into the college environment and enhanced a support network for them. As one student stated:

> The most positive thing I think that's happened to me since I got on this campus is probably just joining the band. It's been an adventure and it's just really positive. Everybody is, like, "Okay well, if you need help I'm here to help you out." (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018, p. 62)

Additionally, many of the students in the Gist-Mackey et al. (2018) study admitted that they could not rely on family to provide information, and so, they depended heavily on social and informational support from school staff and faculty. Last, the researchers acknowledged that these students were *pioneers*, and they also served as support mechanisms for each other. They can serve as role models for other family members and help peers who are struggling with college-related processes (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018).

Studies around academic self-concept, or the perceptions students have about their ability to perform well in school, suggest colleges could help first-generation students by developing a sense of "community and caring in the academic space" (DeFreitas & Rinn, 2013, p. 63). In their quantitative study of 167 ethnically diverse first-generation college students attending a 4-year, open-access, public institution, DeFreitas and Rinn (2013) explored the issue of self-concept and academic ability. The Self-Description Questionnaire III (SDQ-III) was distributed to study participants to measure levels of self-concept specifically for math and verbal skills. These levels were compared against ethnic and socioeconomic status. White students outperformed African

American and Latino participants in academic achievement regardless of first-generation status. Based on the study's findings, it is suggested that

> Factors like having little confidence in one's abilities such as writing effectively, comprehending well when reading, or solving math problems are related to lower academic performance. Perhaps focusing on improving one's beliefs about these abilities would also lead to improved achievement in college. (DeFreitas and Rinn, 2013, p. 62).

Defreitas and Rinn's (2013) discoveries echo Osborne and Jones's (2011) extensive literature review on the topic of self-concept and academic achievement. Osborne and Jones offered that faculty and administrators should take a proactive approach in establishing positive relationships with students who may be at risk of low academic self-concept.

A quantitative study by Garriott, Hudyma, Keene, and Santiago (2015) indicates that academic performance among first-generation students can be influenced by positive environmental supports. The researchers surveyed 414 first-generation and non-first-generation students from two 4-year universities located in the Rocky Mountain and Midwestern regions of the United States. Almost half of the sample (48%) identified as non-first generation college students and the other half (52%) were first-generation college students. Some areas assessed by the researchers included students' perceptions about college self-efficacy, environmental supports, and life satisfaction. One of the findings indicate that strong environmental supports (i.e., students feeling like people on campus like them or care about them) correlated with higher feelings of self-efficacy. Garriott et al. (2015) made the following suggestion based on the results:

Counselors may consider focusing on availability of various supports for first-

and non-first-generation students as they adjust to the demands of college.

Access to mentors, supportive friends and family, as well as helpful teachers may

be useful to explore. Colleges and universities may also develop or ensure

adequate funding for systems-level plans and resources to connect students with

supportive persons on campus or reach out to important people in students' lives.

(p. 261)

Related to creating a welcoming environment is engaging students outside the

classroom. This could include meeting with faculty when class is not in session,

studying, and taking part in extracurricular activities, such as student clubs or

organizations (Engle, 2007). Because first-generation students are more likely to enroll

in college part-time, have family and work obligations, and are more likely to be

commuter students these students are less engaged in campus activities than continuing-

generation students (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Studies have shown that first-

generation students benefit more than their peers from involvement in such activities, and

helping them engage in the campus community is important for their academic success

(Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Stebleton & Soria, 2012). Soria and Stebleton (2012) utilized

the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) in their quantitative study at a

large, public, 4-year university located in the Midwestern region of the United States.

Over 1,000 first-year students were included in the study which explored the differences

in academic engagement and retention between first-generation and non-first-generation

college students. The researchers found that first-generation students were less likely to

interact with faculty in and out of the classroom, contributed to class discussions at lower

rates, and were less likely to seek help from faculty suggested that faculty make students feel welcome and seek their input during discussions. Further, the authors suggested that colleges can help first-generation students feel like they are members of the community and increase their feelings of belonging. Soria and Stebleton (2012) added that this is important because "students' sense of belonging has additional implications beyond their academic engagement: the greater the sense of belonging to the academic and social community for students, the more likely it is that students will persist toward graduation" (p. 681).

Latino students. The following section provides an overview of the diversity within the Latino population in the United States as well as the educational achievements and challenges among this ethnic group.

Latino diversity. At almost 20% of the total population, Latinos represent the largest ethnic or racial minority group in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). While it is common to cluster all members of this population together for the census or research, to respectfully write about Latinos, one must first acknowledge the diversity within this ethnic population. Latinos represent every race, have historical roots in all Latin American nations, and may achieve varying levels of academic and economic success, with some groups far outperforming others (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

Representing over 60% of all Latinos in the United States, Mexicans make up the largest origin group, followed by Puerto Ricans at 9.5%. These two groups are followed by Cubans and Salvadorans who only make up almost 4% of the total Latino population (Pew Research Center, 2015). While immigration among Latinos is declining, the largest share of foreign-born Latino immigrants is currently from Venezuela at 69%. The next

groups are Peruvians at 65%, Guatemalans at 64%, and Hondurans at 63% (Pew

Research Center, 2015). According to the Pew Research Center (2015), approximately

76% of all Latinos are recognized United States citizens, whether they are born here

(65%) or naturalized (11%).

Differences among these groups can be seen in age, educational attainment, and

socioeconomic status. Mexicans are the youngest group, with a median age of 26 years,

and Cubans are the oldest group at about 40-years old (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Overall, Latinos are the youngest ethnic population when compared to other major

groups, with median ages between 25- and 37-years old. Venezuelans are the most

highly educated origin group, with 50% of adults, aged 25 or older, holding at least a

bachelor's degree. In contrast, Salvadorians, Hondurans, and Guatemalans hold the

lowest rate of degree attainment, earning only a total of 26% of college degrees for the

three groups combined. Finally, in terms of socioeconomic status, Argentinians enjoy the

highest median household income at "$63,000, which is about $20,000 higher than the

median household income of all Hispanics ($41,000)" (Pew Research Center, 2015, para.

12). However, over 20% of all Latinos live below the poverty line (Flores, Lopez, &

Radford, 2017).

Latinos and higher education. While differences are noted and exist among the

variety of Latino origin groups, many of their experiences in the United States education

system are shared. Overall, they still earn college degrees at lower rates than other major

ethnic groups (Krogstad, 2016). They fail to graduate at rates that are consistent with

their college enrollments (Gándara, 2015), and issues around their academic success have

been explored (Matos, 2015; Torres, Reiser, LePeau, & Ruder, 2006). The Pew Research

Center: Hispanic Trends, in 2012, reported that Latino graduates earned only 8.5% of

bachelor's degrees and 12% of associate degrees awarded in the United States. As of

2015, the Latino dropout rate was 9.2% versus Blacks at 6.5% and Whites at 4.6%

(NCES, 2017).

More likely to be first-generation students and from low-socioeconomic

backgrounds puts Latinos at a further disadvantage (Engle, 2007). Lack of college

readiness has also been attributed to low college success rates, with many Latinos placed

in remedial education upon entering higher education (Nora & Crisp, 2012; U.S.

Department of Education [USDOE], 2014). Research has shown that students who fall

into these groups are at a higher risk of leaving institutions of higher education before

successfully obtaining the post-secondary degree (Coley et al., 2016; Engle, 2006).

Many studies indicate that Latino students face challenges to degree completion

that are related to out-of-school commitments, or lack of resources, such as financial

support (Longerbeam, Sedlacek, & Alatorre, 2004; Nora & Rendón, 1990; Vega, 2016).

For example, Longerbeam et al. (2004) conducted a quantitative study of over 2,000

college students to understand college students' perception about their retention in

college. Differences between Latino and non-Latino students utilizing MANOVA and

chi-square statistics were found to be significant. The study found that 18.7% of the

Latino participants cited the cost of college as the reason they would most likely depart

from college, as opposed to 12.5% of the non-Latino students.

Scholars have also noted that cultural differences may affect Latino transition and

ultimate success in college (Anzaldúa, 1999, Rendón et al., 2000). Anzaldúa (1999)

employed the concept of *choque* or cultural collision that acknowledges a "cultural

mismatch between low-income and upper-class cultural norms that can create a social performance gap and reproduce social inequalities" (Rendón, Nora, & Kanagala, 2014, p. 10). This includes moving from a collectivist mindset, so often found among Latino communities, to thinking in a more individualistic way. When college faculty and/or administrators do not attempt to better understand ways that students may be struggling in school, it puts an added burden on Latinos' academic performance (Rendón et al., 2014).

While many studies have pointed to the reasons preventing many Latinos from achieving academic success, few have examined the success stories for many in this student group (Borrero, 2011; Ceballo, 2004; Rodriguez, Mira, Myers, Morris, & Cardoza, 2003). Pérez (2017) utilized a qualitative study to understand the experiences of high-performing Latino males in college. The phenomenological study was conducted in the Northeast United States at two institutions that were selective 4-year, residential colleges. One college was private and the second was public. Twenty-one Latino males, who were enrolled in college, participated in the study that consisted of one-on-one interviews with the researcher. Pérez (2017) uncovered four themes: "Unclear, But Evolving Goals, Being the Ideal College Student, Absence of Faculty and Administrative Mentors and [Over]reliance on Peers" (Pérez, 2017, p. 130). Two themes dealt with lack of interaction with college staff and an over-reliance on peer groups. Pérez (2017) found that the Latino students did not seek out support from faculty or staff at the college and, instead, utilized fellow students who were of similar cultural backgrounds to help them navigate the college environment. Pérez (2017) noted:

Latino male achievers benefited from mentoring relationships with faculty and

administrators. Unfortunately, less than one quarter of the participants in this

study received guidance from faculty and administrators on how to work toward

their goals. (p. 133)

Another study found that campus engagement was an important factor for Latino

college success (Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, & Klingsmith, 2014). Sandoval et al. (2014)

conducted focus groups with 22 students who were of African American and Latino

heritage. The study was conducted at a community college in the Southwest United

States. The college comprised two suburban campuses and enrolled over 11,000 students

who represented approximately 100 different countries. The researchers wanted to better

understand the factors that supported the academic accomplishments for those students

selected for the study. The researchers found that, despite students' part-time status at the

college, they overwhelmingly cited being involved in college as helping them connect to

fellow students and the institution overall. College engagement included on-campus

jobs, positive relationships with college staff who helped them, and being members of

student organizations. For these students, having meaningful relationships with college

staff, faculty, and other students helped them do well academically.

Latina college students. Latinas, compared to their male counterparts, face

special challenges when it comes to degree attainment. As Gándara (2015) stated:

As a group, Latinas begin school significantly behind other females and without

adequate resources and supports; they are never able to catch up to their peers.

Latinas are also the least likely of all women to complete a college degree, at just

19 percent compared to nearly 44 percent of white women. (p. 10)

Very little data exists that directly addresses the needs of Latina college students. A review of literature conducted by Rodriguez, Guido-DiBriot, Torres, & Talbot (2000) points to the obstacles this specific student group faces when attempting to pursue the postsecondary degree. Rodriguez et al. (2000) indicated two primary areas that can challenge Latinas' partaking in college: pre-college characteristics and challenges faced once they enter. Prior to entering college, Latinas may deal with socioeconomic factors that may prevent or delay their enrollment and the stereotypes imposed upon them by the dominant culture. For those Latinas who do enroll in college, many suffer from stress related to family obligations and expectations and gender-role struggles (Corona-Ordoñez, 2015; Sy & Romero, 2008).

Studies have found that the Latino norms of *machismo* and *marianismo* continue to hinder female Latinas who seek to pursue college degrees (Castillo, Perez, Castillo, & Ghosheh, 2010; Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004; Sanchez, Smith, & Adams, 2017). The term *machismo* reflects the idea that males have more opportunity to engage in activities outside of the home, such as working and/or going to school, and that they behave in ways that display independence and dominance (Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004). *Marianismo*, on the other hand, indicates that female Latinas should focus more on family obligations, behave obediently, and be more dependent on the family for support (Castillo et al., 2010).

Sanchez et al. (2017) found that some characteristics related to marianismo may hinder Latina college achievement. The Sanchez et al. quantitative study took place at a large Southwest public university in the United States, 211 Latina college students were interviewed to better understand the influence of gender roles on college success. The

findings suggest that some features of *marianismo* may lead to feelings of inferiority and self-silencing behaviors which prevent Latinas from obtaining services or support they require in school. For example, the characteristic of *respeto* (respect) implies that one respects a hierarchical structure and a reluctance to challenge those in a more authoritative position. Sanchez et al. (2017) found that this tenant can lead to Latina students' discomfort with advocating for themselves in college. Relatedly, self-silencing behaviors may prevent Latinas from resolving conflicts with others on campus. Both factors, respeto and self-silencing, have the potential to lead to poor academic performance and increased levels of stress because Latinas may not successfully cope with difficult situations in college (Sanchez et al. 2017).

While Latinas may feel a sense of obligation to their family to stay home and help with domestic responsibilities, many take these feelings and turn them into positive motivation to succeed in college. Gloria and Castellanos (2012) interviewed seven Latina college students who attended 4-year, research institutions and found that many participants were motivated to go to college because they "wanted to achieve and complete their educational goals for their families" (p. 88). Going to college was a way of making their family proud. Latino families, especially parents, are consistently found to be one of the most integral factors affecting Latina success in college (Gloria & Segura-Herrera, 2004; Saunders & Serna, 2004), and so it was suggested that colleges find ways to engage the family throughout students' educational careers. Because family plays a strong role in Latino culture, researchers recommended that institutions implement programming that invites Latinas into the campus culture, almost as a

secondary family unit, connecting these students to the academic community in more intentional ways (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012).

