SHIFTING LANDSCAPE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF LATINOS SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC INTEGRATION ON CAMPUS

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Abstract

A college degree is widely accepted as a basic goal in education, and the United States labor market reinforces that expectation with substantial financial rewards. Today, Latinos are enrolling in colleges and universities at astronomical rates. As educators, we must provide this growing student population with the adequate programs and resources needed to graduate and compete in such a market. Through the use of Critical Race Theory and phenomenology as the methodological framework, this study examined the lived experiences of Latino students’ academic and social integration on campus, and the extent to which their integration impacts their persistence and overall growth and development. Purposeful sampling procedures were employed to recruit five participants and the researcher adhered to Moustakas’s (1994) seven steps for phenomenological analysis in coding and interpreting the themes established. Four overarching themes emerged from the analysis: Academic, Finances, Social, and Sense of Belonging. The academic theme produced three sub-themes: academic preparedness, the de facto spokesperson, and faculty relationships. The social theme evoked three sub-themes: campus community and organizations, importance of having an Intercultural Resource Center, and residence halls. The other two themes did not have sub-themes. A conclusion and future areas of research is also discussed within the context of this study.

Keywords: Latinos, Hispanic, retention, persistence, sense of belonging, critical race theory.
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After rain there is a rainbow, after a storm there is calm, after the night there is a morning, and after an ending there is a new beginning. –Author Unknown-

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Stating the Educational Problem

Latinos are the largest and most rapidly growing minority demographic group in the nation. According to the 2010 Census, 50.5 million Americans identified themselves as Latinos, representing more than 16 percent of the U.S. population. This shift in population is already being seen at colleges and universities. The number of Latinos attending college grew by a record 24 percent in 2009–2010 (Fry, 2011). This brought the total number of Latinos enrolled in colleges and universities to its highest level ever, 1.8 million in 2010 (Fry, 2011). Despite the increase, Latinos still lag behind in obtaining a college degree. In 2010, only 13% of Hispanic 25-29 year-olds completed at least a bachelor’s degree compared to 53% non-Hispanic Asian, 39% of White young adults, and 19% Blacks (Fry, 2011).

By 2018, 63 percent of jobs will require a college degree or certificate (Carnevale, 2010). At the current rate of college completion, the nation will be short by 3 million degrees (Carnevale, 2010). Improving Latinos’ persistence is crucial because, as a fast growing demographic, the educational success of this specific student population will impact the United States economy. To maintain and sustain the United States economy, it is important to enhance college perseverance and degree attainment of society’s rapid growing population by 2020, as one in six United States residents will be of Latino descent (Council of Economic Advisors, 2000).
Colleges and universities need to employ strategies to improve not only access to higher education for Latinos but also success in attaining a college degree. Currently, much emphasis is being placed on Latino students’ failures. Rather than focus on the failures, colleges and universities need to educate themselves on how the cultural knowledge of Latinos can contribute to their educational success. Institutions must be willing to examine their respective retention policies through a cultural lens. Otherwise, Latinos will be left behind, not prepared for higher education in the next decade, and not employed.

**Significance of the Problem**

The increase of the Latino population within the United States cannot be ignored. According to the US Census (2000), “From 1990 to 2000 alone, the Latina/o population grew 57.9%, making it the fastest-growing ethnic group in the century (p. 2).” More Hispanics are enrolled in higher education today than non-Hispanic Whites, yet few of them manage to graduate (Fry, 2004). While retention has been studied in general, the unique aspects of Latino student retention have not been a particular focus. Therefore, it has become increasingly important to examine the retention rates of Latinos in colleges and universities.

As the Latino population continues to increase, these students will distinguish their academic, social, and financial experiences in a different manner compared to the dominant culture. That said the findings from this study can aid institutions in implementing recruitment and retention programs that will enhance the academic success of higher education and Latino students.

The Latino population, due to its rapid growth, requires the attention of all colleges and universities regarding their enrollment and attainment. According to Suarez (2004), “Academic
interest regarding this rapidly growing ethnic group is extremely important for the socioeconomic success of all of America (p. 3).” This study will add significant information pertaining to challenges faced by Latino college students. It will also serve as a catalyst to empower colleges and universities to examine their existing structures and become more cognizant of the restructuring necessary to create optimal learning conditions for Latino students.

**Intellectual Goal/Research Questions**

The intellectual goal of this study was to gain a better understanding of the lives of Latino students and understand what impacts their decision to persist in college. In seeking an answer to the problem of practice, the central research question for this study was: What is the role of social and academic integration in the persistence of Latino college students?

Drawing from Critical Race Theory (Villalpando, 2004) as a framework, the question enabled the researcher to examine the experiential knowledge of Latinos in higher education. Within the tenets of Critical Race Theory, Latinos experiential knowledge can be viewed as an asset and require institutions to consider the factual expertise of Latino college students into the process of implementing more responsive and culturally relevant programs and services.

**Definition of Terms**

It should be noted that the term of choice for this study is “Latinos”. It is used to describe a heterogeneous group in an attempt to embrace all Latin American Ethnicities. However, there are a variety of terms utilized in reviewing the literature (Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, among others). Unless quoting directly, this study will use the term Latinos.

Two other terms that merit definition is retention and persistence. Retention is referred to as “students who remain at the same institution where they started until they complete a program
of study” (NCES, 2000). Persistence, on the other hand, is referred to as “students, who have continued anywhere in higher education, including those who have transferred from one institution to another, with the intent to earn a college degree” (NCES, 2000). Fully aware of the social construction and meanings of both words, this study referenced both words interchangeably. While the words are not identical, most of the research utilizes both words from the perspective of students who sustained their enrollment at colleges and universities.

Finally, the researcher who conducted this study wishes to also elaborate on academic integration and social integration. Academic Integration is “a measure of the students’ perception of their academic experiences with faculty and administrators, as well as perceptions about their career preparations” (Nora, 1987, p. 35). Social integration describes students’ social-related perceptions and experiences - informal interaction with faculty, peers, campus activities, and sense of belonging (Nora, 1987).

**Organization of the Study**

This study is organized into five chapters, references, and appendices. Chapter 1 describes the statement of the problem of practice and significance of the study. Practical, intellectual goals, definition of terms, organization of the study, and the theoretical framework employed (Critical Race Theory) are highlighted. A review of the literature is highlighted within Chapter 2 (the historical background of retention within higher education, demographic data of Latinos, academic self-concept, the role of familia (family), finances, sense of belonging, campus climate and institutional initiatives, faculty-student interactions and mentorship, successful strategies for retention, and cultural & social centers). In Chapter 3, the research design and methodology (phenomenology) is described. Chapter 4 highlights the analysis of the
data and research findings. Finally, Chapter 5 includes a summary, conclusions, and implications for future research. The study concludes with references and appendices.

**Theoretical Framework**

Latino college students have rarely been examined; however, they are the biggest and fastest augmenting racial or ethnic group (Gandara, 1994). Colleges and Universities have attempted to meet Latinos needs by employing traditional institutional responses, such as offering mentoring and outreach programs, and targeted academic support services. They often reference Tinto’s student integration/departure model in relation to the experiences of Latino students. While Tinto’s model has been referenced quite extensively in relation to college students’ integration/departure process, several have question if his model is applicable to students of color.

Moore and Upcraft (1990) posit that theories of student development such as Tinto’s do not consider the cultural variables such as parental roles and community vow, which often formulate different developmental changes for students of color. Other scholars have disputed that Tinto’s theory focuses on the need for students to acclimate to the college environment instead of placing emphasis on the systemic or institutional change that welcomes students of color (Hurtado, 1997; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1999).

Despite institutional efforts, colleges and universities are not yielding the level of success needed with the growing representation of Latinos in higher education. Indeed, when you consider “the current political and institutional retrenchment in providing race-sensitive support programs, one cannot help but wonder how higher education will respond to the increasing needs
of Latinos in the future” (Villalpando, 2004, p. 41). To that end, this study is guided by the use of Critical Race Theory.

At its most basic stratum, critical race theory requires that Latinos not be regarded as “disadvantaged because of their racial or ethnic identity, gender, class, immigration status, generation status, or language ability” (Villalpando, 2004). If Latinos are disadvantaged in any way, it is a consequence of not procuring access to better resourced public schools (Villalpando, 2004). Their culture or race has not placed them at the greatest detriment; rather it is the educational system (Villalpando, 2004). As college students, Latinos have to grapple with a system that ascertains that they and their culture are to blame for their lack of success (Villalpando, 2004). Thus, the critical race theory tenet of appreciating experiential knowledge highlights the importance of understanding how the identity of Latinos can aid them in their persistence of a college degree. It can also more fully deduce and more properly respond to the academic and socio-cultural needs of Latino college students.

What is Critical Race Theory?

Critical Race Theory (CRT) stems from legal studies that can help advance our awareness of matters related to social justice and racial inequality in society (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas, 1995). Critical Race Theory suggests that colleges and universities “interested in creating truly holistic and more meaningful programs or services for Latinos begin by consciously acknowledging that these students might experience varying degrees and forms of racial discrimination at their respective institution” (Villalpando, 2004, p.43).
Critical theories have been applied to explain the differences in educational attainment between the dominant culture and Hispanics academic performance. Literature using critical theory attempts to explain student persistence via the lens of race and class (Castro, 2006). One of the best predictors for college graduation is indeed social class. College students whose parents are wealthy are more likely to persist. Thus, CRT challenges higher education to examine economic inequalities as it pertains to Latino college student persistence.

Karl Marx, best known for his philosophy on Marxism, believed that the engine of the human experience is based on the inequalities produced by class conflict (Marx & Engels, 1967). Marx saw dual systems where the elite class dominated the working class. He believed that human history is a story of oppression against the labor force. His scholarly work, “The Communist Manifesto”, has been added to theories such as CRT to demonstrate the plight of African Americans and Latinos.

Ehrenreich (2008) has expanded several of Marx’s ideas and has applied it to colleges and universities. She asserts that the U.S. spends more on arresting minorities and less on educating them. Furthermore, she highlights that the structure of our society lures African Americans and Latinos into low paying jobs than getting them into the classroom. These structural inequalities must be addressed within higher education, particularly, since Latinos are expected to become the ethnic majority on college campuses.

Critical Race Theory suggests that institutions tend to advance existing political and economic structures, thus further empowering the more powerful groups. One sees this process in the K-12 sector as well. According to Sullivan (2007), “the education system provides a mechanism that powerful groups use to limit the opportunities of the less powerful”. Such
mechanisms produce social reproduction of groups such as Hispanics not persisting within higher education.

**Historical Context of Critical Race Theory**

The early groundwork of Critical Race Theory lay in reframing the outcome of civil rights litigation. This group of scholars assumed the task of questioning how the law, which claims race neutrality, contrives to continue the conditions of racial oppression rather than champion the deconstruction of those conditions. “Critical Race Theorists have, for the first time, examined the entire edifice of contemporary legal thought and doctrine from the viewpoint of the law’s role in the construction and maintenance of social domination and subordination” (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xi). Although there are many legal scholars that have shaped Critical Race Theory, one of them is recognized as the pioneer: Derrick A. Bell, Jr.

Derrick A Bell, Jr. was among the first tenured African American law professors (Crenshaw et al., 1995) at Harvard University and his essay *Serving Two Masters* (1976) “…appropriately sets the stage for the eventual development of Critical Race Theory” (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. 2). In the mid seventies, Crenshaw et al., posit that “the norms of racial integration had become so powerful that they were taken to define the difference between being enlightened and being backward” (p. 2). Cultivation or modernization and perceived ignorance regarding the best course of action for equal education were powerful divisions in separating civil rights legal strategists. In this essay, Bell (1976) explored, or perhaps exposed, two significant contradictions in civil rights litigation regarding the *Brown v Board of Education* decision and the due haste with which states were to comply.

Bell (1976) questioned that integration served the best interests of children of Color.
At the time, this was perceived as pro-segregationist, or as Crenshaw et al., (1995) posited, a backward, non-enlightened position. According to Crenshaw et al., (1995) “It was thus dramatic that he would take on the liberal ideology of the mainstream civil rights movement by criticizing the effect of the enforcement of Brown on the black community” (p. 2). In his own words, Bell (1976) states, “Now that traditional racial balance remedies are becoming increasingly difficult to achieve or maintain, there is tardy concern that racial balance may not be the relief actually desired by the victims of segregated schools” (pp. 471-472). Additionally, Bell inquired if a lawyer in the cases of desegregation could serve the interest of the individuals while at the same time serving the group represented in the class action; hence the two masters. Bell provided personal examples of cases he worked on where the civil rights organizations funding the suit, most notably the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), would not fund a suit that did not involve integration.

Integrated schools were the only solution considered to remedy the segregated system by the organizations that funded the anti-discrimination suits. Bell argued that the very fact no other avenues were considered denied children of Color their due process. According to Bell (1976) “This theory of school desegregation, however, fails to encompass the complexity of achieving equal educational opportunity for children to whom it so long has been denied” (p. 470). Bell’s arguments were and still are controversial. The lone theory of desegregation in response to Brown attacked White liberalism at its basis. Who and what were the civil rights lawyers and organizations serving? Crenshaw et al. summarize this when they state, “the exclusive focus on the goal of school integration responded to the ideas of elite liberal public interest lawyers rather than to actual interests of black communities and children” (p. xx).
Today, the work of Bell has transformed Critical Race Theory. It has extended beyond the courtroom and applied to higher education in addressing the needs of students of color. Specifically, the framework enables scholars and practitioners to analyze patterns of racial exclusion and other forms of discrimination against students of color. In relation to this study, Critical Race Theory offers unique approaches to understanding and meeting the needs of Latinos in higher education.

**Critical Race Theory in Education**

Reestablishing the tenets of Critical Race Theory to focus on education has been attributed to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) in their efforts to place emphasis on educational inequity. They recommended three propositions to this affect:

1. Race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States.
2. United States society is based on property rights
3. The intersection of race and property create an analytical tool through which inequities can be understood.

Through this lens, light is shed on the importance of the complexity of race and ethnicity in students’ resistance and symbolic violence toward education, the social stratification and social reproductive nature of education, oppressive ideals of education, and the role of cultural capital.

