THE SOLO JOURNEY: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF FIRST-GENERATION COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS FROM IMMIGRANT BACKGROUNDS

A thesis presented
by
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to
The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

in the field of Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
October 2019
Abstract

The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study was to discover how community college students from first-generation immigrant backgrounds made sense of their experiences as the first in their family to go to college. The need for this study is highlighted by research that finds that almost one-quarter of college students come from immigrant backgrounds, and this number is projected to rise for some time into the future. While open access community college education offers first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds opportunities to earn degrees, first-year students are twice as likely as their peers to leave college before their sophomore year (Choy, 2001). The problem of practice examined was that college systems designed for traditional students do not consider first-generation students with immigrant backgrounds and their unique personal experiences, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and values, which amounts to a lack of support that can contribute to isolation and high dropout rates for this population. The tenants of academic resilience theory and critical race theory were applied to gather insight into how students make sense of experiences in education and specifically navigating the community college system. This qualitative study with six students enrolled in two community colleges in Washington State revealed that students viewed adverse experiences as the foundation of personal strengths that they use to overcome obstacles as community college students. Students identified relationships with individuals at school, at home, and in the community as impacting their perceptions of their academic achievement. The study also revealed that perceptions about on-going academic achievement and value of a college degree were linked to having a clear sense of purpose and the opportunity to make a difference for others who share aspects of their history and background experiences. This study serves to move beyond a descriptive model that categorizes students to a prescriptive strength-based
approach based on the particularities of individual linguistic and cultural background experience.

The recommendations in this study could be used to provide educational leaders and policymakers with information to guide decisions about how community college systems support first-generation community college students in persisting in their post-secondary experience.

*Keywords*: interpretative phenomenological analysis, first-generation community college students, academic resilience, community college students from immigrant backgrounds, student persistence, English as a Second Language, community college guided pathways
DEDICATION

To My Mother

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Evelyn Martens, whose love, support, and unwillingness to let me give up continues to be the voice in my ear whenever I think that the challenges are too great. Thank you for being an example of a strong individual and for teaching me that success is about persistence. You taught me that anything is possible if you don’t give up. I miss you dearly.

To My Family

To my life-long partner Dean, thank you for every time you reminded me of the importance of my research and my career. Your words of encouragement and your constant support kept me moving forward. And to my three remarkable daughters Madison, Kennedy, Bailey, who inspire me to keep listening and learning so that I can be the best possible version of myself. You are pure joy. My Grandmother, Anna Martens, that interview that I conducted as part of a high-school assignment helped me understand depth of sacrifice and put me on this path. Dad, John Martens, Sister Sharon, Brother Sylvan, you are such a tremendous part of my story and I feel so blessed to share a history with you.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge Dr. William Ewell for his teaching and significant support throughout the various stages of my doctoral journey. Your guidance in helping me clearly articulate my problem of practice made all difference. Thank you for all the proofreading, the conversations, and providing guidance and feedback that helped me to be a stronger writer. In addition, I want to thank Dr. Carolyn Bair for serving as my second reader for reading my work and for guidance and assurance that my dissertation was meeting Northeastern University’s standards.

Dr. Marleen Ramsey, who is not only my third reader, but a role model, mentor and friend. I am beyond grateful for the investment you have made in my life as a human being striving to make difference in higher education. Thank you for shining a light on the path and showing me the way to use talent, strength and passion to be a strong academic leader. I am forever grateful. Thank you.

Finally, a very special and heartfelt thanks to my participants. Your willingness to share your stories of struggle and success bring this work to life. You are brave beyond measure and powerful beyond words. I know that you will go on to be mighty, making a difference in the lives of those you touch and the change makers in your communities.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

First-generation community college students from an immigrant background are the first in their families to go to college in the United States, and possibly even the first in the family to graduate from high school. This puts them at the beginning of a very long and often confusing journey through the complex systems of higher education in the United States. In order to improve the college experience for these students, educators must come to understand what it truly means to be the first in a family to pursue a college degree. In Reflections Bridging Cultures, Julia Lara (1992) wrote about her experiences as a first-generation community college student from Latina and African descent. Lara said that her experience surviving challenges in college was dependent upon “how one survived intellectually and emotionally in an environment that devalued one’s contribution because of one’s race and cultural background” (p. 67). Lara’s description of her college experience is not unlike other first-generation students from immigrant background who describe their college experience as one of survival where they are being suspended between the two worlds of home and school, where they do not quite fit in either one (Banks, 2006; Jehangir, Williams, & Jeske, 2012).

This study explored how successful first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds perceived their unique cultural background and bilingual abilities in the context of the community college system. This research built on previous studies that found students from immigrant backgrounds who are first in their families to attend college experience college as a painful step away from traditional family values and cultural experiences that have shaped their life (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Jehangir, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In fact, research finds that it is the lack of similarity between a student’s culture of origin and the college culture that causes early departure from college (Bridges & Hayek, 2006; Conteh, 2018; Jehangir,
First-generation students from immigrant backgrounds go to college with a dream of securing a future that includes earning a college degree. However, unlike their peers with college-graduated parents, first-generation immigrant students come to college with little or no knowledge of the U.S. higher education system, and often exist in environments where very few people share their history. In the absence of family and others who can guide them, first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds are alone to navigate the spaces between home and community while adjusting to life as a college student (Alverez, 2011; Baum & Flores, 2011; Edwards, Catling, & Parry, 2016; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Jehangir et al., 2012; Stephens et al., 2012; Vega, 2016).

The current day reality is that community college campuses are becoming more diverse, which means that educators must be more aware of the complex cultural layers that contribute to student experiences in the community college system (Perez, 2010; Vega, 2016). Contemporary researchers in the community college system continue to debate ways that institutions of higher education should change to support equitable completion outcomes for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds at the system level (Bailey, Jaggars, & Jenkins, 2015; Baker, 2016; Scott-Clayton, 2011). The aim of this study was to contribute to this conversation by adding a nuanced understanding of how academically resilient first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds perceive education and how they make sense of their experiences within the community college system—specifically, the ways that students access inner resources as strength as they overcome factors of isolation, systemic oppression, and marginalization in their first critical year in community college.
Context and Background: Community College Education

Open access policies and an explicit mission to make education accessible for all are hallmarks of the community college system and continue to be central to the mission of community colleges in the United States. These factors have roots in the Morrill Act of 1862, also known as the Land Grant Act. The Land Grant Act provided dedicated lands for the development of colleges and laid the philosophical foundation of these institutions, which was to provide open access to education for women and minorities (Jurgens, 2010). Today, community colleges offer a gateway to higher education for all students, including millions of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds who enroll in a wide variety of classes and programs each year (Bailey et al., 2015; Jenkins, 2011; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Vega, 2016). However, high dropout rates along with racial and income inequalities in education ultimately brought about a focus on affirmative action policies in the 1990s. With this new look at affirmative action policies came questions about how to implement inclusive processes in higher education to measure the fair and equal entry access for minority students. As a result, many 2- and 4-year colleges considered strategies to increase the diversity of their student body. However, it was not until the Higher Education Act of 1965 to the current Student-Athlete Right to Know Act (1990) and the Campus Security Act (1990) that performance rates for minority populations were called into question and colleges were required to disclose graduation rates (Bailey et al., 2015; Boggs, 2011). Early research conducted under the Student-Athlete Right to Know Act (1990) to assess college graduation rates revealed significantly lower graduation rates for minority students, part-time students, and women (Bailey, Calcagno, Jenkins, Leinbach, & Kienzl, 2006; hooks, 2003). It was many years after the implementation of affirmative action and the Student-Athlete Right to Know Act before colleges began publishing research findings
on graduation rates. When data on graduation rates were finally published, the results showed that only 39% of students who entered community college graduated within 6 years, and some community colleges had graduation rates as low as 10% (Bailey et al., 2006; Bailey et al., 2015).

In 2009, the Obama administration put a spotlight on community colleges, calling on them to contribute to the 2025 goal of a 60% increase in the percent of the U.S. population with a postsecondary credential or degree (Bailey et al., 2015; Boggs, 2011). This sparked a critical time for community colleges as they began to question their identity and reimage their purpose as institutions of learning that provide all students with access to education while at the same time ensuring that everyone who enters leaves with a meaningful college credentials.

Increasing graduation rates is a high priority for college educators, policymakers, and groups interested in developing a highly-skilled workforce (Passel & Cohn, 2017), and reducing the complexity within the system is a priority for educators (Bailey et al., 2015; Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Jenkins, 2011; Karp, 2011; Scott-Clayton, 2011). In The Time is Now: Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence, Tia Brown McNair (2015) wrote that the Association of American Colleges and Universities was calling for a paradigm shift that included “identification, examination, and dismantling of mindsets in higher education that serve as a catalyst for marginalization, inequity, and intolerance” (p.1). Currently, community colleges across the country are undertaking reforms to address structural barriers within the system to increase college graduation rates (Bailey, 2018). Many of the recent reforms in the community college system across the nation are changing community college practices around enrollment, advising, course offerings, and financial aid. However, a critical component of current reform must include an investigation that takes into account the way students experience the system differently so that practices can be adapted in a way that honors, retains, inspires, and graduates
first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017; Takacs, 2002; McNair, 2016).

First-Generation Community College Students From Immigrant Backgrounds

There are data to support the fact that first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds continue to be a growing population on community college campuses (Baum & Flores, 2011; Boggs, 2011; Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Jehangir et al., 2012; Pratt, 2017; Vega, 2016). Data published by The Pew Research Center (2015) revealed that the fastest growing populations on college campuses today are Hispanic students entering college directly from high school. In fact, Krogstad’s (2016) report found that Hispanic student enrollment in all colleges increased from 62% in 2008 to 69% in 2012, while the percent of college enrollment for white students declined from 71% to 67% during the same period. However, first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds continue to lag behind in earning college degrees (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Although demand for education is increasing and the connection between education and access to family-sustaining career jobs is clear, the lack of educational attainment for first-generation students coming from immigrant backgrounds continues to threaten the economic health and well-being of immigrants’ families and the communities where they live and work. According to the Migration Policy Institute (2015), in 2012, nearly 31% of 35.1 million immigrants ages 25 and older lacked a high school diploma compared to 10% of native-born adults. Data support the fact the decline in the numbers of working-age populations in the workforce will be offset by the increase in the number of working-age U.S.-born adults with immigrant parents, a number that is projected to increase to 24.6 million in 2035, up from 11.1 million in 2015 (Passel & Cohn, 2017).
Studies find that students from immigrant and diverse backgrounds enrolled in community colleges continue to graduate at lower rates than their peers (Ma & Baum, 2016; Sparks, 2017), and while vocational degree programs continue to be the gateway to family-sustaining jobs, first-generation, first-year students are twice as likely as their peers to leave college before their sophomore year and eight times as likely to leave college before their junior year (Choy, 2001).

**Rationale and Significance**

Research on first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds has been used to statistically identify the problem of low educational attainment for first-generation immigrant community college students (DeAngelo & Franke, 2016; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Swail, 2014). Previous studies have documented the challenges that students from immigrant backgrounds face when they enter college because of their limited knowledge of higher education (Baum & Flores, 2011; Boggs, 2011; Jehangir, 2009; Kuh et al., 2006). Many argued that it is lack of "social know-how" or "college knowledge" that keeps first-generation college students from completing degrees (Deli-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Jenkins, 2011; Karp & Mechure, 2013; Scott-Clayton, 2011; Yosso, 2005), but less is written that gives a personal accounting of how academically resilient students from immigrant backgrounds, who are first in their families to go to college, create meaning around challenging experiences and graduate from college (Perez & McDonough, 2008; Reyes & Nora, 2012; Vega, 2016).

Bensimon (2005) made the case that it is time for educators to move from using a diversity frame to an equity cognitive frame. Bensimon (2005) argued that using a diversity framework in education reform perpetuates deficit models and the further marginalization of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds. Diversity-minded individuals are aware
of the demographic make-up of college campuses but are less aware of how to address systemic issues that contribute to the unequal opportunities available for students on campus. Why many chose to leave without a degree warrants investigation. Equity is not achieved unless educators know how students’ unique social and cultural backgrounds play a part in how first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds experience school. Because this study focused on how students made sense of their academic environment, an investigation into students’ unique sense of self and their perceptions of the college system was central to this study and adds to the research on first-generation students, students from immigrant backgrounds, academic resilience, student achievement, and community college education.

The more significant issues of a student’s ability to persist after enrolling requires knowledge of how language, college policies and practices, campus and classroom climate, and prior experiences affect students. Access to institutions of higher learning is different from access to all services and educational opportunities within the institution. Data collected from empirical studies identified the problem of low completion rates for first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds, but there was less qualitative research to provide practitioners with a roadmap for how to redesign oppressive structures in a way that encourages students to exercise their sense of purpose and resilience (Bensimon, 2005; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Staylor, 2019; Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, 2011; Yosso, 2005). Research efforts to raise achievement levels for first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds can be hindered by educators’ tendencies to place the problem upon the student (and family) without examining student experience as it relates to school practices and student outcomes (Banks, 2006; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Gray, Johnson, Kish-Gephart, & Tilton, 2018; hooks, 2003; Morales, 2004; Yosso, 2005). Qualitative studies focused on insights of first-generation immigrant students have largely
been left out of literature. Consequently, there is limited information available to inform and
guide educational system reform to increase the success rates for this population of community
college students (Reason, 2009; Szelengy & Chang, 2002). Therefore, a qualitative investigation
into how students coming from diverse cultural, ethnic, and language minority groups not only
access higher education but how they remain academically resilient in environments that require
them to overcome challenging circumstances could be used to inform the work of stakeholders
within community college systems.

Problem Statement

The problem of practice examined in this study was that college systems designed for
traditional students do not consider first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds’
unique personal experiences, linguistic abilities, cultural backgrounds and values, and lack of
college acknowledgment of unique personal experiences. The lack of attention in these areas
contributes to isolation and high dropout rates for first-generation college students.

Students from immigrant backgrounds find themselves on the margins in a system that fails to acknowledge how their unique personal experiences, cultural backgrounds, language abilities, and community values contribute to their academic success (Alvarez, 2011; Arbona &
Nora, 2007; Baum & Flores, 2011; Braxton, Hirschy; Morales, 2004; Vega, 2016). Students
often feel judged when they identify themselves as needing additional academic or social
support, so many choose to retreat into invisibility as a way to fit into the world of academia
(Banks, 2006; Gray et al., 2018; Jehangir et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the cultural norms and expectations that makeup college systems create a
level of social and cultural discomfort as students strive to adapt to unfamiliar environments
(Banks, 2006; Crenshaw, 2010; Gray et al., 2018; Jehangir, 2010; Kim & Chambers, 2015; Sue,
Finally, in adapting to cultural norms on campus, students experience personal loss as they step away from the traditional values and cultural experiences that have shaped their life experience (Inman & Mayes, 1999; Jehangir, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The degree of loss and isolation that students experience is intensified when students find that their life experiences, ideas and values, and cultural backgrounds are not valued in the classroom (Jehangir, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Torres & Hernandez, 2007). The isolation that students experience, coupled with the guilt that many students feel when they take deliberate steps away from their family traditions, becomes overwhelming, and many students do not persist (Alverez, 2011; Arbona & Nora, 2007; Kuh et al., 2006).

Significance of the Research Questions

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis was to discover how students from immigrant backgrounds who succeed in completing their first quarters in college overcame challenges, adapted to college, and, despite adversity, found success within the community college system. Specifically, this qualitative study sought to make student experience visible by asking questions that allowed students to describe how they made sense of experiences in the community college system. The answers to the questions asked in this study provided a deeper understanding of the student experience and could be used when developing policies and practices to increase student success (Creswell, 2013). To this end, the research questions answered in a series of in-depth interviews with participants were used as the method for collecting data.
Research Questions

The primary question that this study sought to answer is how students use inner resources such as bilingualism, cultural backgrounds, and personal values when overcoming challenges to remain academically resilient in a system where they may be isolated and alone.

The subquestions asked include:

1. How do first-generation community college students from immigrant backgrounds remain resilient within their academic environment?
2. How do first-generation community college students from immigrant backgrounds perceive their sociocultural, environmental, and interpersonal experiences as contributors to their academic success?
3. How do first-generation community college students from immigrant backgrounds make sense of their academic achievement?

Definitions of Key Terminology

Definitions for the terms used throughout this study are as follows:

- Persistence: those students who after enrolling, remained enrolled through at least three quarters of their first year of college.
- Open access: access to the full range of college experiences, including all those of a personal, social, and economic nature (Pascarella et al., 2003).
- Resiliency: a multifaceted process by which individuals exhibit the ability to draw the best from the environments in which they find themselves, including the family, school, and community (Morales, 2008).
- Academic resilience: the relevance of resilience in educational contexts defined as “a capacity to overcome acute and/or chronic adversity that is seen as a major threat to a
student’s educational development” (Martin, 2013, p. 488).

- First-generation students: students whose parents are foreign-born, are nonnative English speakers, and who have never attended a U.S. college for the purpose of earning a college degree.
- Successful first-generation students: those students still enrolled in a degree program after three quarters of the first year of enrollment has elapsed.
- Unsuccessful first-generation college students: students who enrolled in college classes but dropped out before completing three quarters of the first year.

**Theoretical Framework**

Critical race theorists analyze and challenge the higher education system by conceptualizing education as a means to bringing about social change that acknowledges how the system advantages some individuals over others and challenges the status quo (Bell, 1992; Freire, 2006; Giroux, 2006). Ospina and Su (2009) stated, “In American society, race continues to be a key determinant of an individual’s and group’s fate in the social structure, as well as a key social identity construct to devise organizational, community and public policy interventions to combat inequality” (p. 132). Critical race theory is the frame used to examine how deficit models and systemic oppression impact how students are supported and how confident students are in their ability to succeed within the system of higher education (Banks, 2006; Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 2010; García & Guerra, 2004).

Resilience theory has been applied across disciplines, so tenets of academic resilience theory were applied to understand how students made meaning of their first-year experience and how students overcame the stress of adjusting to a new environment and adapting to new system norms within the educational context. Although still relatively unexamined, academic resilience
is defined as “a capacity to overcome acute and chronic adversity that is seen as a major threat to a student’s educational development” (Martin, 2013, p. 488). This researcher sought to examine academic resilience within the educational environment for the purpose of interpretation of student experiences that provided the greatest insights on how students who persist despite adversity are retained in the community college system.

Just as colleges are looking to use data as the basis for reform to increase college completion rates, the findings of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) studies rooted in the words of participants can provide qualitative research that answers the questions of how students rely on inner resources in a way that helps them succeed in college. In the following review, the researcher identifies the tenets of resilience theory and its origin and seminal authors. The evolution of the theory that makes this theory appropriate for a study conducted with first-generation immigrant students in the community college system is also described.

**Resilience Theory**

Resilience theory is a framework for analyzing an individual's ability or capacity to “withstand or recover,” or to “bounce back” from experiences that could interfere with normal development (Green, Galambos, & Lee, 2004; Ledesma, 2014; Masten, 2007, 2011; Windle, 2011). A contemporary theorist, Masten (2011), defined resilience as a common circumstance arising from ordinary human adaptive processes. Masten (2011) identified two major approaches to the study of resilience. The first approach is the variable-focused approach that links various measures of risk and the qualities of the individual or environment that reduce the probability of a negative outcome. The second approach is the person-focused approach that compares personal characteristics to determine what differentiates resilient individuals from non-resilient individuals. O'Leary (1998) proposed yet another model called the challenge model,
claiming that an individual’s ability to adapt to challenges prepared them to overcome when faced with the next challenge. Although resilience theory has been applied across disciplines, the components of resilience theory that focus on human development as a means for understanding the experiences of first-generation immigrant students in education is not well documented in literature (Staylor, 2019).

The historical trajectory of resilience theory. The study of human resilience as a theoretical base has been researched across many disciplines including, psychology, biology, and psychopathology (Ledesma, 2014; Masten, 2011; Windel, 2011). Early studies conducted by Garmezy and Masten (1986), Rutter (1985), and Werner and Smith (1992) in the fields of psychiatry and psychology were used to identify resiliency in children living in extremely adverse environments. These researchers applied the concept of human resilience to measure risk factors against protective barriers that prevented the children from developing psychological disorders. Originally, resilience was defined as “doing well” (Masten, 2011, p. 494). However, over the past four decades, researchers have moved from defining phenomena to explaining observed behavior that can lead to applying concepts to policy and practice that promote resilience (Matson, 2011). Although early researchers claimed resilient individuals were invulnerable (Rutter, 1985), more recent studies show resilient individuals as growing as they adapt to adversity in a developmental process within a caring environment (Barnard, 1994; Martin, 2013; Masten, 2011). Essentially, growth and resilience are evident as individuals recover from adverse life experiences and become stronger as a result of overcoming these adverse experiences (Ledsma, 2014; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Windle, 2011).

Seminal authors of the theory. Garmezy’s (1970) seminal study of children of parents with schizophrenia was some of the first work done using the tenets of resilience theory.
Gramezy (1970) found that the majority of children of parents with schizophrenia did not develop the illness and went on to have good relationships with peers, achieve academic success in school and establish productive work lives. Werner and Smith (1992) conducted their work with children living in Kauai by studying the development of subgroups of children living in high-risk situations such as extreme poverty and family conflict, and measured competence and mental health around the ages of 10 and 18 and into adulthood. The researchers compared those who were doing well with those who were struggling. Resilience studies that identify resilience as an aspect of human development that takes place over an individual’s lifetime build on the work of Gramezy (1970) and Werner and Smith (1992). With the focus on identity formation and personal growth, later theorists’ view of resilience also aligns with that of developmental theorists such as John Dewey, Erik Erikson, Uri Bronfenbrenner, Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, Abraham Maslow, and Lev Vygotsky.

Another early contributor to resilience theory is Michael Rutter. Rutter (1985) promoted the notion that resilience is not something that individuals possess but is a condition that can be nurtured in healthy environments, claiming that “no one has absolute resilience, rather it is more appropriate to consider susceptibility to stress as a graded phenomenon” (p. 626). Rutter (1985) identified three considerations as necessary in resilience studies. Firstly, resilience must be assessed over the long term, not as a moment-in-time response. Secondly, influences for resilience are found in individual differences, the environment, or a combination of the two. Thirdly, resilience might be found in the processes used by people rather than in the circumstances of their lives, and so studies should include process identification rather than variable identification. Rutter’s (1985) studies highlighted the need to know more about how to influence processes and possible ways that resilience could be promoted.
Bernard’s (1996) contributions provided a basis for further studies that identify adversity as places where individuals can display optimism and hope and more recently, grit (Cormier, Dunn, & Causgrove, 2019; Duckwork, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). Bonnie Benard’s (1991) work built upon Bernard’s theory of protective factors to advocate for school-wide systems changes that would foster student growth, academic learning, and persistence by creating a sense of belonging for students within nurturing respectful environments. Benard (1991) expanded Bernard’s theory and introduced the concept of the environmental protective factors that are essential to promoting resilience. These factors were considered within the categories of caring relationships, developing an atmosphere of trust, safety and high expectations that convey confidence in a student’s ability to contribute in decision making and highlight a student’s talents.

**Contemporary scholars.** Historically, resilience researchers focused on psychological reliance (Garmenzy, 1970; Rutter, 1985; Werner & Smith 1992). However, contemporary scholars now use resilience theory to research resilience across multiple disciplines as well as across cultures (Ungar, 2012) and academics (Martin, 2013; Martin & Marsh, 2006; Morales, 2004; Morales, 2008).

