CULTURALLY SENSITIVE SUPPORT FOR HISPANIC/LATINO ONLINE COLLEGE STUDENTS: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The Hispanic/Latino population in the United States is growing at the fastest rate compared to all other ethnic groups. However, the percent of Hispanics/Latinos graduating from colleges and universities has not kept pace with this population growth. The gap between ethnic groups’ socioeconomic statuses has not changed for decades, reinforcing the need to improve Hispanic/Latino’s level of degree attainment and their opportunities for higher paying jobs. Higher education must work to improve access and support for Hispanic/Latino students whose cultural norms require them to balance work, school, and family. The online educational medium may be the best option for these students, allowing anytime and anywhere access. While research at traditional post-secondary institutions regarding minority student perceptions has demonstrated the positive impact student support has on student success, research on Hispanic/Latino online students is underdeveloped. This interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) investigated individual experiences of Hispanic/Latino students enrolled in an online undergraduate or graduate program in order to explore their perceptions regarding the existence of cultural sensitivity in student support services at a private university in New England. Findings propose that higher education administrators must advance the understanding of Hispanic/Latino student motivating factors for choosing and participating in the online medium, and work to improve student experience through a culturally relevant pedagogical approach to student support services.

Keywords: Hispanic/Latino online college student, culturally relevant pedagogy, online student support intervention, online student preferences, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)
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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my children, born into our Hispanic/Latino culture that was often viewed as foreign to those in our communities, but whose norms made a lot of sense for our family. I encourage you to push harder toward your goals than others think you are capable of. Challenge those around you to see you for who you are, and what you can accomplish, not for the color of your skin or the origin of your name. Love others deeply and inspire them to make a positive impact in their own environment. Seek every opportunity to be the light for others and improve our world, for yourselves and the generations that will follow you. Thank you for inspiring me to be the best father and best human being I can be.
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Chapter One: Introduction

“I asked my boss is there any way you can promote me to something else and I remember his exact words were ‘I would never ever EVER give a Puerto Rican a higher job than what you have now.’” This quote was provided by one of this study’s Hispanic/Latino participants in describing a conversation with his White boss, who had a major influence on him early in his career. As a member of the Hispanic/Latino community, I too have experienced this type of discrimination and cultural insensitivity many times. I continue to see overt and covert negative bias and a lack of understanding of other cultures in our society. Though prejudice and racism are not likely to be eliminated by merely examining their origins, practical research can be used to influence change at the institutional level. Leading positive change at one university can influence leaders to make change at other institutions, and can eventually inspire change across our industry.

Through this qualitative research study, I have been given an opportunity to help drive change at an online university in the United States. Successful implementation of changes which demonstrate a positive impact on Hispanic/Latino college student experience and academic outcomes, may encourage other leaders to implement best practices derived from those changes. It is my hope that we can begin to drive cultural sensitivity, or a greater appreciation for diversity in cultural perspectives, in all of our interactions within the higher education community. It should be our goal as educators to be the light for others, by positively highlighting and influencing career and academic paths for those who continue to be underrepresented in our community. We do this so that Hispanics/Latinos, like the one quoted above, can be inspired to reach their own personal and professional goals through higher education. Each of us should direct our vision toward a deeper understanding of cultural perspectives through scholarly research, and implement best practices in interacting with cultural sensitivity in our higher education community.
This study investigated the individual experiences of a group of Hispanic/Latino students enrolled in an online undergraduate or graduate program and explored their perceptions regarding the existence of cultural sensitivity in student support services at a private university in New England. For this study, cultural sensitivity is the application of “one’s knowledge, consideration, understanding, and respect… tailoring our behavior and recognizing an awareness of self and others while encountering a diverse group or individual. Cultural sensitivity results in effective communications, effective interventions, and satisfaction” (Foronda, 2008, p. 210). A culturally sensitive interaction may include culturally-accepted language, such as the use of phrases shared by members of the same culture, which provide a moral or teaching when told to others. The context of this study is cultural sensitivity in an online environment with a focus on interpreting how this group perceives their interactions within it. In order to accomplish this, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research approach was the most appropriate design as it is “committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 1). IPA aims to provide insight from an in-depth exploration of the participants’ lived experiences and focuses on personal meaning making in a particular context.

For example, the quote in the first sentence of this chapter may yield an interpretation that this participant has experienced cultural insensitivity in the interaction with their boss. Further inquiry may identify that this is not the first time this Hispanic/Latino individual has had this experience and that they now believe that other White people also feel overtly prejudiced against them. As a member of this population, gained insights provide a first-person perspective on the third person experience by being embedded in intersubjective inquiry and analysis (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011). IPA allows the researcher to share with the perspectives of the participants. The themes identified among the participants in this study can inform admission,
advising, financial assistance, and faculty on best practices for supporting these particular students as they navigate the online learning environment and balance cultural expectations and norms.

This chapter begins with background information related to this study’s target participant group in the context of higher education. The rationale and significance for conducting this study follows, which highlights connections between audiences of this thesis and potential application to their work. A problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions are then presented, which served to focus and ground this study. This study’s theoretical framework, Ladson-Billings’ Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, is introduced and explained as it functioned as a lens for the research. Definitions of key terms found throughout this thesis are provided. Finally, positionality from a personal standpoint is discussed as it influenced the nature of this research project.

**Context and Background**

The population of Hispanics/Latinos is set to become the largest minority group in the United States. Passel and Cohn (2008) suggested that the Hispanic/Latino population will be the largest of all minority groups by 2050. Mellander (2014) cited the 2012 U.S. Census Bureau in stating that Hispanics/Latinos make up nearly twenty percent of all public school kindergarten students in seventeen states. The percent of the population that identifies as Hispanic/Latino is increasing across the nation. States like Kansas and Oregon now equal the percentage of Hispanics/Latinos living in traditionally large Hispanic populations such as in New York. As the population grows in the U.S., the need to serve more Hispanic/Latinos in higher education also increases.

Serving Hispanic/Latino students in higher education is critical because the completion of a post-secondary degree is correlated with socio-economic status. Bradbury (2002) asserted that disparity in ethnic group wage increases over time. Further, she argued that “the payoff to
education has risen steeply in recent decades... the rise in payoff accounts for a significant fraction of the increase in overall wage inequality” (Bradbury, 2002, p. 19). Very clearly, the data suggests that Hispanics/Latinos have seen significant wage disparity because of the lack of degree attainment within this population. She asserted that since many employers pay a premium for higher degree attainment, Hispanics/Latinos have been limited in their ability to seek high earning jobs and receive up to seventeen percent lower wages than other groups (Bradbury, 2002). An analysis of wage earning comparisons amongst Black, Hispanic, and White men indicate that there has been no improvements in reducing the gap of hourly earning rates between the three groups for the last thirty five years, in part due to the lack of minority group degree attainment (Patten, 2016). This presents a problem for this group’s total earning potential, spending power, and our future economy overall, as shifts in the national tax base are increasingly dependent upon this group.

For Hispanic/Latino students, college degree attainment is a critical challenge, as the percentage of students who graduate with a degree continues to be low compared to all other ethnic groups (Nunez, Hoover, Pickett, Stuart-Carruthers, & Vazquez, 2013). Certain cultural characteristics and experiences specific to this population have presented barriers to degree attainment at traditional institutions, such as language acculturation, socio-economic challenges, cultural norms, campus climate, and familial responsibilities (Acevedo-Polakovic, Quirk, Cousineau, Saxena, & Gerhart, 2014; Becerra, 2010; Cano & Castillo, 2010; Crisp & Nora, 2010; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). These studies highlight specific challenges such as the impact English language acquisition, poverty rates, and family duties have on student persistence and degree attainment rates. Although research exists regarding cultural barriers to traditional higher education, very few studies have been done in the online environment. This study seeks to provide
insight into whether a coordinated and culturally sensitive online post-secondary environment may help to improve degree attainment by aligning to the cultural needs of this ethnic group.

**Rationale and Significance of this Research**

Limited research is available to validate whether Hispanics/Latinos have a higher preference for online learning or if they are more academically successful than in traditional educational models. Kilburn, Kilburn, and Cates (2014) demonstrated a statistically significant link between students’ perceived value, loyalty to the online educational institution, and willingness to persist toward graduation. Online education shows a promising opportunity for the Hispanic/Latino student population to increase their college graduation rates and their future earning potential. However, there is still much to be learned about how Hispanics/Latinos perceive online education as a viable educational provider. Research must be conducted to ensure the online learning environment adequately addresses the cultural needs and expectations of this population.

As a member of this ethnic group, the rationale for this study is of personal interest as it relates to cultural diversity and inclusion specific to the Hispanic/Latino population and its role in influencing social integration into the online higher education setting. In addition, this study has already influenced an ongoing strategic initiative to research and respond to the increasing number of Hispanic/Latino students in the research site’s long-term strategic goals. This research has the potential to generate positive experiences for future Hispanic/Latino college students by influencing culturally sensitive interactions and best practices. By viewing higher education as a means for improving socio-economic circumstances, any best practices aimed to improve degree attainment for this population could have longer-term impacts on the ability of Hispanics/Latinos to contribute to society overall.
By understanding student perspectives in the context of online programs, this qualitative research aims to inform higher educational administrators who may predict an increase in the number of Hispanic/Latino online students at their institution. These administrators can then design appropriate culturally sensitive student support systems and develop sustainable models which will yield higher student success and persistence. With some focused attention, higher education administrators may adequately address the needs of Hispanic/Latino students and significantly reduce the degree attainment gap in the future.

**Research Problem**

U.S. Hispanic/Latino college students continue to demonstrate low degree attainment rates, partially due to cultural characteristics and family responsibilities (Delgado, Stefancic, & Liendo, 2012; Nunez, Hoover, Pickett, Stuart-Carruthers, & Vazquez, 2013; Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Torres, 2004). This may be resolved by leveraging a coordinated culturally sensitive student support system in an online platform. However, there is a lack of research regarding the perceptions of Hispanic/Latino students enrolled in online post-secondary institutions. At one private university in New England, the percentage of Hispanic/Latino enrolled students is expected to increase. This growth is in conjunction with an increase in the Hispanic/Latino population overall, though there is little known about how to support their specific cultural needs and expectations.

On a national level, based on a quantitative review of Hispanic/Latino college entry and completion rates over four decades, Ortiz, Valerio, and Lopez (2012) suggested that only 6% of all Hispanic/Latino kindergartners would earn a bachelor’s degree. This low percentage will significantly limit this population’s earning potential as they are relegated to employment that requires no college degree. Unfortunately, the low degree attainment rate issue is not a new
phenomenon. King (1987) called for immediate action of California’s post-secondary institutions as they identified significant growth in the state’s Hispanic population and a decrease in the non-Hispanic White population. He suggested that the system was failing to prepare its workforce for the jobs of the future. This was predicted to have a significant negative impact on the state’s economy. This detrimental effect on the economy at the state level will in turn negatively impact the economy at the national level. As the demographic shifts in the U.S. continue to lean toward Hispanic/Latino population growth, higher education will need to adjust and teach the new ethnic minority workers of the future.

The purpose of this research was to expand knowledge on the perspectives of Hispanic/Latino students regarding culturally sensitive student support services (including admissions, advising, academic intervention, and financial aid services) in online programs. According to literature reviews, there has been limited coordinated effort to understand how to maintain such services at online institutions. Fortunately, there was an opportunity to research this topic at a specific private institution in New England as it aligned with the institution’s long-term strategic goals. Themes extrapolated from participants’ insights into student support strategies will help the research site’s administrators to improve support for Hispanic/Latino online students to achieve their academic goals. Other institutions’ administrators may apply these strategies at their own organizations as well.

**Research Questions**

The following research question and sub-questions were presented in order to gain specific insights relevant to cultural sensitivity in interactions with higher education staff and faculty:
What are the perspectives of Hispanic/Latino students enrolled in an online undergraduate or graduate degree program regarding cultural sensitivity in their interactions with student support services (admission, advising, and faculty) at a private university in New England?

a. What do Hispanics/Latinos consider are the characteristics of culturally sensitive interactions with personnel at this institution in relation to their own culture?

b. What do these students find challenging or rewarding regarding their interactions with college student support services?

c. How do Hispanic/Latino students become aware that student support services staff are or are not being culturally sensitive?

The primary research question was designed to explore the narratives and multiple perspectives that Hispanic/Latino online students have with college student support personnel. Interview questions guided by this research question were geared toward understanding the broader student (research participant) experience surrounding cultural sensitivity in the environment. Thus, those questions were driven by a theoretical lens that explains the nature and structural model of a culturally relevant environment. The research sub-questions are essentially a subset of the primary question.

The sub-questions aimed at investigating specific characteristics of the interactions within that environment which the participants perceive to drive cultural sensitivity. Interview questions guided by these research sub-questions targeted thematic characteristics that were likely to be uncovered in the study. These questions were also driven by the theoretical framework, which can explain culture-specific behaviors and attitudes within the environment.

The research question and sub-questions are based on a constructivist paradigm in accordance to Mertens’ (2010) guidelines. Mertens, who has provided guidance on research
methodology in the constructivist and transformative paradigms, suggested improved methods of inquiry for research. Through this guidance, the research question and sub-questions were built based on a balanced representation of various participants. Findings from the research were expected to show multiple socially constructed realities about participants’ experiences within the online environment. It was expected that a set of shared cultural values would be observed within the participant response. Finally, the information acquired served to uncover contextual factors about the participants’ experiences and culturally specific behaviors and attitudes identified in a hermeneutical approach to the qualitative research.

**Significance of Research Problem**

Traditional college campuses struggle to address low Hispanic/Latino college student degree attainment, while overall enrollment in online programs has grown at double-digit rates since the early 1990s (Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Rovai & Wighting, 2005). As modes of education are changing, so are demographic shifts in the United States, with the Hispanic/Latino population’s growth rate outpacing all other ethnic groups (Passel & Cohn, 2008). With Hispanic/Latinos continuing to struggle in traditional higher educational settings due to cultural norms and family responsibilities (Fiebig, Braid, Ross, Tom, & Prinzo, 2010), online education may serve as an effective avenue in delivering the flexibility that these students need.

Unless higher education administrators understand and develop culturally sensitive student support systems for Hispanic/Latino students, online institutions will also fail to address the gap in Hispanic/Latino degree attainment. There is limited research literature available regarding differences between online program degree attainment and traditional higher education degree attainment specifically for this Hispanic/Latino student group. This suggests the need for additional research in this area, which the current study may help to inform, though not directly
address as it is outside of the scope of the primary research question. Whether it be online or in a traditional program, it is imperative that we determine how to support the Hispanic/Latino population in obtaining college degrees as this issue impacts all who participate in our society.

A low post-secondary degree attainment rate for any ethnic group can have a detrimental effect on society as a whole, particularly when the economic stability of a consumer nation is based on the financial buying power of its citizenry. Since the 1970s, the federal government has been focused on improving the return of investment expected from the higher education financial aid to students. It has sought to receive better returns on the interest on student loans and an increase in graduates’ earning power and taxable income. For example, the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare contracted a major study focused on identifying how higher education was supporting ethnic minorities (Davis, Burkheimer, & Borders-Patterson, 1975). Legislators learned that students of color, and Hispanics/Latinos in particular, were needed to fulfill the employment needs of the future. Their findings suggested that these students needed to graduate at higher rates in order to receive higher returns for the investment.

In a conference paper on the state of higher education in the United States, Wilkinson (1970) highlighted the surge of Hispanic/Latino student enrollments and acknowledged institutions were not aware of how to support them compared to their traditional middle-class peers. The risk to society was continued hostility and rejection of minority groups, further encouraging segregation and social discord. Unfortunately, this issue was not confined to decades past and continues to adversely impact our society today. The lack of improvements to Hispanic/Latino student degree attainment has had a negative impact on this group’s earning potential for the last thirty five years (Patten, 2016). As earning potential continues to stagnate for a growing population, the nation’s tax base continues to erode. Simply stated, to collect increasing
tax revenues, the U.S. needs to tax a higher number of people or collect more revenue from the population’s taxable income.

At the national level, Passel and Cohn (2008) have demonstrated that the Hispanic/Latino population will have exceeded all other minority groups combined by 2050. Kelly (2005) had supported this notion in a previous report for the Lumina Foundation and identified some key states where the majority of Hispanics/Latinos reside. He argued that population increase, degree attainment, and financial stability go hand-in-hand. “For many states, raising educational attainment levels depends upon their ability to address the education needs of particular race/ethnic populations. This is especially true in states where the populations with the lowest current levels of educational attainment are also those that are growing at the fastest rates” (Kelly, 2005, p. 1).

In California, the state legislature recognized a shift in the demographics toward a higher percentage of Hispanics/Latinos by almost six percent. King (1987) further demonstrated that less than 2% of this ethnic group achieved a college degree within five years. He argued that this created an employability gap where less qualified workers would be required to perform in roles they are insufficiently prepared for. At the state level, having inadequately prepared employees could be detrimental to the state’s competitiveness in the marketplace and the ability to sustain the local government’s financial responsibilities. It became clear that the state economics could not tolerate increases in the population below the poverty line nor a lower tax revenue base from a lowered-income middle class. On an individual level, the lack of degree attainment will have a detrimental effect on personal finances and growth far before it reaches the national level.

One of the main reasons for this lower degree attainment within the Hispanic/Latino population is a result of the acculturation challenges experienced while integrating into the more dominant Caucasian culture within higher education. Cano and Castillo (2010) indicated that
Hispanic/Latino college students in their study self-reported higher emotional distress, which could impact these students in other parts of their lives. Taken to a broader extreme, sustained emotional distress can lead to other mental health problems, which could increase healthcare costs (Dismuke & Egede, 2011).

The lack of success in college can have an impact on feelings of self-worth and hope for the future for Hispanic/Latino students. In Hernandez’s (1995) ethnographic study, he explained that the participants perceive the “American Dream” to be unattainable despite their efforts to obtain a college degree. Of course, Hernandez was also careful not to generalize as different Latino/Hispanic subcultures may have varying needs and motivations. He highlighted flexibility, cultural sensitivity, characteristics of the Latino family and community, and career counseling in support of student persistence, as factors in helping them achieve their goals. Acevedo-Polakovic, Quirk, Cousineau, Saxena, and Gerhart (2014) supported this notion in relaying that a student’s identification with his/her own culture had a positive correlation with behaviors leading to academic success.

Though there are some cultural differences found across various Hispanic/Latino subcultures, it is wise to identify the similarities between the groups in order to find common ground to target student support. One characteristic common within all Hispanic/Latino subcultures is the demands of familial responsibilities (Ortiz, Valerio, & Lopez, 2012; Page, 2012). Because Hispanic/Latino students have specific obligations to family based on cultural norms, online education can provide these students the flexibility to balance familial and educational responsibilities. There is currently limited research on the impact of online education on student success for this specific population. Moreover, there is conflicting evidence regarding whether
ethnicity has any correlation with online student success at all (Bradford & Wyatt, 2010; Conway, Wladis, & Hachey, 2011; Kaupp, 2012).

Regardless of the educational delivery method, the previous research literature suggests that Hispanics/Latinos desire to connect with others on a personal basis, build strong social connections, and be academically successful. Additional research is needed to explore the characteristics and motivations of Hispanics/Latino students pursuing online education and characteristics of successful student support systems, which may yield positive academic outcomes. Even though online education can provide students with increased flexibility, the body of research is relatively underdeveloped. This research augments the current but limited understanding surrounding Hispanic/Latino students in online higher education.

**Deficiencies in the Research**

The issue of Hispanic/Latino student success and degree attainment has been a focus since a U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare study found that institutions were not adequately supporting them in the mid-1970s (Davis, Burkheimer, & Borders-Patterson, 1975). More recent research has focused on cultural sensitivities in the interactions between faculty, staff, and students (Tovar, 2015). Though research has focused on causes for Hispanic/Latino student success and persistence, it has been primarily set in traditional “brick and mortar” higher education settings, community college systems, or Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs). An HSI is defined by the U.S. Department of Education as an institution which enrolls at least twenty five percent of their student body from the Hispanic or Latino ethnic group (“Definition of Hispanic-Serving Institutions,” 2011). Fiebig, Braid, Ross, Tom, and Prinzo (2010) contributed to the literature by exploring Hispanic/Latino student perceptions toward their academic environment, and did so at an HSI. Unfortunately the vast majority of institutions in the U.S. educational system do not meet
the criteria of an HSI, which limits the applicability of findings to other institutional settings. The study also fails to address Hispanic students’ experiences at institutions with lower Hispanic/Latino populations than that observed at an HSI. It is important that research is focused outside of these types of institutions as well.

In an example of such a study, Cerezo and McWhirter (2012) completed a quantitative analysis on the impact of a targeted student support program for Hispanic/Latino students at three predominantly White traditional institutions. While the focus of the study was on a non-HSI institution, the limited size of the participant group and subsequent findings may not be generalized to a larger population. Castellanos and Gloria (2007) presented an argument for a student success framework based on cultural norms, however their structure would be more easily applied to a face-to-face setting. In addition, there appears to be a lack of research regarding coordinating efforts between student service functions (academic advising, faculty, and other support services) in addressing the needs of this population.

Research specifically exploring the characteristics of Hispanic/Latino students and possible barriers to academic and social integration tended to focus within a traditional institutional setting, as noted previously. Though Acevedo-Polakovic, Quirk, Cousineau, Saxena, and Gerhart (2014) pointed to gaps in Hispanic/Latino student acculturation into the dominant culture, the study did not provide a statistically significant effect nor address distance learners. Becerra’s (2010) hypothesis that English language acculturation, socioeconomic status, and previous academic achievement would be predictive of perceived barriers to higher education enrollment was not supported. The research results suggested that language must be among a variety of factors. It is important to note that these factors were not studied in an online environment. Cano and Castillo (2010) and Crisp and Nora (2010) both studied variants of multiple factors including
socio-cultural, environmental, and differences in cultural perspective, indicating some support for understanding motivations and perceptions of this ethnic group. However, they again failed to address these considerations in an online environment where traditional face-to-face interventions are limited.

In designing a future study on culturally sensitive student support in an online setting, Ke and Kwak (2013) suggested that some ethnic groups may have a stronger preference for face-to-face versus online environments. However, the research only focused on student preferences for educational delivery and did not consider student service factors on those perceptions. Research has also been conducted on the concept of acculturation to the online environment, but did not specifically target Hispanic/Latino students (Rovai & Wighting, 2005). Most of the literature surrounding academic success and student persistence does not address ethnic group specific needs in the online platform. Research in this area is still developing and there is plenty of opportunity to contribute to the body of knowledge.

Finally, Kaupp (2012) considered whether choice of online versus traditional face-to-face courses had an impact on academic performance in the California community college system. The research only alluded to differences in perception of student academic potential between students and faculty, highlighting some possible discriminatory practices. Student support in online programs must consist of a coordinated system of interventions between enrollment management (admission, advising, and financial aid) and academic functions (faculty, tutoring). It would be beneficial to understand the characteristics of successful interventions by each of the student support functions, which are perceived to be helpful to Hispanic/Latino students, and design a synchronized strategy which yields greater success in student outcomes.
Definition of Key Terminology

Several key terms are utilized throughout this thesis that need to be defined in order to understand their placement in the context of this study:

Hispanic/Latino. The term Hispanic/Latino is used throughout this paper to signify the larger population of individuals who are classified into the category. Various subgroups exist in this designation and may identify themselves by nationality, country, region, or level of association with Spain. The term Hispanic generally refers to those whom identify with Spanish origin. Latino is another term often used for a subculture that identifies themselves as having Latin American origin. The term “Hispanic” may be offensive for some participants, as it acknowledges a cultural association with Spain. Spain was directly involved in the exploitation of various North American cultures during the era of exploration in the Western hemisphere. In addition, some individuals do not relate to the term “Latino” as it assumes association only with Latin American countries in South America and may ignore Caribbean and Mexican descent. Mercado (2008) suggested that there are estimated to be seventeen different Hispanic or Latino subcultures derived from twenty countries around the world. Though the various subgroups may have slight cultural differences, there are shared commonalities amongst them such as the concept of familism or familismo. Vega (1995) suggested that familism is culturally specific, and is a strong identification to family values, loyalty, and the consideration of family needs over individual needs. Hispanics/Latinos thus tend to have tightly bonded families, who stay in relative proximity to each other.