Patton, McEwen, Rendon, and Howard-Hamilton (2007) are proponents for the use of critical race theory in understanding the importance of race in prominent social, cognitive, identity and moral development theories. They conclude that those theories, which ultimately guide practice, fail to consider race, and therefore create a disservice to the students of color with
whom educators and college practitioners serve. In addition, they recognize that the construction of knowledge is often from a Eurocentric point of view, where race and social justice is not extracted, especially at majority, elite institutions. Often faculty fail to recognize the importance of race and culture and White power, privilege and position manifests itself in the classroom and marginalizes students from underrepresented groups. Finally, they reiterate the CRT premise of intersectional that calls attention to the convergence of race, class, gender and does not create microaggressions (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) and the importance for faculty and practitioner to be cognizant of their own racial identities and the manner in which they interpret actions of students of colors and white students.

**Five Tenets of Critical Race Theory**

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) identified five tenets of Critical Race Theory: 1.) the centrality of race and racism, 2.) the challenge to dominant ideology, 3.) the commitment to social justice, 4.) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and 5.) the transdisciplinary perspective. These five tenets guided this study in examining the key research question: What is the role of social and academic integration in the persistence of Latino college students?

**The Centrality of Race and Racism**

This study places Latinas/os identity at the center of its investigation. As a community, Latina/os experience one of the highest rates of attrition in education (León, 2003; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005b; US Census Bureau, 2000). CRT begins with the assertion that race and racism are central and a basic part of describing and clarifying how the United States functions (Bell, 1992). Jones (2004) defined racism in three levels “individual (beliefs in the superiority of one’s own racial group), institutional (institutional practices that
produce systematic advantages for one racial group over another, whether intended or not), and *cultural* (a race-based normative standard of value, merit, and meaning that places one’s own group at the apex of a value hierarchy and judges other racial groups deficient in comparison)” (p. 95). Tatum (1997) defined racism as “a system of advantage based on race” (p. 7) that involved “cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals” (p. 7). She continued to indicate that this “system of advantage is perpetuated when we do not acknowledge its existence” (p. 9). The racist system that this study highlights is the current Eurocentric techniques employed by institutions of higher education to aid Latinos in attaining a college degree.

**The Challenge to Dominant Ideology**

According to Ladson-Billings (1998) “Racism is…so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to people in this culture….Thus the strategy becomes one of unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations” (p. 11). By illuminating this dominant ideology researchers and practitioners can break down the power of whiteness and other dominant identities.

CRT provides “meaning to the creation of culturally and linguistically relevant ways of knowing and understanding and to the importance of rethinking the traditional notion of what counts as knowledge” (Bernal, 2002, p. 109). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) stated that CRT “challenges the traditional claims that educational institutions make toward objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity” (p. 26). This study challenges higher education to not view Latinos as disadvantaged because of their culture or
race. The educational system has positioned them at their greatest detriment by not having better access to resourced public schools; thus challenging dominant ideologies.

**The Commitment to Social Justice**

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) stated that social justice in educational research strives to eliminate racism, sexism, and classism. CRT “offers a liberatory or transformative response to racial, gender, and class oppression” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26) by seeking “political and social change on behalf of [and with] communities of color” (Bernal, 2002, p. 110). This study is committed to social justice as it utilized the lived experiences of Latinas/os academic and social integration on college campuses to deconstruct the assumptions that are the foundation of dominant white pedagogical techniques and then reconstructed to meet the unique cultural and academic needs of Latinos.

**The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge**

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) discussed the prevalence of “majoritarian” stories in education. Majoritarian stories were those that only depicted the majorities’ point of view, thus further privileging dominant identities by silencing People of Color (Solórzano & Yosso). Majoritarian stories emphasized deficit thinking and assimilation for People of Color. These types of stories hindered learning; therefore, the distribution of counterstories was seen by this researcher as essential for Latina/o undergraduate student success. Solórzano and Yosso referred to these stories as “counter” stories because they counter the dominant stories that are typically told in education: they challenge the status quo. CRT emphasizes “listening to and learning from the experiences of people of color” (Yosso, p. 100) and “recognizes that the experiential knowledge of Students of Color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to
understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in the field of education” (Solórzano & Yosso, p. 473). By listening to, learning from, and re-telling Latina/o students’ counter-stories educators and researchers can implement pedagogical techniques that legitimate the Latina/o experience. In this study, Latinas/os students had the opportunity to participate in in-depth interviews and reflect upon their academic and social integration at a small private college in Pennsylvania.

The Transdisciplinary Perspective

“A critical race theory challenges ahistoricism and the unidisciplinary focus of most analyses and insists on analyzing race and racism by placing them in both historical and contemporary contexts” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26-27). This challenge was found to be strongest when multiple disciplines were used to understand the past and the present experiences of Latinas/os in education. For this reason, this study reviewed both positivist and qualitative stories and counter-stories from a variety of disciplines in its review of the literature. Within the Critical Race Theory framework, the researcher conducting this study listened to and learned from the counter-stories of Latinos academic and social integration on college campuses and challenged dominant ideological techniques for the purpose of developing more effective programs and services to aid Latino students in their degree seeking completion.

Conclusion

The five tenets illustrated above are not new, but by and large they act as a test to the existing practices of scholarship (Yosso, 2005). Critical Race Theory refutes dominant ideology, such as Tinto’s Student Integration/Departure Model and Astin’s Involvement Theory, as it pertains to students of color. The tenets afford a useful lens that can inform research in Latino
According to Yosso (2005) “Looking through a CRT lens means critiquing deficit theorizing and data that may be limited by its omission of the voices of People of Color” (p.75). Yosso (2005) states that “Deficit thinking takes the position that students of color are at fault for their academic performance due to: 1.) students entering school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills, and 2.) parents neither valuing nor supporting their child’s education” (p.75).

A CRT lens can see that Latinos nurture cultural wealth through six forms of capital: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance. Parents of Latino students have high aspirations for their children (Solorzano, 1992). Linguistic capital places emphasis on the academic and social skills acquired through communicating in more than one language. Familiar capital refers to the cultural knowledge nurtured among Latino families. “Social capital can be understood as networks of people and community resources” (Yasso, 2005, p. 79). As it pertains to Latinos, they share their cultural capital with one another for continuance and success in a society divided along racial lines. Navigational capital refers to Latino students’ ability to proceed through colleges and universities that are complex. Finally, resistance capital focuses on the knowledge and skills garnered through oppositional behavior which challenges inequality.

In sum, the defining elements of critical race theory form a structure that has relevance in how colleges and universities can serve Latino college students. Critical race theory is especially helpful in bettering our interpretation of the participation of Latinos in higher education, given how our society has traditionally used race, ethnicity, national origin, language, class, and a shifting image of equity in the development of legislation that impacts higher education (Solorzano and Yosso, 2000). CRT also moves the research scope away from a deficient view of
Latinos and alternately focuses on and becomes versed from their cultural assets and wealth (Villalpando & Solorzano, 2005).

Even as higher education observes and forecasts ever-growing enrollments of Latinos, astute political efforts are persuading colleges and universities to decimate race-sensitive support services and programs devised to enhance the educational experiences and end result of this student population. Critical race theory, as a framework, offers an opportunity to counteract the drift of declining quantity and quality of assistance for the expanding Latino student population and connect the Latino community to the academy.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

As the Latino population grows, the volume of Hispanic students entering college is also expected to increase. These students face several obstacles throughout their undergraduate career. Scholars have tried to pinpoint ways to address such obstacles; however, current existing retention literature fails to address the unique cultural attributes Latinos bring with them to college and how institutions can learn from such attributes to aid them in their persistence (Rendon, 2002).

Most often the cultural attributes of Latinos are viewed from a deficit perspective in education rather than from an asset perspective (Valenzuela, 1999). As an alternative to the deficit approach, colleges and universities need to validate Latino students’ cultural attributes and have an understanding of their educational and social inequalities (Rendon, 2002). In doing so institutions will be able to develop adequate programs and services to help retain Latino students and aid them in their persistence of a degree.
The educational attainment of Hispanics continues to be a societal issue and is crucial for the future of our global economy. According to the 2000 Census, approximately thirteen percent of the United States population identified themselves as Hispanic, which made Hispanics the largest racial/ethnic group in the U.S. They were also more likely to be living in urban areas, live in poverty, and experience poor educational conditions (Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). Quantitative and Qualitative studies have been employed to examine the factors impacting Latino college students. However, more in-depth research is needed to study the phenomenon of Latino college students and college persistence.

The following literature review will highlight some of the scholarly literature pertaining to the factors impacting Latino college student retention. A review of the literature will examine the historical background of retention within higher education, demographic data of Latinos, academic self-concept, the role of familia (family), finances, sense of belonging, campus climate and institutional initiatives, faculty-student interactions and mentorship, successful strategies for retention, and cultural & social centers. A conclusion will also be discussed within the context of this literature review. The researcher guided the literature review by the following research question: What is the role of social and academic integration in the persistence of Latino college students?

**Historical Background of Retention**

MacDonald and Garcia (2003) posit that the years that represent the greatest increase in Latina/o enrollment on college campuses were the 1960s, which they term, “el movimiento in higher education.” This era witnessed the Chicano and Puerto Rican civil rights movements as well as the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Higher Education Act. These
movements and legislation contributed to the growth of racial and ethnic minorities on college campuses and, in particular Latinos. However, campuses at the time were not prepared to deal with the needs of increasingly diverse student populations.

Since then, retention has changed throughout the years and so has the approach higher education has taken in addressing the issue. Berger and Lyon (2005) term the 1960’s “Preventing Dropouts” and write, “There had been only limited attempts to systematically assess patterns of student persistence” (p. 17). The 1970s was then a period of “Building Theory,” when the most notable frameworks were offered by Spady, Tinto, Astin, and Kamens. By the end of the 1970s, retention theories were well established, albeit for White male students.

The 1980s were then characterized by Berger and Lyon (2005) as a period of “Managing Enrollments.” Berger and Lyon posit that the study of retention expanded in part due to the conceptual advances of retention theory but also due to the continued demographic shifts in the population of undergraduates. This decade saw an increase in campus-wide initiatives and programs aimed at retention including campus-based strategies aimed at the retention of racial and ethnic minorities.

By the 1990s or the period titled, “Broadening Horizons,” retention had become a major concern in higher education leading to the development of several theories and models that attempted to explain the process of college persistence. During the 1990s, even more attention was paid to racial and ethnic minorities as more researchers of color entered academia and began to critically evaluate retention for students of color. In Berger and Lyon’s (2005) final era, “Current and Future Trends,” they demonstrate how retention efforts by the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century
were fully entrenched on virtually every college campus. Despite the evolution of college student departure, retention rates for Latinos remain alarmingly low.

**Changing Demographics**

The dramatic growth of the Latina/o population in the United States cannot be understated nor ignored. From 1990 to 2000 alone, the Latina/o population grew 57.9% (35,622,000), making it the fastest-growing ethnic demographic group in the country (Census, 2000). According to the U.S. Census (2003), the Hispanic population surpassed all other minority groups to become the largest minority community in the United States. In 2005, the population grew to an estimated 41,870,703 (Census, 2005), an increase of more than 17.5% in only five years. Future predictions indicate that by 2050, the U.S. Hispanic population will increase to 102,560,000 or 24.4% of the U.S. population (Census, 2004). Despite the population increase, researchers note that Latina/os have the lowest rates of educational attainment in comparison to other ethnic groups (Hurtado, 2002) and degree completion rates for Latina/os have not kept pace with their overall enrollment rates (Harvey, 2003).

As the Latino population continues to grow, so will the volume of Latino students enrolling in colleges and universities. As previously mentioned, the trend is expected to continue until 2050 as Latinos are likely to represent 25% of the United States population (Hernandez, 2005). In light of this statistic, colleges and universities are faced with major challenges regarding Latino educational attainment and “institutions are struggling to develop effective retention programs” (Miller & Garcia, 2004). Without adequate retention strategies and programs, Latino students are expected to have the lowest graduation rates at both two and four-year institutions (Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). That being said, it is vital that
institutions begin to understand how to support this increasing student population. Institutions should tap into various types of capitals that have assisted successful Hispanic students graduate from college (Cerna, Perez, & Saenz, 2009). Failure to do so by the year 2050 can result in implications to our economy.

**Academic Self-Concept**

Sedlacek (1989) reported that a strong academic self-concept is important for students of color at all educational levels. Students who express confidence in their academic abilities are likely to achieve higher grades than students who lack confidence (Rodriguez, 1996). Astin (1982) also found that academic self-concept was related to persistence in college for students of color in general, and found it to be related to college grades for groups such as Puerto Ricans.

In a study on the impact of pre-college variables on the academic success of Mexican American students, Rodriguez (1996) reported that academic self-concept, was significantly related to GPA and that students with the same academic background were more likely to achieve higher grades if they had greater confidence in their academic abilities. While test scores are of the utmost importance in the college admissions process, “completing a rigorous curricular program during high school appears to be a more important predictor of college persistence for Latino students (Watson, Redd, & Perna, 2003). In relation to Latino students, perhaps what is needed then is for an understanding of the meaning Latino students give to their self-concept and how this meaning is utilized in their decision to persist in college.

**Support from the Familia (Family)**

Demographic data on Latino families indicate that many students are the first in their family to attend college (O’Brien, 1993; Nora, 2001). That said families may not be supportive
due to not having an understanding of the college process (Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). The Latino family literature reflects a strong emotional and value commitment to family life and God (Valdes, 1996). As such, Latino students tend to experience the family as a fountain of emotional security and support. They view themselves as representatives of their community and family units first and as individuals second (Grossman, 1984). Moreover, they are raised to believe that contributing to and sacrificing for the benefit of the group is more important than simply just focusing on their own advancement (Grossman, 1984).

Schneider and Ward (2003) also discuss the importance of familial support. The impact of the familial support on Latino students may determine how well Latino students adjust to the overall campus, emotionally and academically. In light of this information, it seems clear that the role of “familia” plays a crucial role in the retention of Latino college students. That being said, institutions should have orientation programs in place to work with Latino students and their parents. Hispanic parent orientation must target their needs and allow them to understand the expectations and level of work required of the student (Torres, 2004).