Masten’s (2011) research on resilience included how factors such as academics, parent engagement and support, socioeconomic status, and gender impact students’ ability to overcome adversity and persist. Morales (2008) stated “researching and understanding academic resilience has as its primary mission - the desire to learn about, and spread resilience to underachieving groups” (p. 229). Over the past several years, the primary mission has changed to include a more holistic view of academic resilience because of the universal student experience of struggle, adversity, pressure, and challenge (Martin & Marsh, 2006). Martin (2013) described academic
buoyancy as the ability to bounce back or to remain buoyant despite the setback of poor grades and poor overall performance.

The combination of early studies and more recent studies that focus on academic resilience and buoyancy suggests that some elements of resilience can be developed by overcoming a catastrophic event, thus creating a layer of protection between the individual and potentially derailing situations that arise in the environment. Recent studies have suggested that considering students in the context of their community college, home, and community experiences could be used to examine the influence these environments have on students’ academic resilience. This study draws from research on resilience and specifically focuses on academic resilience as a framework for understanding the first-generation immigrant student experience of overcoming adversity on the way to success in higher education.

Published Criticism of Resilience Theory

One criticism of resilience theory is that ambiguities in the definitions and terminology within resilience theory are too broad, leading to unrelated outcomes (Bonanno, 2012; Ledesma, 2014; Luthar et al., 2000; Windle, 2011; Windle, Bennett, & Noyes, 2011). Luther et al., (2000) stated, “The need for specificity in discussing silent outcomes is pressing” (p. 548). Inherent in resilience theory is a dynamic aspect that makes variables hard to define and equally as hard to measure. The dynamic nature of the theory is due in large part to the diversity in age, time, and types of stressors being considered as the challenges that individuals are required to overcome (Pianta & Walsh, 1998).

“There has been disagreement in the literature on the boundaries of the resilience concept, particularly regarding the timing in the case of recovery from the disruptive function” (Masten, 2011, p. 496). The ambiguity in applying the resilience framework when applied to
adults is due in part to the fact that the theory was constructed for studies with children (Bonanno, 2012; Windle, 2011). An argument against the validity of resilience theory in studies with adults is that as people change and grow over time, so do the unique challenges or adverse situations people encounter (Luthar & Dante, 2000; McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988). The diverse experiences faced by adults makes it challenging for resilience researchers to demonstrate whether they are measuring resilience or an entirely different experience (Windle 2011). Bonanno (2012) found that adult adversity may be more isolated but potentially more disruptive and permanent. A consideration when developing this study was the need to demonstrate reliable and valid measures and an effective strategy for analysis, and an explanation of results (Windle, 2011).

Another concern is when resilience theory is used to describe a set of fixed and stable personality traits because this is used to describe how individuals view and respond to phenomena differently based on their socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural background can perpetuate deficit thinking models in higher education (Green et al., 2008; Morales & Trautman, 2004).

**Recent Research Related to Resilience Theory**

Current studies in resilience theory have created counter-arguments for criticism of resilience theory, and recent studies use resilience as one way to address deficit thinking in higher education. Masten (2014) claimed that resilience theory affects multiple theories concerned with human development and growth and is particularly influential in the “shift away from deficit-based models about symptoms and treating problems to an intentional focus on strengths and methods to facilitate success and adaptive process” (p. 264). Masten (2014) claimed that variable and person-focused approaches to resilience converge and suggested that
resilience is not an extraordinary adaptation but rather commonplace, characterizing this phenomenon as not exceptional, but rather “ordinary magic”. Contemporary research used resiliency theory as a strengths-based approach to study "adaptation, function, or development occurring during or following experiences that pose significant threats to the individual" (Masten, 2011, p. 494).

In recent years there has been a shift toward studying resilience in the context of adult human growth and development (Cormier et al., 2019; Masten, 2014). Resiliency researchers want to account for how adults maintain stability and bounce back from adversity and go on living a healthy life (Bonanno, 2012; Martin, 2013; Netuveli, Wiggins, Montgomery, Hildon, & Blane, 2008). Bonanno (2012) related resilience to early experiences pointing to times when individuals overcame adversity as evidenced by responses later in life.

Recent research has looked at the impact of early experiences and social support to identify factors outside of an individual’s personality that contribute to resilience (Greene et al., 2004; Yosso, 2005). Specific variables such as positive self-concept, social competence, attachment and association with positive adult role models, and a supportive family environment have been identified as indices of resilience and as key components of resilience theory (Rutter, 1985; Werner & Smith, 1992). Yosso’s (2005) cultural capital theory connects with resilience theory by considering how an individual’s prior experience with adversity in educational environments builds cultural capital by finding aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital. Morales’s (2008) decade-long study with students found that student’s ability to adapt by using protective factors and applying them to new challenges helps them remain “on a path of academic and professional success” (p. 245)

Martin’s (2013) quantitative study with 918 Australian students in nine schools was
conducted to determine if academic buoyancy and academic resilience could be used to explain students’ capacity to deal with everyday setbacks as well as with more significant adverse events. This study found that academic resilience and academic buoyancy account for how students deal with aspects of their experiences in academia.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has considered a broad range of literature related to first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds in the community college system. Although there is literature that provides insight into the challenges that all students face when they get to college, there is less written about how the disparate experiences of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds affect their ability to persist in community college. The literature considered the mission of the community college as open access, low tuition institution that promises the opportunity for students to acquire degrees that afford them access to family-sustaining jobs. Research supported claims that although the numbers of students enrolling in community college is growing, students from immigrant backgrounds continue to graduate at low rates. Qualitative studies are needed to provide insight into the ways that these first students experience the college system. The theoretical framework of resilience was ideal for a study that sought to understand how students used internal resources as strength to overcome challenges in the environment in a way that made them stronger and more prepared to handle adversity in the first critical year in college.

**Applications to Current Study**

The study’s research questions, combined with the critical race theory and academic resilience theoretical framework, served as the lens to explore how students made sense of lived experiences as first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds in community college.
Considering student experience through the resilience framework allowed for an in-depth analysis of how students’ made sense of the highs and lows they experienced during the first critical year of studies and what allowed them to persist in college.

Qualitative methods and IPA methodology were appropriate in this study where the goal was to understand how first-generation community college students from immigrant backgrounds made sense of their experiences. A qualitative study of this nature is needed to add to research by identifying how educators can foster students’ resilience in a way that ensures students have the support needed to navigate pathways to graduation in the college systems. The literature included studies on first-generation immigrant students and some of the adaptive challenges they face in their effort to transition from high school to college and as they strive to succeed in community college education system. These studies and findings are presented in the subsequent literature review.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Educational attainment represents a key predictor of social and economic success, especially for first- or second-generation immigrant families. The number of students from immigrant backgrounds who come to community college seeking higher education that provides them with work-ready certificates and degrees or access to 4-year degrees is increasing; however, first-generation students coming from immigrant backgrounds lag in overall educational attainment (Baker, 2016; Carneval, Smith, & Strohl, 2010; DeAngelo & Franke, 2016; Gándara & Mordechay, 2017; Krogstad, 2016). Census Bureau data from 2014–2015 show that “42.4 million immigrants, both legal and illegal, now live in the United States” (Zeigler & Camarota, 2017, p. 1), and although immigrants comprise 16% of the total adult workforce, they comprise more than 44% of adults in the labor force who have not completed high school (Zeigler & Camarota, 2017). “Overwhelmingly, these [working] parents want their children to get a good education and enjoy a better life, but they have…little control over the circumstances of their children’s education (Gándara & Mordechay, 2017, p. 149). According to the Migration Policy Institute (2015), in 2012, nearly 31% of 35.1 million immigrants ages 25 and older lacked a high school diploma compared to 10% of native-born adults. This trend continues in college. In 2016, 19% of Latina/o students aged 25 to 29 years old earned a bachelor’s degree or higher compared to 64% of Asians, 43% of Whites, 23% of Blacks, and 10% of Native Americans (McFarland et al., 2017).

Implications for Leaders in Community College

Presently, leaders in community colleges across the United States are tasked with leading change efforts that will reform community college systems to create seamless and supported pathways. These changes will support the growing number of first-generation students coming
from immigrant backgrounds to earn college degrees, which will prepare them to succeed in the
21st-century workplace. Community college educators must be equipped to lead change that
meets the outcome expectations of students coming from a wide array of backgrounds and levels
of preparation as they enter higher education (Baker, 2016; Bailey et al., 2015; Carnevale et al.,
2010; Remington & Remington, 2013). Increasing the college enrollment, retention, and
graduation of a growing population of first-generation students is imperative to our nation’s
success (Gándara & Mordechay, 2017). To make changes that technically fix the problem of
low graduation rates without first seeking to understand the ways that first-generation
community college students from immigrant background overcome challenges could further
perpetuate deficit narratives that continue to marginalize students. The overarching question that
this study sought to address was how students make sense of experiences in school, at home, and
in their community to remain academically resilient in their first year of college.

The purpose of the literature review is to establish the importance of the topic in relation
with previous studies (Creswell, 2000). The intellectual goal of this review was to discover what
is known about the experiences that first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds have
in community college and specifically, to understand how students create meaning around their
unique cultural and linguistic experiences at home, in the community, and at school in order to
remain academically resilient within the community college environment. The literature review
is organized into three areas of literature:

1) The first stream of literature provides insight into the structural elements of the
community college system and the systemic oppression that contributes to the
institutional isolation hindering student success.
2) The second stream investigates first-generation students’ backgrounds, characteristics, expectations, values, cultural identity, and isolation.

3) The third stream considers departure behavior and isolation to understand the challenges that student’s face, which is important when reflecting on how students access inner resources to remain academically resilient within the college system.

The Community College

A review of the historical trajectory of the community college shows that present-day conversations about how the community college can meet the educational needs of individuals and the economic needs of society is not new. The role that community colleges play in society has been debated since these colleges were first established in the early 1900s. The community college is by design, responsive to social, economic, and political influences because “each has played a distinct role in the development of the community college” (Dougherty, 1994, p. 120). It was during the time of the Civil Rights Movement that community colleges came under close examination as critics challenged the ways that the community college system advantaged some students over others. Critics such as Fred L. Pincus (1980) claimed that community colleges did more to reproduce class and race inequality than to change the reality for lower-class students. Pincus (1980) further argued that community colleges should have a larger purpose than just putting people to work. In 1985, Lois Weis, another critic of the community college system, claimed community colleges “were institutions of social reproduction in a racist and sexist society” (as cited in Beach, 2011, p. 43). In The Diverted Dream: Community Colleges and the Promise of Educational Opportunity in America, 1900-1985, researchers find that community colleges track large numbers of students, primarily students from lower socioeconomic status,
immigrants, and racial minorities “into modest positions at the low end of the labor market” (Beach, 2011, p. 45).

At the same time, defenders of the community college system have strong reactions to these arguments, claiming community colleges do offer a way for less academically prepared students to access 4-year degrees, work-ready certificates, and a pathway towards professional jobs that require a college degree. In fact, many educators point out that the hallmark of the community college system, unlike selective universities, is that these colleges provide students with the opportunity for upward mobility because open access to public institutions allows students to pay low tuition rates while only requiring students to meet minimal entrance requirements to get into classes (Bailey et al., 2015; Boggs, 2012; Bragg, 2013; Levin, 2000). Community colleges have long prided themselves on the ability to serve the higher education needs of communities where they are situated (Bailey et al., 2015) as evidenced by a student body that most often reflects the ethnic composition of the institution’s local area (Boggs, 2012; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Pratt, 2017). The commitment to diversity seen in community colleges is often documented by data that reveals they serve a large proportion of minority, first-generation, low-income, and adult students in the United States (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Ma & Baum, 2016; Pratt, 2017; Szelenyi & Chang, 2002).

In recent times, research focused on the community college education system has begun to focus less on the access agenda of the community college and more on the ways in which community colleges strive to provide equitable opportunities for students from immigrant backgrounds and other minority populations, providing opportunities for them to earn degrees at the same rate as their peers (Allen, Zhang, & Romo, 2018; Bailey et al., 2015; Levin, Martin, Ariadna, & Hoggatt, 2018). A watershed moment came about when undocumented students
gained visibility under the 2012 passage of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. DACA allowed students who had been educated in the K–12 system to have limited access to some of the resources available to their college-going peers. These resources included temporary work permits and opportunities to participate in work–study programs, plus a limited number of other financial aid programs. However, “while it is now relatively safe for undocumented students to be more visible within higher education, many students are still wary of disclosing their immigration statuses, and they often remain invisible on campus, navigating through their education in silence” (Gámez, Lopez, & Overton, 2017, p. 146). Of course, since that time, DACA has been rescinded, leaving 800,000 students exposed and at risk of deportation. Despite all uncertainty, students continue to enroll in community college at high rates, and they rely on their resourcefulness and motivations to complete college degrees alongside others who do not experience the system in the same way (Perez, 2010; Vega, 2016).

According to research conducted by the Community College Research Center (CCRC), in the fall of 2017, 44% of undergraduates were enrolled at community colleges. It is well documented that students from immigrant backgrounds will continue to make up a large part of community college enrollments into the future. Zong and Batalova (2015) report native-born English language learners (ELLs) represent 85% of pre-K to fifth-grade students and 62% of sixth- to 12th-grade students overall. A recent report from the Pew Research Center (2019) found that nearly 14% of the U.S. population is foreign-born, making up “the highest share of foreign-born people in the United States since 1910,” and this number is expected to rise. Colby (2015) predicted that a “majority- minority cross over will occur in 2044” (p.9). A call to action for educational researchers is to commit time and resources to designing policies and practices that reflect empathy and understanding of the ways that first-generation students from immigrant
backgrounds experience home, the community, and school as a first step in creating student–centered support systems that contribute to student success and persistence (Assalone & Fann, 2017; MacSwan, 2017; Perez, 2010; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Pratt, 2017; Reyes & Nora, 2012; Swail, 2014; Vega, 2016).

**Community College in the 21st Century**

Today, America’s community colleges are valuable to students, communities, and employers. “Overall, these are numerically important institutions, enrolling almost 40 percent of undergraduates” (Bailey, 2018, p. 113). However, over the years, community colleges have become overly focused on access and enrollments. Focusing primarily on the front end of the education process, community colleges have kept tuition costs down, provided low entry requirements for enrolling students, and have offered a variety of different courses to give students choices that align with their current interests (Bailey et al., 2015; Levin, 2018). Research conducted through organizations such as the Columbia College Research Center, Achieving the Dream, Jobs for the Future, and the Lumina Foundation have been instrumental in identifying the need for community colleges across the United States to reform practices in a way that moves away from a focus on access to a focus on increasing the likelihood that students persist to graduation. These reforms use policy, funding, and professional development to revise advising, course taking, and program mapping, with a stronger connections to careers as a way to prioritize completion by creating a more transparent and supported educational pathway for students to follow when they enroll in community college (Baker, 2016; Bailey et al., 2015; Scott-Clayton, 2011).

On February 24, 2009, in an address to the joint session of Congress, President Obama challenged every American to commit to at least one year of higher education or postsecondary
training by 2020. This call-to-action put community colleges at the center of reform to increase the numbers of students graduating with college degrees (Bailey et al., 2015; Bragg, 2013; Jenkins, 2011). Although this public declaration of the important role community colleges play served to mobilize educational leaders to retain enrolled students and increase overall graduation rates, the debate over whether these institutions should prepare students for the university or the workforce continued into the 21st century (Beach, 2011; Boggs, 2011; Carnevale & Strohl, 2010). In the 21st century, it is generally accepted that a college education is needed to access family-sustaining jobs (Carnevale and Strohol, 2010). At the same time, there is concern that although the demand for education and training has increased community college enrollments, a limited focus on completion rates may contribute to inequities within the system (Bailey et al., 2006; Bailey et al., 2015; Goldrick-Rab, 2010).

The term *wicked problem*, a term first coined by Ritter and Webber in 1973 as a way to describe multifaceted and complex social problems, has been used when referring to the complex issues leaders face in higher education today. As with any complex problem, there is no one-size-fits-all best answer that will remedy the issues, especially when internally conflicting goals get in the way of identifying how systems need to be adapted to avoid unintended consequences that could continue to disadvantage students into the future. One way to study the impact of current reforms on the success rates of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds is to consider students’ individual experiences as college students (Bailey, 2018; Bensimon, 2005; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; Rankin & Reason, 2008).

**Institutional Oppression**

Many scholars use the term deficit model in education to describe systems that make overgeneralizations about family background and make assumptions regarding sociocultural and
linguistic experiences, perpetuating a deficient view of students (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Shields, 2004; Sue, 2010). In other words, deficit models lead to systemic oppression and affect students directly when their ability to succeed is limited because of their cultural background. Existing research on first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds shows that a focus on demographic diversity on college campuses does not equate to equity for all students (Bensimon, 2005; Shields, 2004). Systemic oppression is perpetuated when individuals who are committed to middle-class values systematically silence first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds thereby denying them the opportunity to challenge institutional norms and practices (Adams, 2007; Gándara & Mordechay, 2017; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Shields, 2004; Takacs, 2002).

Jiménez-Castellanos and García’s (2017) study examining the interaction of policies and educational opportunities for ELLs living in Arizona revealed that policies from the Civil Rights Era, to the War on Poverty, to more recent policies in No Child Left Behind (2002) have consistently required accountability for results with limited emphasis on supporting practices that acknowledge the complexity of the language acquisition process for children learning two or more languages. Instead of policies that address inequity and support students coming from backgrounds where English is not spoken as the primary language of the home, schools have focused on achievement tests with predetermined bars for success.

The passage of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 may represent a shift from the assessment focus of No Child Left Behind. The law provides states with more discretion when defining educational progress. However, it mandates that states use math and language arts scores as a measure of accountability. The writers of the law added non-academic indicators used to measure school quality and school climate (McGuinn, 2016). Time is needed to
determine how changes made as a result of ESSA will take into account the lived experiences of ELLs and how these changes impact the way the system is designed to support the unique learning needs of students coming from immigrant backgrounds.

According to Jiménez-Castellanos and García (2017), education policy fails to take into account ELL students’ varied lived experiences and the sociocultural influences that affect their overall academic and social development. Jiménez-Castellanos and García (2017) found that although frameworks that integrate students’ varied lived experiences are appearing in research on emerging teaching and learning practices, little research has been done to show how educational policy explicitly merges “intersecting elements that influence family, community, and societal contexts” (p. 443). A theme appearing consistently in the literature is that although ELLs have much in common with native English speakers from diverse socioeconomic, racial, or ethnic backgrounds, their needs do not entirely overlap, and without policies that directly support students, academic gaps in student achievement widen (Giroux, 2006; Harper & De Jong, 2004; Swail, 2014; Yosso, 2005).

The systematic oppression in the form of policies rooted in deficit thinking negatively affect first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds when their precollege experiences, multilingual abilities, and unique cultural identities are not acknowledged or validated within the educational environment (Crenshaw, 2010; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; hooks, 2003; Rendon, 2006). A significant limitation of deficit models in education is that the very act of portraying student experience as deficient inhibits students’ ability to view their experiences through a lens that helps them identify resiliency as strength. Ultimately, educators and researchers who rely on deficit models limit students’ ability to develop the resilience needed to successfully progress through the education system.
**Language Learning and Bilingual Abilities**

Linguists have traditionally viewed language learning as a process of understanding a complex communication system made up of phonology, syntax, morphology, semantics, and lexis, pragmatics, and discourse. In his well-known work and his theory of universal grammar, Noam Chomsky (1976) argued that individuals are born with an understanding of the basic rules of language. In other words, language acquisition happens naturally as the brain processes patterns and rules as language is naturally acquired. Reid’s (1997) seminal research on bilingual education has provided a context for how lack of understanding of how first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds acquire language and perceptions of their subsequent bilingual abilities have created deficit views that directly affect student achievement. Reid’s (1977) research showed that errors found in the academic work produced by language learners living in the target language and acquiring English as another language differ from errors produced in the academic work of foreign-born language learners. Reid (1997) identified this as a difference in the ways that students living in the context of an English-speaking environment acquire the English language. Language learners who fit the definition of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds used in this study, develop language patterns around informal speaking and listening exposure in their environments; whereas international students (i.e., college students coming to the United States to study) or individuals that acquire English primarily as a foreign language acquire English by first having explicit teaching on the rules of grammar and through reading and writing instruction. Reid (1997) uses the term “ear-based language learning” to describe first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds who use “self-developed language rules” to make sense of the English language (p.18). Listening learners often have command of the oral aspects of the language but tend to have verb tense, vocabulary,
and capitalization errors in writing (Reid, 1977). As a result of their competence in speaking, students are placed in English-only classrooms without the educator’s knowledge or understanding of how overgeneralization of that appear as students begin to write academic papers. Notably, researchers have identified the fact that first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds do not have equal opportunities to develop a solid understanding of how the languages are constructed and because of limited access to ESL support to build writing skills in the U.S. education system.

By the late 1970s, and early 1980s, linguist and theorist Steven Krashen offered five basic hypotheses about how language acquisition evolves. These five hypotheses are summarized by this author as a combination of naturally acquiring language through 1) Acquisition-learning hypothesis - comprehensible input at a subconscious level, 2) Monitor hypothesis- scaffolded support, by way of explicit teaching that allows time for students to self-correct, 3) Input hypothesis- supports learning or knowing about the language being acquired in an 4) Affective filter hypothesis - an environment where the learner is at ease, engaged, and ready to learn, and 5) Natural order hypothesis- individuals acquire language naturally and over time (Krashen, 1995). In addition, language acquisition researchers since that time have linked cognitive science and neuroscience to the process of language acquisition to explore transference, memory, and connectivism. Specifically, brain-based research looks at the way the brain builds networks and stores and retrieves information, much like a computer, as part of managing the complexity of learning multiple languages at the same time (Myles and Mitchell, 2014). Theorists posit that the human brain is predisposed to making connections and associations, so links become stronger as associations are replicated and practiced over time.
This research is included in this review because understanding the complexities of language acquisition has implications for how students’ bilingual abilities are viewed by educators and the ways in which assumptions about how the English language is acquired affects experiences in school.

One tangible way that a student’s school experience is affected by perceptions of their language or learning ability has to do with placement in Special Education as a result of being identified as at risk of failing to reach stated achievement benchmarks. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, in the fall of 2015, 713,000 ELL students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act were identified as students with disabilities. This number represents 14.7% of the total ELL population enrolled in U.S. public elementary and secondary schools in 2015.

MacSwan and Rolstad (2006), who investigated why there is an overrepresentation of ELL students in Special Education, explored language biases by researching the testing instruments used to measure language proficiency. The researchers’ reviewed multiple tests used in the state of Arizona used to measure the language abilities of students. Their research revealed that verbal deficit theories that link linguistic shortcomings to intelligence formed the basis of state administered required or recommended native language assessments for ESLs. Most notably, both the required English and Spanish test developers did not have backgrounds in linguistics or language research. Finally, the coding systems used to assess competency presented a very narrow analysis of what was deemed proficient use of either language (MacSwan & Rolstad, 2006). Kangas (2014) found that ESLs identified as having limited proficiency in any one of the multiple languages they are learning to speak increases the likelihood that they will be placed into Special Education. Brown and Doolittle (2008), who
studied ESL students and the response to intervention framework, argued that: “Interventions must consider a student’s cultural background and experience as well as linguistic ability (in both English and native language) in order to make appropriate decisions” (p. 66). It is the combination of biased assessments (MacSwan & Rolstad, 2006) and the lack of training and expertise in making informed decisions regarding differentiating between language difference and learning disabilities (Brown & Doolittle, 2006) that increases the probability that students coming from homes where a language other than English is the primary language spoken at home will be placed in Special Education when in their early school years.