Cultural sensitivity. Stafford, Bowman, Eking, Hanna and Lopes-Defede (1997) and Foronda (2008) defined cultural sensitivity as awareness that cultural differences and similarities are evident in people and influence their behavior, learning processes, and experiences. Being sensitive to others’ cultures may also imply that there are implicit biases inherent in an individual’s
perceptions and beliefs toward that culture. Greenwald and Banaji (1995) suggested that children are influenced by the implicit biases of their parents and is even apparent in individuals who explicitly advocate against racial discrimination. Though implicit bias can be changed through cognitive therapies, this research focused primarily on the simple awareness of the Hispanic/Latino culture and its impact on the learning environment.

**Student support services.** For the purposes of this study, the term “student support services” is defined as any coordinated interaction between a student and a member of the faculty or staff at a higher educational institution, which is meant to positively influence the student’s progress toward completion of a degree. Typically, student support is offered by admission, advising, or financial aid staff. Encouragement can come from the academic faculty in the learning environment as well. In this research study’s setting, the support will be provided over the phone, in written format, or in a video conference where there was a two-way communication between the student and the support personnel.

**Online environment.** For the purposes of this study, the online environment is defined as the educational delivery system which utilizes the internet to communicate educational material and facilitate interactions between the student and others within the learning setting. Students who enroll in an online program typically interact with others via a learning management system such as Blackboard. Online students receive support from college personnel via the online medium (chat, discussion boards, electronic mail, video conferencing and videos) or phone calls. This study did not aim to uncover characteristics of cultural sensitivity in the academic technologies (Blackboard, Pearson, etc.) used in the study’s research site.
Theoretical Framework

Ladson-Billings’ Culturally Relevant Pedagogy served as the theoretical lens for this study. Ladson-Billings (1992, 1995, 2014) provided a research perspective regarding how participants’ culture influences and impacts the academic learning environment. She introduced the Culturally Relevant Pedagogy theoretical framework into the secondary environment in order to understand how this approach may help increase literacy for students from various cultural backgrounds. The theory aimed to promote social equity in the classroom and focused on cultural strengths versus deficits of the individuals from minority groups. When the theory was applied using best practices within a classroom, results were expected to improve academic achievement for all students.

Knight-Diop (2010) utilized Ladson-Billings (1995) framework of cultural responsiveness to highlight themes of interpersonal care for Black high school students who were exploring college opportunities. The researcher identified a sustained “college-going culture” which positively reinforced a belief that these high school students were capable of entering college. The impact of culturally relevant learning communities and co-curricular structures were mediated by access to meaningful interpersonal interactions with caring staff. This, in turn, influenced awareness about college information and interest in attending a post-secondary institution. Thus, culturally sensitive and relevant advising may effect college-going expectations and equity in accessibility.

Guiding Principles and Tenets. The principles and tenets in Ladson-Billings’ theory are linked by the context of cultural specificity and interactions between individuals at differing levels of privilege. As it relates to the present doctoral research project, these tenets highlighted the importance of understanding the broad perspective of an underrepresented group (Hispanics/Latinos) regarding cultural sensitivity in interactions with student support staff and
Hispanic/Latino students in this study are also the evaluators of effective culturally sensitive interactions by online university student support staff and faculty.

Ladson-Billings’ (2014) Culturally Relevant Pedagogy includes the notions that (a) culturally responsive teaching promotes high academic expectations; (b) families, communities, and ethnic history play an important role in connecting learning to the curriculum; (c) culturally valued knowledge creation is critical to the successful execution of the teaching model; (d) active teaching and reflective thinking must be employed in order to engage students; (e) the facilitator is the primary leader of discussions, though collaborative work is necessary for successful engagement in the learning community; (f) the facilitator is also embedded in the lived experiences of the minority student; and (g) the facilitator must value diversity in individual contributions, norms, and behaviors in order to promote successful learning. Though these tenets were designed from a perspective of a teacher within a classroom, this theoretical framework focuses on an effective model for any culturally sensitive environment. The framework allows for a wide range of culturally specific educational experiences while acknowledging and celebrating the existence of culturally specific differences in the student body.

Critics of the Theory. Ladson-Billings’ (2014) culturally relevant pedagogy theoretical framework has some weaknesses in relation to this and future studies. First, the link between culturally relevant teaching practices in a small educational setting may not address the larger issue of a growing academic achievement gap between ethnic groups in the United States. Research done using this framework typically includes small sample sizes, which significantly limit the generalizability of the studies. The framework acknowledges that there are potential differences between subcultures, but does not clearly articulate how these can be celebrated in a specific way. Paris (2012) acknowledged that ethnic lines are being blurred within society. This cultural
integration suggests that individualized cultural assumptions are no longer valid and may not be relevant to research studies focused on real-world application. In addition, Sleeter (2012) suggested that this framework does not specifically account for any variances in application in different settings or with the skillset of the facilitator. Most of the studies identified using these ideas were conducted in a K-12 school setting, lending to a gap in applicability to a college setting.

**Rationale for Use in Study.** Though there are certainly shortfalls to the use of this theoretical framework, the framework’s structure and relation to the academic environment is appealing. Ladson-Billings’ (2014) framework provides context for successful culturally relevant interventions in the educational environment. It can essentially be a primer for which students evaluate the effectiveness of culturally sensitive interactions with student support staff. This framework also enables a common language regarding accepted practices that the facilitators of a culturally sensitive environment need to build. Though written from the perspective of the facilitator and teacher, Ladson-Billings’ (2014) framework can be used to describe the culturally sensitive environment created for the students who are supported within them.

Other alternative frameworks were considered for this study but did not fit for various reasons. For example, Delgado, Stefancic, and Liendo (2012) are seminal authors in the design of contemporary Critical Race Theory (CRT). “Unlike some academic disciplines, critical race theory contains an activist dimension. It not only tries to understand our social situation, but to change it; it sets out to not only ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but to transform it for the better” (Delgado, Stefancic, & Liendo, 2012, p. 3). CRT includes a social justice component, aims to show evidence of institutionalized racism in society, and highlights that racism is created as a social construct by people and is not biologically driven.
Though Delgado et al. (2012) had a significant influence on the direction of this researcher’s perspective, the focus of CRT is on race instead of culture. Though the framework does include an advocacy perspective, it limits research to highlighting the existence of institutionalized oppression, which was not a focus of this study. Practical application of this theory within the student service functions would be limited to creating awareness of race and racism. Instead, the focus of this study goes beyond awareness. Its goal is to influence the design of more culturally relevant interventions with the purpose of implementing best practices, not simply highlighting oppression or positions of power within the institution.

The second theoretical framework considered was Bourdieu’s (1997) cultural capital theory. Bourdieu (1997) posited that certain cultural characteristics are more valued in society than others. He proposed a hierarchy of cultural characteristics which were used within society to increase social worth and power. Because of the nature of the theory, those cultures with higher valued cultural characteristics would be viewed more favorably on the social hierarchical order.

Bourdieu’s (1997) framework does not lend to accepting and celebrating individual cultural strengths for groups that are viewed less favorably within the social order. Instead, the framework approaches certain cultural traits from a deficit perspective. In other words, the framework assumes there is an ideal culture which all other cultures measure up against. Each culture then has faults or deficits compared to the ideal. Cultures at a lower social hierarchical order must assimilate cultural characteristics of a dominant group in order to increase cultural value in society. This research does not seek to rank culturally specific behaviors against others.

**Application to Study.** Creswell (2014) suggested that theoretical frameworks in qualitative studies provide an “orienting lens for the study of questions of gender, class, and race (or other issues of marginalized groups). This lens becomes an advocacy perspective that shapes
the types of questions asked, informs how data are collected and analyzed, and provides a call for action or change” (p. 62). Theoretical frameworks that best fit this doctoral research project considered cultural sensitivity as a primary component of the framework. They needed to also be mindful of the cultural influence in various interactions between individuals and groups. These influences needed to include factors such as social equality, conceptualization of self, the relationship between individuals in different levels of authority, cultural concepts of masculinity and femininity, and expression of feelings. Including such a lens would then support the advocacy perspective for an ethnic group that has been underrepresented in higher education for decades.

Through the use of Ladson-Billings’ (2014) theoretical framework, this research’s problem of practice was further addressed as the researcher anticipated identifying perspectives about the effectiveness of culturally sensitive interactions within the online college setting and their influence on students’ intentions to complete their degrees. Previous research had demonstrated that intercultural interactions and acculturation with more dominant cultural norms influences the persistence intentions of Hispanic/Latino students in traditional higher education (Acevedo-Polakovic, Quirk, Cousineau, Saxena, & Gerhart, 2014; Becerra, 2010; Garcia, 2010; Hernandez, 1995; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Ortiz, Valerio, & Lopez, 2012). Thus, building awareness of cultural differences and applying culturally relevant and sensitive student support interventions should influence student persistence intentions and increase degree attainment. Therefore, this research has both practical and scholarly applications within the online higher educational setting.

Ladson-Billing’s (2014) framework supports the belief that advocacy for equity among ethnic groups is a matter of social justice and can be addressed via practical application within education. Her framework aligns concepts of cultural relevance and sensitivity within interactions with inherent differences in privilege and power. Student support personnel are privileged by the
nature of their role within the institution. However, advocates for social equity may be interested in building awareness regarding those power dynamics so that they do not negatively influence student motivations and intentions to persist in their program. This must be balanced with a purposeful attention toward a constructivist paradigm in the research design, interview questions, and analysis.

This constructivist lens, which the research question and sub-question are derived from, leans toward transformative advocacy with a hermeneutical focus on building awareness and support for an underrepresented community in higher education (Mertens, 2010). The research question and subsequent participant questions aimed at identifying the contextual factors of the student experiences with student support staff and gather perspectives about their cultural relevance. These questions were designed to identify evidence of the existence of Ladson-Billings’ (2014) cultural relevance in the student support interactions. Concepts of awareness of cultural differences, acculturation, cultural strengths, and color-blindness in the interactions within online higher education were explored. Since Hispanic/Latino online college students were asked to explain their experiences regarding effectiveness of the student support interactions, their explanations could help to validate the best practices and use of these concepts in these interventions.

Qualitative interview questions that were driven by Ladson-Billings’ (2014) culturally relevant pedagogy framework explored Hispanic/Latino online students’ perspective regarding student support and cultural sensitivity (e.g. “what does student support that is culturally sensitive look and sound like to you?”). Qualitative interview questions also illustrated culturally specific characteristics and behaviors that may influence the interactions within the setting (e.g. “how does cultural background influence your experience and interactions in the online environment?”).
Guided by a well-researched theoretical framework, the research is further strengthened by the improvement of student support for online Hispanic/Latino students.

**Positionality Statement**

As a member of this ethnic group, this topic and area of research is significant personally and professionally. Perspectives are sought for myself and future Hispanic/Latino students, including my own children, who may pursue online academic degrees. This research helped to uncover motivations and perspectives regarding the cultural barriers facing online Hispanic/Latino students. In exploring this problem of practice and topic, I understand that I brought a personal bias and perspective to my research. My research was also influenced by Critical Race Theory (CRT) as described by Solorzano, Villalpando and Oseguera (2005) and Delgado, Stefancic, and Liendo (2012). Though the primary research project utilized Ladson-Billings’ Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, there may also have been an inherent predisposition toward advocacy of research participants, which could negatively impact implications if they were not addressed. CRT theorists suggest that White supremacy is maintained over time in various contexts, as conditions in those settings favor racial inequality. This research aimed to avoid such assertions and focus solely on best practices that may improve the educational outcomes for Hispanic/Latino students.

**Background.** I am a scholar-practitioner whose purpose is to improve the quality of the interactions between student, staff, and faculty to the benefit of Hispanic/Latino students enrolled in online programs. I have an ethical obligation to the field by applying a critical view into current scholarship, continuously seeking truths, and maintaining a relentless focus on application of theory to practice. As a higher education administrator in various student support functions for over twenty years, I have a fundamental expectation that higher education yields greater opportunity for career enhancement or educational enlightenment. However, I have seen
Hispanic/Latino students succumb to cultural pressures and familial responsibilities which distract them from their goal of degree attainment. Though these pressures remained during my own doctoral journey, there were equal and opposite forces which have helped me maintain my focus.

**Researcher Bias and Relation to Advocacy.** My cultural background, career experiences, and personal motivations regarding education influence how I saw this research developing. In considering cultural background, Briscoe (2005) warned that universalized traits (especially compared to privileged groups) has the risk of marginalizing or ascribing inferiority to the group being studied. My own privileged background may have negatively influenced how other Hispanic/Latino students from a non-privileged background answered questions during my research. At the same time, a similar heritage may have provided affirmation as we share many of the cultural characteristics and views toward family, individual roles, and community.

Understanding that there are variants of Hispanic/Latino subcultures allowed a deeper insight into meaning-making for the various groups. Mexican heritage and culture differs from Puerto Rican and South American cultures. Even within the Puerto Rican culture, there are differences between individuals raised in New York City from those growing up on the Caribbean island. Though cultural variations exist, there are similarities across all Hispanic/Latino subgroups (Torres, 2004). Briscoe (2005) suggested that researchers who are members of the participant group are likely to perceive and represent the group in a way that protects and serves their interest.

Through working in a higher education administration function, my bias toward the academy is driven by a Critical Race Theory lens. I view the academy as having failed to support Hispanic/Latino students in completing their degrees. This is a dangerous bias, as one must consistently balance advocacy and justice with continuous quality improvement. A conscious effort was made to avoid an adversarial rift between the Hispanic/Latino participants and the
institution. It is our responsibility to focus on what can be done to improve the outcomes for these students, and not simply highlight what higher education is doing wrong.

Unlike myself, some of the participants were first-generation college students. This may have presented a barrier in my ability to relate to their experiences, their ability to explain their experiences, or their willingness to share their perspectives. Having had privileged academic experiences presents potential ethical implications that extend beyond the research study itself. Participants may make future academic choices as a result of an unintentional influence from the study. As a doctoral student, my academic status may open doors to research participants but may also intimidate them, causing changes in their perspective. Though this could be affirming to them in yielding hope for a brighter future, it also may cause some participants to shy away since literature research shows that very few Hispanics/Latinos obtain a degree even at the bachelor level.

Bahar (1997) reminded us that "vulnerability doesn't mean that anything personal goes. The exposure of the self who is also a spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn't otherwise get to. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake" (p. 14). In this interpretive research, it was important to relate how my cultural, employment, and academic biases may have influenced research participant outcomes. However, this was mitigated by limiting the amount of personal information shared with the participants. The goal was to reduce the risk of jeopardizing responses, misinterpreting data, or advancing other unethical impacts. It has been my intention that established biases were mitigated and associated risks reduced, prior to embarking on the research portion of this doctoral journey.
Conclusions

Traditional higher education has had the advantage of existing for much longer than online education. However, this lengthy history does not excuse the lack of progress that higher education has had in improving degree attainment for Hispanics/Latinos. It is important to understand how the field of higher education is changing, including the development of online educational models, to meet the needs of a dynamically changing demographic. Without further practical research, the Hispanic/Latino population’s degree attainment levels will remain unchanged. As a result, the socioeconomic status of this growing population will remain stagnant, placing further strain on our economy overall. However, based on the findings of this study, new culturally sensitive interventions initiated by staff and faculty could positively impact the perceptions Hispanics/Latinos have of the online higher education environment. This may positively influence their persistence intentions and graduation rates, leading to improved socioeconomic outcomes for the future of this group and consequently, society overall. The following literature review provides the context of the research surrounding Hispanic/Latino student support, cultural sensitivity, and the online higher educational environment.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Since the late 19th and early 20th century, the political environment in the United States has played a major role in the ability for minority groups to access higher education. MacDonald (2013) indicated that scholars and administrators in higher education during this era argued over the purpose of primary language requirements and the need to keep students segregated. Concerns about the dilution of Anglo-Protestant culture as a result of continued immigration of people from Mexico resulted in restrictive educational policies, such as the Immigration Acts of the 1920s, and further development of an English-only public education system. Post-secondary degree
attainment rates for Hispanics/Latinos had been miniscule, as only a small percentage of students had even matriculated into higher learning settings. There is a lack of evidence in the literature regarding coordinated efforts to support post-secondary education for Hispanics/Latinos. Most published articles on the subject were focused on foreign exchange students in an effort to influence institutional reputation internationally. However, the formation of college student organizations during this era aimed to build enrollment of a diverse student body by offering membership in these organizations.

During the mid-20th century, the first Hispanic/Latino college student organizations formed in the United States. Unfortunately, any impact on enrollment from these newly established student groups cannot be substantiated, as there are gaps in data for the years prior to the 1970s regarding the actual numbers of Hispanics/Latinos enrolled in college programs (Clotfelter, 1991). Still, organizations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), continued to support Chicano/Puerto Rican civil rights movements. This included support for the Civil Rights and Equal Education Opportunity Acts in the 1960s and 1970s which aimed to end segregation and the discrimination of all people on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

Though focused on primary and secondary education, these organizations also sponsored legal cases for the educational rights of Hispanics/Latinos. Legal battles such as Del Rio Independent School District v. Salvatierra (1930) and Roberto Alvarez v. the Board of Trustees of the Lemon Grove School District (1931) set the stage for equal educational rights decades before the landmark case, Brown v. Board of Education (1954). In both cases, judgments ruled against school districts which had unlawfully segregated Mexican children and denied them equal access to educational opportunities compared to others. Rulings from these legal cases signaled an
opportunity for acquiring equal access for minorities seeking to improve their lives through education.

Though federal programs, such as the DREAM Act of 2001 (with multiple subsequent iterations), were designed to advance Hispanic/Latino degree attainment by providing access to federal financial assistance for post-secondary education, most of these system-wide efforts failed to improve Hispanic/Latino degree attainment. In light of heated political debates regarding topics such as illegal immigration and the security of the nation, widespread policies such as this have been considered controversial. In their place, individual state regulations such as California’s tuition equity program (California Education Code § 68130.5), which granted lower California resident tuition rates to students regardless of lawful immigration status, began to focus on building the case for student support specifically targeting underrepresented groups. In addition, a variety of post-secondary settings such as Northern Virginia Community College’s Pathway to the Baccalaureate Program and the College Success Program at Barrio Logan College Institute have been testing various student support intervention programs with some promising results (Excelencia in Education, 2016). Both programs have focused on developing academic and social intervention for pre-college Latino students in their communities. Through dedicated attention to academic success factors, both programs demonstrated significant college entry and success rates compared to program benchmarks. Institutional administrators, program designers, and legislative bodies have continued to assess quality of student support systems and the motivations and intentions of Hispanic/Latino students for decades in an effort to decrease the gap in student degree attainment.

Hispanic/Latino student degree attainment has been a significant concern to researchers since the Civil Rights era as it has significantly trailed behind other ethnic groups. For example,
and in viewing the low degree attainment trend through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens, Solorzano, Villalpando, and Oseguera (2005) have suggested that higher education has not done enough to support these students for decades. They posited that student support must become more culturally sensitive in order to begin addressing the challenges facing these students. Concerns about the low degree attainment rates for this ethnic group continue to compound as the population of Hispanics/Latinos increases at a higher rate than other ethnic groups.

Mellander (2014) cited the 2012 U.S. Census Bureau in stating that Hispanics/Latinos make up nearly twenty percent of all public school kindergarten students in seventeen states, and those percentages are increasing across the nation. Passel and Cohn (2008) predicted that the Hispanic/Latino population will be the largest of all minority groups by 2050. However, the latest U.S. Census Bureau numbers suggest this may have already occurred in 2014 and this group is now the fastest growing group after multi-ethnic and Asian population groups (Colby & Ortman, 2015). In order to support future economic growth and ensure a sufficient ongoing tax base to pay for government sponsored services, the U.S. must successfully educate and train this growing ethnic group. Completion of a higher education degree can yield higher paying jobs, assuring larger taxable incomes and consequently producing more revenue overall.

With the limited capacity at traditional higher education institutions to support such an increase in the number of potential students, the online learning platform becomes a viable alternative in leveraging economies of scale in a flexible educational delivery method. In addition, online education may serve to improve student retention at colleges and universities since more students are taking less face-to-face classes (Kilburn, Kilburn, & Cates, 2014). Though there is no guarantee that the availability of a flexible platform will solve the degree attainment challenge alone, successfully combining it with a culturally sensitive student support system may yield better
student retention outcomes than a traditional system. These outcomes could improve by providing Hispanic/Latino students flexibility for student engagement with educational material at a time and place that is convenient and relevant to them. Exploring the barriers facing Hispanic/Latino students, concepts of cultural sensitivity in student support, and student experience of online learning all contribute to the scholarly body of knowledge about this topic. Each also provides potential practical application to administrators and policy makers who seek to address lower comparative completion rates at their institutions.

Though opposing viewpoints have existed for centuries about the purpose of higher education, higher education does have a responsibility to produce qualified individuals who contribute to organizations and our economy through taxable income (Spellings Commission, 2006). However, in reviewing how well various ethnic groups contribute to the economy, Bradbury (2002) asserted that not all ethnic groups have increased their wages at the same rates over time. According to this study, Hispanics/Latinos have experienced significant wage disparity due in part to their lack of degree attainment. This population has therefore been limited in their ability to seek high earning jobs as a result of employers offering higher wages to those with college degrees. Bradbury (2002) estimated that Hispanics/Latinos receive up to seventeen percent lower wages than non-Hispanics/Latinos in society. As the number of Hispanic/Latinos continues to increase, society’s tax base will continue to diminish, placing further pressure on higher education to finally resolve the issue.

**Literature Review Organization**

In order to further explore the known research around this topic, this literature review centered on these questions: 1) what factors contribute to Hispanic/Latino student success when integrating into higher education? 2) what culturally sensitive student support interventions for
Hispanic/Latino students have been evaluated in the literature? 3) how do ethnic groups, in particular Hispanics/Latinos, experience and succeed in an online learning environment? These questions guided library search terms such as cultural sensitivity, academic and social integration, influences to student success and persistence, online learning, use of technology and the internet, and Hispanic (or Latino) experiences in post-secondary settings. The terms Hispanic and Latino are used together throughout this paper to denote inclusivity of the various subcultures that are derived from Latin American countries and Spain.

**Literature Review Framework**

Though not a chosen framework for this research, this literature review was influenced by a Critical Race Theory lens which assumes that racism is a natural part of society in the United States and is only evident when injustices are highlighted (Delgado, 2009). This literature review’s conceptual framework guided search terms, design of research questions, analysis of results, and the synthesis of the literature arguments. Delgado, Stefancic, and Liendo (2012) posited that racism is a social construction which is inherent in our social systems and has been for generations. Historical review of the literature using this framework highlights the Hispanic/Latino struggles to reform and root out the embedded nature of racism in our society. Critical Race Theorists tend to seek equality in results rather than pursue a structure of fairness in opportunity. Critical Race Theorists also tend to view inherent systems, such as higher education, as central to the failures to address society’s needs.

Research completed on Hispanics/Latinos in higher education has historically focused on cultural comparisons, which ranks ethnic superiority in the educational environment. This type of research has assumed ethnicity is a cause for inferiority in educational success. For example, Kirk and Goon (1975) attempted to highlight inherent cultural deficits in their review of the literature.
They suggested that “cultural deficit literature is concerned with explaining why it seems that low-income minority groups have not acquired American middle class attitudes, values, and behaviors” (Kirk & Goon, 1975, p. 600). Cultural deficit literature assumes that desegregation alone would allow for equal opportunity and hence equal outcomes. Thus, racial disparities in society could not be explained by anything other than cultural differences inherent in the minority groups themselves. Though the majority of race-related research focused on Black versus Caucasian viewpoints, the Hispanic/Latinos have also been included in a growing body of research (Aoki & Johnson, 2008; Bernal & Solorzano, 2001; Valdez, 1996). Research in this area has continued to focus on the deficits inherent in this population, which may only further reinforce racial inequality in an attempt to explain their low comparative degree attainment rates (Hyland & Heuschkel, 2009).

The deficit model presumes that all other groups outside of the dominant Anglo-Caucasian group have some deficits which prevent them from being considered part of the standardized ideal. It also includes the assumption that all other groups aim to measure themselves against the social and physical characteristics and preferences of the dominant group in order. Therefore, the image of the dominant group is naturally reinforced through idealizations found in society’s standardized communication and discourse. For example, theorists proposed that low-income minority students do not perform as well as the majority classes because they have not adopted the traditional American middle-class norms and values which would make them more successful (Kirk & Goon, 1975). Thus, there is a categorization of preferred qualities, such as intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, mastery of the English language, and educational aspirations that are inherent in some individuals or cultures and not others.
West (2003) posited that this discourse is simply the embodiment and natural tendency for human beings to embed classification, preference, and ranking to our observations of the natural world, including other human beings. He suggested that White supremacy naturally evolved from a preference for qualities inherent in Caucasian people over others. This preference for “Whiteness” is not directed by some political or psychological force within society, but is promoted as a socially acceptable and expected behavior. Power differentials exist between cultures and those on a higher social order who may be unaware or do not intend to reinforce institutionalized oppression in their establishment of standard rules and behaviors (Delpit, 1998). Nevertheless, these embedded tendencies or implicit bias toward preferred human qualities can flourish throughout whole systems as unquestioned norms.