Girardi (2011) conducted a phenomenological study on Latina college students. She interviewed 11 Latina graduates from a private, urban institution in the New York City area. The study revealed eight factors that supported the women's successful graduation with an associate degree. These included:"(a) goal commitment, (b) cultural, (c) family and significant other support, (d) social integration, (e) institutional commitment, (f) economic, (g) academic integration, and (h) financial aid" (Girardi, 2011, pp. 136-137). Specific to social integration, Girardi found that having a sense of community and belonging for this population led to greater academic success. The women stated that the college from which they graduated made them feel welcomed and accepted. Statements about college administrators and faculty such as: "They understand your culture, they understand the background and they kind of got you through college when it comes to that" (Girardi, 2011, p. 148) confirm that inviting these students into the fabric of the college culture by making them feel valued is important for their academic success.

College student involvement. The following section provides a historical overview of student involvement theories and research utilizing such theories.

Historical overview of student involvement theory. In 1977, Alexander Astin released *Four Critical Years*, which was based on the largest nationwide study of student development at that time. With over 10 years of longitudinal data, Astin (1977) revealed how student outcomes are affected by the college experience. Previous research released on the same subject had not been supported by such thorough data analysis, thus making

Astin's (1977) work groundbreaking at the time (Astin, 1977; 1984). Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement can be simply defined as "the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience" (p. 518). The theory implies that the more students are involved in college, the more learning, development, and academic success they will achieve. Engaging in these opportunities, Patton et al. (2016) stated, "stimulates increasing cognitive complexity, leading to learning and development" (p. 34) in college.

In doing a longitudinal study of over 200,000 students at 300 institutions, Astin (1984) suggested that the way in which students expend their energy and time while in college has a direct effect on their persistence in school. Such factors include how much time a student spends studying for a course to their involvement in extracurricular activities or meeting with faculty during office hours. Further, his research reveals that the more time a student is involved in school-related activities, the better their persistence levels, and the converse held true as well. The less-involved student saw more negative results, such as dropping out of college (Astin, 1984).

Astin (1977, 1984) was not alone in the search for understanding college persistence and attrition. In 1975, Vincent Tinto began formulating his theory of student attrition (Tinto, 1975). Tinto expanded upon the work of William Spady (1971), who had previously utilized Durkheim's theory of suicide to explain college student attrition. Durkheim's theory states that:

> Suicide is more likely to occur when individuals are insufficiently integrated into the fabric of society. Specifically, the likelihood of suicide in society increases

when two types of integration are lacking—namely, insufficient moral (value) integration and insufficient collective affiliation." (Tinto, 1975, p. 91)

Applying this concept to the college setting, Tinto (1975) argued that the "lack of integration into the social system of the college will lead to low commitment . . . and will increase the probability that individuals will decide to leave college and pursue alternatives (p. 91). Central to this theory is the notion of *integration*, which indicates that student persistence is strongly predicted by the degree of academic and social amalgamation at an institution. Tinto (1993) posited that through intentional programming, extracurricular offerings, and engaging coursework, colleges could improve retention. Like Astin (1984), Tinto (1993) recognized the importance of how students interacted with the college environment while outside the classroom setting. Each of these researchers highlighted the need to connect students to the college setting as means to retain them as well as to support their academic endeavors.

Both Astin (1984) and Tinto's (1993) models of student involvement and persistence speak to the issue of first-generation Latina student retention in college. Involvement models can serve as retention guides for those colleges seeking to support this student population to better succeed academically. Research has shown that *involving colleges* (Kuh, Whitt, & Carney Strange, 1989), or institutions with a strong emphasis on student engagement, have higher retention and graduation rates, even when controlling for student background (such as race, socioeconomic status, etc.).

Research utilizing student involvement. In 1988, Abrahamowicz revealed that higher levels of involvement led to higher levels of overall satisfaction for those students who became engaged at their college. Another key benefit of college involvement is

persistence. Those students who are more integrated into the campus life, due to their

extracurricular activity, are more likely to return to the institution to continue in their

involvement (i.e., returning to participate in a student club or organization) (Berger &

Milem, 1999). Being involved in college results in great benefits for students, and those

who are highly involved indicate being more satisified with their college experience

(Webber, Krylow, & Zhang, 2013).

Student involvement is often defined as those non-academic activities in which

students engage that enhance their learning in school. As Karp (2011) explained:

> Non-academic support activities are presumed to encourage academic success but
>
> are not overtly academic. They can occur within formally structured programs or
>
> informally, through in-class interactions. In this way, there is a symbiotic and
>
> multiplicative relationship between academic interventions, such as tutoring and
>
> developmental education, and non-academic supports. *Nonetheless, nonacademic*
>
> *supports are distinct from academic ones in that they address different skills and*
>
> *knowledge and encourage student success via different processes* [emphasis
>
> added]. (p. 2)

Student involvement is also closely linked to social integration. For example,

Johnson's (2007) mixed-methods study of 229 Latinas who successfully graduated from

a community college in southwestern Texas found that one reason for these students'

success was related to their social integration into the college environment. In the

quantitative component, all respondents were asked to rank six factors that they perceived

had contributed to their success in college: (a) goal commitment, (b) family and

significant others support, (c) academic integration, (d) social integration, (e) institutional

commitment, and (f) financial aid. In addition to the quantitative survey, Johnson (2007) employed interviews and focus groups with a total of 13 participants. In analyzing her data, the researcher found that the more the students engaged with the college, the great their academic success. Johnson (2007) concluded:

> Students who achieve reasonable levels of comfort and familiarity with the college environment are considered integrated into an institution. As a result, they are then better able to navigate the system and find their way to crucial institutional resources or services that can enable them to achieve their educational goals. The more fully students are integrated into and, consequently, committed to the institution, the greater the likelihood they will persevere to graduation. (p. 84)

Jones's (2009) quantitative study focused on gender differences and the effect of social integration on college retention. Data was collected from over 400 first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students who attended eight religiously affiliated colleges and universities. The study found that male and female students have different responses to social integration. Female students were found to need and benefit most from social integration in college. When their levels of social integration are low, female students' levels of institutional commitment is remarkably less than their male counterparts. Jones (2009) stated that "female students, consistent with the tenets of gender role theory, appear to have a greater need for the type of rewards and social support that come along with higher levels of social integration" (p. 697).

A 2013 quantitative study by Webber et al. utilized findings from the National Survey of Student Engagement (2008) to determine if student involvement in college

correlated with academic success. The researchers utilized data obtained from a large, research-focused institution located in the mid-Atlantic section of the United States. Responses from over 1,000 students was included for evaluation. The study examined how often students were involved in college activities, both academic and social. The researchers sought to understand if frequency of engagement and levels of involvement correlated with academic achievements and overall satisfaction with the college. Webber et al. (2013) found that the more involved students were in a variety of college activities, the better their academic performance and level of satisfaction. Further, the study found that non-White students reported lower levels of satisfaction, which could be attributed to "their perceptions of not feeling involved or welcomed" (p. 605).

Fischer (2007) conducted a study using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshman. Twenty-eight selected colleges provided information from their first-year students, of which 3,924 were selected to complete surveys in person with the researchers. The longitudinal study followed up with the selected students every spring semester until their senior year, with an 88% retention rate of study participants. Fischer (2007) found that for

> minority groups having more extensive formal ties on-campus was significantly
>
> related to higher grades. . . . [The] act of getting involved in campus life through
>
> formal activities played a more central role in helping them to feel a part of
>
> campus life. (p. 141)

Further, the Fischer (2007) study showed that the more involved minority students were in campus activities, the less likely they were to leave the institution. This likelihood was reduced by at least 83% for Latino students. These findings echo Hurtado and Carter's

(1997) earlier study that found that Latino college students who took part in extracurricular activities enjoyed a much higher sense of belonging when compared to those students who did not take part or were less involved.

Similarly, Hurtado and Carter's (1997) quantitative study of over 200 college students from over 100 colleges found that involvement in social-community and religious organizations resulted in feelings of belonging at a college. Further, the researchers found that for Latino students

> both the social-community organizations and religious organizations seem to have strong external-to-campus affiliations. Perhaps one reason why Latino students who belong to these organizations have a stronger sense of belonging is because they maintain connections with these external campus communities and hence maintain some link with the communities that they were familiar with before they entered college. (p. 338)

The National Survey of Student Engagement (2008) lists a number of college activities that have been shown to augment the student academic experience. They include:

> having serious conversations with peers from different ethnic backgrounds, religious faiths, and political orientations; actively participating in student organizations and out-of-class activities; using the internet, instant messaging, and other electronic resources to work collaboratively on class assignments; participating in a learning community or some other formal program where groups of students enroll together in two or more common classes; taking foreign

language courses; completing an independent study or self-designed major under the supervision of a faculty member. (Harper, 2009, para. 7)

Kuh's (2008) research, utilizing the results of the National Survey of Student Engagement (2008), contributes to the above list. He stated that certain activities are *high-impact* and significantly contribute to student learning and academic success. These include internships, global learning, service-learning, and capstone projects or courses. By participating in these kinds of activities, students can engage with faculty and each other in meaningful ways. Also, students learn how to apply skills from one area to another. For example, participating in a community service projects potentially builds skills that can be used in a future internship.

Kuh (2008) also noted that students of color have much to gain by participating in college activities. He noted that Latino students who were academically behind their White peers in the beginning of their first year of college actually achieved higher grade point averages than the White students after becoming more engaged in high-impact activities. Kuh (2008) stated that, "while participation in effective educational activities generally benefits all students, the salutary effects are even greater for students who begin college at lower achievement levels, as well as students of color, compared with White students" (Kuh, 2008, p. 19).

Bergen-Cico and Viscomi (2012) conducted a quantitative study examining the relationship between co-curricular activities and academic performance. The researchers investigated over 3,000 students' attendance at university-sponsored events over a 4-year period. The students represented two cohorts of first-year students at a large, private, 4-year university located in the Northeast Region of the United States. The first cohort

entered in fall 2002, and entered the second in fall 2003 and were both tracked for eight

successive semesters. The results indicated that those students who attended more than

five college events achieved higher grades than those who attended less activities.

Bergen-Cico and Viscomi (2012) contended that "institutional attachment emerges from

involvement in co-curricular activities; and institutions of higher education that focus on

quality, diversity, and breadth of campus programming may reap benefits for both the

students and the institution" (p. 341).

Validation theory. In 1994, Laura I. Rendón introduced validation theory as an

alternate model of student involvement (Rendón, 1994). According to Rendón,

"validation is an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-

class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development" (p. 44). Astin (1985)

indicated that students who are highly involved in college spend substantial amounts of

time and energy in activities, such as taking part in student clubs, engaging with faculty

and staff, or working on campus. In contrast, Rendón (1994) argued that while this

exertion of energy was important for college student success, students who were from

lower socioeconomic families, of ethnic minority groups, or identified as first-generation

college students had a more difficult time engaging in these activities. It is not that they

do not want to be involved in college, but that they are unsure how to become more

involved. Finally, validation precedes involvement. If students do not feel like they can

become involved, then they will not. As Gildersleeve (2011) pointedly stated:

> Astin (1984) generated a theory of student involvement that made the logical
>
> connection that students who were involved in the institution were more likely to
>
> respond positively to its enterprise and therefore achieve greater academic

success. However, Astin's theory was based on research that relied heavily on aggregated national data, which had a tendency to overlook the nuances of nondominant students' realities. Not all students could be involved in colleges and universities in the same way, nor to the same extent. (p. 76)

Rendón (1994) stated that colleges and universities need to invite students into these activities and validate students' experiences. Rendón (1994) found that there were actions institutions could implement to help students. On the academic side, faculty, who were sincere in their feedback to student work and took extra time to meet with students outside of class time, were cited as reasons that students from diverse race/ethnic and cultural backgrounds felt better able to achieve academic success. Outside the classroom, family, friends, and college staff can serve as validation agents who motivate students to do well in school.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Vasti Torres was one of the first to discuss racism and its impact on college involvement. Utilizing the qualitative data from a larger longitudinal mixed-methods research study, Torres and Hernandez (2007) interviewed 29 self-identified Latino college students from four urban universities. Two universities' population were predominately White, one HSI had 25% Latino students, and the fourth university was monocultural, with 95% Latino students. Torres and Hernandez (2007) found that "Latino students need meaningful support as they face the developmental tasks associated with confronting racism, lest their growth stagnate or regress" (p. 572), leading to attrition and poor academic performance. The Torres and Hernandez study was significant in acknowledging the experience of racism and its meaning in students' lives on college campuses. The study indicates that it simply is not enough to encourage

student involvement at the college level. Colleges and universities must do so while reducing systems of marginalization and racism on their campuses (Torres & Hernandez, 2007).

Barnett (2011) applied validation theory to conduct a quantitative study to understand whether validation by community college faculty contributed to students' sense of belonging and their intent to continue at the college. The study was conducted at a community college in an urban setting in the Midwest United States. It included over 300 students who were enrolled in credit-bearing coursework. Barnett (2011) utilized a survey instrument, with a demographic breakdown, to capture college students' experiences with validation. The researcher found that validation by faculty significantly predicted students' sense of academic integration and intent to persist in college. This significance was also more pronounced for the non-White students in the study.

Vega's (2016) qualitative case study of first-generation Latinos explored the high school to college transition through the lens of validation theory. Utilizing a phenomenological approach, Vega selected a purposeful sample of 10 students attending an HSI in the Southwest. The participants were eight females and two males. All the students identified as first-generation college students and were in either their junior or senior year at the university. Through one-on-one interviews with each student, Vega found that student validation can also come from social activities. For example, one student interviewed claimed that her involvement in the college's ethnic student organization validated her sense of identity and made her feel prouder of her culture. Based upon these findings, Vega (2016) suggested that institutions of higher education can help support such student groups on their campuses because they can help at-risk

student groups connect to the environment, and that support may lead to better academic success rates.

Chapter Summary

While Latinos continue to increase their enrollment in institutions of higher education, their levels of degree attainment remains some of the lowest. Latinas are enrolling in college at much higher rates than their male counterparts; however, they struggle to earn degrees at the level of other racial/ethnic groups. Their ability to complete a college credential is hindered by many factors, including first-generation status, gendered stereotypes, and academic preparedness.

