

First Generation Latinas in Graduate School:

A Thesis Presented to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
California State University, Channel Islands

In (Partial) Fulfillment  
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Masters of Arts

By  
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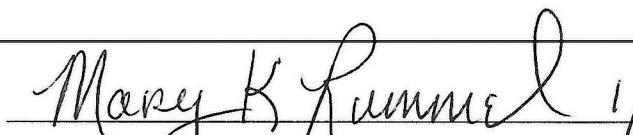
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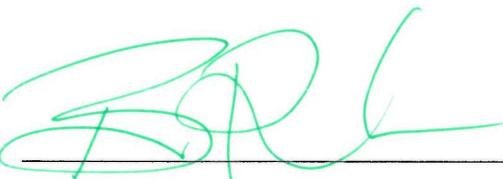
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-Carolina

**Abstract**

The purpose of this qualitative research was to identify barriers that first generation Latinas face when pursuing a graduate degree. This population of students is emerging and in order for campuses to fully understand their needs, these students will need to share their experiences. The narratives of five recently Latina women awarded masters recipients are shared in order to gain insight into their decision to attend graduate school, what kept them going, and what obstacles they faced. The data collected in this study provides campus administrators with a glimpse into who their student population is. The study uncovered the following themes: “family” “identity” “mentorship” “career goals” “finances” “campus resources” and “the next generation.”

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The census-released data showing Hispanics or Latinos as being the fastest growing minority group at 17.8%, making Hispanics or Latinos the largest minority population. It is projected that the number of Hispanics or Latinos will double by the year 2050 (United States Census, 2014) With the rapid increase of Hispanics or Latinos in our nation comes the increase in enrollment from this group in higher education institutions. College enrollment is increasing every year among this particular group. Although both men and women are enrolling in four-year institutions, it is women who have a higher percentage of enrollment. More and more Latinas are enrolling in four year institutions and very few continue on to a graduate education. For the purpose of this study, Latina is being defined as a woman of Latin-American descent. Some of the countries that fall into this category are Argentina, Costa Rica, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela. For many in this group, not only do they identify as Hispanic or Latino but also as first generation college students. For the purpose of this study the term first generation college student will be defined as a student whose parents have no college experience and who are the first ones in their family to obtain a college degree. The term first generation student is being heard and used very often now as there are more and more individuals identifying as “first gen” in their institution. This term is being used more and more frequently and has now been taken as a term of pride for many. It also has alerted higher education administrators and staff to address the needs for first generation students on their campus. (Darling & Smith, 2011) This study will focus on the struggles inside and outside the classroom that Latinas face in their pursuit of a masters degree as well as what keeps them going despite these obstacles. This research will also provide and understanding of barriers and struggles Latina graduate students face when pursuing their post-baccalaureate degree. Four areas will be the main focus, these areas being the students'

desires, academic needs, struggles in graduate school, and the lack of or importance of mentorship.

Research by the College Board indicates that only a small number of Latina women complete a four-year degree and even fewer go on to enter a graduate program. The decision to attend graduate school is a big decision to make. For this group, the decision to continue their education comes with financial, family, and gender obligations. Latinas face the difficult task of balancing school, work, and family obligations. For some, their families pressure them to dismiss their educational goals in order to contribute to their family's financial well-being. (Leyva, 2011) Because very few Latinas have gone on to a masters degree, there are not many individuals who understand their daily struggle. There is still not enough research on this group to fully understand what help they seek. One of the problems they face is not having a mentor to guide them through the process and/or to provide them with support. Unless there is awareness of the barriers Latinas face in the pursuit of a masters degree, these numbers will continue to be low.

Historically, the Hispanic population of the United States has been considered undereducated which is due to some significant social and economic struggles that have kept many Hispanic Americans from many them from fulfilling their full potential. However, this group has been increasing in enrollment and college completion. This is because many universities have become Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). Hispanic students are embracing higher education through outreach programs that target them for college enrollment. However, these programs diminish in graduate school. Students are forced to find other means to get motivated so they can continue their education. One of the most consistent obstacles for Hispanic students has been a lack of financial resources. Students are in search of scholarships and loans in order to pay for school. (Rodriguez, 1982) Financial resources are a topic that needs further

investigation. Many aspects of programs have changed. This gap in knowledge is what will be the focus, thus making sure there is an understanding on why this particular group has low numbers of enrollment in graduate programs.

Little is known about who these women who have earned admission to graduate school are. Few studies have focused on the factors that promote academic success among Latina/o students. (Cruz, 2012) Although research exists on Mexican American women and education, most studies focus only on dropout rates, low performance levels, and low educational attainment. Most studies only take undergraduate education into account, and many do not study Latinas exclusively. The gap in literature can be addressed via the studies on successful completion of a four-year degree. This case study of five recently graduated Latinas from a graduate program will highlight their voices in order to better understand what they need in order to achieve academic success. This qualitative study will focus on the motivational factors these women had to continue their education regardless of the obstacles they faced, who if anyone has served as a mentor to them, the need both social and personal to continue their education, and what initially motivated them to enroll in graduate school. There is a need to hear these stories in order to understand how to better serve this population. Their responses will serve as proof that there can be more done to help support these individuals in their studies. It is hoped that there will be improvements in policy making from institutions.