Acknowledging bias and positionality are critical skills for all researchers as they relay perspective to the reader regarding the lens with which arguments are formulated. Stanfield (1985) reminded us that “no matter how well tested a theory is and no matter how well constructed social research instruments are, they are human constructs and are therefore embedded in the cultural background of social scientists” (p. 387). As such, there is an inherently human element to bias, which could be countered by a different viewpoint. This scholarly debate ensures that research remains open to alternatives, and can spark new ways of explaining phenomena and generate new ideas. One of these ideas is the development and incorporation of cultural awareness, or cultural sensitivity, into human conversation. Interactions with a sensitivity for the perspective of other people may improve relationships by reaching a shared understanding.

With a clear definition of cultural sensitivity, it has been possible to narrow the scope of this literature review around this complex concept. As noted earlier, cultural sensitivity is the ability to consider and tailor interactions to the context of another individual from a different
background. Cultural sensitivity is employing awareness of self and of others in a manner which yields effective communication and satisfaction (Foronda, 2008). Though the term cultural sensitivity can be synonymous with terms such as cultural relevancy and intercultural awareness, the overarching concept includes a critical element of understanding between people of different perspectives. Applying cultural sensitivity means that programs are designed, and interactions are tailored to fit the needs of others in a way that raises their level of satisfaction and accomplishment. This approach is strikingly different than that of a cultural deficit model that seeks only to compare and contrast characteristics against a dominant norm versus seeking to relate how one’s perspective adds value to social interactions and understanding between people.

The following literature review is organized into four streams: history of institutional intervention for Hispanic/Latino student support (presented chronologically), barriers and motivations to Hispanic/Latino college entry and graduation, culturally sensitive student support concepts, and emerging online learning delivery research in regard to ethnicity and student support. Each of the streams are synthesized into discovery statements and arguments regarding applicability to the present study. Finally, a conclusion provides a high level summary of findings and my position on the topic as it relates to this literature review’s conceptual framework, which influenced the investigation and final review.

**History of Institutional Intervention for Hispanic/Latino Student Support**

Early academic references arguing for cultural sensitivity can be found in the literature on intercultural communication. Following the end of World War II and the creation of the United Nations, researchers began investigating theories surrounding the influence of culture on interpersonal communications with diverse people (Aneas & Sandin, 2009). These researchers aimed at demonstrating awareness of the interconnectivity between cultures and its importance on
building stronger communities, especially within the healthcare and education fields. This was as a result of the need to provide services for the growing number of Hispanics/Latinos in the United States. As of the 1971 U.S. Census, their population was estimated at under nine million (Padilla, 2002). Compared to the estimated twenty-three million Blacks and one-hundred eighty two million White Americans counted in that year’s U.S. Census figures, Hispanics/Latinos were a relatively small ethnic group during that time.

During late 19th century, the United States began experiencing an increase in the immigrant population. With the continued focus on expanding their reach internationally, higher education in the early part of the 20th century began to support individual international student exchanges (Thelin, 2011). Many of these institutional programs were focused on South American and other Spanish-speaking countries as a result of Pan-Americanism after the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, which set the tone against European intervention in the western hemisphere. Pan-Americanism, or the diplomatic and social movement aimed to improve relations between North and South American countries, had influenced higher education’s focus on Hispanic/Latino student support.

According to Doyle (1938), the political environment in the 1930s continued to expand on the influence of South American immigrants and focused on the importance of defining English as the primary language in the United States. Doyle argued for the expansion of higher educational support for international student exchange programs and the intention to improve cultural interchange with Latin American countries. Marking an important historical turning point in valuing Hispanic/Latino student participation in higher education, he indicated his involvement in creating an international student exchange program which would integrate Hispanic/Latino students into the college environment. This article is the earliest document found which provides
a glimpse into the state of higher education for Hispanics/Latinos, referencing the roots of Hispanic American cultural centers and support for Pan-Americanism.

In another early document depicting Hispanic/Latino life in higher education, Mercado (1941) predicted that Hispanic/Latin American students would increase in number. At the University of Michigan Ann Arbor, Mercado aimed to influence Latin American student perspectives by painting a patriotic picture of education in the U.S. While Mercado (1941) supported the Pan-American movement, he also advocated for an English-language learning curriculum as the primary purpose of Latin-American student education. The author argued that these students were most similar to Caucasian Americans in that they also struggled for independence, referring to efforts in the late 19th century toward South American independence.

Mercado (1941) suggested these students very rarely had “black blood” – indicating that they were selected from the “best” people. There were clear subtexts of racial discrimination in the article and an overt attempt to suggest Latin-American students should be integrated into society. This juxtaposition of racial discrimination and integration only appears in this early literature as society struggled with categorizing Hispanic/Latino students. Mercado (1941) and Doyle (1938) advocated for culturally relevant student support but perhaps had alternative intentions in the effort to integrate Hispanic/Latino students into a dominant society.

Under the Morrill Act of 1862, which aimed to ensure public education for all social classes, institutions were granted lands to support the creation of agricultural and mechanical programs (Thelin, 2011). Subsequently, updates to the Morrill Act’s language in 1890 stipulated that funding would be granted only to states which distributed funds equitably amongst institutions who served White and Colored students. As such, traditionally underserved students such as African Americans, began taking advantage of the opportunities provided by this funding. Like
many institutions created to serve primarily African American students, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts was founded in 1888 as a land-grant college. Institutions like New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts began serving Hispanics/Latinos, though the percentage of this population that attended post-secondary education was still very small (MacDonald, 2013). Though the Morrill Act aimed to support all social classes, it had not yet influenced a large number of Hispanics/Latinos to enroll in post-secondary education.

Only more affluent Hispanic/Latino families in the late 1800s were sending their children to post-secondary schools, which were more often religious-based institutions (MacDonald, 2013). Teacher training schools, or “Normal Schools,” began gaining popularity in southwestern United States. These, along with junior colleges, began surfacing in Hispanic/Latino population centers such as Illinois, Texas, and New Mexico (MacDonald, 2013). Though the number of Hispanic/Latino students attending college was still limited, the higher education system began to note the importance of educating students of non-Caucasian descent.

As a faculty member at New Mexico College, Tyre (1942) wrote in support of Latin American exchange student support and expansion of Pan-Americanism after the Monroe Doctrine in the late 19th century. He positioned the need for financial scholarships for Colombian and Ecuadorian students at his institution. Institutions began creating financial support programs specifically for these students in order to attract more of them for their programs. These financial support programs often included room, board, and tuition scholarships. Tyre (1942) provided a glimpse into motives for improving relationships with Latin American countries in stating that “it will require patience and open mindedness on our part to help these young Latin Americans adjust themselves the first few months of their stay in this country. But thereafter, they will reward us with gratitude and friendship. They will return home with true loyalty and affection for all of
America” (p. 115). The United States needed allies especially during World War II, and international student exchanges with Latin American countries was one way to develop them.

The political environment of the World War II era created an urgency in the education environment overall. As a result of continued legal challenges such as in the late 1940s, President Truman created a commission to explore the role of higher education in society and signaled a new wave of federal support for student support programs. Further, higher education was forever changed by Brown v. Board of Education (1954), which removed segregation barriers for students. This landmark case opened the door for minority groups to gain access to education that had only been available to the dominant ethnic group. However, it did not solve all of the problems inherent to the educational system during this era. Thelin (2011) suggested that the variety of undergraduate educational models encouraged institutional growth but also lacked evidence of tailoring to the needs of a diverse group of students. This lack of sensitivity in educational delivery amongst institutions may be a contributing factor in the lack of minority groups, including Hispanics/Latinos, entering into the system and persistence for these students leading to degree attainment.

Education in the post-World War II area focused heavily on the expansion of the GI-Bill, according to the literature. The GI-Bill provides financial assistance for veterans and service members to pursue education, though it does not specifically target minority groups. The 1960s was also a significant decade in expanding post-secondary student support for Hispanics/Latinos. Dispenzieri, Giniger, Tormes, and Weinheimer (1969) described a key student support initiative at the City University of New York (CUNY) during the early years of the 1960s. The College Discovery Program of CUNY was designed as a special program initially supporting 231 students, and still continues today as one of the longest running programs of its kind in the United States.
Its primary function is to support underrepresented students, typically African American and Hispanic/Latino students, with specialized and culturally relevant counseling, supplemental instruction, and financial support leading to significantly higher retention and graduation rates. CUNY’s College Discovery Program and its companion SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) program, which advances student financial and academic support for pre-college students, are models for minority student persistence and academic success intervention models in higher education. Intervention programs that specifically target Hispanic/Latino students, such as CUNY’s SEEK program at Lehman College, have been highlighted for their success in improving college enrollment, retention, and graduation rates (“Percy Ellis Sutton SEEK Program,” 2017).

Dispenzieri et al. (1969) indicated that a primary function of CUNY’s program was to provide remediation for student academic deficiencies, student personal counseling, and the identification of the characteristics of successful students. The authors argued that Hispanic/Latino students would not have qualified for college admission nor transfer into four-year programs were it not for this program. The study also suggested that successful students in this program would have a halo effect on their communities. Thus, the program was considered a community relations and development initiative. Dispenzieri et al (1969) further described the program as an effort to align collegiate student degree attainment with New York State’s Board of Higher Education’s goals at the time. The intention of state boards began to shift toward assessing and evaluating student support programs in order to allocate funding. This marked another historical shift in the purpose and mission of the education system for Hispanic/Latino students.

As a result of the Higher Education Act Amendment of 1968, higher education was directed to allocate resources to build student support services for disadvantaged students. In the mid-1970s and as a result of increased pressure for financial accountability, the U.S. Department of
Health, Education and Welfare contracted a major evaluation study in an effort to understand how the state of higher education was supporting ethnic minorities. The final needs assessment report from this study described the existence of almost 200 programs designed to support over 50,000 students in campuses across the country (Roman, Rodriguez, Gotsch, Wesley, Vicente, Lauro, Jimenez Hyde, & Pastoriza, 1974). Through questionnaires and analysis of student academic and success data, the report suggested that 14% of the collegiate student population in the U.S. was below the poverty line, yet the typical support program employed only two full-time staff and two faculty members with a reported average cost of $673 per year per enrolled student (or $3757 adjusted dollars in 2014). The report suggested that there was a lack of evidence in support of special service programs improving the success or satisfaction of disadvantaged students. In addition, the report implied that race was more closely tied to educational outcomes than economic factors and disadvantaged students would likely not attend without financial support.

Private organizations, such as the Lumina Foundation, began to be contracted by state and federal governments in the late 20th century to supplement government efforts to identify the extent of student support systems across the higher educational system. Since this era, the expansion of student services for Hispanic/Latino students has grown at a rapid rate. For example, a brief presented by the Institute for Higher Education Policy depicted the varied higher educational institution student support services available (Bridges, 2008). The report described programs across more than 100 Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Hispanic Serving Institutions, which demonstrated improvement in student engagement and learning.

During this era, three key legal cases also set the stage for higher educational access for minority students. In the landmark case Regents of the University of California v. Bakke (1978), the Supreme Court of the United States upheld affirmative action in college admission policies,
allowing for race to be considered in the admission of students. This decision allows institutions to retain an admission policy which considers minority students’ ethnicity in the decision, which may improve access for underrepresented groups. Further, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld and reaffirmed the existence of a compelling interest in promoting institutional diversity via affirmative action policies in *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003). As a result, race-conscious admission policies were deemed to be acceptable insofar that there were other factors also considered in institutional admission decisions. Though institutions have an obligation to continuously use all available data to assess changing societal demographics in admission decisions, affirmative action in admission policies continues to be reaffirmed even in the more recent decision in *Fisher v. University of Texas* (2016). This recent decision allowed for integration of cultural relevance, through strict scrutiny of policies and practices, to be utilized as critical success factors in the evaluation of institutional effectiveness.

Across the institutional programs described in Bridges (2008), successful programs appeared to focus on the use of assessment data to diagnose problems and measure solutions, integrate student services, cross-train across the institution about available resources, and gain support from those who interact with students most often. In the early 2000s, coordination of student support for Hispanic/Latino students within institutional offices had become a best practice. According to a national survey by the American Association for Higher Education, a majority of successful activities or programs seem to surround cross-functional collaboration for student counseling, first-year experience, orientation and on-boarding, diversity programs, and academic advising (Kezar, 2001). However, the problem in managing it has been the vastness and variety of institutional programs across the entirety of the system. Though various institutions attempted to mirror what may have succeeded in other programs, there has been no single
agreement about which program design works best. This is partially due to the fact that no one institution, from its student make-up to personnel and programs, is exactly the same as any other institution. There may be other confounding factors, such as institutional funding allocation or even regional student characteristics, which makes comparing institutional programs difficult.

A best practice, found in the literature on student support intervention programs, integrates a student’s cultural values to a shared community. Keim, McDermott, and Gerard (2010) researched peer and cohort groups that supported Hispanic/Latino student success as they transferred from community college to bachelor’s degree granting institutions. They posited that culturally sensitive administrators and faculty who practiced role modeling and mentoring were effective in improving degree completion. One grant-funded student success program, called the “Bridge Program,” has demonstrated success for students preparing to become teachers. Though Keim, McDermott, and Gerard (2010) pose interesting measures of success in regard to building a community integration component for culturally sensitive student support, its descriptions and scope of the practices are limited. Though student cohort groups and shared community are extremely important, the influence of staff and faculty have an impact on student success as well.

For instance, faculty and academic advisors have been shown to play an important role in student support as they have for decades. Tovar (2015) demonstrated that intentional interactions between faculty, advisors, and students at a community college could impact student GPA and persistence intentions until degree completion. Faculty who dedicated time to non-academic interactions outside of the classroom had an impact on student GPA, but not on students’ intention to persist. Involvement in specific campus college support services positively influenced both measures. Academic counselor support was found to be useful only when an assessment of needs and specific referrals were made in this research.
Though Tovar (2015) admitted that the impact of the interventions in this study were small, the findings were still significant. Citations referenced in this article supported the idea that research in this area is relatively new and is still developing. The approach to student support described in Tovar’s article can have implications to new institutional programs based on culturally sensitive student support systems. Though the insights depicted in this article may only be limited to the referenced community college, the nature of this recent approach reinforced the validity of this research study and described some current strategies to address Hispanic/Latino student support in today’s higher education institutions.

**Synthesis.** The creation of institutional support systems for Hispanic/Latino students evolved over decades and was based on the historical context at the time. The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 had previously expanded U.S. diplomatic efforts toward Latin American countries and became the precursor for an influx of students with Spanish heritage. During the World War II era, the United States sought to expand its position in the world through opening its doors to international student exchanges. More than a century later, and though it was primarily in support of African American students, *Brown v. Board of Education* removed segregation barriers for Hispanic/Latino students as well. An increasing number of students entered the higher education system, though Hispanics/Latinos continued to be underrepresented. Thus, various student support programs were launched in an attempt to improve degree attainment. Programs like the College Discovery Program of CUNY, CUNY’s SEEK Program, or the Bridge Program, have been examples of successful programs. Despite various decades of research, the exact factors that consistently predict program design success continue to be elusive. Current research suggests that the program’s design must include culturally sensitive interactions between faculty, staff, and students. However, new model designs are primed for further exploration as the numbers of
Hispanic/Latino students continue to grow in the U.S. higher educational system. Until some coordination at a higher federal level occurs and best practices are more widely adopted across the higher education system, success in increasing Hispanic/Latino student degree attainment will remain dependent on individual program efforts.

**Barriers and Motivations to College Entry and Graduation**

The study of factors and characteristics of Hispanic/Latino students has been a topic of investigation for decades as researchers sought to understand academic and social competency factors for successful college students. Field, Maldonado-Sierra, Wallace, Bodarky, and Coelho (1962) studied the social psychology of one Puerto Rican male college student in the 1960s to compare the Hispanic/Latino group to the general college student population. They measured responses to photographic depictions of college life to attempt to identify internal motives and concerns about the subjects. They determined that cultural characteristics and familial expectations could have an effect on student perceptions and experiences in college. They also noted that there seemed to be contrasts between traditional American values and those from Hispanic/Latino origins. Though limited in scope, understanding the cultural stereotypes and their impacts on Hispanic/Latino student social integration set the stage for future studies regarding acculturation. This information contributed to the knowledge about cultural differences and potential risk factors for student persistence and academic success in the post-secondary environment.

Researchers posited that low acculturation, or the inability to adopt the dominant culture’s norms and behaviors, is a primary reason for low degree attainment for Hispanic/Latino students (Acevedo-Polakovic, Quirk, Cousineau, Saxena, & Gerhart, 2014). Specific cultural traits, characteristics, and norms inherent in these minority students may be what prevents them from maintaining good academic standing. Acevedo-Polakovic, Quirk, Cousineau, Saxena, and Gerhart
(2014) suggested that the level of acculturation impacts student attitudes toward academic
development and achievement, while student identification with his/her culture leads to academic
success.

In a similar study, Schwartz, Zamboanga, Jarvis, Nagayama, and Gordon (2007) indicated
that acculturation and ethnic identity were important factors in resulting academic performance
and prosocial behavior in the academic environment. Though primarily focused on
Hispanic/Latino adolescents, this study validated that students’ self-esteem was a mediating factor
in the relationship between their ethnic identity and their academic success. The identification with
the Hispanic/Latino ethnic group increased positive feelings toward self, reduced acculturative
stress, and hence prosocial behaviors in an environment which retains dominant group cultural
practices. This study suggests that the adoption of some dominant group cultural behaviors, while
retaining some heritage-cultural practices, may be the most successful adaptation for these students.

Ortiz, Valerio, and Lopez (2012) argued that Hispanics/Latinos have lower acculturation
rates in higher education than other ethnic groups. However, not all Hispanic/Latino subcultures
experienced this, as they noted with the Cuban population in their study. They cautioned that
generalization of the factors for acculturation may not provide an accurate picture. Instead,
multiple causes should be considered when looking at drop-out rates in a socioecological
theoretical framework. These characteristics were further developed by Page (2012) in studying
the Hispanic/Latino student population. Page (2012) indicated that the demand of familial
responsibilities is a generalizable commonality amongst Hispanic/Latino cultural subgroups, as is
their shared language. Though every culture makes family a priority, Hispanics/Latinos have
family at the forefront of all decisions surrounding their lives. The expectations regarding familial
support are ingrained in their values leading to an ideology that serves to explain this strong connection.

The study of this concept, referred to as *familism*, has been a primary topic since the 1970s with myriad research to include understanding of emotional support, the family unit, protection against emotional and physical stressors, and psychological growth and development (Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal, Marin, & Perez-Stable, 1987). Of the subcomponents that make up *familism*, the attitudinal feelings of loyalty and reciprocity are most similar amongst Hispanic/Latino subcultural group variants. It is important to note that geographic distance between family members may negatively influence these feelings. The most distinctive dimension of Hispanic/Latino *familism* is the perceived family support regardless of level of acculturation into mainstream U.S. culture (Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal, Marin, & Perez-Stable, 1987). Though *familism* appears to be independent of higher levels of acculturation, language has a definite correlation to and impact on level of acculturation.

A student’s ability to relate to the language at the institution via communication of acceptable phrases, terminology, and grasp of the English language can have an impact on their level of acculturation in the group. Becerra (2010) discussed how language relays socioeconomic status and academic achievement for Hispanic/Latino students. He stated the students with lower linguistic alignment would have a higher number of academic barriers. Though his hypothesis was not supported, his participants noted some perceived barriers that could be challenges for this population. For example, discriminatory remarks may not be completely understood by students who struggle to understand nuances of language or have little to no experience with racism. As a symptom of inherent cultural and racial bias, micro-aggressions may be both subtle and overt. Sue (2010) suggested that these micro-aggressions, regardless of intention to harm, can have negative
impacts on the receiver by justifying their inferior status and silencing their voice. This can lead to lower self-esteem and disassociation with the environment for the receiver.

Even simple expressions of cultural stereotypes can reinforce the reality of economic disadvantage, high familial expectations, and poor educational conditions. Capello (1994) studied the role of women in a Hispanic/Latino family and found that stereotyping presented a challenge for ten Latina women enrolled in the Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) program at a private institution in the northeast. Capello (1994) identified that cultural expectations and social constructs impacted their ability to successfully navigate the college environment. Furthermore, Capello suggested that the support group’s strategies, particularly collaboration in navigating the educational environment, helped to mitigate any perceived barriers.

Hernandez’s (1995) study furthered the insights into cultural expectations by completing an ethnographic study on the Latino family, community, and career counseling. He cautioned that different historical and cultural backgrounds of Hispanic/Latino subcultures may present varied needs. However, across subgroups, the concept of valuing a collective group over the individual as well as the profound commitment to family obligations was present. Hernandez (1995) supported the notion that a student’s cultural heritage should be discussed in student support interventions.

Research points to a statistical relationship between student acculturation, their perceptions of their academic barriers, and student demographics (Fiebig, Braid, Ross, Tom, & Prinzo, 2010). Applying a multiple regression model, the researchers found that there were gender differences in the Hispanic/Latino participant population related to the perception of acculturation into the academic community. Familial expectations may influence the potential for integrating successfully into the college environment. First generation college students were at higher
academic risk according the results, and researchers found this group of students relied more heavily on peer support. This leads to the suggestion that a highly engaged peer support group may be a viable substitute for the strong familial bonds typically present in the Hispanic/Latino family.

Garcia (2010) further expanded on the first year experiences for community college students in particular. The researcher posited that the lack of context, through their own or previous familial experiences in a college setting, impacts their ability to acculturate and successfully navigate the complex environment. Garcia (2010) recommended that intrusive advising with a culturally sensitive support staff can help students to traverse the bureaucratic system. Hispanic/Latino students in this study relayed negatively perceived experiences and high stress in an environment that was already highly stressful due to expected academic performance. Specifically, the study suggested that a direct focus on uncovering problems with staff interactions, miscommunication, or exclusionary actions is preferred. By asking students about their perception of the environment, the students may also begin to feel more included and connected to the academic environment. The intention here would be to build connections between ethnic identity and the culture of the institution. Consequently, this could yield a shared understanding and attention toward the typical insecurities of first-year college students and decrease the potential for future emotional distress.

Emotional distress can have an impact on academic success, as demonstrated in a study of Latina students at two universities in the south (Cano & Castillo, 2010). The researchers found that an incongruity between acculturation, demonstrated behaviors, and personal values predicted an increase in self-reported emotional stress. This quantitative study suggested that student perceptions of distress may be a barrier to degree attainment, just as Hispanic/Latino cultural
norms influence intentions to persist and graduate. The level of acceptance into the higher educational community may be a factor in reducing stress for these students.

Hurtado and Ponjuan’s (2005) study supported this notion by investigating whether an unfriendly campus climate has an impact on Hispanic/Latino students’ sense of belonging. The study found that a student’s sense of belonging to the environment is linked to their persistence in their degree program. The researchers indicated that negative cultural campus climates can have detrimental effects on student adjustment to the institution, thus causing them to withdraw prematurely. Though they did not predict educational outcomes, they did identify that student perceptions of the campus climate can ultimately impact their sense of belonging to the larger educational community.

Ultimately, multiple factors impact student intention to persist. Crisp and Nora (2010) measured various sociocultural and academic predictive variables on student intention to persist and graduate. Their quantitative analysis included pre-college preparation, developmental education, and other academic factors as predictors for student success. Crisp and Nora (2010) highlighted that financial burdens and student employment workload (financial aid awarded, work hours per week, credit load) had significant influences on student persistence. Though the outcomes may be generalizable to other ethnic groups, the researchers suggested that Hispanics/Latinos face special challenges when adjusting to family, work, and school expectations based on cultural norms.

In support of this research, Flores (1992) noted that voluntary attrition from the college environment was dependent on several sociopsychological factors, which include language retention and adoption, bicultural identification, and level of social integration into the college environment. Incomes for parents and self were also significant differentiators between college
persisters and non-persisters. The successful balance between student responsibility to the family as well as the level of commitment to academic pursuits suggests that those who manage integration of multiple social contexts are more likely to persist to graduation.