**Finances**

For many low-income and minority students, enrollment and persistence decisions are driven by the availability of financial aid (Nora, 2001). Financial aid and its relation to Latina/o retention, persistence, and success in higher education is consistent within the literature (Cabrera, Nora, & Castañeda, 1992). In fact, Nora (1990) posited that the lack of finances is a significant obstacle to Latina/o students. In 2007-2008, dependent students from families with less than $20,000 in family income received a financial aid award in the amount of $12,840 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). In contrast, those families with income
of $100,000 or more received aid, with an average award of 12,960 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

Latino students who receive grants generally are more likely to persist than those who receive loans (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). However, giving the rising costs of attending college, it is unlikely that Latino students will be able to receive a bachelor’s degree without any loan assistance (Swail et al., 2003). At the same time, the research also suggests that the shift in aid from grants to loans and from need-based to merit-based programs adversely affects both enrollment and persistence for Latino students (Swail et al., 2003). However, need-based institutional grants tend to facilitate persistence (Haynes, 2008). For example, Haynes (2008) found that 90 percent of students who received grants in their first year, were still enrolled in the second semester. Therefore, reversing these shifts may be needed to increase college access and success for Latinos and other minority students.

**Sense of Belonging**

Lane (2002) wrote that student affairs professionals can no longer ignore or underestimate the respective influence of the many on-and-off-campus variables that simultaneously affect a student. There are several variables within the institution’s scope that can influence the retention of Latino students. Some of these variables include living on campus, presence of an ethnic community, among other variables.

Latino students today are looking for a “home away from home” (Rendon & Nora, 2000). Research has found that college environments influence the student’s sense of belonging, especially amongst racial/ethnic groups (Johnson, Soldner, Leonard, Alvarez, Inkelas, Rowan-
Kenyon, & Longerbeam 2007). Research also finds that having a sense of belonging in residence halls is important to all students, but particularly to students of color (Hurtado, 2002).

Latino students are in need of various support systems. Academic and social support systems are of the utmost importance to Latino students; however, those aspects must incorporate a sense of belonging, and touch base on the importance of feeling part of the whole group (Hurtado, 2002). Strayhorn (2008) found that Hispanic students who do well academically and spend more time studying feel more connected to campus than those who perform poorly in their academics, while low-performing Hispanic students feel less connected to campus, and may eventually end up leaving college. Strayhorn’s study (2008) also found that Hispanic students who have frequent and constant interactions with those of diverse backgrounds have a greater sense of belonging.

It is important to note that Latino students’ experiences vary, especially in the first and second year in college, but their sense of belonging in the third and fourth year in college is also important (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that Hispanic students, who have more interactions with their peers and faculty members outside of the classroom in their junior year, tend to have high sense of belonging. Hurtado and Carter’s study (1997) also found that students’ GPA is not associated with sense of belonging, but students who are involved in religious organizations and Greek life have a stronger sense of belonging. The most important finding of the study is that Hispanic students who are members of a social community have the highest sense of belonging as related to campus life.

In lieu of the aforementioned, colleges and universities should conduct regular on-going assessment and evaluation of Latino students’ sense of belonging on campus. The information
garnered can aid them in retaining students in their subsequent years and thus lead to a degree attainment.

**Campus Climate & Institutional Initiatives**

The campus climate can facilitate Latino students’ transition to college life and combat issues such as feelings of isolation. Hurtado (1992) reported that institutions may foster racial tension when they support priorities that work against promoting a better climate. Hurtado (1992) also indicated that this can particularly occur at selective universities which often represent the extreme in American wealth and privilege. It is in this type of environment that racial tensions may be the highest due to ambivalent institutional commitments towards issues of inclusion and acceptance.

Colleges and Universities seeking to increase the retention of Latino students on their respective campuses need to fully understand their unique background. Rendon (1994) posits that institutions need to validate Latino student experiences, which she depicts as “an enabling, conforming and supportive process initiated by in and out of class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development” (p. 44). Furthermore, Solorzano et al. (2005) points to educational inequities and barriers impacting Hispanics in college. Institutions often have structures, policies, and practices that have a negative impact on the academic achievement and success of Hispanic students in college. For example, several institutions do not offer academic support services, such as bridge programs and peer study groups, to help students succeed academically (Solorzano et al., 2005).

Gloria et al. (2005) state that the academic environment influences the experiences of Hispanic students pursuing a college education. Hispanic students often have to juggle their own
cultural values and beliefs and the values and beliefs of the mainstream culture. A student’s perception of the academic environment impacts the student’s social and academic life. Gloria et al. (2005) claim that the impact of perceived prejudice and discrimination and its effects on academic performance is yet to be explored, but racial ethnic minority (REM) students have a significant amount of stress compared to White students. For Hispanic students, financial stressors seem to be a problem, and it impacts college drop-out rates (Gloria et al., 2005).

Hispanic students’ persistence to continue navigating the college campus depends on factors such as social support, stereotypes, expectations, and supportive institutions (Oseguera, Locks, & Vega 2008). There are many underlying factors influencing the experiences of Hispanic students and it is up to the respective institution to find solutions. For example, Oseguera et al. (2008) argue that Hispanic students are vulnerable on the college campus because they tend to have negative academic self-concepts and negative perceptions of the campus climate. Hispanic students’ underrepresented position in society and conflict within the campus culture and home makes them a lot more vulnerable and at risk of dropping out of college (Oseguera et al., 2008).

Given the above mentioned, colleges and universities need to focus on effective retention programs to aid Latino students in their degree seeking attainment. Miller and Garcia (2004) suggest that institutions should consider the following components when designing, planning, and implementing institutional initiatives to retain Hispanic students:

a) Leadership: institutional leaders must be committed to the program and must share the values and mission.
b) Recruitment: maintain connection to community, build K-12 partnerships, and engage underrepresented groups.

c) Engaged faculty: develop ways to incorporate faculty and students.

d) Personal attention: meet individual learning needs through mentoring and tutoring.

e) Peer support: students are offered opportunities for support and advice.

f) Financial assistance: provides students the opportunity to focus on coursework rather than financial struggles.

g) Research opportunities: offer opportunities beyond the classroom where students can connect to community and the world.

h) Evaluation: continue to evaluate efforts and ask the right questions.

Retention programs can certainly aid institutions in the retention of Latino students; however, programs need to be consistent. Institutions need to evaluate the campus climate on their campus in relation to the needs of Latino students when attempting to develop an effective retention program. Long-term, the data can be used to measure effectiveness and progress. Finally, institutions should also focus on having a symmetrical culture, which includes being open-minded, organic, decentralized, collaborative, and innovative (Lopez-Mulnix and Mulnix (2006). In doing, they are more likely to develop multicultural programs on campus. Operating in an asymmetrical format will only deter Latino students from feeling welcomed on campus.

**Faculty-Student Interactions & Mentorship**

The literature strongly supports the positive impact of student-faculty interactions. Faculty involvement outside of the classroom helps students feel validated, making them feel a
part of the campus community (Rendon, 1994). In *How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research*, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) integrated studies from decades of research related to faculty-student interaction. In their review, they posited that student and faculty contact outside of the classroom does positively affect student persistence, degree completion, career choice and educational aspirations. Milem and Berger (1997) also found a strong positive relationship between faculty-student interaction and perceived institutional support. They noted that early faculty-student involvement aided in student persistence.

Steven Lohr (2004) conducted his qualitative dissertation study on student-faculty interaction. He noted that student-faculty out-of-classroom interaction assisted students with a variety of college outcomes, including clarifying career and educational goals. In 2001, Anaya and Cole, studied Latino students in particular. They utilized data from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) administered at thirty research and doctoral granting institutions. They defined three types of interaction: general; academically related; and, primary-personal contact. Frequent interaction with faculty positively impacted academic achievement. In addition, the better students performed academically, the more positively they viewed faculty.

Positive student-faculty interactions have been beneficial for Latino student retention (Schneider & Ward, 2003). Faculty involvement outside of the classroom helps students feel validated, making them feel a part of the campus community (Rendon, 2006). Students who have contact with faculty outside of the classroom are more likely to persist to graduation, exhibit higher levels of achievement, and be satisfied with college than students not involved with faculty outside of the classroom (Schuh & Kuh, 1984). How do we know that interaction with faculty have the same result for Latino college students? Does it have a positive impact on their social and academic integration?
In a study of 254 Mexican American, 315 Black, and 292 Native American students, Mayo, Murguia, and Padilla (1995) reported that relationships with faculty proved to be the most significant dimension of social integration in affecting grade point average. As predicted, having a good relationship with faculty members was an important ingredient to academic success.

Similarly to student-faculty relationships, Latino students who participate in mentoring relationships with their peers often experience positive attitudes towards the university environment and increased confidence in their abilities for problem-solving, goal-setting, and decision making (Johnson, 1989). Through peer-mentoring programs, Latino students attain college survival skills and often make sense of their environment through social support, which enhances their overall college experience (Johnson, 1989).

**Successful Strategies for Retention**

Colleges and Universities need programs that are inclusive to the social needs of Latino students, while also targeting academic life to help students succeed in their classes. Borland (2002) asserts that retention programs are great, but assessment should take place to ensure the student’s social and academic needs are being met, which is necessary to help Hispanic students navigate through college successfully.

As institutions recruit and retain Latino students, University Counseling Centers can also influence institutional systems by providing psychological, social and cultural support (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). When counseling Latino students, counselors should consider factors such as psychological concerns, social support systems, faculty mentors, family support, culture, and other environmental factors (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000). Hispanic students have higher
educational aspirations, but they do not persist until graduation, unless adequate support systems are in place (Gloria & Rodriguez, 2000).

Some universities have developed inclusive strategies that focus on the student’s basic needs, but others have remained stagnant throughout the years. Metzger (2006) found that students should be in an inclusive environment where the social, emotional, and academic areas are taken into consideration. For example, some institutions have found that students who study abroad, especially minority students, have higher retention rates than those who do not study abroad. Unfortunately, only 5% of the students who studied abroad in 2002 were Hispanic college students (Metzger, 2006).

Retention strategies have a strong focus on issues impacting students at various levels; therefore, colleges and universities continue to observe and monitor their effectiveness. Lang (2002) suggests that pre-college programs, bridge programs, counseling, mentoring, and special services should be used as major retention tools. Living Learning Communities (LLC) that incorporate diversity are also extremely effective (Green, 2007). LLC’s provide students the opportunity to learn about themselves and others living on the same community floor or residence hall (Green, 2007). In these communities students develop inclusive social networks that help them get accustom to the college campus (Green, 2007). More importantly, students build peer relationships that help them stay in college (Green, 2007).

**Cultural and Social Centers**

Colleges and Universities across the nation have developed cultural centers that provide services to help students of color navigate the college campus. Jones, Castellanos, & Cole (2002)
Point out that PWI’s (primarily white institutions) reluctantly allow cross-cultural centers for minority students to enter their institution, which is unfortunate because the centers have actually served ethnic minority students in college. Cultural centers have positively impacted ethnic minority students in the social, academic, and cultural arena (Jones et al., 2002). Although cultural centers are important to the overall institution, many of them have remained marginalized (Jones et al., 2002). This is due, largely in part, because many debate on the importance, value, and role of cultural centers (Jones et al., 2002).

Cultural centers enhance ethnic minority college experiences and decrease the number of ethnic minorities who drop out of college (Jones et al., 2002). Cultural centers also indicate that the institution respects diversity and enhances multiculturalism (Jones et al., 2002). Minority students in general face prejudice and these experiences impact their college experience. However, cultural centers are viewed as a great support system to receive social, cultural and advising support (Jones et al., 2002). For the most part, Latino students enjoy cultural centers, where they receive assistance from center staff and feel as if it is a safe place to aid them in their degree seeking attainment (Jones et al., 2002).

Conclusion

A review of the literature indicates that institutions need to be aware of the multiple challenges faced by Latino students. When social integration, sense of belonging, and cultural awareness and development are incorporated with Latinos experiences, there is evidence that Latinos tend to persist at higher rates (Rendon, 2006). Parent involvement is also viewed as a strong factor in Latino educational attainment; therefore, it is important for educators to include Latino parents in their college decision making. Lack of knowledge regarding financial aid,
college costs, and scholarships could be perceived by Latinos as barriers to finishing college. Educational leaders, such as administrators and guidance counselors, need to develop workshops that offer helpful information pertaining to the operation of U.S. school systems; publish U.S. public policies regarding college enrollment, retention, and graduation; offer access to college resources such as mentors, tutors, and bilingual counselors; and provide materials needed to implement teaching and learning in the classroom.

According to Marschall (2006), Latinos need to serve as school board representatives. Their presence on the school board will create a positive impact on school policies and practices that will engage Latino parents in their children’s high school career. As a result, policies and practices that will promote and support effective school organization and academic performance will be implemented. Latinos who fail to complete higher education experience hardships in the U.S. economy. Their low educational attainment and rapid growth as an ethnic group need the attention of K–12 school leaders, college administrators, business and civic leaders, legislators, policymakers, and researchers to identify additional barriers that may prevent their success in the nation’s economy. In addition, college recruitment, enrollment, and attainment for all Latinos should top the list of every education administrator and policymaker.

Chapter 3: Research Design

The Purpose and Overview of Qualitative Approach

The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of Latino students’ academic and social integration to colleges and universities and how that experience impacted their decision to persist in higher education. It is based on a qualitative approach. Creswell (1998) noted that qualitative research is a method of inquiry that explores a social or human problem.
Additionally, Creswell (1998) asserts that such an approach is befitting when seeking to interpret and depict the lived experiences of human subjects. Qualitative research operates on the premise that experiences can best be deduced when they are applicable to a study and examined in the setting where they occur. According to Merriam (2001), “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 6).

Moustakas (1994) notes that qualitative researchers place emphasis on the multi-dimensional, comprehensive existence which seeks meaning in lieu of weight. The research procedure is collective amidst the researcher and participants (Creswell, 2007). The researchers intend to comprehend what it is like to encounter certain situations and how they cope with such issues (Willig, 2008). Finally, according to Merriam (2001), the substance of qualitative research falls in the researcher’s scope to be exploratory and adjustable.