By examining these statistics and conducting interviews, we can better understand the needs of these students. Understanding the needs of students can bring in new resources. College administrators, faculty, staff, students, and politicians can understand the needs of these students better and create better opportunities and programs for them. This study can also help encourage more Latinas to enroll in graduate school with the knowledge that they will be supported. More

importantly, these students will feel welcomed and wanted by their institutions. As these stories are shared with other students, perhaps they will not feel alone and realize that there are others going through this same process. Hopefully, individuals will be able to relate and become empowered to continue their education.

The purpose of this study is to understand the struggles Latinas face in the pursuit of their masters degree. What can educators and community members do to increase the number of Latinas in graduate programs. Also, how can Latinas help each other and motivate one another? Participants were asked to share their experiences in graduate school, whether they had a mentor, and if they were involved in any student support programs. In the following chapter, the literature will be shared and will serve as proof of the need for further research.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

### Introduction

The numbers of minorities obtaining a graduate degree are low compared to those who are part of the dominant population. Obtaining a college degree can be very difficult for some individuals. Many believe that a college education will open opportunities for the individual, especially in the work force. For those underrepresented populations, a college degree means socioeconomic flexibility. This means an opportunity to become an active member of society and encourage others as well. Latina women are among the most poorly educated of all U.S. citizens. (Lango, 1995). Although the enrollment of women in college has increased, not many of them are Latinas. The numbers are even lower for those in a graduate program. Research conducted by the College Board indicates that only a small number of Latina women complete a 4-year degree and even fewer go on to enter a graduate program. There has been little research on the characteristics that contribute to Latinas enrollment in graduate studies (Lango, 1995) Unless there is awareness of the barriers Latina women face in the pursuit of a masters degree, these numbers will continue to be low. The primary goal of this study is to determine the barriers that Latinas face in the pursuit of their graduate degree and how institutions can better serve this group. The research question for this study asks: How are Latinas overcoming the obstacles they face during their time in graduate school? This literature review examines previous research done on this topic, which include interviews done on current and former Latinas in a graduate program. We can learn a lot from the research done on this topic but it needs to be current. The research found is outdated and specific to one region, which only gives us a small glimpse of the bigger obstacles this group faces.

### Overview of the Context of Literature

There are a few areas that were discussed when examining this topic. These areas were family obligation, family values, culture, language, and educational experiences. All of these factors contribute to the kind of person Latinas are. They are considerate, family oriented, bilingual, and understand the limitations in their education. The theoretical framework that was used in previous studies is qualitative research, which included interviews, data collecting, and documenting of strategies their interviewees used. Due to their limited educational access, Richard Fry (2002) states that Latinos very clearly lag behind in the pursuit of graduate and professional degrees. Fry (2002) also states that among 25- to 34-year-old high school graduates, nearly 3.8 percent of whites are enrolled in graduate school and that only 1.9 percent of similarly aged Latino high school graduates are pursuing post-baccalaureate studies. The presence of limitations to one's education diminishes the desire to continue into college let alone graduate school.

Many of the studies reviewed showed that these young women did not feel motivated to receive a higher education. For this reason, few have continued but those who have found a way to breakthrough the chains. For many, it was family support, encouragement from counselors and teachers, mentorship provided, and that feeling of belonging was what helped them through the barriers. The criteria for analyzing and comparing literature included the relevance and history of women in higher education. Each study concluded with specific goals and discussions that need to be had regarding access and success to this type of population. Each study also interviewed women who are Latinas but have different stories. Based on all that were interviewed, all have different stories, not one is the same. This indicates that all have faced the barriers listed above but to a different degree. It was important to understand how each dealt with them. Research excluded from this study includes Latinas from around the U.S. Most of these studies were

conducted in California and even more were from Southern California where there is a large population of Hispanics.

### **Literature Area – Stories of Success**

In my research I came across a few qualitative studies which demonstrated how Latinas have overcome the barriers they face in their decision to attend graduate school. Gonzales (2012) shares the stories of three Latinas who have achieved professional and academic success despite all the barriers and challenges they are faced with due to their heritage and economic status. This article focused on the end result of the achievements rather than what they went through. All had the same expectation in their family, which was to get an education. They had a strong support system and encouragement from their parents. Family support became a recurring theme in most of my research. There is a strong correlation between having family support and continuing ones education. Gonzales (2012) goes into cultural capital by defining it and applying it to these three women's lives. She came to the conclusion that these women achieved so much thanks to their family support, motivation, responsibility to their community, and their own desire to keep learning. As I mentioned earlier, that desire someone carries with them is a strong motivation to excel.

Another article that showcased success among Latinas is by Gonzalez (2004). She came to the conclusion that Latinas have created more of a presence in higher education as more and more are enrolling in higher education. Their numbers have increased more than any other underrepresented group in the 1990s. Although the numbers have increased, it does not mean that they have found themselves in a better situation. The decision to attend college came with challenges and sacrifices for this group. Latinas are faced with the difficult decision to either leave home and their families or balance both family and their education. They face the problem

of opportunity versus dilemma?? Word choice. Gonzalez, Spencer, and Stoner (2004) concluded that Latinas have come to challenge the norm by exploring their potential. They have decided to change their role, they are now discovering their abilities and capacities.

Lastly, Gandara (1982) focuses on the resilience Latinas have. Gandara goes in search for answers as to how Mexican American women completed masters degrees and even Ph.Ds regardless of their low socioeconomic background and stereotypes associated with them. She obtained her answers by conducting a study of interviews with seventeen Mexican American women ranging from age 28 to 40. Gandarea (1982) went beyond the economic hardships and focused more on the life events these women experienced. Based on her results, she concluded that these women defied the odds thanks to positive, strong models their mothers provided, full emotional support from their families, and their attendance at integrated schools. However the overall take away from this article was the potential that this group has when given positive experiences and individuals???. All of these factors contributed to their successful completion of their degrees. The author focused more on motivation rather than financial help, which led to a unique perspective.