**Recommendations for Dismantling Deficit Models**

Although many scholars agree that focusing on students’ surface errors perpetuates a deficit perspective of immigrant students (Bunch & Kibler, 2015; Doolan & Miller, 2012), finding effective ways to support English literacy development will lead to better academic achievement, fewer students directed to Special Education, and more successful learning outcomes for first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds (Brown & Doolittle, 2008; Doolan & Miller, 2012; Ferris, 2009; MacSwan, 2017; MacSwan & Rolstad, 2006). Studies support the need for research that provides educational leaders with a deeper understanding of how first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds experience school (Baker, 2016; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Rankin & Reason, 2008).

Dowd and Bensimon (2015) recommended that stakeholders review education policies and practices as the first step in addressing problems related to the low retention and graduation rates for first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds that continue to plague community college systems today. DeAngelo and Frank (2016) supported this view, stating that creating equitable system practices for first-generation students is to acknowledge the ways that
“various policies and practices within and outside of the systems of higher education affect lower-income and first-generation less-ready students in ways that their higher income and continuing-generation peers do not experience” (p. 1614). Some research has postulated that seeking to understand how students experience the current community college system is a valid way to develop equity-minded change agents equipped to investigate policies, practices, and procedures that effectively promote persistence in higher education (Baker, 2016; Bensimon, 2005; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; Rankin & Reason, 2008). Considering community college systems through the lens of students’ unique experiences within the community college system represents a paradigm shift and changes the way that educators consider system reforms (Benison, 2005; Rankin & Reason, 2008). Shields (2004) claimed: “If we believe that schools are culture free there is no need to explore which culture(s) are reflected in the school, which groups have power and are dominant, and which groups are marginalized and often excluded” (p. 119).

Recently, MacSwan (2017) described a conceptual framework called translanguaging linguistics that expands Noam Chomsky's theory of the internal language. Translanguaging is an approach that can be used to build academic resilience and personal strength by placing a value on students’ unique linguistic and cultural backgrounds, thus allowing students to draw on their abilities as language learners as they acquire new knowledge and skills in the English language. Employing the tenets of translanguaging in the classroom is a way to challenge deficit views and apply a cultural lens where human stories and histories are seen as resources that expand awareness of all students in the classroom.
Conclusion

Educators, philosophers, learning theorist, and philanthropists have debated the aim, object, and reward of education over time. The overarching theme in literature is that community college history explains some of the present day challenges these colleges face. The varied missions, organizational ideologies, and organizational cultures of community colleges continue to be susceptible to implications of government policies and economic realities in the states and regions where they are located (Bailey et al., 2015; Baker, 2016; Dougherty, 1994; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Levin, 2000; Levin et al., 2018). Stakeholders and education leaders working on education reform to increase the graduation rates for first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds benefit from understanding how community colleges have responded to the economic, political, and social pressures in the past. Although the college system has mainly remained the same over time, current realities in the 21st century include the need to recognize the unique needs of an increasing number of students enrolling as first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds. In order to increase the graduation rates for first-generation students coming from immigrant backgrounds, leaders must understand how they experience access and equity within the community college system.

Finally, although the literature review of research on the topic of the unique language learning needs of first-generation students in the early years of school is not exhaustive, it provides a foundation for how language differences and developmental stages of language learning and how insufficient knowledge of individual students’ social and cultural characteristics inhibits, and in some cases, completely derails the academic achievement of first-generation students coming from homes where languages other than English are spoken at home. Emerging approaches to teaching and learning have implications for how instruction can support
students in acquiring academic English language skills through intentional instruction strategies applied in the classroom.

**First-Generation Students From Immigrant Backgrounds in Community College**

It is important to understand what makes first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds, a unique population of community college students. A part of considering how experiences in school, home, and the community can foster academic resilience was considered by looking at college experience as a continuation of earlier experiences in the K–12 system.

**Students From Immigrant Backgrounds**

Early work conducted by Ogbu and Simons (1998) included a 15-year study to understand the differences in school performance between minority and dominant group students. The descriptions these researchers used to describe the different ways that individuals living in the United States acquired immigrant status is useful in understanding how context and histories shape the unique ways that first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds experience school. Ogbu and Simons (1998) identified autonomous, voluntary, and involuntary immigrants as distinct groups with different histories and different experiences navigating their immigration experience. The researchers posited that a group’s unique experiences in systems and situations become a frame of reference that affects attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. For example, autonomous or voluntary immigrants are defined as those who are more or less willing to move to the United States because they believe that they will experience more opportunities and a better future there as opposed to their homeland (Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Baum and Flores (2011) referred to this as “immigrant optimism” because immigrants come to the United States with high expectations and a motivation to improve their chances of success. Involuntary immigrants are those who come to the United States because of a civil war or other crisis that
forces them to flee their homeland. “They do not freely choose or plan to come to settle in the United States to improve their status” (p. 165). This research confirmed themes that appeared in later research, mostly that first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds bring with them various cultural experiences, linguistic abilities, and educational backgrounds, as well as a multitude of achievement levels and aspirations for the future (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016; Swail 2014; ED & Chang, 2002; Vega, 2016). Notably, another finding in Ogbu and Simon’s (1998) study was that this variation does not account for differences in academic achievement. The researchers found that: “Academic achievement cannot be attributed to cultural, linguistic, or genetic differences” (p. 158).

However, one variation in student experience is the degree to which students have access to quality education in high school or the resources to pay for enrichment activities that prepare them for college. In many cases, parents, and consequently students are left mostly on their own in "converting expectations and dreams into the kind of resilient motivation and goal directedness that can overcome barriers to achievement" (Hamrick & Stage, 2004, p. 165). A lack of preparation immediately affects students’ confidence in their ability to succeed at school when they begin to realize that they are less academically prepared for college than their peers.

Studies found that students who perceive that they are not ready for college face additional pressures when they are isolated from peers and fall behind in their classes. Students are often left alone to find their own ways of coping or adjusting to the college environment (Baum & Flores, 2011; Hernandez, 2002; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Morales, 2004). DeAngelo and Franke’s (2016) study on persistence and degree attainment for first-year students found that 75% of attrition in the first year of college occurs among students who identify at intake as beginning less ready for college because they have a high school grade point average that is
lower than a B+ and because they have not taken required courses in English, math, foreign language, and science. Their data also revealed that more African American, Latino/a, lower income, and first-generation students are overrepresented in the less ready group versus the college-ready group.

As in Gray et al. (2018), the students in the study of resilience conducted by Morales (2004) expressed bitterness and anger over what they perceived to be “inadequate academic preparation” for college (p. 38). Additional studies on academic resilience found that students’ self-awareness on their level of preparation for college was more pronounced when students first enrolled in the college and saw how white and usually privileged classmates had been prepared for college (Choy, 2001; Gray et al., 2018; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Jehangir, 2010; Morales, 2004; Swail, 2014). Students who are excluded from the pathway to graduation find themselves on the margins looking in at the success that they perceive others are experiencing. This feeling of exclusion can seem like a personal failure and reinforces the idea that college isn’t a place where the students can succeed (Terenzini et al., 1996). In a qualitative study of Latino students in their first year in college, students attributed family ties and support, proper time management, financial stability, managing anxiety about their schoolwork load, and an organized routine as positive factors in their acclimation to college (Hernandez, 2002).

**Being the First One in College**

First-generation students often do not have the support of parents who can guide them through the complex transition between high school and college. Without the support of parents who understand what it means to be a college student, many students enrolling in community college are often left on their own to navigate the complicated first critical steps of entering the
college system (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Ovink & Kalogrides, 2015; Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield, Burgos-Cienfuegos, 2015; Vega, 2016).

Once in college, precollege experiences, inadequate information about college opportunities, limited understanding of college systems, cultural differences, language barriers, and discrimination all create potential challenges that first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds need to overcome in order to persist (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Bensimon, 2005; DeAngelo & Frank, 2016; Hamrick & Stage, 2004, Pascarella et al., 2003). A unique aspect of the student experience is that for many students from immigrant backgrounds, the fact that they are disoriented and overwhelmed on campus is a painful reminder of the ways that the parents who have sacrificed so much for their future cannot help them because parents do not speak the English language and do not have experience in with the U.S. college system. They have a heightened awareness of how resources that can support them financially might not be available because of their status in the United States. This awareness becomes particularly hard for students when they see how peers with college-graduated parents have an easier time paying for school and navigating the system as they transition into college. Perez (215) investigation of underrepresented students’ transition from high school to college found that social context and personally supportive relationships with peers, faculty, and staff directly impact their ability to persistence. This finding is supported by research that finds that because first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds burnout if they are isolated on campus and perceive that educators do not honor their family’s history and cultural background (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Hernandez, 2002; Pike & Kuh, 2005).

Extensive literature has illustrated how being the first in the family to take a step toward earning a higher education degree often includes the uncomfortable experience of living between
the worlds of home and school. This experience is particularly apparent in the early stages of being a college student (Choy, 2001; Jehangir, 2010; Teranishi et al., 2011). For many first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds, the first day on campus is the first day anyone in their family has ever been on a college campus. This fact alone makes their first experiences vastly different from students who have been able to absorb information about college from parents throughout their lives. The literature included in this review clearly revealed that an aspect of being the first in the family to go to college includes the student’s struggle to navigate around standard community college practices. Students’ lack of knowledge of what is expected from them combined with their parents’ lack of direct knowledge about how to support them in navigating the complicated college system puts these students at an immediate disadvantage (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Inman & Mayes, 1999). Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2003) identified seven structural obstacles that first-generation students must overcome immediately upon entering the college systems. These include: a) bureaucratic hurdles such as difficulty reading course schedules and applying for financial aid, b) difficulty choosing appropriate courses, c) difficulty seeing guidance and knowing what questions to ask, d) limited counselor availability, e) poor advice from staff, f) delayed detection of costly mistakes, and g) poor handling of conflicting demands.

The First Year in College

Although students enter community colleges with the same goals and motivations as their peers, too few make it through the first critical year (DeAngelo & Franke, 2016; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Swail, 2014). Characteristics such as country of origin, race, parental socioeconomic status, community schools, and legal barriers all affect the ways that first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds access opportunities and resources in
postsecondary education (Baum & Flores, 2011; Rankin & Reason, 2008). Research indicated that understanding how first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds interpret their early experiences contributes to understanding how to foster students’ ability to overcome challenges and adapt to the culture of higher education and achieve success in their first year of college.

Studies have shown that when students arrive on campus, they become overwhelmed when they do not know what is expected of them in the classroom or how to manage their time (Swail, 2014). In fact, some first-generation immigrant students describe being disorientated on campus as a type of culture shock brought about because of the contrast between what students experienced in high school and what they are currently experiencing in college (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Research has supported the claim that disorientation and shock contribute to the length of time it takes for first-generation students to adapt to college routines and expectations, and the time it takes to adapt to new routines and expectations factors into how quickly students fall behind in their studies (Baum & Flores, 2011; Hernandez, 2002; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Morales, 2004; Perez, 2015). In contrast, when students are immediately integrated into the campus environment and establish a common ground on which to build relationships and access to campus support networks, their ability to achieve early successes increases (Williams & Ferrari, 2015).

Research has suggested providing “spaces of cultural familiarity” where students feel comfortable expressing their identities is culturally validating and creates a sense of belonging on campus (Museus, Shiroma, & Dizon, 2016). Conversely, a student’s ability to persist is negatively affected if the student’s early experiences on campus were not structured in a way that promoted early integration into college life (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Gray et al., 2018).
Understandably, the first few days on campus are often a time when students have a heightened awareness of the way that they may or may not fit in with their peers. It is also a time when they become aware of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic differences that exist between their new campus community and the life they have at home.

Social Adjustment in the First Year

The focus on social adjustment is considered as part of understanding the factors that contribute to students’ ability to persist in college beyond the first year. Inman and Mayes’s (1999) study of 5,057 first-generation community college students found that although first-generation students reported an intention to earn a degree and remain in college, “Slightly fewer firsts (3% fewer) were enrolled after their first year” (p. 17). Inman and Mayes’s (1999) findings were supported by others who argued that students’ persistence in college is based on the degree to which they are integrated into campus life and experience a sense of belonging on campus (Jehangir, 2010; Pascarella et al., 2003; Gonzales, Stein & Nadia, 2013; Perez, 2015; Yosso, 2005).

Students reported their ability to find connections on campus and adjust (Hernandez, 2002) to college expectations is heightened when educators engage students in educational environments that intentionally validate students’ background experiences by providing cultural and equity-focused curricula and practices throughout the college designed to increases the likelihood that students will successfully integrate into college life (Bensimon, 2007; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Finley, 2012; Jehengir, 2010; Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017; Rankin & Reason, 2008; Rendon, 2006). Conversely, students reported feeling excluded and experienced isolation and frustration when their unique identities were not
recognized as being significant, their families were seen as lesser than, and their contributions to the educational community were not validated (Crenshaw, 2010; hooks, 2003).

Another view of social adjustment includes educational research on fostering social engagement and creating a sense of belonging on campus. This research stressed the importance of supporting students’ personal growth and personal development, along with creating spaces and places where students feel understood and heard. The seminal work of Benard (1991) and Henderson and Milstein (2003) on student resilience suggested that environments are viewed as caring and supportive when there are high expectations of all, with access and opportunity for everyone to engage as full participants. More recently, Yosso (2005) recommended rejecting one-size-fits-all approaches to education and shifting the focus to one where individuals are seen as adding to the richness of campus life because of the social and cultural assets students bring with them when they come to campus. In contrast, research overgeneralizations about students’ abilities based on assumptions regarding sociocultural and linguistic experiences have changed how students engage on campus and has limited how willing students are to share their experiences and may impact their desire to seek the assistance they need to stay in school (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Sue, 2010).

During in-depth interviews conducted by Hernandez (2002) with Latino students enrolled in their first year in college, participants said that social adjustment into the university environment required that they find their own ways of coping or adjusting to the college environment. Students in this study attributed family ties and support, proper time management, financial stability, managing anxiety about their schoolwork load, and an organized routine as positive factors in their acclimation to college.
Another significant factor in students’ ability to make social adjustments on campus has to do with their ability to establish relationships with faculty and staff. The literature identified significant relationships with teachers and counselors as factors in how well students adjust to campus life (DeAngelo & Franke, 2016; Gray, 2018). The Hudley et al. (2009) study on the influence of high school experiences and characteristics on college adjustment used Attinasi’s (1989) two-stage process to link high school behaviors, attitudes, and experiences with students’ college-going behavior and the ways that messages from parents, teachers, or other significant others influence a students’ decisions to go to college and their experiences engaging with individuals when they arrived on campus. This study found that students from diverse backgrounds had increased confidence in accessing college when they were enrolled in an academically oriented high school where all participants were socially engaged on campus and had positive and comfortable relationships with faculty and staff. This research found that having significant relationships with teachers and counselors increased social and academic adjustment when students entered college. It is interesting to note that the study also found that students’ relationships with fathers was a factor in their confidence. Researchers attributed this to the fact that in this study, more than 60% of the faculty were male.

In sum, a review of the literature revealed that early adaptation to college is fostered when students have supportive individuals available to work with them inside and outside of the classroom and when the campus systems are designed in a way that explicitly provides early opportunities for them to engage with faculty, staff, and peers in a way that lifts them up as contributors to the richness of the campus environment.
Placement Testing Practices and College Pathways

In the same way that first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds enter college with varied understandings of social expectations on a college campus, these students have limited knowledge of the high-stakes consequences of college testing and placement practices. Assessment and placement practices at community college play a role in determining the pathway students take when they first enroll in college (Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Scott-Clayton, 2011). College testing and placement practices have significant implications for students coming from immigrant backgrounds. Students entering college as first-generation students may or may not be aware of the high-stakes consequences of placement tests and may be surprised to learn that despite graduating from high school, they are not prepared to enroll in college-level classes (Bunch & Panyatoval; 2008, Pratt, 2017).

Student Enrollment and Persistence

Many community college campuses use placement practices to direct students toward courses in their identified pathways (Scott-Clayton, 2011). Students found to be college-ready begin their academic journey immediately, while other students are taking classes in remedial education or in English as a second language programs. A study by Salas et al. (2008) conducted with community college students in Georgia revealed that despite good intentions, policies and standardized testing practices forced students to take courses that they did not think they needed to take. This decreased students’ motivation and ultimately decreased persistence and graduation rates.

Some research has suggested enrollment in courses based on college placement testing does not take into account the consequences of faulty or misaligned placement (Bunch et al., 2011) making this an important aspect of student retention. Current research has shown that time
spent in remedial courses decreases persistence and graduation rates of community college students (Bailey et al., 2015). A review of the literature suggested that this is a significant factor in how first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds experience college when they do not understand the significance of college practices such as placement testing and the implications for course-taking and financial aid (Scott-Clayton, 2011; Teranishi et al., 2011).

Most students experience multiple forms of testing during their K–12 years, and as college students, may not realize that decisions made based on college placement tests could mean additional time and money for them to complete degrees (Bailey et al., 2015; Ma & Baum, 2016; Pratt, 2017). The lack of familiarity with the U.S. school system, when combined with limited English skills, adds an additional layer of anxiety to a process that is already laden with complexity, even for continuous generation students (Baum & Flores, 2011).

Placement that does not account for students’ unique characteristics limits access to transfer-level courses among racial and ethnic groups during the first year of college (Bunch & Panayotova, 2008). Although a correlation between remediation and college persistence has been examined, less has been written about how language acquisition and multilingual language abilities factor into the placement of students in remedial education. One reason for this oversight offered in literature is that “college staff have limited training and experience with issues of second language acquisition” (Bunch & Panayotova, 2008, p. 20), and lack of understanding about the unique needs of these students results in potentially erroneous decisions about placement. Beyond the tests themselves, there are crucial decisions made from perceptions-founded on surface-level characteristics such as a foreign accent, a student’s nonnative English language status, comparative language proficiency in English, the language spoken at home, and classes taken in the U.S. school system.
Although study of the placement practices for students with unique linguistic and cultural backgrounds is relatively new, gathering data on how policies and practices around placement should be adapted to better assess the skills and abilities of this particular student population could support students in taking the appropriate college courses and ultimately impact a student’s ability to complete a college degree. This is of significance given the fact that currently, first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds are disproportionately placed in remedial education courses.

**Remedial Ed and Student Success**

Pratt’s (2017) review of student transcripts from 2003 to 2009 found that “68 percent of students at two-year public colleges took at least one remedial class, with higher rates among low-income, black, and Hispanic students” (p. 37). Reports add to the considerable research conducted over the past decade that found first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds are disproportionately enrolled in community college remedial education courses when compared to white middle-class continuing generation peers (Bailey et al., 2015; Deggs, 2010; Everett, 2015; Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011; Scott-Clayton & Rodriguez, 2015).

Although half of college students enroll in remedial coursework, the outcome results remain mixed (Scott, 2011; Scott-Clayton & Rodriguez, 2015). Students placed in remedial education must overcome discouragement or stigma attached to poor performance in high school that follows them into college. Mott-Smith (2009) found that students became frustrated when test results did not align with their performance in courses, and this frustration led some of the students in her study to drop out. Bailey’s (2009) review of remedial or developmental education finds that “overall, fewer than half of all students who are referred to developmental education complete the recommended sequence.” (p.24). Additional investigations of immigrants
in higher education found that enrollment in remedial courses correlate with low rates of persistence and degree attainment (Bunch & Kibler, 2015; Scott, 2011; Teranishi et al., 2011). Research in this area is relatively new, and more in-depth knowledge of the effects of remedial education as a factor in the departure from college of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds could be studied from a student perspective to determine in what ways the additional time in college has affected them.

**Financial Aid and Paying for College**

Another critical factor in students’ full participation in college is their knowledge of and access to resources to pay for school (Teranishi et al., 2011). Although college financial aid policies and practices work for some students, studies have shown that lack of financial support and poorly designed policy and practices contribute to higher dropout rates among diverse populations (Boggs, 2012). The research in this area indicated that students drop out of school because of finances when they don’t have the knowledge needed to help them understand all of the options available to help them pay for college (Banks, 2006; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Jehangir, 2009; Ma & Baum, 2016; Rendón, 2006; Swail, 2014).

Students entering the system who are less ready do not typically qualify for any merit-based awards, which mean that to fund their education, they must apply for loans. The fact that students must incur debt immediately upon enrolling in classes places them at a financial disadvantage over college-ready peers who may have also benefited from merit awards, scholarships, and grants (Szelenyi & Chang, 2002). Ma and Baum (2016) reported that in 2013–2014, community colleges enrolled “40% of total undergraduate students” (p.12). However, during this period, “36% percent of all Pell Grants, but only 23% of Federal Supplemental Ed Opportunity Grant (FSEOG) aid, 18% of Federal Work-Study funding, 16% of Subsidized, and
7% of Unsubsidized Stafford Loans” (p. 12) went to students studying in the two-year college system.

Recent research found that loans of any amount put additional burdens on students, and this puts less prepared students at immediate risk for not completing their degree (Ma & Baum, 2016). Students who qualify for loans do not always understand the consequences of discontinuing their studies or failing to meet the requirements of maintaining financial aid assistance. For students who take out educational loans, the consequences of dropping out of college prior to earning a certificate or degree means that they will have to pay back the loan immediately, which becomes another bill to pay without the benefit of the certificate or degree that would have helped them secure a higher paying job. It is this cycle of attempts and failures that ultimately contributes to the more significant problem that many immigrant families face, which is the ongoing burden of debt that impacts a student’s ability to reenroll in college (Ma & Baum, 2016).

For students who qualify for grant funding, funds available through grants may be enough to cover tuition and fees but most often does not cover additional living expenses to support students while they are in school. The lack of financial support means that students from immigrant backgrounds are more likely to work full time or part time to supplement their income while in school, which ultimately increases their time to completion (Ma & Baum, 2016). In fact, first-generation students spend more time working than their continuing education peers (Pascarella et al., 2003). Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield and Cienguegos’s (2015) survey of first-generation Latino students in California revealed that students “experience a cross-cultural value conflict” between internalized family values and academic expectations (p.273). Many students believe that they can work long hours to contribute to the family’s income while attending
college and parents who are unaware of the general education requirements of college may not understand how much time students should dedicate to obligations outside of their studies. Ultimately, the need to work long hours while attending school interferes with studies and many students fall behind and ultimately drop out of school (Baum & Flores, 2011; Teranishi et al., 2011).

**Conclusion**

A common theme that emerged in literature was that the transition to college for first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds differs from the adjustments students make if they benefit from having a close relationship with someone who can guide them through the initial entry into campus life. The ability of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds to succeed in the higher education system is at least initially influenced by their educational experiences as students in high school (Baum & Flores, 2011; Choy, 2001; Deil-Amen & Rosenbaum, 2003; Finley, 2012; Gonzalez, et al., 2013; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Hudley et al., 2009; Teranishi et al., 2011). Research has only now emerged to address the specific ways that first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds can create meaning around these differences in a way that will help them overcome the challenges that most students encounter when they enter college (Gray et al., 2018). Research has confirmed that precollege experiences affect first-generation immigrant students’ decision to enroll in college. These messages come from parents, teachers, or other significant individuals and indicate to students that they are expected to go to college, (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Hudley, 2009; Vega, 2016). Additionally, first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds are significantly impacted by the community college system policy and practices used for course placement and financial aid (Ma & Baum, 2016; Pascarella et al., 2003; Reason, 2009; Teranishi
et al., 2011). Limited existing research specifically looked at student entry into college systems through a student lens.