These challenges are inherent in social pressures to preserve familial responsibilities as dictated by the cultural expectations within the Hispanic/Latino culture. Kao and Travis (2005) refer to these caregiving expectations as filial piety or familismo. Though their research focused on caregiving expectations for elder parents, the researchers acknowledge that Hispanics/Latinos place greater importance on taking care of the family versus focusing on the needs of the individual. Since pursuing a college degree is an individual feat, it may not be seen as a priority over familial responsibilities. Thus, cultural expectations may influence how Hispanics/Latinos view the worth of completing their degree when other responsibilities are considered to be more important.

**Synthesis.** This stream of the literature identified the real and perceived challenges that Hispanic/Latino students face in integrating into higher education. Cultural norms, familial responsibilities, perception of worth, and institutional climate impacted their intent to persist. The research suggested several factors influencing student success and college degree attainment for Hispanic/Latino students. Early research identified some internal motivations and concerns for this student population. Familial obligations and expectations have also shown to impact student perceptions and academic achievement. Hispanics/Latinos value group collective needs over individual needs, which may indicate a cultural differentiator that could be leveraged in culturally sensitive student support. This stream of literature highlights that the issue of low degree attainment has not been resolved for decades. The deficit approach to exploring student barriers to their success in the previous research does not immediately lend to useful applications. Instead,
further investigation regarding effective culturally sensitive student support interventions provided perspectives on what the institution could do to support these students.

Culturally Sensitive Student Support Interventions

In order to categorize scholarly research as investigations into cultural sensitivity, a clear definition of “cultural sensitivity” must be articulated. While the term has been used widely in a variety of research articles in fields such as healthcare, social psychology, and education, few theorists have agreed upon a unified definition across all fields. After completing a comprehensive literature review and concept analysis, Foronda (2008) proposed that cultural sensitivity includes: 1) the existence of knowledge of cultural characteristics and values, 2) the ability to demonstrate care and concern over others, 3) the willingness to understand others’ perspectives, 4) the preservation of respect and appreciation of others, 5) and the ability to tailor or adapt to the needs of others. For someone to maintain or gain cultural sensitivity, they must encounter individual or group diversity and be aware of its impact on relationships. The outcomes of cultural sensitivity are more effective communication, interventions, and satisfaction which are necessary for student support and can positively impact student persistence.

Student support and intervention strategies have been widely researched in the field. However, Vincent Tinto is the most well-known author for his research in this subject. Tinto (1993) proposed a theory of student social and academic integration which could be applied to an intervention strategy to yield higher student persistence. He proposed that quality academic advising and successful matching to student needs has a positive impact on student withdrawal rates. Tinto (1993) also posited that a student’s previous academic experiences and various individual characteristics influence student persistence and academic success. A successful advising strategy would consider those individual characteristics and background. While Tinto’s
(1993) work is fundamental in this field, it has been widely criticized for lacking consideration for cultural aspects of the individual student characteristics (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1992). In fact, Tinto’s model was tested with Hispanic/Latino college students and it was found that social and academic integration did not influence student persistence intentions (Torres & Solberg, 2001). This suggests that this population may have characteristics or tendencies that are different than those of the traditional college students studied in Tinto’s research.

In studying the effect on student persistence and individual characteristics, Castellanos and Gloria (2007) found that Hispanic/Latino students responded to culturally specific language. The researchers utilized a psychosociocultural framework in stating that student support strategies must consider the psychological needs, sociological constructs, and cultural norms that are part of a student’s ethnic identity. They proposed using the concept of *dichos* (sayings, or cultural words of wisdom) in student interactions. These concepts could be applied to any type of institutional support in any higher education setting.

Oseguera, Locks, and Vega (2008) also explored social integration and relationship development in early intervention programs with Hispanic/Latino students. A successful student retention strategy includes various characteristics, including a means to evaluate the effectiveness of the culturally sensitive student support provided. Zalaquett’s (2006) study on this topic at a large urban university suggested that aligning student support to family, highlighting accomplishments, as well as social integration, supported student success. With these findings, it is clear that student integration into a supportive culturally sensitive environment is a large part of this puzzle.
It is clear that Hispanics/Latinos can benefit from an environment where they are supported, considering their cultural norms and beliefs. For example, Dayton, Gonzalez-Vasquez, Martinez, and Plum (2004) interviewed a small group of Hispanic/Latino students to identify their preferences about their learning environment. They found that Hispanic/Latino students prefer support systems that demonstrate care and sensitivity to their feelings. They recommended building an environment where students feel supported and are integrated into their community. However, Dayton et al. (2004) also suggested that these students should remain in close proximity to their families while attending a Hispanic Serving Institution. This presents a challenge to the student since attendance at a local institution does not relieve them of the familial pressures they typically face. Since online education provides a flexible option for these students, it may help them balance school and family pressures. This concept, which may not be as readily influenced by face-to-face institutional support, needs further exploration. The concept of peer support outside of institutional interventions in support of student success is well documented.

For example, Keim, McDermott, and Gerard (2010) looked at integration of cultural values in a shared community via peer support group or cohort groups. They studied various formats of this type of support as Hispanic/Latino students transitioned from community college to baccalaureate-granting institutions. Role modeling and mentoring was found to improve degree completion in this population as evidenced in the grant-funded “Bridge Program” for future teachers. Museus (2008) also provided evidence of how culturally sensitive ethnic organizations help minority students at predominantly White institutions. Students gained a sense of belonging on campus in sharing their cultural identity, receiving support, and advocacy.

Tovar (2015) supported this notion in stating that intentional interactions between faculty, advisors, and students could impact student GPA and persistence intentions. The research results
highlighted that faculty have interactions outside of the classroom that positively impacted student GPA but did not influence student intention to persist. Some campus student support services did influence both measures, and academic counselor interventions were only useful when a student’s needs were assessed and followed by appropriate referrals to institutional resources. Though the study only found small gains, Tovar (2015) stated that these small gains were still statistically significant.

Research into successful student support systems must also include validation and review of the effectiveness of institutional strategies. Hernandez, Mobley, Coryell, Yu, and Martinez (2013) attempted to review whether a specific student engagement survey to Hispanic/Latino students at a research university was useful to that population. They found that while the engagement survey did address the student population effectively, there were some cultural considerations that may be influencing the results of that survey. Bosch and Gess-Newsome (2014) also studied the effectiveness of institutional support systems. In reviewing the Spanish-English Nurse Education Program (SENE) at two community colleges in Arizona, the researchers aimed to understand how interpersonal relationships between students and their support systems were impacted by external support. They determined that peer and family support was more effective in yielding student success than institutional intervention. The contradictory results suggest that not all intervention strategies are created equal, and that generalizations must not be made lightly.

Quintanilla, Gonzalez, Southern, and Smith (2007) took a broad approach at evaluating the effectiveness of university programs on a large scale. They identified key characteristics of institutional programs that lead to Hispanic/Latino student success. Each successful program incorporated elements of an ecological system (micrsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and
macrosystem) in which positive interaction occurs between elements from the student’s inner self through the external environment. Only those programs with effective integration of the elements experienced the highest degree attainment rates at that time.

On a micro-scale, Cerezo and McWhirter (2012) depicted the evaluation of the Latino Educational Equity Project (LEEP) via quantitative analysis of its impact on three predominately White institutions in the Northwest region of the United States. The project was designed to build community, critical consciousness of participants, cultural congruity, and an awareness of others. Though the program improved Hispanic/Latino student social adjustment to college, it did not improve all intended outcomes. Thus, not all interventions for Hispanic/Latino students were successful, further highlighting the challenge in applying a one-size-fits-all model.

Hernandez et al. (2013) recommended that any known cultural values of participants should be considered when writing normative surveys or assessments on student success. The surveys should also consider the potential subtle differences between sub-cultures within a population. To expand on this topic, Torres (2004) reviewed migration patterns and histories of various cultural subgroups while traversing higher education. They suggested there is enough variance within subgroups that student affairs professionals should pay attention to those differences, no matter how subtle. Some Hispanic/Latino subgroups, such as those from Cuba, experienced academic success and degree attainment over time while others remained low. The study suggested further investigation into the reasons for subcultural differences.

Finally, Musoba and Krichevskiy (2014) provided statistical results and survival analysis to suggest that various academic factors influence Hispanic/Latino student success at a research university in the southeastern region of the United States. The researchers only looked at the academic component and did not explore other social variables. Though limited in scope, they
found that early success in English composition and mathematics courses predicts college graduation for Hispanic/Latino students. Musoba and Krichevskiy’s (2014) closed the loop on good academic advising planning and utilization in the way that Vincent Tinto described successful academic integration into the community.

**Synthesis.** The literature in this stream suggests that culturally sensitive student institutional and external support may positively impact Hispanic/Latino student persistence and academic success. The research emphasized how important cultural context is in delivering student support for this ethnic group. Strong and supportive relationships based on respect, caring, advocacy, and reinforcement of shared cultural values provides Hispanic/Latino students with the best chance at persistence and degree attainment. Assessment of interventions and student support must accompany any institutional effort to influence student success and persistence, particularly when cultural differences exist. The research also highlights concerns about subculture generalizations as not all intervention strategies are created equal, and there may be too many factors influencing results. This means that any research into new educational delivery methods, such as online learning, may need to consider these known and unknown factors when evaluating the effectiveness of culturally sensitive student support.

**Ethnicity and Online Education**

Since research into online education and Hispanic/Latino ethnicity is still a developing field, it is not surprising that there are a limited number of research articles on this topic. Most of the research available is correlational, meaning that loose linkages have been made between students’ ethnicity, the online delivery method, and student persistence. However, just as in traditional higher education, the importance of social connections and community building is important to student success. This is evidenced by research on awareness of diversity within the
online environment and a growing interest in applying this knowledge to improve the culturally sterile environment of online learning. The quality of the interactions between students, instructors, and staff is critical to student success even in the online environment.

The majority of the early research completed on ethnicity and use of internet in the educational setting focuses on the existence of the “digital divide,” or the significant differences between acculturation of technology when comparing non-Hispanic/Latino Caucasian students with other races. Jones, Johnson-Yale, Millermaier, and Perez (2009) expanded on this topic by presenting differences in gender which may play a factor in reported comfort with the use of technology in the educational setting. However, most interestingly is the evidence that initial exposure to technology for Hispanics/Latinos is in the educational setting, suggesting that socio-economic status and access to the internet may play a factor. In addition, the researchers posited that “Hispanic college students are less likely to use the Internet to communicate with their professors than are the Black, non-Hispanic and White, non-Hispanic counterparts, by a significant margin” (Jones, Johnson-Yale, Millermaier, & Perez, 2009, p. 256). The lower perception of value of online education for Hispanic/Latino students may negatively influence initial enrollment decisions and attitudes toward persisting in college.

Ethnicity is thought to be correlated with the decision to enroll and persist at higher education institutions as well, particularly for the Hispanic/Latino population. As previously mentioned, Vega (1995) suggested that familism is a culturally specific strong identifier for Hispanics/Latinos which focuses on family values, loyalty, and the consideration of family and community needs over individual needs. These cultural traits may present challenges to students who must balance familial responsibilities with the pursuit of a college degree. Institutional
support that does not acknowledge these cultural responsibilities or focus on individual achievement versus the benefits of an education on family and community are missing the mark.

Despite culturally specific characteristics such as familism, Villarreal’s (2014) study highlighted how Hispanic/Latino college students may be inconsistent in their brand loyalty. His research suggested that purchase decisions based on sale price were more likely tied to protection of discretionary income than brand loyalty behaviors. The study’s participant group showed a strong belief in the relationship between price and quality of the product, though marketing may need to reach Hispanic/Latino students at a lower price point that is aligned with their income. Because Hispanics/Latinos demonstrate these inconsistencies in purchase-decision behavior, enrollment management and institutional student support plans for this target group necessarily needs to be more multi-faceted.

As institutions are continuously exploring new means for acquiring and retaining more students, research on the online delivery method has become a popular trend for institutional administrators. Kilburn, Kilburn, and Cates (2014) suggested that traditional higher education institutions are increasingly looking to the online educational delivery method as it allows for greater flexibility and student choice in an asynchronous model. Their research indicates that availability and access to educational resources are an important factor in student perception of the value of education. The more valuable a product or service is perceived to be, the greater chance that customers will seek to purchase and refer others to that product. For tuition-dependent institutions that need to maintain a healthy number of loyal and persisting students to remain financially viable, expanded online educational offerings appears to be a plausible option.

Smith and Ayers (2006) researched student interactions at various community colleges that used the online learning platform to see if they could understand what made students successful.
Their focus was on learning styles for various ethnic groups and maintained a deficit perspective regarding student cultural norms. They reasoned that certain cultural characteristics enabled some ethnic students to perform more successfully than others. However, they did suggest that cultural stereotyping was a dangerous perspective in distance learning platforms. This would seem apparent as there would be less opportunity to formulate a more accurate representation of individuals versus the common stereotypes found in society.

On the other hand, the online environment allows some students to take advantage of the sterile or impersonal nature of online education in cases where avoidance of cultural expectations may be sought. Coryell, Clark, and Pomerantz (2010) studied this phenomenon in their research on full-time Hispanic/Latina students enrolled in an online Spanish language enrichment course. In this situation, these students had felt online education allowed them to avoid embarrassment because of their perceived lack of mastery of the Spanish language. Since language mastery is often a component of cultural acceptance, these students were seeking to separate themselves from their ethnic community first in order to gain the skills necessary to join it later. The researchers looked at a constructivist-interpretive lens in their qualitative study to understand the narratives and perspectives of the participants who demonstrated preference for cultural separation, but their study was limited in scope to the specific environment and participants.

In contrast, Ke’s and Kwak’s (2013) study asserted that some ethnic groups had a stronger preference for traditional higher education settings as they sought a highly cultural context. They studied whether the level of participation and student perception of the online environment was influenced by their age, ethnic background, and previous educational experiences. While they posited that ethnicity was a factor in those student perceptions, it did not appear to impact the level of participation in the environment. The study fell short of exploring other influencing factors.
such as the impact of student services. It also did not explore the emotional sentiments of students experiencing the environment.

In a study regarding the perceptions of Hispanic/Latino community college students and participation in web-enhanced learning, Keim and von Destinon (2008) demonstrated that access to web-enhanced classes facilitated participation for Hispanic/Latino students. These students reported a higher sense of community while enabling greater flexibility and accessibility of the course content. The researchers acknowledged that other study skills, such as effective time-management and technical expertise may play a factor in student success. However, positive attitudes and interest in the online learning environment was significant for this population.

The level of emotional attachment within the online environment was a focus area in Rovai and Wighting’s (2005) research. They reviewed the level of student feelings of alienation in regard to the online educational community, exploring concepts such as social isolationism, powerlessness, and normlessness. The researchers measured online graduate student perceptions of alienation, utilizing Dean’s (1961) theoretical conceptual framework of alienation. The study did consider ethnicity in the environment but was unable to address the Hispanic/Latino population because of limited data. Instead, they focused on African American student perspectives in identifying a higher level of alienation to the environment than their Caucasian counterparts. Though limited in the contributions toward understanding the Hispanic/Latino perspective in the online environment, Rovai and Wighting’s (2005) research brings to light that online education also has a culturally sensitive context which is delivered through the construction and interpretation of the written language.

A study by Bradford and Wyatt (2010) attempted to understand whether there was a connection between student ethnicity and satisfaction with online education but found that there
was no strong correlation. They studied student academic level, their ethnicity, and preference for online courses but failed to resolve why results were not statistically different from one another. They implied that there must be some correlation, but suggested additional research needs to explore those concepts. There may be other factors influencing the results that they received, or there was an inherent flaw in the research design. It is possible that the measurement tool they used or the approach in analyzing secondary data could have been an issue. Further research may need to focus on exploring the validity of the tool for potential application in a practical setting.

Conway, Wladis, and Hachey (2011) also explored the relationship between online learning, ethnicity, and student success measured via student grade point average at a large Hispanic Serving Institution. In continuing to highlight the complexity of student preferences for online learning, they found that Hispanic/Latino and Black students had higher GPAs in their online courses than comparable face-to-face versions. However, the sample sizes were smaller as they did not enroll in online courses as readily as their Caucasian counterparts. There may be other factors influencing these results, however, such as the motivational drive and self-determining characteristics of students who enroll in online courses.

Johnson and Galy’s (2013) hypothesis that “Hispanic students’ academic performance is linked to their computer self-efficacy, their ability to work independently, and their ability to manage time effectively” was supported (p. 329). Though these skills may be important for any student’s success, they reiterated the need for institutional personnel to provide meaningful and culturally sensitive student support, especially in a non-traditional online setting. The use of educational assistive technology, or e-learning tools, can help students to be more successful through providing general technology enhanced study skills proven to be a more statistically significant predictor of student success. In addition, the perception of the online environment’s
value compared to a traditional campus environment has an impact on student academic performance. In other words, the institution must provide guidance to Hispanic/Latino students regarding the effectiveness of the educational delivery model as well as e-learning tools which enhance course design.

Kaupp (2012) also attempted to address whether online course enrollment impacted Hispanic/Latino student success in the California community college system. However, his results contradicted Conway et al. (2010) in that these students performed worse than their Caucasian counterparts. Though not blatantly stated, Kaupp (2012) appeared to maintain a Critical Race Theory viewpoint when highlighting the stereotypes instructors had for Hispanic/Latino online students. The study demonstrated a gap in perspective about the language mastery, use of technology, and motivational stereotypes between instructors and students. The researcher expressed concerns over potential discriminatory practices, which may also be found within the online medium, and further suggests the need for increasing awareness of cultural sensitivities in this context.

**Synthesis.** Higher educational institutions are increasingly looking to online education to support their financial viability by offering flexibility and increasing student loyalty of the institution’s brand. However, knowledge on how student experience is impacted by the online delivery method is still a developing field of research. There are conflicting results in the research exploring the relationship between ethnicity and academic success in the online educational delivery environment, which suggests an opportunity for additional study in this emerging field. Though most of the researchers in this stream of literature cautioned against generalizing the results, the research suggests that culturally sensitive communities and social integration may influence student success online. It is incumbent on student support personnel to understand the
motivations of online learners as the online medium may actually be a way for Hispanics/Latinos to escape certain social environments where racism and discrimination may be present. Regardless, most of the research indicates a strong argument for continuing to develop a better understanding about the relationship between ethnicity, cultural sensitivity, and student academic success in the online environment.

Summary

This literature review highlighted significant gaps in knowledge regarding cultural sensitivity and the higher educational experience while attempting to present a balance of perspectives evident in the research. Traditional higher education has had the advantage of a longer history compared to online education; however, this does not legitimize the lack of progress it has made to improve degree attainment for Hispanics/Latinos. Critical Race Theorists believe that awareness of cultural perspectives, language, and norms are an important part in understanding how to advance the potential in individuals (Delgado, Stefancic, & Liendo, 2012). It is equally as important to understand how research can change the field of higher education, including the online educational models, to meet the needs of the Hispanic/Latino population.

The limited research regarding cultural sensitivity and student support intervention in the online environment demonstrates that this is an emerging area for research. The majority of the articles written on this subject focus on various characteristics of students within the traditional educational system, such as previous academic experience, ability to integrate into the culture, and internal motivations for pursuing a degree. However, this research is often viewed from a cultural deficit perspective. In other words, the research views which cultural characteristics are lacking in comparison to the characteristics of the predominantly Caucasian dominant culture. Research which focuses on a cultural group’s strengths, by acknowledging cherished culturally specific
qualities and norms, may bring to light new program designs for student support. The goals for these student support programs would yield more effective interactions and positive results in student retention and graduation metrics.

Hispanics/Latinos face very real challenges in navigating the higher education space, whether at traditional institutions or in the online environment. This is evidenced by the continued deficits in degree attainment rates for this population over various decades (Fiebig, Braid, Ross, Tom, & Prinzo, 2010). Some researchers argue that the cultural characteristics of this population are a primary factor inhibiting Hispanics/Latinos from successfully completing degrees. Others suggest that the cultural norms and strengths can be used to improve degree attainment (Yosso, 2005). However, there are likely significant confounding factors that impact Hispanic/Latino student success, making single solution recommendations difficult. Researchers must therefore be cautious in generalizing results, especially when considering various subcultures within the Hispanic/Latino ethnic group.

The literature suggests that culturally sensitive student support interventions may help some students overcome various challenges in navigating their collegiate experiences. Some of these interventions may be in the form of improved interactions between faculty and students, as well as coordinated efforts by student support staff. There is a limited understanding of what types of activities have the greatest impact to student success in the online environment. Though current research speculates that there are loose connections between ethnicity and the online model, there are conflicting perspectives on whether online learning benefits the Hispanic/Latino student population. More research on practical applications must be conducted in order to address this gap in knowledge. In the meantime, the literature assumes that strong and supportive institutional and external relationships that are culturally sensitive to the Hispanic/Latino population may
provide the best opportunity to make an impact on degree attainment levels. This in turn, may positively impact the socioeconomic status of this population and economy overall.

Furthermore, the application of culturally-accepted language, social integration and community involvement practices will be necessary in the online education mode. The incorporation of Hispanic/Latino values and personal identity systems will have to be considered in developing culturally sensitive interventions as well. This research study closes the gap in knowledge regarding how online Hispanic/Latino students perceive cultural sensitivity in the interactions with others in their online educational environment. A focus on the student’s evaluation of student support personnel (including faculty, academic advising staff, and others in the online community) regarding cultural sensitivity in their delivered interactions is of importance in this research. The findings augment the previous knowledge in this field which, though extensive, has failed to focus on the needs of this group in an online learning environment. It is the responsibility of scholar-practitioners, institutional policy makers, and higher education administrators to apply knowledge from scholarly research to their institutions. Since online education is an opportunity to offer greater flexibility for Hispanic/Latino students who have cultural and familial responsibilities, the time has come to apply knowledge about cultural sensitivity at traditional institutions in the emerging online education medium.

Chapter Three: Research Design

Despite their significant increases in population in the United States and number of prospective post-secondary students, Hispanic/Latino students continue to struggle to achieve traditional college degrees compared to other ethnic counterparts (Passel & Cohn, 2008; Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). Current research on this ethnic group provides conflicting insight regarding the correlation of ethnicity and online post-secondary student success,
though institutional misalignment with culturally specific norms may play a factor (Bradford & Wyatt, 2010; Conway, Wladis, & Hachey, 2011; Fiebig, Braid, Ross, Tom, & Prinzo, 2010; Kaupp, 2012; Rovai & Wighting, 2005). Thus, the purpose of this doctoral thesis was to explore the lived experiences of a group of Hispanic/Latino students regarding the existence of cultural sensitivity while enrolled in undergraduate or graduate program at an online university in New England. The overall research question guiding this inquiry was “What are the perspectives of Hispanic/Latino students enrolled in an online undergraduate or graduate degree program regarding cultural sensitivity in their interactions with student support services (admission, advising, and faculty) at a private university in New England?” Research questions drive the research approach (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Conclusions and implications from the analysis suggest that this institution must address inconsistencies in the application of student support interventions regarding cultural sensitivity toward the Hispanic/Latino culture.

**Research Design**

Qualitative research is designed “to answer the *whys* and *hows* of human behavior, opinion, and experience – information that is difficult to obtain through more quantitatively-oriented methods of data collection” (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2012). This type of research is useful for scholar-practitioners who seek to understand actions, behavior, or circumstances surrounding a phenomenon via an established and well-researched theoretical framework. Generally, though two qualitative research projects are never exactly alike, there are common threads and philosophical approaches that unite this type of research methodology. Epistemologically, qualitative research generally seeks to observe and describe the world in an interpretative sense which lends to a description of sense-making by individuals who experience life events (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).
Qualitative research is inductive in the sense that data collection and analysis drive the findings and conclusions of a research study. As such, the research generally does not begin with testing a hypothesis or proving a theorem as often found in quantitative research. The study’s research question dictates the approach, and answers to open-ended interview questions drive the conclusions. Qualitative research may also include observations of behaviors within the research setting or collection and analysis of artifacts to provide richer descriptions of context for the study. This type of research can also be introspective, considering the role and perspective of the researcher in the context of the study, participants, analysis, and conclusions.

Practiced evaluators and creators of research consider the internal perspective of the researcher when reviewing studies. This perspective is comprised of a theoretical framework for the research and a paradigm of inquiry, which is often aligned to the facilitator’s internal lens and research interest tendencies. Pontorotto (2005) suggested that paradigms impact all research components of a study and can be further identified via the study’s aim, means of generating knowledge, the unit of analysis chosen, and the role of the researcher in the study. There are three most common paradigms that influence research design: positivist/post-positivist, critical-ideological, and constructivist-interpretivist design.