### **Literature Area – An Emerging Population**

There is still a low presence of Latinos in higher education both as students and as faculty or staff. These next authors have concluded that Latinos will be emerging and the numbers enrolled in higher education will rise. Although this article was written many years ago, it still sheds light on this particular group, the stereotypes associated with them, and the obstacles they face entering higher education. The authors' previous research concluded that Chicanas are the least underrepresented group in higher education and have the lowest income and professional status. This trend will continue unless they obtain a higher education. Casas & Ponterotto (1984)

conducted a study where they used an adapted questionnaire developed by a previous researcher to expose the truth behind these low numbers and shed light on misguided stereotypes. Their questionnaire focused on their background, their adjustment to college, and their potential sources of conflict, which included gender expectations. Their results concluded that these low enrollment numbers are the product of a lack of financial resources and appropriate academic preparation rather than self-motivation. The authors' debunk specific stereotypes in order to get a clearer picture on who this group is. They also make a call to action to higher institutions declaring that the lack of resources Chicanas face range from financial aid to college advisement. Although the numbers have increased, they are still low compared to other minority groups.

In this next article, Espinoza (2010) goes in depth of the life of the Latina college student. After extensive research and interviews conducted on fifteen random Latina doctoral graduate students, Espinoza concluded that Latinas are stuck in two worlds. They struggle with two identities, the good daughter and the educated independent woman. Espinoza uses the term *familismo* to describe the cultural value Latinas face. Under this value, they are to be loyal to their culture and family as well as keep family a priority over one's interests. The conflict comes when a Latina decides to continue their studies thus making their studies take up most of their time rather than the family. The author also uses the term bicultural to describe Latinas in higher education stating that this is an identity where one retains their cultural traditions and creates a relationship with mainstream society. They cope with these two demands by being an integrator or a separator. Each strategy keeps the bicultural idea. By understanding their unique needs and outside world, institutions can create support programs for Latinas so they can succeed in postsecondary education.

Haro (2004) shares the concerns he has seen with institutions. He presents strategies to help Latino students and parents regarding preparation and selection of a college. His main points in raising the number of Latino students in college are parental support, assistance of academic support staff and faculty, and liaison between graduate schools and undergraduate institutions. He claims that there is not much activity between undergraduate and graduate institutions. Haro (2004) claims that if there was more interaction between these two the number of Latinos in graduate school would increase. He believes that face-to-face interaction is more helpful rather than a web site search when students are considering graduate school. Haro (2004) comes to the conclusion that more students will succeed in going to graduate school if they have the correct information, mentoring of a supportive faculty member, and the encouragement of family. He also concludes that all of the above are challenges Latino students and families face. However, Latinos are still an emerging population.

### **Literature Area – The Need for Mentoring**

Success comes easier when there is mentoring being done. Luna and Prieto (2009) come to the conclusion that these students would better succeed if they had mentors that looked like them. If so, the cycle of motivation would increase. This article demonstrates the problems Hispanic women face finding someone who can mentor them during their time in higher education. The first point these authors address is the lack of mentors available for these students. (Luna & Prieto, 2009) This is a problem because mentors can change the course of a students experience and life. Mentors serve as teachers and advisors for someone who is in need of guidance. Also they serve as motivators, in which, perhaps, the students do not have one at home. The second problem is the lack of women mentors let alone someone who is a minority. There is also conflict within the Hispanic culture which leads to a crisis of values. Women face

family duties and career needs. Lastly, the authors address the educational barriers Hispanic women face. These include lack of funding, underrepresentation, and discrimination in higher education.

This next study was a qualitative study to find out how a group of Latina/o undergraduate students in Texas considered graduate studies and if they considered enrolling in a post baccalaureate program. Quezada, Lohyde, and Kackmarczyk (1984) conducted this study in order to understand the connection between mentoring and enrolling in graduate school. Previous research had shown that there is a low number of Latinos enrolling in college and an even lower number graduating. Not only were these authors interested in the connection but also the outside forces these students faced. These students shared a lack of knowledge on what graduate school is as well as a feeling of intimidation. However during their mentorship, these students shared that they felt a sense of empowerment. The mentoring process gave these students the confidence to continue their education. They concluded that there is a great importance in having mentors for graduate(Quezada, Loheyde, & Kackmarczyk, 1984).

### **Connections to the Literature**

All students face obstacles when they attend college or decide to attend college. Lately there has been a push for access to underrepresented students. This is true of many but in the case of Latinas it goes much farther than access. These studies showed that success comes as a result of being able to balance school and family obligation. On the family side, success is achieved by having family support. On the education side, success is achieved when there is mentorship being done. As a result of these studies, it was found that many of these articles are connected. The topics overlap as well as their studies. The research conducted provided an insight into the lives of these women and why their stories are important.