**First Generation Students, Isolation And Deficit Thinking**

Institutional isolation and deficit thinking are conditions within the educational environment that influence how first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds experience school. Vincent Tinto’s (1975) model of student departure has been widely cited in educational research as a model that institutions can use to change policies and practices to decrease dropout behavior. Tinto (1975) stated that: “It is the individual’s integration into the academic and social systems of the college that most directly relates to his continuance in that college” (p. 96). Thus, Tinto’s model of dropout concluded that the dropout problem was best addressed by helping students recognize the benefits of staying in college and fully integrating into the campus culture (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2000; Tinto, 1975).

Although many would agree that Tinto’s (1975) theoretical model has helped advance what is known about how systems can be built to promote student success, others have found that Tinto’s (1975) integration theoretical model does not take into account cultural bias or students’ unique experiences in college (Banks, 2006; Kuh & Love, 2000; Kuh et al., 2006; Pike & Kuh, 2005), stereotype threats, and microaggressions (Gray et al., 2018; Sue, 2010). Multicultural theorists have since responded and offered an alternative perspective to Tinto’s (1995) theories of student isolation.

An alternative view is to study high dropout rates for first-generation immigrant students from the perspective that student departure occurs when students are required to ignore cultural values and linguistic abilities as part of becoming educated (Pascarella et al., 2003; Tierney, 1992). Requiring students to step away from their cultural experiences and embrace the cultural
routines of the dominant institutional culture when they get to college places an unnecessary burden on these students (Banks, 2006; Gray et al., 2018; Jehangir, 2010; Kuh et al 2006; London, 1989). In fact, the very act of enrolling in college represents the discontinuation of a tradition and an act of breaking away from family and cultural traditions (Gray et al., 2018; London, 1989). Students who feel ignored, misrepresented, or unaccepted by faculty, peers, or Staff may already be isolated from family and from support within the institution, and this isolation can contribute to a student’s inability to thrive within the college environment (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004). When students perceive that their experiences, ideas, and life stories do not fit with what is expected on the college campus and this perception is reinforced by their inability to connect with course content and the curriculum, students often feel “invisible in both the curriculum and in the eyes of their peers and teachers” (Jehangir, 2010, p. 45). For first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds, the accumulation of invalidating experiences in and out of the classroom has been described as a “slow death by a thousand cuts” (Sue, 2010, p. 66). The larger problem is that first-generation students exist in the shadows and do not engage in their learning authentically as their full selves. In contrast, learning communities where students’ stories and lived experiences are integrated as part of the curriculum can engage students who have existed silently on the margins of the system (Jehangir, 2010). This is one way to build academic resiliency.

A longitudinal study by Torres and Hernandez (2007) of Latino/a students enrolled in predominantly white institutions and one Hispanic serving university found that students who were externally defined by family expectations or by negative stereotypes were most likely to avoid engaging in anything outside of their comfort zone. Central to this study was the work of “understanding and managing racism as well as stereotypes that influence individuals’ self-
image (intrapersonal dimension) and their choices of who they seek out for support and relationships (interpersonal dimension) when dealing with the effects of oppression” (p. 571). In the longitudinal study, Torres and Hernandez (2007) conducted interviews with students, revealing that Latino/a students’ adjustment to college included “making meaning of societal images that can be positive or negative” (p. 564). What these researchers found was that students who were able to internalize personal choices and engage in developing an informed identity were most successful in maintaining their cultural identity while valuing diverse environments. The study concluded that more research was needed to fully understand the complexity of student’s developmental process and to understand the experiences of students and the role of the environment. Increasing programming that allows students to engage in identity work and builds awareness of the impact macroaggressions can have on human interactions is an essential aspect of the work that change agents on campus can do to promote student success (Gray et al., 2018).

According to Paulo Freire (2006), Educational practice implies a theoretical stance on the part of the educator. When first-generation immigrant students first enroll in college, characteristics such as country of origin, race, parental socioeconomic status, community schools, and legal barriers are considered varying aspects of their access to postsecondary education (Baum & Flores, 2011). Educators influenced by cultural deprivation theory and deficit thinking consider students’ characteristics as barriers to success and place the problem of lack of educational attainment on these students and their families (Banks, 2006; Bensimon, 2005; Yosso, 2005). Education reform constructed from deficit perspectives reinforces views of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds as students with problems to be fixed who don’t easily fit into the college system.
Effects of Labeling

A review of the literature revealed that labeling and stereotyping perpetuate deficit thinking and further marginalize first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds, placing them at a higher risk for dropping out (Alvarez, 2011; Arbona & Nora, 2007; Baum & Flores, 2011; Morales, 2004). In a recent study conducted by Gray et al. (2018), interviewees reported early incidents of negative stereotyping, microinvalidation from faculty members, and class-based microaggressions as causing anxiety and stress. Gray et al. (2018) identified these “intersectional experiences as identity collapse, wherein observers make assumptions about one less visible aspect of a person’s identity based on assumptions about the more visible identity markers” (p. 1238). Reform efforts based on this kind of labeling perpetuates deficit views of students when social class and cultural differences systematically problematize students’ achievements based on demographic characteristics (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Morales, 2004; Yosso, 2005).

Students from immigrant backgrounds are often identified as skill deficient, high needs, and academically at risk, which results in lowering academic expectations of students when they arrive on the college campus. Students often interpret labeling as a microaggression when they interpret the hidden messages behind the label. According to Sue (2010), hidden messages or microaggressions affect individuals “biologically, emotionally, cognitively and behaviorally” (p. 16). In the college setting, hidden messages or microaggressions are counterproductive to the goal of student success because of the way these messages undermine students’ confidence in their ability to achieve their goals. Additionally, in many cases, the individuals on campus who are the subject of labeling and microaggressions have little power to advocate for system level change. When placed in this impossible situation, students become isolated and silenced and,
without support, come to believe that nothing they do will make a difference to change or improve their situation. It is the cumulative nature of microaggressions brought about by unconscious biases of well-intentioned individuals that often cause persons from less dominant cultures to become stressed and withdraw from the environment (Sue, 2010).

**Isolation, and Model Minority Status**

First-generation students coming from a variety of immigrant backgrounds share the common experience of being marginalized in a system that does not recognize the unique challenges students face in college. Asian American students are often said to project a “model minority image of academic success” while at the same time being considered “at risk” because of their immigrant or refugee family, or other aspects of their ethnic and racial background (Lew, Change, Wang, 2005, p. 70). Although students coming from immigrant backgrounds experience similar challenges in college, researchers posit that lack of research on marginalization of Asian students is largely due to a student’s status as a model minority (An, 2018).

According to Zong & Burrows (2015) Indian and Chinese immigrants are second to Mexico in the most substantial increase in foreign-born U.S. and non-U.S. citizens in the United States. The same analysis of data found that Spanish, Chinese (including Mandarin and Cantonese), and Vietnamese are the most common languages spoken in these homes. Lew et al. (2005) predicted that Asian student populations will continue to grow as a demographic on college campuses and claimed that the limited research on community colleges has contributed to the invisibility and the “significant challenges and obstacles in their [Asian students’] quest for higher education” (p. 70). Assalone and Fann (2016) reported that community colleges enroll the largest concentration of Asian American college students and this number continues to
increase. The college’s proximity to their homes “open admission” [open access], lower tuition rates, flexible class options, and developmental education” make community colleges a first choice for many students (p. 423).

The typical stereotype that Asian American students excel academically fails to account for the emotional, psychological, and social needs of the individual students (An, 2018; Assalone & Fan, 2016; Lew, Chang & Wang, 2005). The model minority label negatively affects Asian American students and “many suffer silently from the unrealistic expectations and academic demands sustained due to the dangerous stereotypes and societal pressures” (Assalone & Fann, 2016, p. 423). Students have reported being questioned about the decision to attend the community college because it is often assumed that they should be attending a 4-year university. Other students have felt that professors hold them to a higher academic standard because of their background, and many expected students to enroll in STEM classes. “Another participant who struggled in math classes explained that he would often receive pushback from peers that insisted he was being dishonest when he was unable to help them” (Assalone & Fann, 2016, p. 429).

Assalone and Fann’s (2016) review of literature finds that Asian American students are often excluded from educational resources and support because of the model minority status and the corresponding assumption that they do not need assistance. The implications of findings suggest that voices of Asian American students must be included in research that studies the lived experiences of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds in community college.
Dismantling Deficit Models

Cultural difference theorists believe that students from immigrant backgrounds have strengths that they apply to their experience in school. For example, Yosso (2005) applied concepts from critical race theory to explain how system oppression continues to value white middle-class experiences over others, and setting these experiences as the cultural norm perpetuates ongoing social inequality that continues to award privilege to those in the dominant culture. Yosso (2005) proposed that critical race theory provides a lens through which to view student experience and argued that negative perceptions about students from immigrant backgrounds affect students’ ability to integrate into campus life, which affects their ability to stay engaged in school long enough to earn a college degree. Rather than deficits, students should be considered to possess cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities that make their perspectives in and out of the classroom valuable and necessary (Yosso, 2005). Students “become empowered participants, hearing their stories and the stories of others, listening to how the arguments against them are framed and learning to make the argument, to defend themselves” (Yosso, 2005, p. 75).

Professional development initiatives aimed at addressing deficit thinking and placing a sharper focus on understanding inequities within the system are bringing about a cultural shift within community college ed. Studies indicated that institutions are only beginning to disaggregate data, and as such, are providing limited opportunities for educators to closely examine how institutions engage in unequal practices so they can challenge previously held assumptions about students (Bensimon, 2005; Berger, 2001; Gandara & Mordechay, 2017, Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017). Literature identifies assessing how students perceive the campus climate as a strategy for recreating organizational structures that promote improving
Conclusion

The literature reviewed found that college students from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds often feel unprepared for the degree of isolation and alienation they feel on today’s community college campuses (Alvarez, 2011; Braxton et al., 2011; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Hernandez, 2002; Jehangir, 2010; Yosso, 2005). Deficit models in education built upon a single story about how first-generation college students from immigrant backgrounds come to college financially, socially, and academically underprepared to engage in their educational journey do not take into account the variety of ways that student’s experience college (Banks, 2006; Baum & Flores, 2011; Yosso, 2005). Contemporary literature implied that building community college systems that promote academic resilience in first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds must consider how to change the narratives about students and dismantle deficit models that (Banks, 2006). According to the literature, reform efforts should consider how identities and life goals and cultural and academic backgrounds of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds could impact a student’s academic performance (Banks, 2006; Briscoe, 2005; Morales, 2004; Pidgeon, 2009; Takacs, 2002).

First-Generation Students from Immigrant Backgrounds Drop-Out Behavior

The literature showed that although students enroll with the intention of earning a college degree, many drop out before they reach their stated goal (Bailey et al., 2006; Boggs, 2011; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). First-generation students, like their peers, found the prospect of acquiring a college degree motivating, but also found the transition to college stressful and disorienting. Although challenges in the first year may be similar, the review of literature found that experiences of isolation are amplified for first-generation students from immigrant
backgrounds. Social and institutional isolation contributes to withdrawal from the support of the campus community and support at home. The experiences related to isolation and marginalization increased the probability that first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds will eventually drop out of school (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Braxton et al., 2011; Hernandez, 2002; Pirorkowski, 1983).

**Loss of Connection, Guilt, and Isolation**

Researchers who examined experiences of first-generation immigrant students identified guilt and loss of connection to family as factors that cause students to drop out of college before earning a degree (Alvarez, 2011; Arbona & Nora, 2007; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Kuh et al., 2006). In some cases, the guilt that students may feel because they have an opportunity their parents didn’t have keeps them from engaging fully in campus life, which ultimately contributes to their isolation on campus (Choy, 2001; Jehangir, 2010; Kuh, et al., 2006; Pirorkowski, 1983). The growing awareness of the fact that education provides a way to rise above difficult family circumstances can develop into feelings of guilt as students begin to embrace their life on campus (Pirorkowski, 1983).

Covarrubias & Fryberg (2015) posited that many first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds recognize that leaving home to attend college is an intentional first step as part of their goal to access a life that is different from their parents. Students experience “survivor guilt” as they come to fully understand the extent of “the economic and cultural discrepancies between the working-class home environment and the middle-class university environment” (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015, p. 420). In many cases, students continue to have responsibilities and obligations at home after they enroll in college. Students’ attempts to balance the obligations they have at home with the increasing demands of being a college student
often contributes to students’ lack of early engagement in campus life. The lack of integration on campus and the inability to juggle obligations at home and at school leads to eventual isolation of first-generation immigrant community college students. When the burden of helping at home while keeping up with assignments at school becomes too much to bear, students drop out of school (Perez, 2010, Pike & Kuh, 2005; Yosso, 2005). The review seeks to understand the ways in which students make sense of unique cultural traditions and obligations at home alongside understanding experiences at school to provide clarity on how institutions of higher education can support the academic resilience of students in their first year of college (Morales, 2008).

**Engagement in the Classroom and Academic Achievement**

In addition to studies on guilt and isolation at home and on the college campus, the level of engagement in the classroom factors into how students experience school (Banks, 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996). Many community college students commute to school, making classrooms the primary site for student interaction on campus. An analysis of literature found that students experience strong emotions when the lessons they learned at home contradict what they read in textbooks and when their perspectives are not considered valid in relation to what others in the classroom say or think about a topic (Apple, 1985). First-generation students from immigrant backgrounds may not be prepared for the isolation that they feel in the classroom when they are the only one in the classroom with a personal history and life experience that differs from their peers or the faculty member teaching the class (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Jehangir, 2009; Kuh et al., 2006; Swail, 2014). Studies found that students who come from immigrant backgrounds are often overlooked and socially marginalized, and often their talents go unrecognized, unappreciated, and unacknowledged in the classroom (Banks, 2006; Choy,
2001; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Kuh et al., 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996). For example, students are asked to read and write about weaknesses and shortcomings of individuals who have the same, or very similar backgrounds as their own. The divide between home and school worlds coupled with a sense of being left out or negatively portrayed in the curriculum perpetuates the isolation that many first-generation students feel when they are on campus (Jehangir, 2010; Kuh et al., 2006; Yosso, 2005). Researchers recommended providing students with “culturally validating experiences” to manage the isolation that limits their engagement in college (Jehangir et al., 2012; Rendón, 2006).

Engagement in the classroom is significantly improved when students have a positive relationship with the faculty (Jehangir, 2010; Pidgeon, 2009; Rendón, 2006; Swail, 2014). In fact, studies found that a student’s relationship with faculty plays a central role in first-generation immigrant students’ ability to remain academically resilient in their college programs (Baum & Flores, 2011; Braxton et al., 2011; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015: Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Hernandez, 2002; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Jehangir, 2010; Kuh et al., 2006; Rendón, 2006). Additionally, faculty using social justice practices and culturally relevant pedagogies support student engagement by modeling intergroup dialogue that validates students’ personal experiences so that multiple worldviews bring to light new insights and understanding (Adams, 2007). Approaching student success from a positive perspective that encourages a deeper understanding of students’ immigrant backgrounds and promotes positive interactions with faculty could guide educators in developing policies and practices that support students in their first critical year of college (Banks, 2006; Jehangir, 2010; Rendon, 2006).
Conclusion

This literature review revealed that cultural background factors into first-generation students’ school experience. Past and recent research has found that students from immigrant backgrounds dropout of college when they feel overwhelmed by the responsibility to maintain the cultural expectations of their family and experience feelings of guilt related to their decision to change the course of their life. Students are also more likely to drop out if they experience isolation or have negative experiences in the classroom. One way to enrich the journey of first-generation students and reduce their isolation is to do more to recognize their cultural capital and to bring their stories and lived experiences forward. Learning from students lived experiences will make educators more aware as they develop strategies for including students in all aspects of campus life.

Literature Review Summation

Chapter 2 offered a review of literature to discover how first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds experience the community college system. The question the researchers sought to answer is how students remain academically resilient in the community college system.

The literature review included a historical perspective on how the mission of community colleges to serve all students includes serving their political, social, and economic needs in society. The review investigated several aspects of traditional models designed around open access to higher education and the ways in which they do not always-support first-generation immigrant students in a way that allows them to remain academically resilient. This literature review looked at the early experiences of first-generation students coming from immigrant backgrounds where neither parent earned a high school diploma as a factor in understanding the
challenges students face in adapting to college culture. Finally, the review investigated the challenges of first-generation students prior to their enrollment and early in their college experience as factors that contribute to drop out behavior.

A theme found in the review of literature was the pervasive and powerful nature of the community college system as a factor in early experiences of first-generation immigrant community college students. The literature indicated that students’ diverse cultural backgrounds play a significant role in how they experience the admissions, placement, and financial aid process and how isolation also factors into their experience on campus. Included in the literature were examples of how deficit perspectives and reforms created out of deficit model thinking continue to disadvantage first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds.

For many students, entry into community college includes potential marginalization and isolation, both of which contribute to students’ lack of persistence (Alvarez, 2011; Hernandez, 2002; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Jehangir, 2009; Morales, 2004; Pascarella et al., 2003). The literature available on first-generation students in community college suggested that students remain academically resilient in environments where there is parental, academic, social, and financial support. The question the researcher sought to answer in this study was how then do first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds use inner resources such as bilingualism, cultural backgrounds, and personal values when overcoming challenges to remain academically resilient in a system where they may be isolated and alone?
Chapter 3: Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate academic resilience of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds in community college. Specifically, the problem of practice examined in this study focused on the experiences of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds and how they remained academically resilient within the college system that does not account for their cultural and life experiences. The literature revealed that first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds enroll in community colleges at a high rate (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Ma & Baum, 2016; Pratt, 2017); however, these first students leave college at a higher rate than their peers (Choy, 2001). Although research identifies the challenges that students face adapting to expectations in college, few studies have identified how successful first-generation community college students from immigrant backgrounds rely on inner resources to overcome adverse experiences and remain academically resilient during their first year in college. This study adds to research on academic resilience by identifying how successful students create meaning around obstacles they face and persist in community college. The analysis of how first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds apply strategies that foster academic resilience can be used to reform systems and develop policy and practices to support this unique population of college students.

Conceptual Framework

The framework chosen for this study was selected because it allowed for a careful and nuanced account of the inner resources study participants used to foster academic resilience. The theoretical framework of resiliency theory was the foundation for questions that sought to identify how participant’s strengths and supportive environments contribute to a student’s ability to overcome adversity in the academic and social environments at community college (Greene et
al., 2004; Masten, 2011; Rutter, 1985). The strength-based academic resilience framework was used to illustrate how personal experiences and individual characteristics of each of the participants contributed to their academic success in their first year in community college. The researcher chose this framework in conjunction with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology to focus on how students make sense of their unique experiences and the meaning they ascribe to those experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In sum, the voices of current community college students and the discussion of their backgrounds and the perceived supports and challenges they faced in their first year of college were the particular focus of this study.

**Research Questions**

The researcher used the research questions to shed light on the human story of the personal challenges each of the participants faced in their journey through the education system (Creswell, 2013, p. 43). The interview schedule used a semi-structured interview format with open-ended questions designed to allow participants to recount their personal experiences in their own words related to their language abilities and cultural backgrounds. Techniques such as using prompts, asking follow-up questions, and asking for concrete examples were used to draw out concepts and insights that provided additional information related to the questions posed in relation to the problem of practice. As a part of this exploration, the researcher used a structured format for reflective memo writing (Daher et al., 2017) to identify topics and reflect on how each of the participants created meaning around the challenges they experience in college. The interview protocol included asking introductory questions to establish a comfortable space for the participant. Ten to 12 open-ended questions were developed for the purpose of guiding the 45-minute conversations.
The central questions explored in this qualitative study were:

RQ1. How do first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds make sense of their experience at home, at school, and in their community to remain academically resilient in community college?

Sub-questions included:

RQ2. How do first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds remain resilient within their academic environment?

RQ3. How do first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds perceive their sociocultural, environmental, and interpersonal experiences as contributors to their academic success?

RQ4. How do first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds make sense of their academic achievement?

Research Paradigm

Many different paradigms are used to design quantitative and qualitative research studies. Researchers use paradigms to frame the work in a way that makes it comprehensible to others and to guide them in philosophical assumptions about the research and in the selection of methods used in the study (Merriam, 1991; Ponterotto, 2005). According to Butin (2010), “there are no obvious answers and responses to any educational issue” (p. 58). The framework paradigm selected for this study aligns with the intent of the research and the philosophical orientation of the study (Anfara & Mertz, 2015; Ponterotto, 2005; Roberts, 2010).

Ponterotto (2005) summarized the four main philosophical research paradigms as positivist, postpositivist, constructivist–interpretivist, and critical–ideological. Educational researchers used positivist paradigms—or scientific methods—to identify cause and effect
correlations between variables in education outcomes up until the late 1970s (Merriam, 1991). The large-scale studies conducted during that time-period and beyond contributed much of the quantitative baseline data still used in educational research today. More recently, other paradigms used in qualitative research emerged as valid alternatives for conducting research (Jovanović, 2011). In this qualitative study, a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm was used to get at the particulars in the data related to retention and success of first-generation community college students from immigrant backgrounds. When using a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm, the researcher assumes that there are “multiple, apprehendable, and equally valid realities” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129), and reality constructed in the mind of the individual and “there is no ‘obvious’ answer and response to any educational issue” (Butin, 2010, p. 58). In order to answer the questions in this study, the researcher needed to understand the discrete parts of each participant’s personal experiences. In the constructivist–interpretivist paradigm, the researcher is the central investigator and the interactive researcher–participant dialogue can stimulate reflection, awareness, and shared understanding (Creswell, 2013; Ponterotto, 2005). This paradigm, along with the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis research approach, frames this study to gather data and interpret the meaning that each participant ascribed to the experiences they attributed to their resiliency and persistence in college.

**Research Method**

The researcher found interpretative phenomenological analysis to be the most appropriate method because the focus of this study was to document how students made sense of their lived experiences as community college students in a way that allowed them to remain academically resilient and to persist in their first year of college. The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology is designed to examine a specific phenomenon and is rooted in cognitive
psychology and social cognition (Larkin, Shaw & Flowers, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). In this study, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology allowed the researcher to interpret the meaning that participants attributed to the experiences that brought them to college and the experiences they were having in college (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011; Smith et al., 2009; Wagstaff & Williams, 2014). A dynamic interaction occurred between the researcher and each participant was central to capturing the lived experience of the participants (Ponterotto, 2005; Smith et al., 2009). As such, the researcher focused on the participant’s unique sense of self and how each used their inner strength to overcome adversity at school and home in a way that allowed them to remain academically resilient and persist in college.