The preceding review of the literature explores some of these factors and implies that two important theories can help support this group's future success. The student-involvement and validation theories, used in combination, can be utilized to implement programming and initiatives that directly address the needs of first-generation Latina students. The researcher considered both theories for this qualitative study.

Chapter 3 details how the researcher conducted her study and the instruments that were utilized. The research questions are stated, along with the site description, and the participants and justification of the research type is explained. Finally, the research collection and analysis processes are described in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

  While Latinas are enrolling in college at exponential rates, their levels of degree attainment have not risen as quickly (Gándara, 2015). In fact, Latinos, in general, have some of the lowest educational levels among all major racial and ethnic groups in the United States (Krogstad, 2016). Research has helped to explain the reasons behind these low achievement levels (Gándara, 2015), but there is limited research into how some members of this group have achieved academic success (Pérez, 2017). Even less can be found regarding how their involvement in college affects their ability to earn a college degree (Castellanos, 2016).

  The purpose of this study was to understand how first-generation Latina students, who have graduated from a community college, understand and define their involvement in school. Further, it is the goal of this study to gain insight into the degree of involvement first-generation Latinas had while attending a community college and if they associated this involvement as contributing to their academic success. While some studies have explored what factors support Latino students in college (Girardi, 2011; Johnson, 2007), very few have attempted to understand the experiences of those who identify as (a) first-generation, (b) Latina, (c) graduated from a community college and understand how engagement in college could have affected academic success. In addition, this study sought to understand student involvement by utilizing a validation

lens to understand if validating factors contributed to higher levels of college involvement for first-generation Latinas.

To address these factors, the research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do first-generation Latinas define their engagement with the institution?

2. What factors impacted the degree of involvement by first-generation Latina students at this community college?

3. To what degree of importance did first-generation Latinas perceive college involvement had an impact on their academic success?

4. How did first-generation Latinas perceive the level of institutional support as impacting their academic success?

5. To what degree did relationships with faculty/staff support academic success for first-generation Latinas?

Utilizing a qualitative approach, this study sought to understand how first-generation Latinas perceived their academic success as it related to their degree of college involvement. This study utilized a phenomenological method to study nine first-generation Latinas who graduated from a community college located in the Northeastern United States. It was the goal of this study to understand how these women defined college involvement and what validating experiences contributed to their level of involvement. The researcher hoped to learn how this involvement did or did not affect their academic success.

Qualitative research is an approach that allows researchers to understand how individuals make meaning of a lived experience. The use of qualitative research is appropriate to better understand a phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). According to Creswell

(2014), "phenomenological research is a qualitative strategy in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in a study" (p. 245). Because the goal of this study was to understand what meaning first-generation Latina students attributed to their involvement in college, the researcher implemented a qualitative approach to obtain her data. In addition, the literature review revealed that this research design has been successfully utilized to explore and give meaning to how first-generation and/or Latino students give meaning to their lived experiences (Girardi, 2011).

A phenomenological study is one that defines the understanding of a group of individuals who have a specific experience in common (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In a phenomenological approach, the research aims to uncover the meaning participants give to a lived experience and to discover if that meaning is similar among other members of the group. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), the researcher "collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all the individuals" (p. 75). This research approach was best suited for this current study because it allowed the researcher to gather detailed information of a lived experience from each participant.

Utilizing the phenomenological, qualitative approach described above, the researcher conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with first-generation Latina students who graduated from a community college within 3 years of the timeframe of the collection of data. According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), "in the semi-structured interview, the researcher has a specific topic to learn about, prepares a limited number of questions in advance, and plans to ask follow-up questions" (p. 31). One-on-one

interviews were conducted for the research to fully capture the lived experiences of each participant. The researcher decided that is was important to give individual consideration to those who underwent the phenomenon that was being evaluated.

Research Context

This qualitative study was conducted in a large urban city located in the Northeastern United States. The participants consisted of first-generation Latina students who had recently graduated from a community college. The community college from which the women graduated is large and diverse with over 23,000 students enrolled in associate and certificate programs. Students represent over 160 countries and speak approximately 100 languages. The institution that was selected for this study is an HSI. HSIs are "defined in Title V of the Higher Education Act as not-for-profit institutions of higher learning with a full-time equivalent (FTE) undergraduate student enrollment that is at least 25 percent Hispanic" (HACU, 2016). The community college selected for this study enrolls over 40% Latino or Hispanic students. Of all the students who attend the institution, 57.2% are female.

Research Participants

The researcher selected nine participants who fit the following criteria. They (a) were Latina, (b) were first-generation college students, and (c) completed their associate degree between January 2015 and December 2017. The researcher obtained approval from the community college's Director of Research (Appendix A) to access alumni data after the researcher received approval from St. John Fisher College Institution Review Board (IRB).

The study focused on Latinas who earned their associate degrees between January 2015 and December 2017. Based on the data provided by the institution's Department of Institutional Effectiveness and Analytics, 2,572 Latina females completed an associate degree during this time span. Latinas represented 26% of the total graduates, 37% of the female graduates, and 60% of all the Latino graduates. From the population of 2,572 Latinas students who completed the associate degree between 2015-2017, the researcher randomly selected 30%, or 771 women, to whom she sent an e-mail letter of introduction (Appendix B) and a selection questionnaire (Appendix C). The 771 women were selected using Randomizer, a sampling selection tool.

The selection questionnaire was reviewed for specific criteria. Graduates who were first-generation Latinas whose parents did not earn a college degree were eligible for the interview process. Additionally, the participants had to be willing to participate in an in-depth, one-on-one interview. The questionnaire was accompanied by a letter of introduction to provide the potential participants with information regarding why they were being selected to take the questionnaire and to give the participants some general background information on the study.

Utilizing Qualtrics as the platform, the researcher distributed the questionnaire. The participants were informed that the questionnaire was optional, and they could opt out of responding to it. To ensure reliability and validity of the selection questionnaire, the survey was member-checked by associate degree graduates who were not included in the study, and it was also reviewed by experts familiar with doctoral research methods.

Upon completing the process of collecting characteristic data of the potential participants, the researcher had to determine who fit the appropriate criteria, and then she

selected her sample. A sample is a subset of the population being studied (Creswell &

Poth, 2018). The sampling approach used in a study is a critical part of its design

because it determines who in that population will contribute to the data collected

(Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Once the researcher had determined who was eligible to participate in the study,

she had to determine if the 49 completed surveys 34 (69%) met the required criteria.

From the 34 eligible respondents, 12 were randomly selected to participate in an

interview. A random sampling tool was used to select the potential participants. Because

not all of the 12 original women responded to participate in the study, a total of nine

participants (67%) successfully completed the interview process and were included in the

study.

Instruments Used in Data Collection

After the participants were successfully identified, they were contacted to

schedule face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. An informed consent form

was issued to all selected participants (Appendix E). The informed consent form

informed the subjects of the risks associated with the study, that they were able to

discontinue their participation at any time, and that no compensation would be issued.

A semi-structured interview allows the researcher to ask a set of predetermined

questions while providing the flexibility to ask follow-up questions based upon the

respondents' answers (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The semi-structured interview "seeks

to obtain descriptions of interviewees' lived world with respect to interpretation of the

meaning of the described phenomena" (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015, p. 31). The interviews

included some predetermined questions that were asked of all of the participants. These

questions were field tested by a panel of experts prior to the interview process. Due to feedback from this panel, some questions were revised or eliminated. The semi-structured interview permits the investigator to ask predetermined questions as well as follow-up questions based on the respondents' answers. The researcher used this methodology to explore unexpected, unusual, or especially relevant material revealed by a participant (Pattern, 2009). This flexible approach allowed for richer data to be collected by the researcher. A list of predetermined questions was asked of each participant (Appendix F).

The researcher used voice recording devices, along with handwritten notation, to collect data. It was important that the researcher had more than one method of documenting each participant's response, to prevent loss of data or to have missing information. In addition, the researcher recorded a unique ID number for the interview, the date the interview took place, the start and end times, and the time elapsed.

In collecting data, the researcher was extremely cognizant of maintaining participant confidentiality. It was of utmost importance that the researcher safeguarded all the information collected, such as the participants' personal information and their responses to the interview questions (Creswell, 2014). Confidentiality is directly linked to ethical research protocol. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) argued that "ethical issues go through the entire process of an interview investigation, and potential ethical concerns should be taken into consideration from the very start of an investigation and to the final report" (p. 85). The ethical research design began with the IRB approval, which required a confidentiality disclosure that was included in the letter of consent. This letter was then provided to each participant by the researcher and signed by both parties. Further, the

researcher included an informed consent form informing the participants about the purpose of the study and how their information would be kept confidential.

The researcher created unique identification numbers to assign to each participants' responses once the data was collected. All documentation and interview materials were stored in a protected location that was accessible only by the researcher. The researcher sent all of the participants copies of their transcribed interviews to ensure that the information had been accurately translated and captured. Finally, the participants received notice that there would be no compensation for their participation in the study.

Procedures for Data Analysis

Data analysis helps the researcher understand and makes sense of the text that has been collected. It encompasses "segmenting and taking apart the data . . . as well as putting it back together" (Creswell, 2014). Creswell (2014) provided a structure that the researcher followed when analyzing the data. It included six steps:

1. Organize and prepare the data for analysis. This involves transcribing the interview transcripts.

2. Read or look at all the data. This provides a general sense of the information and an opportunity to reflect on its overall meaning.

3. Start coding all of the data. Coding is the process of organizing the data by bracketing chunks and writing a word representing a category in the margins.

4. Use the coding process to generate a description of the setting or people as well as categories or themes for analysis.

5. Advance how the description and themes will be *represented* in the qualitative narrative.

6. Making an interpretation in the qualitative research of the findings, asking,

   "What were the lessons learned?" (pp. 197-200)

To support her data analysis, the researcher utilized a transcription service to translate the audio recordings into text as part of the first step. She reviewed all transcribed data, along with her own notes taken during each interview. The researcher also sent the interview transcripts to the study participants for member checking. This allowed the participants to confirm that their responses had been recorded correctly by the researcher and to clarify anything that was misinterpreted. After this, the researcher began coding the data to determine categories and themes that emerged from the data collection.

The researcher invited experts to review the interview transcripts. Four readers were invited to review the transcripts and provide their feedback. A fifth reader was invited to review and organize all the other readers' evaluations. Afterwards, the researcher compared her results with those of the reviewers to safeguard accuracy and to confirm that all the themes were included. Member checking and a review by experts allows for trustworthiness and consistency of coding to occur (Creswell, 2014). Once the themes were established, the data was assembled into narratives. These narratives allowed the participants' stories to be told through the information. Finally, the data was interpreted, and recommendations were made.

Coding process. The researcher read, evaluated, and coded all interview transcriptions. The researcher then manually coded the data utilizing Excel charts and tables. The process of coding data included a three-step process. The initial coding cycle incorporated a priori, in vivo, and descriptive coding techniques. According to Saldaña

(2016), a priori coding allows the researcher to compile a list of codes prior to conducting

the research. A priori coding enables the researcher to analyze the data in a way that

complements the research questions and the structural framework. These codes are

derived from the literature review that relates to the topic (Saldaña, 2016). In vivo

coding, also known as literal coding or verbatim coding (Saldaña, 2016, p. 105) refers to

terms or words that the participants say during interviews. Because this study employed

a phenomenological approach, it was important to the researcher to utilize this type of

coding method to fully capture the participants' lived experiences. Some in vivo codes

that emerged included more than just class, increased my confidence, and felt very

supported. Finally, descriptive coding was implemented during the first-cycle coding.

Descriptive codes are those that "summarize in a word or short phrase—most often a

noun—the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 102). Such

descriptive codes that were revealed in the data included: activities, networking, and

college environment.

     The second round of coding included pattern coding. Saldaña (2016) defined

pattern coding as a method of categorizing the first-level summaries into less groups.

According to Saldaña (2016), "pattern codes are explanatory or inferential codes, ones

that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation" (p. 236). The categories

that emerged through pattern coding include waiting to get involved, having free time to

get involved, and great communication from administrators.

     Finally, in the third-cycle coding, the researcher utilized axial coding. Axial

coding allows the researcher to focus on that data that is most important and "aims to link

categories with subcategories and asks how they are related" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 244).

Utilizing this type of coding helped the researcher to understand the "why" of a phenomenon. The classifications that were developed through this third cycle coding included access to college faculty and administration, family support, and college programs.

Chapter Summary

Latinas are earning college degrees at rates much lower than other major ethnic groups in the United States (Gándara, 2015). It was the goal of the study to understand what factors support the academic success for those Latinas who defy the odds and successfully graduate from college. A qualitative phenomenological approach was utilized to explore how college involvement did or did not support first-generation Latinas obtain an associate degree from a community college. Data from in-depth interviews was collected, analyzed, and are described in future chapters. The goal for this data it to offer insights into how to better support first-generation Latinas as they navigate the higher education environment.

Chapter 4: Results

This study sought to understand the college involvement from the perspective of first-generation Latinas who successfully graduated from a community college. The study focused on the narratives of first-generation Latina graduates to examine the relationship between college involvement and academic success. Validation theory (Rendón, 1994) was the guiding theoretical lens for this study.

Rendón (1994) argued that lower income, first-generation, and minority students are more likely to become engaged with an institution when key individuals from the college encourage their involvement. Validation is made up of six elements: (a) initiating contact, (b) influencing student's self-worth, (c) precedes development, (d) occurs inside and outside of the classroom, (e) continues over time, and (f) relies on early involvement (Rendón, 1994; Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). Validation occurs in two domains within the college setting: the academic domain and the interpersonal domain. In the academic domain, faculty and administrators affirm students' abilities to be successful in school. In the interpersonal domain, faculty and staff create meaningful relationships with their students, taking an interest in their academic accomplishments and achievements (Rendón, 1994).