## Conclusion

The total Hispanic population of the United States now outnumbers that of other minorities, but the percentage of Hispanics that attend college lags behind population numbers (Carter & Wilson, 1991). Historically, the Hispanic population of the United States has been considered undereducated which is due to some significant social and economic struggles that have kept many Hispanic Americans from fulfilling their full potential. However, this group has been increasing in college completion. This is because many universities have become Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). Hispanic students are embracing higher education through outreach programs that target them for college enrollment. However, these programs diminish as graduate school begins. Students find other means to get motivated and continue their education. One of the most consistent obstacles for Hispanic students has been a lack of financial resources. Students are now in search of scholarships and loans in order to pay for school (Rodriguez, 1982). This is a topic that needs more research as there has not been much done in recent years. Although there are statistics out there, there needs to be an updated report. Many events and changes in programs have not yet occurred.

Richard Fry conducted a report on the enrollment of Latinos in higher education. Fry (2012) went back to the principle of attending college. He makes the point that attending college is encouraged in everyone. A college degree is a must that comes with financial rewards when looking for that job. Based on this principle he specifically focused on the Latino community. This population has also bought into this principle but do not have the same advantages as other groups. Fry (2012) discovered that although many Latinos are enrolling in community colleges and four- year institutions, not many graduate. A few reasons for this are because they enroll part-time, do not have the financial resources to finish, have family obligations, prolong college

until their mid 20s, and do not receive the same type of resources as other groups. Many do not graduate college and even fewer go on to attend graduate school. In this 2002 report, the percentage of Latinos in graduate school is 1.9% of the total population. Fry (2012) came to the conclusion that Latinos are beating the odds by graduating high school and wants them to beat the odds again by graduating college. The next chapter will provide the method used in this qualitative approach

### **Chapter III: Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

The number of Latinos in this country has increased dramatically in the last ten years, many of them entering our politics, workforce, and higher education institutions. Many more are entering college today than in the last few years. Although the number of Latinos in higher education has increased, the numbers for both Latinas/Latinos seem to stop at the undergraduate level. There are still many obstacles that surround this population. Unfortunately, the number of Latinos who obtain a graduate degree has remained low. This is especially true for Latinas, Lango (1995) states, “although obtaining an undergraduate degree is a substantial personal achievement-especially for a Mexican American woman-a graduate degree is also increasingly important to socioeconomic mobility.” (p. 34)

Little is known about Latinas who gain admission to a graduate program. Most research is focused on the high drop out rates, low education attainment, and the low performance level associated with this group. The focus of this study is how Latinas are overcoming the obstacles they face during the pursuit of their graduate degree. In order to attain a clearer picture, a series of five interviews were conducted. The main goal was to understand, share, and provide assistance to the lives of this population. This study focused on the experiences recent post baccalaureate graduates from the southern California area had during their graduate experience. This research used qualitative research methods to examine the current obstacles Latinas face in graduate school, more specifically in the areas of mentorship and family support. The information gained from this study can help educators and policy makers become informed on the current struggles the Latina graduate student population faces.

#### **Participants**

Participants in this study included five Latina students from or near Ventura County, all of whom attended a four year institution for their graduate degree. These participants have identified themselves as Latinas meaning that they are from Latin American descent and speak the Spanish language. These participants share very similar upbringings, come from a low-income family, and are first in their family to attend college. They share similar experiences but differ in resources and family demographics. The participants were asked to participate in an interview where they shared their experiences, both positive and negative, during their time in graduate school.

### **Setting**

The interviews were conducted at various locations. Three were completed at California State University Channel Islands, one was completed at the Camarillo Public Library, and one was completed at the participants' home. Before the interview date, the participants were emailed the interview questions, which allowed them plenty of time to gather their responses. The questions ranged from the topics of motivation to suggestions for our higher education system. These questions can be found in Appendix B. The interviews were completed in between 35 to 55 minutes. A voice recorder was used to capture their responses. They were then transcribed which allowed the researcher to gather themes and capture findings from their responses.

### **Instrument**

Participants in this study received questions orally and had them in front of them during the interview. The questions (Auclair, 2018) were a guide for the participants to share their struggles inside and outside of the classroom, concerns, family involvement, program barriers,

and motivation during their time in graduate school. They were written to fit the appropriateness of the topic. This measure was chosen because narratives provide depth and detail to a particular topic. They also create openness and simulate people's individual experiences. This approach helps to avoid pre-judgments that are particularly true with this topic and these participants. (Creswell, 2012)

## **Design**

This qualitative study is an ethnographic narrative research design. It is a study of graduate students and their particular culture and the characteristics they bring to their education and social surroundings. This group had the opportunity to share their independent stories hoping to help future generations thus creating a sense of belonging and awareness for the next generations to come. The participants had the opportunity to share their voices with others who may be going through the same obstacles.

## **Procedure**

Participants were selected via acquaintances and reference from the researcher and colleagues. The criteria were an individual who is female, identifies as Latina, and is currently or has recently completed their masters degree. Once a reference was made, the researcher contacted the individual via email. The email asked if the individual identified with the criteria for the study and were willing to be interviewed.

## **Analysis**

Interviews were recorded using a voice recorder and later transcribed. During the interviews the researcher took notes on expressions and observations that were observed during the interview. With the notes taken during the interview and the preliminary questionnaire, and

the transcriptions, the data was collected and organized into themes. The main take away from these interviews are the experiences these women had. Through an ethnographic lens, educators will get an inside look at how the students dealt with obstacles and what educators can do to help students like them succeed. From their responses it will be determined how these students can be better served and how to increase the number of Latinas enrolling in a graduate program.