It is because of the aforementioned that the researcher who conducted this study believed the best method to employ was a qualitative approach. Such approach enables the researcher to build a holistic account of the subjects’ words and outlook in context specific settings, thus granting for a more authentic analysis (Creswell, 2003).

**Research Design**

Phenomenology was selected as the methodological approach to examine Latino students’ academic and social integration on college campuses. It is a framework that assumes “human experience makes sense to those who live it, prior to all interpretations and theorizing” (Creswell, 1998, p. 86). Phenomenology was an appropriate avenue for this study as it provided the researcher with a detailed examination of individual Latino students lived experiences.
Phenomenology was first developed by Husserl (1964) who believed that the truth was uncovered through directed experiences. Bursch (1989) believed that phenomenology was to understand lived experiences in its truth. He asserted that phenomenology “strives systematically for essential insights, for ideas and information about everyday experiences, and our participation in the truth” (p.193). Finally, Creswell (1997) posited that phenomenological research depicts the lived existence of individual’s.

In Dukes (1984), *Phenomenological Methodology in the Human Sciences*, he explained Husserl’s approach to phenomenology and how it can be used in research in the human sciences. He indicates that the approach is used to understand the experiences, rather than define them. Dukes (1984) suggests that “The researcher’s aim, in studying any human experience or social phenomenon, is to uncover the inherent logic of that experience or phenomenon, the way it makes sense to its subjects” (p. 199).

The phenomenological approach tries to discard everything that acts as a prejudgment in order to reach openness (Moustakas, 1994). Researchers have often utilized this methodology as a framework to study or place emphasis on phenomena that they believe have been misconstrued by researchers using other approaches, or not found in current existing literature (Ragin, 1994). In relation to this study, the phenomenological approach enabled the researcher to explore Latino students’ experiences, beliefs, and meanings that contributed to their academic persistence. Their personal stories or “cuentos” as Rendon (2006) highlights is culturally relevant and important for institutions to address in aiding them with their academic persistence.

Today, phenomenology has become more recognized in conducting social research. Utilizing this approach enabled the researcher to explore the truth about the experiences of
Latino college students as to how they are integrated academically and socially on campus. The approach is also enhanced by Tesch (1984) who defined phenomenology as descriptive research which dealt with the inner experiences of the individual.

**Study Setting**

Creswell (2003) states that qualitative researchers regularly visit the site of study participants. The researcher conducting this study selected a small private liberal arts college in the Mid-Atlantic region to secure the natural frame of reference. The institution has a student population of about 2,700 and offers 67 academic programs. The average class size is 18 (10 to 1 student-faculty ratio) and the students come from more than 40 states and 35 countries. Outside of the classroom students are afforded the opportunity to prepare for leadership through experiential learning opportunities, an extensive career network, and countless co-curricular, service, and off-campus study activities. The gender distribution is 50% for both men and women enrolled at the College. In fall 2012, 12% of the student body was comprised of students of color and international students. Within that 12% figure, 4% identified as Latino. First-year retention rates have been over 90% in recent years at the College and the four-year graduation rate has exceeded 80%. Tuition and fees for the College is $54,770 with over 75% of students receiving financial aid averaging $33,259. The institution has an Intercultural Resource Center to aid students of color in their transition and persistence towards degree seeking completion.

**Study Participants**

When conducting phenomenological research it is vital that all participants encounter the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). To that end, all five participants in this study were informed of the central research question: What is the role of social and academic integration in
the persistence of Latino college students? The participants in this study voluntarily chose to participate, which Moustakas (1994) indicates that it establishes a keen interest in the phenomenon.

Purposeful sampling procedures were employed to recruit the participants for this study. Each participant received a $25 gift card to Wal-Mart for participating in the study. Purposeful sampling, as Patton (1990) defined, is “selecting information-rich cases for study in depth” (p. 169). Creswell (2003) further explained that for purposeful sampling, individuals and sites must be selected purposefully to learn about the phenomenon being examined. To that end, the following participant criterion was established for the study:

1. Participants must be in good academic standing with a minimum of a 2.0 grade point average.
2. Participants must have completed at least one year of academic studies.
3. Hispanic students who are members of the Latin American Student Organization were invited to participate in this study. The participants were solicited via email by the researcher.

Introduction of Study Participants. The five participants in this study included three males and two females: Anna, Brenda, Carlos, Daniel, and Enrique. Each of them described themselves as Latino and came from inner city communities (New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore). Their majors included Sociology, Spanish, English, and Economics. All five were traditional-age (18-24). Four of them were juniors and one was a senior. As their institution required the participants to live on campus, each participant lived in a residence hall or college owned fraternity house.
The socioeconomic status and family backgrounds of all the participants was diverse. Their parents had varying levels of education (8th grade diploma to high school diploma). Most of the participants lived with both their parents, with the exception of Brenda and Daniel. Both Brenda and Daniel were raised solely by their mother.

Table 3.1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants and highlights the differences that exist among them including educational attainment of their parents, type of high school attended, and ethnicity, among other things.

Table 3.1

Demographic Information of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Anna</th>
<th>Brenda</th>
<th>Carlos</th>
<th>Daniel</th>
<th>Enrique</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
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<td>Salvadorian</td>
<td>Dominican</td>
<td>Dominican &amp; Nicaraguan</td>
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<td>Public</td>
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<td>Private</td>
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<td>Senior</td>
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<td>English</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of</td>
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<td>High School</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>8th Grade</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Gathering

Data gathering involved a variety of activities to collect research data regarding Latino students’ experiences at the institution. Consistent with phenomenology models, the following two data gathering activities were employed for this study:

1. Individual Interviews
2. Demographic Information Sheet

Interviews

Bogdan and Biklen (1998) suggests interviewing as an approach for data gathering when the central goal is to “gather descriptive data in the subjects’ own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret pieces of the world” (p. 94). Furthermore, (Willig, 2003) notes that interviewing is one the most crucial instruments employed by qualitative researchers. To that end, one-on-one interviews served as the primary method of gathering information for this study. All five interviews were conducted in person and recorded. The sessions were held in a quiet meeting space, offering privacy for each of the participants. A research consent form (Appendix D) and demographic information sheet (Appendix B) were given to each participant. Once seated in the room any general questions regarding the study were answered. All consent forms were collected from participants and sealed in an envelope. The researcher explained the nature of the study to each participant, assured anonymity, and proceeded with asking the following questions:
1. What was your reason for attending college?
2. What are some of the financial obligations you have encountered?
3. What do you perceive, if any, as major barriers that may prevent you from persisting throughout college?
4. How are you connected to the campus community?
5. Tell me about your experiences with faculty, and staff, and how these relationships impact your experiences on campus?
6. Tell me about your experiences with your fellow peers and how these relationships impact your experiences on campus?
7. Do you have sense of belonging on campus? Why or why not?
8. Do you expect to graduate from here? Why or why not?
9. What support services have been the most helpful to you throughout your undergraduate career?
10. Would you like to share anything that was not asked?

It is important to note that an interview conducted in a phenomenological study provides subjects with the opportunity to tell their stories. That said the interview questions highlighted above were not the only ones asked. The researcher explored other topics requiring more detail and as such some of participants were asked additional questions. Care was ensured so that participants did not feel like they were led. In addition, throughout the interviewing process the researcher made sure to bracket or set aside his experiences pertaining to the phenomenon being examined.
All interviews were recorded on tape. The researcher also took notes during each interview to record nonverbal and situational cues that often are not recorded on tape. Taking notes forced the researcher to listen and provided backup in the event of any technological issues. The relevant notes were associated with the emerging themes in this study during the final data analysis step, imaginative variation. Upon completion of the interview, the researcher provided each subject with a short debriefing about the nature of the study. Subjects were reminded that any follow-up questions could be directed to the researcher and that they would be asked to review their respective transcript to clarify any misinterpretations (process known as Member Checking in qualitative research). Member checking is a “way of finding out whether the data analysis is congruent with the participants’ experiences” (Curtin & Fossey, 2007, p.92).

Managing and Recording Data

Merriam (1998) suggested audio taping as a process of recording authentic interview transcripts. As previously mentioned the researcher recorded all sessions and took notes during the interview process. The interviews were transcribed into electronic format. All files were saved on a computer and backed up offline for each participant in the study. The transcribed tape-recorded information has been stored in a file at the researcher’s home institution. To protect anonymity, the researcher used pseudonyms rather than names to identify research participants.

Data Analysis Strategies

Moustakas’s (1994) methods for phenomenological analysis were used to analyze each interview (epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences). Moustakas (1994) indicated epoche or bracketing was “a process of
setting aside prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time” (p. 85). As a Latino, the researcher acknowledged that his direct encounters in academia led him to this study. As such, the researcher empowered participants to share their experiences without him imposing his own world view. In doing so the researcher saw the phenomena in a fresh, wide open sense. Furthermore, the researcher reminded himself that epoché is a continuous process that does not end with phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994).

In phenomenological reduction, while describing the experiences of participants in the study in textual form, the data was abridged to what the researcher found meaningful and thematic. A full textual description of the experience was established. Moustakas (1994) recommended the following three steps in phenomenological reduction:

1. Bracketing the focus of the study that concerns the topic and the central research question.

2. Horizontalization, a process which involves treating every statement with equal value. Data discovered to be insignificant to the central research question is removed; thus, leaving only the textual meaning and invariant aspects of the phenomenon.

3. Codifying the horizons and themes into a logical textual description of the phenomenon.

Table 3.2 highlights a representative sample of the phenomenological reduction process which illustrated the themes from the participant’s narrative. The emergence of themes began with a thorough review of each of the transcribed interviews and commentary from field notes. A
recursive process of aggregating the notations into fewer emerging themes resulted in the formation of a myriad of charts similar to table 3.2 that illustrated the emerging themes and relevant quotes from study participants.

Table 3.2

*Sample Table of Themes for Study Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Anna</th>
<th>Brenda</th>
<th>Carlos</th>
<th>Daniel</th>
<th>Enrique</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aid</td>
<td>Yeah, loans, yeah</td>
<td>Financial Aid is always on the back of my mind.</td>
<td>Well, every year they kind of roll back the aid, depending on different factors. I almost had to leave my sophomore year.</td>
<td>If I didn’t have any financial aid, I would not be here because I cannot afford the $52,000 it cost to attend this institution.</td>
<td>There have been some financial hardships especially for my family. We have had some difficulties because I do have two other siblings. One of my other siblings is in college in NYC and therefore, we rely heavily</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Imaginative variation is a procedure where the researcher is apt to “shift various aspects of the description around and re-see the experience and its many aspects in as many ways as possible. The purpose of imaginative variation is to locate those features of the description that are essential to the experience” (Patton, 2002, p. 486). It allows for the development of the themes to lend a more clear depiction of the experience, but not quite the fundamentals of the phenomenon. In utilizing the textual information, structural descriptions of the phenomenon are derived in the imaginative variation stage (Moustakas, 1994).

The final process in phenomenological analysis is coined intuitive integration. In this stage, the combination of the individual textual and structural information created in the earlier stages form a single explanation of the core of the existence of the experience of the phenomenon being examined (Moustakas, 1994).

Data analysis for this study involved a detailed, timely process of discovering themes and assigning meaning to each of them. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), data analysis is not “off-the-shelf”. It is custom built, revised, and “choreographed”. The researcher conducting this study began the analysis with the organization of the interview materials. The first step was to identify general themes or categories from the interview data. Strauss and Corbin (1990) define a data category as a unit of information comprised of events, happenings, and occurrences.
Second, the interview data was divided into statements using a software program entitled MAXQDA, process known as horizontalization. Thus, the researcher was able to transform the categories into clusters of meanings, expressed in phenomenological principles. Tables 3.3 and 3.4 highlight the themes relevant to the participants’ academic and social integration on campus. It does not characterize the information of the charts created during the phenomenological reduction stage, but rather shows which participant’s quotes equated to the themes created in the process. Some of the themes remained unaffected from the phenomenological reduction process, while others joined together.

Table 3.3

*Themes by Participant (Academic)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Anna</th>
<th>Brenda</th>
<th>Carlos</th>
<th>Daniel</th>
<th>Enrique</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Preparedness</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom &amp; Curriculum</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Relations</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aid</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.4

*Themes by Participant (Social)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Anna</th>
<th>Brenda</th>
<th>Carlos</th>
<th>Daniel</th>
<th>Enrique</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Community &amp; Organizations</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercultural Resource Center</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residence Halls</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Belonging</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The researcher also adhered to Moustakas (1994) seven steps in analyzing phenomenological data:

1. Listing and preliminary grouping
2. Reduction and elimination
3. Clustering the invariant constituents
4. Final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application: validation
5. Using the relevant, validated invariant constituents and themes, construct for the researcher an individual textual description of the experience
6. Construct for the researcher an individual structural description of the experience based on the individual textural description and imaginative variation
7. Construct for each subject a textual-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience, incorporating the invariant constituents and themes. From the individual textual-structural descriptions, develop a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experiences representing the group as a whole. (p.121).

Following the above-mentioned steps, every individual expression that related to academic and social experiences of Latino college students was underlined for coding. As such, themes were identified for each subject to summarize their academic and social experiences on campus. The meanings and experiences for each subject’s academic and social integration were framed into a textual form. In conclusion, adhering to Moustakas’s seven steps for phenomenological analysis enabled the researcher to have an authentic analysis of central research question: How does the social and academic integration of Latinos on college campuses affect their ability to persist”?

Validity and Reliability

The conception and issues of construct validity in phenomenological research was addressed by Cheeryholmes (1988). He noted that such research looked for the “object” of the study and attended how the researcher made sense of the world. The validity of phenomenological research was how researchers interpreted their own experiences, and the social situations in which they found themselves.

Creswell (1997) suggested that to ensure validity of phenomenological research, the researcher should comment on past experiences, biases, and prejudices. To judge the validity of phenomenological research, Creswell summarized the following criteria:
1. Did the interviewer influence the contents of the subjects’ descriptions in such a way the descriptions do not truly reflect the subjects’ actual experience?

2. Is the transcription accurate, and does it convey the meaning of the oral presentation in the interview?

3. Is the analysis of the transcriptions, were there conclusions other than those offered by the researcher that could have been derived? Has the researcher identified these alternatives?

4. Is it possible to go from the general structural description to the transcription and to account for the specific contents and connections in the original examples of the experiences?