A review of literature indicated that first-generation, Latina students who attend community college are at a higher risk of not attaining a degree than other ethnic groups (Martinez & Hernandez, 2018). This study examined the perceptions of first-generation Latinas' level of involvement while attending community college and the impact they

perceived it had on their academic success. The areas that were considered included the participants' perceived level of involvement, interactions with faculty and administration, and level of support from the college as a whole.

The purpose of this study was to understand how first-generation Latina students who had graduated from a community college understand and define their involvement in school. Further, it was the goal of this study to gain insight into the degree of involvement first-generation Latinas had while attending a community college and if they associated this involvement in contributing to their academic success. While some studies have explored what factors support Latino students in college (Girardi, 2011; Johnson, 2007), very few attempted to understand the experiences of those who identify as (a) first-generation, (b) Latina, (c) who graduated from a community college, and (d) understand how engagement in college could have affected academic success. In addition, this study sought to understand student involvement utilizing a validation lens to understand if validating factors contributed to higher levels of college involvement for the first-generation Latinas.

The participants of this study were first-generation Latina graduates from a community college located in the northeast region of the United States. The community college utilized for this study was a 2-year urban institution that enrolled over 25,000 students per year. At the time of this study, the college was designated as an HSI because at least 25% of its student population identified as Hispanic/Latino. As of 2016, the college's Latino enrollment was 44%. The participants in this study graduated from the community college between 2015 and 2017.

This study employed a phenomenological, qualitative research approach to understand the lived experiences of the participants in question. A phenomenological study is one that defines the understanding of a group of individuals who have a specific experience in common (Creswell & Poth &, 2018). In a phenomenological approach, the research aims to uncover the meaning the participants give to a lived experience and if that meaning is similar to other members of the group. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the researcher "collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all the individuals" (p. 75). This research approach is best suited for this study because it allowed the researcher to gather detailed information of the lived experience for each participant. This study utilized phenomenology to understand how validating factors could have supported the first-generation Latinas' college involvement and, ultimately, their successful graduation from a community college.

To allow for rich and detailed information to be collected, this study employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews as the primary method for data gathering. This data collection approach allowed the researcher to ask predetermined questions to understand the phenomenon while also providing an opportunity to ask follow-up questions. While the interviews served as the primary tool for data collection, a demographic questionnaire was utilized to determine who would be eligible to participate in the study. The researcher sent an email, along with the questionnaire, to 771 graduates who were identified by the college as Latina and who graduated between January 2015 and December 2017. The data collected from these surveys provided basic demographic information about the participants, such as year of graduation from the community

college, their parent/guardians' educational level, and their participation in any college

activities. Of the surveys distributed, 49 surveys were completed of which 34 (69%) met

the required criteria for participation in the study. From the 34 eligible respondents, 12

were randomly selected to participate in an interview. Of those 12 respondents, nine

participants (67%) successfully completed the interview process and were included in

this study.

This chapter begins with a review of the research question. It then follows with

the data analysis process and the major themes that were uncovered. The first-generation

Latina graduates' stories provided insight into the validating experiences or the

participants at the community college. These answers indicate how involvement at the

college and with faculty, administration, and fellow students supported the participants'

academic success.

Research Questions

The researcher employed five qualitative research questions to guide this study.

The research questions were developed to understand the perspectives of college

involvement from the first-generation Latinas who graduated from a community college.

The research questions were developed utilizing a validation theoretical lens to

understand the participants' college involvement as it related to academic success. The

research questions were:

1. How do first-generation Latinas define their engagement with the institution?

2. What factors impacted the degree of involvement by the first-generation

   Latina students at this community college?

3. To what degree of importance did first-generation Latinas perceive college involvement had an impact on their academic success?

4. How did first-generation Latinas perceive the level of institutional support as impacting their academic success?

5. To what degree did relationships with faculty/staff support academic success for first-generation Latinas?

Data collected through in-depth interviews was utilized to understand the women's experiences and allowed for major themes to be developed by the researcher.

Data Analysis and Findings

This section provides the process utilized for data analysis. The major findings are discussed later in the chapter.

Questionnaire data. It was important that the study include the participants' demographic information to better paint a picture of the women who participated. A prescreening questionnaire was used primarily as a selection tool, and it provided the researcher with basic demographic data. The questionnaire allowed the researcher to have some understanding of the participants' backgrounds, which would help guide this study. While the data from the surveys provided important statistical information about the participants, this study followed a qualitative approach to presenting the participants' experiences. The questionnaire data was highlighted strictly to provide descriptive statistics and give a more rounded picture of the study participants. No quantitative data analysis was performed for this study.

Parental educational attainment was significant to this study as the research centered on first-generation status. Only those students whose parents had not attained a

college degree were included in the study. While graduates whose parents did have a

college degree were not included in the study, it is still important to note that out of the

49 survey respondents, only 14 (29%) had at least one parent with a college degree.

Further, only two women (4%) reported that both parents had a college degree. This data

is consistent with the literature that most Latinas who attend community college are first-

generation students (Reyes & Nora, 2012). For those who participated in the study, five

(50%) had at least one parent with some college credits, but only one (10%) participant's

parents both had some college education.

Table 4.1

Highest Level of Parents' Educational Attainment

Parent	All Respondents (*N*)	Participants (*n*)
Highest Level Earned by Mother		
No schooling	–	–
Elementary School (K-5)	9	2
Middle School (6-8)	5	1
High School (9-12) or equivalent (i.e., GED)	16	2
Some college credits, no degree earned	4	4
College degree	12	–
Unknown	3	–
Highest Level Earned by Father		
No schooling	4	–
Elementary School (K-5)	9	1
Middle School (6-8)	4	1
High School (9-12) or equivalent (i.e., GED)	18	4
Some college credits, no degree earned	6	4
College degree	5	–
Unknown	3	–

The prescreening survey asked respondents what type of college activities they had participated in while they were at the community college. Table 4.2 shows the types of college involvement from which the respondents were asked to select. Of all of the questionnaire respondents, 45% indicated that they were not involved in any of the listed activities. The majority of women respondents were involved in at least one of the extracurricular activities listed on the questionnaire, 55% of all of the respondents and 80% of all of the interviewee/participants. This study utilized the college involvement theory in conjunction with the validation theory; therefore, it was important to understand how involved first-generation college Latina students were at the community college. The data collected for this study indicates that first-generation Latinas are involved in some college activities, with 55% (27) of all questionnaire respondents involved in one or more activities.

Table 4.2

Level of Involvement in College

College Involvement by Type	All Respondents (N)	Participants (n)
Not involved in listed activities	22	2
Internship	11	2
Member of Academic Cohort Group	6	4
Joined study groups with peers	4	1
Leadership Program	4	4
Volunteer Program	7	5
Peer Mentoring Program	3	2
Student club/organization	8	6
Level of College Involvement	All Respondents (n)	Participants (n)
No involvement in listed activities	22	2
One activity selected	16	4
Two activities selected	8	–
Three or more activities selected	3	4

Of the study's participants, 60% were between 22-25-years old at the time of their interview. Two participants were born in the Dominican Republic and arrived in the United States between 3 to 10 years prior to attending college. Another participant identified as Dominican because, while she was born here, her parents migrated to the United States from the Dominican Republic. One participant was born in Ecuador and arrived only a few months before enrolling in the community college. One participant identified as Puerto Rican and was born in the United States. Two participants (25%) were of Mexican descent, one was undocumented, and the other was born in this country. One participant was born in Honduras and lived most of her life in the United States, and another participant was born in the United States after her parents immigrated from Honduras. Only two of the participants did not have to work while they attended the community college because they were fully supported by their families. Of the total number of participants, 40% held part-time jobs on campus, and 30% worked off campus. Two participants worked a full-time job while they attended school.

Regarding childhood household type, 50% of participants came from single-parent homes, with four of those participants growing up with single mothers. One participant lived with her father while attending community college, until his sudden death, when she was forced to move in with her mother. One participant spent most of her childhood in foster care and lived with various family members until she became independent at 18 years old. Table 4.3 provides an overview of the demographic information for all the study participants.

Table 4.3

Demographic Table for All Participants

Participant Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Employment While at CC	Childhood Household
Nancy	22	Dominican	No employment	Single Parent; Mother
Jessica	25	Ecuadorian	No employment	Two Parents
Camila	24	Puerto Rican	P-T on campus	Single Parent; Father
Valentina	22	Mexican	P-T on campus	Two Parents
Lucia	24	Mexican	P-T on campus	Single Parent; Mother
Eva	30	Honduran	F-T off campus	Single Parent; Mother
Diana	32	Dominican	P-T on campus	Single Parent; Mother
Anabel	31	Dominican	P-T off campus	Foster Care
Jackie	25	Honduran	F-T off campus	Two Parents

Participant profiles. The researcher created pseudonyms to protect participants' identities. Their individual profiles are below.

Participant 1. Nancy, a 22-year-old Dominican woman, was raised in a divorced household. She moved to the United States at the age of 16 with her mother and siblings. At the time of her interview, Nancy was not married nor did she have children. While enrolled at the community college, Nancy received full financial aid in the form of grants, and she was a member of an academic support program that provided financial incentives for students earning good grades. Nancy's family supported her educational goals and trusted that she would do the right thing when it came to school. Nancy was very involved in the college programs and activities. Having taken part in leadership training and volunteer programs, she was a club member and executive, and an intern with a program specifically geared toward first-generation college students. After graduating with her degree from the community college, Nancy went on to pursue and attain her bachelor's degree, and at the time of her interview, she had been accepted to an Ivy League law school.

Participant 2. Jessica, a 25-year-old Ecuadorian woman, was raised in a two-parent household in her home country. At the time of her interview, Jessica was not married nor did she have children. She lived at home with her family and was financially supported by her father who ran his own small business. Jessica had never felt pressured to go to college; in fact, her father did not believe she needed to go. She was driven to complete college because of her own desire to learn and be prepared for a future career. Like Nancy, she was also highly involved in college activities, such as student clubs, volunteer programs, and student government. After graduating with her associate degree, she immediately enrolled in a 4-year college where she continued to attend.

Participant 3. Camila, a 24-year-old woman, was born and raised in the United States. Her parents are of Puerto Rican descent. At the time of her interview, Camila was not married nor did she have children. Camila's father played a very important role in her desire to go to college and do well academically. He supported her financially and never wanted her to worry about working. Camila did take on a part-time job at the college out of sheer interest in learning more about the college and having more to do than just classwork. She never joined any student organizations and considered herself not a very involved student while at the community college. Camila completed her associate degree and went on to complete her bachelor's degree. She works full time as an administrator. She was considering graduate studies at the time of her interview.

Participant 4. Valentina, a 22-year-old woman, was born in Mexico and had been living in the United States since she was a year old. Her parents were still married and lived in the United States with Valentina. At the time of her interview, Valentina was not married nor did she have children. She is the middle child of three siblings.

Valentina did not have to work while she attended college. She was very involved in college programs and activities, such as taking on leadership roles in clubs, serving as a peer mentor, and volunteering in the community. Valentina graduated with her associate degree in 2017, and she immediately began pursuing her bachelor's degree at a 4-year college, where she was enrolled at the time of her interview.

Participant 5. Lucia, a 24-year-old woman, was born in the United States, but both of her parents were born in Mexico. She was raised in a single-parent household that relied on public assistance to make ends meet. Lucia said was not very involved in college until her last semester. She worked part-time as mandated by a program for students receiving public assistance. As a result of her job, she learned about the various opportunities for involvement outside the classroom. As a result, she joined a volunteer program and was hired into a leadership position at the college. After she graduated from the community college, Lucia attended and graduated with her bachelor's degree, and at the time of her interview, she was going to be pursuing her master's degree at an Ivy League institution.

Participant 6. Eva, a 30-year-old woman, was born in Honduras and, at the time of her interview, had lived in the United States for 23 years. Both of her parents stopped attending school after they reached the fifth grade. Eva was the only child of 13 siblings to have earned a college degree. She worked full time, sometimes more than 40 hours per week, while attending the community college as a full-time student. She received no financial or social support from her family. Given struggles with family and balancing work with academics, it took Eva 10 years to attain her associate degree. Eva never took part in college activities, such as student clubs or athletics, because she had no extra time

between her studies and work. At the time of her interview, she was going into her second year in a bachelor's degree program as a full-time student while continuing to work a full-time job. Eva's planned to pursue her law degree in the future.

Participant 7. Diana, a 32-year-old woman of Dominican descent, moved to the United States in 1991. Diana served in the United States military prior to attending the community college. She attended multiple colleges before enrolling in the community college. As a result, she transferred many credits and only spent 1 year at the community college. She said that she wished she had the opportunity to be at the school longer because she had become involved in many extracurricular activities "too late." Diana was a member of student clubs, participated in student government, and was a member of a civic-engagement program. At the time of this writing she is attending a 4-year college with plans to go on to graduate school soon after.

Participant 8. Anabel, a 33-year-old woman of Dominican descent, was born in the United States and grew up in the foster care system. As she became independent at a young age, she did not have the family support to guide her through the college-going process. It took Anabel 8 years to earn her associate degree. She said she was not involved in the traditional extracurricular activities while at the college but was strongly connected to an academic-support program. She said she would not have gotten through if it was not for that program. At the time of her interview, Anabel had just completed her bachelor's degree, and at the time of this writing, she is pursuing her master's degree.

Participant 9. Jackie, a woman of Honduran descent, worked full time while taking a full-time course load in the evenings while she was a student at the community college. Jackie was not involved in any college activities or programs when she attended

due to her work and school schedules. Because her parents did not have the experience of going to college, her older brother served as her primary support. Jackie says that although she did not take part in many activities, she does thank the community college for introducing her to a program in which she is now enrolled. After earning her associate degree, she completed her bachelor's degree, and at the time of this writing, she is completing a certificate program to enhance her career skills.