## **Conclusion**

Participants in this study included five participants, all of who recently completed their graduate program. Two of the participants earned their degree from California State University Northridge, one from California State University Channel Islands, one from California Lutheran University, and one from Pepperdine University. These campuses were selected as they are in or close to the Ventura County area. A qualitative interview design was used to collect the data from participants. The sample size was small due to the narrative style of this study. The results from the study add to the literature about why more and more Latinas are entering graduate programs and how their needs are being overlooked.

## Chapter IV: Results

One in five women in the U.S. is a Latina. One in four female students in public schools across the nation is a Latina. Projections are that by 2060, Latinas will form nearly a third of the female population of the nation. (Gándara & The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence on Education, 2015). Latinas make up a large part of our population and our schools, thus making them our future doctors, lawyers, teachers, and educators. Despite their determination, the numbers of Latinas who enroll in a graduate school are still low compared to non-Hispanic women. This group of individuals face many challenges from their decision to attend graduate school to the need to prove to themselves and others that they deserve to be in their program. This group faces many barriers before and during graduate school, which will be discussed below.

### Participants

In an effort to understand and expose the barriers Latinas face when pursuing a masters degree the researcher utilized a qualitative approach for this study. A list of preliminary questions as well as the interview questions was used in order to obtain detailed answers on the participants' experiences. A total of five women were interviewed.

*Susana* is a 30-year-old female with a positive spirit of life. She is one of seven children. She is a friendly, lively, chatty individual who brightens up the room when she walks in. Her smile is contagious and you notice it as she is approaching you in order to ask how your day is going. She is comfortable in her own skin and is happy with the way things are in her life. It is clear that she is comfortable with her life as she writes in her answer to the question “how would you describe your marital/relationship status?” as “single” with a happy face next to it. She grew up in Santa Maria, California and is currently working at a public four-year university in

Southern California as a Program Assistant. She is also a full time graduate student in the Educational Leadership, Higher Education concentration program. She is very close to finishing the program as she has completed all courses and is now focusing on her thesis. Her first degree was in sociology and Chicana/o studies from a public four-year from the university of California system.

*Melinda* is a 32-year-old woman who is a wife and mother to a three-year-old dinosaur enthusiast boy. She like *Susana* also grew up in Santa Maria. Also, just like *Susana* she is a very lively person. She is an extremely helpful individual, willing to go out of her way to help in any way she can. She is passionate about what she does and is dedicated to informing students on how to get into a four-year institution. Prior to working at a community college, she worked at a non-profit organization where she was the outreach manager for an education program. She then worked at a public four-year institution as the Outreach Lead for two Title V grants. She now works at a community college in Southern California as the Student Outreach Specialist reporting directly to the president. Somehow she is able to balance being a mentor to many, working full time, and being a wife and mother. She is a true representation of the belief that anything is possible. She always has a smile on her face and faces obstacles straight on without skipping a beat. She completed her masters through an extension program offered though a four-year public institution from the Los Angeles area.

*Angela* describes herself as a go-getter and always eager to help others create their academic path. She has always loved school to the point where as a young child she would cry when weather conditions did not permit her to be taken to school. She is strong believer in education and advocates for it. She completed her high school degree earlier than her friends by placing herself in AP classes and successfully completing them. It was this type of dedication

that gave her the drive she needed in her educational path. She is a 28-year-old female who identifies as Latina and Mexican American. She is from Oxnard, CA, a community rich in Mexican heritage and boasts some of the richest agricultural land in California. She is currently working as a college counselor to graduate students at a public four-year institution in the Southern California area. She always knew that she wanted to help others map out their academic path. This is why she earned her M.A. in Counseling and College Student Personnel from a private religious university in Southern California. She earned her bachelors in Sociology from the same institution as her masters.

*Mari* is one of five children and the first in her immediate family to receive a masters degree. She also is from Oxnard, CA, which is the largest and most populous city in the County of Ventura. She is a 25-year-old female who recently got married. She describes married life as “good” and “happy” and they have added a new member to their home, a dog-named Xina. She has faced a few struggles growing up. She was believed to be “dumb” by her elementary teachers when she would not respond to the teacher’s question. It turned out that she had a hearing disability, one that she was able to overcome quickly after it was discovered. She also is a family person, making the decision to move back home to take care of her father. Even through all her struggles she decided to pursue her masters and enrolled in 2014. She was able to finish in two years and received an M.A. in social work from a public four-year institution in Southern California. Her program was online which she was grateful for because of her busy work schedule. She works long hours as a behavioral health clinician for the city of Oxnard. Back in 2015 this online program received national recognition for its quality of student experiences. She is thankful for her experience and for online programs that work well for individuals who do not work set hours during the week.

In her short 26 years of life, *Ana* has faced many hardships but they have made her into the person she is now, a fierce individual. Facing discrimination during her graduate school experience was the least of her problems. She is an undocumented Latina from Oxnard, CA who had real life problems, the biggest one being the fear of being deported. For many years she lived in fear until the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) programs started. As a DACA recipient she was now able to legally work in the U.S and have legal protection from deportation. She worked with what she had and was determined to fulfill her goals. She was not going to let anything or anyone stop her. Because she was determined, she aimed high. She completed her Bachelors Degree in Communication from a public four-year institution in Southern California and her Masters in Communication; Organizational and Intercultural from a private coeducational research university in Southern California. When asked why she decided to attend this private religious affiliated university for her graduate program, she responded with “I very much wanted to prove to myself and others that I deserved to be in a place reserved for the elite.”

### **Recurring Themes**

The following themes emerged from the review of literature and from the interviews: “family” “identity” “mentorship” “career goals” “finances” “campus resources” and “the next generation.”

