

Running head: LATINA UNDERGRADUATES IN EOP AT AN HSI

Exploring Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) Practices at a 4-year Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in Supporting Latina Undergraduate Students Matriculating Directly from Secondary Schools

A Qualitative Research Study Presented to  
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In (Partial) Fulfillment  
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Masters of Arts

By  
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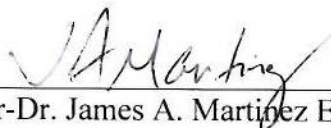
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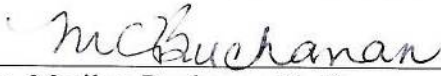
Thesis/Project Title: Exploring Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) Practices at a 4-year Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in Supporting Latina Undergraduate Students Matriculating Directly from Secondary Schools

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Dedication

*To all first-generation students who have worked hard to make it to college. The road you have chosen to travel is not an easy one, but it is well worth it. Keep moving forward, the world needs to hear your voice.*

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### Abstract

In 2013, only 16% of Latino students held a bachelor degree while the rate for White students was 24% (McGlynn, 2014). Thus, the disparity of Latino/a representation in higher education requires additional investigation. This study investigates support for first-generation Latina students when they attend four-year universities directly after completing high school. Set in a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), this qualitative study followed a semi-structured interview method. Six one-on-one interviews were conducted to identify the experiences of Latina students that supported their motivation to pursue higher education. The findings indicate that the Education Opportunity Program (EOP) supported their transition to a four-year environment, parents' lack of knowledge of the college application process challenges the transition, and there is a need for more interaction between students and Latino/a faculty. Through the findings, the need for career guidance was discovered. Thus, further support is still needed to improve the rate of Latino/as pursuing advanced degrees.



## **Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem**

While there has been an increase in the Latino population in the United States, there has not been an increase in their higher education enrollment (Cerezo & Chang, 2013). Research revealed that Latina/o students are more vulnerable and their academic achievements are greatly affected by their self-confidence (Crisp, Taggart & Nora, 2015). Additionally, youth from immigrant families, specifically Latino or Asian American, experience greater demands to fulfill family obligations than those from U.S.-born families (Sy & Brittan, 2008). With these struggles and vulnerabilities, Latina women, particularly, are seeking new pathways through which they must pursue their educational goals. Focusing on Latina women in higher education, this study explores the pathways that aid Latina women in achieving academic success in a four-year Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI).

In contrast to twenty years ago, student diversity in higher education continues to rise. Data from the Higher Education General Information Survey (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015) showed that, in 2014, 18% of the students enrolled in post-secondary undergraduate institutions in the United States were Hispanic women, a climb from 17.2% in 2013. Because of this, agents of higher education, including educators, need the tools to improve or implement policies that can support Latina women. Studying the struggles and achievements of Latina students pursuing higher education in the United States can also provide knowledge to student services personnel on how to provide academic support to undocumented students. In the State of Washington, for example, there was a shift in student demographics in 2003. With House Bill 1079 approved, the State opened the way for a larger number of Latino students to attend college by granting them the ability to pay in-state tuition (Contreras, 2009). The main

issue to address are the ways that institutions can provide for students, like Latinas, to complete an undergraduate degree.

The social environment of Latina students while attending college is also a variable to consider, as it has an impact on their educational experiences. Students who pursue an education in an unfamiliar environment could benefit from the support of family and friends. For the parents of Latina students, involvement becomes important. Especially if students pursue higher education at an institution where they are underrepresented, the support of families becomes key. For higher education institutions, adopting programs that promote family engagement is one method to educate families about the process and challenges their daughters experience in college. Metropolitan State University of Denver, for example, implemented *Orientación Familiar*, an orientation program designed for Spanish-speaking families (Kiyama, Museus & Vega, 2015). Methods like this provide a better understanding for parents who may be unfamiliar with the higher education environment.

The intent of this study was to examine the cultural and familial aspects that have an impact on Latina students' confidence throughout their college education. This research sought to better understand the cultural shift Latinas face when forgoing community college and instead, enroll in a four-year university directly after high school graduation. Using social capital theory as a lens the researcher was interested in discovering how did student support programs aid the academic journey of Latina students transitioning from high school to a four-year university. Additionally, this study focused specifically on students participating in the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) with the intention of learning how the program affected their transition into an HSI campus. Research focusing on the Latino/a population continues to be important because despite the increase in enrollment at four-year universities, Latina/o students

have a lower percentage of involvement in higher education than in K-12 programs (Contreras, 2009). Furthermore, only 16% of Latinos go straight from high school to a four-year institution while 24% of their White peers do so (McGlynn, 2014). While the statistics show that Latino students fall short in choosing to go straight from high school to a four-year institution, the graduation gap between Latinos and their White peer is even larger. In 2013, 40% of White students held a bachelor's degree for Latinos the percentage was only 16 (McGlynn, 2014).

Studies have also shown the increase of women interested in careers in engineering, science, math, and business, which have been predominantly filled by men (Geshkter, 2008). Unfortunately, Latina women receive less positive reinforcement than White female students (Provitera, 2002). Investigating the methods that positively influence Latina students in their pursuit of a college degree becomes essential to lower their dropout rates and increase their number among those who pursue graduate and doctoral degrees.

A qualitative approach was followed in this study to learn about the journey of Latina women preparing to graduate from an HSI. The goal was to answer the following research question: how did student support programs aid the academic journey of Latina students transitioning from high school to a four-year university? One-on-one interviews were conducted to learn about their experiences on campus, their interaction with faculty and staff members, and the support they received. Interviewing junior and senior Latina students at a four-year university given the pseudonym California Coast University (CCU), yielded information about the impact of the college environment, parental involvement, available resources, and student support programs. CCU, being an HSI, serves as an ideal setting to learn about the experiences of Latina students. Some of the questions the participants were asked concerned their

demographics, family support, and future endeavors. Through the interviews the researcher was most interested in learning the following:

1. What does it mean to be a Latina in higher education?
2. In what ways was family able to guide these students through the college application process?
3. How academically confident were they when starting college?

The researcher sought to tell the story of Latina students who overcame the challenges of transitioning to college and who found methods that influenced them to persevere. The audience that the researcher intended to bring awareness to was faculty and staff who work closely with students as well as to parents who, many times, have a great influence in their daughters' academic decisions. Additionally, larger non-Hispanic Serving Institutes could gain knowledge of methods that can better support their Latina student population. The more aware that university faculty, administrators, and staff are regarding the needs of Latina students, the better support they can provide to help them to excel academically.

The following chapter presents a review of literature already available on Latina students, predominately White institutions, the college environment, and student support programs. While adding, the theoretical framework underlying the study. Chapter Three presents the design, participants, setting, and instrument of the study. The procedures, including the analysis of data is also presented in chapter three. Chapter Four presents results from the data collected, the process used to analyze the data, and the findings of the study. Lastly, Chapter five offers a discussion of the findings, the limitations of the study, a personal reflection from the researcher and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Despite the volume of research on Latina students available, the absence of the Latino/a's pursuing a college level education is still prevalent. Cerezo and Chang (2013) stated that “[a]lthough Latina/os comprise of the largest growing ethnic group in the United States, only 13% of Latinas/os in the United States have completed an undergraduate degree compared to 30.6% of non-Hispanic Whites” (p.73). The gap between college entrance rates and college completion rates is worth noticing. As the Latino population grows, it is important to identify how student support programs aid the academic journey of Latina students transitioning from high school to four-year universities. Given that large universities in the United States are predominantly white institutions (PWI), looking at HSIs is useful. Connecting both types of institutions and their different environments can lead to uncovering new methods to minimize the achievement gap between Latinas and their non-Latina classmates.

This chapter presents a review of literature focused on areas such as campus environment, family support, and academic support. These factors influenced Latina students' retention rates in higher education institutions. Previous studies on the barriers in higher education for Latino/a students are also discussed in this chapter. The review of the literature provides guidance as to why Latino/a students' enrollment remains lower in comparison to that of the overall population. A review of the literature on Latino/a students is important to better understand the challenges and determine the tools that can advance the graduation rates, specifically for Latinas. The following section provides an overview of the literature that best supports the purpose of this study.

### **Overview of the Context of Literature**

The lack of Latino/a students represented in higher education prompted previous researchers to study this population further. To find literature that best supported this study, the researcher used the database ProQuest to search the following terms: Latin, Mexican, university, higher education, low income, first-gen, and women. Key areas such as student involvement, academic self-confidence, cultural factors, and parental support were found in the literature. Previous researchers have been guided by social capital theory (Tovar, 2015; Riegle-Crumb, 2010) as a theoretical framework. Other researchers used Tinto's theory of student departure to understand the factors that influence academic achievement (Johnson et al., 2007). Using social capital theory as the theoretical framework this study focuses on student participation in EOP to better understand how such interactions aid students transition from high school to a four-year institution. Furthermore, according to the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES), the percentage of Hispanic students between the ages of 18 and 24 enrolled in higher education, two-year and four-year included, increased from 21.7% in 2000 to 37.5% in 2012, but, fell to 34.7% in 2014 (2016). Despite the various researchers who have mentioned that the Latino population in the United States has and will continue to increase, the percentage of higher education recipients still falls short (Cerezo & Chang, 2013; Kiyama et al., 2015; Crisp et al., 2015).

Previous studies also found that Latina/o students have a greater need for academic support to be academically successful (Crisp et al., 2015). The need for this support can vary by type of institution, as the academic achievement rate can differ at an HSI as compared to Ivy League schools, which are PWIs. Cerezo and Chang (2013) aimed at discovering if cultural factors affected students' achievements while attending PWIs. In an older study, Gonzales (2002) also intended to discover the impact of college culture on Chicano students. The students

who participated in that study expressed that they felt alienated due to the lack of other Chicano students, staff, and faculty at their institutions (Gonzales, 2002). Thus, seeking personal experiences from several students through one-on-one interviews can provide additional information on the impact that campus programs have on Latina students.

Another key area that stands out in literature is the effect of student's socioeconomic status (SES). A low SES background can limit proper access to necessary information, preparation for rigorous curriculum of universities, and parental support. Addi-Racah and Israelashvili (2014) developed a study focused on outreach programs in higher education to target the low enrollment in higher education of students from low socioeconomic statuses. Although this study provided good insight into the challenges of low-income students and provided reasons for the low enrollment numbers, the students who participated were Israeli students and this research focus is on Latina students. Yet, the study was helpful because it exposed the importance for colleges and universities to pay attention to the needs of students regardless of their SES.