**Qualitative Research Approach**

Qualitative research was used because this approach allowed the researcher to get at the participants “knowledge, opinions, perceptions, and feelings as well as people’s actions, behaviors, activities, and interpersonal interactions” (Roberts, 2010, p.143). In this qualitative study, the researcher first discovered how participants’ background experiences influenced their decision to pursue a college degree. Next, the researcher investigated the participants’ experiences transitioning to college and all aspects of engagement on campus. Finally, the researcher considered academic resiliency by considering the participant’s interactions on three levels: individual, family, and community. “Qualitative research requires that one is willing to engage in the complexity” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 55), and a study of this nature is complex because it draws together themes based on the unique ways that each of the study participants engaged in meaning-making and how they viewed the way that unique experiences affected academic resilience.
Qualitative data goes beyond numerically measurable outcomes to a deeper understanding of the nuances of student experience (Creswell, 2013). Semi-structured interviews used open-ended questions with opportunities for participants to elaborate on their experiences as a way to gather data and to get at the complexity of the issue being studied (Creswell, 2013). Asking the participant to interpret their experiences allowed for an analysis of how each participant remained academically resilient within the community college system.

**Research Tradition of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

The research traditions of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) has roots in Edmund Husserl’s (1970) work in transcendental phenomenology and Martin Heidegger’s (1962) hermeneutic phenomenology. Husserl’s thinking was inspired by the writings of the philosopher Franz Bento in the 18th century, which promoted perception, awareness, and consciousness as a necessary element in research on human consciousness (Dowling, 2007). In Transcendental Phenomenology, the focus on perception and awareness was a key aspect of phenomenological studies, namely, exploring the essence of the participant’s experience. Finding the essence of the experience required that the researcher make value free assessments by “bracketing out” experiences and reducing an individual’s preconceptions (i.e., epoché) to interpret phenomena in a way that allows an individual’s story to speak for itself (Larkin et al., 2011, p. 105). In order to get at the essence of the experience, the researcher must suspend judgment and distance in order to present an unprejudiced representation of the phenomena under investigation (Dowling, 2007; Larkin et al., 2011). The use of bracketing is intended to ensure that findings aren’t influenced by researchers’ assumptions (Dowling, 2007).
Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Husserl’s students, Martin Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, advanced phenomenology from an intentional focus on bracketing and reduction to the focus on hermeneutics. The distinction being that hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation. Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty argued that researchers and participants engage as human beings in the world of experiences and as such, are incapable of completely disengaging in the process of seeking out what is meaningful. The main tenet of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty’s work is that it isn’t possible to completely take out the researcher’s perceptions and insights when interpreting what they have witnessed. Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty’s focus on existential philosophy and hermeneutics influenced contemporary phenomenology and IPA methodology (Larkin et al., 2011). Contemporary phenomenological theorists use phenomenology to understand the whole experience of interacting with the real world (Larkin et al., 2011). Phenomenological studies conducted using this methodology sought to understand the essence of individuals’ experiences by analyzing data to using hermeneutic cycles leading to identified themes suggesting a more complex and subjective approach presented as an alternative to an objective view of the world (Moustakas, 2001, Reiners, 2012).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was developed in 1996 by Jonathan Smith, a professor of psychology at Birkbeck University of London. Smith’s IPA methodology is based in hermeneutics and the interpretation of the essence of the experience. IPA is informed by phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2009). Specifically, IPA has a strongly idiographic approach concerned with human lived experience used to bring forward new
insights or to serve as the basis for further studies. Key scholars noted in published literature during this investigation include Michael Larkin and Paul Flowers.

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and Phenomenology**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research draws on principles of phenomenology, but it is the intentional focus on double hermeneutics and idiography that IPA apart from traditional phenomenology. IPA is appropriate in studies where the researcher aims to emphasize reflection and interpretation of the lived experiences of each individual rather than focus on the fundamental phenomenon. The focus on idiography means research begins by situating the participants in their particular context and documenting their unique perspectives before arriving at conclusions (Smith et al., 2009). The focus on meaning making provides opportunities for the researcher and participant to engage exploring illuminating insights as they emerge (Larkin, Shaw & Flowers, 2018; Smith, 2018).

**Double hermeneutics.** While hermeneutic analysis requires the correct interpretation of the phenomenon to uncover meaning (Moustakas, 2001), an IPA researcher’s approach uses double hermeneutics to interpret these meanings (Smith et al., 2009). The application of double hermeneutics, or multiple layers of interpretation, is another key philosophical difference between phenomenological studies and IPA studies (Smith et al., 2009; Wagstaff & Williams, 2014). In applying double hermeneutics, the researcher engages along with the participant in identifying and interpreting data related to the research topic. This is done because IPA researchers recognize that it is not possible to remove research bias and prior assumptions from the Interpretative process. While phenomenologists try to bracket out presupposition or personal experiences so they do not affect the study, Interpretative phenomenologists do not believe that personal experience or ideas can be effectively set aside. Rather, they view personal experience
as something that the researcher must be aware of because of the way it may affect the study (Smith et al., 2009). Smith and Osborn (2004) emphasized that IPA is a dynamic process were the researcher is both “empathic and questioning” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 36). Consequently, a personal understanding of the phenomenon is valuable when seeking to build a trusting relationship with participants in the study. Researchers using an IPA methodology must ensure that their interpretations provide participants with a clear sense of their experiences, and researchers bring their positionality to bear in a rich, inductive, and dynamic process of coding and analyzing lived experience (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

**Positionality statement.** In this case, the researcher self-identifies as a first-generation student from an immigrant background growing up in Canada, now living in the United States. The interest in this research topic began with the researcher’s experience growing up as a second-generation Canadian in a home where English was not the primary language spoken in the home. The researcher’s maternal and paternal grandparents moved to Canada from present day Ukraine in the early 1930s as part of the wave of Mennonites who left their villages in Ukraine for Canada to seek peace and freedom from persecution and violence they experienced during the Bolshevik Revolution.

The researcher has 18 years of professional experience as an educator working with immigrants and ELLs in the community college system. Personal experiences, which were gained firsthand as a first-generation college student navigating systems of higher education in Canada and the United States and along with experiences teaching first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds in the community college system, prompted this investigation. However, as Takacs (2002) states: “Few things are more difficult than to see outside the bounds of our own perspective” (p. 169). Personal awareness based upon personal and professional
experience supports the belief that although experience provides a sensitivity to the issues, addressing current problems of low educational attainment cannot be addressed without getting to the heart of the matter. In this case, the researcher is a white woman with different experiences navigating the immigration and education systems in the United States. Considering how to create a more equitable community college system from the perspective of the students who experience it on a daily basis is the only way to ensure all students can be full participants in higher education (Banks, 2006; Paris & Alim, 2014; Sirin & Fine, 2007). In IPA studies, both participant and researcher are instrumental in interpreting the experiences (Smith et al., 2009; Smith, 2018). It is in the application of this method that the researcher used personal experience to bring forward the insights participants shared for them to examine, and it is the participant’s process of making sense of these experiences and the researcher’s documentation of this meaning-making that creates richness and depth in the study.

**Idiography.** IPA studies require the researcher to carefully examine each individual case using idiography as the way to focus on specific aspects of shared phenomena. The data gathered is unique to each individual because “idiographic assessment focuses on understanding the individual as a unique, complex entity” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 431). In other words, through the idiographic process, the researcher seeks to provide details based on the understanding of unique facts about participants rather than by investigating groups of participants to garner data that could be transferred to explain the behaviors of multiple groups of people (Larkin et al., 2018). Through the process of analysis, IPA researchers uncover and examine the essence of how each participant makes sense of lived experiences (Larkin et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2009) and how individuals reflect on the significance of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009).
smaller sample size is used to allow for multiple interviews and a more thorough exploration of the data and of themes that emerge in single cases or across participant cases.

**Concerns and Considerations with the IPA Approach**

Qualitative methods like IPA allow researchers to focus on an accounting of individual experiences that can lead to more than one truth. For this reason, academic communities continue to be skeptical of the findings in qualitative research (Giorgi, 2011). Skepticism has to do with an epistemological belief that places qualitative methods at odds with methods that test a hypothesis to arrive at a conclusion or single truth (Giorgi, 2011; Jovanović, 2011).

This IPA researcher identified limitations in this chapter and at the conclusion of this research study. Interviews conducted as part of this research are consistent with what is recommended in IPA studies by Smith et al. (2009), which include using a purposive homogeneous sample of six participants with data gathered during two 45-minute semi-structured interviews. Interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure the quality of the interview and the data obtained during the interview process. IPA researchers are committed to understanding our participant’s perspective and assessment is a matter of judgment. Bias could be present due to the researcher’s Interpretative role in IPA data analysis, therefore the researcher’s involvement including the role of preconceptions, beliefs and aims were identified prior to the analysis stage of the research (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). In addition, the researcher used preliminary field notes to identify phrases or statements that the participants discussed during the interviews and this was used to clarify perceptions and gather more in-depth data during the second interview. A third meeting with participants was used as an additional check to validate findings (Daher, Carré, Jaramillo, Olivares, & Tomicic, 2017).
**Justification and Alignment of Study With IPA**

The study aligns with Interpretative phenomenological analysis because of the intent to explore how first-generation college students from immigrant backgrounds remain academically resilient in the first year of community college. Interpretative phenomenological analysis places an intentional focus capturing personal perspectives “as a way of ‘making a difference’ in situations when the people in the system are in difficulty” (Larkin et al., 2018, p.194). Consistent with IPA research, the primary source of data in this study came from participants making sense of their lived experiences in community college, which is central to the investigation of academic resilience (Smith, 2018).

Finally, the overarching purpose of the study was to provide educators with an insider’s view into the complex lives of first-generation students. The findings of IPA studies rooted in evidence of the words of participants can provide qualitative research that answers the questions of why and how the system needs to change when considering practices and processes that will increase completion rates for first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher was aware of the potential for bias because of the connection between personal and professional experiences and the study, and precautions were taken during the individual interviews and member checking to ensure validity during the processes of data gathering and analysis (Cho & Trent, 2006; Creswell, 2013).

**Research Participants**

The criteria for selection of six first-generation community college study participants used in this study followed what is defined by Smith et al. (2009). To be consistent with IPA methodology, participants represented a homogenous student sample of six students who had persisted in the community college education system. This method of selecting participants was
consistent with sampling in IPA studies designed using a small sample size to allow for a deeper exploration into the individual experiences of students who were all from an immigrant background and the first in the family to go to college (Smith & Osborn, 2004).

The participants selected for this study were students currently enrolled in community colleges in the State of Washington. The sites targeted included two community colleges that serve high numbers of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds in a variety of college programs. Establishing connections with the campus institutional researchers, student services administrators, and program directors as well as direct communication with individuals in the communities around the college were the methods used to recruit study participants.

In order for students to participate in this study, they needed to meet the following criteria:

1. Must be currently enrolled in college and in good standing
2. Must come from homes where foreign-born parents have not attended college
3. Must have entered the college with a stated goal of completing a vocational or academic transfer degree
4. May or may not be a U.S. naturalized citizen
5. May or may not be enrolled in a campus TRIO program or similar programs that strategically recruits and supports first-generation college students.

**Recruitment and Access**

The researcher began recruiting students after obtaining approval from the Northeastern University Internal Review Board (IRB; Appendix A) and from the IRB at each of the individual colleges. Site approval to conduct the research was also approved. The researcher contacted the college’s institutional researchers to review enrollment and demographic data and identify prospective participants currently enrolled in the colleges who met the study criteria. Most
community colleges have a TRIO program designed to support first-generation students transitioning from high school to college with the intent of earning a college degree. The researcher was directed to campus TRIO programs as another way to identify students who would meet the criteria for the study. The other recruitment strategy was to contact advisors who work with students on an ongoing basis. The researcher provided all personnel with materials including a list of participant criteria and a recruitment script.

Screening

Interested participants were screened for eligibility by reviewing program status and background. The researcher gathered preferred contact information and participants were notified of the schedule of two 45-minute interviews and a follow-up member check. Once the participants were screened and confirmed, the researcher contacted each participant via the researcher’s Northeastern University email address to confirm the meeting date, location, and time. Appendix B shows the script used to inform individuals of the anticipated length of the interview and follow up meetings. The interviews were tentatively scheduled to provide participants with knowledge of the time commitment. Participants were informed that this was a confidential and voluntary process and that they could withdraw at any time.

Data Collection

The data collection and interpretation process were conducted following the process for IPA studies set out by Smith et al., (2009). The researcher conducted two 45-minute semi-structured interviews with the individual students included in the study. The 45-minute interviews began with asking each participant to identify their gender identity, ethnic background, the language spoken at home, and year in school. The initial questions were intentionally broad and were used to develop a rapport with the participants (Smith et al., 2009).
During the first meeting, the researcher used the informed consent document (Appendix C) to review the purpose of the study and the study procedure. Students were provided an opportunity to ask questions prior to signing the consent form. Prior to beginning the formal interview, students were asked to select a pseudonym to be used throughout the study. The researcher used a notebook to record notes throughout the interview and wrote an analytic memo following each interview. The researcher conducted the interviews in a private, calm, and relaxed environment so that the participants felt comfortable describing details in as much depth as possible (Smith et al., 2009).

The semi-structured interview format was utilized and included predetermined and open-ended questions along with prompts that allowed insights and awareness to emerge from the dialogue between researcher and participants (Appendix D). The interviewer disclosed to the participant at the onset of the interview that the role of the interviewer was to listen to their personal stories. The interaction between the interviewer and the participant was structured in a way that allowed for plenty of time for the interviewee to tell the story. The interviewer used the strategy described in Smith et al. (2009, p. 65) of making short notes of keywords and topics that the participants used in their responses to facilitate follow-up during natural breaks in the conversation or during the second interview.

The interview sessions were digitally recorded, and transcripts were transcribed using the Rev.com application immediately following each session. IPA studies are iterative and inductive, cycling, and recycling through strategies (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). The researcher listened to the recordings several times before completing a line-by-line analysis after each interview was completed. Additionally, listening to the transcription allowed the researcher to assess the effectiveness of the questions and interview strategies.
Data Storage and Management

To ensure confidentiality through all stages of data collection and analysis, participants were invited to choose a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Names and other identifying markers were not included in any documents or in the transcribed interviews. Rev.com was used as the transcriber. However, the individual does not know participants as preassigned pseudonyms were assigned prior to uploading data for transcription. Audio files were deleted after each transcription. Any other artifacts, such as signed consent forms, interview notes, memos, and evaluation documents were locked in a file cabinet only accessible by the researcher. All electronic files continue to be maintained in a password-protected computer.

Analytic Methods

The data analysis process in qualitative research is one in which complex reasoning takes place using inductive or deductive logic (Saldana, 2016). IPA follows a bottom-up, inductive account of the data gathered in the field. An inductive reasoning or a bottom-up approach is used to gather large amounts of data so that they can be broken down into more discrete and significant pieces of information (Creswell, 2013). The aim in interpreting data is to develop an organized, plausible, and transparent representation of how participants experienced community college (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Throughout all stages of data gathering and interpretative process, the researcher used memoing and a reflective journaling device described by Daher et al. (2017, p. 13) as a way to reflect on the unique aspects of what each participant said as well as on the researcher’s perceptions as they emerged (Appendix E). Additionally, the memos and field notes were used throughout the research process to capture the complexity of how participants viewed their experiences in community college and then to “refocus the “blurry” (Saldana, 2016, p. 54).
The researcher reviewed the data and text information in the transcribed interviews multiple times before beginning the process of coding and analyzing the data (Saldana, 2016; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). In addition to listening to each interview, each transcript was read multiple times to capture the essence of what had been collected and to ensure a focus on what each participant said before drawing conclusions. The coding process in IPA is an iterative process through which the researcher considers data at various levels of abstraction (Creswell, 2013). A PDF version of the transcript data gathered during the interviews was loaded into NVivo 12 so that it could be organized through a coding process to identify major themes that emerged from the data.

A key part of the process was dedicated time to review types of coding that would be most appropriate for the nature of the study. Data taken line by line from the transcribed interviews were initially coded in NVivo into thirty-four unique codes. The data were then translated into a table format where they were organized, analyzed, and clustered into emergent themes. The researcher coded the data using descriptive coding in the first cycle included vivo coding, emotional coding, and values coding (Miles et al., 2014; Saldana, 2016). Coding was used to organize emergent themes as appropriate to “the primary questions, goals, conceptual framework, and literature review” (Saldana, 2016, p. 200). During the second cycle coding, emergent themes that connected student experiences to the research question were identified and analyzed. The strategies used to organize data in IPA can be a creative process (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher used notes and a graphic organizer to conceptualize major themes in a visual way for the purpose of analysis. Table 1 shows the design elements and analytical methods used in this study.
### Table 1

**Summary of IPA Design Elements and Analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Design Elements</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coding</strong></td>
<td>The researcher codes data adding memos and annotations to notes in the transcript, asking questions of the data, and looking for objects of interest. The researcher is ultimately looking for patterns in the data that can be used to identify themes drawn from a line-by-line review of the interview transcript. Multiple cycles of coding are applied to analysis of transcripts after each interview has taken place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Themes</strong></td>
<td>Organize and summarize case-level themes.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A “cross-sectional” analysis across cases is used to identify common themes (Larkin &amp; Thompson, 2012).</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clustering work around common themes and bundling themes in a table is used to keep track of emerging themes in the research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The thematic chart is used to capture themes reinterpreted by the researcher and documented in the narratives with verbatim extracts from the transcripts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identify events, actions, and interactions in the data to reflect the content of the respondent’s words (Smith et al., 2009).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use an iterative process that includes ongoing and thorough exploration into the experience and perceptions and assigned meanings in the findings (Smith &amp; Osborn, 2004).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Researcher interpretation of data</strong></td>
<td>Apply double hermeneutics when working with the participant in interpreting data-explicit interpretive data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data is interpreted by collapsing data in abstract categories and asking questions of the data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A final step in the process is to use a member check to verify findings with the participants and/or secondary readers to verify conclusions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Representation between themes</strong></td>
<td>Themes are labeled in an iterative process and arranged in a table. The data is used to understand the relationship between themes and the research questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td>The use of online software, charts, and field notes are used when collecting and organizing data. Copies of transcripts are kept in a secure file cabinet for a designated period of time. The organization system is established at the beginning of the data collection.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Trustworthiness

Smith et al. (2009) recommends selecting appropriate participants and a set process for conducting interviews. Multiple semi-structured interviews can be used to gather thick data, specifically accounts of areas where individuals have experienced hardship and challenge and their interpretation of how they used inner resources or external sources of support to stay on track in school.

Use triangulation and an audit trail to maintain close alignment between all elements of the study within IPA format. It is important to pay close attention to this aspect because a review of literature reveals that validity and trustworthiness is where the research community questions IPA.

Ensuring that the data is verifiable is ultimately very important to being able to defend the findings. Smith et al. (2009) suggest maintaining written documentation on the original research question, the research proposal, the interview schedule, recorded transcripts, and annotations to trace the process of establishing the thematic analysis, tables of themes, analysis, and the write-up.

Narrative

A descriptive narrative that is written creatively is used to capture the experiences of each participant. The narrative will be included in the analysis and is written as a final statement discussing the meanings unique to individual experience (Smith & Osborn, 2004). Thick descriptive data gathered during the interview process provides transferability for others who may wish to apply all or part of the findings elsewhere (Schwandt, 2014).

Findings

The study’s findings are written up by themes supported with a table to assist the reader with understanding research findings. The table is used to represent interviewee’s words along with the researcher’s interpretations. It is important to highlight what is new in the research.

The themes are drawn together to create a complete picture of findings, which are used to produce a narrative report.

The data is represented in the form of quotes taken from the interviews with participants. The quotes are interwoven throughout the narrative report as a way to connect the overall findings back to the study questions, literature, and theoretical frameworks (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Special attention is paid to participants’ language. Participants’ voices are captured by including excerpts from interviews to allow findings to emerge as participants speak for themselves (van Manen, 2017).

Criteria for Quality Research

Identifying the specific criteria for quality research in qualitative studies ensured the credibility of research and provided a way to document the “accuracy” of what is presented in the study (Creswell, 2013, p. 250). The researcher identified criteria used at each stage of the
research process as the way to ensure that ethical considerations and trustworthiness are maintained, and analysis is rigorous, transparent, and credible.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations are essential at all stages of the research process (Creswell, 2013). The IRB approval ensures that data gathered during the study is maintained in a secure location and protected to ensure anonymity of participants. Study participants were asked to select a pseudonym, which was used at all times during the study. No personally identifiable information was gathered during any stage of the study process. Participants were informed of this process during the first meeting. Additionally, participants were informed of their rights to opt out of the study at any time. Data was reported honestly with high quality reporting of results. The interpretation of data was conducted based on pre-established protocols for coding qualitative studies (Saldana, 2016).

**Trustworthiness**

To build credibility in qualitative research, the researcher must build trust and clarify evidence. Researchers build trust by acknowledging that power structures could impact the validity of the research if the participant does not feel empowered to disagree with the researchers. Kornbluh’s (2015) recommendation is especially appropriate for projects focused on understanding different perspectives for the purpose of addressing social inequities. In order to maintain trustworthiness in this study, the researcher suspended early judgments regarding the data, and member checking (i.e., participant validation) was utilized. The researcher conducted a 30-minute member check review session with each participant to ensure that the transcript fully captured what they said. Additionally, due to the complex nature of gathering data in semi-structured interviews, the research questions were reviewed prior to each interview to ensure that
the data extracted from the interviews answered the overarching questions while at the same time capturing the meaning from what each participant shared (Daher et al., 2017; Shenton, 2004).

**Credibility**

Establishing credibility is an essential aspect of developing trustworthiness. Thick descriptions were used to provide the details needed to draw conclusions. Thick descriptions, including direct language of participants, were used in the form of quotes when creating themes and drawing conclusions (Shenton, 2004; Yin, 2015). To ensure credibility, the researcher critically analyzed all data while being mindful of alternate explanations to ensure that facts were carefully critiqued throughout the process. Member checking develops credibility through a process of verifying accuracy and identifying missing elements (Creswell, 2013). To conduct a member check, the researcher followed the following steps:

1. Engage with participants to establish an understanding of the researcher–participant relationship so that the participant was at ease and willing to engage in a conversation about what is represented in the data.
2. Convey the purpose of the research so that members feel informed.
3. Establish open lines of communication and invite feedback throughout the process.
4. Follow pre-established guidelines for comparing multiple perspectives.
5. Incorporate the member checking in the final write-up.

**Transferability**

Rich, thick description also provide the reader with enough detail about the participants and the study to enable the reader to transfer information to another study setting if the conditions of the studies are similar (Creswell, 2013; Schwandt et al., 2014). However, IPA research, by design, explores how individuals make meaning of their lived experiences. The
individual experiences of participants may not be applicable to how other individual experiences of the same phenomenon.

**Dependability**

The data collection and analysis steps identified earlier in this chapter follow procedures put forth by previous IPA researchers. Smith et al. (2009) describes Yardley’s criteria as including four key characteristics: a) sensitivity to context, b) commitment and rigor, c) transparency and coherence, and d) impact and importance. The researcher for this study will document the research process which included: detailed memos used as field notes to capture what happened during the interview, the interview schedule, audio recordings and transcripts of interviews, field notes, drafts of documents around themes, analyses of interviews, and the final analysis.

**Conformability**

Triangulation of data is used to reduce the effect of investigator bias by gathering data from different sources, which in this case will be multiple participant surveys. Miles and Huberman (1994) considered the “audit trail” as essential to conformability as it allows others to identify decisions made and the steps for each of the procedures described. A qualitative analysis coding form, such as the one illustrated in Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), will be used to document procedures, rules followed during analysis, conclusions, confirmation of conclusions, and research comments (p. 318). The audit trail for this study can be found in Appendix F.