Research has shown that Latinas have the lowest percentage of graduate degrees compared to all women of other non-Hispanic racial groups combined. While in graduate school, these five participants faced obstacles inside and outside the classroom. In 2013, just 4 percent of Latinas had completed a Masters degree or higher by age 29 compared to nearly 5 percent of black, 11 percent of white, and 22 percent of Asian women. (Gándara & The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence on Education, 2015) The decision to enroll in graduate school is stressful; there are many factors to take into consideration.

### **The Role Family Played**

For these five participants, this decision was either already part of their life goals or it happened by chance. Regardless, they were determined to make their decision a reality regardless of all the obstacles around them. All participants had different enforcers, whether it was family and outside support, their parents struggle, or their personal career goals. When asked why she decided to pursue a masters degree, *Susana* answered “So I decided to pursue a masters just because, it was definitely important for me, kind of on a professional level, so to be able to kind of be able to go on to the next step. I definitely knew I wanted to do it. I took a little longer than expected, but I knew that it was needed in order to kind of move up into the next step and to kind of grow on a personal and professional level.”

Others answered through the lens of their parent’s sacrifices. *Angela* shared that her father earned a bachelors degree in Mexico. He was able to finish his degree by commuting four hours to get to class in which he either hitchhiked or asked acquaintances for a ride. It was not easy for him so this is why *Angela* answered by saying, “I had to either match him or do more than him. Because if I have other resources here, there’s no way that I cannot get a masters degree.” A parent’s sacrifice served as motivation to go beyond the norm in her educational attainment.

For *Mari*, the decision to enroll in graduate school was new to her. It was not in her plan until someone encouraged her to consider it. Once she understood the benefits of a masters degree, she decided to enroll. She said the following about her decision to enroll, “Once I knew what it meant to get a masters degree, like the many more opportunities it would open up for me and my younger siblings, I think that was my biggest motivator, was realizing that I didn’t have

to stop at just my bachelors.” *Mari* had a much larger reason than herself to attend graduate school.

Overall, the women believed that obtaining a masters degree would improve their odds for a better life. Their families served as encouragers and were there to root them on every step of the way. It was their family and their parents’ stories that gave them the drive they needed. As first generation students, they all had the opportunity to further their education, something their parents did not have back in Mexico. Except for the case of *Angela*, who’s father obtained a bachelors. However, they all did not want their parents sacrifice to go to waste.

### **Financing Their Education**

Financing their education was a barrier for all five participants. With high rent prices in Ventura County, it made it difficult for these participants to pay for their daily expenses and tuition. Some had multiple jobs, some lived at home, and some borrowed money from family. They all agree that there is a need for more scholarships for graduate students. Graduate students are working professionals with more responsibilities than they had as undergraduate students. For many of them, they attended local schools because they knew that they would be unable to afford housing so they decided to live at home while taking on graduate school. For *Ana* it was especially difficult. When she made the decision to attend a private institution for graduate school, she knew that making tuition would be a barrier. However, she did what she does best and fought for what she wanted. After informing her advisors and professors that “this was great but I can’t afford it so I’ll be dropping out now” she managed to negotiate a full ride, something that this institution had never done before.

For *Mari*, it came as a complete shock to her that graduate students do not receive financial aid. She recalls “I didn’t realize that you don’t get financial aid, you don’t get grants in getting your graduate degree. When I did the financial aid, they said oh here’s a loan for these thousands and thousands of dollars.” Due to this she kicked into gear and obtained a full time job to cover this new expense.

Scholarships are a great help to students so they can pay for their education. However, scholarships available for graduate students are limited. *Melinda* who got married and had a child during graduate school would have liked to see more financial opportunities. She stated, “I think if they had more graduate scholarships, more assistance because once you go to grad school most times, in the program that I was in, we were working professionals. People there were either married, single, living on their own, and so having that extra support, like an institution investing on a scholarship for people in the programs would be useful.”

Although this was a barrier for all, they all made the effort to make ends meet without taking on any more debt. In a 2015 report, it was found that “the average amount of student debt accumulated by age 26 for Latinas who had gone to college was approximately \$22,000 in 2012, which was somewhat less than the average for all other women.” (Gándara & The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence on Education, 2015) Dropping out was not an option for them, but it does happen to graduate students. The financial burden that these students take on is stressful. As mentioned earlier, many graduate students have families to support. In the case of these five participants, one is a mother, one was responsible for her father’s care, and three just barely made it to pay their bills. Scholarships would help these students focus more on their studies rather than how they will be paying for their next set of courses.

## **Mentorship**

Mentorship has just recently become an important topic. The reason being that there are many benefits to having a mentor while earning a degree. Mentorship provides the human connection to students; individuals inside the institution are encouraging them. As more and more Latinas earn their masters degree, they can become mentors themselves thus increasing and encouraging more and more Latinas to earn a masters degree, thus creating a cycle of success. Research has suggested that students react well in seeing someone who looks like them at higher education institutions. *Susana* stated the following about mentorship, “Along the way, having those mentors have really helped me, expand my knowledge, right? Understand what I want for myself as a person, so kind of finding my identity, right? Who I want to be, if I want to kind of shadow them and be who they are one day. That was huge advantage, a huge advantage on multiple levels, on kind of like an educational level, and for myself as well.”