Knowledge, in the constructivist viewpoint, is inherently subjective. Butin (2010) explained that the findings of research studies are socially constructed by the participant(s) being studied. That is, the meaning the participant generated is not necessarily generalizable to a wider population. Researchers of this type of paradigm must trust that the interpretations of the participant’s reality are being relayed completely. Further, the interpretation of what is being relayed is dependent on the values held by the researcher and participants. This type of research attempts to maintain some distance from the participants while exploring their value system in-
depth. According to Pontorotto (2005), the “distinguishing characteristic of constructivism is the centrality of the interaction between the investigator and the object of investigation” (p. 129). Like the positivist/post-positivist approach, the researcher remains independent and analyzes the participant’s act of meaning-making about the topic being researched.

The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm takes a reflective approach to research in seeking multiple understandings or perspectives in the findings. Where a positivist paradigm is value-free, the constructivist view considers the values of the participants being studied. Pontorotto (2005) confirmed this by indicating that a constructivist viewpoint is generated out of the need to identify the human element in natural interactions. The author further identified the roots of this paradigm to be Kant’s critique of rational inquiry in the late 19th century, and recited Dilthey, who helped set the stage for study of “human lived experiences” (p. 129).

In the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, the object of the research is to ensure the participant’s voices are heard through the research. The research aims to provide greater understanding of the social constructions of the human beings being described in the study. Butin (2010) postulated that a description of meaning is the end goal, where the patterns of sense-making are identified. The constructivist researcher does not necessarily take further action as a result of identifying this meaning. The goal is to simply describe and represent the participants’ voices.

In this research on Hispanic/Latino online student support, a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm focused the study on identifying these students’ value system as they pursue an online college education. The study included interviews with various Hispanic/Latino online students as they considered how culturally sensitive interactions may impact their achievement and success. Insights were generated by means of collecting participants’ descriptions of how student support
personnel has influenced their perceptions of their environment, and any sense of bias toward their cultural norms, behaviors, and values. The knowledge gained was highly contextual to participants’ history, cultural practices, subcultural characteristics, and previous academic experiences.

This research approach has benefits because it allows for the voice of the individual participants to be heard more clearly compared to the positivist/post-positivist approach. Furthermore, the chosen paradigm aligns more readily to the research design in that value-system patterns can be identified from multiple points of data. A limitation, however, could be the potential lack of ability to influence direct change for the students in the study. However, findings and conclusions could influence change regarding best practices in supporting all students in this ethnic group and potentially reducing implicit bias against the Hispanic/Latinos via cultural sensitivity training.

**Research Tradition**

In order to understand the lived experiences of the selected research participants, an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research approach was determined to be the most appropriate design as it is “committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 1). IPA aims to provide insights from an in-depth exploration of the participants’ lived experiences and focuses on personal meaning-making in a particular context. For this research, the context was cultural sensitivity in an online environment with a focus on interpreting how this group perceived their interactions within it. As a member of this ethnic group, it was possible to provide a first-person perspective on the third person experience by being embedded in intersubjective inquiry and analysis.
IPA allows the researcher to share in the perspectives of the participants while conducting the study.

**Philosophical Underpinnings and Overview**

IPA retains its philosophical underpinnings as a modification of the traditional phenomenological approach, championed by Husserl in the early 20th century, in studying the essence of human experiences. Phenomenology aimed to understand how participants intentionally became conscious of the meaning of their experiences. Husserl was interested in exploring how humans depict their own life experiences related to a phenomenon, thus providing insight into how others might experience a similar phenomenon (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In order to make sense of the conscious sense-making, Husserl proposed that the researcher “bracket” or set aside their own perceived world in order to describe those of the participants, also known as eidetic reduction.

Heidegger, as cited in Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) took a different approach to Husserl’s phenomenological stance by exploring the state of consciousness as the only true means of interpreting human existence. Heidegger acknowledged that an individual’s existence is dependent on the existence of the world around himself or herself. Thus, one cannot excise the relationship between self and the context for his/her existence in phenomenological research (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). An interpretation of self in relation to others is essential to this stance within the research approach.

Other philosophers also approached the sense of self within context of the world around, as an acknowledgement of that relationship. For example, Merleau-Ponty conceded that one cannot experience the exact experiences of another, while Sartre explored the changing context of existence depending on the context and environment of the individual and the perception of
becoming aware of self (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The concepts contributed by Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre regarding exploration of human experience and the notion of “self” became part of the philosophical underpinning for interpretative phenomenological research. Ultimately, this alternative to traditional phenomenology was further developed.

Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) explained that IPA retains the theoretical foundation behind interpretation of meaning, or hermeneutics. The concept of hermeneutics was described by Heidegger in the study of hidden meaning in phenomenology. He posited that preconceptions of meaning were to be found in the interpretations of the perceiver. Gadamer, as cited in Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), expanded on Heidegger’s perspective in describing the act of projecting meaning onto the initial interpretation of text, as well as in the replacement of preconceived notions about the meaning derived from the understanding of text. Gadamer further cautioned that true meaning of the author of a text cannot be accurately recreated in the interpretation of sense-making. IPA studies aim to interpret participant experience and meaning.

Smith (1996), as cited in Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), proposed that research should include a qualitative experiential approach to explore the hermeneutics of participant experiences along with traditional experimental research. In this seminal article, Smith highlighted the importance of the patient’s perspective of a chronic illness in health psychology research. Investigating and interpreting the perspective of the individual enables the researcher to express this sense-making in terms of the participant from an idiographic and inductive standpoint. This yields multiple levels of interpretation of the participants’ experiences in context of a phenomenon. The researcher’s role is to capture the meaning-making of the participant as well as interpret that meaning in a double hermeneutic position.
The double hermeneutic position is not unique to IPA but becomes an important quality of this qualitative research method when exploring the perspective of the participant. IPA aims to interpret what the participants are stating while making sense of the participants’ perspectives from their viewpoint. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) explained that “successful IPA research combines both stances – it is empathic and questioning… attempting to understand, both in the sense of ‘trying to see what it is like for someone’ and in the sense of ‘analysing, illuminating, and making sense of something’” (p. 36).

IPA’s inductive approach is idiographic, meaning it focuses on the personal and individual experiences of the participants. Likewise, traditional phenomenology focuses on the individual descriptions of experience itself in capturing its essence and characteristics. Moustakas (1994), who is the most often cited phenomenologist, posited that this type of research should focus on a constructivist approach toward highlighting the participants’ experiences about an event. The researcher is immersed in the participants’ reflection of the phenomenon, but does not seek to interpret meaning from those viewpoints. However, IPA integrates hermeneutics with the descriptive quality of phenomenology to make sense of how those descriptions are created by the individual (van Manen, 1990).

Similarly, narrative research also focuses on meaning-making from the participant perspective but does so in the analysis of the telling of the individual’s story itself. Trahar (2009) provided a guide to narrative research through an autoethnographic approach which allows the researcher to include his or her own personal accounts into the narrative description. Narrative inquiry includes rich descriptions, often focused on intercultural issues and the exposure of shared meaning among participants. Moreover, that approach emphasizes
participants’ voices, which aims to identify how they construct their life story and not the researcher’s interpretation of their sense-making.

Alternatively, case study methodology seeks to explore the processes and complexity of human behaviors that are evident in an integrated bounded system (time or place). Merriam (1998), as cited in Yazan (2015), explained that this approach is aligned to a theoretical framework and examines the phenomenon to clarify a specific issue. The goal of the case study approach is to fully describe the issue by collecting data from as many sources as possible. Other research methodologists explained the case study approach in terms of being either a strictly positivist paradigm, such as Yin (2002), or a constructivist paradigm, such as Stake (1995). Contrary to an IPA, the case study explores a specific and complex system to holistically describe “how” and “why” something is occurring in the context of a defined setting (Baxter & Jack, 2008). IPA may ask similar questions, but focuses on interpreting individual sense-making of life experiences. The present study on Hispanic/Latino online university students sought to interpret how they make sense of their environment and experiences. Thus, the IPA research methodology was the best approach for this particular study.

**Research Setting and Participants**

This research study was conducted at a private non-profit university in New England. The institution was founded more than eighty-five years ago as a traditional technical school, focusing on select business-related fields. The traditional campus-based institution expanded operations into online distance learning programs in the early 1990s and has faced double-digit enrollment growth since then. The institution continues to yield regional recognition for its quality programs. It has begun to expand to national and international markets, seeking to transform the lives of students and communities through affordable and accessible education.
Most recently, the institution launched a strategic initiative to understand the educational and student support needs of a growing Hispanic/Latino population which has aligned with the focus of this research study.

Nine participants for this study were selected from the nearly two-thousand seven hundred self-identified Hispanic/Latino students enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate online program at a private non-profit institution in the New England region of the United States. Purposeful random sampling was applied based on a set of criteria about the participant group. This sampling method was selected due to the limited number of students expected to respond to the request to participate and the expected difficulty in acquiring a sufficient number of participants that met the selected criteria. The criteria for selection included 1) self-identification as a Hispanic/Latino online student, 2) course enrollment and completion of at least two consecutive terms in an online program at the selected institution within the last three academic terms, 3) initial enrollment within the last academic year, meaning a newly enrolled student experiencing the first academic year at the institution, and 4) having at least two electronic or telephonic communications with institutional support staff (admission, advising, or financial aid) within the last three academic terms.

The overall average age of incoming students across all online programs at this institution is between 32-33 years old, though a very small percentage of the overall active student population of almost 60,000 is classified as Hispanic/Latino. Because the institution does not require new students to identify their ethnicity upon application, the Hispanic/Latino enrolled student population may in fact be higher than the 2.8% reported. As such, findings and conclusions from this study may be limited in the ability to generalize to all Hispanic/Latino students enrolled at this institution or other online post-secondary institutions. In addition, the
small sample size selected for this research project was intended to yield depth in data collection in alignment to the interpretative phenomenological analysis method. Implications and conclusions may only be applicable to this study’s research setting.

**Recruitment and Access**

Access to the research site was gained as a result of employment at the institution and approval to conduct research through review by Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the IRB committee at the research site. Research participants were recruited from a sampling of the Hispanic/Latino student population that met the criteria listed above. Every effort was made to protect the identities of the participants through the use of pseudonyms, privacy in data collection methods, and the separation of data collected on the participants from institutional access.

In alignment with Northeastern University’s protection of human subject policies, the Belmont Report and Title 45 Code of Federal Regulations Part 46, this research was conducted in compliance with best practices for ethical conduct of research, including an independent review of the research proposal prior to data collection by Northeastern University and the research site. In addition, participants provided informed consent prior to data collection and were granted the opportunity to review all data collected from semi-structured interviews as well as the analysis of their contributions to the research. Member-checking enabled research participants to correct any inaccuracies in the data collection and analysis. This research was conducted under the guidance of a Northeastern University faculty member to ensure the investigation was conducted under the highest ethical standards. The participant recruitment email and research consent form are provided in the Appendix A and Appendix B, respectively.
Data Collection

The overall research plan for an IPA study included identifying a sample of a pertinent participant group and conducting semi-structured interviews in order to collect thematic data. IPA studies are typically conducted with small, homogenous, and purposive sample sizes and individual case-by-case analyses of individual interview transcripts (Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA is idiographic by design, thus the smaller sample size allows for more in-depth and detailed exploration of each individual case. Turpin, Barley, Beail, Scaife, Slade, Smith, and Walsh (1997) suggested that an appropriate sample size would be between six and eight participants in order to collect rich and meaningful data. This study exceeded that recommended sample size.

Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) identified that semi-structured, one-on-one interviews is the most popular method to collect rich and detailed accounts from the participants in an IPA study, though focus groups and artifact collection may also be employed. Interviewing skills of the facilitator must be developed, which allows for open-ended questioning and a natural flow of conversation to capture participant viewpoints. Smith and Osborn (2008) suggested creating an interview schedule that allows the researcher to cover specific topics throughout the interview, along with prompts which help the facilitator to dig deeper into specific topic areas (Appendix C). Because the conversation during an interview can become complex and nuanced, IPA researchers typically function as a catalyst during the discussion and therefore include an audio recording of the interview to allow for verbatim transcription at a later time (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Recorded audio was then reviewed to create written transcripts for analysis of the text.

Data Storage

All data collected during the research process was secured in a password protected cloud storage location under the researcher’s Northeastern University’s Google Drive account. Draft
versions of the data, analysis and reports were saved on the researcher’s personal laptop computer but were immediately deleted upon saving to the Google Drive. Access to the data was limited to the researcher and his faculty advisor during the research process. Final research insights were shared with the key leaders at the research site who have a vested interest in the results. Confidentiality of the research participants’ personal information was strictly enforced throughout the study, in alignment to Northeastern University’s and the research site’s IRB requirements.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the data collection steps in this type of inquiry, analysis of case-by-case transcripts is conducted via an iterative process of thematic coding (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The researcher reviewed the data several times whilst taking notes of observations and insights about the participants’ and researcher’s sense-making. Generally, facilitators spend a significant amount of time immersed in the data, moving between emic and etic perspectives regarding the participants’ and researcher’s perspectives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). As a flexible research methodology, analysis of IPA data may include structured coding, but typically uses emerging thematic coding based on the study’s design as was the case in this study (Gibbs, 2007; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). Member-checking validation is not typical for interpretative studies, though triangulation may yield greater study plausibility (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Participants in this research study were allowed to react to research findings and analysis, correcting any inaccuracies in their previous statements.

During the first stage of analysis, the researcher began by highlighting anything that was interesting or significant in the participants’ transcripts. Associations, connections, and interpretations began to emerge from the review of the data which led to initial themes (Smith,
Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). The second phase included an analysis of connections between noted emerged themes or structured codes, which were clustered into superordinate ideas and then into a master list or table of major and minor themes (see Appendix D). This master list of themes informed the analysis of additional participant cases as a search for shared ideas commenced (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). The researcher selected master themes based on the prevalence of the concept throughout the participant interviews, depth of the theme context, and the importance of a topic to the participants’ or researcher’s interpretation of meaning-making.

**Presentation of Findings**

After master themes were compiled and organized in a way that adequately described the participants’ viewpoints and researcher’s interpretation, a written report was drafted which reflected the narrative account of the group. Smith, Jarman, and Osborn (1999) posited that there is no division between writing the final report and analyzing the findings. Typically, new interpretations are gathered during the writing of the final report and the researcher must be open to responding and documenting these new insights. Thus, “qualitative reports have considerable flexibility in the relationship between results and discussion. Sometimes the themes are presented together in one analysis section while a separate section is devoted to exploring their implications in relation to the existing literature” (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999, p. 227).

During the presentation of the findings, each theme was described using specific examples from the transcripts (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The report included a description of the researcher’s interpretation of the findings during the process of analysis. This commentary about the research was critical as it engaged higher levels of interpretation aligned with the research methodological approach (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Linking the emergent themes, researcher interpretation, and discussion to the existing literature is a common approach (Smith
& Osborn, 2008). Once the themes, narrative accounts, and links were included, a reflection of the research as well as comments on implications and limitations of the study were provided. Analysis and findings for this research project are included in chapters four and five.

**Trustworthiness**

In order to maintain trustworthiness and validity of the study, three procedures were employed to demonstrate credibility in the methodology, dependability in findings, and assurance of minimal researcher bias which would negatively affect the study. First, member-checking was applied during the course of the data collection and analysis process. This involved providing participants with interpretations of interview transcriptions and analysis of findings. Participants were granted the opportunity to correct inaccuracies or suggest alternative interpretations of the findings. In addition, the researcher employed triangulation via a faculty advisor and two other doctorate level educators in reviewing the research analysis and findings. These procedures aimed to reduce concerns about researcher bias.

As an IPA study, the researcher is expected to provide an interpretation of the meaning-making of the participants as well as a self-reflection of the interpretation throughout the process. As such, reflexive journaling was maintained during the data collection and analysis process. This process included self-reflections on any reactions, tendencies, and biases toward participant commentary. Since the researcher has a tendency to be influenced by Critical Race Theory, special self-reflective notes were kept regarding any feelings of bias toward or against any particular group. These findings were also included as potential biases during the research study and are included in the previous chapters.
Limitations

This research and its findings were constrained by the small sample size, selection of research methodology, and limited applicability to other ethnic groups or research sites. In addition, the research only focused on the student perspective and did not review the faculty nor staff insights into their interactions with students. Interviews were conducted shortly following scheduling with the interviewees. Participant selection was not limited by the degree level the students were enrolled in or any other criteria other than previously listed. As such, a larger number of female participants and students enrolled in a graduate program participated in the study, though every effort was made to recruit participants equally. Applicability of the research findings may not be reproducible, but should serve as a guide for future research on the lived experiences of Hispanic/Latino students at this institution or enrolled in other online programs. The following chapter provides the findings and conclusions based on the IPA analytical approach.

Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to investigate how a group of online Hispanic/Latino post-secondary students perceive the existence of cultural sensitivity in student support interactions at a private university in New England. The results of the analysis yielded three main themes: 1) Hispanic/Latino participants experience conflict in acculturation and the preservation of cultural identity, 2) the online environment can be a “great equalizer” in reducing the potential for this conflict within higher education, and 3) culturally relevant values motivate Hispanics/Latinos to succeed in higher education. Hispanic/Latino culturally accepted practices are sought by this participant group, though they are inconsistently applied in student support interventions at this institution. Participants shared a common interest in integrating cultural relevancy into the online
educational experience to support academic and social integration. This research also uncovered that these Hispanic/Latino participants see the online educational mode as a way to reduce social acculturation challenges and potentially resolve issues in their struggle with cultural identification. This discovery may influence how institutions approach intervention strategies with this population.

Several supporting themes describe Hispanic/Latino participants’ perspectives on their online educational environment in relation to the identified main themes. Supporting themes in regard to conflict in acculturation and preservation of cultural identity included the existence of: 1) participants’ heightened awareness of cultural insensitivity in society, 2) participants’ use of cultural disassociation as a coping mechanism for dealing with insensitivity, and 3) participants’ struggle to preserve cultural identity. Supporting themes which further described the online environment as a “great equalizer” included: 1) participants’ perspective about navigating a sterile online environment, 2) participants’ need to seek validating support from the institution, and 3) participants’ placing high value on cultural exploration. Supporting themes, which aligned with the main theme of culturally relevant values as motivators, included: 1) participants’ greater purpose in the pursuit of education, and 2) the value of culturally accepted language in inspiring self and others. Supporting themes guided an in-depth explanation of the findings described in the main themes. The following chapter explores each of these main themes and associated supporting themes, highlighting relevant statements provided by the participants during the interview process. This chapter also includes interpretations of the participants’ sense-making regarding cultural sensitivity throughout their educational journey experiences, specifically while enrolled in their online undergraduate or graduate program.
Hispanic/Latino Conflict in Acculturation and Preservation of Cultural Identity

“Si fueris Rōmae, Rōmānō vīvitō mōre; si fueris alibī, vīvitō sīcut ibī” (“if you should be in Rome, live in the Roman manner; if you should be elsewhere, live as they do there”). This phrase, attributed to St. Ambrose the Bishop of Milan, accurately portrays the expectation placed on these participants by a society built on more dominant White cultural norms. The expectation of “acculturation” includes the adoption of new cultural norms and practices regardless of whether the individual’s own cultural norms are in conflict with those of the dominant group.

Hispanic/Latino participants in this study shared their internal conflict as they attempted to preserve Hispanic/Latino cultural practices while adopting White cultural norms in their daily lives. Participants expressed a high value toward their involvement in the educational environment, a place where Hispanics/Latinos are still in the minority. However, they also acknowledged the strong demands of culturally relevant expectations, such as family needs and the preservation of cultural traditions. This creates a discord between the need to maintain cultural values as well as practice cultural traditions, and the need to adapt to the dominant culture. As they struggle to maintain multiple conflicting expectations, they expressed experiencing cultural insensitivity and misunderstanding from others. In some cases, this may have led to emotional distress.

Participants shared a common strategy to cope with the emotional stress of experiencing cultural insensitivity in their environment by disassociating with their own cultural identity. Participants provided examples of experiencing micro-aggressions and overt racist comments in their experiences outside of their current online educational setting. In some cases, participants even expressed avoidance of identifying as Hispanic/Latino as a way to evade negative cultural prejudice. This aligns with Cano and Castillo’s (2010) study which found a link between self-reported emotional stress and acculturation challenges when values, norms, and practices differ.
between distinct cultural groups. While participants expressed interest in preserving cultural norms and teaching these values to others, they struggled to maintain cultural expectations in an environment in which these norms are foreign. For example, participants shared how the Spanish language may or may not have impacted their childhood development depending on the level of acculturation their families had in their community.

This study’s participants had a wide range of Spanish language usage as a cultural norm, from expressing the importance of passing on this practice to future generations to the complete absence of speaking Spanish in their daily lives. Some even shared that the diminishing use of the Spanish language was important in order to acculturate into a larger predominantly White culture in society. Throughout this study, participants highlighted the importance of family and family needs (familism) as a demand of their Hispanic/Latino cultural heritage and as a source of inspiration and support. Participants demonstrated evidence of cultural adaptation as they sought harmony in their new educational environment. They understand that their educational environment is another space to interact with others, just as it is outside of that setting, and are aware that their cultural norms influence the way others perceive them. Thus, they navigate the online educational environment, highlighting or hiding cultural norms as they interact with others. This is a way of adapting in order to maximize the acceptance by others within the community.

**Heightened Awareness of Cultural Insensitivity.** All of the participants expressed an awareness of a negative reaction they have experienced because of their appearance, cultural norms, and perspective. Participants described facing years of cultural insensitivity, from childhood educational experiences to adulthood and career pursuits. They demonstrated an awareness of the negative perceptions of others, which often emerged as cultural assumptions surrounding a lack of motivation or abilities. Many of these stereotypes were assumed to be
precipitated by participants’ physical appearances. When asked whether participants had experienced cultural insensitivity in any social context, most expressed the awareness of micro-aggressions. In some cases, overt racism was present in their interactions at various educational institutions as a result of their appearance.

“Because of my skin color...one of the teachers specifically said I wasn’t gonna pass her class and I guess she didn’t realize that I was also Hispanic.”

“Assuming every Hispanic that comes to class is not legal or that, or that all Black girls or Black women are angry or you have a certain type of look or just you know-stereotyping them.”

In at least one case, the participant did not wish to elaborate further on the level of negative reactions perceived to be generated from others in a social context based on appearance. This suggests that physical appearance may have had an impact on the way others reacted to the individual, including cultural stereotyping.

“I experienced things that if perhaps somebody didn’t know what I looked like it would have been different.”

Participants also expressed awareness of cultural insensitivity as a result of the way they utilized the English language, spoke another language, or how they otherwise communicated with others in their environment.

“(I’m) trying to teach (my) kids to be welcoming, to understand (others) may speak differently than you... not to look at somebody (who) might have an accent...that doesn’t mean they’re uneducated, they’re just from another country.”

Other participants expressed witnessing cultural assumptions being made by others because participants (or a relative of theirs) have Spanish-sounding names. They expressed that their name
alone may create stereotyping tendencies by who identify with a dominant White cultural group, impacting how participants have been treated. In one case, the participant and her fiancé are both Hispanic and have Hispanic names, leading to an assumption about their ability to speak Spanish. In general, participants explained that cultural assumptions made about them as a result of their Hispanic/Latino sounding names may lead to them being treated differently than others.

“I know my fiancé has had people come over and automatically speak Spanish to him and he’s like I’m sorry, I grew up in Delaware, I don’t speak Spanish.”

“Some people might feel offended or something like different, ya know, less appreciated if they, if something they do might affect the way they do things in their cultures and stuff like that.”

Participants described these experiences as the norm, as if they have accepted that this is the way the world works around them. Participants perceive that cultural assumptions made by others about them may serve to justify prejudice in the context of a social environment. Though they acknowledge the existence of cultural insensitivity, they did not approve or condone these behaviors in others. Instead, they learned to manage their own reactions to these behaviors in the form of a shared coping mechanism. Many participants shared the need to separate themselves, in some part, from their cultural heritage and norms.

**Cultural Disassociation as a Coping Mechanism.** Cultural disassociation is a term most often used in social psychology to describe the sense of separating oneself from social participation as a result of traumatic experiences in the context of cultural discourse (Lewis-Fernandez, Martinez-Taboas, Sar, Patel, & Boatin, 2007). For example, an individual may change their physical appearance or hide their cultural practices in order to avoid disclosing their ethnic background to others. These actions allow the individual to avoid any negative responses during
their social interactions with others who may have a different cultural background. The extent of the cultural disassociation in these cases is dependent on the level of cultural insensitivity experienced by the participants in their daily lives. This is particularly evident for participants who identified themselves as having mixed ethnicities (e.g. Black-Hispanic, Hispanic-Japanese, etc.) and those who have strong cultural influencers (e.g. relatives or communities) surrounding them. When asked about how participants identify themselves, some illustrated challenges with identifying with a single culture. They also described the resulting impact when they attempted to explain who they are to others because of their appearance, use of Spanish language, accent, or name.