To fill some gaps from older research, Ainsworth (2002) focused on, "examining which neighborhood characteristics influence education behavior and achievement" (p.118). The lack of research focused on disadvantaged neighborhoods and their influence on social behavior was discussed. Moreover, students' SES can have an impact on the relationships they build in college as well as the cumbersome financial discussions they have with peers from a higher income background (McLoughlin, 2011). Using a wide range of methods to further the study on Latina students, researchers opened a pathway to better understand the importance of support, accessibility, and campus culture for student success.

The lack of research on women and parental attachment, prompted Melendez and Melendez (2010) to study the influence of parental attachment on academic achievement. For Latina and Hispanic women, the study showed that those who received higher levels of support from their families developed greater feelings of attachment and pride for their institution (Melendez & Melendez, 2010). The support provided to Latina students is crucial to their academic success, especially at predominately White institutions where they are more likely to be underrepresented. Additionally, Riegle-Crumb (2010) found that Hispanic high school students who interacted with a counselor a minimum of two times had a 0.45 higher probability of attending a four-year university versus those who rarely communicated with a counselor, who had only a 0.23 probability. The research Riegle-Crumb (2010) presented demonstrated how impactful the interaction with student personnel is for student perseverance.

Through a human social capital framework, Belasco (2013) studied the influence that counselors have on postsecondary trajectory. Belasco (2013) pointed out that the lack of information on postsecondary education for Latino/a students is noticeable in communities where going to college is not a norm. With the information provided by both Belasco (2013) and Melendez and Melendez (2010), it can be determined that support for Latina students becomes vital for academic achievement. This chapter presents a review of literature in three sections academic support, campus culture, and parental support. All three areas reflect the common themes previous researchers have focused on throughout the last decade, the researcher believes all areas provide substantial information for this study.

### **Literature Review I: Academic Support**

This section shares literature on academic support which provides knowledge of the areas that have advanced students academically. Through a human and social capital framework,



Belasco (2013) used a quantitative method to investigate the positive influence of counselors on students' postsecondary trajectories. The study references the effect that a community's overall education level can have on younger generations' decision to pursue higher education for themselves. To answer the two research questions based on the influence of school counselors, Belasco relied on data provided by the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002. The final sample used for Belasco's (2013) study included 11,260 students from 750 schools. The variable of interest for this study was the number of times students visited their counselor for college-related questions in tenth grade and again in twelfth grade. Although, Belasco's (2013) study included data from over ten years ago the research demonstrated that high school counselors greatly influence students' educational future. Also, socioeconomic status plays a role in postsecondary education enrollment as evidenced by the fact that "[s]tudent-counselor visits were greatest for students at lower ends of the socioeconomic scale" (Belasco, 2013, p. 795).

A few years prior to Belasco's research, Riegle-Crumb (2010) examined high school girls' involvement in interpersonal relationships with friends, parents, and institutional agents like counselors, who are most beneficial for college-going (p. 574). Data were gathered from the Texas Higher Education Opportunity Project, a longitudinal study wherein a statewide cohort of high school seniors was surveyed. In the study, the data were from 3,641 Hispanic and White students who graduated from high school. Additionally, academic performance and social capital were measured. Even though this study looked at the gender variance, it did provide evidence that, although the rate of Hispanic female college goers had improved, access to counselors was still a need. Riegle-Crumb mentioned that students most likely in need of counselors are the least likely to have access to them. Because a large percentage of Hispanic female college goers are first-generation students, providing counselors for support is crucial to

their success. Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that a larger percentage of Hispanic women do not attend college at all in comparison to White female students: the data showed 29% of Hispanic women and 40% of Hispanic males forgo college.

Next, a study by Yamamura, Martinez and Saenz, (2010) used data gathered from focus groups of students, parents, community leaders, k-12 educators, and higher education administrators. The purpose of these focus groups was to gain insight into intergroup dynamics and the responsibility each held in the college-readiness process. Although, the study only focused on data collected in South Texas, which holds a large concentration of Latino/a students, results highlighted a shared responsibility amongst all stakeholders to stop the inequity cycle in education. College readiness programs in all stages of education are important support tools, especially for underrepresented students who may not be exposed to the concept of higher education at an early age.

Later, the research of Delgado-Guerrero and Gloria (2013) and Cavazos (2016) took different approaches to studying the impact of student support. Using Latina sorority organizations in the Midwest, Delgado-Guerrero and Gloria's quantitative study aimed to interpret the positive influence of sorority groups on academia. The data used for this study derived from 159 different surveys, and results showed the majority expressed that sororities helped them persist in their education. Conversely, Cavazos' research included interviews with 10 Latina professionals in academia, half of whom had over a decade of experience and the other half who had just begun their professional careers. Those with long-term experience shared the persistence they gained through their mentorships and the benefit for their educational success. The author stated that "supportive Latina/o faculty not only guide Latina/o students in their academic writing but are also role models who set an example through enacting an academic

identity that valorizes no dominant values” (Cavazos, 2016 p. 19). The quantitative study presented by Delgado-Guerrero and Gloria (2013) presented the trends of students who participated in Latina sorority organizations. While, Cavazos (2016) qualitative study included the personal experiences of Latina’s who had achieved professional careers. Both studies exposed the importance of mentorships amongst Latina students with the purpose of closing the academic achievement gap.

Another study concentrated on understanding how an ethnic studies curriculum and student support programs at an HSI serve the Latino/a student population (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015). The research took place at a large public master’s granting institution which forms part of a larger system of state universities. That institutions’ EOP, Chicano/s studies department, and Pan-African studies were established in the 1960s, after demands from the students. In 2012, the student demographics at the same institution were 35% Latino/a, 29% White 11% Asian American, and 6% black. Garcia and Okhidoi (2015) collected data through interviews and focus groups. The interviews were conducted with selected administrators, faculty members, and student affairs staff; the focus groups were created for students. Additional data was also collected from historical documents and non-participant observations. The findings resulted in two themes: the historical presence of culturally relevant curricula and programs, and the embedding of culturally relevant curricula and programs within the structures of the institution. This study intended to inform about good practices which can be implemented at other institutions. However, the research did not demonstrate the learning, growth, and development of students who take part in the courses or programs. Furthermore, the limitation of Garcia and Okhidoi’s study was the lack of generalizability of the findings, as the report was meant to inform and support information that had already been discovered about Latino/a low-income and

first-generation students. Thus, the authors recognized that programs like the Chicano Studies and EOP do affect the university's ability to serve Latino/a students. A variety of other programs could be offered; the institutions must identify the methods that meet their underrepresented students' needs.

Tovar's (2015) research focused on support programs by looking at how interactions with faculty and counselors influence the success and will of Latino/a students to graduate from their community college. Through a social capital theory and 2-year college impact models, Tovar examined the influence of select pre-college student characteristics, transition to college experiences, academic, social factors, and interactions with faculty and counselors. For the study, participation was limited to Latino/a students attending one community college. Students involved in three different college support programs self-selected for participation.

Two research questions that guided Tovar's (2015) work: (a) how do institutional agents and students support programs influence Latino/a community college students' success? (b) How do institutional agents and student support programs influence Latino/a community college students intend to persist in degree completion? However, student participation in these programs is often minimal due to time limitations or lack of knowledge of the benefits (Tovar, 2015, p. 63). Results showed that discussing career issues with instructors influenced grade point average (GPA), but failing to do so had a negative effect. The author also discovered that "students' interactions with instructional faculty outside of the class had a small but significant impact on GPA but, did not influence their intention to persist" (Tovar, 2015, p. 62). Although Tovar focused on community colleges, the findings presented refer to the importance of academic support provided to Latino/a students.

Crisp et al. (2015) examined the factors related to undergraduate Latino/a student academic success outcomes during college through their systematic review. Their research, in addition to exploring campus culture, shed light on the issue of *academic self-confidence*. The goal was to make sense of the growing research as well as provide direction to future researchers. Crisp et al. used a variety of studies conducted prior to 2012. Out of the 190 publications reviewed, a third focused on nonacademic outcomes and 18 described the college experience of Latino/a students. Several of the publications described experiences at PWIs and HSIs. Although Crisp et al. offered a systematic review of previous research, they did note the crucial gaps still left unfilled. The findings suggested a greater need for academic support for Latina/o students to be academically successful and the need for policies to provide additional support to have more students attend college immediately following high school. Using a different framework to analyze data, as the authors' work suggests, offers future researchers new ideas on how to further examine Latina students' academic outcomes. This study aims to identify how Latina students are supported in their transition to four-year universities thus, the literature presented on academic support provides knowledge of the areas that have advanced students academically.

### **Literature Review II: Campus Culture**

Campus culture is an additional area of review this section provides literature that focuses on the impact of college environments on students. Guided by the earlier work of Hurtado and Carter (1997), Johnson et al. (2007) focused on examining what factors led students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds to feel like they belonged in their college culture. Minority students at PWIs face unique challenges in comparison to those attending HSIs. By examining a diverse population of first-year students living in residence halls, Johnson et al. aimed to see the

effects derived as those students adapted to their new environment. To carry out the study, the authors collected data through electronic surveys from the 2004 National Study of Living-Learning Programs sample. The data came from 2,967 first-year students attending 34 different universities in 24 states and the District of Columbia. The study raised questions regarding the policies in place to enable students from underrepresented backgrounds to receive the right support to find their sense of belonging. The issue can have a great impact on students' academic attainment because, when students cannot fit in, they have a harder time focusing on their academic achievements (Johnson et al., 2007).

For Hispanic/Latino students, the results of Johnson et al.'s (2007) study mentioned that females had a higher sense of belonging, supporting previous research by stating that White/Caucasian students have a higher sense of belonging than any other racial/ethnic group. Additionally, the study found "students' perception of the residence hall as socially supportive was a significant predictor of sense of belonging" (Johnson et al., 2007, p. 532). The study provided important insight on first-year student experiences and the influence their residence halls have on their sense of belonging. Thus, a campus that is more socially supportive and tolerant of diverse populations allows students to feel more comfortable and willing to continue their education. Even though the study was not solely focused on Latino/a students, it presented a larger perspective of the issues that can lead students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds to leave their university. Johnson et al.'s (2007) work allowed others to explore what methods provide students the essential tools to succeed in their college environment.