5. Is the structural description situation specific, or does it hold in general for the experience in other situations (p. 208).

In keeping these standards in mind the researcher ensured validity. Samples were selected purposely so that comprehensive and real information would be provided. The samples selected represented various Latino students throughout their college career (second-year to senior). Being a Latino male also aided the researcher in collecting valid data. Subjects were more likely to express their ideas to the researcher than they were to a person of another racial/ethnic background. Finally, the process of member checking established credibility in the research. As previously mentioned participants were given the opportunity to review the researcher’s findings and themes for accuracy; thus establishing credibility of the research.
Limitations of the Study

This study posited four limitations in regard to the research process which needs to be addressed:

1. The study had a small sample size of five and it was conducted at a small private liberal arts college. Furthermore, the researcher aggregated the data of the participants into one category in an effort to recognize Latinos as a heterogeneous group. According to Arbona and Novy (1991), “Because there is some evidence to suggest that subgroups of Hispanics differ in demographic characteristics that are related to academic success, the practice of aggregating all Hispanics in one category may distort research results related to Hispanic college students (p. 335)”. Therefore findings in this study are limited for national policy.

2. The participants of this study were limited to Latino students. Therefore, any generalizations as to applying the findings to other students of color should be analyzed carefully.

3. The findings of the interviews were contingent upon the authenticity of students participating in the study.

4. The research project began with the operational assumption that campus climate had a direct impact on Latino students’ experience in college.

Protection of Human Subjects

Upon conducting any form of research (qualitative or quantitative), the researcher must adhere to ethical considerations set forth by the National Institute of Health (NIH) and make a
concern effort to become aware of his or her own understanding assumptions of the research question in the data collection/analysis stage of a study. Prior to the start of this study, the researcher provided each participant with an unsigned consent form. The consent form explained the premise of the study, the role of the participant, identified any potential risks involved, time commitment, who viewed the data collected/confidentiality, and the option to withdraw from the study. The researcher reviewed the consent form in detail with each participant and obtained their signature.

Because of the nature of this study, the researcher assigned pseudonyms to each participant. Each interview was conducted in a quiet meeting space, offering privacy for each of the participants. The sessions were tape recorded and each participant was informed that the information would be kept on file at the researcher’s home institutional review board.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of Latino college students’ academic and social integration. The central research question guiding this study was: What is the role of social and academic integration in the persistence of Latino college students? During the interviewing process, participants were asked to discuss and describe their experiences to establish factors impacting their persistence. It is important to note that the participants’ perception and detailed accounts in this study are not a critique of their current institution, rather their experiences as Latino college students.

Five undergraduate students, three males and two females, participated. Individual interviews with each participant demonstrate how Latino college students are affected with adjustment issues to college. Most of the participants believed that, due to their ethnicity and
race, they have additional obstacles while attending college. Thus the findings of this study shed perspective on concerns relative to how colleges and universities might begin to view both the academic and social experiences of Latino students.

Four overarching themes emerged from the analysis: Academic, Finances, Social, and Sense of Belonging. The academic theme produced three sub-themes: academic preparedness, the de facto spokesperson, and faculty relationships. The social theme evoked three sub-themes: campus community and organizations, importance of having an Intercultural Resource Center, and residence halls. The other two themes did not have sub-themes.

**Brief Description of Participants**

**Anna**

Anna is a junior, majoring in sociology and identifies herself as Panamanian. She is from New York City. Both her parents have a high school diploma. Anna decided to attend college because “she wanted better for herself”. Anna works on campus and has participated in paid internships in an effort to gain experience and make money. Outside of the classroom, she is an active member of the Latin American Student Association and the Black Student Union.

**Brenda**

Brenda is a junior, majoring in Spanish Linguistics/Latin American Studies. She identifies herself as Dominican and hails from Philadelphia. She was recruited and accepted to her current institution through a pipeline program entitled, Philadelphia Futures that provides high potential, economically disadvantaged, college-bound students with deep, rigorous and life-changing programs and resources as they transition to college.
As a college student, she has struggled financially and works ten hours per week on campus. Brenda is the first person in her family to attend college. On campus, she is an active member of the Latin American Student Association.

**Carlos**

Carlos is a junior and identifies himself as Salvadorian. He is a first-generation college student and learned about his current institution through a specialized program for talented minorities, entitled Collegiate Directions. Carlos lives in Maryland. He is a member of the Center for Public Service, Latin American Student Association, Sigma Nu Fraternity, and participates in eRace (a group of students that gather weekly on Friday afternoons to discuss issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion).

**Daniel**

Daniel, a first-generation college student, is a junior from New York City and identifies himself as Dominican. His mother did not complete her high school education. On-campus, Daniel is an active participant of the Latin American Student Association, Black Student Union, Dance Ensemble (teaches weekly Salsa classes to the campus community), and is a member of Alpha Chi Rho Fraternity.

**Enrique**

Enrique is a senior from New York City and identifies himself as Dominican and Nicaraguan. He is a first-generation college student, majoring in Economics. Enrique ran track his first-year, joined Alpha Chi Rho Fraternity, and is a member of Student Senate.
Academic Themes

Sub-Theme 1 - Academic Preparedness

The participants in this study all found their enrollment at a private liberal arts college intellectually challenging and did not feel their high schools adequately prepared them for such academic rigor. The high schools attended by the participants were very diverse. All of the participants, except Enrique, attended an inner city public high school and were enrolled in honors classes. As Brenda recalls,

I was in honor classes, which were the highest classes you can take; however, I think I wrote one five page paper throughout my high school career. My high school was so focused on tests, which were easy, and passing standardized tests. The white students, on the other hand, at our college went to better equipped schools and took better courses. What I needed was writing, reading, and critical thinking skills to succeed in a liberal arts setting. As a Latina, coming from an inner city high school, I know I have to compensate for that. The one skill set, however, from high school that has aided me in college is to remain a strong self-disciplined student and never give up. Of course, I also know how to seek help.

Enrique had very similar feelings as Brenda. He states,

Yes, I attended a private school. However, it was a private charter school in New York City. In fact one of my friends who graduated earlier than me in high school was smart and got kicked out of college. So, I knew I was underprepared. What separates me from my friend is my desire to succeed and make my parents proud. That said I have paid close attention to the faculty expectations throughout my undergraduate career and have
performed well academically.

Despite their level of under preparedness, each of the participants had a belief and a realization that they possessed the potential to succeed. At times this was depicted as a belief in oneself even beyond academic ability. For example, Carlos states,

Life is tough. I come from an inner city high school in Maryland that barely assigned homework or large quantity of papers. I knew I had to start from the bottom and work my way up in college and that is how life works. Yes, I’m not one of these privileged White kids but you can’t keep me down.

This notion of believing in oneself is more than simply having a positive outlook. It also combined self-efficacy in that the five participants each had an “I will/I can” disposition. This positive outlook enabled the participants to overcome obstacles making them more resilient, thus empowering them to persist in their degree seeking completion.

In her interview, Anna said,

I think this school is very challenging for me, especially coming from an inner city high school. It’s not like my high school was bad; however, it definitely was not at the same standard as I would say the White students at this college attended. I did not take any classes in high school that taught me how to write and no one sat me down to tell me how college was going to be like. While I never took AP courses, I was the kind of person in high school to adapt after a while. I do not give up easily. I just look at things and remind myself that I can do it.
Anna is now in her junior year at the institution. While she still finds it challenging intellectually, she has adapted to the academic rigor and style of writing. Anna, like the other participants, has not given up hope.

Daniel, too, described himself as unprepared despite graduating third in his high school class. Daniel stated:

The public school I attended in New York City did not prepare me academically in the least bit. I graduated third in my class. I didn’t understand how hard it was and how much different it was going to be from a public education. As such, I performed horribly my freshman year. I started to get my act together during my sophomore year. So, I would say my high school education delayed me a bit. Yes, I wrote papers in high school but it certainly was not of the magnitude I have to write now. The longest paper I wrote in high school was five pages long; Whereas, here it’s constant writing. Writing was always my weakest subject; however, I have gotten use to it now and will not quit.

Like Anna and Daniel, all of the participants had similar experiences in relation to not being academically prepared for college. They each disclosed that their high school coursework was less rigorous than that of their current peers. For example, some of the participants reported barely writing, reading, and conducting research throughout their high school education. Others disclosed the lack of math and science preparation received that would have been helpful in fulfilling the College’s math and science distribution requirement. The participants wished they had the development of good language skills and study habits prior to starting college.

At times the participants feared failing in college. However, that fear was reduced each time they passed a course. Successfully completing each semester further confirmed their belief
and desire to persist in college. “Not passing” was not an option for the participants. They want to succeed and be a role model for their siblings and family. For example, Brenda stated, “I am first-generation college student. My mom never attended college and I saw the struggles she went through in life. A high school diploma is not enough today and I want to show my family the things you can do with a college education”. Similarly, Carlos stated, “My mom instilled the value of higher education in me. As a first-generation college student, I want to show my family that anything is possible as long as you work hard and apply yourself”.

As college students, the initial academic concerns seem to stem from their socio-economic status and neighborhood characteristics. From observing their perceptions, they just want to prove to themselves, family members, college, and peers that they are smart and talented and can succeed. While they each have encountered obstacles along their academic journey, they possess an “I can/I will” demeanor and will continue to persist. In the words of Anna, “Yes, college has been challenging. However, I am still pushing and I know a lot of my Latino friends are as well. I am going to make it though”.

Although all of the participants felt underprepared for college, they do not feel their lack of academic preparation is a hindrance nor reflective of what they are capable of achieving. The desire to succeed lies within each of them. For the participants their drive to succeed is a philosophy of life, not willing to take anything for granted. As Carlos states, “You have to work hard for what you want in life. You can do anything if you just apply yourself”. Beginning something and completing the task, in this case a college education, is imperative for all the participants. They want to serve as role models for their families and future generation Latino students enrolling at the College.
Sub-Theme 2 – The de facto spokesperson

Findings from this study indicated that students of color often take on a de facto role as spokesperson for their racial and ethnic groups, a role they are regularly expected to play. According to the participants, they were often expected to assimilate to White classroom norms and separate their culture and ethnicity from the learning process. The following statements revealed several times in which the participants in this study felt the need to speak in general terms about their race or ethnicity within the classroom. All of the participants discussed their dislike for the unsettling position this role of “spokesperson” signifies on their campus. Yet, many felt the need to answer in class with these generalities when called upon. Participants also reported a concern regarding the lack of Latino culture being discussed in classes. If it was discussed, it often was associated in a negative context - crimes.

Because the classroom may be the one place that sets the tone for how students make meaning of their college experience, the participants in this study were tired of being treated as a “collective”. They would rather be treated as “individuals” who possess “diversity of thought”. In the words of Daniel,

I am tired of speaking on behalf of the entire Latino population when topics or discussions about my culture are raised in the classroom. A different set of voices should be available to share their perspectives on the topic. Thus, respecting my own opinion and not ignoring the differences of experiences among racial groups in the classroom.

For participant Carlos, he states,

I feel like I am always the only Hispanic kid in class. I am often called upon anytime we discuss Latino related issues and expected to speak on behalf of the entire Latino
population. I find it absurd and offensive. However, I know that I must persist and therefore answer the question.

Participants, Daniel and Enrique, both feel that the Latino culture is rarely addressed in the curriculum. Daniel states, “If it is brought up it often is associated with South America or Spain”. For Enrique he “panics” when the Latino culture is ever raised in the classroom for fear that students are simply going to be negative. According to Enrique,

This semester I am enrolled in a political science course. As you know, we are in the middle of a presidential election. Given the changing demographics of our country, clearly the Latino vote matters. However, the media portrays us in a negative light and I am fearful that students in class will also be negative given the stereotypes of the Latino population. I wish people would recognize that not all of us are undocumented and that we each come from different walks of life.

Several of the participants implied that their dual role as a Latino student and a college student greatly collided with their identity and development. While they have garnered an understanding of their identity development as college students, they must also seek certainty in their evolution as Latino college students. These two competing variables of identity development emerge in the participants’ daily interactions both in-and-outside of the classroom. For example, Anna reported, “When issues of race come up in class or outside of class, it is a big thing for me because I am a token Latina on campus. Professors, students, and administrators on campus look to me to represent the entire Latino race”.

Thrust into the role of “spokesperson” participants believed inferences were often made about them based on their ethnicity or culture. They were also concerned about the college
placing Latino students into one category. Their perceptions suggest that the pretense around the notion that all Latino students act and think alike sets the foundation for both faculty and students to “clump” them into the same category. As Brenda states, “I am from the Dominican Republic and live in Philadelphia. My experience as a Latina is clearly different than that of a Puerto Rican Latina student from the mid-west”. In sum all of the participants disclosed a feeling of “frustration” and a desire for the campus community to find out “what it means to be them as individuals”.

**Sub-Theme 3 - Faculty Relationships**

Despite the negative feelings in the classroom, all participants in this study disclosed positive relationships with faculty and the faculty impact on their college experience. This interaction has aided them in academically integrating into the college community. Two of the study participants were intentional in establishing relationships with faculty of color and developed close bonds, as they felt such faculty would be more sympathetic to their ethnic experiences. Anna and Daniel specifically bonded with faculty of color. In fact, they felt that the College should recruit more faculty of color, as it would aid students of color in their transition.