“I used to say I’m Mexican when I lived in Texas. Um, coming over here, I’m not sure if it’s the area or maybe it’s my fiancé, we’ve been together for about two years, he’s always identified himself as American and I think that that’s really grown on to me as well. He comes from a very strong military family. And they’re Hispanic but he likes to say when people ask him, ‘I’m American.’ So, because of him, I’ve started incorporating the American part of it, I say I’m Mexican-American and every once in a while, I’ll say I’m Hispanic.”

“It happens when people don’t identify or people don’t accept the part of me being Hispanic, like people will make Hispanic jokes all the time and I would not, it would go over my head, partly I just didn’t care, I mean I didn’t identify with it so I just detach from it completely.”

“It was just more hurtful that, like, I just wasn’t accepted. I felt rejected from each side I felt like at that point, who was my identity? Was I Black, was I Spanish? How did the people perceive me? I was just kinda like ‘whoa’ on who I was…That’s like when I decided I was
just gonna be black. Like my dad might be Hispanic, I might be Hispanic, like my last name, when people ask for my last name, I’m not going to say it in a Spanish accent.”

For some participants, this means making a personal decision to change the focus of the discussion, redirecting the conversation away from cultural identification and towards generic topics which may discourage the scrutiny and judgment often expressed by others:

“Because there are times that I do not accept myself for who I am and that’s because friends tell me, ‘you’re causing it, you’re causing things.’ I’m like, ‘why do you say that?’ ‘No one knows about you’ ‘Why does anyone need to know about me? What happens in my home is my business, ya know’…So (I) learned how to separate personal and professional. No one at work knows about my personal life and no one in my personal life knows about my professional life unless I talk about it but I always make sure no one talks that.”

“I think it goes back to people asking about where I’m from, about what my heritage is and stuff, I think sometimes I get the feeling that that’s what people want to hear. Oh ya know, ‘where’re you from or where’s your family from?’ and like ‘yeah, I was the first one to graduate from college and now my brother’s doing it’ and all this other stuff [cultural background], it doesn’t make so much of a difference”

**Struggle to Preserve Cultural Identity.** Just as participants face judgment as a result of their cultural heritage and ethnicity, they shared a strong desire to preserve their cultural identity as it plays an important role in their lives. Participants with mixed cultural identities, including those who also identify as acculturating into the dominant White culture, articulated the complexity of associating with a singular cultural identity. When asked how their culture influences their daily lives, they expressed a strong desire to celebrate all parts of their cultural
identity and shared pride in respectfully representing the Hispanic/Latino cultural elements of their persona to others.

“Anyone asks me, I always say I’m Puerto Rican... That’s it, I wave it loud and strong and people are always like, ‘you’re Latina?’ Yes, I am.”

“I identify myself Puerto Rican first... (though) I did travel to Argentina when I was a kid, to see my culture, my mother made sure that we learned both cultures.”

“(We) appreciate both of our backgrounds, my father is Italian, being able to make sure to still pay attention to our [Hispanic/Latino] heritage even though it was being taught to us not to talk about it much in that time period.”

“I try to keep them, I try to mix up both of them [cultural identities], making some food, trying to keep some of the culture from Venezuela still up in there. It’s not easy, it’s not easy because you have to kinda incorporate both of them, everything from here to there and try to make it work for everybody.”

For some, the search for their cultural identity also has served to set the context in explaining their perspectives and sharing their ideas with others.

“So, I think just trying to discover who I am and where my family’s from, my ancestors, always made me kinda feel like I have a story to tell or I wanna tell, trying to explain myself to the world or, ya know, just try to be, try to expose myself to the world where sometime’s it’s good to be mixed or to be this multicultural person- there’s always like a back and forth.”

One of the ways in which participants aim to preserve and share their culture with others is through the celebration of traditions. When asked about their cultural norms, participants often used descriptions of holiday events, celebrations, and other ways to acknowledge their rich cultural
history. These events were cultural connections, bridges to their identity formation and reinforcement of cultural values.

“We still hold our traditions at holidays.”

“My great aunt actually did the same thing [research family history] for my family. She went back to the 1500s—yes, and one of my ancestors was one of the soldiers on, I think, the second boat from Spain, that they came to New Mexico and that my family has been in New Mexico for centuries. Some left, and their last names changed, and mine kind of stayed here. So my aunt actually put a big event together this year. So the last name of the person on the boat was actually (name), and she went and found his descendants and where his lineage went over the last couple centuries and got in contact with a bunch of them and invited a bunch of them to a big event for like a week-long thing.”

“Something that I always, I love doing this, is Three Kings Day, I’m a huge fan of it, I just think the meaning behind it and like that was something that we held onto, that part of the culture when all of the family was in New Hampshire...we would do the leaving the presents on the 6th of January, the night before. That, I think just the story behind it with the presence of the Three Kings, that’s really nice to have that. And I still do it to this day so that practice is still being done.”

“I still celebrate mother’s day twice a year where one in America, one in Panama. Different holidays such as they’ll have different major celebrations they’ll have. We’ll have different celebrations with my mom’s side of family that’s in America.”

The preservation of one’s cultural heritage is also found in the method of communicating cultural values. The Hispanic/Latino culture is rich in history and tradition. However, the use of the Spanish language in particular, has strongly associated with Hispanic/Latino cultural alignment.
In a study by Taylor, Lopez, Martinez, and Velasco (2012), Hispanics/Latinos identified that maintaining the use of the Spanish language was very important for future generations of Hispanics/Latinos living in the United States. This study also demonstrated that Hispanics/Latinos who identify with Spanish language usage see themselves as being very different than a “typical American,” or the dominant White cultural group. Though the present research study’s semi-structured interview design did not specifically target the topic of language, a significant number of participants volunteered the notion that Spanish is an important influence in their lives.

“My first language of course, is Spanish.”

“Even in a sentence you might start it with English but throw in some Spanish words to mix and then turn back to English.”

“It’s just kind of the way it is when you grow up in a border town. You can’t swing a dead cat without hitting somebody who speaks Spanish and such.”

“My mother doesn’t speak English very well, so my kids and her, they speak in Spanish the whole time, and so our household is bilingual... (We) live with two languages that we constantly interact and think in.”

“My mom comes every six months and she stays for a couple of months in here, so my mom does not speak any English. So when she’s here, (my daughter) is obligated to speak Spanish to her because she won’t be able to understand her. So I try to, ya know, when they do Skype with my family, and try to explain to her that it’s important to learn a different language. Ya know, you get more, you’d be surprised at how much more you can get by speaking another language.”

Moreover, participants expressed regret in the diminishing role that Spanish is playing in the Hispanic/Latino culture. They shared how the use of the Spanish language is being diluted in the
daily lives of younger generations. In some instances, the language has disappeared as a result of acculturation into a dominant White culture.

“My first language was actually Spanish because I didn’t leave Panama until I was like two, and that was around the time my brother was born and I came back to the states and from there, not having to speak Spanish, I kind of lost it. But when I’m around people that speak Spanish, I understand it a lot more than I thought that I would have.”

“I know with like my family and I, I’m fluent, and I speak it, I can read, I can sort of write, it’s probably not the right grammar and stuff but whereas my brother...can understand Spanish very well but he can barely speak it and my sister is just terrible at both. So it’s like the generations go down, between the three of us, I’m probably the best one, it’s maybe watered down Spanish when it comes to my sister. She’s the youngest.”

“My mother felt there was not a best practice for us to learn Spanish other than what we learned in school... the fact that she felt like she couldn’t teach it to us because she didn’t want us to seem different from the people that were in our area... I can understand Spanish better than I can speak it so that’s helpful for me. It still has that connection for me.”

“When my mom was little, it was looked down upon when you spoke Spanish so my grandma did not teach her or her sisters.”

As students navigate through higher education, they realize that the educational environment is also a new social context for them to manage, with a new “language” to learn. Participants see the educational opportunity as a place to explore new ways of communicating with others in a language that may not be their own. When asked how language has influenced their experience in the workplace or within the educational context, one participant shared how it is important to consider adoption of a second language as it assists with acculturation.
“Whether or not English should be the only language spoken, whether Spanish should also be a language that should be spoken, that maybe part of it being able to- for a population that is coming to this country and that has been in this country long enough, to also wonder to what extent, when we hold to our roots so tightly, that we are feeling ourselves inhibited in our capacity to be creative.”

Along with the typical demands of adult learners in navigating the higher educational environment, these Hispanic/Latino participants shared the demands placed on them as a result of culturally specific values that are present in their identities. For Hispanics/Latinos, the ideology of familism is revered and encouraged through cultural expectations. While education is certainly highlighted as important for individuals to be able to take care of their families, individual needs do not come before the needs of the family. Participants expressed this dichotomy in their accounts about balancing academic performance expectations in the context of their higher educational program. They shared challenges of managing the demands of their cultural norms and practices, particularly the expectation to put family first above their individual pursuits.

“My kids demand a little more of my attention...the cultural habits that we have of really mixing as a family unit...family staying together or really taking care of each other...multigenerational people in the household in the Latino community most of the time, especially when they come to the U.S. ...strong contact with basically my entire relatives... (I) remain connected to what happens in South America... (Managing) logistics of it as a family and just in regular life, I’ve opted to take only one course at a time. I think that if you took more than two, I could do it but you would begin to feel like it was a strain...it is challenging just simply because as an adult, when you have so many other responsibilities, the last thing you always do often sadly is take care of yourself.”
“I think that family is fluid, like your immediate family. Like, I feel like you’re supposed to go above and beyond to help them. Like me and my family, we’re very involved in each other’s lives... I notice a lot of families aren’t like that which to me is weird.”

“It is, it is hard. It’s not easy. Sometimes I just feel like ‘ah I don’t know, I wanna give up on it,’ but I was like ‘nah, I don’t wanna give up on it.’ I just figured out how to do it. It is hard when you work 40hrs a week and then you have to come home and do all the stuff that you have to do and then you have to go to school for things... I think for Spanish people, like the family is more important than anything... that’s something that I’m trying to teach my daughter.”

“Being close, ya know, I could still stay at home, help (my mother) with certain things that she may need, financially, or just to help her with my brother... even though I don’t live with her anymore, I speak to her like daily.”

Though balancing work, school, and family is certainly strained by the pull familism has against the pursuit of higher education, family is also a source of inspiration and support. Participants expressed deep gratitude for the inspirational characters in their lives, whether they were family members or close friends. They articulated that this inspiration to pursue post-secondary education may have even come from those close to them that do not have the experiential background or knowledge on how to navigate the higher educational system. When asked about their sources of inspiration during their academic journey, participants shared how their family was a strong source of inspiration. Some even identified an immediate parent or someone very close to them who had a direct influence on their choice to pursue a post-secondary education.

“I remember I just talked to my dad and he was like just do it. You’ve been sitting on this long enough, just do it, do it, do it.”
“So education in our family is very very important... we were all gonna go to college regardless of whether or not we knew what we were gonna focus in on... I knew this was something I was gonna do, so after I made that decision is when I said to people, oh I’m gonna go for my Master’s and they were like that’s great... it was really me telling them and getting a great response and support.”

“My mom definitely put that in my head to go to school cause, ya know, her and my father only did about a year and they didn’t complete it so... that was a goal of mine... It was not an option, like, I had to go to school.”

**Synthesis**

Hispanic/Latino participants in this study shared the struggles they face in their daily lives, including the existence of cultural insensitivity, negative assumptions, and prejudice by others as a result of their Hispanic/Latino cultural heritage. This experience is often lost in the racial discourse between Black and White cultures, as those identities are often more clearly delineated by physical characteristics and societal standards. However, the existence of micro-aggressions and other overt cultural presumptions are apparent in daily interactions for this population as well. These stigmas are a consistent challenge for this group in every environment, including higher education.

One of the strategies these participants share is the practice of disassociation from their own cultural identity in order to cope with negative external influencers. They have sought environments where they could exist as socially accepted members of the community. Though they desired an escape from prejudice, they highly value preserving their cultural traditions and heritage, as demonstrated by their active interest in participation in cultural activities. Moreover, this is validated by the regret over the loss of the Spanish language as a central component of their
cultural identity. Even though the balance of work, family, and school is shared with other students participating in the online educational medium, participants also chose this mode due to its ability to offer a “safe space” to explore other perspectives and cultural identities. The next section explores this main theme in describing how the online educational medium is viewed as a “safe space” for participants in this study.

The Online Educational Environment is “The Great Equalizer”

Horace Mann, renowned pioneer of the American public education system and Secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education in the late 1800s, is credited with stating that “education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men – the balance-wheel of the social machinery.” Although his idea was positioned during an era well before online educational pursuits were conceived, it is relevant to the current paradigm shifts in educational delivery. It is insurmountable to think that we have successfully designed an educational medium in which the color of someone’s skin or the accent in their voice as a result of the influence of a second language, has no bearing on a student’s ability to participate in higher educational discourse. This research posits that higher education in the online medium is the true “great equalizer” by creating a “safe space” free from cultural prejudice or negative assumptions about the individual’s motivations or abilities based on skin color, language usage, or accent.

The concept of “color-blindness” was explored in Ladson-Billings’ (2014) study and is a central component of one’s perception of cultural identity. In essence, when one does not see “color” in the ethnic sense, one avoids judgment about cultural identity or negative perceptions about the individual’s motivation or behavior. Color-blindness in the context of the online educational environment then allows for the creation of a “safe space” for students to explore
educational enlightenment and cultural perspectives. Participants were asked about the online environment and its relation to their perceptions about cultural insensitivity.

“I think that actually not knowing someone’s background, I think is kind of a good thing because there’s nothing to base any preconceived notions on about them. Um, literally, I actually like that about this experience.”

“It feels good to be judged based on my intelligence rather than my race.”

“I think it’s a benefit to the online experience because it does allow for people to just be smart. It allows people to not feel that they’re put down every single time because they’re of a different race or an assumption that they’re of a different race.”

“I have this interesting background that some people will want to know about and some people don’t want to know about but I want them to know about it so they don’t down play me or shame me or anything...So with being online, I can be me, like I’m free to be me and I’m not feeling like everyone is judging me when I walk into a room. Like, I walk into the digital classroom and my work speaks for itself.”

These Hispanic/Latino participants feel that the online environment provides them a safe place to learn, free from judgment about who they are and what abilities they bring. It allows them to escape prejudice by others who may negatively perceive them because of the color of their skin or the language they use. This concept of feeling free allows them to focus on the actual learning content and fully utilize the resources available to them in the online medium without unwanted scrutiny about their academic potential.

Navigating a Sterile Online Environment. The online educational environment provides a wealth of educational resources at the fingertips of its students. This environment extends the reach of a physical campus and physical libraries, allowing the student to access information
anytime and anywhere, at a pace that is conducive to their lives. When asked about their feelings about the online environment, some explicitly acknowledged appreciation for the medium itself.

“It’s made me more aware that the versatility of technology is really important…the fact that I can access some of the material in online format, I print a lot of the material…able to really access a lot of information, journals, journal articles and papers, academic things that I wasn’t sure, how was I gonna be able to tap into.”

In addition, the ability to preserve elements of personal anonymity in what is shared with others as well as the ability to avoid witnessing negative physical reactions to one’s contributions, can embolden students to participate more actively in educational discourse.

“I’m not afraid to be myself... you know if like you’re in person and you’re like meeting somebody, maybe you’re a little timid because you don’t know how they perceive you, or how they may ask certain questions. With this, because I’m not physically there, I don’t hold anything back. Like, I feel ‘more free’ to now write my stories about being Hispanic, about being Black... I’m not holding it back just because I think someone is gonna judge me or stereotype me. Like I’m more forthcoming when it comes to putting my culture out there like writing stories- sharing it with other classmates. So that’s more empowering, it gives me more confidence in- to (share with) other people out there in the Latin community, the school’s community.”

Alternatively, the online experience can also be considered “sterile,” or free of personal connection or communication. When asked about navigating the online environment, participants also shared experiencing loneliness and disconnection with others in the community as a result of the lack of face-to-face dialogue in an asynchronous environment.
“It wasn’t so much that I was doing it for an assignment but I was trying to keep up with my reading that at the end of the day it was kind of a lonesome person just sitting there doing it for my own enrichment but there was no feedback.”

“I feel like it was discouraging and you’re on your own in a way. Which I know you basically are, but I felt like if you needed something, you had to figure it out for yourself and then when you communicate it, it’s just like copy and paste.”

“The challenges would be that there’s not much communication, like you don’t really get to know anyone, you don’t really talk to anyone. So you, kinda, like in the discussions, you only have to reply to two. Most people don’t even read the comments that people write to them. So like you’re not really having any conversations with anyone so it’s kind of impersonal.”

Because the online educational environment is new territory for most of the participants, they expressed feeling fear and uncertainty. For some, this was a familiar feeling as if they were foreigners in a new land, having to speak a new language, and adapt to a new culture.

“(I felt) fear, but more or less a sense of always watching what I was saying as if I was tinkering with a tool that was not for me to tinker with… (a familiar feeling, since) feeling like a foreigner for somebody that is multiracial starts from the moment we are little in school.”

“This is my first time doing anything online completely, and I think I thought it was gonna be a lot more difficult, I was very afraid, everything was unknown to me.”

“I’ve never taken an online class so I don’t know what I’m gonna do.”

For some who self-identified as first-generation college students, the fear of navigating through a new technology-based environment was exacerbated by the unfamiliarity with the higher
educational system itself. In those cases, there was additional uncertainty in even knowing how to seek assistance from others since there was little or no reference points derived from the experiences of family members.

“Sometimes when it’s your first time doing something, you have a lot of insecurities, you don’t know what’s going on, you don’t know what to do, you don’t know if it’s ok to ask, you don’t if what you’re asking is a stupid question, ya know?”

“The problem with me at that time was that I had no guidance. I’m the first one to ever be in a Master’s program in my family or to even consider enrolling and I knew it was important and I knew I wanted to do it, but I didn’t know what I wanted to study, I was totally lost.”

“Because I have to say like I don’t know what, besides what little thing I know from when I look at my school and my classes. I don’t really know what else (this institution) offers. I don’t know what else they have for the community. What else are the things that they offer for the students? I don’t really know, so maybe to reach out to those people like me that say you know they’re not that close, or they don’t have the time to just go there and figure out what they doing.”

For these students, the online environment and the higher educational environment are unfamiliar places, and little guidance on how to navigate these environments was offered by members in their family support systems. This research did not aim to explore first-generation Hispanic/Latino student experience specifically, thus this topic may be a potential starting point for future research, utilizing knowledge from available literature on this topic. Considering the importance of receiving validating support from others as they navigate unfamiliar territory in their online educational experiences, Hispanic/Latino students turn to institutional support for guidance.
**Seeking Validating Support from the Institution.** In order to alleviate some of the fear they felt, participants sought places and people where they could generate comfort and familiarity. Most often, this came in the form of developing a strong relationship with their academic advisor. When asked about the existence of cultural sensitivity in the interactions with staff and faculty, these Hispanic/Latino participants most often shared positive experiences with staff. Academic advisors were viewed as a proxy for the familial support, validation, and inspirational encouragement they received outside of the institution.

“My advisor at (this institution) was always like ‘no this is real and you are in a real university and this is really happening.’”

“Part of why I do say that about the advisors, is that I do think it’s cultural because the relationship and communicating and how I like talking and stories, that’s kinda how I feel like I learn and I understand things by expressing them. So I think that they play a huge role.”

“So when I asked her [my advisor], and even during term she was like ‘keep it up!...you’re doing great, you’re doing everything you need to do and more’ and I was, I guess it’s really nice to hear that because even though I’m doing all my work, I still think there’s something missing. So having her say those type of things to me, I’m like ‘ok,’ I can sort of calm down a little but, I’m like ‘alright, she thinks I’m doing well, she knows the grades I’m getting, she knows what’s happening, I’m doing well and everything is gonna be fine.’ So when we talk, it’s definitely something that helps me calm those nerves down from when I was a kid and sort of having that anxiety about As.”
“They [my advisors] know that English is not my first language but they always offer the resources and stuff...what I think is pretty good because it makes my life a little bit easier sometimes when I have to write a paper and stuff like that.”

“From the time they pick up that phone, and it’s funny, I’ve encountered that they [my advisors] recognize my voice already Raul, “is this (name)” and I’m like how do you know?? It’s me!’ ‘Oh, hi!’ It’s funny because that’s what I learned from the beginning of my educational life is that communication is the best thing.”

However, there appeared to be some inconsistency in experiencing familial-type of interactions with staff members at this institution. For some, the absence of cultural familiarity may have had at least some influence in the way institutional staff interacted with them.

“I don’t think she had a deep understanding of Hispanics or anything but she was very excited for me that I was the first one in my family moving forward with this. She thought it was I guess, ‘very brave of me’ is what she said.”

In addition, there was a notable lack of mention of faculty presence in culturally relevant student support and encouragement at this institution. This is likely due to the nature of the role of faculty in the student experience in this mode of education. For at least one participant, a more personal communication method with faculty was preferred.

“When I spoke to him [faculty member] (on the phone) it just kinda worked out cause it was more natural, it was organic that he was talking to me which I think was also kind of good because another teacher, my other teacher that I just texted, she recorded lectures and I think that kind of helped with hearing someone’s voice but yeah my AHA moment was with the one on the phone... even if (my other faculty member) didn’t want to explain it as he obviously did not, at least...if I were to talk and they were like ‘no you’re
misunderstanding, it’s this, or this is where you’re wrong or this is how your grasp got skewed’ or whatever. Ya know, like instead of having to wait three or four days for a response.”

Inconsistency in culturally relevant experiences in these participants’ interactions with faculty and staff was present, which highlights a potential disconnection between support areas at the institution. These Hispanic/Latino participants expressed preference toward the preservation of their cultural identity as well as in receiving validating support they normally would expect to receive from others. They shared appreciation for the familiar and personal connections they maintained with certain members of their institutional support teams, particularly academic advisors, as those interactions validate their academic efforts and encourage them to persist in their program.

**High Value Placed on Cultural Exploration.** Participants placed a high value on the ability to create a personal connection with staff and faculty at this institution. They expressed interest in staff and faculty receiving training on cultural sensitivity, pedagogy, and the importance of communication that sounds personal to the individual. Though this study did not aim to specifically examine content of culturally relevant training, participants expressed wanting cultural sensitivity to be evident in the context of their interactions in the online educational environment. When asked about how cultural sensitivity currently exists in their online educational experiences, they shared how they have appreciated learning from other cultural perspectives. They expressed a desire to share personal and cultural connections with others students in their online educational community so that they also can explore the cultures of others in safe learning environment.
“I feel like that people maybe can’t address things the way they used to be able to address things, or be as open about cultures as they have been before, and I think that’s something that we as a society need to work on. And I do think it starts in the classroom.”

“Whether you were Jewish, Native American, or Asian, like I think a lot (of us) found some type of identity in that class. So with that class, I think I found I reached out more to my classmates whenever we would have like a weekly discussion about what we relate to that book or what do we find interesting about that book. I think that class is what pushed me to be even more acceptant of my Hispanic background. So yeah, I definitely interacted more with other people who probably felt the same way that I did. They were trying to find this identity, this part of them that didn’t know about before. I think that helped us find more about each other.”

As these participants navigated the online educational platform, they have sought a welcoming environment and common ground between members of the academic community. They have been drawn to finding similarities between people and perspectives so that they can support each other in this shared experience. They see the online educational environment as an avenue to explore perspectives other than their own, and seek shared understanding between people. When asked about interacting with other students in their online classes, participants expressed appreciation for cultural perspectives and the viewpoints of others.

“Everyone comes from a different angle, where they lived and how they grew up, that is where I find the commonality. We really are very much alike and we have the same kind of struggles and I have really enjoyed that very much... We worked very well finding the common ground and how to bring what was necessary into the classroom and remaining supportive of each other.”
“It’s interesting to know what, how their life is and that’s what you usually do at the beginning of every semester-just post information about us and...I try to relate to everybody. We don’t see each other, so I guess that’s the only way to communicate for the students... (it’s) nice to see how that person is doing, how school is going, maybe have somebody related to the things that I like- have something in common.”