Núñez (2009) analyzed the effects of social capital and how it can benefit the transition to college for Latino students. The study discussed social capital, intercultural capital, perceptions of a hostile climate for diversity, and immigration status. In addition, the research discussed the

negative effect that affirmative action policies could have on Latino students racial/ethnic climate at universities. Nuñez hypothesized on five different measures which can have a direct effect on relationship with a dependent variable of sense of belonging. The questions were addressed through a structural equation modeling method, which can reveal indirect and direct relationships among different variables. The data were gathered from the Diverse Democracy Project Study, which provides a national longitudinal data set. The first wave of data came from 13,520 students from nine different campuses, and the final collection of surveys yielded 35% of responses. Students were first surveyed in their first year and again in their second year. Some of the findings demonstrated the benefit of community service activities and cross-racial classroom interactions. Moreover, second-generation Latino/a immigrant students felt a less sense of belonging as compared to first- or third-generation (Nuñez, 2009). Because of the minimum amount literature in addressing second-generation immigrant higher education students, this group was also more exposed to perceiving racial/ethnic climate as more hostile. Nuñez (2009) suggested that intercultural and social capital access can positively predict sense of belonging, but it can also predict the perception of a hostile climate. The study focused on students from diverse backgrounds however, Nunez (2009) noted that it is crucial for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to address how all students from diverse backgrounds navigate transition to college. Thus, Nunez (2009) work was included in this literature review to demonstrate the importance of campus culture on students transition to college.

Cerezo and Chang (2013) investigated the role cultural factors played in predicting grade point average (GPA) for specific Latina/o students attending PWIs. The interest was in discovering if the cultural factors affected these students' achievements while attending

intuitions where they were underrepresented. The sample consisted of 113 Latina/o students from four different PWIs in the Pacific Northwest. At the time of the study, each campus had a Latina/o enrollment rate of less than 8%. The authors found Latina/o students' academic achievement was greatly affected by sense of belonging and the connections they had to other students of color. Furthermore, the authors offered suggestions specifically for campus professionals who can influence policies and practices that can better serve Latino/a cultural needs. Cerezo and Chang stated that student personnel should encourage a sense of community and mentorship relationships among students, staff, and faculty. Even though the study moved away from the original focus of GPA, since it did not play a major role in academic achievement, Cerezo and Chang verified that Latino/a student's face challenges in institutions where they are underrepresented.

Kiyama et al. (2015) emphasized the culturally engaging campus environments model (CECE) to inform higher education institutions of the need to cultivate campus environments that respond to Latino/a communities at PWIs. The goal was to prompt campus leaders to begin discussing methods of improving campus environment to increase student success rates. Methods suggested more culturally engaging events, work-study opportunities, and continuous assessment of programs (Kiyama et al., 2015). The CECE model presented by Museus (2014) lists nine indicators of a culturally engaging campus environment which benefits a more culturally diverse student population. Kiyama et al. (2015) explained the indicators in the first subgroup, cultural relevance, as focused on the ways that institutional environment stays relevant to college students' cultural backgrounds, communities and identities. Cultural responsiveness, the second subgroup, focuses on the ways campus environments respond to cultural norms (Kiyama et al., 2015). Museus' work on the CECE model and Kiyama et al.'s description



provides PWIs' methods which can increase the positive experiences and passion of students, leading to succeeding in college.

The work presented by Museus (2014) was a framework that considered a racially diverse population of students, including White and students of color. Next, Kiyama et al., (2015) used the CECE model to focus on Latino and Latina students' college success. However, the authors hypothesized how multiple indicators could influence students' college experience and learning outcomes in higher education. Additionally, the information that Museus presented supports a positive association between the sense of belonging of students and intent to persist. Therefore, both studies were included in this review to support the notion that campus culture does, indeed, play a key role in the success of students. Additionally, PWI's should continue to search for new tools to support their underrepresented population. The literature reviewed in this section provided evidence to the researcher that campus culture impacts the success of all students.

### **Literature Review III: Parental Support**

It is critical to discuss the role that parents play on a student college journey, the final area of literature reviewed was work that focused on parental support. Work presented by Ainsworth (2002) more than a decade earlier brought forward analysis of different neighborhood characteristics that could influence youth. Ainsworth used data from National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 that was linked to the information at the neighborhood level of the 1990 census. Through a quantitative method, Ainsworth aimed to link several variables to provide a better understanding as to how impactful disadvantaged neighborhoods can be for youth in choosing to pursue higher education. Ainsworth stated that, although many studies examined urban and low-income neighborhoods, there is a lack of in-depth analysis of variables

that influence individual behavior. This study, although it contained older data, did reflect the lack of research on educational outcomes which is due to the lack of generalizable results. Ainsworth's study reminds us of the need to continue investigating the challenges Latina students face in their pursuit of a college education.

Kiyama et al. (2015) discussed the CECE model, pressing on the importance of programs supporting parents of college students. Previous research by Kiyama (2011) focused on the knowledge of parents and disclosed the importance of involving parents in the educational process. Focused specifically on Mexican American families, Kiyama (2011) used two sets data. The first set came from 27 interviews conducted in 2004 for the pilot year of the Parent Outreach Program, and the other six interviews were conducted in the spring of 2007. All the families who participated in the study were selected from the Parent Outreach Program. Additionally, "the sample included a family with adopted children, a biracial family, a family that was not originally from the local area, as well as families that had been in the local area for multiple generations" (Kiyama, 2011, p. 29). The parent program was created to educate parents of elementary-aged students about academic requirements and expectations. Kiyama (2011) explained that the program consisted of 2-hour workshops held over a 10-week period and offered in both English and Spanish (p. 29).

Kiyama's (2011) results indicated that students are better supported in their household when their parents have knowledge of how to navigate college. The Parent Outreach Program provided parents with more information about sending their children to college (Kiyama, 2011). Participants expressed they helped other parents by providing them with their own experience and offering actual advice as opposed to what they were simply told. Kiyama's (2011) work

suggested practitioners should understand the relationship among students, their family, the community, and institution. The study's results support the importance of parent involvement.

Matos' (2011) dissertation revealed that parental involvement was limited because parents were unfamiliar with the college experience (p. 94). The qualitative study investigated how the parental message regarding the value of education was used by undergraduates at PWIs. Three different institution types in western Massachusetts were selected as sites for the gathering of data: an all-women's college, a coeducational university, and a community college. All three settings were institutions created without people of color in mind, and White students made up most the population. Through direct interviews and focus groups, Matos found that parents were more involved in the early stages of their secondary education, but, as parents had less experience, they were less able to help academically. Furthermore, parents who had attended college in their country of origin were still unable to provide the necessary support because they could not relate to their child's college experience (Matos, 2011). The three different institutions provided insight into the similar challenges faced by the participants.

The participants revealed that support specifically for Latina students was lacking, given that all campuses consisted of a predominantly White student population, yet they persisted in great part because of their families' moral support. Participants identified the ways their parents and extended family supported them through the college journey through examples such as helping their child move to college and the affection received when the students returned home for break. The information provided by Matos (2011) assists in understanding the frustration that Latino/a students encounter when attempting to follow their parents' message on education, even though the college experiences can be foreign to Latino/a parents. Thus, to fully

understand the issue, Matos suggested future research focus on male students and second- and third-generation students.

For many Latino/a students, going to college is not a choice but, rather, their parents' expectation (McCoy, 2014). McCoy (2014), in comparison to other researchers, aimed at understanding the challenges imposed on students by their families during the transition to higher education. Students with parents who immigrated to the United States shared that the main purpose for their parents' immigration was to give them the chance for a better education (McCoy, 2014). Because of that, students were aware that the expectation for them to attend college was set high. However, parents' lack of understanding and "[t]heir unfamiliarity with the admissions process resulted in frustration and a sense of helplessness" (McCoy, 2014, p. 161). One key factor that contributed to the challenge of navigating the transition to college for first-generation students and their parents was terminology. Thus, McCoy's found evidence that parents will benefit from gaining knowledge of the terminology, the process, and the requirements colleges have for their children.

Tovar's (2015) research mainly discussed academic programs, yet the findings also disclosed the need for college administrators to create programs for families and significant others to aid students in the degree-completion process. The number of family responsibilities on the students who participated also affected their transition to college (Tovar, 2015). Out of the 397 community college students who participated in this study, 75% were first-generation students, but 97% noted that they spent several hours per week taking care of family responsibilities. Moreover, institutions should also take advantage of the positive influence that family and friends have on students. Tovar (2015) suggested that programs should be developed to include these support systems in the lives of students in college.

The lack of minority students in higher education swayed many researchers, including Melendez and Melendez (2010) to study the many factors involved in this occurrence. The initial method for the study was surveying both male and female nonresidential commuter students from an East Coast college. However, the researchers decided to only use information provided by female students enrolled in their first year of college, given the lack of research on that specific population. Their final data revealed 31% of participants were born outside the United States, and 91% lived with a family member. The high percentage of students living with a family member demonstrated that exploring the effect of family was essential.

The total number of female students who participated was 95, of whom 27 were black and 44 were Latina /Hispanic; all were between 17 and 25 years old (Melendez & Melendez, 2010). For Latina/Hispanic subgroups, results showed that those who received higher levels of support from their families developed greater feelings of attachment and pride in their institution (Melendez & Melendez, 2010). The authors also stated the importance of student personnel in higher education. Additionally, findings also showed the impact of family values when focusing on minority student retention. For college students, the support found in friends, family or significant others can benefit their college experience. The only limitation to this study was that it focused solely on nonresidential commuter students. However, the study provided significant information to support this current study which focuses on Latina's living on or close to their campus. The literature presented on parental support, which included both quantitative and qualitative, highlighted important issues that need to be further explored to better support Latina students at higher education institutions.

### **Connection to Literature**

The literature available demonstrates the continuous research on issues regarding the low college attainment rates of the Latino/a population. The fact is that Latino students continue to be the largest ethnic group: by the 2022–2023 school year, 30% of the student population in public schools will be Latino (McGlynn, 2014). However, high schools are still not fully preparing these students for a college education (McGlynn, 2014). Using social capital theory this study intends to expand the research on Latina students and their transition to four-year universities. Earlier work of Riegle-Crumb (2010) indicated the need for further research on women and academic performance, even at the high school level. Although the rates of women in higher education have been significantly increasing, further research is still necessary to understand gender differences. By 2050, the Latino population will have more than doubled, leaving a large population of individuals who could potentially seek a higher education (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Additional research can provide insight into what methods of academic support work best for Hispanic women versus Hispanic men.

Powerful insight for student personnel was provided by Kiyama et al., (2015) echoing the importance of cultural engagement as a method to provide support to students. *Orientacion Familiar* at the Metropolitan State University of Denver was an example of how the CECE model, originally presented by Museus (2014), was implemented (Kiyama et al., 2015). *Orientacion Familiar* was an orientation program designed for Spanish-speaking families which allowed them to gain knowledge on how to support their children as they transition to a college environment (Kiyama et al., 2015, p.35). While some may argue that there should be a greater focus on providing support for Latina students to get to college, furthering the research to support these women persist during their college education should be of equal importance.