Identification of themes. The data were hand coded, through line-by-line review of the transcripts. The researcher utilized Excel to keep track of coding process and theme development. This study's theoretical framework was integral to theme development, as it provided a guide by which to categorize data that also aligned with the research questions. Validation theory (Rendón, 1994) provides six guiding factors that support first-generation students' involvement in college activities (student contact, student self-worth, preceding development, in- and out-of-class validation, continuous validation, and early intervention). These six elements helped the researcher to group codes into themes and categories. Once the codes were established, the researcher was able to generate themes by grouping codes under topical headings in Excel. The researcher was then able to analyze the data as it related to each research question and keep track of the frequency of each theme she noted. Finally, all the themes were clustered into seven separate categories, utilizing Rendón's (1994) six validating elements. Tables 4.4 through 4.6 display the themes that emerged as they relate to validation theory.

Table 4.4

Categories and Themes

Rendón (1997) Six Elements	Category and Themes	Description of Category and Theme
Initiating Contact	Receiving Information	This refers to participants receiving information from the college about how to get involved or being referred to services/programs that helped participants become more involved.
Student Self-Worth	Confidence	Participants expressed an increase in confidence overall due to their participation in college activities.
Precedes Development	Growth	Due to validating experiences, participants felt like they learned skills that helped them grow as students and professionals. This led to increased involvement and academic success.
Occurs inside and outside the classroom	College Support	The participants felt supported and validated both in and outside of the classroom at the community college. This included faculty who pushed the participants to succeed academically and administrators who supported them with services that were provided at the college.
Occurs inside and outside the classroom	Family Support	This refers to the support that participants received from their families. Level of support impacted level of involvement. This includes financial support or a general support of participants' involvement in college activities.
Occurs inside and outside the classroom	Peer	This refers to the ways that other students validated participants' experiences. Having peers to push them to become involved or inviting them to activities was another form of support
Continuous	Continued Support	This refers to validating experiences that were throughout and continuous and lasted throughout the participants' time at the college.
Early Intervention	Early Involvement	This refers to validating experiences that occurred within the first year of school.

Table 4.5

Validation in the Academic Domain

Rendón (1994)	Category and Theme	Description of Category and Theme
Faculty affirm students' abilities	Faculty Support	The participants had faculty members who believed in participants' abilities to do well in school. Also, faculty motivated the participants to achieve academic success.
Administrators affirm students' abilities	Administration Support	This refers to administrators who showed they believed that participants would succeed academically. This came in the form of pushing students to take challenging courses or connecting students to resources to support academic goals.

Table 4.6

Validation in the Interpersonal Domain

Rendón (1997)	Category and Theme	Description of Category and Theme
Faculty create meaningful relationships with students	Faculty Relationships	This refers to relationships with faculty members. Includes how accessible and approachable faculty were at college.
Administrators create meaningful relationships with students	Staff Relationships	Participants expressed having positive interactions with administrators. This included feeling like administrators really cared about the participants' academic success and made efforts to help them succeed. In addition, administrators were accessible and easy to meet.

Frequency of themes. Table 4.7 shows the list of themes, categories, and the frequency that each occurred in the data.

After a thorough review and investigation of 511 statements, the researcher noted 28 themes. Upon further investigation, correlations were made among the themes which were then assembled into categories. Six themes correlated with the category of receiving information, four themes linked to confidence, four themes mapped onto growth, six themes were associated with college support, three themes related to family support, one theme linked to peer support, two theme correlated with continued support, and two themes with early involvement.

Table 4.7

Categories and Themes (Frequency)

Category	Theme (Frequency)
Receiving Information (64)	Email (13)
	Faculty (3)
	Administrator (31)
	Peers (14)
	Website (2)
	Flyers (1)
Confidence (31)	Faculty/staff made them feel like they had potential (5)
	Felt good about their academic abilities (8)
	Believed they would graduate with degree (3)
	Increased confidence overall (15)
Growth (15)	Improved academic performance (7)
	Became a better student (3)
	Increased knowledge (2)
	Prepared for future goals (3)
College Support (208)	Specialized programs (55)
	Student services (20)
	Faculty support (16)
	Administrator support (40)
	Financial aid (5)
	Available activities in which to participate (72)
Family Support (83)	Did not work while in school (46)
	Family supported involvement (20)
	Family supported academic goals (17)
Peer Support (10)	Students inviting/encouraging involvement (10)
Continued Support (28)	Supported throughout time in college (23)
	Support even after graduating (5)
Early Involvement (72)	Received support within first year (26)
	Became involved in first year of school (46)

Major Findings

The researcher uncovered eight areas that the participants linked to their level of involvement in college activities. These areas were receiving information, confidence, growth, college support, family support, peer support, continued support, and early involvement. Utilizing validation theory (Rendón, 1994), the researcher correlated each of the eight areas with one of the six elements of validation. Receiving information related to initiating contact. Confidence correlated to the students' self-worth, and growth related to validation preceding development. Three areas, college support, peer support, and family support, all connected to what occurred inside and outside the classroom. Continued support connected to continuous validation and early involvement related to early intervention.

Initiating contact. One of the earliest findings in the study includes how the participants became aware of opportunities to become involved at the college. The ways in which the participants received information was important to their level of involvement. The participants indicated that having a connection to cohort programs and good relationships with faculty and staff helped them learn of ways to become involved. One participant mentioned the name and title of the administrator who told her of an on-campus, paid leadership role. She remembers him encouraging her to apply, saying she would be great in the position. Having this person believe in her abilities moved her to apply for a position that she never would have known about. Another participant said she simply received an email at the beginning of her first year inviting her to join a leadership program. She had not even started classes, but the email sparked her interest, so she applied, and thus began taking part in various extracurricular activities throughout her

studies. For other the other participants, it was academics that pushed them to become more involved. One participant mentioned that when she was doing poorly in a course, a faculty member contacted her. She was grateful that the professor took the time to check in with her and guided her toward tutoring services at the college. For this participant, her involvement began with the email message from her professor.

Another participant learned of opportunities through a financial aid advisor. The advisor recommended the participant apply for a specialized program for low-income students that would provide academic and social support throughout her time at the college. The participant recalled how it was the best advice that could have been given to her as she credited the program for helping her graduate.

Some of the participants sought out information directly. They took the time to explore the college's website, read the flyers that were posted on the bulletin boards, and went directly to the offices where they asked how they could become involved. Finally, the participants spoke of their peers as sources of information. One participant mentioned how she noticed students in her class were volunteering around the campus. She began asking them questions, seeking information on how she could also become a volunteer. Another participant remembers a classmate recruiting her to join his club; even though she knew nothing of the subject matter, she attended and later became the club's president.

Student self-worth. Through their participation in college activities, many of the participants indicated that their confidence increased. This confidence came in various forms, from feeling more comfortable with speaking to others and refining their public speaking skills to participating in class more often and improving their academic

performance. This increased confidence can be correlated with the participants' self-worth, because the more they became involved in college activities, the more they believed in their abilities to accomplish goals and tasks. One participant said she never liked to speak in class because English is not her first language. She noted that after a semester of being in a leadership program, she became more comfortable raising her hand. She claimed to be one of the most outspoken students in her classes, no longer shying away from giving her opinion or asking questions.

Other participants remembered administrators who pushed them to take on challenges. For example, one participant spoke of her academic advisor who pushed her to take honors courses. She said she never would have considered registering for those classes, but having someone encourage her, and say that she could do it, was so motivating. Some of the participants faced difficulties that threatened their academic success. One participant spoke about what a challenge it was to stay on track to graduate. She said she had so many obstacles along the way, but having an advisor who connected her to services and resources helped her graduate.

Precedes development. Many of the participants noted that the level involvement could have had an impact on their goal attainment. For example, one participant said she wished she had become involved earlier because she might have graduated sooner. She was too proud to ask for help and had failed courses earlier in her college career. Once she began reaching out to faculty, she was surprised at how supportive they were, and she began to involve herself more in the academic support services.

When the participants took part in activities and programs in the college, they became connected to faculty and staff who helped them succeed academically. Through these connections, they felt like they became better students and learned more. For example, one participant said that because of her involvement, she met like-minded students who would check in on each other and study together. She eventually became a peer mentor, using the skills she acquired to help other students who were struggling academically.

Through college involvement, the participants felt they had grown both academically as well as professionally. One participant said that taking part in the various clubs and programs at the college helped her gain the confidence to apply for various jobs. She said she never would have believed, just a few years earlier, she would be working in her current position had it not been for college her activities.

College support. One of the primary findings in this study relates to how well the community college supported the participants. This support existed both inside and outside of the classroom environment. The participants spoke of faculty who guided them to academic resources, and administrators who pushed them to take advantage of various programs at the college. For example, one participant remembers an instructor who encouraged her to use the tutoring services because the teacher believed in her potential to do well. Another participant remembers how the director of the student activities office motivated her to take on leadership roles in clubs and organizations.

In most instances, the participants spoke positively of how the college provided ways for students to become involved and succeed academically. Even for the participants whose involvement was low, they were able to recollect at least one moment

when someone at the college helped them. One participant said she was so grateful to the financial aid advisor who helped her apply for a special program for low-income students. That one interaction helped her tremendously in her college career.

Family support. In this study, family played an important role in how involved the participants were at the community college. This is particularly true regarding how much financial support family could provide the participants. As one may expect, the participants who did not have to work while in school enjoyed much higher levels of college involvement than their peers who had to work. Being able to attend college full time without the burden of having to work allowed some of the participants to take part in multiple activities and programs at the college. One participant even remembered that her father, who insisted she not work at all, wanted her to focus solely on her academics. Despite her father's wishes, she took on a paid leadership role at the college to learn more and have something other than classes to focus on. Conversely, the other participants had no other option than to work because they did not enjoy the same luxury as their counterparts. One participant described how, at 17-years old, she began working full time, sometimes 60 hours a week, while taking a full-time course load.

In addition to financial support, families were generally supportive of the participants' involvement in activities. However, most of the participants noted that their families did not really understand what their involvement meant or what it really was. One participant, who was highly involved in student clubs, said her parents really did not know what she did all those hours she spent on campus. They just asked that she check in with them every so often if she stayed on campus later in the evenings. Another participant said she did not bother telling her mother all of the activities she did. She

would just say it was related to school and her mother would not ask questions. Those families who were not as supportive, the participants could simply be labeled as *absent* from their family. For example, the participant who began working full time at 17 was disowned by her family; so, they had no input into her activities while she was at the community college.

Peer support. Some of the participants recognized how much other students helped them become involved at the college. One participant said that a student she met at a retreat invited her to be a member of his club. While she had already started becoming involved in some activities, it was this invitation that deepened the level of her involvement. Another student claimed that it was the other students in her leadership program who kept her engaged and exposed to her so many other opportunities at the college.

Many of the participants said they learned about becoming involved by talking to other students. One participant said she kept hearing her classmates talking about some volunteer program in which they were involved. One day, she finally asked them to tell her about how she could join as well. Some of the programs at the college utilized students to help *sell* their services. For example, one participant attended an information session for a program at the college. She saw students standing in the front presenting, and she said this convinced her to join.

Continued support. For many of the participants in this study, being supported throughout their community college experience helped them become more involved. Some participants took part in a leadership program that was only open to first-year students. Through their participation in this program, they became connected to the

office of student activities and its staff. One participant said that this connection helped her learn of the various other activities in which she could participate. She remained very active with this department throughout her studies, and she even worked for them after she graduated.

Building strong relationships with administrators was a common theme in this study. Many of the participants utilized the same one or two individuals within a department, always feeling comfortable going to them with questions or for advice. For example, one participant said she utilized the veteran's resource center staff to help her with everything related to school, even if they did not handle the issue. She said they never turned her away or said, "we don't handle that," but instead, they connected her to resources at the college.

Early involvement. Most of the participants who were interviewed for this study indicated that their involvement began within the first year of study at the college. While the majority claimed it was by the second semester, it is still important to note that they were aware of the opportunities to get involved earlier, but they decided to wait before doing so. For those who became involved early, it was due to email communication from the office of student activities. The office sent out an email prior to classes beginning to all freshman students. It invited them to apply for a leadership program. Some of the women in the study took part in the program and immediately became connected to the college and its programs.

For various reasons, the other participants waited a semester before taking part in activities, most relating to prioritizing academic responsibilities. One participant said she wanted to learn how to manage a college course load before joining any clubs, while

another felt like she had to have a better handle on the English language. Finally, another participant had been so involved in high school activities that she felt like she had to be more serious in college and just focus on her studies. All of these participants indicated that they had received information to become involved in activities, whether it was by email, speaking with college staff, or other communication, but they simply made the choice to wait.

Findings by the Research Questions

The following analysis and discussion include the relationship between the themes and the study's research questions. The participant quotes are used to help with the analysis and serve as evidence of the findings. The quotes are abbreviated to highlight significant discoveries.

Research question 1. *How do first-generation Latinas define their engagement with the institution?* The primary theme that emerged in response to this question was that involvement was taking part in college activities outside the classroom. For most of the participants, being involved in college was more than just attending class and going home. Involvement also meant taking the initiative to seek out academic support services, such as tutoring or writing labs. It meant creating relationships with faculty, staff, and students. For example, Lucia indicated that college involvement could include activities such as "student clubs, volunteering, and even doing work study."

The participants reported varying levels of involvement. For most of the participants, it included taking part in more than one college activity, such as a student club or a specialized program. Other participants worked on campus while holding

leadership positions. Finally, some participants indicated low levels of involvement as a result of work and other responsibilities.