For some, this includes a gentle reminder that the educational environment should not place a higher value on only one specific cultural perspective. Participants expressed interest in valuing the perspectives of all cultures in the larger context of society and the human race.

“I think we Hispanics and Latinos, we need to stick together but just remember that it’s not just us, we need to stick together and help out everybody else that’s human and represent everyone as one.”

Once participants adapted to this new “safe space,” they shared a yearning for a more personal cultural connection with others in the community. When asked additional probing questions about how to improve their online environment, they even offered suggestions on how the community could be improved to include sharing cultural norms and traditions.

“We can exchange pictures and photos and then we’d know the same people in area with the same background...I don’t know if there’d be certain (community) discussion boards or different events that might be based on cultures of Latinos/Latinas, different meals even would be cool...even though different areas of the country could do it all at the same time, something like that. That would actually be really cool...letting people know that there’s a message board for people who are from the same background, sort of trying to get their ideas of how it was for them and seeing how it is now. And then going from there... my
thought process could help someone else and their’s could help me... Definitely the meal thing, I have that in my head. That would be a neat thing to do.”

While participants continued to express value in seeking perspectives other than their own, they also shared how they believe that not only learning from, but accepting others is a cultural characteristic for Hispanics/Latinos. They attributed valuing the culture and perspectives of others as influenced by their own cultural experiences, upbringing, and cultural expectations.

“Always felt at home being with people with completely different ideas...It gives the opportunity for folks to, for one thing, they have never thought about engaging with someone from a different ethnic background... (I) was able to pull out the stories of my childhood and living in the Andes and interacting in an environment that for the rest of my classmates was, it apparently felt very exotic”

“I mean I’m Puerto Rican, but there’s so much other blood - that my family is that. Just being exposed to that culture, I feel like I’m more open to other cultures…I was always fascinated by other cultures.”

“I look at other people and other races differently than other people who are only of one race. So I accept people for whatever they say, if they say they’re a dog, they’re a dog. I say hey, thanks for being that, I’m not going to judge you because you’re something different.”

“I like to know things about people in other countries and I need to learn how they say things and they have different names for things that might be the same.”

“It’s really helpful [to have this perspective] and it makes it more interesting to speak to anybody who lives a different life, who sees the world differently who sees me differently but not prejudiced or biased or anything like that. Like, just very helpful and friendly.”
On the spectrum of exploring the cultures of others, language again emerged as an influencer within the educational discourse. Participants shared the importance of considering one’s cultural influences in the way they communicate and how they may be perceived by others. Cultural sensitivity therefore includes consideration to how others interact, the language that is used, and the tone that can be perceived in the written word. When asked about what the institution needs to consider as far as cultural sensitivity in the environment, they provided insights into the importance of considering language that is relevant to Hispanics/Latinos.

“Especially with language and reading some of the discussions, like of someone from a different race, and I’m like ‘ok look, they’re speaking English, it’s not like the Queen’s English, it’s a broken English.’ So reading the discussion, some of the way people write things, I’m like ‘oh, this person must speak a different language because the whole sentence is backwards because it’s translated that way.’ (Others) might not have been completely taught, this is the difference between this and this within those two cultures.”

“(People should) pay close attention to language, because again Hispanics tend to speak very directly. It’s not a disrespect thing it’s just how Hispanic people talk. I know on my mom’s side, they can be giving you praise but being very rude about it at the same time. And if you don’t know them, you’ll take it completely out of context. So being very mindful of the way things are worded, to be very mindful that some people might come off not wanting to give their all. ‘Cause on my mom’s side, if you’re the younger generation, you kinda just sit back and wait for your turn to (become) the older generation…people might take that as we don’t do anything bad, we don’t say anything bad, we just accept what’s said and some time’s it needs to be, ‘you’re grading my assignment wrong’ (instead of) ‘oh I’ll just take what they said and do nothing about it.’ It’s about being more aware of why
students aren’t asking questions or they don’t ever catch, like made a mistake, there might be a reason behind it.”

“That’s why I think an institution should have everything a student needs... whether it’s having issues with another language, because again, although Spanish is my first language and my English has gotten great, I still get a little bit, ya know, what’s the word I’m looking for, I get off track with my English language and some places, (I) get embarrassed and I’m like I can’t speak to this person because they might look at me like this guy can’t speak very well English.”

“When it comes to speaking to each other, there’s certain words or whatever, it’s like ‘wow!’ it’s amazing how, ya know, the culture overall is just very family oriented but um it’s really interesting when it comes to the speaking and dialect, that’s a whole other ballgame.”

Outside of the student-to-student interactions in the educational community, participants also shared an interest in the pursuit of intellectual and cultural exploration within the academic content itself. Some participants acknowledged the existence of certain cultural elements within the curriculum, but expressed interest in incorporating more of these elements as another way to explore other perspectives and cultural lenses. When asked about additional suggestions for improvements to the curriculum or the online classroom, participants shared a personal interest in exploring more culturally relevant topics.

“(It) would be worthwhile...to see the Latin American literature playing out within the English Language context where you can still discuss thoughts, and ideas, and experiences and allow that to begin to communicate your ideas - and they’re not separate, they don’t have to be separate ideas... they don’t have to be limited to just Spanish writers, Spanish
speaking writers, in general that could be said about every region of the world, African writers. There’s amazing African poets…I used to go to Japanese modern literature and they are amazing writers of postmodern literature there and it would enrich the literary culture in general.”

“I think that they [the institution] (should) make things more aware so that the sensitivity is... not shut down in a negative way... where (faculty) says ‘everything is going to be about culture in this specific type of setting.’ It’s like they (can) make people very aware of the fact that different cultures will have different responses for everything.”

“(I am interested in) more classes that do deal with Afro-Hispanic culture. A lot of the classes that dealt with that, as far as me learning about the Dominican Republic or any Latin or Hispanic country, I discovered through either a Black studies course. It wasn’t the main headline, it wasn’t like Latin studies or Hispanic studies. I found it out through another course so maybe having more classes that are geared toward that.”

**Synthesis**

The online environment has the unique potential of fulfilling the vision Horace Mann and others have had for the education system. It can truly be the “great equalizer” for those who have and are experiencing cultural insensitivity in society by opening doors for the exploration of other cultures in a “safe space.” This environment can be free of preconceived judgment based on student physical appearance or the influence of language, contrary to experiences articulated by the participants in other educational modes. It allows for a free discussion of ideas and an increased access for students who may otherwise be limited by time, location, and cultural obligations.

For some participants though, the experience can be daunting for reasons beyond unfamiliarity with technology. These students may be first-generation college students without
the benefit of having family members with the ability to provide mentorship in relation to their college experience. Regardless of their academic background, participants have come to rely on their academic advisors as a proxy to the familial support and encouragement they would receive from family members. Inconsistency in the application of culturally sensitive support can be detrimental to the long-term persistence of these students as cultural obligations may be a strong pull away from maintaining engagement in the environment. Participants share a strong desire to have a place to share cultural experiences as they seek common ground and an opportunity to explore their own cultural identities.

**Culturally Relevant Values Motivate Hispanics/Latinos in Higher Education**

The participant group’s range of motivational drivers for the pursuit of higher educational degree attainment is as diverse as their cultural backgrounds and experiences. However, there are commonalities which are shared amongst them that guide their actions. These include a belief that education matters and it will help them to serve their communities, a belief that the completion of their education will benefit themselves and others, and a belief in inspiring others through mentoring and the encouragement of the pursuit of education. These convictions are shared as cultural values for all participants and have been integrated as a part of their cultural heritage and upbringing.

**Purpose for the Pursuit of Education.** Recent research by Aslanian and Clinefelter (2012) suggests that the primary motivation for online students pursuing higher education relates to career ambitions in the form of advancement, or to change careers. The researchers posited that students choose to enter higher education at pivotal moments in their lives, or life transitions which are triggered by career and family changes. However, insights from the Hispanic/Latino population in that research were limited by a disproportionate number of Caucasian students in
this study. Though it may be true that Hispanics/Latino students may also be interested in the benefits of career advancement that comes with degree attainment, few participants mentioned it as a primary motivator in the present study. When asked what their motivators were in pursuing their degree, very few answered from an “individual needs” perspective, and even less expressed financial gain as a motivator.

“If you wanna progress career wise, you wanna grow your salary, you wanna grow your experience, ya know education is the key. And the saying, ya know ‘do it now,’ you know it’s like ‘you’re single, you’re not married, you don’t have any children, really just invest your time, it’s an investment, I know how it is... it’s a good investment.’”

“I thought if I pick something that is more related to what I do for work, then it will benefit me in a way that I can learn something new and I can apply it at my job and eventually get a better job, a better promotion and stuff like that. The more that you know, the better.”

Instead, those who mentioned personal gain that comes from degree attainment focused less on financial benefits and more on other benefits including the achievement of personal goals.

“(I’m) taking care of a desire, this moment is not necessarily something that I’m necessarily thinking from a financial, from an economic standpoint, it’s really more about a skill that I’ve always wanted to do.”

“Well, I think... for my personal satisfaction. I wanted to go to school and finish, and do something for me. So I decided that going to school and finishing-doing something different, it was gonna be...the decision was for me and my family at the end.”

“I would like to become a life coach and this would the perfect thing to build on my anthropology and sociology background and learn more about psychology so I can grow more and keep learning and pursuing and going onto the next step to become a life coach.”

The vast majority of participants in this study expressed desires to pursue higher education for the benefits of others. They looked at their efforts as a means to support the personal growth and encouragement for family members and other close friends. They expressed the value in teaching others about their experiences so that others could benefit in a positive way.

“I think that (everyone has) the capacity to learn, you just have to be taught by the person that wants them to learn something.”

“I was always excited, ya know, doing really well on projects, so much so that other people always wanted me to do their projects for them so and from there I said I want to do graphic design.”

“(I’m pursuing this to become) a thoughtful leader and, ya know, helping out the culture of the work environment.”

“I actually have a coworker who… she also has been out of school for almost a decade and I was just kinda telling her to think about it. ‘You’ve been in healthcare, you know how things are and you know the way…Any positive way that I could help guide somebody, I will. I’ve always accepted information, people have helped me along my journey, if I could do that for someone else- that’s a good thing.”

“I kinda want to be a role model for my daughter. It’s never too late for you to go to school, even if you have to stop somewhere and come back, and come back later in life. So I, um, believe it’s important for you, no matter what age you are, if you have the desire and you wanna do it, just go for it.”

Then there are those who see the pursuit of education as a means to influence a larger community and society as a whole. These participants view the opportunity to share cultural values in higher education as essential to improving cultural awareness and opening the dialogue on cultural
acceptance and inclusion. These ideals are central to a culture that believes education is critical for the success of all their people and the preservation of cultural identity.

“I think it’s my mission because there’s so many other girls out there that are like me, even guys, that there’s a part of them that feels like it’s missing and they don’t feel like, they don’t know there are people out there that feel the same way as them. I have this incredible talent, this skill to tell stories about who we are. It’s not just Black and White or whatever color. But it’s so different, there’s so many layers to it and people should understand it more. So with my platform and theories of different points of view, getting feedback from people with different points of view, I feel like I, it’s important for me to relay that story, to tell the world who we are and that we’re here. We’re not just gonna fade into the background with whatever (expression) you deem as correct or right or what you believe is the only one. There’s just so many different layers to it. Like me and so many other people can tell that story. Bring it out to light more.”

“Raul, keep doing what you’re doing and just don’t do it for us, Hispanics and Latinos, do it for the entire culture that fits on this planet… listening to you and what you’re doing and you’re not just (saying) ‘being Hispanic is a great thing.’ I like learning that Hispanics are striving and striving, and doing what they want best, ya know what I’m saying? Because you never know, there might be another child and he could be from another culture that needs help but because we are different, because they make us different, not because we’re different, people make us different, we’re able to say you know what? It’s ok to be this, it’s ok to be that. I’m here. I’ve learned and experienced, and I’m here to help you.”

These students likely share both personal and professional expectations for higher education with other ethnic groups, but seem to value education as the primary means for improving the lives of
others. They have looked upon the online educational environment as a way to balance the needs of their families while benefiting them and their communities in the long-run. Though they have chosen a “sterile” environment to pursue higher education, they seek ways to communicate their values in a judgement free place with others who value the insights they can provide.

**Value of Culturally-Accepted Language in Inspiring Self and Others.** All cultures have a way to share ideas, communicate values, and find commonalities in shared lived experiences. Like many other cultures, Hispanic/Latino customs are rich in storytelling and culturally shared sayings. This term, commonly referred to as “dichos” in the Hispanic/Latino community, is one way for members to provide important teachings and inspiration for others. Amongst the data collected for this research, specific phrases emerged out of examples of encouragement shared by important inspirational people in the lives of the participants.

“There’s a saying that a lot of the people on my dad’s side say-‘speak up or you won’t get fed,’ which is very true, if you don’t ever speak up on something, how are people going to help you?”

“I remember back to what my mother tried to have me do. She’s always been pro-school and (said) ‘take the opportunities you get, seize the chances you’re given.’”

“My mother always said never say no to people and never take no for an answer.”

“‘Muchacho, here, take advantage, take advantage’ and I’m like ‘what do you mean take advantage?’ She goes, ‘you don’t take advantage, or listen very well.’ ‘What do you mean by that mom?’ She said, ‘you know what son? You don’t take advantage of this situation, meaning that you know the rules, and you know I’m letting you stay (in the kitchen) and next thing you’ll be looking at me being all nosey, being nosey, and that’s not good—but what is it that you always in the kitchen for?’ ‘Well ma, I just wanna see how you cook.’
‘Oh, so let me let you use this advantage in learning how to cook.’ But she always told me, ‘don’t take advantage of a situation’ meaning that if something is there for you, don’t abuse it. Don’t take advantage of it but use it to your advantage meaning that if it’s there and it’s for you then use the advantage.‘

Apart from the cultural teachings these participants recalled, they also recounted what has worked for them in the online environment. These keys to success are shared amongst other students and do not necessarily include cultural elements. Nonetheless, it was important for these students to share their suggestions as they hope to help others to navigate the online educational environment. This act of sharing best practices with others through their stories is culturally relevant to the Hispanic/Latino group. These stories and sayings included the importance of time management, planning ahead, and staying organized. The participants also mentioned the importance of not procrastinating, not putting too much pressure on oneself, working around family needs, and putting education in the context of their environment in their storytelling.

“(You need to have) intention of really committed to doing the work... (and) have to decide for oneself just how important this is to me.”

“Being proud, ya know, because what was stopping me before was...things, as always ‘you have no time to do this,’ but yeah, if you structure yourself properly, you give it good, your best effort, it is possible.”

“(I’m) pretty good at studying independently... (I) do most of my work when the kids go to bed at eight, and I sit at my computer until eleven every day, and I try to work as much as I can... (I) am very organized...I find myself, I set my limit on Tuesday, so I am thinking and writing my draft on Tuesday so I get it out of the way...When it comes to most of the
final paper or not final but short papers, I often do them by the Sunday... If I’m thinking already the week prior, I can set myself a good pace to do it.”

“I realized I was overthinking everything. I think I was just so concentrated on keeping my 4.0 that I became sort of uptight midway through the program. I was just like, I have to do this, I have to spend hours and hours and review and review, paper and everything. Then there was one point where I was just like you know what? I think I’m doing very well. And I think I’m just freaking out for no reason.”

“Nothing good comes easy and, ya know, it doesn’t come for free. You’ve got to work and it might seem like a pain in the butt. Like Saturdays and Sundays, you’re glued to your laptop doing work, but in the end what you’ve got is a ‘green hand,’ once you see how much you’ve accomplished.”

“It’s not easy but you gotta keep up.”

**Synthesis**

Hispanics/Latinos in this study are generally motivated to pursue education for the betterment and encouragement of others, though there is also an importance placed on self-validation in the accomplishment of this goal. Participants shared in the belief that education plays an important role for them and others. This notion is passed from generation to generation and inspires others by the way of culturally accepted teachings. While some may have an interest in improving their socio-economic conditions by gaining new skills and career advancement, most participants shared a greater purpose for education that transcends personal gains.

Participants shared a strong interest in teaching others how to succeed in the online environment, willingly sharing their keys to success and wishing upon the institution to improve the experience for other Hispanics/Latinos just like them. Their persistence, through cultural and
logistical adversity, can inspire others to achieve goals beyond their perceived limits. Their ultimate success may truly be dependent on them taking advantage of opportunities placed before them, their willingness to stand up for themselves, never taking ‘no’ for an answer, and never giving up on themselves.

Conclusions

The purpose of this doctoral research study was to investigate individual experiences of a group of Hispanic/Latino students regarding the existence of cultural sensitivity in an online undergraduate or graduate program at a private university in New England. The overall research question guiding this research was: “what are the perspectives of Hispanic/Latino students enrolled in an online undergraduate or graduate degree program regarding cultural sensitivity in their interactions with student support services (admission, advising, and faculty) at a private university in New England?” The research was backed by extensive literature surrounding the need for institutional resources and support to match the culturally sensitive relationships found in family support systems. The use of culturally accepted language, social and cultural integration, and a strong culturally relevant personal identity system may positively influence academic success.

This research has demonstrated that Hispanic/Latino students perceive cultural insensitivity in the world around them, and have regarded online higher education as a “safe space” to learn within the educational opportunities provided. This mode of education allows them to seek common ground within the community and encourages them to explore and share their own cultural identity. Participants shared a coping mechanism, defined as cultural disassociation, to manage cultural insensitivity and considered the online environment as a means to escape judgment based on appearance or language influences. As students navigated the online environment, they perceived student support (particularly academic advisors) as potential sources
of inspiration and encouragement similar to what typically is provided by family members. However, inconsistency in the application of culturally sensitive support may negatively influence their perceptions of the existence of a culturally sensitive environment. Participants value cultural experiences and opportunities to share different perspectives. An environment rich in opportunities to share insights motivates this group, as well as a strong desire to serve others and the greater good. The motivation to achieve something beyond one’s perceived limits, through dedicated persistence and a willingness to never give up on themselves, is apparent with these participants. As facilitators of change, motivators, as well as partners in this research, they are truly inspirational.

The central research question sought to address how these Hispanic/Latino students perceived their online learning experience in the context of cultural sensitivity. It is clear that there is some evidence of the existence of cultural sensitivity in their interactions with others, but that it is being inconsistently applied in this particular environment. There appeared to be a gap in culturally sensitive support by faculty and inconsistent application with academic advisors. However, there appeared to be elements of cultural relevance in the interactions with other students and in some of the curriculum. These students have clearly relayed a strong interest in finding a “safe space” in online higher education in order to avoid prejudice, while seeking an opportunity to explore their own cultural identity and learn from other cultures. These results may influence the design and implementation of new culturally sensitive support strategies at this online higher educational institution. However, implications may span beyond a single institution or educational platform, further informing the transferability and credibility of the findings. The following chapter describes these implications in further detail in the hopes of influencing change for these students and for Hispanics/Latinos just like these participants at other institutions in the future.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this research was to investigate the perspectives of Hispanic/Latino students regarding culturally sensitive student support in an online undergraduate or graduate program at a private university in New England. This is especially relevant today as higher education has not properly addressed the lack of degree attainment within the growing Hispanic/Latino population (Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). This research study aimed to answer the primary research question: “what are the perspectives of Hispanic/Latino students enrolled in an online undergraduate or graduate degree program regarding cultural sensitivity in their interactions with student support services (admission, advising, and faculty) at a private university in New England?” In addition, secondary research questions included: 1) what do Hispanics/Latinos consider are the characteristics of culturally sensitive interactions with personnel at this institution in relation to their own culture? 2) what do these students find challenging or rewarding regarding their interactions with college student support services? 3) how do Hispanic/Latino students become aware that student support services staff are or are not being culturally sensitive? These research questions guided the design of the research project, literature review, interview questions, and analysis. Findings from this research uncovered characteristics of culturally sensitive interactions (including the use of culturally-accepted language), perceptions about the student experience in regard to cultural sensitivity in the online post-secondary environment (including perceived inconsistency in application of cultural sensitivity), and Hispanic/Latino student preferences regarding the culturally sensitive interactions in the academic community (including interest in cultural exploration with others).

This research was completed with the rationale of understanding how cultural sensitivity, specific to a group of Hispanic/Latino students at an online institution in New England, influences
social integration into the online higher education setting. Insights gained during the study have already influenced development of a strategic initiative at the research site, aimed at addressing an increasing number of Hispanic/Latino students. By understanding and applying insights from the research findings, site administrators can create positive experiences for future Hispanic/Latino college students. Their goal would be to create best practices for culturally sensitive interactions across all student service functions (admission, advising, faculty, student financial services, etc.). If online higher education can improve degree attainment for Hispanics/Latinos, it may contribute positively to this group’s socio-economic status and their ability to contribute financially and socially in our society.

**Research Framework**

Ladson-Billings’ Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (1992, 1995, 2014) was used as a theoretical framework in setting the context of the educational environment and as a proven model leading to student success. Ladson-Billings’ framework posits that (a) culturally responsive teaching promotes high academic expectations; (b) families, communities, and ethnic history play an important role in connecting learning to the curriculum; (c) culturally valued knowledge creation is critical to the successful execution of the teaching model; (d) active teaching and reflective thinking must be employed in order to engage students; (e) the facilitator is the primary leader of discussions, though collaborative work is necessary for successful engagement in the learning community; (f) the facilitator is also embedded in the lived experiences of the minority student; and (g) the facilitator must value diversity in individual contributions, norms, and behaviors in order to promote successful learning.

An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was conducted to allow the participants to provide insights about their lived experiences. Those insights were used to make sense of their
perspectives regarding cultural sensitivity in their online educational environment. Through semi-structured interviews, participants described their interactions with academic advisors and their online classroom experiences. Interpretation of their comments via a multi-layered thematic analysis provided clear evidence of their interest in entering a “safe space” free of prejudice based on their ethnicity, an inconsistent use of culturally sensitive interventions throughout their experience, and a yearning for cultural connections within the online learning environment.

Participants described their lived experiences in the context of conflict in acculturation and their interest in preserving their cultural identity. They also attributed the online environment as a potential “great equalizer” for Hispanic/Latino student access and identified cultural drivers, such as the belief that education will benefit themselves and other Hispanics/Latinos. These cultural drivers motivate them to succeed in higher education, which will ultimately lead to degree attainment. Participants recognized that they experience cultural insensitivity and prejudice in society and practice cultural disassociation, such as redirecting questions posed to them about their cultural identity, as a coping mechanism for dealing with this issue. They perceive the online environment as a sterile, sometimes lonely, but “safe space” for the exploration of other cultures and their own. Participants place a high value on education as a means for self-improvement and for the benefit of others. They value the use of culturally-accepted language, such as dichos, as an inspirational tool to encourage continued effort toward educational goals. These themes are more fully explored in this chapter, organized by a description of major research findings in the context of Ladson-Billings’ theoretical framework and the literature regarding culturally sensitive student support. Concluding remarks and implications of these findings are provided, which will help the research site to develop new approaches in working with a growing Hispanic/Latino student
Finally, future investigation and additional research is proposed which can advance knowledge in the academic community and practices at similar online institutions.

**Cultural Sensitivity Includes Creating a “Safe Space” for Online Collaboration**

Research participants in this study expressed a shared value system, placing cultural heritage and their cultural identity as important elements of how they define themselves. However, conflict surfaced in their struggle to balance cultural identity within the context of a larger society, in which strong drivers to acculturate with a predominantly White culture exists. Participants shared the need to disassociate from their cultural identity as a coping mechanism to deal with cultural insensitivity in their daily lives. These students then sought to apply this approach in their pursuit of higher education degree attainment via the online educational medium, thus allowing them to be seen first for their academic and intellectual capabilities. This online educational medium is seen as a “safe space” for which cultural insensitivity and assumptions about their lives can be avoided.

This finding aligns with Coryell, Clark, and Pomerantz’s (2010) study on Hispanic/Latina students enrolled in an online Spanish language course. Participants in that study felt that the online environment allowed them to avoid embarrassment over their perceived lack of mastery of the Spanish language. They also demonstrated cultural disassociation as a coping mechanism for dealing with potential scrutiny, prejudice, or cultural insensitivity. Though that study was limited in scope and was not able to be generalized to a wider audience, the findings in the present study suggest some validity to their conclusions.

Hispanic/Latino participants in this study expressed concern about the potential for cultural insensitivity and discriminatory practices in the higher education space, just as Kaupp (2012) suggested in highlighting negative stereotypes faculty had of participants in that study. Concerns
over experiencing stereotyped assumptions about their motivations because of their cultural identity were evident in the participants’ statements, yielding a warning for institutions who do not increase their staff’s and faculty’s awareness of cultural sensitivity in that context.