There are several different areas aside from academics that influence college students' persistence. Vincent Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure discussed how student's transition into a college environment differs from that of which they are accustomed to. This concept has been used by many researchers who study the transition of minority students into higher education (Estrada et al., 2011; Kiyama et al., 2015; Melendez & Melendez, 2010). Guiding students to become comfortable with their academics while keeping in mind the influence of culture is key for their success (Crisp et al., 2015). The literature reviewed establishes the importance of continued work focused on Latina students to support their college journey as well as increase the rate of those pursuing a college education.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, this study intends to identify how student support programs aid the academic journey of Latina students transitioning from high school to a four-year university. The literature reviewed provided a fundamental background of areas that have been found important in advancing Latinos/as in higher education. Melendez and Melendez (2010) conducted a study focused on the student-parent relationship. With additional concepts provided by Riegle-Crumb (2010) and Crisp et al. (2015), it can be concluded that support for undergraduate students is a determinant in their success. For Latina students pursuing a higher education, this concept is especially crucial due to the lack of proper information and mentorship, as demonstrated by Cavazos (2016).

Understanding the barriers that Latino/a students encounter allows higher education institutions to provide them the proper support to ensure success. First-generation students have more difficulties if no one explains the different environment of a college campus in comparison to their high school experience (Kiyama, 2011). The same goes for students whose families did

not attend college and for whom transitioning to college or choosing to pursue advance degrees may not seem like an achievable goal. However, discovering the different barriers students faced prior to attending college can assist in discovering tools that can help them persevere towards increasing the rates of Latino/a college degree recipients.

The available literature analyzed for this study demonstrated a greater need for research on Latina women in higher education, as many studies mentioned the rate at which Latino/a students successfully attain post-secondary degrees is still low in contrast to the rate of the population's growth. This research was, in part, influenced by those low rates of post-secondary achievement and by the need to provide proper tools that prepare high school students for the transition to college. Focusing on four-year institutions and not community college was chosen because of the low rate of Latino/a student's choosing to go straight to four-year universities after high school (McGlynn, 2014). One method to further analyze the issue is to inquire about specific tools that helped Latina students succeed in higher education. Additionally, through the review of several pieces of literature the researcher chose to follow a qualitative method to allow the findings to narrate the personal experiences of Latina's pursuing an undergraduate degree. The researcher sought to bring awareness to institutions, agents, and parents of how important it is to support students to get through college. The following chapter details the methodology used in this study and discusses the approach to better understand how institutions support their Latina student populations.



### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Previous researchers shared that, even though the rate of the Latino/a population in the United States continues to increase, their rate of enrollment in higher education is still relatively low (Cerezo & Chang, 2013; Kiyama et al., 2015; Crisp et al., 2015). Although previous studies have focused on Latina students in higher education, to increase completion rates, further research is necessary. Previous researchers, such as Gonzales (2002), suggested further investigation on issues of Latina students in predominately White institutions. Examining the tools that benefited Latina students' academic success at an HSI offers student services professionals' additional understanding to further support this underrepresented population.

This qualitative study aimed to gather personal experiences from Latina students pursuing an undergraduate degree at an HSI while also participating in EOP. Such experiences will lead to identifying the tools that HSIs provide undergraduate Latina students that grant them the ability to excel academically. Conducting a qualitative study of Latina students at an HSI could provide further suggestions to be applied at large PWIs, which can potentially increase the rate of Latinas earning undergraduate degrees. Cerezo and Chang (2013), Kiyama et al., (2015), Crisp et al., (2015), Gonzales (2002), Matos (2011), and Mateo (2010) studied Latina/os in higher education and the different factors that influence their academic careers. This study focused on Latina students at an HSI and on how their active participation in EOP benefited their transition to college and continues to benefit their academic goals.

To best gather data, this study followed a qualitative method. One-on-one interviews were conducted to gather participants' personal experiences. Although, one-on-one interviews could impact the way participants respond, the researcher chose this instrument because it "permits the participants to describe detailed personal information" (Creswell, 2012, p. 218).

The data collected from the interviews was analyzed and coded to identify themes. Analyzing the tools that supported Latina students on the path to graduation could provide insight to other institutions and future researchers. The students participating in this study were selected from one HSI in Southern California given then pseudonym California Coast University (CCU). Participants were recruited through email invitation from their EOP center. Selecting Latina students participating specifically in EOP allowed for identifying the benefits that the program provided students throughout their college years.

### **Design**

To narrate the experiences of the participants, a qualitative approach was chosen for this study (Creswell, 2012). The researcher shares a background with the participants, having attended an HSI as an undergraduate student and being involved on campus. Previous work with Latina students at a professional level has been minimal; however, it should be noted that the researcher, as a student, did participate in several student programs and clubs. Although the researcher may have a personal experience, for this study the researcher was an outsider because the study was focused on current Latina students pursuing an undergraduate degree. This study was based on the need to improve the graduation rates of Latina students from four-year institutions. Later sections of this chapter provide information regarding the participants, setting, instruments, the complete procedure of the study, and on how the data were analyzed.

### **Participants**

The participants were six Latina students in pursuit of their bachelor's degrees who hoped to become the first in their families to obtain a college degree. One of the requirements to participate in the study was to be in junior or senior status, thus three participants were scheduled to graduate in the spring of 2017, two planned to complete their degree in December 2017, and

one student in her third year planned to graduate in the spring of 2018. To best understand the participants' personal experiences, the researcher found it important to share their demographics (Table 1). To maintain confidentiality and protect their identities, pseudonyms were used for the participants, their hometowns, the university, and other individuals mentioned in the interviews. All participants were raised in the state of California, two of the participants were from Los Angeles County, one was from Northern California, one was from San Diego County, and one was from Riverside County. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 23 and all but one had attended public high schools. One participant attended private catholic schools, and CCU was the first public school she attended. Additionally, three participants were pursuing a degree in biology, two in psychology, and one in communication; two were also minoring in Spanish and one was minoring in Chicano studies.

This group of women was sought from the campus EOP, which actively supports Latino/a students on campus. To minimize any risk prior to seeking the desired participants, permission was obtained from the program's assistant director. A copy of the gatekeeper letter can be found in Appendix A. To find participants who best fit this study, the assistant director was the best point of contact since the desired participants were EOP students. The researcher has had minimal interaction with Latina students in higher education at a professional level. However, having previously attended an HSI as an undergraduate, some of the programs available to students are relatable.

The low rate of Latina undergraduates completing bachelors and post-secondary degrees demonstrate the need for further research to provide additional understanding to practitioners supporting this population. The participants had to meet the following criteria: (a) participant must be Latina, (b) participant should be a junior or senior undergraduate student, (c) participant

should be a first-generation student, and (d) participant should have started college right after completing high school.

The search for the desired participants commenced once approval was granted by the university's institutional review board (IRB) and gatekeeper at the site. Once IRB granted approval, the assistant director of EOP sent an email invitation seeking participants to EOP students. The researcher received seven emails from students volunteering to participate, the first six volunteers were included in this study. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 23; two of the participants were from Los Angeles County, one was from Northern California, one was from San Diego County, and one was from Riverside County. The following table lists the participants, their age, and area of study.

Table 1

*Participants*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Minor</b>
Carolina	22	Psychology	Chicano Studies
Juliana	22	Communication	Spanish
Genesis	20	Biology	
Brenda	21	Psychology	Spanish
Leslie	23	Biology	
Michelle	22	Biology	

**Setting**

Following the selection of participants, the researcher communicated with each via email to identify a date and time to meet for an interview. All six interviews took place at the university's main library. To assure that participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences, the researcher secured a private room in the library to conduct the interviews. The researcher maintained a comfortable environment and thanked each participant for volunteering their time

to take part in the study. Before beginning each interview, the researcher read through the participant consent form and highlighted that participation was voluntary; the participant consent form can be found in Appendix B. The researcher also explained that pseudonyms would be used to protect their identity. The location of the interviews was convenient for all participants, the private room minimized distractions and allowed them to feel comfortable in telling their stories.

### **Instrument**

To achieve successful interviews, the researcher prepared questions aimed at learning about student experiences at each point of the academic journey, including high school. To obtain the necessary data for this study, Gonzales (2002) study focused on male students served as guidance. However, this study focused on female students at an HSI, which is a different population. In addition, the questions previously used by Mateo (2010) and Matos (2011) helped served to guide the questions for the current study (Appendix C). Although the researcher prepared questions to best fit the purpose of this study, the work provided by both Mateo (2010) and Matos (2011) aided in organizing them to best allow participants to share their personal experiences. The researcher chose to use interviews rather than surveys to gather data for this study because the intent was to inform about specific tools that supported the participants' transition to college. Surveys on the other hand, "describe trends in the data rather than offer rigorous explanations" (Creswell, 2012, p. 376).

### **Procedures**

Once IRB granted approval for the study, the researcher worked with the assistant director of EOP to seek participants. To protect the privacy of all students participating in EOP, the researcher did not receive a list of student names, list serve, or any other student contact

information. Instead the assistant director of EOP sent an email invitation to the EOP students seeking participants. Students interested in volunteering in the study had one day to email the researcher their contact information. Within seven hours the researcher received seven emails from students volunteering. However, the researcher felt that six interviews were a good number to yield enough data needed for the study; the first six volunteers were included in this study. Additionally, even though the researcher shares a similar background, being Latina and having attended an HSI, for this study the researcher was an outsider because the study was focused on current Latina students pursuing an undergraduate degree.

All six interviews were recorded using a recorder and the researcher's phone voice memo application. Additionally, the researcher requested permission from the participants to take notes throughout each interview. For purposes of privacy, as previously mentioned, all meetings were held in a quiet location on campus. The researcher allotted enough time for the interviews and for any unexpected delays. This allowed participants to share their experiences without feeling rushed. All participants were read the participant consent form (Appendix B) and received a copy for their records. The researcher, then, proceeded to ask the interview questions, and only two interruptions took place during the six interviews. In one instance, the light sensors in the room turned off. In the other instance, students looking to borrow white board markers walked in. These small interruptions did not disrupt the interviews. At the end of each interview, the participants inquired further about the researchers' motivation for the study. The researcher explained the factors that inspired the study and informed participants they would have access to review transcriptions prior to dissemination of data. The researcher chose to utilize member checking method because it allowed participants to determine if the transcribed information was accurately interpreted (Creswell, 2012). All participants expressed their desire

to read the final thesis work and their excitement to be part of a study on Latinas in higher education. Lastly, all participants received a \$10 Amazon gift card as a token of appreciation.