College activities. Many of the participants specifically used language, such as "beyond academics," "doing more than just classes," and "more than academics" in their definition of college involvement. The participants recognized that being involved in college included participating in activities that were not required for class. Nancy defined it as "taking part in the extracurricular activities that are offered through the college, such as volunteer activities, leadership programs." Although most participants defined involvement in this manner, Eva did not. While she did acknowledge that college involvement is commonly perceived as taking part in extracurricular activities, she defined it differently. She stated:

> College is a whole is education, so when you say involvement, some people might perceive it as being involved in athletics or other activities that go on within the college campus. I take it more so [as] being involved in your education and what your needs are and what it is you need to meet your needs in terms of accomplishing the degree at the end of the journey. So, that is seeking all of the resources available on campus for you.

Similarly, Camila reported that being involved in college meant "going out of your way to find out what's available to you. What resources are out there for you as a student in the environment and seeking it out and actively doing something with what you have found." In a similar tone, Diana speaks about forming relationships with faculty while also taking the initiative to join various programs. She stated that college involvement means "being involved with your professors, and being proactive, signing up for events."

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Many of the participants alluded to this sense of exploring resources, information seeking, and building relationships. Many of the resources that these participants spoke of came in the form of administrators, faculty, and other students who provided the participants with important information. As Jessica stated

So, college involvement for me, it goes beyond academics, it goes to the point you start making relationships within college, whether it's professional or with your peers in class, because sometimes you only go to class. Especially in community college. . . . But if you start making conversation you can pretty much find someone that belongs to a club or any kind of program. So, college involvement, for me, is being a part of different programs and activities around the school.

Jessica's involvement began by "making relationships" and having conversations with other students, which led her to joining various clubs and programs at the college.

Last, Valentina indicated that being involved included understanding the college culture. She stated:

College involvement, I guess for me, would be being active in more than just academics. I guess getting to understand and know academia culture. College is just its own little world, because there is nothing like it. I feel like, [by] getting involved in college activities and stuff, you get to understand more of maybe the bureaucracy and how things work, and also it gets you comfortable in a way that it's not just through your professors.

For Valentina, involvement meant understanding college culture through taking part in various programs and activities that helped her see how college functions outside the classroom environment.

 Level of involvement. The participants indicated varying levels of involvement, which were mostly dependent upon whether they had to work in addition to attending college. In addition, feeling comfortable to become involved in the first place was important to some of the participants. For example, Jessica recalls that the first year of school was a huge change for her. She reported, "I had just moved to the United States, so I was still adjusting . . . but after that first year, when I was more accustomed to it, I became very involved." Nancy stated that she was very involved at the community college:

> So, I was involved in various programs. I was part of the leadership programs. I also attended workshops. I volunteered and was a club officer, and I was a member of an internship program for first-generation college students.

Although Diana was only at the college for 1 year, she also became involved in a variety of extracurricular activities in that short time. She defined her involvement saying, "so, I did extracurricular activities. I was actively involved with clubs and student government and civic engagement programs, and that definitely helped me get more involved at the senior college level."

 After adjusting to life in the United States, Jessica became highly involved in student clubs, volunteer programs, and the student government. Her involvement began "first with the leadership program and then the clubs." She had taken leadership positions in the clubs: "In the clubs I had been a member for one semester. I then became club

secretary of the first club, and then I became a treasurer for the next one, in my last semester." Working while in school played an important role in how involved the participants could be in college. Nancy recognized: "Because I wasn't working, not even part-time, not anything, I had more time. So, for me to take part in the program, it was easy. I had free time, and I wanted to do something else. So, that helped."

The responses to the first research question revealed that most of the participants agreed that college involvement expanded beyond the classroom. It included the effort and time one spent either improving their academic performance through tutoring and other academic support services or taking part in extracurricular activities. Many of the participants were moderately to highly involved while attending the community college because they did not have to work or worry about other major responsibilities. For those participants who did have full-time employment, involvement levels were lower.

Research question 2. *What factors impacted the degree of involvement for first-generation Latina students at this community college?* This question sought to understand how the participants learned of opportunities to become involved and how easy they found it to become involved. For many of the participants, it was their relationship with college administrators that led to their involvement in college activities and programs.

Cohort groups. Several participants were members of specialized cohort programs or groups at the college that helped the participant to become involved. These programs provided academic support services that the participants opted into when they entered the college. As Camila stated,

Because I was in [an accelerated academic program], I was close to the

employees. One day, I was meeting with the employment specialist. He was the

one who told be about the [leadership program] position. But before him, I didn't

bother seeking out programs.

For Anabel, it was a meeting with a financial aid counselor who led her to becoming

involved in an academic support program. She recalls:

I went to the financial aid office. There was a gentleman there who helped me fill

out the application online, and he asked me, "Hey do you wanna be part of this

program? In order for you to even try to be part of this program, you have to be

an entering freshman and be from a background of low income." I said, "hey, that

fits my description, sign me up!"

Ease of becoming involved. Once they learned how to join, becoming involved

in college activities was generally not very difficult for most of the participants. As

Nancy stated,

Well, mainly I found out through the office of student activities. Before I entered

the school, I received an email about a program that was for incoming freshman,

and I applied for that program, and I took part in that. So, after that, I kept

receiving more information because I was already involved. So, most of the

things that I learned from school was through that office.

For other participants, becoming involved was difficult. They had full-time jobs that kept

them away from many activities or limited the kinds of opportunities in which they could

participate. Jackie talked about the challenge to get involved due to her full-time job:

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I don't think I was as involved as I wanted to be only because I was juggling full-

time work, and then I was going to school in the evening. It made it really

difficult to kind of be involved with the school.

Eva expressed a similar situation as it related to becoming involved in school, "It was

really difficult because of my life outside of school, which were my responsibilities. I

was independent since I started college, so my job was my priority. That's what made it

difficult in terms of getting involved."

Jessica, who was very involved at the college, remembers it was not so easy at

first. She stated, "I think when I first started, my first semester, I was not involved at all.

I didn't even know there was college communities and clubs and stuff, so it was just

really bad." Eva felt like her pride was on the line if she asked for help:

At the beginning, I wasn't involved at all, and I think it had a lot to do with pride.

I knew that I struggled with some classes, but I like to just read and learn. So, to

place myself in a position where I'm looking at this material but I'm not

understanding it, it's like attacking my pride, so to speak.

Most of the participants learned of opportunities to become involved through their

connection with specialized programs. This granted the participants access to

information that helped them become more involved at the college. Once they learned of

the opportunities to become involved, it was easy to do so. Only those participants who

had obligations outside of school found it most challenging to become involved.

Research question 3. *To what degree of importance did first-generation Latinas*

perceive college involvement had an impact on their academic success? This question

sought to explore how the participants felt their involvement affected their eventual

graduation from the college, as well as revealing what degree of importance the participants placed on their involvement.

Impact on academics. Some of the participants felt that their involvement positively affected their academic success, particularly in helping them to build confidence. As Jessica simply put it, involvement "gave me a lot of courage." It helped her speak up in class more often and not to be shy when talking to professors:

> So, [after being involved] I would talk in class. Because I didn't used to. So now I would raise my hand every time I could. And also I started to find people in my class who were in clubs. Or in different programs. So that gave me a little more familiarity. Makes it more comfortable.

For Anabel, it was her continued involvement with an academic support program at the school that helped her reach her academic goals. She wholeheartedly expressed, "Oh my gosh. They are the best. They are the reason why I finished my associate's, I pursued my bachelor's outside of the community college, and now ''m going on to my master's. Like, literally!"

The other participants took advantage of some of the academic services that were available. For example, Nancy remembered that she was able to complete assignments on time, thanks to the library providing extended study hours and offering laptops on loan:

> The library, during finals, I think, they had like 24-hour library [hours] so that helped me. Not worrying all the time when it came to studying. Also, they had services like lending the laptops to students, and that helped me a lot because I didn't have a laptop at the beginning when I was here at school

Importance of involvement. The participants felt it was important to become involved at the community college. For Diana, being involved was essential:

It makes me more marketable. It makes me stronger, as a person, and so when I apply for, like, the grad schools and stuff like that, I already have experience in leadership. When you're in college, you not only have the knowledge in your education, but you have knowledge in how to manage things, manage people, and expose yourself out there.

Lucia shared similar sentiments:

I didn't notice how important it was, but eventually, while speaking with other peers that were in other clubs, they would tell me how they would put it on their resume. Eventually when I was thinking about transferring to a 4-year school, that's what motivated me to be more involved, because I did see that the more things you have, the better. With all these activities I have done in the past, I could demonstrate what skills I've learned and that includes even public speaking.

This research question revealed that the participants recognize how being involved assisted them academically. By helping these participants expand their skills outside of the classroom, involvement brought them closer to their goal of attaining the college degree. As they became more involved in college, the participants recognized the importance of this involvement. Involvement helped them build their confidence, improve academically, and it prepared them as professionals.

Research question 4. *How did first-generation Latinas perceive the level of institutional support as impacting their academic success?* The participants believed the college did a good job of supporting their involvement in various activities in programs.

Additionally, they agreed that the institution supported their academic success and eventual graduation from the college. The participants stated that the college promoted services and resources well—even if they personally did not utilize the services themselves.

    Supporting involvement. Many of the participants spoke of how well the college tried to help students become involved in various activities. They recognized the multitude of avenues that information was communicated whether it was electronic or in person. Valentina stated, "I think pretty much they're on social media, and they do the orientations. I feel like there's a lot of effort on [the college's] part to try to get people involved." She continued talking about attending an orientation session where she learned so much about how to become involved, especially because other students were sharing the information:

> I guess orientation would be . . . yeah . . . and students. Because I remember, in orientation, there was this student who was talking about it, so I think that's what motivated me more to get involved. I think it would have been different if it would have been a faculty member or an administrator just that was saying it. I think it makes a difference when it's actually the student that was saying, "Yeah, this was my journey, and this is how I got involved, and there's a community here that's gonna support you," and stuff like that.

While most of the participants recognized the college's effort to provide services to help students achieve academically, some felt that they could not fully take advantage of such resources. Jackie indicated this:

So, I remember seeking counsel, it's really hard 'cause it's one of those things you have to book appointments for, and you have to be there at a certain time. So, there's a lot of road blocks, and I think it's easy for someone who doesn't work in addition to school.

When asked how she managed to seek counseling, despite working full time, Jackie stated, "I would have to take either half days or schedule some PTO, but mostly I would say that I was on for a long lunch." She would travel almost an hour back and forth from work to school just to make her appointments.

Supporting academics. For those participants who did take part in programs, they felt very strongly that the support they received was good. Nancy summarized her experience in an academic support program: "Because of the guidance I received from the [academic support] program, I feel that I succeeded, and it was in a positive way that they influenced me."

The participants remembered specific instances when the college helped them academically. Camila, who participated in an academic program, stated,

I was taking Statistics; I wasn't doing too well. So, there's this thing that they do where if you are failing anything within, like the first quarter of the semester, you have to go to mandatory tutoring. You have to have proof that you went to tutoring and how long you were there. So, it was like an accountability feat. I was the kind of student who never went to summer school, never had to go to tutoring, because I was able to just get things on my own. But then I get to college, and I'm taking this class, and I'm not doing so well, and I'm like, "Oh, my God! Am I actually going to fail my first class ever in my life?" Imagine, I

never even got a C in my life. So, at this point, I'm just like feeling so ashamed

because I have to go to tutoring. Lo and behold, though, I actually aced the final.

I ended up doing really well in that class. I got an A in that class, I think.

Speaking more generally about the college, as a whole, Diana expressed:

Everything is catered to us in college. There's always tutors, and they advertise it

so much, every semester, every class, every ad. It is out there . . . you know,

everybody has their issues, their home life, their life, and things happen, which is

understandable, but other than that, there's no way why people should fail

anything, because everything is there for you. [The college] did a really good job

with helping me succeed academically.

Some of the participants were aware of the college's academic support services,

but they said they did not take advantage of them, such as tutoring or meeting with

faculty outside of office hours. They felt like it was enough to know it was available, but

they did not feel the need to utilize them. Jessica honestly stated:

To speak and be honest, I never utilized. The main thing I used was the library

but just borrowed books. But I never did tutoring or anything. I didn't need it, so

I do think that they offer great services, but I never [used them].

Likewise, Lucia remembers:

> So honestly, I didn't . . . like, I know about the student services. I did know, but I
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> didn't use any of it. I just didn't use any of it. I could have used it. I mean I use
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> it in my 4-year school, and it really did help a lot. I just didn't use it in the
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> community college.

The participants remembered the college promoting services and opportunities in effective ways. They felt that the college wanted students to be involved and did a good job of supporting students in taking part in various activities and services. Additionally, the participants agreed that the college offered good resources that helped them to be academically successful.

Research question 5. *To what degree did relationships with faculty/staff support academic success for the first-generation Latinas?* This question sought to understand how the participants interacted with faculty and administrators at the college. The researcher wanted to learn how the participants perceived their experiences in interacting with faculty and administrators at the community college, and how the faculty and administrators helped the participants achieve their academic goals. Responses to this question overwhelmingly reported positive interactions with college personnel. The participants could name the individuals who helped them and guided them to achieving their academic goals. Even those participants who were not highly involved had interactions with faculty and staff at the college who made a positive impact on their academics.

Positive experiences. The participants expressed having mostly positive experiences with college faculty and staff. They remembered how nice and caring

members of the college were toward them. Having positive experiences aided in the participants' involvement on campus, as these positive relationships connected them to various opportunities. Having a positive experience was also closely related to how accessible staff members were. Valentina talked about her interactions with various administrators:

> I feel like people were very welcoming, and it was easy to talk. I think, especially, the females, [names female administrators from an office]. I feel like it was very easy to just . . . they were so approachable. Also, the international advisors, yeah. I could just walk into the office and see them.

For Camila, it was her participation in an academic support program that helped her develop strong relationships with administrators:

> As a student, I really only interacted with the program's staff members. I'm actually grateful for that because they were all so helpful. They were all so dedicated to their job. The advisers, especially my adviser, she would do everything in her power to make sure that you were happy with what you needed to do. Everyone was helpful. From the director to the front desk secretary. [The secretary] knew everybody. She knew all the students that came in. Everyone was on top of everything. But if I had to summarize it in one sentence, everyone did what they had to do and more.