As *Susana* mentioned above, mentorship went beyond just who you are as a student but also who you are as a person. Many who are in a masters program are just beginning their career. There is much to learn and much advice to listen to. Melinda said the following about mentorship, “I feel in general I think having a mentor is a benefit because being a 26 year old grad student, we don't know it all.” Learning from someone who has gone through the same process is golden. Receiving advice is truly beneficial both professionally and personally.

All participants experienced graduate school differently. They either did an online program, an extension program, or a traditional in classroom program. When asked about mentorship, all responded based on how their program was structured. In *Mari's* case, she completed her degree online. *Mari's* experience was the following, “I felt like each professor that I had was an opportunity to get mentored from. And a lot of them were very open to spending that extra 10-15 minutes with you on the webcam. You know trying to figure stuff out with you.

So I really felt supported by not just like my assigned mentor, but also from staff that really took the time to listen to their students. Even though, we were just web based." Institutions are responsible for their student's resources. In this case, providing individuals who went out of their way was something that benefitted their students.

Support within higher education institutions for its students is crucial. In an article regarding recommendations to raise Latina graduation rates, it was stated, "Mentoring should be a top priority. Latinas must be exposed to positive role models who will discourage them from dropping out due to familial or peer pressure. Mentors must work with Latinas to not only help them have a more successful academic experience in high school, but also to expose them to college experiences that will allow them to set long-term education goals and career aspirations for themselves." (Cooper, M.A, 2012) Someone that these students can relate to and confide in will be the deciding factor regarding completion of degree.

### **Campus Resources**

Resources are tools that an individual may use for specific needs. Higher education institutions have resources for their students. It is why students pay so much in tuition. For graduate students, campus resources become either difficult for them to take advantage of due to their busy work schedule or due to the lack thereof. All five participants shared that they did not see many services aimed for their needs. *Susana* was frustrated with the hours of operation of all the offices on her campus. Graduate students are evening students, which means that they arrive to campus just on time to find parking and walk to class. She expressed the following, "I remember not feeling very supported, like "Hey, how am I supposed to get my ID if they're not open that late?" Obtaining something simple like an ID card was difficult.

Two out of the five participants had a non-traditional graduate program. *Melinda* did not find the question regarding how she used campus resources to her advantage applicable to her. She earned her degree through an extension program. She only took advantage of a resource once. She tells the story of this one time in the following, “They had a pre-comp exam session on how to guide us. It was actually facilitated by the department chair of our program, who was a full-time, tenured faculty there. That was the only thing that I was able to take advantage of as a graduate student because our campus was off-site.” In *Melinda*’s situation, she knew the resources were there for her. However she chose to use only this one because she needed it.

When asked about campus resources, all participants knew that they were offered to them. Whether or not they used them was their choice. However, it became clear that although the resources were there they were not aimed for a graduate student population. The level of need was different for them. *Angela*’s statement shed light on the difference between availability and applicability. She stated, “I never used tutoring, even though they did have tutoring. I would say that I used my professors, because I've always been an advocate of my own education, so I would make it a point to reach out to my professors after class or come in before class to help myself with clarification or, you know, assignments or things like that.” In other words, tutoring was not enough for her. She needed to go straight to the source in order to fully understand what she was having trouble with.

Degree attainment consists of many factors. The resources that the campus offers its student’s are one of those factors. These five participants took advantage of what they could and what they believed they would benefit from. However, there is still much more that can be done for graduate students. Longer business hours, workshop topics that apply to them, a graduate

student space, and resources that actually apply to them are just a few items on the list of graduate student needs.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the many barriers presented to this group, these five Latina women have managed to overcome them and succeed. The most important findings from this study related to: the resiliency these women have; their commitment to family; their concern on how to fund their education; their desire to have a mentor who will guide them; and their camaraderie in their hope to pave the way for the next generation. They faced challenges on issues they have no control of but are more than happy to share what they can in order to improve services to students like them.

## Chapter V: Conclusion

### Discussion

This study focused on the barriers Latinas face when pursuing a masters degree. The questions were focused on what these obstacles are, how they overcame them, what can administrators do to better serve them, and what advice these five participants have for future Latinas in graduate school. The following were topics that were captured based on their responses: “family” “identity” “mentorship” “career goals” “finances” “campus resources” and “the next generation.” Five qualitative interviews were conducted. All participants were female, first generation, and identified as Latina. Three attended a public four-year institution and two attended a private university in the southern California area.

The qualitative data collected in this study provides researchers with a glimpse into the lives of this population of students. This study concluded that these students have much to juggle in their daily lives. Being a graduate student does not only mean that they are a graduate student. In the case of these five participants, they are caregivers, mothers, wives, daughters, and an advocate for undocumented individuals just like herself. A support system, especially family support, is crucial in believing that they can survive two years of long days and nights. A significant finding was that believing in themselves was what kept them going as well as their drive to overcome their financial stress. Funding one’s education is stressful especially when there are limited scholarships being offered to graduate students. Also, being an evening student is difficult. Most campus offices close by the time evening classes begin. Something as easy as obtaining a campus ID can be frustrating. Lastly, relating to your professor and having a mentor is a large part of gaining confidence and the belief in oneself necessary to complete a graduate program. Having someone to go to for guidance is golden; speaking with someone who has gone

through the process is comforting. These five women hope to share their experiences with future Latinas and encourage them just as they were encouraged.