### **Analysis**

To identify themes, the researcher analyzed the interview transcriptions through open coding process. The six interviews lasted between 30-50 minutes, the researcher chose to transcribe verbatim three of the interviews while the other three were transcribed through Rev.com, software dedicated specifically for transcription. The researcher listened to the audio of each interview, transcribed the audio files and read through the transcript for accuracy several times. The transcriptions completed through Rev.com were received within 24 hours of submission. The researcher reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy and filled in the areas where the Spanish language was used by the interviewee. Once the transcriptions matched the audio files, the researcher highlighted areas that stood out from each interview. To further analyze the data, the researcher printed the transcriptions, each in different color paper, and read through them once again. The researcher wrote, on the side of each transcription, words or phrases that best described the topic the interviewee mentioned. Key phrases and quotes that were impactful were also underlined. Following the open coding, the researcher listed all the participant's demographics and keywords from their interview in an excel sheet. From this exercise, the researcher noted the following themes were consistent throughout the interviews: (a) family, (b) sense of belonging, (c) resources (d) and support programs. Lastly, to validate the findings of the study, the participants were asked to check the information they provided. Member checking allowed them to determine if the transcribed information was accurately interpreted (Creswell, 2012).

A thematic approach was followed by the researcher to present the findings, since the data collection method for this study consisted of interviews. This approach includes discussion of the major themes supported by quotes obtained from the interviews (Creswell, 2012). The major themes allow for elaboration of the findings; however, minor themes could lead to suggestions for further research. The findings of this study were also compared to literature on Latino/a students, as presented in the final chapter. The comparison facilitated discussion of both challenges and support for Latinas in higher education. Furthermore, the data collected through all six interviews will allow the researcher to inform how student support programs aid the academic journey of Latina students transitioning from high school to a four-year university?

Additionally, since the researcher was familiar with student support programs offered at an HSI, this qualitative study includes a personal reflection. The personal reflection provides additional background on the benefits of support programs for Latina students. Thus, a personal reflection using a social capital lens allows further understanding of the challenges Latina students face in higher education as well as offers guidance to higher education institutions and student personnel.

Through the interviews and data analysis, the researcher gained an understanding of the many challenges that Latinas face when applying to college, even with the advanced technology available. The researcher became submerged in the information while coding the transcriptions, which provided the opportunity to identify commonalities among participants. Because of the confidentiality and for the privacy of all participants, real names were not used. Instead, the researcher used pseudonyms to describe the campus, participants, hometowns, and other individuals mentioned in the interviews. The following chapter presents the results derived from the data collected to best understand participants' experiences.



## Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents an overview of the study and summary of the major findings that address the research question: How did student support programs aid the academic journey of Latina students transitioning from high school to a four-year university? This fourth chapter presents themes that emerged from the open coding analysis of the interview transcriptions: (a) family, (b) sense of belonging, (c) resources, (d) and support programs.

To gather the data that would help answer the research question, the six Latina undergraduate students were interviewed and asked a total of fourteen questions; the questions can be found in Appendix C. The researcher decided that conducting interviews as the instrument for this study would allow participants to share their experiences in greater detail (Creswell, 2012). All participants volunteered to be interviewed after receiving an email invitation from the assistant director of their EOP center. The researcher chose this group to examine EOP practices that support them in pursuit of their degree.

The higher education institution selected for this study is in a high socioeconomic status area; however, given the large population of Latino/a students, the university has been granted recognition as an HSI. To best conduct this study, the researcher scheduled one-on-one interviews through the spring 2017 academic term. However, the information shared by participants was inclusive of all their years at the institution. The researcher acknowledges that, while this study could provide suggestions that larger institutions could adopt, there will be other Latina students who will face different challenges during their own academic journeys. Overall, the researcher hopes the findings will help higher education professionals who oversee support programs as well as secondary education professionals who could identify areas that can further assist first-generation students.

**Theme I: Family**

The first theme to emerge from data analysis was family, as all participants shared that their families emotionally supported them throughout their years in college. Additionally, the language barrier was one of the greatest trials for their parents. This section provides information shared by participants regarding their parents, siblings, and grandparents. The following interview questions helped to understand the participant's relationship with their families.

1. Was your family an influencing factor for you to attend college?
2. In what ways was your family able to guide you through the college application process?
3. Has your family been a support system throughout your college journey?

**Lack of information.** As the participants shared, they were the first members of their family to pursue higher education. Three were the youngest in their family, yet the first ones to pursue higher education in the United States. Thus, when asked if their families had been involved in their college application process, the participants shared similar experiences. The common response emphasized their parents' lack of knowledge regarding the application process and college in general. Carolina stated, "I didn't think they understood the steps that it took...to go to college. Given that, they didn't take those steps to go to college." Additionally, Leslie, who also shared that her parents were not able to help because they had not gone through the process, felt "completely in the blind" because she did not know what she was doing. Nevertheless, these participants' parents encouraged them to continue their education even if they could not relate to the experience.

Carolina, whose mother was born in the United States and graduated high school, knew she had her parents' support. However, she shared that, since her parents did not go through the university application process, they lacked the knowledge and information to guide her. Leslie, who grew up in a middle to upper-class community, still found herself "in the blind" because neither her parents nor her older sister could guide her. Unlike her peers who had parents who went to college, Leslie had parents who did not have the opportunity to continue their education. The lack of information not only disallowed parents to guide their daughters but also prevented them from understanding the concept of living on college campuses.

Living on campus was a concept that all interviewees wanted to experience. All but one of the participants did live on campus during freshman year. For Juliana's parents, letting go of their youngest child was no easy task, she shared, "I think for my parents it was just more of they wanted me to do it, but they didn't know how to be able to leave me." Brenda shared a similar experience. Being the only daughter, her father tried to convince her to attend a university closer to home even though home was about an hour away from the university. She stated, "I knew that when I went to college I wanted to dorm and then my time came I wanted to do it." In addition, Brenda's father had difficulty understanding the purpose of her moving away from home. He still had a hard time with the idea of her living on campus. Although Brenda's first choice was to attend a larger university about two hours away from her home, she knew her father would be more comfortable if she were to stay closer. After finally convincing their parents, both Juliana and Brenda decided to leave home to attend CCU, which gave them the opportunity to become independent and to experience the college life.

The participants' college experience was not something their parents or siblings could relate to. Although some parents, like Brenda's father, did not always understand the workload,

for the most part, their families did their best to be supportive. Out of the six interviewees, only Brenda mentioned, “My dad sometimes [asked], ‘Why are you always busy?’ Well, because this is the workload I have.” As the participants shared their experiences their tone expressed how removed their parents were from the college application process. Chapter Five presents a detailed discussion of the impact of parent’s lack of information on their daughters’ college journeys. Parents’ lack of information was just one of the findings to emerge from participants’ experiences. The language barrier was another area highlighted in the interviews.

**Language barrier.** Because many minority families immigrate to the United States seeking better job opportunities and a better future, language many times becomes a barrier to understanding their children’s education. In the United States, English is the language across all academic institutions, and it was evident that communication was a great challenge for these Latina students’ parents. Additionally, many students acted as their parents’ translators, whether at the bank, grocery store, or at school. For this reason, Leslie, who is the youngest of her siblings, chose to attend a university near her home. Their experiences further explained the challenges that both they and their parents faced because of the language barrier.

Genesis’ hometown is a wealthy area, so, when she moved to Orchard, she was surprised people spoke Spanish everywhere she went. She mentioned,

There was not a single place where there wasn’t a person that spoke Spanish. There wasn’t like a store, like the laundromat. Anywhere you go in Orchard pretty much, there’s always customer service that’s gonna be in Spanish.

The experience was unlike her hometown, where her mom struggled to communicate even when she visited the bank. Because of the language barrier, Genesis’ parents were not able to directly help her in her academics. Furthermore, her siblings who live and attended college in Mexico

were not able to advise her on the college process because they could not relate. Genesis hoped to obtain a bachelor's degree to care for her parents who financially supported her entire education.

Carolina made it clear that seeking help from her father on homework was a challenge, as he did not speak English. She stated,

My dad didn't speak the language of English, so it was very hard for me to kind of "Apá, me puedes ayudar con mi tarea?" He didn't know because he didn't graduate high school. He didn't get an advanced education to be able to help me with that and not know the English language.

However, her mom, who did speak English, was more involved in her education.

Carolina's parents, sister, and grandparents supported her throughout her college years. Because of the challenges her parents faced, Carolina shared her father wanted her to have a better lifestyle, not live "paycheck to paycheck." Carolina's parents wanted her to be educated and to become something in life. Similarly, Leslie's mother encouraged her to progress, succeed and go "beyond what she was capable of." When speaking of her mother, Leslie shared, her mother felt illiterate because it took her a long time to read and write. Leslie shared that her mother always stated that she crossed the border to give her and her siblings a better future and lifestyle. Even though Leslie's mother supported her decision to go to college, neither of her parents could properly guide her.

Through conversations with all participants, the challenge to navigate the college application process was obvious. The lack of information from their parents led many of them to feel uneasy about pursuing college. During Michelle's interview, she pointed out the importance of exposing parents to educational resources. Michelle mentioned that, when volunteering at the

science carnival that her university hosts each year to get middle school children interested in the science fields, “if you speak Spanish, you wear a pin, so you could speak to the parents,” thus demonstrating the importance of considering the language barrier for Latino/a families. After all, as many participants expressed their parents moved to the United States to give them a better future.

## **Theme II: Sense of Belonging**

The second theme reflects the participants’ perception of being Latina in higher education. Participants were asked to share their experience regarding diversity on campus. All participants felt their campus was more diverse than they expected, and their participation in EOP allowed them to find a home away from home. All but one lived on campus a minimum of one year, which lead to the subtheme, campus culture. Additionally, the impact of Latino/a faculty on their campus was also highlighted throughout the interviews, prompting the researcher to create a second subtheme: Latino/a faculty. The following subthemes highlight the participants’ experience of their transition to college.

**Campus culture.** This section covers participants’ experiences with diversity on campus and with being away from home. As Juliana shared, having to adjust to a new environment was “a big thing to get used to.” For her, this was especially difficult because the majority of students in her high school were Mexican. She explained that “you can count with one hand how many White American students there were. So, coming here, it was kind of, I don’t know, of culture shock.” Contrary to Juliana’s high school experience, the student population at her university had a higher rate of White students, even though it is considered an HSI.

Carolina, who had a similar experience, felt that she did not fit in when she started college. However, through her junior and senior year, she witnessed an increase in diversity on

campus, making her feel like she fit in better. Although EOP is discussed further in the section on the fourth theme, Brenda's experience helped explain how her participation allowed her to find a sense of belonging. She mentioned,

I know that I can go into the EOP center and really connect with people. It's really cool. You can be a freshman and connect with, like, a senior, and you see people working on campus that were previously in EOP, and it's really cool the way you can connect and make friends like that.