**Potential Research Bias**

It is critical to address researcher bias because the social positioning of the researcher could impact representations of specific data (Briscoe, 2005) and personal or professional
connections to the work could affect the interpretation of the results in this study (Creswell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). To mitigate bias, the researcher has taken deliberate steps to carefully document participants’ accounts of their lived experiences and their unique interpretation of the events. The documentation of interviews includes maintaining recordings, notes on the data gathering process, and step-by-step descriptions of the interview and data analysis processes, which ensures that the researcher’s perceptions of specific situations do not detract from the goal of ensuring that students’ voices are fully represented in the findings.

**Limitations**

Limitations of this study relate to transferability. This study focused on the unique experiences of participants in two colleges in one state with a small sample size. The lived experiences of participants were not considered representative of all students. The researcher sought to understand how students’ sense of their unique cultural traditions affects their educational experiences in distinct ways. A focus on resiliency directed the study toward identifying successful students’ unique self-awareness and individual perceptions of how they fit within the community college system. A limitation in this study is that the data gathered from each interview was unique to the participant in the study and therefore would not be generalizable to all first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds. Also, the sample did not include students from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds.

The sharing of personal stories required that students be comfortable sharing details of their lives with the researcher. Two 45-minute interviews with students may not have provided students with enough time to go deeply enough into their experiences and may have represented only a portion of what has been significant for them.
Summary

The goal of this study was to understand how first-generation community college students from immigrant backgrounds remain academically resilient in their first year of community college. IPA methodology was used to gather rich data through a process of individual semi-structured interviews where participants were provided an opportunity to speak openly about their college experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The data gathered was analyzed and represented as themes used to answer the research questions posed in this study. Ultimately, the research could be used by stakeholders as they make decisions about how to reform policy and practices in the community college system in ways that take into account how first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds experience school. Specifically, findings could be used to inform practices including orientation to college, course advising, curriculum development, financial aid policies, and program mapping.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

The overarching question that this study sought to address was how participants made sense of experiences in school, at home, and in their community in order to remain academically resilient in community college. The subquestions asked a) how first-generation participants from immigrant backgrounds remain resilient within their academic environment, b) how participants perceive their sociocultural, environmental, and interpersonal experiences as contributors to their academic success, and c) how participants make sense of their academic achievement. This method of analysis followed IPA methodology with its focus on using participants’ voices to identify the meaning of experiences related to the study questions and the problem of practice (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Smith, 2018). The problem of practice was that college systems designed for traditional students do not consider first-generation students with immigrant backgrounds and their unique personal experiences, linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and values, which amounts to a lack of support that can contribute to isolation and high dropout rates for this population.

Six participants enrolled in two different community colleges located in Washington State were invited to participate in this study. Participants were provided the opportunity to review transcripts and the self-reflective notes as a form of member checking the researcher’s interpretations of each participant’s experience. Table 2 provides a brief description of the study participants.
Table 2

*Participant Attributes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Self-Identified Race/Gender</th>
<th>Year in School</th>
<th>Degree Goal</th>
<th>Career Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>Latinx, female</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>Ed</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristina</td>
<td>Vietnamese-Chinese</td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luis</td>
<td>Mexican, male</td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>Criminal justice</td>
<td>Law enforcement, border patrol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abigail</td>
<td>Mexican, female</td>
<td>2nd year</td>
<td>Criminal justice</td>
<td>Attorney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Mexican, female</td>
<td>1st year</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>Midwife, or nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay</td>
<td>Latinx, male</td>
<td>2nd year standing, 4th year in college</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>Teacher, policy writer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

The data collected from the six interview participants were analyzed using methods consistent with IPA (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher was central in the identification of themes. Themes that emerged across at least one half of the transcripts were identified as being recurrent themes. The extracts taken from individual interviews were selected because they provided the most powerful insights into how the participants’ experiences in their formative years, at home, in the community, and at college promoted academic resilience. Analysis of the interview data yielded three superordinate themes and their subthemes. Superordinate themes and subthemes were identified as those recurring in at least four of the six participants’ interview data. Table 3 provides a listing of the superordinate and subthemes that manifested during analysis as well as the recurrence of each theme across participants.
Table 3

Superordinate Themes and Subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Challenges as Internal Factors in Resilience</td>
<td>Significant events in the participants’ lives that lead them to college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Personal experience</td>
<td>• Students’ perceptions and making sense of adverse experiences in a way that makes them want to overcome challenges in college and earn a college degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Educational environment</td>
<td>• Perceptions of K–12 and community college educational experiences and how they fit within these systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Navigating systems</td>
<td>• Perceptions of how transitions from K–12 to community college and experiences in community college affect confidence as college students and academic resiliency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Social Competence</td>
<td>Perceptions of how social networks and relationships foster academic resilience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Relationships as social networks</td>
<td>• Perceived importance of relationships with faculty, staff, and peers and academic resilience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Sense of control</td>
<td>• Making sense of how labeling is used to describe linguistic abilities, family background, and academic ability and how this impacts their identity as college students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Sense of Purpose</td>
<td>Personal experience, overcoming adversity, internal drive, and motivation contributes to academic resilience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Leading the way</td>
<td>• Perception of what it means to be first: breaking the trail to make it easier for others and changing the system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Navigating multiple worlds</td>
<td>• Making sense of experiences of adapting to multiple cultures, languages, and expectations at home and at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Staying the course</td>
<td>• Making sense of adversity and challenges as a way of overcoming barriers to persisting in college and the importance of being an example of someone who made it through the system</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Challenges as Internal Factors in Resilience

The first superordinate theme, Challenges as internal factors in resilience, captured significant events in the participants’ lives that led them to college. Each participant shared
unique aspects of their childhood experiences along with details regarding the transition from elementary and high school to college. Participants identified language ability and U.S. immigration status as being a significant part of lived experiences. The analysis of themes was interpreted using IPA methodology, critical race theory, and the resiliency framework. The first subtheme that emerged captured factors of participants’ lived experiences that affected their resiliency in college. Descriptions of personal experiences showed how participants made sense of experiences transitioning among environments at home, at school, and in their communities. Participants reported perceptions of learning the English language. The subordinate, educational environment that emerged in this study captured the participants’ experiences of finding their voices on the college campus while at the same time maintaining a connection to their language of origin and cultural values at home. Specifically, participants discussed the challenges of navigating multiple languages and multiple systems at the same time. Participants described the difficulty of learning how to ask for help or guidance on their own while at the same time learning how to register for classes, how to pay for college—in some cases without any form of financial aid—while at the same time establishing relationships with faculty, advisors, and peers. Finally, participants elaborated on how they perceived the education system affected their experiences in college. The three subthemes discussed here are: personal experiences, educational environment, and navigating systems.

**Challenge: Personal Experience Learning English**

Each of the participants in the study viewed their experiences as ELLs in K–12 as having a significant impact on academic achievements. In addition to ELL classes, two of the six participants in this study were also enrolled in Special Education. Each participant referenced these early experiences as formative and described the ways in which their experience as ELLs
continues to affect class performance now that they are in community college. They viewed learning English as a personal challenge. When asked about perceptions of how their dual language ability affected her, Kristina stated:

English is my second language; Vietnamese is my first. And not having a family that speaks English is hard because they always speak your native language at home, and then you get everything mixed up.

Katie had frustration in her voice as she described her experiences learning English in elementary school after she tested out of classes for English as a second language (ESL):

We tested out of ESL. But when we kept joining class like regular participants, we struggled so much. We were like, oh, I don't know what that word means. Our writing was short. We would write shorter stories than usual because they're like, I don't know what else to say. I guess the reason for that was because they didn't have a teacher.

Katie’s experience learning English resembled Kristina’s. Katie’s words illustrated the frustration she felt in her college classes when definitions and terms in English were incomprehensible to her:

Sometimes my English classes have a lot of definitions, but it's mostly when it's . . . I don't know how to explain it. So, for example, science classes. Science classes where I'm always kind of like, that definition works now but it doesn't work later on. I was like wait, how does that work again? As well as any psychology class. A definition . . . I don't why psychology does this, but I was reading my psychology book right now. They'll give me a definition of something, and I still have questions. Like what does that mean now? What does that word within the sentence mean, and how does that fit to behaviorism or to this? So, I have to look up that word again.
The meaning that Katie ascribed to her experience is that the lack of explicit instruction in English for children in K–12 continued to affect a large number of multilingual students. Katie attributed a shortage of qualified ESL teachers in her elementary school as the root cause of the problem. Katie used her struggles to overcome language barriers in school as motivation to become an ESL teacher:

There's a lot of students that still go through it even though it seems like there's more ESL teachers, but I feel like the way they teach is very . . . it's not wrong, but they can't connect with the students because they've never had to . . . most of the teachers that I've encountered and met who are ESL teachers, they've never really encountered the issue or struggle of why a 15-year-old struggles to differentiate between worm as the bug and warm as the temperature. That was my issue for the longest time. And then feel like that's the thing with students. I feel like they might not have understood why students struggle with they, there, they're, their when they're 15-year-olds because we didn't go through that. We really weren't taught the basics as kids.

Two participants identified limited opportunities to attend school as children as not only inhibiting their ability to learn the English language but also to develop critical foundational academic skills. When asked about perceptions of how these early experiences affected them as college students Abigail and Jay described how their childhood experiences made them feel less prepared for school. Both stated that they were aware of how they were underprepared for college.

Abigail’s family moved from the United States back to Mexico when she was a child so that her father could take a job in a church, and Jay’s family moved because of the nature of their work as migrant workers in the United States. During the time in Mexico, Abigail’s father kept
her out of school as a form of punishment for not attending church. She expressed disappointment in the school because no one at the school followed up to find out why she was not attending. She said of her father, “He didn't let me go to school. And I don't know why the school would not send someone or call them because a child is not going to school.” Abigail became emotional, saying these were the saddest moments of her childhood when she was isolated at home. She felt regret because now as an adult, she recognizes how much of her childhood she missed because she could not go to school. Abigail stated that now that she is in college, she embraces the opportunity to study, learn, and realize her dream of becoming a defense attorney. Abigail stated:

I remember when I was little; I had no help at all. Every time my dad moved, I lost that. . . In school, the new school, I would be behind, or they had already past that. So, I didn't learn anything. So, going to college now, it's like I'm learning. But I missed everything else. So right now, I'm learning.

In a similar way, Jay described his childhood as “living under a rock,” isolated from the experiences he imagines that other children his age enjoyed. He interpreted his early childhood experiences as being “typical” of migrant families because of the way that migrant families “lived in the shadows, not venturing out to libraries, movies, school activities in a way that other children did.” Jay was placed into ESL in the first grade and Special Education in the second grade. His voice expressed disappointment when he described falling further and further behind in the K–12 system. He claimed that he still struggles with catching up academically now that he is in college. Jay demonstrated self-awareness of the way that his learning experiences, and specifically his placement in Special Education, did not challenge him academically. He said, “K–12 system that
Special Education system does not challenge you whatsoever.” Jay expressed frustration with the amount of testing he had to do in K–12.

They don't tell you how to think critically, other than just to test you, test you, test you, test you.” Jay’s struggle and stressful experiences as ELL and Special Education students were the motivation that drove him to stay in school and earn a degree. He said his goal is to become a teacher or a social worker so that he can change the system in a way that creates learning environments that consider the various ways that students learn and demonstrate their knowledge. He said of his experiences with testing in school:

That's what I experienced school being like, which is maybe why I say that I'm okay with, I don't have the greatest transcript, because that's what school has been like. Just testing, testing, you've got to produce, produce, produce, and that to me is not . . . It's not the way I want to learn. It's more I want to learn, and I enjoy it, and I like it. Yeah, and I think the education . . . because that’s what I want to do; I want to start changing that too.

Maria’s comments demonstrated a positive and optimistic perspective when she said that her willpower and her organizational skills helped her to stay in school. She said that she gained these skills because she was left on her own after her grandmother was deported to Mexico. When asked how she thought these early experiences affected her now that she is in college, Maria said her early experiences at home and at school taught her how to survive. Maria became emotional as she described her early years in high school as a time when she had to grow up and face realities of going to school while living on your own. She spoke about how she is using the survival skills she learned early in life to help her manage her college classes while keeping a part-time job to pay the bills:
I was fine for my first quarter that I had already begun, but then once [my grandmother] left, it was all about me paying my bills, me paying my rent, my food and all of that . . . it was constantly like do I go to school or do I go to work? It was always that tough decision.

Eventually, Maria fell behind in her classes and was not on track to graduate from high school. Like Abigail, Maria perceived a lack of support from the high school because she perceived that no one believed that she could graduate on time. However, Maria’s words illustrate how she translated these experiences into feelings of pride when she finished high school on time. She said:

Because I was really behind on my junior year. I think I had 23 credits, so I wasn’t gonna graduate, but I ended up graduating with 34, so I ended up with extra credits. And I'm just so very proud of myself.

Now in college, Maria said she is motivated to complete her degree so that she can make a better life for herself and make her grandmother proud. When asked what keeps her going, Maria said that when she feels challenged, she remembers her high school experience and gives herself this pep talk: "You passed high school; you were really behind. I know you can do it. Right now, you're not behind, so don't get behind."

In sum, each participant had a lot to say about how prior life experiences affected the way that they had experienced community college. Although experiences varied, common themes emerged as participants described how their experiences at home and school during childhood produced in them the awareness and resolve that they brought to community college. This theme was reinforced as participants described how they used prior experiences to inform their interactions in the educational environment on their community college campuses.
Perceptions of the Educational Environment

The researcher found a subtheme that emerged across all participants related to how they perceived the educational environment as a place where they could explore identities, find connections, and achieve academic success. Participants reported experiences with faculty, advisors, and peers as affecting their sense of belonging and academic resilience. A common theme emerged when participants spoke about their desire to feel connected to the campus community and to have engaging relationships with faculty and peers in the classroom. Furthermore, the participants viewed being understood by faculty, being engaged in the classroom, being included in course content, and being listened to by their advisors as the critical ways that they could become visible learners on campus.

Strengthen by engagement with faculty. The participants viewed engagement with faculty as critical to their engagement on campus and essential for achieving academic success in college. When asked what helped them to achieve academically, there was a consensus among all participants that developing a positive relationship with faculty was necessary if they were going to succeed in college. Participants expressed feeling valued when faculty adjusted their classroom routines, changed deadlines on assignments, or modified communication strategies after speaking with the participants. Ultimately, the participants perceived that faculty members wanted to help them. According to Jay:

[The faculty are] very nice, and they're always willing to help you. And that even though if you don't think you're smart enough, they are there to help you. You just have to ask, or just go in. They're there to help you. They're here to help you.

And Luis stated: “They help me, just help me in what I need to improve on in their class, just by giving me advice on what specifically I need to work. I think that that's very helpful.”
The participants in this study expressed a belief that it is a student’s responsibility to disclose
details that help faculty understand what they need to succeed. How well faculty listened to
them and provided additional accommodations or resources reinforced participants’ behavior and
fostered students’ resilience.

Jay felt validated as a learner when he was able to voice his opinions about an
assignment and the faculty member made an adjustment based on his feedback. He explained:

I told her that some of her assignments were real intimidating because they were just
bunched up and it made me feel overwhelmed and I just didn't feel like doing it because it
was overwhelming for me, and she ended up liking that feedback because she doesn't get
much feedback from her students. So, she actually gave me extra time on finishing my
report as well, because she just seemed understanding.

Katie had a positive experience when she decided to open up to her teacher in her English
class about challenges she was having writing her paper in English. She said:

And I was afraid to get my grade back, but I actually got a good grade. And my
professor was like, "Oh, thank you so much for teaching me about this. I didn't know you
guys had a similar thing," or, "I didn't know you guys had a word that defined that, but
it's said differently and it's used for a female not a male, the way we use it English." I was
like, whoa. And so, she thanked me for teaching her something new, and I'm like, whoa,
snap. I was like okay, it's not that bad then.

Abigail provided an example of a time when she wrote a letter to her faculty member to
explain why she had some missing course assignments. The faculty responded to her by
accepting her assignment. After this response, Abigail perceived that the faculty’s high
expectations as supporting her success rather than an attempt to fail her. Abigail said:
She's very tough. . . . It was just like, you have to do this. And then I wrote a letter. I guess they all shared it, the participant letter. And she came back the next day and she was completely different. Completely different. Because she wanted to fail me because I turned in two assignments 15 minutes late. So, she was . . . It was going to be a fail. And I brought all the papers that she didn't grade and that made me get a C at least in her class. I had proof, I brought all the evidence, and she didn't fail me. But I know now that she thought differently after reading the letter. She changed completely.

In a similar way, Katie, Kristina, Luis, and Jay identified their belief that they needed to ask questions and use multiple forms of communication to reach out to faculty for support. Kristina stated:

If you don't ask questions in class, how you're going to learn? But also talking to them personally, and talking about your growth in that, and like what you need help more, or what you need specifically from them.

Despite the fact that Luis is quiet, the way that he spoke about college teachers showed that he trusted that they had his best interests in mind. He said, “I'm not really a guy that likes to talk a lot, but if I seek help to them, they would tell me.” Jay found success using email communication, saying: “Each time I'm struggling with something I normally email the teacher and let them know that I need their help on certain things and they are always welcoming and willing to listen and support me.”

In order to build relationships with faculty, participants were required to disclose personal information about their circumstances that at times moved these participants outside of their comfort zone. Several participants spoke about how challenging it was for them to authentically speak about their unique set of circumstances and the challenges they faced in
college. Katie expressed understanding that it took courage to disclose personal details to faculty and staff. She acknowledged that was critically important that faculty understand why things might not be going well for her. Katie expressed a belief that people would help her find the resources she needed, which motivated her to step outside her comfort zone:

But once I saw that, I was like dang, I need to open up more. I need to speak more to get resources because if I don't say my situation, then I won't get the resources I need. And that's the thing that I see. I honestly feel like I would still be struggling. I feel like I would not be taking classes that I actually enjoy. I also feel that without me opening up, she would not know how to help. She would just help me basically be . . . well, obviously you have advisors, right?

Katie’s words illustrated what emerged as a common thread among several participants. Katie claimed:

I've seen a lot of first gen, a lot of participants that identify as me or identify something similar. First gen, they don't get the resources that I have because they haven't been able to speak up or have not felt comfortable yet saying what the situation is.

**Faculty as powerful change makers.** In addition to seeing faculty as the individuals on campus who helped them succeed in the classroom, participants believed faculty held the key to their personal success in college and identified faculty as change makers on campus. Several participants identified faculty as the individuals on campus with the power to make changes that could improve how first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds experience the college system. When asked what they needed faculty to understand about them to be effective change makers, these participants thought that faculty should take time to get to know students’ histories so that they could show more empathy and compassion. When asked what change meant to
them, the majority of participants reported that a positive change would include being deeply
listened to and having faculty show understanding by responding to them with empathy and
compassion. Jay said:

I would say their empathy would really help, because if they're willing to understand and
open a space for me to have extra time on the assignment, or understand where I'm
coming from, and the way how I word things, would be really helpful. And I've actually
gotten to see that this quarter with one of my teachers. She understands that her students
aren't always the same, and that she has to meet her students where they are because you
can't teach something correctly if you don't meet your students where they are. And that
to me showed me empathy and it allowed me to express myself, how I felt about her
class. I think it's pretty awesome, too, if instructors were to open up the mike and ask
their students, "Okay, what do you want to learn? How could I provide this to you in a
way where it's gonna help everyone and not just one person?"

Making sense of experiences in the classroom. Beyond relationships with faculty,
participants’ experiences in the classroom and with the course content affected their belief in
their ability to achieve academically in college. At the beginning of their community college
experience, almost all of the participants faced challenges that made them question how their
worldviews and life experiences factored into what was happening in the classroom. When
questioned about how these experiences helped them achieve a positive outcome in the class, Jay
said:

Not being understood by my instructors and belittling me because I may not have the
same lenses as most white Euro-Americans have in these textbooks, because I find
myself arguing with the textbook, just the way they word things, it's just I don't agree with some of it because it's just not the way I think.

Katie spoke with passion and determination in her voice when she talked about how she perceived classroom expectations as being unfair because they did not accommodate the unique needs of students represented in the classroom. Katie highlighted an experience in class as a way to make her point:

I feel like in general, teachers . . . well specifically this last quarter I had a teacher, she went over how many hours a participant has to put in of studying, how many hours of work, how many hours of free time, and when I looked at that, I was like, does this fit first gen participants? Does this also fit participants who are of color? Does this chart also fit participants who are undocumented? Because when I looked at that, I was like, all right, so technically you're saying that I have to put 60 hours of studying, but I can't do that because I have other things to do outside of work, outside of life, outside of school in general. And I was like, wait, all of these numbers that you're giving me, how many of them were [people of color]? How many of them are first gen? How did they do it? How many hours did they put knowing that sometimes we have to work two to three jobs or knowing that our English is kind of wonky at times or knowing that we don't have the same financial support that other participants have or knowing the fact that we can advocate for ourselves.

In the same way, Abigail and Maria expressed frustration with what they perceived as assumptions that everyone in the class had access to the same resources. This was something that chipped away at students’ confidence in their ability to meet expectations. Abigail stated,
If it was other participants, the ones that slack, they're not into it. You know they're not gonna make it. That's different. But for one that is doing everything that they can to be there, but then something happens, that ruined my whole day. Not that I'm late, but that would make me feel bad, because I did everything that I could, even though I'm gonna be late. But I'm still here. If they could have a little bit more compassion.

Maria made the same point when she said, “[The teacher] sets her standards; it's pretty clear: no late work, no nothing. So, I feel like it would mainly be like, ‘You didn't really try to be in class. You didn't really try very hard to stay focused.’” Maria’s words express how she made sense of her experience in class and how she interpreted this to be a factor in her ability to succeed in the class:

I'm like, it hasn't really come up to me, to succeed in the class, so I feel like it's going to be a very hard thing to get over. So, if they give you 10% off then I'll try harder, and even if get 10% off, I'll take my time on it. So, I would probably get a better grade than turning it in on time and getting a bad grade.

Additionally, the tone in the classroom environment impacted the level of comfort participants felt in contributing in class. According to Abigail:

The way you're treated does everything. That will change everything, because if I'm scared of being in that class, I can't wait for that class to be over. I'm just looking at the clock. I probably didn't learn anything because I'm so scared. I'm scared to talk, I'm scared to give my opinion, and I’m scared of doing everything. But in the other class, she makes it feel comfortable. And when we feel comfortable, we start talking, and then we start debating. It's a fun class, but we know our expectations. We know that yeah, she's
being fun, but at the end, if you don't do your homework; she's gonna give it to you at the end.

Maria expressed a similar thought: “Yeah, because . . . I'm not sure how to explain it, but sometimes teachers have a way of showing that they care. Then sometimes, some do care, but they don't really show it.” Maria expressed a need to feel comfortable in class so that she could raise her hand and ask questions in class. She stated that she needed challenging concepts broken down into chunks so that she can understand:

English, I have a really hard time in it. But math, if they're not explaining it in depth enough . . . Because my professor right now, he just writes a question and gives you the answer. He needs to go step-by-step, otherwise I won't get it. In English, if I don't understand it, I don't understand it at all. I need her to sit down with me and talk to me about the whole thing.

These comments indicate that the expectations in the classroom and the way that students perceived these expectations considering their unique circumstances factored into their ability to remain engaged in their studies and academically resilient in the college environment.