While most participants had positive interactions with college administration, there were some instances when they were not so good. Nancy had a memory, that in recalling it, made her laugh:

I only had a bad experience once, when I went to ask a question in an office, and I guess the secretary screamed at me for no reason, but then somebody else screamed at her for screaming at me!

Anabel recalled how she struggled with a counselor to whom she was assigned when she was in an academic program:

I remember I was transferred to [counselor's name]. Oh my God. It was just; what a nightmare. I felt that this lady would talk down to me. Oh my God, they assigned me to her, and I felt that this was the worst time of my life.

Luckily, through meetings and appeals with the director of the program, Anabel said she was switched back to her original advisor, who helped her get back on track to graduation.

Academic goals. Having strong positive relationships helped the participants reach their academic goals. Camila's earlier statement continued to include how her advisor pointed Camila in the right direction when it came to academics:

[The advisor] would also give you a kick in the behind, if you needed it. So, it was good tough love that she would give you. She would be like, "Okay. Well, listen. I understand you're complaining about this, but you got to do it. You either do it, or you delay yourself. So, sorry."

This *tough love* helped Camila stay on track not only to graduate successfully from the college but to do so within 2 years.

Even Jackie, who worked full time and had very low involvement, remembered her college advisor and the impact he had on her academic success:

I wanna say, I think my college counselor was pretty cool. He was really helpful.

At first, he was also going to school [for his master's], and he was doing his

thesis. He was really great about steering me in the right direction and giving me

options and what it would look like if I planned to switch majors or something,

like, the longevity of my career in community college. But he was really helpful.

He was pretty good about seeing me and making sure that I was on the right path.

Eva remembered a negative exchange with an academic advisor that she turned into a

motivating experience for herself:

I did have one bad experience and that was with a counselor. I was at my finish

line, I think I just had one semester to go. At that point, I was just working on

bringing my GPA back up. She asked me what my plan was after graduating

community college. I told her that my goal was to attend [specific 4-year school],

and her response was, "Well, you should come up with a Plan B. I don't think

you'll get into [4-year school]." That was more, like, motivational for me. It was

a bad experience at that moment, but it was more motivational for me.

Jessica nicely summed up how one office can be "good" and another "bad" in how its

staff interacted with students:

So, the offices that were good for me, they would always say, "Hi, do you need

something," but the offices that were bad, they wouldn't even acknowledge you

were there unless you would go up to them and really ask them.

While the participants recalled many interactions with the administrators at the

institution, a few did recall how faculty helped them at the college. Eva stated, "My

instructors, they showed real concern. Yeah, and they challenged me. I guess they saw the potential in me, so they never left me behind, so to speak."

Camila remembered a faculty member who taught her freshman year seminar class. His approach to teaching and classroom management was different from others, and it kept her engaged. She said,

> We were always having a good time in his class, but he was always teaching us something valuable. We were always doing workshops on, like I said, time management, studying, grooming, etiquette, just basic things that you don't really learn in high school. So, I feel like that was something that was also helpful to me because, again, it was a way for me to get to know the other students, get to know a faculty member in a way where every time I would see him, I would say, "Hey Matt, how are you doing?" And he would say, like, "my best student."

Having positive interactions with instructors helped the participants feel more comfortable approaching them, even if it took a while. Anabel remembered:

> I believe that they were very accessible, especially when I went to appeal. I disappeared for a year and a half, and then I reappeared 2 years down the line, and I had to hound and locate each and every one of those professors that I had during the years prior, so that they can help me fill out and appeal and sign off on it. I was afraid of them, 'cause I didn't know you can approach and have conversations with them; they're people. They just have a title and higher degrees, but I wasn't aware, I wasn't taught you can talk to everybody. [I learned later] don't be afraid to speak up or ask questions. So, they were very accessible to me during that time, so as far from that, it was very positive.

The participants shared how having meaningful and positive relationships with their faculty and staff supported their involvement at the institution as well as helping them achieve their academic goals. Very few negative experiences were noted among the participants, but even those few experiences motivated them to overcome obstacles and reach their goals. This research question indicates that the participants valued the positive relationships with administrators and faculty at the college and that these experiences helped them reach their academic objectives.

Summary of Results

Chapter 4 provided an overview of the study's discoveries and the process of analysis that led to these findings. This phenomenological study was guided by five research questions that were discussed in the chapter. The researcher shared the findings that were collected via semi-structured, in-depth interviews with nine first-generation Latinas who graduated from a community college. The findings indicate what factors supported their involvement in college activities and how this involvement supported their academic success.

Through thorough analysis, the researcher uncovered eight significant categories through which the participants became involved and achieved academic success while attending the community college. These included receiving information, confidence, growth, college support, family support, peer support, continued support, and early involvement. All of the participants offered their understanding of college involvement and how the college supported that involvement. Every participant had a unique way of defining her involvement and recognizing how the college provided each of the participants with avenues to become involved in various ways. By utilizing Rendón's

(1994) validation theory, the researcher was able to connect the six elements of validation to the categories that emerged. In Chapter 5, the researcher offers implications of the findings and suggests recommendations for future studies.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This study sought to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of nine first-generation Latinas who had successfully earned an associate degree from a community college. The study applied validation theory (Rendón, 1994) as the theoretical framework to examine if validation by the college contributed to higher levels of college involvement and, in turn, higher levels of academic success.

Studies show that the more involved and connected students feel to an institution the better their academic success and completion rates (Astin, 1984; Hu & McCormick, 2012; Rendón, 1994; Turrentine et al., 2012). Further, validating students' experiences has been demonstrated to better retain students from minority and first-generation backgrounds while enhancing their academic performance (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015; Barnett, 2011; Chaves, 2006; Rendón, 1994). Thus, the researcher evaluated whether the level of engagement and degree of validation by the college could have impacted first-generation Latinas' academic success at a community college.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how first-generation Latina students defined college involvement, to gain insight into the degree of involvement they had while attending a community college, and if they associated this involvement with their academic success. To address these factors, the research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do first-generation Latinas define their engagement with the institution?

2. What factors impacted the degree of involvement by first-generation Latina students at the institution?

3. To what degree of importance did first-generation Latinas perceive college involvement had an impact on their academic success?

4. How did first-generation Latinas perceive the level of institutional support as impacting their academic success?

5. To what degree did relationships with faculty/staff support academic success for first-generation Latinas?

Implications of Findings

This research supports the literature indicating that validating factors can contribute to increased levels of college involvement, especially among first-generation Latinas (Rendón, 1994). Validation from college administrators and faculty contribute to college involvement in extracurricular activities and academic programs. Validation has six elements: (a) initiating contact, (b) influencing student's self-worth, (c) precedes development, (d) occurs inside and outside of the classroom, (e) continues over time, and (f) relies on early involvement (Rendón, 1994; Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). This study offers an in-depth examination of how first-generation Latinas define college involvement and the factors that supported their involvement at a community college.

The participants revealed that having connections with college administrators helped them become involved in college activities, such as leadership programs, academic support programs, and student organizations. These findings concur with the literature that suggests that having institutional support in the form of staff and/or faculty

help first-generation students navigate the college environment more successfully (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018; Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011). By making connections with these individuals, the participants learned how to become involved at the college and enjoyed higher levels of academic success than their counterparts who were not as involved.

Financial support and involvement. Much of the literature related to first-generation, Latina, and community college students suggests that these groups are not very involved in college because of responsibilities and commitments outside of school (Vegas, 2016). However, this study found that many first-generation Latinas are highly involved in college through their participation in programs or their interactions with faculty and staff. Many of the participants were involved in more than one activity while they attended the community college.

Unlike the literature that states that these students are more likely to have to work and support family members, only two of the study participants held full-time jobs off campus while they attended the community college. Many of the participants noted that the financial support they received from family and through financial aid allowed them the flexibility to become highly involved at the college. Additionally, the participants noted how supportive their families were of their involvement in the college programs, even if their families did not fully understand what it was they were doing. As Nancy stated: "My mother trusted that whatever I was doing was for school, so she knew it had to be good."

This finding suggests that the affordability of community colleges may provide more opportunity for first-generation Latinas to become involved in college. Creating

financial aid packages and programs that help cover the costs of tuition and fees should continue and expand. Many of the participants were members of academic support programs that provided financial incentives to help keep the participants engaged and connected to college activities.

Early involvement. Validation theory encourages colleges to initiate contact and encourage involvement within the first few weeks of a semester (Rendón, 1994). While many of the study participants did become involved in their first year of school, most waited until their second semester. Many of the reasons related to their need to feel more settled in the college and have a handle on college-level coursework. The participants also indicated that they became involved after someone, such as peer or college personnel, invited them to participate. It was after a relationship was created and a level of trust was established that they felt comfortable accepting an invitation. This study indicates that while early involvement is important, it is also important that these students feel connected to an individual or a department in order for the involvement to take place.

Relationships with college personnel. This study found that all of the participants had positive interactions and relationships with most of the college administration and faculty. Having these positive interactions supported the participants' involvement in college activities. The participants felt like the individuals with whom they interacted daily truly cared about their academic success. Martinez and Hernandez (2018) suggested that administrators who are working with Latinos in community colleges employ the advising and supporting competency approach, which was set out by the Association of College Personnel and Administrators and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (ACPA & NASPA, 2015). This approach allows

administrators to provide the necessary information for students to make informed choices in an environment that is supportive and understanding of the students' life experiences.

Academic support. Many of the study participants had interests in the academic programs that connected them to resources at the college. These programs instituted specialized advising structures that helped the participants build relationships with administrators. Having a point person who provided the participants with holistic advising allowed them to become more involved in the college. This supports the literature that had argued for college administrators to establish positive relationships with first-generation college students (Osborne & Jones, 2011). As Camila stated,

> Michael, who was the employment specialist, he and I were really cool. We were
>
> really close. I would hang with him, like once a week, or like twice a week. We
>
> could talk about everything, and he was always telling me about different
>
> opportunities. It was really because of the connection I had with him that I
>
> became more involved.

For those students who do not have the guidance or the support at home to help them navigate a college setting, having a relationship with a college faculty or staff can make an incredible impact on their level of involvement and success in school.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. The first limitation was the small sample size. Only nine women were interviewed for this study. Creswell (2014) recommended between 9-12 participants for a phenomenological study; however, richer data may have been provided if two comparative groups were studied. It would be

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interesting to have had a group of participants who had very low involvement, compared to those who were highly involved, for a better understanding of students' experiences at the community college.

Another limitation was that most of the participants who were interviewed did not have to work while they were in school, nor did they have family obligations, which allowed them the opportunity to take advantage of the college activities. They also seemed to be more likely to respond to a survey request to participate in this study because they opted into activities much more than their counterparts. It would be helpful to capture more stories from women who work full time and have many other responsibilities outside of school. This would have provided a different narrative from what this study found.

This study was conducted after the participants had graduated from the community college. A limitation in this could be that their memories of their time at the college could be skewed so that they remembered only positive or only negative experiences. While they all had graduated within 3 three years of their interviews, they were all at new institutions that they considered "better" or "worse" than the community college. Their new college experience provided them with a different perspective from which to consider their time at the community college.

Last, requests for interviews began in late spring and continued through the summer. Many requests were made with few responses. It was not until the end of the summer that many more potential participants began to respond to requests. The researcher realized that the email requests had been sent to school accounts, which many Latina students had not been checking over the summer. Had the study begun prior to

classes ending, there may have been better response rates and a higher number of participants for the study.

Recommendations

Because of the findings in this study, many recommendations can be made. The recommendations include early involvement, academic support programs, and peer support. The participants shared important insights into how colleges can improve first-generation Latinas' academic success. Joining programs and services early and being connected to a caring individual was key to many of their stories. The following recommendations can help colleges implement such processes.

Early involvement. A key finding in this study was that most participants became involved in their first year at the college. While not all of them joined programs in their first few weeks of school, they did note that they were aware of opportunities. Colleges should continue to increase and build first-year experiences or programs that target new students. These programs can come from both the academic and student affairs sides of the college. For example, some of the participants in the study were members of academic programs; while others were in a freshman leadership academy.

Colleges should examine the various ways they can draw first-semester students to specialized programs that address them specifically. Inviting students to take part in these programs early on can create meaningful connections and build relationships with faculty and staff immediately. This is especially important when working with first-generation and Latina college students who may need additional guidance in navigating college or who are looking for a community that feels welcoming.

Academic support programs. It may be of interest to colleges to create more academic programs that provide individual advising structures that help build relationships and provide continued support. Many of the participants applauded the programs in which they took part because they created strong connections with their academic advisors who they could count on throughout their time as students. Having a "one-stop shop" for all their needs was beneficial to these students. Not only were academic advisors assigned, but many of the programs also conducted workshops relating to career readiness, health and wellness, and how to be involved in college activities. Colleges should consider how they can create more of these advising models to better support the needs of their first-generation college students.

Peer support. The impact of peers on college involvement was another finding that was uncovered in this study. Utilizing involved students in marketing and promotion is something that should be considered by colleges that are trying to improve the retention and graduation rates for first-generation Latina students. A number of participants mentioned the influence of fellow students on their decision to join a club or program. Colleges should work to implement or expand peer-mentoring initiatives to create opportunities for first-generation students to connect with more experienced students to help them learn about the resources offered at the college. Having another student who may have a similar background or story can help first-generation Latinas feel like they are not alone at college. Additionally, utilizing student leaders at new student orientations as guest speakers, or other mandated freshman programming, can help new students imagine themselves in those roles. As Valentina mentioned: "I remember, in

orientation, there was this student who was talking about it (leadership program), so I think that's what motivated me more to get involved."