All interviewees noted that, although their university consists of a large population of White students in comparison to other campuses, diversity was practiced in multiple ways. Events on campus, clubs, and student organizations were some examples used to describe the growing diversity.

Genesis and Leslie both grew up in predominantly White communities. Thus, they did feel their campus supported their diversity and culture. Given that the students they went to school with were predominantly White, both felt attending CCU reconnected them to their culture. Leslie, who was the only participant to not live on campus, felt she was encouraged to be involved both by EOP and the biology program. Genesis appreciated that she was exposed to other Latino/a students and to a community that does speak Spanish because, even though she was born in Mexico, she shared her Spanish is not fluent. To further explain the influence of student experiences on their sense of belonging, the following subtheme regards interactions with Latino/a faculty.

**Latino/a faculty.** To gain a better understanding of the participant's experience with faculty and staff on their campus, the researcher asked if they felt supported by the faculty

members. Because the participants highlighted the role that Latino/a faculty played in their adjustment to a university setting, the findings were essential to this study.

As Juliana, pointed out “there’s not enough.” To her, it “is important to have that diversity, to see Latinos who have come this far,” referring to Latino/as who pursued advanced degrees. Latino/a faculty is important to Juliana because they are the professors who can make a difference in the classroom and help students feel more confident. For Michelle, her University 150 professor, Marina, was the first Latina professor she encountered. She shared, “I didn’t see any Hispanic role models in my high school years.” She enjoyed the course because it was the first time she witnessed a Latina teaching, which was “really interesting” to her. This is not to say that White professors negatively impact the education of Latino/a students. However, like Genesis mentioned, “Latino professors do just get it a little more.” Carolina also pointed out that her Latino/a professors understood her: “I feel like they’re able to relate from where I come from with my ethnicity with my diversity so, I’m able to have a connection with them.” To the participants, Latino/a faculty have a larger impact on Latino/a students because they are relatable, and students gain a sense of confidence by seeing someone from a similar background who accomplished what they, too, want to accomplish.

Additionally, participants expressed the importance of Latina women, and women in general, in higher education. Empowerment was the word they used to describe the meaning of being Latina in higher education. For Carolina, having “our voices be heard” was significant, especially as more women are entering careers historically led by men. Careers in engineering, math, and science, as both Carolina and Michelle shared, are careers that women should be encouraged to pursue. Similarly, Leslie shared that the fact she was Latina in higher education stating,



[being a woman] doesn't mean I can't step out of that stereotype and go into a STEM field which is dominated usually by males and Caucasian, like that kind of area and it's like wealthy. And I'm like 'If I have the brains to do to do it, then why not do it?'

The second theme pertains to Latina students' sense of belonging in higher education. Questions regarding diversity were used to identify the areas of a university setting that affect or challenge first-generation Latina students. Chapter Five presents a discussion on the impact that culture and faculty have on Latina undergraduate students' academic performance.

### **Theme III: Resources**

The researcher, using knowledge of social capital theory and Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure, examined students' academic confidence, family support, and future aspirations. One interesting similarity amongst all participants was they were involved in extracurricular activities, community programs or academic support programs throughout their secondary education. Another interesting detail was that all participants changed their major within their first three semesters. Subsequently, the third theme was chosen to represent the participants' involvement, their community, and the mentors. All three areas that the participants shared became the fundamental resources that influenced their decision to pursue higher education.

**Involvement.** A common characteristic of these students, besides being first-generation and Latinas, was their involvement in academic and community programs. Participants shared the common sentiment of helping others and volunteering. Throughout their secondary education programs, programs such as Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) and Upward Bound seemed to have guided them through their academic development. While their

parents were not able to guide them through their college applications, the resources they found were essential to their decision to apply to 4-year universities.

Juliana's involvement with Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MECHA) influenced her to go to pursue higher education. She stated,

I think it was two high school teachers. One of them was my MECHA advisor. She wasn't even my teacher. She was just my MECHA advisor, and the other was my chemistry teacher. They were really pushy about it. They wanted to see me continue with my education. If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't have really chosen to come.

Additionally, for Genesis, the AVID program made sure she applied to four-year universities: "AVID, they didn't even let you apply. They didn't even want you to go to community college." Through involvement in high school, participants were guided and influenced to go to 4-year universities.

Brenda's experience with Upward Bound provided support for her parents to be involved in the application process. She shared, "the Upward Bound program made sure that, for each student, their parents made time to sit down and be there when it came time apply." Through this, the program staff wanted parents "to ask any questions, especially with the financial aid portion." They wanted, as Brenda explained, parents to feel included in the process. Yet, because Brenda's father had to work, he did feel left out in comparison to her mother, who was more involved. However, Brenda and her parents understood that the sacrifice of her father's absence was for the best.

Participants' involvement in academic programs prior to attending college provided them the resources to apply and be granted admission to 4-year institutions. Genesis, for example, was involved in many community programs as well as AVID. Through AVID, she gained the

confidence to apply to 4-year institutions and not community colleges. Involvement yielded a beneficial resource for these students and their parents.

**Community.** One of the questions asked of the participants was how their community influenced their decision to go to college. Given the participants' active involvement with community programs such as Boys and Girls Club and Woman Leadership Program, they benefited from their community's influence. Leslie had a more traditional experience put college on her mind:

Growing up in an environment where there's privileged kids and rich, and middle-class, upper-class, stuff like that. Since they were little kids, they've been talking about college, going to a university. It's happening. It's like that is the route to take.

For Leslie, living in a high SES community benefited her future endeavors. Similarly, Genesis' involvement with the Boys and Girls club as well as AVID helped her envision a college education in her future. Unlike many students whom she hears say, "I wasn't meant to be here, I had no support," Genesis had much support and encouragement to go to college. Going to college was part of her future, even though, as an AB 540 student, financing that college education was tougher than for most students. In the State of California the Assembly Bill 540 offers in-state tuition to undocumented students who meet certain requirements, attending any UC, CSU, or California community college. Thus, Genesis referred to herself as an AB 540 student because although she paid in-state tuition, federal student aid was not available to her unlike other students.

Carolina was the only participant who attended private schools prior to attending a public university. Like the other participants, Carolina's community was a major influencing factor: "I went to private Catholic school. They wanted us to go to college. Everything was leading us to

go to college. So, with that, I guess, I was always influenced.” Although many of the participants were not sure how they were going to afford to go to college, they envisioned themselves in college early on. Leslie’s own experience did differ from many other first-generation low-income students, yet it provides evidence that communities affect students and their future. Although Leslie’s family was not from a high SES, she had the opportunity to attend schools that could afford resources, allowing her to be influenced by other peers. Genesis’ environment also played a role in her decision to go to college, as she shared. Because the city she lived in was a wealthy city, she was considered “White washed” even though she was born in Mexico. Nevertheless, Genesis knew going to college was part of her journey, in great part because of the mentorship she received.

**Mentors.** Students are influenced by many different factors, one being the mentors they encounter. For three of the participants, mentors were a significant influence. Through the relationships they participants built with their mentors, they learned about student support programs, such as EOP. Otherwise, they believed they could have missed out on the opportunity to apply to colleges or additional support programs. Although all participants had the opportunity to participate in programs that gave them access to resources, only half had long-term mentors. Genesis, Brenda, and Michelle had the most to share about the influence of their mentors.

Genesis’ interview, unlike the other participants, found her mentor in sixth grade: “She’d always encourage us to go to college, so, ever since sixth grade, I’ve always been like, ‘Okay, you’re going to college. You’re going to college. It doesn’t matter.’” Genesis had access to resources for both her parents and her because of her involvement and the mentorship she received. As Genesis shared, her mentor connected her to other individuals who spoke Spanish

and could provide support to her parents. Because of the relationship with her mentor, she was influenced to think of college as a path for her future.

Brenda and Michelle found mentors through community programs they were involved with in high school and in college. Michelle's mentor provided her with career information: "She was an accountant for a dental office, but she was a city council member, and she was an African American female. So, I got a lot of leadership information from her." The guidance Michelle received from her mentor was especially helpful, since she was initially inclined to pursue business as a major in college. Additionally, having a female mentor raised Michelle's self-confidence. Furthermore, Brenda described her mentors as "empowering," which is what she aspired to be. Through different volunteer work, internships, and work opportunities, Brenda, encountered several individuals who became mentors. Her mentors, who are Latinas in higher education, influenced her to move forward in the same direction: "All my mentors have always been so empowering. In the back of my head, I've always been like, wow, I want to be like them." Brenda hoped to pursue a graduate degree in educational psychology or education to later become a university professor. The experiences shared by each participant included at least one example of the key role mentors played in their lives. Additionally, all three subthemes involvement, community, and mentors, represented the different types of resources that were available to the participants. The following section describes experiences with their college support program.

#### **Theme IV: Student Support Programs**

The second and third themes pertain to participants' sense of belonging and the resources they had access to. Both factors allowed them to pursue a college degree. The participants discuss how support programs available at their university helped them persevere. This study

focused on the importance of support programs for students and their academic success, especially for first-generation Latina students. Programs such as EOP, in which all interviewees were active participants since their freshman year, are discussed in this section.

Access to EOP and academic counselors is one of the benefits of this student support programs. Michelle stated, “Just having the program there and knowing you have someone to talk to, like, you can go talk to this counselor. It’s just good to have a support group.” Additionally, Carolina pointed out that meeting with both her EOP counselor and an academic counselor helped her be more involved and attentive of her course. The support allowed her to be less confused as to what she was doing: “Am I taking the right classes, or, you know, waiting until graduation and then knowing, ‘oh, well, todavía me faltan like five more classes’ that I need to take and I didn’t know.” Having that support allowed Carolina to not be caught off guard with the courses she needed to graduate. This was essential to all participants because they all changed their major within their first three semesters.

All participants expressed their approval of their one-on-one sessions with their EOP counselors, which were required. Students, to stay on track, need to meet with a counselor each semester, meet with an academic counselor, and attend a campus event. Additionally, meetings with the EOP counselors allowed students to be commended for their good grades. As both Genesis and Carolina mentioned, the appraisal felt good and was motivating. The sense of belonging was identified as the second theme given students’ common experiences on campus and with faculty. Student support programs were separated from the second theme to allow for more detail in discussing the programs’ various outcomes. However, Michelle’s experience demonstrates having a counselor provided her a support group. Thus, programs such as EOP not

only guide students through their academic work, but they also offer the space to connect with their campus.