**Perception of course content and ability to engage in the classroom.** Participants viewed relationships with faculty and peers and engagement in the classroom as necessary factors in their academic achievement. In a similar way, participants viewed course content engaging them as learners as a critical component in their success. They described how what they learned in class and how the material was presented in the textbook and lectures was a critical factor in how they felt about what they were learning and how willing they were to fully engage in class.
For Jay, the main issue he described was how the textbook and the conversations in the classroom were presented from a one-sided viewpoint. He stated, “I haven't seen more of the perspectives of marginalized communities and it's always been English, English, English, English, or American, American, American shoving in my head, and I completely have a strong feeling towards that.”

Several participants used examples that illustrate how they felt when course content was presented from a one-sided perspective with no opportunity to present alternative observations or critiques. Jay used an example from a sociology text discussing the class system to illustrate how the text made him feel when he read it. He explained:

Because it's like I'm learning these $10 dollar words, which were the words . . . I'm having a . . . Okay, how do I explain this? So, like I'm learning this $10 words, right? Which is explaining basically what I lived through and I still have a hard time pronouncing, which you noticed right now. So this is where English and Spanish get into the mix where I can pronounce a word and I can't pronounce a word sometimes in English, so I have to Google it or research it what that means, so it takes more time of my study, which gets frustrating sometimes and irritating because it's taking me time to get through this chapter.

In a similar way, Katie’s expressions and tone of voice as being angry and frustrated with an experience she had in her history class when she said:

I had a lot to say because my step dad and his family still know that knowledge, I guess. They still are aware of the knowledge. My mom is still aware of some of that knowledge back from the indigenous people, and of course it's gets lost through time. And my stepdad, some of my stepdad's family actually still speak their native tongue. And I was
like, I don't know what you guys are talking about. I was like, I don't know. So, it's interesting because as I read something on the Aztecs, we were reading a myth from the . . . I forgot the name of it exactly, but as I was reading that myth, I was talking to my mom and stepdad. And they're like, "Oh, that makes sense. That makes sense." I was like, "How does this make sense to you guys and not make sense to me?" Like, okay. And they said, "Well, it does make sense to us because we've heard of it back home. "That wasn't really a myth, you know? That actually happened." I was like, "Oh, really?" He was like, "Well, I don't think it's a myth. I think it really happened. So, I think it's a history in my family." So then myth, myth, like it's false. And he was like, "I don't think it's false. I mean, I genuinely believe that this is true to my heart and to my family's heart.”

Kristina’s interpretation of why her experience was excluded from the content in the class was that people in the class were closed minded. She said:

And also people being like closed minded. I feel like when you're talking to them or anything, people think that they're right in this one way, or they don't see how other people will think. And to be open minded to other people's opinions or thoughts, or just even talk, you'll just be open minded about.

Conversely, Katie’s description of her experience in English class demonstrated a time when she felt that her instructor considered her prior knowledge and how it factored into her learning. Katie explained that she felt validated by her faculty member’s response:

And I actually told her, I was like, ‘is it weird text to world connections with my own life, but it's in different . . . it's in a different language.’ The words we use are different and obviously are always either addressed to a male or a female. It's never addressed to
them because we don't really have pronouns like that. She said its fine and she's learning herself too. She's like, "I actually enjoy reading your essays because I actually get to learn more about another culture or about you specifically." And I'm like, oh, okay. So that was a pro. For me, that was a pro.

Across the participants, academic resiliency is diminished when participants perceived that their lived experiences were not acknowledged or validated. The participants had negative classroom experiences when they perceived that their identity group was portrayed in a negative way and when their personal histories were misrepresented in the presentation of the materials. They had positive feelings about the class when they were invited to challenge what they were learning and felt validated by their teacher’s positive response.

**Engagement with advisors.** Participants described advisors as the important people on campus who helped them navigate the system. Some participants explicitly expressed a connection with an advisor on campus as the determining factor in why they decided to go to a community college instead of a larger university. Katie thought about her decision this way: “How am I going to find people that can relate to my story or can relate to my struggles, or advisors that can relate and be able to give me some form of help?” When probed about how she considered advising and support services as a factor in her persistence, Katie said she thought about advising as an essential form of support because advisors connected her to the resources she needed to stay in school. Katie considered: “Is this school going to be able to provide me the resources I need, or this school is too big, is it going to have time to provide me some resources?”

In describing the most useful and productive conversations with advisors, students talked about conversations that went deeper into their experiences, and beyond the surface level of
simply selecting academic courses of study as helpful and meaningful. Participants attributed academic success to having advisors who took time to get to know about their background experiences, their preferred learning styles, and the unique challenges they faced because of their struggles with the English language.

Katie recounted what she described as a deeper conversation with her advisor who helped her make decisions after Katie failed a math class. Katie said;

And she helped me. She asked me, “Well, how do I learn?” And I said, “Well, I do have an issue understanding sometimes math teachers, because math is another language of its own. I do speak two languages, so sometimes I don't understand when they say, “Oh. This transfers into this.” I was like, “well, what transfers? I don't understand that.” [My advisor] suggested this professor who speaks five languages, who is also a linguistic, who also has a minor in linguistics. And I was like, “oh snap, there are math teachers that have that too?” And she's like, “Yeah. Well, let's look into it.” I took her again the next quarter, and I enjoyed it so much I passed that . . . for the first time ever in that math class, I passed with an A.

**Advisors help with overcoming isolation.** Participants generally acknowledged that they felt isolated when they arrived on campus and needed college staff to help them figure out where they belonged. Maria, Luis, Jay, and Abigail identified advisors as people that helped them overcome feelings of isolation by connecting them with support on campus. Maria said: “[Advising] helps me realize that I actually do have people to go to when I feel lost, or something.” Luis credited his advisors with helping him make a successful transition out of high school and into college. In fact, he claimed that without his Upward Bound advisor, he would not be in college at all. He described his thoughts about what his experience would have been
like without his advisor’s support, saying: “I would have been doing things on my own, and I
don't think I would have been interested in college if I were just me on my own, because college
wasn't really something that I wanted to go to.” Abigail, Kristina, Katie, and Jay spoke about
advisors as the people who take time to listen to them and help them think about how they can
engage in campus life before offering them quick advice.

**Advising that isn’t as helpful.** When Luis described his experience with advisors,
indicating that although he appreciated the guidance he received in college he perceived that
sometimes advising felt like having choices dictated for him. He said:

> Having someone say, "Oh, go this pathway or go that pathway." Or to have someone to
do that for me. I would want me choosing the pathway that I want. I'm interested in
criminal justice. I want to go to that pathway rather than I can be told, "Oh, do this." This
other pathway which I don't want. That's what I mean when I referred to your life, your
choices.

Meanwhile, Maria’s only wish was to have one advisor because she felt her life situation
was complicated. She said: “I feel like I just go to one person, so then I just tell one person
everything instead of going to one person and then the other one and then explaining and
explaining and explaining.”

Jay and Katie, DACA participants noted that although they believed in the best intentions
of community college staff, they were not confident that staff understood the DACA system. The
students’ responses indicated that they needed to establish trust with staff and a concern that if
students will be pushed back into the shadows if they think that people are unaware of how
DACA status continues to affects them especially when it comes to accessing financial support
in the higher education system. Katie claimed
There's a difference between knowing and again, communicating it to them. Because if you just say it or you're aware of it, but you're trying to fight it and the student doesn't feel comfortable with you anymore, they don't want to get help. So again, that starts the cycle again where first gen students come to school or undocumented students, or students of DACA, come to school and they don't have the resources because they didn't feel comfortable talking to the person.

Jay made the same point in a slightly different way claiming:

I have so many first gen and so many undocumented and DACA or POCs as friends, we have to really, really, really have . . . we make a list in our head where we actually have to look really deep into what we want to do, and we have to come prepared for any questions that they have for us. We just have to be mentally prepared for a lot of these things that most people don't have to be prepared for.

The participants expressed a high level of appreciation for the role that advisors played in their ability to succeed in school. Participants felt most supported when advisors knew their unique situation and took time to listen to them before offering advice. This theme developed into a larger theme as participants began speaking more specifically about their overall experience navigating the system. They explained how they felt that their experiences were situated within the context of the community college system, which is the next subtheme.

**Navigating Systems as a First-Generation Student From an Immigrant Background**

The third subtheme captured participants’ lived experiences navigating the system. Participants discussed their perception of the education system by describing the ways their background intersected with elements within the system. The researcher noted that although each participant experienced the systems in K–12 and college in different ways, recurring topics
emerged. One concept emerged consistently when participants referenced the way they experience the system of higher education. Participants did not see system challenges as barriers that held them back from achieving their goals, rather Abigail and Maria described “obstacles” that they went over, under, or around. Jay described these obstacles like “pebbles in the path” and Kristina and Katie referred to “situations or challenges” they were aware of and tried to make sense of. Participants described the various ways that they overcame the obstacles they faced in community college. The most common obstacles discussed included immigration status, language barriers, family dynamics, parents’ understanding of the U.S. college system, and finances. Capturing participants’ reflections on the college system allowed the researcher to perceive how each participant approached the obstacles they encountered.

**Impacts of microaggressions, stereotypes, and obligations.** Participants had a lot to say about the ways that they navigated the system of higher education. Their descriptions and illustrations allowed the researcher to gain insights into how each participant experienced navigating the community college system. The participants highlighted microaggressions, stereotypes, obligation to family members, and relating to peers as a continual part of their experience in the community college system. The data gather consisted of each of the participant’s responses to questions that asked how they made sense of early experiences in community college to gain insight into how participants interpreted their experiences in combination with experiences they had at home and in the community to remain academically resilient.

Katie shared feelings which reflected her belief that race and ethnicity were a factor in her ongoing struggles to understand how the system worked for her. She said:
Since I am a person of color and ethnicity also plays a huge part in the system, and the language barrier, and just the way, the fact that the system was created, I'm still trying to navigate through it, I'm still trying to know how other students who don't have these barriers or who weren't first generation, whose parents didn't know, like oh, I know what financial aid is. I know how to do it. I got it but I feel like they have more of a benefit. They have a privilege there. There's nothing wrong with that, but they have a way to navigate through that. Me, on the other hand or students who are like me, we're still struggling.

Abigail said having more diverse faculty who could relate to her prior experiences would make her feel more accepted and understood. “But [college administrators] need to understand that maybe some of those teachers, they never experienced or have gone or have obstacles when they went to college because their parents paid for it and stuff like that.” Although Jay expressed gratitude toward faculty and advisors who supported him along the way, his words showed that he was aware of the ways the college system was not created for him when he said:

Yeah, college has been really challenging, but it also has been the time of my life, right? Being able to develop myself and come up with different strategies to navigate school. Especially this higher education system that obviously sometimes I feel like it wasn't made for me. So that's when school and my identity becomes challenging too because I can't relate with my fellow white classmates because . . . I may be able to relate at a certain level, and certain experiences, but not into a deeper experience like this.

Managing the details in the transition to college. Kristina, Luis, and Maria’s experiences in college were affected by their first-generation status and the ways that their families were not prepared to help them work through the details of becoming a college student.
For Kristina and Luis, although family supported the decision to go to college, they struggled to figure out the details of getting enrolled and paying for school. Kristina provided an example by describing her experience applying for financial aid. She said:

Things that have not prepared me was like not the help from my family, because I was basically kind of just thrown into something that I don't know what I'm doing. I had to do a bunch of . . . When I was doing financial aid, I had to go through a bunch of mom's taxes. And I didn't know what was going on, so I did a bunch of things wrong when I turned in the application, so I had to do that again.

Maria explained that being completely on her own exhausted her. She referred to the “freedom” she perceived other students experienced in college and provided insight into how heavy the burden of managing on her own felt to her and how she experienced isolation within the college environment as well. She said:

I feel like other students had a lot of freedom. They had less weight on their shoulders, less bills. They just had to focus on their homework. Maybe occasionally take care of their siblings. But I would have to make sure I had a roof over my head, food, and all of that stuff. I feel like it is because I noticed that if I give, if I tend to give it a lot of attention it seems like a bigger problem. Then that's when I really freaked out because I make it a bigger issue than it should be.

Jay captured how he feels in the sociocultural and academic intersections of his life this way:

It's a weird feeling, because here in America, they tell me that I'm not American enough to be here, but if I were to move back home, I'd be too American to be a part of the Mexican culture there. Also, I don't really know much of my history from my home
country either, so I probably would feel isolated. Although, the one thing that we would have in common is the language I would say. We have a saying that says nor from here, nor from there, which goes with what I just described. I don't feel like I belong here, I don't feel like I belong there, so I'm in the middle.

**Linguistic Abilities Seen as Strength Impacts Resiliency**

After capturing the participants’ experiences of integrating into the college system, Participants viewed linguistic and bilingual abilities as affecting their experience in college. All participants spoke of their bilingual abilities in response to questions about how they viewed the personal strengths and abilities that helped them succeed academically. All participants expressed pride when they described how being bilingual was a strength they possessed, but they also highlighted how thinking and learning in two languages created learning challenges for them in college. The theme emerged as significant when several participants identified that learning the English language affected their confidence in succeeding academically and achieving their goal of earning a degree. Specifically, participants’ opinions of their command of the English language affected decisions about what classes to take and what college degrees they would pursue. The participant’s responses indicated that decisions about which college to attend and what to study was affected by their linguistic ability, cultural background, and family expectations. In addition, bilingual abilities factored into how participants made sense of their academic achievement.

Katie passionately described how much she loved biology, and it was her desire and intention to pursue a career in a STEM field, but she ultimately left the STEM pathway because she was overwhelmed with all of the terms that people assumed she should know. She
interpreted this experience as meaning that her English abilities were not strong enough and no one could help her when she said:

I love science. I love biology. I love biology so much. Environmental science is what I love. I love it so much but I just couldn't deal with the fact that I couldn't understand terms or words, and it's weird and it's more difficult. I don't know if people would be able to understand the fact that every day we're learning English even though we test out of ESL, even though we're in college, we're always learning English. And then on top of having to learn English, you're taking math which is a language of its own. And then you're having to do science and biology where it's like another language of its own, so you're piling. And then on top of that you have your first native language because technically, cause technically air quote, native language is native language. And on top of that you have the language that you first learned. We basically have to do like six languages in one day and it's just difficult. . . . I don't mind struggling in STEM, but I just didn't want to keep going knowing that there was a language barrier for me there, and I didn't enjoy the fact that whenever I ask someone I don't understand what that word means, they're like, oh, you really don't know?

In a similar way, Abigail expressed frustration when she described her perception of why she could not take sociology and political science courses. She stated that she couldn’t take the classes that she really wanted to take because she was required to take more English classes:

For me, I can't wait to take sociology and political science and stuff like that, because I'm more interested in that. Taking English I know is very important, and everything is bad. I'm not interested in English, and I can only focus so much just to pass the class. Yes, it's very important, because right now, with my new teacher, we're learning how to do
essays, and she's giving us all the tools to make it not difficult and stuff like that. Yes, it's cool and very important, but that's not interest. I think that I will do so much better when I'm so interested in that class that I'm gonna be so focused. But now I just gotta pass.

Several participants expressed levels of frustration with completing course assignments because of ongoing challenges with learning academic forms of the English language. The participants highlighted the fact that they felt embarrassed when assumptions were made about how well they understood English grammar and vocabulary simply because they were enrolled in college. Capturing the participants’ experiences offered the researcher the opportunity to understand how participants have a good command of spoken English but struggle with applying English grammar rules and learning English vocabulary. Kristina describes it this way:

And when you come to school, like a teacher is saying like the simplest things, but you still don't process it in your brain, even if it's so simple, because our wording, it'd be known is like backwards than it is here, and so it's kind of hard to scramble it all back in different ways because then everything gets all confusing.

Katie, Luis, and Jay express levels of frustration when peers and faculty couldn’t help them with their assignments. They perceived the reason being that native English speakers don’t always understand the nuances of the English language themselves, and don’t acknowledge that learning English is hard and confusing.

Katie illustrated her frustration with English grammar and her peers’ inability to help her understand it when she said:

Yeah. Why do I have to put a comma there? Why can't I just use a period? Since [my peers] get it more, I think it's also the same for them trying to explain the basics to
someone who’s like, “What? What is that? What is that?” They’ll be like, “well, that's just the way it is.” And I’m like, “well, I'm not there yet.”

Kristina and Jay felt shut down, silenced, and less academic when they could not express their opinions in English in a way that was comprehensible. According to Kristina:

   No one understands. And no one person thinks that their language is correct while the other one is like, we’d have no idea what you’re talking about. I feel like I can’t speak, like I’m unheard. I can’t be heard, or my word isn’t taken in correctly. They think that what I say isn’t important, and so that’s why I feel insecure every time people use big words, or people are just seem more smarter than I am, and then they downgrade me to an even lower level than I thought I was.

   For Kristina, isolation was intensified and self-confidence was eroded when she perceived that her “very intelligent” peers looked down on her if she let them know that she didn’t understand what they were talking about. She said:

   And it can also be when you have friends that are very intellectual, and they use bigger words and you don't understand them. You feel dumb asking them what it means, and then they'll think that you're dumb, and then they think you should know what it is.

   According to Katie:

   We're not the only ones that go through . . . a lot of the regular students who know English already go through it, but they have more support than we do because we can't really come forth like, I don't know English. People will look at us funny like, well, you're in college, just start reading.
Jay demonstrated self-awareness of the ways that dual language ability created learning challenges when he experienced language interference while completing assignments when he said:

Obviously, I don't speak just one language. Sometimes when I say things in English, I say them backwards because my Spanish kicks in. I want to learn how to embrace both languages, whether it's English, Spanglish, or Spanish. Just to tell myself that it is okay to say things backward, just because this is the right way to say them, but it's also fine to say them like this, because I think in two different ways. I can't think in just English. I can't just think in just Spanish. It's that Spanglish mix.

In a similar way, Luis disclosed what he thinks about when he completes assignments in English. He said:

I just put in what I think onto the paper without actually thinking if it makes sense, does the sentence make sense? Which, I think it's just English, I think. This is my English and this sounds like all gibberish when I read it out loud.

Abigail and Jay attributed their struggle with writing academic papers to their inability to express themselves in English. They attributed the challenges they were having in college to a lack of formal English instruction in K–12. Abigail used an example from class to make her point stating:

You have to write a paragraph and then you had to analyze that, and I'm not good at commas and grammar stuff. I'm not good at it. I missed all of that. So, I know in the test I didn't score well, but if it was my essays, what I wrote . . . Because I can write really passionately.
Similarly, Jay said, “But sometimes I can't explain it because I can't pronounce the word or I struggle sometimes expressing how I feel.”

It was important to note that participants often spoke multiple languages when families spoke dialects of languages at home. Maria stated that assumptions about the languages she spoke made it challenging for her in her Spanish class. Maria grew up speaking a dialect of Spanish, which was the language that her grandmother spoke at home. Maria acquired the Spanish language in school and in the community while living in the United States. Maria described her experience taking a Spanish class in college as difficult and frustrating because Spanish is not her native language. She felt embarrassed when people assumed that Spanish was her native language because she had to tell them that she doesn’t’ have a full understanding of Spanish grammar. In Maria’s words, “learning Spanish grammar is difficult because there's, like, home words, that you learn at home, and that's one version of it, but the right way to say it is a different way. I don't know.” Maria added: “When my grandma came here, she only spoke our Mexican language, which was not Spanish or English. She hardly knows Spanish or English. She doesn't know how to count, so that was a very big, hard thing.”

For Katie, taking Spanish was challenging for another reason. She said:

I don't consider Spanish my native language because it was a language forced onto my people from the Spaniards, but I still ended up being fond of it because my people made it their own after years of colonization. We have different slang in Mexico. We use different words. And I did take AP Spanish and it was so rough because I would get graded down because I wasn't using the formal Spanish. I was using my Spanish that I know.
These responses showed that participants were aware of how language and cultural background factored into how they perceived their ability to remain academically resilient in the community college system. Learning how participants perceived their personal power within the system and how they responded to adversity allowed the researcher to understand how participants built personal resiliency when they encountered aspects of the system that worked against them. This led to the subtheme identified in the next section.

**Making Sense of Experience in the Community College System**

Making sense of experience in the community college system emerged as a theme primarily within the discussion of how students viewed their experience in the college system in relation to how they imagined their peers experienced college. All participants stressed that they perceived having different challenges to overcome than their peers because of their status as the first one in the family to go to college and because of their differing cultural backgrounds. Students highlighted the ways that they made sense of their lived experiences on a daily basis.

Maria described how hard it was for her to stay in school because she had to manage her everyday needs on her own. When reflecting on how her experience differed from some of her peers, she said:

> And since I've never had help, I don't know how to ask for help. Everything, I figure out myself. I figure everything out. I don't have help. No. I get sad sometimes to think of, like, "Oh, I'm all alone and I have so many things to take care of." But it doesn't really get to me all the way. Jay and Luis described how hard it was for them to help their parents understand what was expected of them in college while learning the ropes themselves. Jay said:
I've always been carrying the extra pressure. It's almost as if I was sometimes their parents rather than their son and that becomes really frustrating and irritating sometimes. That's all I've heard throughout my whole entire lifetime. There comes a time where I do get so frustrated and tired of always having to do things on my own, always having to figure out things. When I look around at my fellow classmates, all of them are obviously white Caucasians and I notice that when it comes to orientations, they bring their parents with them. Their parents ask these questions for them, where like in my first orientation I didn't bring my mom or dad because I knew they didn't know how to ask the right questions and they would always put me at a younger age, "Hey, could you figure this out?" Or, "Oh hey, could you do this for us?" Or, "Hey, could you translate this for us?"

In a similar way, Katie related her experience and interpreted the meaning of being first as carrying a degree of responsibility to educate younger siblings so that they could follow her path to college. Katie said:

If you're first-gen and you're older, you're required or you're expected to be there for the younger siblings, or if your parents get sick . . . for example, my mother got sick. I'm an only child so I'm the gen and the oldest so I was expected, and I also feel obligated and I wanted to be there for her and help her out because she got surgery. So when you're first gen and you're the first student and maybe the only student and probably the only one in the family that really knows how to speak to people, how to communicate well, and knows how things work, you're there, you have to be there because you're like, that's my mom, that family member, I have to be there. So it's in the way of so many things. So I did stop because of high school, work. I'm just getting depressed.
The participants expressed high levels of awareness of how they experienced the college system and how experiences at school and at home affected their ability to adjust to campus expectations and overcome the continual battle to address the obstacles that they encountered on a regular basis.

**Drawing on Strength to Overcome Challenge and Demonstrate Academic Resiliency**

The participants portrayed strength as a factor in their academic resiliency as they described how they overcame obstacles and challenges as they navigate through their college and home environments. Participants’ words illustrated awareness of how they had been strengthened by adversity at school and at home. Each of the participants described how they possessed knowledge and insight that they acquired over the years that helped them navigate challenging circumstances once they arrived at college. Although the situations they described varied, each of the participants used words that helped the researcher to see that they had deeply felt self-confidence that went beyond a surface level understanding of how to solve problems. The ways they described making sense of their academic achievements are described in this section.