In contrast, Carlos and Enrique bonded with White faculty members. Enrique established a relationship with his White Economics faculty advisor based on common interests and personality. He was less concerned about the faculty members’ race and or ethnicity. Enrique enjoys his interactions with his Economics faculty advisor. He states,
I like our conversations, whether it is academic, career, or personal. My faculty advisor gives me a lot of ideas, provides me with motivation, and wants to see me excel. I have even eaten dinner with her, which makes me feel welcomed in this campus community. Similarly Carlos states, “Coming in as a first-year student from an inner city and establishing a rapport with my first-year White seminar professor was great. She offered to show me around the community and went out of her way to make me feel connected”. Given the aforementioned, faculty involvement with the participants outside of the classroom made them feel validated and empowered to persist. In the words of Daniel, Through my side conversations with faculty members they have inspired and motivated me to do well. It is nice to sit down with a professor over a cup of coffee and just talk about life in general. You leave the conversation feeling supported and that you can succeed. To that end, the participants in this study also reported that the interaction they have with faculty also contributed to their sense of belonging on campus. Furthermore, each of the participants reported faculty embracing the use of office hours and encouraging students to follow-up with them regarding comments on papers, among other things. Participants also disclosed the appreciation for the college incorporating faculty into orientation, as this enabled them to interact with faculty early on in their academic career. Several of the participants also reported interacting with faculty through lunch/dinner, departmental colloquial series, guest lecture talks, events, serving as internship advisors, trips, and scholarly research. All of these interactions enabled the participants of this study to view their interactions with faculty as important to their development as students both personally and
in their respective academic discipline. As a Spanish major/Latin American Studies minor, Brenda saw firsthand how important it was to establish such relationships. She states,

I’d say I have a great relationship with four professors in my department. Two of them are Latino and two are White. They have helped me a great deal in college through my writing, adjustment concerns, financial issues, and empowering me to succeed. I am forever indebted to them and now tell other Latino students about the importance of establishing relationships with faculty in their academic department early in the process.

**Finances**

The role of finances emerged as its own theme in relation to the ability to persist. For some, there was the struggle of needing money and trying to balance out work with school. For others, there was a concern whether they were going to be awarded substantial financial aid to cover their tuition and fees.

Participant, Brenda, indicated that she has “struggled financially”. Coming from a low-income household, she did not have the luxury of asking her mother for money. Similarly, Daniel’s mother was not able to assist him financially. He indicated, “I am paying for school myself and therefore have not taken anything for granted. Life is difficult but you have to work hard for what you want in life”.

All five participants received financial aid and disclosed the importance of it in their ability to persist to meet the financial demands of a college education. They were able to identify peers who had dropped out of college because of financial difficulties and not receiving adequate financial assistance in their award packages.
For Participant, Carlos, he indicated,

Every year they roll back the aid, depending on different factors. For example, my dad made more money during my sophomore year. As such, my aid was cut and we had to struggle to find the money. We found a way to pay my tuition, but it was a big blow to our finances. If it continues to get cut, it will definitely prevent me from graduating; however, I am determined to make it.

Although the participants in this study did not allow financial hardships to affect their goal of graduating from their institution, the reality is the role of finances does play a factor in Latino college students’ ability to academically persist. Most of the participants in this study disclosed coming from lower economic backgrounds and were puzzled that students from upper-class backgrounds received more financial aid than they did. In the words of Carlos,

My parents make a combined income of about $53,000. My roommate, on the other hand, parents make a reported income of $112,000. Yet, he receives $9,000 more in aid than I do. How is that fair?

Some participants also reported that upper-class students often associated financial aid with students of color. In contrast, two participants, Anna and Enrique, did not feel there was an image of the typical financial aid student. Enrique felt that the student “could be anyone”. He indicated, “I have White friends who receive financial aid”. Anna had the same image as Enrique; however, she differed in her experience base. As part of her work study, Anna actually worked in the Office of Financial Aid. She states, “Every kind of person walks into the financial aid office”. The difference is you see more students of color talking freely about financial aid on campus and the White students tend to keep it quiet.”
In sum, participants’ discussion of financial issues demonstrated an unevenness in the impact of financial aid. Some of them faced major financial obstacles, such as having to work on campus, while others encountered fewer issues. The latter group identified the role of scholarships, financial aid, and support from family as a means to support them. Some had an image of the typical financial aid recipient and others did not. Regardless, all of the participants have embraced their financial issues, learned from the experience, and are determined to graduate from their institution. In Anna’s words,

When I was accepted to this college I was fully aware of the costs associated with this institution. I am blessed to receive some grants, scholarship money, and loans as money plays a big role in my ability to remain in school. Working in the Office of Financial Aid also helps because I have the ability to ask first-hand questions, such as, how many hours can I work without it impacting my financial aid? As a junior, I have a solid grasp of the financial aid process, am continuously monitoring it, and will make sure I have enough money to graduate next year.

Similarly, Carlos states, “I am aware of how much money it costs to attend this institution. My parents and I have learned enough about the financial aid process and have figured out what it will take to see me graduate next year”.

**Social Themes**

The third overarching theme that emerged from analysis of the central research question was Social. Within the social scope the following sub-themes transpired: 1. Campus Community and Organizations, 2. Importance of having an Intercultural Resource Center, and 3. Residence Halls.
Sub-Theme 1 - Campus Community and Organizations

Managing social relationships outside of the classroom environment helped aid participants in their persistence towards a college degree. For them, the process of making it academically and socially was difficult. By successfully navigating both these lived experiences on their campus, participants referred to how these skills will help them in the real world. In the words of Anna,

I joined the Latin American Student Association and Black Student Union my freshman year. It made my transition on a predominately White campus easier. The members in both organizations look out for each other and want to make sure we reach our full potential. Both these organizations had an influence on my retention because they provided me with leadership opportunities and something I can identify with.

The participants in this study found campus organizations based on compatibility and their ethnic background. Therefore, while the organizations to which the students belong varied greatly, it was the sense of belonging that was integral to the students’ lived experience.

As a first-year student, Brenda joined the Latin American Student Association. “I joined the Latin American Student Association because it was something I was familiar with and felt comfortable”, said Brenda. Carlos, on the other hand, not only joined the Latin American Student Association but became involved in the Center for Public Service and joined a fraternity. “The Center for Public Service has always been supportive of me. I have participated in various volunteer and philanthropic events with their office and have gotten to know other students that are not Hispanic”, said Carlos.
To a person, the participants learned more when they were engaged in all aspects of their undergraduate experience: academic and co-curricular. Each of them learned about themselves – their individual passions, talents, strengths, values, and leadership skills – while also making significant contributions to the College and beyond. Participants reported the skills gained from belonging and contributing to an organization went beyond the classroom, thus aiding them in their job search and life upon graduation. Carlos for example indicated,

Throughout college I think the biggest thing I’ve learned is not the theories, and all that stuff, but like, it’s personal growth, like you learn things from outside the classroom in leadership skills that I know will benefit me on the job front.

Drawing from Carlos’s statement and the other participants in this study, it is evident that becoming involved on campus not only has aided them for the world of work but also connecting them to the college in a social setting. For example, Brenda felt her involvement in the Latin American Student Association was instrumental to her sense of belonging on campus. “LASA members take on a big brother/big sister role. We empower one another, provide emotional support, and ensure that we do well academically”, said Brenda. Through campus organizations, participants felt a sense of belonging and honed in on some key leadership skills – cooperation, communication, and leading. In addition, participants learned how to handle themselves and others under stressful situations, manage time effectively, and become organized. For Anna, “Serving as President of the Black Student Union has taught me how to be an effective leader, manage my time well, practice my communication skills through newsletters and facilitating meetings, and operating a balanced budget. All of these skills I am sure will aid me upon graduation”.
Though Anna’s, Brenda’s and Carlos’s level of involvement varied and the type of organizations they opted to interact with were quite diverse, they both benefitted from getting involved. Anna and Brenda felt easily accepted through the Latin American Student Association and Carlos felt the Center for Public Service opened up the doors to more opportunities and do other things. Getting involved was important for these participants. There was a perception that one must be involved to make things happen for oneself and that simply might mean taking advantage of the things that are present. In Carlos’s words,

Prior to starting classes, we all go through pre-orientation and learned about different clubs and organizations. I remember hearing about clubs through correspondences with my orientation leader in the summer. It can be difficult for a student to navigate the classroom environment without having a sense of belonging on-campus first. This is why being involved is so important. There is so much to do on this campus. By getting involved, I feel a connection to this place. It definitely has shaped and empowered me to graduate.

Interestingly, all three male participants in this study opted to join a fraternity on campus even though the College does not have Latino fraternities. Carlos joined Sigma Nu Fraternity. Daniel and Enrique both joined Alpha Chi Rho. For Enrique, it provided him with the opportunity to feel connected with the campus community. He states,

My fraternity brothers are my extended family. Through serving in leadership capacities within the organization, I feel like I have garnered some great skills. Do not get me wrong. I still like getting together with my Latino friends for dinner; however, stepping out of your comfort zone in a predominately White campus can aid you in the long run.
Finally, one big concern expressed by all the participants was the lack of involvement in campus organizations by other Latino students on campus. They felt the Latino students who were not involved had a different view of the campus community than they did. The participants stressed the importance of stepping out of one’s comfort zone and getting involved, for, to them, belonging, was key to persisting in college. According to Enrique,

Staying within your comfort zone does not enable you to try new experiences. You have to be willing to leave your niche and reach out. There have been situations where I’ve spoken to other Latino students on campus and they refuse to branch out, which is really unfortunate. I have grown immensely through my involvement on campus and know the importance of human interaction is essential if you want to get by in life. If you stay within your own comfort zone, you are going to miss out on what else is out there.

Sub-Theme 2 - Importance of having an Intercultural Resource Center

Colleges and universities across the nation have developed cultural centers that provide services to help students of color navigate the college campus. Four out of the five participants in this study found the Intercultural Resource Center on campus to be of great help to them in their transition to college. For participant, Daniel, the IRC is a home away from home. “I always go to the IRC to do homework, relax, sleep, or just chill”, said Daniel. He further states, The Intercultural Resource Center has been here for me since freshman year. They provided us with weekly talks and workshops. I treat the staff like my second academic advisor and family. In lots of ways, they have been there for me more than my actual faculty advisor. The director checks on me periodically to see how I am doing academically, socially, and financially. He even helped me obtained an internship. This
past summer I ran into some financial difficulty and almost could not return to the College. Had it not been for the director’s quick action, I would not be here today. I can truly say that he and the other staff members go out of their way to make sure students of color succeed on this predominately White campus and for that I am grateful.

In contrast, Enrique did not make use of the intercultural resource center throughout his college career. He felt that it “impedes on students of color leaving their niche and reaching out to the greater campus community”. However, for the other four participants in this study, the intercultural resource center, they reported, enhanced their other college experiences. For Enrique he understands the importance of having an intercultural resource center on campus. Yet, he wants the faculty and staff to “be cognizant of the fact that Latino students can easily segregate themselves by only taking advantage of the cultural center. We must empower Latino students to utilize such resources but also step out of their comfort zone and take full advantage of all the rich resources made readily available to them”.

**Sub-Theme 3 - Residence Halls**

The participants in this study grew up in predominately Latino communities. As such, they were not conditioned to feel out of place or different. However, when they left home for college the participants were placed in residence halls where they were viewed as “minorities” or “different”. In Brenda’s words,

> At home I was a part of a culture and surrounded by Latinos in my community. Here it is so much different. The dominant culture on campus is that of the model American. I can recall having nothing in common with my roommate or peers during my first semester, from Salsa music to good ole fashion Latino cuisine”.
Living on campus is required for each of the participants, as the College is a four-year residential liberal arts institution. Only a certain number of seniors are allowed to live off-campus and it is on a case by case basis. To that end, the residential component is as important as the academic and social for the five participants in this study.

For the participants, departing from home to attend a college in a different state proved to be a difficult experience at first. Each of them reported feeling “homesick”, having a sense of alienation, and struggled with their ethnic identity by living in a residence hall comprised mainly of White students. They had to leave their norms of past associations and get acclimated to a new environment. They each reported not having any mechanisms in place to help them navigate the residential experience during their first semester.

Participant, Anna, states,

I can recall moving to campus my first year from New York City. The only students of color living in my hall were my roommate and another person living down the hall. I was homesick and said to myself that I had to do something. Therefore, I joined student affinity groups that resonated with me (Latin American Student Association and the Black Student Union). There was no support for students of color living in the residence halls and there was a lack of programming geared towards diversity. During the weekends, the only thing offered were fraternity parties involving alcohol”.

Similarly to Anna, participant Daniel shared,

When I think of the dorms my freshman year, I recall a negative experience. A few minorities lived in my dorm and it was very segregated. People associated with people who were like them. My RA did not go out of his way to connect me or other minorities
to the dorm. He simply focused on what the dominant culture wanted to do in the dorm, thus making me feel alienated at times and missing home”.

All five participants had similar experiences and had no choice but to make contact with the dominant White culture on campus through the residence halls. This challenged their identity and sense of belonging. For example, Carlos states, “The entire college environment was just so different in terms of culture. I came from an inner city in Maryland and my roommate was from the suburbs of Vermont. There were no other Latino males on my floor freshman year. I easily stood out as the minority on the floor and was also dealing with issues of guilt from leaving my Latino friends and family back home to pursue a college education”.

Due to the fact that all of the participants were far away from home, they each discovered a sense of “self-reliance” within themselves. They learned how to survive without their family unit and make use of relevant cultured organizations on campus. As a result, all of the participants joined the Latin American Student Association in their first semester. This provided them with a sense of normalcy, as they were surrounded by their culture. In Brenda’s words, “I was able to connect with members of my ethnicity/culture through the Latin American Student Association, feel connected, and learn to navigate the campus community on my own”.

Although the participants struggled living in the residence halls their first year, in subsequent years the participants got more involved on campus and reported satisfaction with their living environment. “As I got involved with the Center for Public Service and joined Sigma Nu Fraternity in my sophomore year, I began to establish a sense of belonging on campus. Thus, my living situation changed. I was now living with friends that shared my same interest”, said Carlos. In subsequent years, some of the participants opted to live in special interest
housing pertaining to their ethnicity such as the Spanish House. Others opted to live in their Greek affiliated house on campus. One participant, Anna, opted to work for residence life as a resident assistant. For Anna, she did not want other Latino students or students of color to encounter what she experienced her first-year of college. Therefore, she took it upon herself to reach out to all the incoming students of color.

In Anna’s words,

The College has become increasingly diverse since my first-year. I have seen more Latinos enrolling and I want to make sure they have a positive experience living in the dorms. Therefore, I took it upon myself and obtained a list of all the incoming students of color from the Intercultural Resource Center on campus. I reached out to all of them via facebook and email. I also helped planned a welcome reception with the IRC and discussed the importance of making students of color feel welcomed in the dorms with my co-RAs.”

Drawing from Anna’s commentary and the other four participants, the residential experience is as important as the academic and social integration in their persistence. For Anna, it is important that students of color feel a part of a “tight knit community” and not feel “alienated” on a predominately White campus.