The students who participated in this study described EOP as being their “home away from home.” In addition, they made connections prior to starting college through a summer program. The experience permitted them to feel more comfortable being away from their family. Genesis, through the summer bridge program, connected with friends, and, as she recalls, had a small group to socialize with before being exposed to a larger group. Also, for Juliana,

The program has made it more inclusive because it’s not just Mexicans. We have a variety of diverse groups in our program. So, it kind of gives you an insight of what’s about to come, and I think that it has really made a difference in my college experience.

Statements regarding the impact EOP had on their revealed their transition to a university environment was reinforced because of the summer bridge program and the interaction they had with their counselors.

Because of the lack of information from their parents and the language barrier, as discussed earlier, the participants were not always able to share their college experiences with their families. As Leslie pointed out, the EOP program introduced her to other peers whom she could relate to, making the transition to college a more pleasant experience. For Genesis, connecting with others minimized the feeling of isolation as a college freshman. Additionally, Leslie noted that EOP provided the support that her sister could not or did not know how to provide and allowed her to get out of her comfort zone by being involved on campus. The experiences shared by the participants informed how the practices of support programs made available to them helped them persevere.

## **Conclusion**

The themes emerged through the stories of the participants, who shared similarities beyond EOP participation. Even though their families supported them through their college years, they lacked the knowledge to guide them through the application process and their experiences once in college. Participating in support programs such as EOP gave these students a support group where they could relate to other students and feel confident they made the right choice. Given that they enrolled in a four-year university straight after high school, it was important to inquire about their academic confidence. While all knew, college was in their future, they were not necessarily confident they were academically prepared. However, as they enter the final phase of their college journey, their confidence improved.

The overall contribution of the students who participated in this study was their stories as first-generation students, which is the story of many other Latina students as they, too, pursue a college degree. Furthermore, as participants Leslie and Genesis shared, being that their mothers do not speak English, they assisted with translation. Because of this, Leslie only applied to CCU, which would allow her to live at home. As previous researchers, have explained, students from minority backgrounds feel the responsibility to take care of their family, limiting their choices of universities to attend (Tovar, 2015; Crisp et al., 2015). On the other hand, Brenda's mother, who did learn English through her work as a teacher's assistant in her native Guatemala, could understand, yet was not completely able to guide Brenda. Because the parents of first-generation students are not able to relate, guiding their child is a challenge in comparison to students whose parents did attend college.

Even though participants' parents lacked the ability to help their children during the application process, they all did encourage them in their decision to pursue a college education. Carolina's grandparents, as encouragement, told her, "echale ganas," which translates to keep



putting up effort. Michelle's grandmother bragged about her granddaughter being a doctor, which embarrasses Michelle; however, it makes her feel proud of getting an education. Parents' expectations are high even though they are not always knowledgeable of the requirements to obtain a college degree. McCoy (2014) noted this issue when studying first-generation students in extremely White institutions. In Genesis' case, even though her parents could not guide her to the application process, they financially supported her decision to attend CCU. Because of this, Genesis goal after completing college is to send her parents back to Mexico, so they can relax after all their years of hard work. Increasing students' academic self-concept could increase the number of Latina/os obtaining bachelor's degrees, as Cuellar (2014) found that, at HSIs, family support increased students' academic self-concept at the end of college.

Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure explains the need for students to find their identity in their college campus. For first-generation students, adjusting to a new environment can be a challenge, especially those at a PWI (Cerezo & Chang, 2013; Cuellar, 2014). The key factor that allowed participants like, Carolina and Juliana to fit into their campus was the increase of diversity. To further understand the impact of the college culture, the researcher asked participants if they felt their campus supported their culture and diversity.

Sense of belonging, presented as the second theme explained how the participants felt when they started college and how those feelings evolved. Genesis and Leslie shared their ability to reconnect to their culture because of the number of Latino/a students in their institutions. Both Genesis and Leslie, who grew up in areas with a smaller Latino/a population, felt the diversity on their campus helped them cope with their transition to college. Carolina and Juliana, on the other hand, attended schools predominately populated by Latino/a students. Their transition to CCU was described to be a culture shock. Many researchers pointed out the

alienation and culture adjustment experienced by Latino/a student's (Cerezo and Chang, 2013; Cuellar, 2014; Melendez & Melendez, 2010), especially on campuses with a lack of Latino/a students (Gonzalez, 2002). This goes to show that the lack of Latino/a's in higher education is still preventing first-generation students to fully relate to other students and faculty who are not Latino/a.

Moving out of their home to go to college seemed to be another aspect for these participants to overcome. The experience was described by some of the participants as "scary." Carolina mentioned "tenia miedo." She was scared because moving to college meant she had to grow up and become an adult. Genesis and Michelle shared the same sentiment, and both acknowledged that moving away from home required them to become independent. However, for some, the bond with their parents and siblings grew after moving away. Genesis and Brenda, who were excited to live on campus because they grew up knowing they wanted to have the college experience, shared that, as they have gotten older, they appreciate their families more. Juliana, who shared that her parents did not know how to let her go, found a schedule that allowed her to spend time with her family without missing out on the college experience. Even though Leslie's parents encouraged her, because there was no need for support programs at her high school, she wondered how other Latino/a students could be guided. The same concern was expressed by Michelle, who, like all other participants, had no knowledge of EOP until she applied to universities. High SES areas offer fewer programs for students because the need is not high enough, yet those who need the support are left with the challenge of finding the resources on their own.

Previous research highlighted the benefits of mentorship for underrepresented students (Cavazos, 2016; Cerezo & Chang, 2013). The experiences participants shared reinforced the

benefits of mentors. For Juliana, pursuing college was possible because of her chemistry teacher and her MECHA advisor. In Genesis' case, being mentored since the sixth grade embedded in her the possibility of going to college. These experiences support previous studies which demonstrated that support systems help students persist (Delgado-Guerrero & Gloria, 2013), just as mentorship relationships with faculty also increase the rate of persistence (Cavazos, 2016). Mentorship not only assisted participants in applying to college, but also informed them of programs like EOP which guided them through their college journey.

The participants did not have knowledge of EOP due to lack of information as first-generation students. Michele and Brenda applied to EOP because they were told to by mentors or counselors without being fully aware of what the program entailed. However, they were glad they listened. Michelle even informed her peers in high school who were also applying to college. A larger number of students continue their education without discovering programs that can be beneficial to their journey. Nevertheless, Latina mentors empowered these participants to keep moving forward and, as they shared, prevented them from becoming a statistic.

The following chapter further discusses the findings, implication for practice, and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to better understand factors that support first-generation Latina students who attend a 4-year institution after high school. The researcher was interested in discovering, how did student support programs aid the academic journey of Latina students transitioning from high school to a four-year university? The findings were discovered through one-on-one interviews with six Latina undergraduate students who shared their experiences by answering questions and reflecting on their educational achievements. The researcher chose to use interviews to gather data for this study because it would allow participants to share their experiences in greater detail (Creswell, 2012). The university chosen for this study is in a high SES area, yet, because of the large percentage of Latino/a students enrolled, it has been recognized as an HSI, which made it an ideal location to seek participants. Additionally, all participants had to have junior or senior standing, be first-generation, and, most importantly, Latinas to participate. After the interviews, the researcher analyzed the information through an open coding process, and four themes were identified. In this final chapter, the researcher discusses the findings and the connections to existing literature. Suggestions for future research, limitations, and a personal reflection by the researcher is also included.

Chapter two presented a review of literature focused on areas such as campus environment, family support, and academic support. As a result, the objective of the researcher was to identify challenges Latina students faced in their pursuit of a college degree. To achieve this, the researcher focused on the following questions:

1. What does it mean to be a Latina in higher education?
2. In what ways was family able to guide these students through the college application process?

3. How confident were they academically when starting college?

However, to truly discover these students' motivation to continue their education despite the challenges, the researcher asked fourteen questions during each interview. These questions touched on topics related to their demographics, family, community, and participation in EOP. The following section discusses the findings that were more thoroughly presented in Chapter Four. Four themes emerged from the study: (a) family, (b) sense of belonging, (c) resources, (d) and support programs.

### **Discussion**

The children of many immigrant families are influenced to pursue a college education, and, for many, the standards are set high (Matos, 2011), yet those who do pursue a higher education face the challenge of figuring out how to make it to college. With regards to family, one of the questions asked of each participant was how, if at all, family was involved in the application process. The questions yielded similar responses, none which were unexpected. From these responses, two subthemes emerged: lack of information and language barrier. All participants shared their parents lacked the ability to guide them as they applied to college. The findings included in the family theme supports previous research emphasizing the effect of parents' involvement (McCoy, 2014; Melendez & Melendez, 2010; Tovar, 2015). Additionally, the language barrier is key to the support that parents provide their children. Because of the language barrier, these participants' parents were not able to assist them in applying to college or in applying for financial aid or student loans. Language barriers limit parents from being involved even when their child moves on to higher education. Thus, the participants' experiences demonstrate the need for more programs to aid parents in understanding the college application process, as well as programs to teach parents how to support their children in college.

The findings presented in chapter four did relate to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2; academic support, campus culture, and parental support were all reiterated in the findings. The findings suggested the need for parental support, the importance of campus culture for Latina's to find their sense of belonging, and the benefits of involvement on student academic achievements. Additionally, through the lack of information from their parents, the language barrier that makes it difficult for parents to send their child off to college, and limited financial resources, these six students found support through EOP to get through their first years of college. The focus should not only be on getting Latino/a students to college, but there should also be a focus on getting students through college.

Out of the total number of students enrolled in post-secondary institutions in 2014, 16.5% were Hispanic, those pursuing a graduate or doctoral degree were 9.1% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Subsequently, the number of Latino/a faculty is still lacking in higher education institutions. Although the setting of this study has a large population of Latino/a students and a number of Latino/a professors, the same cannot be said about all universities in California. Cuellar (2014), for example, demonstrated that, at non-HSIs, Latina students felt intimidated, resulting in having a lower academic self-concept. The lack of Latino/a faculty prompts many students to feel out of place or less deserving of their college education. Genesis, pointed out Latino/as "just have to be better or at least try to be better" in comparison to other students who had better backgrounds. Furthermore, the Latino/a faculty at CCU allowed participants to relate and feel connected to their professors. Thus, the findings on faculty demonstrate that faculty in all types of institutions can have an impact.

An unexpected answer to how community affected their decision to go to college was the resources available to them. All participants were involved with academic or community

programs, hence their influence on pursuing a college degree. The interviews revealed two commonalities: (a) the benefits participants gained while being active in their communities and (b) the importance of mentorship for students and their parents.