The theme of the “next generation” became a significant part of this study. These participants were asked what advice they have for future Latinas. Their responses were encouraging. *Ana*’s responses were “you got this!” and “remembering that we are valuable and we are strong.” *Susana*’s responses were “to believe in yourself and surround yourself with people that will believe in you more than you believe in yourself” and “to be informed, be proactive and always, always, always use your faculty and professors as a resource.” *Melinda* responded with “don’t give up, there’s going to be times where things are going to be difficult, you’re going to have differences in classroom discussions, and just know that not everything to take personally because everybody has been raised in a different upbringing so things may not be meant the way they come off. Be strong!” *Angela* responded with “reach out to your professors and seek those services on campus that are there for you because really no one wants to see you fail.” *Mari*’s response was to “Push forward! Don’t be shy, don’t feel like you need to conform with your fellow classmates. I wish someone would have told me, you’re not going to be that obnoxious annoying kid by asking all these questions.”

As a result of this research, what is needed is more studies aimed at graduate students. It is important to keep this study going in order to stay current with the needs of these students. Administrators should read the results of studies in order to have their institutions better serve their students. The findings can be used to implement more resources for graduate students as well as understand their very different class and life schedules. Institutions can create spaces for these students to meet with their professors and each other. A one-stop shop for graduate students can increase involvement and knowledge about their campus. Documenting their

responses and sharing them will spread awareness. These are necessary steps to take in order to shed light on graduate student needs. Many studies are focused on PhD candidates rather than masters level graduate students. By taking a look at the early years in graduate school, administrators will become aware of what this population needs. As these students advance their education, by the time they are enrolled in a PhD program they will have the necessary support to thrive.

As stated earlier, the number of Latinas who enroll in a masters degree is low. This number is even lower for those Latinas who enroll but do not complete their program. Retention is a big topic for higher education institutions. The institution should get to know its students in order to make sure they achieve their goals. A limitation of this study was the small sample size. Five participants were interviewed which limits the findings. Further research including interviewing students from different parts of the state will result in stronger findings and more themes.

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## Appendix A

### Preliminary Questionnaire

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study to help me understand your experiences. Below is a list of questions that I will use to better understanding our conversation and to inform the study. Please complete the questions as thoroughly as possible. If there are questions that you would like clarified or that you may want to leave blank please do so. You are under no obligation to complete this questionnaire or to answer all of the questions. Please feel free to ask me any questions regarding this questionnaire or to contact the thesis advisor for this study Dr. Tim Rummel at 805-437-3739 or email at [conrad.rummel2@csuci.edu](mailto:conrad.rummel2@csuci.edu) for further information.

CSUCI Student Investigator: Carolina Martinez, California State University Channel Islands (CI) under the supervision of the thesis advisor of this study, Dr. Tim Rummel.

Preferred Alias for this study (optional):  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What is your gender? Other \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_

How old are you \_\_\_\_\_?

How would you identify your ethnicity & race? \_\_\_\_\_

How would you describe your marital/ relationship status? \_\_\_\_\_

Who did you live with while in graduate school? \_\_\_\_\_

Where did you spend most of your time growing up? (city, state, country)  
\_\_\_\_\_

Do you consider yourself to be financially independent of your parents or guardian(s)?

Yes  No

What is your annual household income? (Check one)

Less than \$24,999     \$25,000 – \$49,999     \$50,000 – \$74,999     \$75,000 – \$99,999     \$100,000 – \$149,999     \$150,000 – \$199,999     \$200,000 or more

To the best of your knowledge, how would you identify the social class of your family of origin (parents or guardians) during your undergraduate years? (Check one)

lower      lower/middle      middle      middle/upper class      upper class

What is your current occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

Were you the first in your family to complete a bachelors degree program? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you a 1<sup>st</sup> generation American? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the highest level of education your parents/guardians obtained?

Mother \_\_\_\_\_ Father \_\_\_\_\_

Guardian(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Highest degree completed by a member of your family \_\_\_\_\_

When did you start your studies in your graduate program? \_\_\_\_\_

If completed, when did you complete your graduate program? \_\_\_\_\_

What stage are you in the program? If applicable

Still need to take classes \_\_\_\_\_

Withdrawn and not finished \_\_\_\_\_

All but thesis completed \_\_\_\_\_

Completed the program, year completed \_\_\_\_\_

What was your major at the undergraduate level? \_\_\_\_\_

What was your major at the graduate level? \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you, and I look forward to our conversation!**

**Appendix B****Interview Questions**

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Tell me about your graduate program, when did you start and when do you plan to complete or when did you complete your program?
3. Tell me about your educational experience before graduate school?
4. Why did you decide to pursue your masters degree and why in particular the institution you attend or attended?
5. What was your biggest motivation to continue your education beyond a bachelor's degree?
6. What are some advantages that you have encountered during your time in graduate school? (knowledge, confidence, family support, etc., etc.,)
7. What are some obstacles, if any that you have faced during your time in graduate school? Were you able to overcome them, and if so, how? (Family, financial, educational barriers, preparedness...etc., etc.,)
8. Did family and family support play a role in your decision to attend graduate school? If so, please explain. If not, why so.
9. Did you feel welcomed on campus? What campus resources, if any, did your institution offer graduate students and did you use these services?
10. Did you have a mentor during your graduate school enrollment? If yes, how did that relationship impact your experience as a graduate student? If no, would having a mentor be helpful? Please explain.
11. What should administrators, staff, and faculty know about the needs of Latina students?
12. What changes can your institution make to support your and other students like yourself paths to a graduate degree? What absence or presence of support did you encounter?
13. What words of advice do you have for future Latinas in graduate school?
14. Is there anything you would like to add or mention that was not asked?