Faculty involvement. The important role of faculty cannot be ignored when discussing college student success. This study highlighted the importance of faculty providing constructive feedback, being responsive and accessible, and how these qualities helped the participants become more involved in their academics. Rendón Linares and Muñoz (2011) discussed how validation occurs when "faculty and teaching assistants actively reach out to students to offer assistance, encouragement, and support" (p. 19). It is recommended that faculty take a proactive approach with their students. Letting students know if they are doing well, and letting them know in what ways they can improve, is a simple act of validation that can go a long way. When Eva recollected on what helped her succeed, she stated, "I had professors that were willing to stay after class, professors that were fine with me emailing them anytime, even when we were on vacation, they were very responsive and just provided me [with] all the material that I needed, even material that was outside what was required for class, just to help me pass the class."

Future research. This researcher recognizes that there are opportunities for further research around college involvement among first-generation Latina students:

- Future studies on this topic should take a quantitative approach to reach a wider population of individuals who identify as first-generation Latinas. Quantitative research could allow for longitudinal data to be collected over the span of students' careers while at the community college to see what trends develop and how much they participate in college activities.

Additionally, tracking the number of first-generation Latinas who are involved in college activities will help researchers understand how to support those who are already involved, and work to increase involvement among those who are not. Quantitative data could track the progress of those students who are involved at the community college and compare them to those students who are not involved to evaluate graduation rates between the groups.

- A second recommendation is that this research study be conducted with first-generation Latinas who are still enrolled at the community college. It would be beneficial to learn how students are experiencing the college while they are still enrolled and involved. As mentioned earlier, graduates may have a skewed perception of their time at the college based upon their current experiences. Interviewing students as they experience college in real time can provide some important data that may have been missed in this study.

- The third recommendation is that this study be conducted at a 4-year institution. This study was conducted at a community college because research shows that nearly 50% of Latinos begin their college career at these types of institutions (Krogstad, 2016). Therefore, it would be beneficial to learn how Latino students experience college involvement at a 4-year schools. Learning how to engage first-generation Latinas at a 4-year college can provide incredible insight into how to better retain and graduate these students.

- Finally, future studies should be conducted to focus on first-generation

  Latino students. Latinos are not graduating at rates comparable to Latinas

  (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2011). Because they are lagging behind their female

  counterparts, it would be of great interest to learn more about how to help

  them succeed in college. This study can be replicated to focus on the male

  perspective and understand how they are involved at the community college

  level.

Conclusion

The Latino population represents one of the largest growing ethnic groups in the

United States, and is estimated to represent almost 30% of the total population by 2060

(Colby & Ortman, 2015). Following this growth in population, Latinos have increased

their enrollment in higher education institutions (Bauman, 2017). Bauman (2017) stated

that Latinos have tripled their college enrollment in only the last 20 years. Additionally,

Latinas have enjoyed much higher rates of enrollment and degree attainment than their

male counterparts (Gándara, 2015). While their enrollments in college continue to rise,

the rate at which Latinos attain college degrees is still an area of concern. According to

Excelencia in Education (2018), "Latinos have lower adult degree attainment compared

to all adults and lower graduation rates compared to Whites in almost all states/locations"

(para. 1).

Many factors contribute to low levels of degree attainment among Latinos. Some

of these include first-generation status, low socioeconomic standing, and community

college enrollment (Batista & Collado, 2018; Engle, 2007). Many of these students have

family and personal obligations outside of school, they must work full time while

managing their course loads, and they are not prepared for the academic demands of a college curriculum (Nunez et al., 2013). As a result of these and other factors, these students tend to be the least involved in college (Rendón, 1994).

There is much literature on first-generation and Latina students that indicates why these groups are at a higher risk of not graduating from college than their peers (NCES, 2018; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014). However, few studies have focused on those students who have been academically successful (Borerro, 2011; Gist-Mackey et al., 2018; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). This research was developed to highlight first-generation Latinas who successfully graduated from a community college.

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into how first-generation Latinas defined college involvement and how they felt this involvement contributed to their successful graduation from a community college. To proceed with this investigation, the researcher utilized validation theory as the theoretical framework (Rendón, 1994). While validation served as the primary theory, the researcher also acknowledged the role of college involvement theory in this work (Astin, 1984). College involvement serves as the seminal theoretical lens from which validation was founded. Validation speaks to college involvement, which implies that the more students are involved in college, the more learning, development, and academic success they will achieve (Astin, 1984).

College involvement suggests that the level of students' investment in college activities, which can range from studying for school to joining clubs, determines their level of retention and eventual graduation from college (Astin, 1984). While much research has supported this view (Astin, 1984; Price & Tovar, 2014; Suarez-Orozco & Paez, 2002; Tinto, 1975), there are critics who have argued that responsibility for

involvement cannot rely solely on student effort (Museus, 2013; Nora, 2002; Rendón, 1994). Rendón (1994) assisting in bringing alternate views to college involvement and engaging college students. She found that students from certain groups needed to be invited in. Her study revealed two important findings:

> 1) There were stark differences in the way low-income and affluent, "traditional" students experienced the transition to college, and 2) at some point, low-income students suddenly began to believe in themselves not so much because of their college involvement, but because some person(s), in- or outside-of-college took the initiative to reach out to them to affirm their innate capacity to learn (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011, p. 14).

Validation theory aims to explain how nontraditional students, such as those from low-income, first-generation, and ethnic backgrounds, could be successful in college. As opposed to the student involvement model by Astin (1984) that assumes involvement depends primarily on student effort, Rendón (1994) argued that lower income, first-generation, and minority students are more likely to become engaged when others from the institution invite the involvement.

Utilizing validation theory, the researcher developed the following research questions:

1. How do first-generation Latinas define their engagement with the institution?
2. What factors impacted the degree of involvement by first-generation Latina students at this community college?
3. To what degree of importance did first-generation Latinas perceive college involvement had an impact on their academic success?

4. How did first-generation Latinas perceive the level of institutional support as impacting their academic success?

5. To what degree did relationships with faculty/staff support academic success for first-generation Latinas?

This study revealed the lived experiences of first-generation Latinas and their perceptions of involvement while attending a community college. It utilized a qualitative, phenomenological approach to gather data. Data were collected via a prescreening survey and with in-depth interviews.

This investigation supports prior research that suggests college involvement among first-generation Latinas is supported by relationships with college personnel who invite or encourage involvement (Rendón, 1994). It also found that connecting first-generation Latinas to academic support programs, with assigned advisors, and other specialized programs, helped these women become more involved. Having programs that provided a holistic support structure made it easier for the participants to build relationships with college administrators and faculty, which led to increased levels of involvement and eventual academic success.

This study discussed eight categories that affected the level of involvement among nine first-generation Latinas, which include (a) receiving information about involvement, (b) increased confidence because of involvement, (c) growth as a student, (d) receiving college support, (e) receiving family support, (f) receiving peer support, (g) having continued support over time, and (h) becoming involved early in their studies.

This study makes recommendations on how institutions can make improvements in practice and create an environment where first-generation Latina students can be

involved and reach academic success. The recommendations include early involvement, academic support programs, and peer support. Colleges must ensure that they are capturing students early in the educational process. Specialized programs where students can engage with administrators and faculty in cohort-style structures was found to be incredibly impactful in this study. These programs can be housed in either an academic or student affairs division. Providing opportunities in both areas can help colleges engage more students. Finally, utilizing student leaders and other peer groups can help bring first-generation Latinas into programs and services provided by a college.

This study contributes the body of literature that was discussed in Chapter 2. By exploring the perspectives of first-generation Latinas who successfully graduated from a community college, this study filled a gap in the literature relating to this student population. This study gave voice to women who, despite the statistical odds against them, achieved academic success and were involved in their educational journey. This study provided alternative definitions of college involvement, as provided by the participants. These definitions may help other researchers and practitioners in the field better understand how involved first-generation Latinas are in college and how to support their involvement for further success.

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Appendix A

Letter of Permission from Community College

March 1, 2018

Ms. Helene Bach
Director of Research
Borough of Manhattan Community College
199 Chambers Street, New York, NY 10007

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear Ms. Bach,

I am a doctoral student at St. John Fisher College completing a dissertation study entitled: *First-Generation Latinas' Perspectives of College Involvement: A Phenomenological Study.*

I am contacting you to request permission to access alumni data from the Borough of Manhattan Community College for the years 2015-2017. Specifically, I am requesting to access data on female, Latinas who successfully earned an Associate Degree in that time span. I will need contact information for this alumni group, such as email and phone numbers. **I understand that I must submit proof of IRB approval from St. John Fisher College prior to accessing your alumni data. This letter is to confirm that once I provide IRB approval to you, I may access the requested data**.

The goal of this study is to understand how first-generation Latinas who earned an Associate Degree at your institution perceived their involvement in college activities and how this involvement could have contributed to their academic success. If approval is granted, I plan to conduct interviews with first-generation Latinas to learn more about their perceptions of college involvement while attending your college. The significance of this study is to contribute to the literature on how to best support these students attain their college degrees.

Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. I will follow up with a telephone call next week and would be happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have at that time. You may contact me at my e-mail address: XXXX@sjfc.edu.

If you agree, kindly sign below and return via e-mail to the address above.

Sincerely,

Melissa E. Aponte, St. John Fisher College

_____   _____

Signature   **Date**

Approved by:

_____

Print Name and Title

_____   _____

Signature   **Date**

Appendix B

Qualtrics Contact Request

Dear Student,

I am a doctoral student at St. John Fisher College completing a dissertation study entitled: *First-Generation Latinas' Perspective of College Involvement: A Phenomenological Study.*

I am contacting you to request your participation in my online survey that may lead you to being selected for my research study. Based on your date of graduation from XXXX college you have been selected to participate in the following questionnaire.

After responding to these questions, you may be contacted to participate in an in-depth interview. If selected, 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 earn 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

Selection Questionnaire

1. Do you identify as Hispanic or Latino?

☐ Yes or ☐ No

2. Do you identify as female?

☐ Yes or ☐ No

3. Please indicate what year you graduated with your Associate Degree:

☐ 2015 or ☐ 2016 or ☐ 2017

4. What is the highest degree or level of education that your mother has completed?

If mother's educational level 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 education that your father has completed?

If father's educational level 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

6. Please select the extra- or co-curricular activities in which you participated while

attending community college. *These activities must have been organized by the college*

or related to coursework you took at the college. You may check all that apply:

☐ Recognized student club/organization (this includes student government)

☐ Peer mentoring program

☐ Athletic Team

☐ Volunteer program

☐ Leadership training program

☐ Internships

☐ Member of academic support program

☐ Study groups

☐ I was not involved in any of the above activities

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

☐ Yes or ☐ No

Appendix D

Sample Email Invitation to Interview

Hello,

My name is Melissa Aponte and I want to thank you for completing the survey for my doctoral study. Based on your responses you have been selected to participate in an in-depth interview. The purpose of my study is to understand your experience as a first-generation Latina who successfully graduated from XXXX College. The interview should take anywhere between 60-90 minutes. I am happy to meet you at a semi-public location that is convenient for you.

If you are still interested in participating in the study, please review the attached Informed Consent form. You will sign it when we meet in person.

Please let me know if you have any availability in the next two weeks to meet.

Thank you again and I look forward to meeting you!

Melissa E. Aponte

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 Latina descent and have graduated with an associate degree either within the last three years. 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: First-Generation Latinas' Perspectives of College Involvement: A Phenomenological Study.

Investigator: Melissa E. Aponte

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to gain insight into how first-generation Latinas define college involvement and how they feel this involvement contributed to their successful graduation from a community college.

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 spring of 2018 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.

Print name (Participant)	Signature Date

Print name (Investigator)	Signature Date

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher listed above. If you experience emotional or physical discomfort due to participation in this study, please contact your personal health care provider or an appropriate crisis service provider (1-888-NYC-WELL, ext. 2).

The Institutional Review Board of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding this study/or if you feel that your rights as a participant (or the rights of another participant) have been violated or caused you undue distress (physical or emotional distress), please contact Jill Rathbun by phone during normal business hours at (585) 385-8012 or irb@sjfc.edu. She will contact a supervisory IRB official to assist you.

Audio recordings addendum:

All digital audio recordings and transcriptions of interviews will be maintained using a private, locked, and password-protected file and password-protected computer stored securely in the private home of the principal researcher. Electronic files will include assigned identity codes and pseudonyms; they will not include actual names or any information that could personally identify or connect participants to this study. Other materials, including notes or paper files related to data collection and analysis, will be stored securely in unmarked boxes, locked inside a cabinet in the private home of the principal researcher. Only the researcher will have access to electronic or paper records. The digitally recorded audio data will be kept by this researcher for a period of five years following publication of the dissertation. Signed informed consent documents will be kept for five years after publication. All paper records will be cross-cut shredded and professionally delivered for incineration. Electronic records will be cleared, purged, and destroyed from the hard drive and all devices such that restoring data is not possible.

Appendix F

Predetermined Questions for the Participants

Research Questions	Interview Questions
How do first-generation Latinas define their engagement with the institution?	Please tell me how you would define the following term: "College Involvement"? Based upon this definition, how involved were you in the community college?
What factors impacted the degree of involvement by first-generation Latina students at a community college?	In what ways did you find out about becoming involved in college? How easy or difficult was it for you to become involved in college? What do you believe affected you the most in becoming involved?
To what degree of importance do first-generation Latinas perceive college involvement had an impact on their academic success?	How important was it for you to be involved in college? In what ways do you feel your involvement (or lack of involvement) impacted your academics?
How did first-generation Latinas perceive the level of institutional support as impacting their academic success?	In what ways could the college have supported your involvement in college activities or programs? How did the college help you succeed academically? (What programs or services did it provide?)

To what degree did relationships with faculty/staff support academic success for first-generation Latinas?	How did you perceive your experiences interacting with faculty and/or administrators at the community college?
	How much access did you feel you had to college administrators and/or faculty?
	How did faculty and/or administrators help you achieve your academic goals?