Although the participants did not feel completely confident academically, because of their mentorship and family support, they knew they had potential to succeed at a 4-year university. Genesis, for example, participated in AVID, a program which encouraged students not to apply to community colleges because they would be accepted at 4-year universities. The influence of their support systems encouraged participants to move forward in their education. However, what about those students that lack the resources and the mentorship and whose parents hinder support?

Through various questions during the interview, the researcher aimed to explore the impact of campus support and support from programs like EOP. The findings yield evidence supporting research in existence. EOP provides students financial assistance, academic advising, mentoring opportunities, and transitional assistance (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015). For participants, leaving home to attend college was a challenge. However, they found a “home away from home” through EOP. The program gave them a place to gain access to new friends. The program introduced them to other students they could relate to, helping them cope with their transition to an unknown environment. Additionally, counseling, which has been demonstrated to support academic success (Riegle-Crumb, 2010), did, in fact, benefit these participants. The findings demonstrated that all types of higher education institutions need support systems to guide Latina students.

**Limitations**

As a first-generation student, the researcher was motivated to study this population. Although the researcher's college experience did not include participation in EOP, it did include participation in TRiO programs. Thus, the experiences shared by participants were, to an extent, relatable. However, EOP was chosen for this study because it is one of the few programs exclusively supporting first-generation students. The findings support the benefits of the program. Furthermore, given the population, the location of this study can be a limitation because the experiences of Latina students can differ from those of students at other institutions. The participants could be another limitation because, although the study focused on Latina students. The participants had points of views and experiences that vary from those of other underrepresented students.

**Recommendations**

Research demonstrating the need for Latino/a faculty already exists (Cavazos, 2016; Cuellar, 2014), and studies highlighting the benefits EOP has also been available (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015). Yet, the rate of Latinas pursuing post-baccalaureate degrees only increased by 0.4% from 2013 to 2014 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), demonstrating that, although there has been a slight increase in Latino/a students in higher education, support is still fundamental to motivate them to pursue advanced degrees. Only then will there be an increase in Latino/a faculty, which, as the findings showed, positively influence students' experience. There should also be more investment by college faculty, administrators, and staff in racial and ethnic-specific campus programming, to provide undergraduate students with more opportunities to interact with others who share their similar backgrounds (Kiyama, et al., 2015). This study focused only on Latina students who enroll at a 4-year college right after high school.



Additionally, the participants participated in EOP throughout their college career. This group was chosen to understand how prepared Latina students truly are when transitioning to college, the challenges they faced, and the factors that motivated them to continue moving forward. Thus, a longitudinal study on high school seniors could be beneficial to understand the other factors influencing students to either pursue or opt out of higher education.

Additional research on male Latino students should also continue, as the rate of male students enrolled in any type of higher education is far lower than that of female students (Riegle-Crumb, 2010). Furthermore, the unexpected factor that came from this study was the need for career guidance. All participants entered college pursuing different majors than the one they had selected at the time of interview; one mentioned changing majors three or four times. The reasoning for all participants was that they thought the major they originally selected was the only way to help others. Thus, high schools as well as higher education institutions, including community colleges, need to guide students to better identify the end goal of their education. This is important because students need to identify a path for their future; graduating cannot be the only objective. Identifying their purpose benefits graduation rates. If students change their major multiple times, they run the risk of postponing their graduation.

Although this study did not focus on immigrant students, it is important to continue research supporting AB540 students, especially amid the United States political climate. Because of the location of this study, the findings cannot reflect the experiences of students in institutions outside of California. The researcher acknowledges that California is a far more diverse State, ethnically, in comparison to others. Continued research on Latina and Latino students and student support programs helping first-generation students is essential to increase the graduation rates and possibly increase the number of Latino/a faculty on college campuses.

Through this study the researcher was interested in identifying, how student support programs aided the academic journey of Latina students transitioning from high school to a four-year university. Using an HSI as the setting for this study produced findings which the researcher believes could benefit the Latina undergraduate population. However, a larger PWI would have also been an ideal choice for the setting of this study. Future researchers should investigate how PWI's are supporting Latina undergraduate students in comparison to an HSI in southern California. Furthermore, the questions used throughout the six interviews helped in answering the main question of this study, the researcher confirmed that all six participants felt that their participation in EOP allowed them to persevere in their journey to college. The unexpected result of this study was the number of times all participants changed their major prior to discovering the area that most interests them. Thus, the researcher wished career guidance could have been investigated more thoroughly in this study.

### **Personal Reflection**

Social capital, the chosen theoretical lens has been used by multiple researchers in various forms as explained by Rogosic and Baranovic (2016). For this study, social capital is used to demonstrate the influence on social mobility. Although the researcher chose to be an outsider in this study, she shared many similarities with the participants except participating in EOP. The researcher was not aware of the support EOP provided to students, until now. Instead the researcher did participate in Student Support Services (SSS), a TRiO program after the second year of college. In addition, the researcher believes that even after being able to complete an undergraduate degree in four years, mentorship would have been beneficial throughout those years, specifically for career guidance. Through this study, the researcher can now identify the importance of student support programs and families of Latino/a student's much better.

The researcher hoped to live on campus when it was time to attend a university. However, having that conversation with family members was not an easy conversation as a first-generation Latina student. The researcher's personal experiences along with the findings of this study, support previous studies that family members of Latina students could greatly benefit from additional education regarding the college process. Also, like the participants who found a "home" in EOP, the researcher found a sense of belonging through involvement with SSS, clubs and organizations on campus, which contributed to my academic persistence. Through the findings of this study, the researcher hopes to have highlighted the perseverance of six Latina students who choose, amidst obstacles, to attend a four-year college. As a Latina, first-generation graduate student, the researcher believes there is still a need for mentorship and support programs to motivate Latina/o students to pursue graduate level degrees.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the experiences shared by six Latina students support previous work on Latina/o students in higher education. For first-generation students, applying to and attending college becomes difficult when resources are less accessible. Consequently, many do not identify with their campus or find a sense of purpose for pursuing a degree. For these students, a sense of belonging is crucial not only to improving graduation rates, but also to not lose their sense of culture. Given that Latino/as are predicted to make up 30% of students in public schools by the 2022–2023 school year (McGlynn, 2014), it is necessary to increase the number of individuals achieving advanced degrees. In addition, "social capital (measured according to the degree of parental involvement in a child's education) shows a stronger relationship between self-respect and educational achievements, making the quality of the parent-child relationship responsible for social mobility" (Rogoscic & Baranovic, 2016, p. 95). Students are more persuaded to give back

to their communities, creating a cycle of educated Latina/os in the community (Moreno, 2016).

However, student support programs are just one way to increase the cycle. Institutional agents in both K-12 programs and higher education must help create the cycle that can lead to more educated, diverse communities.

Appendix A  
Gatekeeper Letter



**DIVISION OF STUDENT AFFAIRS**  
Educational Opportunity Program

November 14, 2016

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter is to grant permission to Karina Cruz, master's student pursuing her degree in Educational Leadership with a Specialization in Higher Education, to seek Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) students for a research study taking place at [REDACTED]. I understand that her research will focus on the educational programs that support Latina students to persist in their pursuit of a postsecondary education. EOP supports Ms. Cruz's current plan to begin her study this December 2016, ending in May of 2017.

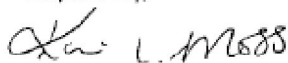
The EOP office, allows Ms. Cruz to seek six to seven volunteers to participate in one-on-one interviews. Participants can be sought via social media, the *EOP Monthly* (program newsletter), EOP Center's digital signage, and individual emails sent by the program's Assistant Director. Ms. Cruz understands that a listserv of all EOP students' emails will not be given, rather the Assistant Director will serve as Ms' Cruz's liaison to communicate with students until her volunteers are determined.

The EOP office is in agreement with the following:

- Data collected from participants will be included in the final thesis.
- Names of the participants will be kept confidential and
- Participants will be allowed to check the reported findings for accuracy.
- Student participation is voluntary.
- Students may drop out of the study, at any time, without consequence.

EOP appreciates the chance to aid Ms. Cruz in her research, including the solicitation of participants currently in the Educational Opportunity Program.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kari L. Moss".

[REDACTED]

Assistant Director, Educational Opportunity Program

## Appendix B

## Participant Consent Form

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study. My name is Karina Cruz. I am a graduate student in the Master of Arts, Educational Leadership Specialization program at California State University Channel Islands (CI). To participate in this study, you must be at least 18 years old.

For my Master's thesis study, I will be conducting one on one interviews with Latina students. For the purpose of this study some of the questions you will be asked will focus on your involvement with the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), family support and your future plans. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can withdraw at any time without consequence. Your identity will be protected as pseudonyms will be used for your name and university. All materials and data collected as part of the study will be destroyed after three years. If you do choose to volunteer a \$10 Amazon gift card will be awarded at the end of your interview as a token of appreciation.

It is expected that participants may experience minimal risks from this study. People react differently to stimuli, and it is possible that some may react negatively to the interview questions. If you experience any discomfort, you can terminate the process at any time and you have access to me (Karina Cruz) and Dr. James Martinez should any issues arise. Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your current or future relationship with the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) or with [CCU]. Prior to dissemination of study's results, you will have the opportunity to review responses and researcher's interpretation before publication.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me (Karina Cruz) at 213-300-9457 or [karina.cruz@csuci.edu](mailto:karina.cruz@csuci.edu) or my thesis advisor, Dr. James Martinez at 805-444-9782 or [james.martinez@csuci.edu](mailto:james.martinez@csuci.edu). For questions or issues regarding your rights as a subject, please feel free to contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) **at 805-437-8496 or via email at [irb@csuci.edu](mailto:irb@csuci.edu).**

By signing this consent form, you are agreeing to be a participant in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

By selecting this box, I agree for the interview to be audio recorded.

By selecting this box, I do not agree for the interview to be audio recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix C

## Opening Questions/Demographics:

1. How old are you?
2. In what city, did you grow up?
3. What is your major? What inspired you to pursue such major?
4. Are you a first-generation college student?
5. How, if at all, did the community you grew up in impact your decision to apply to college?
6. To you, what does it mean to be a Latina in higher education?

## Family Structure:

7. Was your family an influencing factor for you to attend college?
8. In what ways was your family able to guide you through the college application process?  
How did that affect you?
9. Has your family been a support system throughout your college journey?

## College Experience:

10. How confident were you academically when you started college? How has that changed?
11. Do you feel that the campus supports your culture and diversity?
12. Do you feel supported by the faculty members? What about by staff members?
13. How has participating in the EOP program benefited your college experience?
14. What do you aspire to do after graduating?

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## **Certificate of Completion**

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that **Karina Cruz** successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 05/04/2016.

Certification Number: 2069119.