Whilst the online medium presents an opportunity to avoid potential negative stereotypes based on cultural identity, it also provides students with the prospect of communicating with other people with varying cultures. Dayton, Gonzalez-Vasquez, Martinez, and Plum (2004) and Keim, McDermott, and Gerard (2010) found that Hispanic/Latino students preferred engaging in an environment with a strong social support structure. A strong social support structure includes characteristics such as community orientation, cooperative group learning opportunities, and an increased availability of staff and faculty for questions. This structure also involves an open and trusting dialogue in interactions as well as a purposeful incorporation of students’ strengths instead of a focus on cultural deficits by comparing them to a dominant White culture.

Participants in the present study shared a strong interest in collaborating with others and engaging in a broader social context within the academic community via dialogue with other students from different cultural backgrounds, albeit in the asynchronous learning environment. The incorporation of diverse interactions with their online academic community may benefit these participants by adding new perspectives from other students regarding the academic content, yielding greater understanding of the topics. In contrast, Johnson and Galy (2013) suggested that standard academic success skills, such as the ability to work independently, are the best predictors of academic performance. Both perspectives can be accomplished via purposeful interventions by staff and faculty. The interventions can introduce cultural relevance into an engaged online community, while educating the community on key academic study strategies that are predictors to student success.
In the context of this study’s theoretical framework, Ladson-Billings acknowledged that communities play an important role in connecting learning to the curriculum. A facilitator with the primary responsibility of directing cultural connections, actively engaging in the lived experiences of minority students, and creating a learning environment where collaborative work is central to the mode of educational delivery, can promote academic success. The responsibility to facilitate these interventions may not be in the form of a single functional role, particularly at this institution. The importance here is the assurance of a purposeful approach to engaging in cultural relevance across all interactions between the Hispanic/Latino student, faculty, and staff.

**Consistent and Purposeful Application of Cultural Relevance is Needed**

Clearly, Hispanic/Latino students in this study prefer the opportunity to engage in an academic community where their cultural values (e.g. *familism*), cultural identity, and culturally relevant discussion are actively addressed within the academic community. Access to a wider and more diverse community than participants’ local communities provides them an opportunity to explore elements of their own cultural identity as well as those of others via the online medium. Engaging the academic community with cultural sensitivity minimizes the risk of prejudice and judgment surrounding participants’ physical appearance or accent in their spoken language. Unfortunately, participants in this study expressed experiencing inconsistency in how staff and faculty interacted with them in regard to cultural relevance and sensitivity.

This is not to say that cultural relevance was not present at all in interactions with staff and faculty, but that it became most evident in the natural engagement through discussion boards that require collaboration with other students. For example, one of this study’s participants described how she was able to learn how individuals from different cultures diagnose psychological disorders based on the way another individual’s culture perceives the symptoms. Another participant shared
how students from different cultural backgrounds found shared common understanding as they explored the academic content, even though group members looked at the issues through different cultural lenses.

Foronda (2008) proposed that cultural sensitivity includes purposeful knowledge of cultural characteristics and values, as well as using these principles to demonstrate care and concern for others. Participants did not share that there was a lack of concern, but that there seemed to be no purposeful correlation to their ethnic backgrounds, cultural norms, nor cultural identity. Foronda (2008) also noted that cultural sensitivity includes that ability to tailor and adapt communication to the needs of others. While these Hispanic/Latino participants certainly experienced a willingness from academic advisors to adapt to the basic needs of students, there was a curious lack of cited examples of this occurring while interacting with the faculty. In addition, academic advisors seemed to focus on academic skills needs instead of utilizing cultural norms or best practices, such as *dichos*, to engage with this population.

The lack of consistency and purposeful engagement of culturally relevant interactions was also evident in the present study’s participant group descriptions of loneliness in the online environment. Rovai and Wighting (2005) acknowledged this risk in reviewing students’ feelings of social isolationism, powerlessness, and normlessness in an online environment. Their study highlighted the differences between a minority group’s perceptions of the environment compared to a dominant White student group. They identified that their participant group experienced a higher level of alienation in the online environment compared to their Caucasian counterparts. The researchers posited that participants in the online educational medium perceive cultural sensitivity in the contextual knowledge derived from the written language. Participants’ satisfaction with positive cultural experiences in the online environment may be correlated with different ethnicities,
as Bradford and Wyatt (2010) attempted to substantiate, but the present study did not aim to compare ethnic group preferences. Evaluating these preferences based on ethnicity was outside of the scope of this study, as individuals identifying themselves as Hispanic/Latino were the only individuals examined. However, this study did identify that participants viewed the online environment as having the potential to include culturally sensitive interactions in the context of group dynamics and student-to-student exchanges.

Though the present study did not explore actual academic success of student participants, the level of engagement with purposeful and culturally relevant interactions with staff and faculty is known to positively influence academic outcomes. Tovar (2015), Conway, Wladis, and Hachey (2011), and Garcia (2010) have all suggested that intrusive and intentional interactions between faculty, advisors, and students leads to higher student grade point averages and positive persistence intentions. Kezar (2001) also confirmed, via a national survey, that cross-functional collaboration between faculty and advisors in engaging with students yields positive successful outcomes in purposeful activities surrounding students’ first-year experience.

Tinto (1993) acknowledged that social and academic integration in students’ first year experience is critical to their long term academic success and persistence intentions, though others acknowledged that this model is flawed when describing minority groups (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Rendon, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1992; Torres & Solberg, 2001). Nonetheless, the distinct characteristics that define the Hispanic/Latino culture may influence the way they approach education, and especially the online educational medium. For one, Page (2012) acknowledged that the demand for familial responsibilities is evident in this ethnic group regardless of subcultural identity, such as Cuban, Mexican, South American, Puerto Rican, etc. Page’s study suggests that all Hispanics/Latinos place family at the forefront of all decisions and
activities in their lives. The present study’s findings advances, via descriptions from the voices of the participants, that online higher education should purposely integrate culturally relevant interactions throughout the online experience. This includes increasing culturally sensitive awareness by staff and faculty regarding the cultural demands, such as the importance of familial responsibilities that are placed on Hispanic/Latino students.

The nature of the online environment allows for students to study anytime, anywhere, in a mode that allows them to remain physically close to family members in order to manage familial responsibilities. This is clearly important as participants of this study shared the strong connection they have with their immediate and extended families, and is aligned with previous research literature findings. Since familism is such a strong influence within the Hispanic/Latino cultural norm, students can still meet the cultural demands of family while participating in educational activities in this online education medium. Since the Hispanic/Latino family is a central motivator for student success within this population, the online environment can allow them the flexibility to maintain responsibilities while engaging in educational experiences. Completion of their educational journey can also lead to improvements in the socioeconomic status of the family, as graduates increase their potential for acquiring higher paying jobs. In addition, the online environment allows them to remain active amongst their local communities as well as those activities which are aimed at supporting others, and aligned to the participants’ expressed cultural values.

Alignment of institutional student support to the needs of the Hispanic/Latino family may require greater involvement of all of the student’s areas of influence, such as communities, family systems, and the educational environment (Bosch & Gess-Newsome, 2014; Hernandez, 1995; Dayton, Gonzalez-Vazquez, Martinez, & Plum, 2004; Zalaquett, 2006). The literature supports
the present study’s findings that integration of family support and community engagement as additional sources of positive influence on online students may lead to improved academic outcomes and student intentions to persist.

**Broadening Cultural Exploration May Positively Influence Engagement**

Personal experience suggests that others may perceive minority ethnic groups as solely interested in ethnocentricity. However, this was clearly not supported in the present study’s results as Hispanic/Latino students shared a strong interest in exploring the nature and characteristics of other cultures along with their own. For example, one of the participants expressed a newly formed interest in African poetry and Japanese modern literature as a result of the multi-cultural curriculum in one of her literature courses. This study’s findings suggest participants have a strong interest in sharing their own cultural connections, histories, and traditions in an environment which will accept them. This environment must be built by considering how participants identify themselves culturally, while simultaneously providing them with the opportunity to explore other cultures as well.

Furthermore, aligning with the literature on student response to culturally specific language (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007), Hispanic/Latino students in this study generally identified themselves as having been influenced in part by culturally associated traditions. Examples of guiding customs here included incorporation of the Spanish language, historical and cultural accounts, and in *dichos* (culturally relevant sayings) that were passed down from generation to generation. These cultural elements can also be passed along to others in the online community regardless of their cultural heritage, cultural identity, or community association. This creates a more culturally rich and nurturing environment, which encourages cross-cultural collaboration, communication, and openness to other perspectives. Participants consistently advocated for
culturally relevant interactions within their educational journey. Student support services that wish to leverage this student preference would benefit from encouraging the sharing of culturally relevant language within the academic community, including sharing their own personal “words to live by.”

The interest in cross-cultural collaboration identified in this research is not a new concept and has been observed for decades. Interpersonal communications between diverse sets of people have been a focus of research studies as societies found value in understanding the nature of others since World War II (Aneas & Sandin, 2009). The intentions behind this research also included a strong will to understand how successful communication was delivered in spite of cultural and language differences. These studies traversed various topics spanning thirty years of research on intercultural competence, and has been demonstrated to positively impact internationalization outcomes (Deardorff, 2006). Improving interpersonal communication required purposeful intention to the development of cultural sensitivity training and best practices. This begins with a study of the existence of implicit bias within student facing groups, building awareness of other cultures, and generating skill-building on intercultural competence.

Intercultural competence, or the ability to successfully interact with others and accept the perspectives of others around them in both attitude and language, allows for the individual to absorb new information, question assumptions, and think critically in a global environment (Byram, Nichols, & Stevens, 2001). The Hispanic/Latino students in this study all demonstrated a strong commitment to learning from others and seeking outside perspectives from fellow students in the online environment. This global reach is further reinforced by an online educational medium that does not limit students to interacting with a closed set of individuals bound by physical
distance. This allows for a wider community to contribute to the generation of new ideas, enriched by varied cultural backgrounds and perspectives.

Though the literature on Hispanic/Latino student support explored in this research does not purposefully focus on intercultural competence, the possibilities for future research may yield close connections between cultural groups and the cultural need to explore new perspectives. Alternatively, the interest in developing intercultural competence is likely not Hispanic/Latino specific, but a shared belief inherent in all types of students who would explore online education to expand their intellectual horizons. Nonetheless, this population shared a passion for the exploration of other perspectives in this online environment and can be considered a strong motivator for them and their persistence intentions. Participants shared a deep appreciation for the way other students perceived the academic content and expressed genuine and explicit interest in learning about others’ cultural backgrounds as it can help them understand their world from a different lens.

**Conclusion**

While higher education may not be doing enough to support Hispanic/Latino students as Solorzano, Villalpando, and Oseguera (2005) suggested, there remains an opportunity for institutions to purposefully coordinate culturally relevant interventions in order to influence academic outcomes and success for Hispanic/Latino students enrolled in online programs. We may not be able to solve the socially constructed racism that is still evident in our society (Delgado, Stefancic, & Liendo, 2012; Delpit, 1998; West, 2003), but we can create a “safe space” for students to explore themselves and others in a culturally relevant online higher educational environment. This opportunity has been afforded to us by the expansion and development of the online educational platform which can bring people from various cultures into one forum. Designed with
purpose and intention, educational institutions can use this forum and develop supportive interventions for faculty and staff that align to the various cultural values and diverse backgrounds of their students.

This study aimed to answer the question: “what are the perspectives of Hispanic/Latino students enrolled in an online undergraduate or graduate degree program regarding cultural sensitivity in their interactions with student support services at a private university in New England?” The research explored characteristics of culturally sensitive interactions, challenges and successes faced by these students, and the degree of awareness regarding the existence of cultural sensitivity at this institution. The findings of this IPA study suggest that these Hispanic/Latino students face cultural insensitivity in their daily lives and look to the online educational environment as a “safe space” for the exploration of their own cultural identity and the cultural perspectives of others in the online community. Participants perceived inconsistency in the application of the tenants of Ladson-Billings (1992, 1995, 2014) Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the interactions with staff and faculty, but found value in the ability to interact with other students from various cultures. These conclusions influence the following recommendations in developing new culturally relevant practices at this institution and others who aspire to develop similar online programs. This study also suggests new possibilities for future research on this topic, including investigating the perspectives of staff and faculty, and the exploration of related issues as higher education continues to develop functional members of a more globally responsible society.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Successfully employing a culturally relevant environment requires the online higher education institution to direct mission, vision, strategy, resources, and tactics toward a purposefully coordinated effort between faculty, staff, external student support (i.e. family), and
the online community. This begins with the assignment of an institutional sponsor who creates
the vision for institutional change, such as the creation of a strategic plan to include staff and
faculty development, curriculum design, and strategic goals specifying recruitment and retention
of Hispanic/Latino students. A knowledgeable and driven institutional champion who has the
expertise on the subject matter and the ability to influence across business and academic units is
also required to further this effort. This institutional champion will execute the vision, driving the
incorporation of culturally sensitive language in interactions between faculty, staff, and students
through training that aligns to Ladson-Billings’ framework. Concepts such as implicit bias, cultural
relevant pedagogy, and culturally-accepted language must be included. The institutional champion
must also drive incorporation of best practices and culturally sensitive language into the content
in the academic curriculum. It will be critical for this individual to collaborate with departmental
leaders to incorporate this study’s findings into best practices, create additional focus groups, set
up a timeline for implementation, and adhere to the created strategic vision in order to hold the
institution accountable to its goals.

With institutional support, a collaborative effort of departmental champions can be
leveraged to deliver the shared vision and strategies to the various student facing functional areas.
Learning and Development offices can be leveraged to deliver training, utilizing the tenants of
Ladson-Billings’ Cultural Relevant Pedagogy as a theoretical foundation. External knowledge
resources can be brought in to address any gaps in understanding about cultural characteristics or
factors that need to be considered, including utilizing the voices of the students themselves as a
resource. For faculty at the institution, training can be developed which covers concepts such as
implicit bias (i.e. judgment or behavior derived from social influences or developmental cognitive
processes), intercultural competence (i.e. the ability to communicate effectively with people from
other cultures), and the introduction and use of cultural norms into classroom discussion (i.e. during first week introductions and orientation into the class, or in the inclusion of cultural exploration in the curriculum). Training for advisors can include similar concepts, but also include sharing best practices amongst staff members and advanced discovery techniques to uncover sources of student motivation during initial advising calls. Finally, a new approach to the delivery of education can be developed that begins with rethinking how the institution measures success via culturally relevant assessment.

Bridges (2008) suggested that successful programs focused on the use of assessment data to diagnose problems and measure solutions, integrating student services, cross-training throughout the institution about available resources, and gaining support from those who interact with students most often. For an institution to consider its efforts successful in the development of culturally sensitive student support, one must look to program and educational outcomes of its students. Institutions must realize significant advances in the degree attainment levels of Hispanics/Latinos in our industry in order to ensure the economic stability of our society. With the growth rate of Hispanics/Latinos exceeding all other ethnic groups, our society cannot afford to allow their economic progress to stagnate. We risk slowing the growth of our society intellectually and economically, as waning tax and revenue sources continue to be an issue.

The pressure continues to exist, just as it has for decades, to advance education for Hispanic/Latino students of the future. Higher education must devise new models for teaching and assessing student educational outcomes that are more culturally relevant. In a truly globally focused educational environment that values institutional prestige and respect, we must rethink traditional academic norms, such as in the time-honored traditions like the five chapter doctoral dissertation. New methods, which are focused on meeting the needs of students from various
cultures, must be designed and implemented. This will take courage, critical thinking, and a strong vision from those who are willing to seize the opportunities before them.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study on Hispanic/Latino student perspectives regarding cultural sensitivity in the online post-secondary environment is not without its limitations. As a qualitative IPA study, generalizations to a broader Hispanic/Latino community may be difficult. Quantitative research with a larger sample size of students across a larger number of online higher educational institutions may be necessary. In addition, this study does not present the viewpoints of the staff or faculty who interact with this student population. A secondary study using the same theoretical framework and design, focusing on the staff and faculty perspective would be appropriate. The findings of this secondary study may provide additional insights about the value staff and faculty place on cultural sensitivity in the online environment. This may allow administrators to understand where to focus training on cultural relevancy in the online academic environment, and assess the level of change management required to implement the best practices described in this research. Additional research on the impact language has on cultural norms and perspectives should also be completed within the online environment. This may include case studies on institutions who have attempted to incorporate Spanish language proficiency into the hiring of faculty and staff, such as at the now defunct Ameritas College at Brandman University in California. This research may yield additional insights into the importance of incorporating culturally-specific spoken and written languages in interactions with students. Finally, research on cultural relevance in the online environment must include other ethnicities and cultures. This research may inform practices in other learning environments as well. This is a call for leaders in our academic community to highlight the importance of respecting others, learning from different
perspectives, and developing responsible and welcoming people. Ultimately, what we learn about ourselves and others may just determine how well we will see each other as members of one big family.
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Attachment A: Recruitment Email

Dear (Participant),

My name is Raul Galarza, and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University. I grew up in Puerto Rico and have found my way to the Northeastern coast of the mainland. I have worked in higher education for the past twenty years and am very interested in helping make colleges and universities more accessible to every culture, including Hispanics/Latinos.

As part of a doctoral dissertation research project on the nature and existence of culturally relevant student support interactions between Hispanic/Latino(a) students enrolled in an online program at Southern New Hampshire University and staff, I would like to interview you to discuss your perceptions of cultural sensitivity with staff in admission, advising, financial aid, and/or faculty. The goal of this study is to contribute to a limited, but growing body of research on cultural factors involved in Hispanic/Latino(a) college student enrollment decisions in the online post-secondary environment. I hope to provide insights to administrators at this institution as well as other similar institutions to design more culturally relevant interactions and improve student satisfaction.

Here is what will be asked of you:

- Participate in a recorded videoconference or teleconference at a convenient time
- Answer semi-structured questions in an approximately 45 minute to 1 hour ½ interview
- If appropriate, provide relevant examples (documents, emails, etc.) related what you share
- Respond to potential follow-up questions seeking clarification or additional information

Your participation is completely voluntary. If you do not wish to volunteer your time, I would like to thank you for considering and wish you the best in your continued studies at SNHU. I also thank you for contributing to the improvement of the student experience at SNHU and other online institutions.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions about this research, please contact me at 603-851-1422 or galarza.n@husky.neu.edu

Sincerely,

[Signature]

N. Raul Galarza

IRB# CPS16-08-19
Approved: 10/12/16
Expiration Date: 10/11/17
Attachment D: Signed Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Lynda Beltz, Principal Investigator & N. Raul Galarza, NEU doctoral student
Title of Project: Culturally-Sensitive Support for Hispanic/Latinos Online College Students

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want 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.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are asked to participate because you are enrolled in a first-year online undergraduate or graduate program at Southern New Hampshire University and have self-identified as Hispanic or Latino/a during the admission process and may be able to provide insight into the nature and existence of cultural sensitivity in your interactions with faculty and staff.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to understand the student experience for Hispanic/Latino(a) students by learning how students feel about the way faculty and staff interact with them related to their cultural norms, needs, and expectations. By understanding these experiences and insights, we can develop new approaches in working with students from Hispanic/Latino(a) backgrounds, as well as other cultural groups.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to participate, you will be asked to provide answers to questions during a 45 minute to 1 hour ½ interview via video conferencing or tele conferencing. All interviews will be recorded for transcription purposes. If a participant agrees to participate but does not want to be recorded, the interview will proceed with the researcher taking copious notes during the interview. Participants may be contacted again after the interview to gain clarification on answers or to seek additional information. Participants may also provide additional examples in the form of electronic documents (emails, screenshots, etc.) which may help provide context to answers. All participants will be offered a copy of the completed research study.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
You will be interviewed over the phone or over a video conferencing application (e.g. Skype) in a 45 minute to 1 hour ½ session at a time that is mutually convenient. You may choose where you are comfortable participating in this interview, whereas the researcher will conduct the interview from a private setting.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts for participants in this study.

Will I benefit by being in this research?

IRB# CPS16-08-19
Approved: 10/12/16
Expiration Date: 10/11/17
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help improve experiences for all Hispanic/Latino(a) students enrolled in an online program at SNHU.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your involvement and contributions to this study will remain confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the personally identifiable information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project. Pseudonyms will be used when quoting directly from transcripts and all other personally identifiable information will be held in password-protected electronic files that can only be accessed by the researchers. Video and audio recordings will be destroyed at the conclusion of the research study.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board or Southern New Hampshire University’s Institutional Review Board to see this information.

**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**

Participation in this research is completely voluntary and you may quit at any time.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

Since no personally identifiable information will be shared with anyone other than the researchers, there is no cause for concern regarding harm in participating in this study.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a student at Southern New Hampshire University.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact N. Raul Galarza (galarza.n@husky.neu.edu), the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Lynda Beltz (L.Beltz@northeastern.edu), the Principal Investigator for this research project.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

There will be no compensation for participation in this study as it is completely voluntary.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

There will be no costs to participate in this study.

**Is there anything else I need to know?**

We appreciate the time and energy you will take to participate in this study and thank you for your consideration and support of this research.

IRB# CPS16-08-19
Approved: 10/12/16
Expiration Date: 10/11/17
I agree to take part in this research.

Signature of participant

Date

Printed name of participant

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

Date

N. Raúl Galarza
Printed name of person above

IRB# CPS16-08-19
Approved: 10/12/16
Expiration Date: 10/11/17
Appendix C
Interview protocol and prompt questions

First, I want to thank you for your time and your willingness to participate in this interview. I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University and this interview is part of a research project to understand the lived experiences of Hispanic/Latino(a) students enrolled in an online program at (institution). You have been identified as someone who may be able to provide great insights into the experience of a first year student in an online program. Our research project focuses on the experiences of Hispanic/Latino(a) students with a particular interest in understanding how students enrolled in an on-line program describe the nature and existence of cultural sensitivity in their interactions with staff and faculty. Through this study, we hope to gain more insight into your experience as you navigate the online environment and interact with others here. Hopefully this will allow us to identify ways in which we can better support students using culturally relevant interactions during their academic journey.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to record our conversation today so that I can create a transcript of your responses. I will also be taking written notes during the interview to ensure I capture as much information as possible. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

OK, ___, I have begun recording our session. ___, I’d like to let you know that all responses will remain confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. My doctoral faculty advisor and I will be the only ones with access to the recordings which will be destroyed at the conclusion of the research project. In order to meet our human subjects requirements at both universities, I have asked that you sign the participant consent form which you have already provided me. To briefly summarize, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or this form you have signed?

We have planned this interview to last about 45 minutes to one hour and a half. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If, at any time, you’re uncomfortable with a question or need clarification, please feel free to let me know. Do you have any questions at this time?

I would like to take a moment to learn a little bit more about you and your background. Please feel free to go in as much depth as you feel comfortable sharing. You can include personal, academic, or professional elements as appropriate.

- Tell me a little bit about your background…

- How do you identify yourself culturally?

- How has your cultural background or experiences influenced your life?

I’d like to shift gears and move to your experience at SNHU. Again, please feel free to go into as much depth as you feel comfortable sharing and include any relevant specific examples that will help me understand your experiences.
- What helped you decide to enroll at (institution) and your program?

- How has your culture, background, and family history influenced your choices and interactions with staff and faculty at SNHU?

- What does the phrase “cultural sensitivity” mean to you?

- In regard to your interactions with staff (such as advisors and financial aid representatives), how would you describe them in relation to cultural sensitivity?

- In regard to your interactions with faculty and the curriculum, how would you describe them in relation to cultural sensitivity?

- Have you experienced cultural insensitivity? Tell me about your experience.

- When working with support staff, such as advisors, financial aid, and faculty during your first year here, what experiences have aligned to your cultural background and interests?

- In what ways has this online environment or interactions within the online community supported your cultural background, interests, or needs?

- In what ways has this online environment or interactions within the online community been a challenge for you personally as it relates to your cultural background, interests, or needs?

- What has been the biggest “ah-ha!” moment for you during this journey and why?

- What could SNHU staff and faculty learn about the Hispanic/Latino(a) culture that could help them improve your student experience?

At this time I have no further questions for you. I’d like to thank you for participating in this research project. Your insights will certainly be useful as we work to improve the online student experience. I would be happy to provide you with the final research report when completed. Do you have any questions before I let you go?
Appendix D
Examples of research study major and supporting themes

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<tr>
<th>Nodes</th>
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<td>Support system in academia (staff)</td>
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