**Sense of Belonging**

The last theme to emerge in this study was a sense of belonging, which all five participants reported having on campus. They described the campus as physically beautiful and pleasant. “I like the fact that we have a lot of green space on campus. It provides students with the opportunity to relax and process”, said participant Carlos. In contrast, Brenda reported, “the
College is short on diversity in regards to their paintings and portraits around campus. Furthermore, the campus at times feels segregated. However, I have a sense of belonging due in part to my membership with the Latin American Student Association and the Black Student Union”.

It is important to note that the participants’ sense of belonging varied in terms of certain affinity groups and the college in general. Participants strived to develop a sense of belonging on campus, even while maintaining strong connections to their home and family. Some participants felt strongly about several communities, while others focused mainly on one. The two female participants, Anna and Brenda, possessed a sense of belonging with their affinity groups but not necessarily the College. As a student of color, Anna states, “I feel like I am constantly on the defense and have to prove myself to the dominant culture on campus. However, being a part of the Latin American Student Association has helped me immensely”.

The three male participants, on the other hand, definitely suggested a sense of belonging. They not only joined organizations that resonated with their culture, but became engaged in other on-campus organizations. Participant Carlos states,

I have made friends with a lot of people on campus through various means. I’m still cool with people who lived in my first-year residence hall. I am active with my fraternity, volunteer with different students at the Center for Public Service, and talk to classmates. I’ve found it pretty easy to connect with people on campus.

Participant Enrique, indicated,

I knew this institution was predominately White. Therefore, I made the best of it and have integrated well on campus. My best friend on campus is my first-year roommate,
who happens to be White. I feel like I was welcomed with open arms by the administrators, faculty, and students. I don’t believe that’s the same for every Latino student, but I believe my personality, my openness, and open-mindedness has allowed me to integrate easily and enjoy this environment here. I ran track my first-year, joined a fraternity my sophomore year, and am involved in student senate. It’s regretful to see that some of the Latino students don’t integrate with the dominant culture on campus. In lots of ways I think it hinders them in the long run, beyond college.

For the female participants, Anna and Brenda, they clearly experienced levels of racism and prejudice on campus. While they do not have a sense of belonging with the entire College, they still are persisting and have one year left to graduation. In Brenda’s words,

In high school, I did not think of myself as a minority, because I was surrounded by people like me. When I came to the College, I felt different for the first time. Still, I wanted folks to know that I liked being me and did not want to let go of my Latino identity. It’s sad to say, but students on this campus don’t know anything about the Latino culture and often make ignorant stereotypes. Instead of getting insulted, I try my best to educate them about my culture. I refuse to have my culture hold me back and with it I plan to help others in the Philadelphia community that I call home.

In conclusion, all of the participants recognized the importance of family relationships, faculty/administrator relationships, and the quality of facilities and layout of the campus in relation to their sense of belonging. For the five Latino persisting participants within this study, each of them had two or more sources of persistence on campus. Most importantly maintaining their relationships with family members were also found to be a source of support. As such,
participants reported these ties should be nurtured and that the College should encourage Latino students to build stronger systems of support to aid them in their degree seeking completion.

**Summary**

Overall, the participants in this study presented a myriad of responses to the questions regarding their academic and social integration on campus. Each of the participants struggled academically during their first year at the college. However, they have come full circle and are confident in their academic abilities. They attribute their academic success to their willingness to succeed, great relationships with key faculty members, and being a positive role model for their family. Within the classroom environment, they shared their frustration with the lack of diversity in the curriculum and always having to be the spokesperson on behalf of the entire Latino population. Finally, financial aid definitely played a factor in their degree seeking completion process. Each participant said they would not be able to persist without receiving some form of financial aid.

The social themes highlighted the importance of having culturally relevant organizations, such as the Latin American Student Association and the Intercultural Resource Center, as the participants experienced incongruence with the White culture their first year. These multicultural social communities enabled the participants to not let go of their ethnic identity and fostered a sense of belonging.

All five participants exhibited a strong commitment to the academic goal of graduating from their institution, recognized the importance of family relationships, and had a sense of belonging to the college. The next and final chapter in this dissertation will address how the
findings of this study relate to the central research question, literature review, and theoretical framework. Recommendations for future research will also be addressed.

Chapter 5: Overview, Discussion of Research Findings, Implications, Recommendations for Future Research, and Conclusion

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the lived experience of Latino college students to understand what impacts their decision to persist in college. In seeking an answer to the problem of practice, the central research question for this study was: What is the role of social and academic integration in the persistence of Latino college students?

Drawing from Critical Race Theory (Villalpando, 2004) as a framework, the question enabled the researcher to examine the experiences of Latinos in higher education in the second decade of the 21st century. The researcher used a qualitative approach in conducting this study. From the interviews with five participants, four key themes emerged: Academic, Finances, Social, and Sense of Belonging. This chapter will discuss these themes in relation to the literature and to the theoretical framework, offer suggestions for further research and suggest recommendations.

Restatement of the Problem

Latinos are the largest and most rapidly growing minority demographic group in the nation. According to the 2010 Census, 50.5 million Americans identified themselves as Latinos, representing more than 16 percent of the U.S. population. This shift in population is already being seen at colleges and universities. The number of Latinos attending college grew by a record 24 percent in 2009–2010 (Fry, 2011). This brought the total number of Latinos enrolled
in colleges and universities to its highest level ever, 1.8 million in 2010 (Fry, 2011). Despite the increase, Latinos still lag behind in obtaining a college degree. In 2010, only 13% of Hispanic 25-29 year-olds completed at least a bachelor’s degree compared to 53% non-Hispanic Asian, 39% of White young adults, and 19% Blacks (Fry, 2011).

By 2018, 63 percent of jobs will require a college degree or certificate (Carnevale, 2010). At the current rate of college completion, the nation will be short by 3 million degrees (Carnevale, 2010). Improving Latinos’ persistence is crucial because, as a fast growing demographic, the educational success of this specific student population will impact the United States economy. To maintain and sustain the United States economy, it is important to enhance college perseverance and degree attainment of society’s rapidly growing population by 2020, as one in six United States residents will be of Latino descent (Council of Economic Advisors, 2000).

**Findings in Relationship to the Literature**

There are essential works within research literature that are relevant to Latino college student persistence. The following section considers the relationship of the findings within this study to that of the literature. In fact, the research confirmed all four themes consistent to the participants lived experiences.

**Academic self-concept.** Participants in this study all agreed on the importance of possessing academic-self concept in relation to their academic persistence. To that end, Sedlacek (1989) reported that a strong academic self-concept is important for students of color at all educational levels. Students who express confidence in their academic abilities are likely to achieve higher grades than students who lack confidence (Rodriguez, 1996). Astin (1982) also
found that academic self-concept was related to persistence in college for students of color in general, and found it to be related to college grades for groups such as Puerto Ricans. Furthermore, Rodriguez (1996) posited that students who express confidence in their academic abilities are likely to achieve higher grades than students who lack confidence.

Faculty-student interactions and mentorship. The participants in this study all reported having relationships with faculty both in and out of the classroom, which is crucial for Latinos in their degree seeking completion process (Rendon, 2006). The current literature strongly supports the positive impact of student-faculty interactions. In How College Affects Students: A Third Decade of Research, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) integrated studies from decades of research related to faculty-student interaction. In their review, they posited that student and faculty contact outside of the classroom does positively affect student persistence, degree completion, career choice and educational aspirations. Milem and Berger (1997) also found a strong positive relationship between faculty-student interaction and perceived institutional support. They noted that early faculty-student involvement aided in student persistence.

Steven Lohr (2004) conducted his qualitative dissertation study on student-faculty interaction. He noted that student-faculty out-of-classroom interaction assisted students with a variety of college outcomes, including clarifying career and educational goals. In 2001, Anaya and Cole, studied Latino students in particular. They utilized data from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) administered at thirty research and doctoral granting institutions. They defined three types of interaction: general; academically related; and, primary-personal contact. Frequent interaction with faculty positively impacted academic achievement. In addition, the better students performed academically, the more positively they viewed faculty.

Positive student-faculty interactions have been beneficial for Latino student retention
Faculty involvement outside of the classroom helps students feel validated, making them feel a part of the campus community (Rendon, 2006). Students who have contact with faculty outside of the classroom are more likely to persist to graduation, exhibit higher levels of achievement, and be satisfied with college than students not involved with faculty outside of the classroom (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). Furthermore, Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996) found that Latina/o students who identify a role model or mentor have an increased chance to adjust to the college environment.

**Finances.** Participants in this study all reported concern regarding the role financial aid plays towards their degree seeking completion. They reported that without the aid received they would not be able to afford the price tag of a small private liberal arts education. For some, their financial situation has improved since they began college; others reported constantly stressing about the subsequent semesters tuition bill. For many low-income and minority students, enrollment and persistence decisions are driven by the availability of financial aid (Nora, 2001). In 2007-2008, dependent students from families with less than $20,000 in family income received a financial aid award in the amount of $12,840 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). In contrast, those families with income of $100,000 or more received aid, with an average award of 12,960 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

Latino students who receive grants generally are more likely to persist than those who receive loans (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003). However, giving the rising costs of attending college, it is unlikely that Latino students will be able to receive a bachelor’s degree without any loan assistance (Swail et al., 2003). At the same time, the literature also suggests that the shift in aid from grants to loans and from need-based to merit-based programs adversely affects both
enrollment and persistence for Latino students (Swail et al., 2003). However, need-based institutional grants tend to facilitate persistence (Haynes, 2008). For example, Haynes (2008) found that 90 percent of students who received grants in their first year, were still enrolled in the second semester.

**Campus Community and Organizations.** The participants all reported being involved outside of the classroom and stressed how their on-campus involvement aided them in their persistence. Two of the female participants joined multicultural organizations that resonated with their ethnicity (Latin American Student Association and Black Student Union). The three male participants not only joined these organizations, but other organizations in an effort to aid them acclimate to a predominately White campus.

Dorsey and Jackson (1995) conducted a study regarding minority students’ college experiences. Their study illustrated that in spite of students’ level of satisfaction with their academics, a large percentage of students indicated socio-cultural isolation with regards to the campus community. Becoming involved on campus is an important aspect for college students (Light, 2001). For Latinos, the process of making it academically and socially can be difficult (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). The participants in this study found campus organizations based on compatibility and their ethnic background. Connecting with like ethnic organizations on campus was important, as it enabled participants to have a sense of belonging. When social integration, sense of belonging, and cultural awareness and development are incorporated with Latinos experiences, there is evidence that Latinos tend to persist at higher rates (Rendon, 2006).

**Cultural and social centers.** Cultural centers enhance ethnic minority college experiences and decrease the number of ethnic minorities who drop out of college (Jones,
Castellanos, & Cole, 2002). Cultural centers also indicate that the institution respects diversity and enhances multiculturalism (Jones et al., 2002). Minority students in general face prejudice and these experiences impact their college experience (Jones et al., 2002). However, cultural centers are viewed as a significant support system to receive social, cultural and advising support (Jones et al., 2002). The participants in this study all saw the importance and value of having an intercultural resource center on their campus. Four of them utilized their services regularly.

The Intercultural Center on campus, was a safe haven for four of the participants who reported that the center was critical towards their academic and social integration. Today, colleges and universities across the nation have developed cultural centers that provide services to help students of color navigate the college campus (Jones et al., 2002). Cultural centers have positively impacted ethnic minority students in the social, academic, and cultural arena (Jones et al., 2002). Although cultural centers are important to the overall institution, many of them have remained marginalized (Jones et al., 2002). This is due, largely in part, because many debate on the importance, value, and role of cultural centers (Jones et al., 2002). The one participant who did not see the value of having an Intercultural Center on campus recognized its importance but felt that it further segregated the campus community.

**Residence Halls.** All of the participants struggled to fit into their respective residence hall during their first year. They attended a predominately White, private, four-year liberal arts institution where only a few other students of color lived in the residence halls. In interpreting the data, the residential component was as important as the academic in terms of their persistence.
Residence halls that have living learning communities (LLC) which support diversity initiatives are found to be extremely effective (Green, 2007). LLC’s provide students the opportunity to learn about themselves and others living on the same community floor or residence hall. In these communities students develop inclusive social networks that help them get accustomed to the college campus. More importantly, students build peer relationships that help them stay in college. Lane (2002) wrote that student affairs professionals can no longer ignore or underestimate the respective influence of the many on-and-off-campus variables that simultaneously affect a student.

The campus climate itself can facilitate Latino students’ transition to college life and combat issues such as feelings of isolation. Hurtado & Kamimura, (2003) reported that institutions may foster racial tension when they support priorities that work against promoting a better climate. Hurtado & Kamimura, (2003) also indicated that this can particularly occur at selective universities which often represent the extreme in American wealth and privilege.

**Sense of belonging.** The final theme that emerged as a result of this study was a sense of belonging on campus. Strayhorn (2008) found that Hispanic students who do well academically and spend more time studying feel more connected to campus than those who perform poorly in their academics; low-performing Hispanic students feel less connected to campus, and may eventually end up leaving college. Strayhorn’s study (2008) also found that Hispanic students who have frequent and constant interactions with those of diverse backgrounds have a greater sense of belonging.

For participants in this study, feeling connected to the campus community, being validated, and having adequate resources on campus to help them persist in their degree seeking
completion was of the utmost importance. In fact, Rendon (1994) posits that institutions need to validate Latino student experiences, which she depicts as “an enabling, conforming and supportive process initiated by in and out of class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development” (p. 44). When validation is present, students are more apt to learning and succeeding (Rendon, 1994). Luckily for the participants in this study adequate programs and services were in place to help Latinos feel welcomed and acclimated within their campus community.

In summation, the participants reported a sense of belonging on campus in their first-year through culturally relevant organizations, such as the Latin American Student Association. They disclosed such culturally relevant organizations enabled them to stay connected to their culture and empowered them to succeed. The three male participants got involved on campus beyond just culturally related organizations and therefore reported a higher sense of belonging. Latino students today are looking for a “home away from home” (Rendon & Nora, 2000). Research has found that college environments influence the student’s sense of belonging, especially amongst racial/ethnic groups (Johnson, Soldner, Leonard, Alvarez, Inkelas, Rowan-Kenyon, & Longerbeam 2007). Research also finds that having a sense of belonging in residence halls is important to all students, but particularly to students of color (Hurtado, 2002).

**Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

This study employed the use of Critical Race Theory as its framework. CRT offers unique approaches to understanding and meeting the needs of Latino college students (Villalpando, 2004). In relation to the findings, participants all agreed on the importance of possessing academic-self concept and struggled with it their first year of college. Four of the
participants came from an inner city public high school and one from a charter school that each said did not prepare them for the academic rigor of a small private liberal arts institution.

Drawing from CRT, it is important to note that at its basic stratum, critical race theory requires that Latinos not be regarded as “disadvantaged because of not procuring access to better resourced public schools, their racial or ethnic identity, gender, class, immigration status, generation status, or language ability” (Villalpando, 2004).

Participants also reported that they often felt like they have to take on the defacto spokesperson role within the classroom for their racial and ethnic group whenever a topic around their identity was discussed. Furthermore, they were each dismayed to learn that their culture was rarely addressed through the academic requirements of the college. If it was brought up, it was typically associated with crimes or Spain. According to Harper and Quaye (2009), “Although we focus on engaging racial/ethnic minority students in predominately White classroom environments, we cannot treat the classroom as an isolated space that is void of dominant cultural norms, values, and beliefs” (p. 162). Critical race theory addresses this point and posits that a culturally reflective curriculum is most relevant to engaging Latino students in predominately White classrooms (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

In relation to their social integration, the participants reported difficulty getting acclimated their first year of college. The two female participants also shared that they felt they constantly had to prove themselves to fit into the campus community. Such innocuous forms of racism are deemed as microaggressions (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000). Microaggressions are subtle verbal and nonverbal racist assaults directed at people of color (Solorzano, 1998). They result in a “chilly climate” for students of color, which lead them to question their sense of
belonging and academic self worth (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Hurtado (2002) believed that an institution must provide a welcoming climate for Latino students to have a sense of belonging. This, in turn, will lead to integration. Nora (2004) also posited that students who feel connected to a college are more likely to lead to a commitment to complete.

Hurtado (2002) suggests that institutions must make a commitment to diversity and include Latinos in the discussion and decision making processes. Appropriately addressing the characteristic concerns of students of color requires a framework that responds to their identity (Harper & Quaye, 2009). The goal of CRT is to provide students, practitioners, and faculty with ways of changing oppressive in and out classroom practices (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000).

The literature outlines that often as college students, Latinos have to grapple with a system that ascertains that they and their culture are to blame for their lack of success (Villalpando, 2004). Thus, critical race theorists posit the importance of validating and encouraging the experiential knowledge of Latino students in academia (Bernal, 2002). By using such approach, critical race theory can more properly respond to the academic and socio-cultural needs of Latino college students.

**Implications for Educational Practice**

This study sought to examine and gain an understanding of Latino college students’ academic and social integration on campus. This research suggests that addressing issues of student persistence is complex and is the responsibility of the entire institution, not just one division or department. The themes that transpired from this study have practical implications for educational practice, particularly when institutions ask: What can we do to aid Latino college students in their degree seeking completion?
Given that the Latino student population will continue to grow, the “persistence” of these students is a critical issue for higher education. For the first time, the number of 18- to 24-year-old Hispanics enrolled in college exceeded 2 million and reached a record 16.5% share of all college enrollments (Fry & Lopez, 2012). Hispanics are now the largest minority group on the nation’s college campuses, a milestone first achieved in 2010 (Fry & Lopez, 2012). This suggests that higher education and lawmakers make a reasonable effort to comprehend the lived experiences of Latino students’ success and, validate their life experiences as well as their academic and social integration. To that end, several implications are highlighted from this study’s findings, which can contribute towards an institution’s understanding and strategic plan in aiding Latino students in their persistence.

First, is to highlight a culture of success for Latino students. Institutions should refrain from using deficit language and theories and models that have been criticized in academia and found not to be applicable to Latino students. By utilizing Critical Race Theory and empowering Latino students to be successful shows that elements of success are in existence, and thus completing a degree is attainable.

Second, the importance of having a relationship with faculty and staff outside of the classroom is crucial for Latino students. There are a myriad of opportunities for colleges and universities to engage faculty and staff with incoming Latino students. For example, new student orientation, faculty/student mentor program, provide funding for faculty and staff to have lunch or dinner with Latino students outside of the classroom/office, among other ideas.

Third, this study finds the importance of having an ethnic presence on campus. To that end, having intercultural centers on campus is critical and provides an important resource for
Latino students. It is important for institutions to note that supporting Latino students needs to be an “institutional response” and not just the responsibility of an intercultural resource center.

Fourth, increasing the funding sources for Latino students is paramount in their ability to persist. Critical Race Theory challenges higher education to examine the economic inequalities as it pertains to Latino college student persistence. In short, an increase is needed in local, state, and federal spending to aid Latino students in their degree seeking completion. Financial aid offices might also be able to work in concert with alumni and donor relations to seek donors that might be interested in establishing a scholarship/award for Latino students.

Fifth, given the rise of Latino students on college campuses it would behoove institutions to increase the number of Latino faculty and staff. Increasing the numbers of Latino faculty and staff creates an opportunity for institutions to support Latino students holistically and provide them with role models.

Sixth would be to highlight the importance of mentoring in relation to Latino students. Mentoring is one of the best tools to aid students in their learning process (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005). All of the participants in this study disclosed their struggle at fitting in with the college their first year. Connecting Latino students with Latino faculty and staff can aid them in their persistence and sense of belonging early on in their academic career.

Limitations of the Study

As indicated in the research design section of this study, the researcher identified four limitations. First, the study had a small sample size and it was conducted at a small private liberal arts college. Furthermore, the researcher aggregated the data of the participants into one category in an effort to recognize Latinos as a heterogeneous group. According to Arbona and
Novy (1991), “There is some evidence to suggest that subgroups of Hispanics differ in demographic characteristics that are related to academic success, the practice of aggregating all Hispanics in one category may distort research results related to Hispanic college students” (p. 335). Therefore findings in this study are limited for national policy.

Second, the participants of this study were limited to Latino students. Therefore, any generalizations as to applying the findings to other students of color should be analyzed carefully. Third, the findings of the interviews were contingent upon the authenticity of students participating in the study. Finally, the research project began with the operational assumption that campus climate had a direct impact on Latino students’ experience in college.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the findings of this study the researcher recommends conducting a quantitative or mixed-method study with a larger sample which would yield additional responses to what Latino college students feel contribute towards their persistence. Future research is needed to examine the differences within the subgroups of Latino students as it pertains towards their persistence. Arbona and Novy (1991) posit that

“At most universities, the distinctions between Hispanic subgroups are ignored when data are collected on ethnicity. Typically, with college students, researchers often aggregate Hispanics from various subgroups into one category. Because there is some evidence to suggest that subgroups of Hispanics differ in demographic characteristics that are related to academic success, the practice of aggregating all Hispanics in one category may distort research results related to Hispanic college students.” (p. 335).
Participants in this study disclosed the importance of having an intercultural resource center on campus and culturally relevant organizations. This gives rise to a research opportunity to examine specifically the role intercultural resource centers and culturally relevant organizations play in Latino college student’s decision to persist. Further research is needed on the impact financial aid has on Latino college student persistence, both at private and public institutions. Additional study emanating from this research could examine in detail Latino students’ academic self-concept both qualitatively and quantitatively. The information generated can help colleges and universities provide this unique student population with adequate programs and services.

Although there has been considerable research on racism, this research suggests further study on the unique impact racism can have on Latino students and its implication towards their persistence of a college degree. Based on the findings of this study, Latinos continue to perceive the college campus environment differently from their White counterparts. Issues of alienation and isolation become crucial factors when one considers their measure on the academic and social success of Latino college students. These factors are rarely considered when persistence rates are presented. Thus, the information garnered from such a study can aid student affairs practitioners, administrators, and faculty in assisting Latino students who encounter racism and discrimination on college campuses. Finally, while participants only briefly talked about family, further research is needed on the role family plays on Latino college student persistence.

Conclusion

The participants in this study shared their lived experiences as Latino students in relation to their academic and social integration on campus. The interview data and reported findings
illustrate that Latino students have feelings of doubt, struggle with financing their education, and experience culture shock. Although most college students have similar experiences, the participants in this study were faced with adapting to an unfamiliar culture on their college campus.

Critical Race Theory suggests that colleges and universities interested in creating truly holistic and more meaningful programs or services for Latinos begin by consciously acknowledging that these students might experience varying degrees and forms of racial discrimination at their respective institution (Villalpando, 2004). Thus, the defining elements of CRT form a framework that has applications in how institutions can serve Latino college students.

Hurtado (2002) believed that an institution must provide a welcoming climate for Latino students to have a sense of belonging. This, in turn, will lead to integration. Hurtado (2002) also posits that institutions must make a commitment to diversity and include Latinos in the discussion and decision making processes. The findings in this research reinforced this scholarship.

Latino students today want to feel validated on campus. As practitioners, we need to make sure their voices are heard. Incorporating them into decision making processes for institutions is critical. As Latinos evolve from minority to majority, institutions must respond to them in a way that recognizes not only demographic trends, but enduring problems that remain unanswered: access, retention, graduation, campus climate, and faculty/staff diversity (Castellanos & Jones, 2003).
Colleges and universities need to employ strategies to improve not only access to higher education for Latinos but also success in attaining a college degree. Furthermore, as educators and practitioners we need to effectively demonstrate the importance of the Latino student community to the higher education community. In doing so, it will serve as a catalyst to validate the Latino student experience.
References


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Appendix A: Email to Potential Subjects

Greetings,

My name is Manuel Ruiz and I am a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University. Currently, I am in the process of conducting scholarly research on the factors impacting Latino students’ academic and social integration on college campuses and how such experiences impacts their decision to persist in college.

I am writing to seek your participation in the study. Should you be interested in participating, you will be asked to participate in a 1-on-1 interview. Information garnered is kept confidential and required informed consent must be given to me prior to the interview. As a “thank you” for participating in the study, I will provide you with a $25 gift card.

Best,

Manuel Ruiz

Doctoral Candidate

Northeastern University
Appendix B: Demographic Information Sheet

Ethnicity:

Gender:

Type of High School Attended (Public or Private):

Class Year:

Major:

Do you plan to graduate? _____Yes _____No

Level of Parents Education:
Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. What was your reason for attending college?
2. What are some of the financial obligations you have encountered?
3. What do you perceive, if any, as major barriers that may prevent you from persisting throughout college?
4. How are you connected to the campus community?
5. Tell me about your experiences with faculty, and staff, and how these relationships impact your experiences on campus?
6. Tell me about your experiences with your fellow peers and how these relationships impact your experiences on campus?
7. Do you have sense of belonging on campus? Why or why not?
8. Do you expect to graduate from here? Why or why not?
9. What support services have been the most helpful to you throughout your undergraduate career?
10. Would you like to share anything that was not asked?
Appendix D: Consent Form

Northeastern University, Doctor of Education
Principal Investigator: Joseph McNabb, PhD
Student Investigator: Manuel Ruiz, Doctoral Candidate
Title of Project: Shifting Landscape: A phenomenological study of Latinos social and academic integration on campus.

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

You are invited to take part in a research study. This form will inform you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask the researcher any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you wish to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

This study seeks to explore and understand the lived experiences of Latino college students’ social and academic integration on campus. As a Latino student, your input into this project is critical in hopes of improving adequate programs and services needed to aid Latinos in their degree seeking completion.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research is to discover what Latinos say is contributing to their success and persistence in College. This study will contribute to the literature and benefit Latino students like you who are currently enrolled in college.

What will I be asked to do?

With your consent, the researcher will have you complete a demographic information sheet and participate in an interview. The interviews will held in a quiet meeting room, recorded, and transcribed for analysis. Each interview will last an hour long and be comprised of 10 questions. As part of qualitative research, you will be asked to approve particular aspects of the interpretation of data to establish trustworthiness.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

Your interview will be held in the student researcher’s office – Center for Career Development. Each interview will last 60 minutes. Upon transcribing the data, you will be asked to clarify any data in the student researcher’s office. This process should take approximately 15 additional minutes of your time. Once transcribed, the tapes will then be destroyed.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

There are no known risks associated with the procedures of this study.

Approved

NU IRB
2011-090
18/11/12

Valid Through:
18/11/12
Will I benefit by being in this research?

There are no direct benefits to the study participants. However, the overall potential benefit from conducting this study is to better understand both the negative and positive experiences of Latino college students. The findings from this research may serve as a catalyst for institutions to develop adequate resources and programs needed to aid Latino college students in their persistence.

Who will see the information about me?

Your part in this study will be confidential, to the extent allowed by law. If the researcher feels you are a threat to yourself or others, legally the researcher must report the information to appropriate authorities. All participants will be given a pseudonym. Only the researcher on this study will see information about you. Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study to establish themes. Data will be transcribed and analyzed using the phenomenological approach. Phenomenology has been selected as the framework for this study to examine the lived experiences of Latino students' academic and social integration on college campuses.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see the research information from this study. This is done to ensure that the research has been conducted properly. The researcher would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see the information.

Can I stop participation in this study?

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision to participate or not to, will have no bearing on your standing at the university. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

You can contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Joseph McNabb, at j.mcnabb@neu.edu or call at (617) 373-6602. You may also contact the Student Investigator, Manuel Ruiz, at ruizman@husky.neu.edu or call at (717) 448-8374.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any inquiries about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617-373-4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
You will be given a $25 Wal-Mart gift card upon completion of your interview.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

There are no monetary costs for you to participate in this study, but there is a small time commitment to participate in the interview.

Is there anything else I need to know?

You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study, have completed at least 1 year of college, and have a minimum grade point average of 2.0.

I agree to take part in this research.

__________________________  __________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part               Date

__________________________
Printed name of person above

__________________________  __________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent               Date

__________________________
Printed name of person above

APPROVED
NU IRB 
2-09-06
VALID
11/11/06
THROUGH
12/31/12
Certificate of Completion

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

Date of completion: 11/29/2009

Certification Number: 344814