Katie perceived that first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds gain awareness through challenging experiences. She claimed: “[First-generation students from immigrant backgrounds] just know more about what it means to be having life and what it means to live life or not being able to live life because of something holding you back.” Katie used her understanding to define what it means to persist when she said: “What you learn in class is just the basics of what it means to have knowledge, but actual knowledge is the people on the outside who go through every day with so much weight on their shoulders.” In a similar way, Jay used
his experience to advocate for himself and claimed that staying positive was how he overcame self-doubt and fostered his own success when he said:

I would say one of my strengths is being resilient and being always willing to be open about things and look at the situations differently, rather than focus on negative, because that's what I used to do a lot. I used to be focused on this, like, negative. And I had such a fixed mindset, too, and sometimes that mind kicks in, when I doubt myself. But then I catch myself and I realize that, wait, you've been through this, and you've been through this, and you've been through this. You have experience in that, it's just not the same thing that they're explaining the book's way.

For Jay, an additional challenge was overcoming the stigma of being a Special Education student and his early years in college. His responses coupled with the tone of his voice when he spoke about integrating past experiences into his current views of how he experiences school demonstrated a sense of confidence and pride:

I was in Special Education since second grade all the way up to my senior year and it wasn't until I got to community college where I got to explore more, and I was out of the Special Ed system so it felt more like I was just like a college student like everyone else. Even though I didn't place in college level classes, I had to work my way up, It made me feel more included and it made me think about why do I hate this about myself when on the other hand I should be proud of it because not every other American knows two languages, and especially in America, they only know English and they perpetuate English to be the greatest language, when it's not. I personally don't think it's not. I think it's better to know more than one language.
Maria perceived her prior life experiences as providing the motivation and drive that she used to help her set a course to earn a college degree. She clearly expressed the knowledge that working part time or working full time at minimum wage jobs would never lift her out of the struggles that she continued to face on a daily basis. In her words:

[Living alone] made me realize that I really do want to go to college, because I learned to be by myself since I was 16. I always say Jack in the Box isn't gonna get me through when I have kids and all of that stuff. It pushed me through to realize that I actually do want to go to school, and I actually do need to go to school.

In a similar way, Abigail portrayed her vision for social justice when she talked about how she wanted to become an attorney so that she would have the education and skills needed to help people who are held down and oppressed by society. She credited her insights to her own lived experiences when she said:

Now I have learned to understand other people that are going through things, because I didn't understand before. So, not everyone is like that. Not everyone. It's just certain people. And without being determined and defiant, I don’t think that I could do anything. It's just, my personality is just like that. It doesn't matter what anyone tells me, especially if they tell me that I can't. I'm gonna do it.

Luis exuded a sense of internal fortitude when he described how his work ethic and his positive attitude are strengths he draws on when he encounters challenging circumstances in college. He said that he tells himself: “Just to try hard and don't see that this is overwhelming, that it's gonna an obstacle for you. Just be positive, just try it.” In a similar way, Kristina described how she overcame her self-doubt and shyness when she stepped out of the shadows and engaged in the campus community:
I came to the college, and so I was really scared. With me, I'm that shy person everyone meets first, and then I grow out of my shell, and then I'm like this total opposite of a person that you met in the very beginning. I've definitely grown more out on my shell of what I know of. If you see me around campus, you will see me being that happy person just waving to everyone I know.

In all instances, the participants drew on their knowledge of self and their belief that what they were accomplishing in college was not only changing the course of their life, but the lives of those who would follow in their footsteps as motivation to turn adversity into strength and opportunity.

**Conclusion**

The participants’ statements related to the superordinate theme of *Challenges as internal factors in resiliency* indicated several findings. Participants carried with them the echoes of significant experiences that they had as they moved from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood. The participants’ words revealed that how they were currently experiencing college was connected to the adversity they experienced at an earlier point in their lives. Some of the participants faced challenges due to their linguistic abilities; for others, immigration status or opportunities to go to school were the significant obstacles they chose to disclose. What was notable was that although each participant shared different descriptions of their journey through the K–12 system and different obstacles in their transition into community college, each participant used these early experiences as the foundation for their resilience. A unifying factor was that each participant was placed in ESL classes in elementary school, and each participant recognized that his or her English proficiency affected them academically as community college students.
The participants were influenced by their relationships with faculty and with advisors. They expressed the desire to share details of their lives with faculty and advisors to garner support for themselves and other college students who shared their background as nonnative English speakers. Engaging in the classroom was especially painful for the participants when they could not voice their opinions and when their lived experiences were not validated, or worse, considered false. Finally, participants felt that the education system was not designed to fit them. Participants shared the feeling of being at a disadvantage when they entered college as first-generation college participants from non-English-speaking homes. They entered college with fear, not knowing if they were prepared to succeed. They perceived a lack of connection and support in classes where their bilingual abilities were not seen as an asset and prior knowledge was not validated. The data in participants’ words as conveying confusion and generally feeling bad on campus because of being dismissed and disrespected. The data gathered during interviews illustrated how students used networks and relationships as a way to build on internal resources and personal resilience, which is the next theme.

**Engagement as Social Competence**

The second superordinate theme, Social competence, emerged as participants discussed how personal relationships with campus faculty, staff, and peers as well as with friends, family, and other significant individuals in communities off campus were key contributors to their academic success. The theme emerged when participants responded to research questions that asked who helped them and how participants perceived formal and informal relationships with college faculty and staff, peers and friends, mentors, family members, and individuals in the larger community beyond campus as factors in their academic persistence and success. Participants were seeking relationships and social networks that would help them develop their
personal identity while also helping them integrate into the campus environment. However, all participants expressed labeling and stereotyping as things that they experienced in multiple environments that diminished their sense of personal control. They also described factors that played a role in how well they adjusted to college and how confident they felt in their ability to thrive on campus. Three subthemes emerged from the data including: relationships as social networks, sense of control and labeling, and perception or adjustment.

**Social Competence in Establishing Relationships, Social Networks, and Resilience**

The participants’ words illustrated that they perceived their initial isolation within the campus community and recognized that they needed to make meaningful connections on campus if they were going to persist. Kristina and Luis felt disoriented and overwhelmed, and Kristina described being on campus like living in a dreamland, like transitioning into a new and foreign system. Katie, Jay, Abigail, and Maria described the college campus as completely unfamiliar. Although participants described different responses to early experiences on campus, all participants developed strategies to help them adjust to campus life. One half of the participants described succeeding in their first quarter as contingent on how they integrated into the campus community. Participants described feeling supported on campus when they felt that they had a place to go on campus where they were around people who listened to them. Participants identified their support networks on campus as critical to fostering their resilience. Kristina said, “I think my strengths come from my friends and . . . some alone time to myself and to rethink of what and who I am.” Kristina, Katie, and Jay, took on leadership roles in clubs on campus, which provided them with a sense of place and community on campus and connected them with peers. Kristina described how participating in her club drew her out of her shell when she said:
Like walking in a day in my shoes for college, I normally just have my earbuds in because I'm walking through college and no one really acknowledges me unless I know them. And [now] I know a lot of people here, and I'm connected with a club, and connected with a bunch of other people in my classes.

**Informal Relationships.** Informal relationships with peers reinforced each participant’s ability to remain academically resilient because relationships with peers created a sense of belonging. Participants felt connected to college when they had relationships with other students on campus who shared some of their history. They found these support networks critical in helping them develop pride in their personal identities as first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds. Katie said it this way:

> I used to think it was just me, myself and I, but now I'm like, no, it's me, it's that person and that person, it's that group over there, it's these people. I just know that we've got each other and whenever we talk about this, we always have that connection like, yeah, the system

Katie felt strengthened by her realization that she was not alone in her experience and this awareness encouraged and motivated her to persist. “Just hearing [my peers’] stories and how they did it, I always keep it in my head, it doesn't matter if you're a first gen or undocumented or just of color.” She described her peer network this way:

> [First-generation students from immigrant backgrounds] don't share the same trauma, we don't share the same experience, but we do share the same experience when it comes to navigating through this system of higher education. We share just that one common thing is that we're struggling through the system that wasn't created in the first place to benefit first-gen or undocumented students or people of color. It was mostly created to benefit the
euro Americans, not to be rude, but yeah, and so knowing that all of us are bundled into this little group that we know it wasn't made to benefit us, but yet we're still here, that's just something that I was like, okay, we're all here, we're all together. We got this.

Likewise, Jay's words convey feeling a sense of relief and encouragement when he found an informal peer study group that he could join. He spoke about the ways that connecting with the peer group provided him with the kind of support he needed to feel more confident in his ability to succeed in college when he said:

Another group strategy that has really helped me has been what we call listening partnerships. So listening partnerships is we have one person listening for 2 minutes without responding and just allowing the person speaking to express themselves, how they're feeling, how they're doing and of course the other person is just being of how they're doing and feeling, and then we switch. It's a good tool for those folks that talk less to speak more, but also for those folks that talk more to listen more. It's been really helpful.

Luis, Katie, and Kristina felt supported when they used networks to help them acquire resources needed to pay for college. Katie described a time when she thought she was going to drop out of college because she didn't have funds to pay for the next quarter. She said:

At first, I'd be super embarrassed to say I don't have the money at the moment. But now I'm like, you know what? I got comfortable with [my advisor]. She knew a lot about me. I started learning more about her too, 'cause as I opened, she opened up more. I'm like, Whoa, we're not that different”. I just felt more comfortable and I felt comfortable asking some questions like that. Like, "Hey, I actually don't have the money to pay tuition. Or
I'd say, "Yo, I'm actually struggling to pay. Is there a way I can get a scholarship?" And she'll just list off scholarships for me.

**Relationships support enrolling in college.** Maria described her support system in the community as being critical to her decision to go to college. Maria claimed she would not have gone to college at all without the support she received from her Upward Bound TRIO advisor. She claimed:

- I feel like without him, I would not have signed up for college, and maybe this would've been my first year, because I did say I wanted to take a break. He would always nag me on the shoulder and be like “you're not gonna take a break, you're not gonna go back.” Finally, I was like “okay fine, sign me up, I'll go.” He was like “okay, where do you want to go?” I was like “I'm just gonna go to a community college.”

Once in college, Maria used the TRIO support network on campus to hold her accountable for getting good grades. She said:

- I feel like I would care less, because I would not have somebody looking over me. I wanna have somebody to be like “Why do you have an F?” besides me. But I would not just sit there and be like “why do you have an F?”

By way of contrast, while participants’ support networks increased their sense of belonging on campus and fostered academic resilience, negative labels applied to them as individuals chipped away at their resiliency by dissuading them from engaging in communities on campus. Sense of control and labeling emerged as a subtheme as participants described times when they felt out of control because they could not find places of connection especially when labels were used to describe their identities and lived experiences. Each of the participants
explained that the labels used to describe them chipped away at their confidence as students and their belief in their ability to persist.

**Changing the Narrative**

All participants explained having to break free from one or more labels used to describe them at some point in their educational experience. Participants identified the following labels as most harmful because of how the labels made them feel: at risk, trouble makers, the problem makers, the problematic children, Special Education kids, and undocumented. Participants demonstrated a keen awareness of the extent that these labels influenced the way they were treated on campus and the ways that they were perceived as always in need of extra help. These were places where participants challenged the system. One participant expressed it this way:

I guess we get labeled as first-gen, we get labeled as problematic or at risk, or participants who don't have resources. But it feels like sometimes the K–12 system doesn’t really ask themselves, why though? Why are these students in this situation?

Jay described how being labeled ESL and Special Education affected his level of confidence and made him feel not very smart. He said he overcame these labels in college, but he continues to struggle with how to interpret his academic success. He described in detail how he felt about his academic ability and his descriptions provided the researcher with insight into how he internalized the labels he was given as a child. He said:

At first in school, it was really frustrating, because like I said, I was placed in Special Education and classmates would make fun of me. Even though they were the same ethnicity as me, for some reason my brain wasn't understanding the English concepts or how to express myself in English, which became really frustrating. I just really hated
that part of me so much that I wasn't picking up things or I wasn't understanding the concepts of the texts or what the teacher was asking.

In a similar way, Kristina and Abigail found stereotyping harmful because of how it made them feel judged and misrepresented. This bad feeling was compounded when participants perceived that they were silenced and could not challenge negative stereotypes. Kristina described her experience when she said, “I've seen people that shut out other people, kind of be close minded or not cooperative at all. More of like, I am right no matter what. You can't change my mind”

The labeling and stereotyping that participants experienced in their lives affected them when they were in college. Jay interpreted his early experience as one where he was given a label that he could not shake off, and he was aware of how this label has played a part in how he views himself as a college student. He said:

Yeah, throughout my whole entire lifetime, I've always been tested on my IQ, and I resent that so much when it comes to testing because it made me hate testing. I felt like that since second grade, all the way up to my senior year, and it wasn't until I got to college where I got to explore more, and I was out of the Special Education system, and it felt more like I was just like a college participant like everyone else, even though I didn't place in college level classes, I had to work my way up.

**Creating a New Narrative**

Jay’s response to labeling demonstrated his resilience. His words illustrated how he was applying internal strength when he acknowledged how he has to unlearn some of the things he came to believe about himself as part of rejecting the labels he was given as a child. He said:
When the K through 12 system was telling me, "No, you can't do that, no you can't do this," and I found myself to resist a lot of those things. I internalized a lot of those things too, which I'm still working on too because . . . It's just growing up as a migrant student, it's really challenging when both of your parents are not . . . They're there, but not there. They're main worry is about survivor skills and the school district doesn't seem to understand that, they completely disregard that those students are . . . They don't approach the issues in a different way, rather than like, "Oh, we're going to teach you English and we're going to shove it in your head."

Katie demonstrated how she made sense of labels when she stated that she had rejected labels used to describe her experience. Her responses provided evidence that she did not see how being labeled helped them in any way:

First-gen, person of color, people see us in such a different way and it's just kind of like, okay, either you're admired and you're like, okay, I'm admired, yet there's no resources given to us, but you're admired, and they're like, how does it feel being first gen? I'm going to tell you how it feels, but I hope that you spread the word and you've listened, and actually make it possible for people to get resources, and that's why I like what you're doing because it's a research and I feel like teachers have that power to actually give this knowledge to students and maybe those students end up creating resources or maybe those teachers end up creating resources or whoever reads it or whoever is listening. So that's I guess the only thing I would say. You're admired, but yet people aren't listening.

In contrast, although labels diminished participants’ sense of control, data gathered during the interview allowed the researcher to see that overcoming labeling was a place where students demonstrated resiliency and applied knowledge to help others. Participants exhibited
self-confidence and pride as they spoke about how they rejected labeling and turned their experience into a resource that they used to foster their success and to help other students.

One of the participants described an experience being labeled as a DACA student and expressed pride in finding a way to succeed despite existing outside the systems of support. This participant described how this experience will be used to help other students:

And even now that I'm at a community college, I'm a participant still. I'm seriously a participant. It's my second year. I still get students come in through the [Intercultural Center] door, 'cause that's where I'm always studying, or participants in my classes, I still get participants who are like, "Oh, I don't know what WASFA is or FAFSA." And I'm like, what? And I'll let them know and . . . Or sometimes participants even say, "Well, I don't know if you know this but I am undocumented." It's like, "Girl, me too." Like, "I'm undocumented. How do you do it?" I'm like, "There's a scholarship or there's WASFA." And then me knowing this, I gave some other participant resources. And now those participants are somewhat in a better position now, or don't have this disadvantage anymore. So it's more kind of just like those kinds of things I do feel I have an advantage.

Katie conveyed her thoughts on how overcoming negative labels is fortifying when she spoke about the internal knowledge that individuals possess because of how labels affected them on a daily basis. She claimed: “[First-generation students of color] just know more about what it means to be having life and what it means to live life or not being able to live life because of something holding you back.” In a similar way, Jay described how he integrated prior experience with the recent experience in college to embrace all aspects of his identity:
But when I got to college I started to embrace [bilingual abilities], and I told myself,

“Why don't I start writing my papers in English and Spanish, after all I always have to
look up words, those big ones I don't understand, so why can I make my teacher make
extra work like they're making me?” I think it's a fair trade, it's like they're learning from
me, I'm learning from them. It's a well balance. Yeah.

Luis, Maria, Abigail, and Jay expressed confidence in their ability to persist academically.
Abigail attributed her strong personality to her ability to shake off negative labels when she said:

“It's just, my personality is just like that. It does not matter what anyone tells me, especially if
they tell me that I can't. I'm gonna do it.” In a similar way, Luis described overcoming the label
“struggling students” by thinking about how he addressed this label when he was in high school.
Luis said:

Like, in high school what was hard for me was math. Each year was getting harder and
harder and I would see that, and I would just keep on going. Keep trying. Just being
positive. Then, know I can do it, and I did it in high school.

Jay thoughtfully described how he was just beginning to see himself differently as he
continued to experience success in his classes. He disclosed how hard it was for him to consider
himself smart because of all the time he spent believing that he wasn’t. He stated:

So, my mind is slowly changing to that mind because, for example, I took my final exam
last week, and it was 55 points, right? So the high score was 55. And I got my test score
today, and I got 44 out of 55. I was expecting a lot less, so just seeing that, and seeing
what I have a B plus now, and retaking this class for the second time, I replaced a D to a
B. So it's like, "I did that?" And so I still have a hard time accepting that. I don't know
why.
In sum, across almost all participants, the researcher perceived that the ability to overcome the negative impact of labeling contributed to participants’ sense of control and academic resilience. This process of recognizing the labels used to describe them and then to thoughtfully consider how they used inner resources as strength to reject labels helped them to gain confidence in themselves as learners and adapt to expectations in college. The researcher observed a high level of awareness in how addressing labels factored into how they experienced community college and subsequently how they could take control over how they interpreted the labels applied to them.

**Conclusion**

The participants’ statements related to the superordinate theme of *Social competence* demonstrated the high level of importance participants placed on engaging in their community and the value they placed on developing supportive relationships. Participants’ statements demonstrated how they had the courage to come out of the shadows when they knew they would not be alone in their experiences and when they knew that disclosing aspects of their lives would not be viewed as a mark of deficiency. Participants described the intersection between being celebrated for the diversity they bring to campus and how labeling negatively affected them by making them feel undervalued and marginalized. Participants’ used these experiences to build resiliency when they experienced relationships where they belonged and when they were allowed to contribute to campus life.

The participants indicated that labels that placed them into categories did not help them in college. In one case, a participant described how being categorized as a Special Education student limited his ability to develop academic skills that he needed in college. Multiple
participants described labels as hindering their engagement in college and described overcoming labels as something they used to propel them forward once in college.

Finally, participants’ descriptions of the strategies they used to overcome labels and adjust to community college culture illustrated how they used self-awareness, pride, and confidence to foster resilience. Although each participant had varying levels of social comfort in speaking out publicly, all participants demonstrated the internal strength and resolve to do what it took to get their needs met so that they could persist in college.

**Sense of Purpose**

The third superordinate theme, *Sense of purpose*, relates to the participants’ identity and what they perceived as being the driving force behind their academic success. Participants described awareness of a larger purpose that drove their determination to earn a college degree. The participants discussed how they perceived the opportunity to attend college in light of expectations placed on them by family members and the expectations they placed on themselves. They described how academic accomplishments are changing the course of their lives. The data gathered during the interview showed that participants had an awareness of the significance of their decision to attend college because earning a college degree represented a change in their lives and in the lives of their younger siblings and others. The participants believed that their experience as the first in their families to navigate the complexity of the higher education system would be a resource for others. The overarching theme represented how participants made sense of personal sacrifice, the cost of staying in college, and their interpretation of how they overcame obstacles and adversity, seeing all of these factors as benefiting others in addition to themselves. Three subthemes emerged from the data under this theme, including *leading the way*, *navigating multiple worlds*, and *staying the course*. 
Leading the Way: Advocating for Self and Others

Leading the way emerged as a subtheme as participants described their achievements in college as breaking a trail, creating a path, and making the system better for others. The words that students used to illustrate sense of purpose gained from the idea of helping others factored into their resiliency because their work meant more to them than simply earning a college degree. Students’ expressed a desire to earn a degree so that they could be an example that students coming from similar experiences and backgrounds could follow. One way they did that was by speaking out and advocating for themselves. Katie stated: “People who are going to help us, they don't know where we need help until we actually do all the work for them to see we actually do need some resources, or actually speak up.”

Katie became emotional as she described her experience advocating for herself and her peers on campus. She was passionate about getting the attention of people who can initiate change:

I'm always told, you talk too much. You're talking too much. I was like, if I don't talk, no one's going to hear me. If I don't talk, no one's going to connect with what I'm saying, and if I don't talk to my peers and students or advisors will not hear me and I won't have a connection to them. I won't have something for me to connect with them that way. So I like talking. Sometimes I can't talk about personal situations because I tend to tear up a bit and that's obvious, but that's just a sign that I'm still trying to heal from past experiences. I am tearing up right now, sorry. But if I don't talk, then people won't hear.

Jay initially declined the opportunity to participate in this study. However, he later reached out, asking if he could still contribute to this topic. When the researcher asked why he changed his mind, he responded by saying:
I was reflecting on my abilities and I feel like voices like mine or students like me need to have their voice out there in research, or whatever it is because otherwise things aren't gonna change. We need to start doing more about it and we start speaking up how to go about things, and how to plan about things because it's not just one way, and it shouldn't just be fitting one person. It should be fitting everyone in this country, and the education world, especially because it's really . . . I feel like the education world is like art. It could be really flexible, but there's so much restraints and so many politics involved and so many ties involved that does not allow teachers, does not allow whoever in charge to be flexible towards radical change or progressive.

Similarly, Katie, Luis, and Maria expressed a desire to be an example that others could follow. Maria shared that she assumed the responsibility of setting an example for her young cousins to follow. She attributed this deep sense of responsibility as the fuel for her internal drive to be successful in college. She described her experience bringing her cousins to her community college campus as follows:

I bought one of the little ones to school, too, one time. She was like, "Why do you go here? This is really big." I was like, "Well, you're going to come here one day too." It just pushes me really hard to set a good example for them, even though they're not my siblings. I know they watch everything I do. . . . And since I have siblings I was like, yeah, if I go through this myself, I'm going to know how to counter attack this with my younger cousins or siblings. I will know the kind of advice I can give them on how I made it through and to help them.

Luis says it this way:
Well, just gotta leave a good following, just to try hard in college so that they can try hard as well and try to just try hard in college so I can be a role model to them, yeah. They probably don't see it right now as a big deal, college, going to college, but it should be and it's an option out there that will help you later in life.

**Setting an example for others to follow.** In another way, Luis was externally motivated to do well in college because he knew that his parents were counting on him to be the one to help his siblings get into college. He had pride in his voice when he spoke about how his parents have used him as an example of someone who is achieving their dream of earning a college degree. He said:

> Now that I'm going to college, my parents are focusing on the other kids as well, trying to push them to go to college as well. Oh, he's going to college, let's try to get my next sibling, try to go to college and try to get her to the program that helped me, try and help my next sibling.

Jay, Katie, and Kristina expressed a desire to earn college degrees so that they will be educated in a way that will allow them to support first-generation students who are learning English or students with other kinds of learning challenges. According to Jay, his journey through college will make sense if he is equipped with the skills needed to change the way that some students experience school. He said:

> To be able to express myself in an academic way so that people that struggled like me, especially students who are part of the Special Ed department could see that, "Hey, this person struggled, so that doesn't give me an excuse to not put time and effort to my academics or to pursue higher education." Because I've seen that in the Special Education system where there was only a few of us that ended up going to college. Maybe two out
of the 10 students that were in the Special Education classes, I happened to be one of the two that ended up pursuing a higher education. The rest of them I know are working class, ex friend, classmates of mine, or I see them to be not so motivated, and encouraged because the system has told them that they're not smart enough because they don't know how to express themselves. I really want to show, not only society, but those students that it is possible to obtain a higher education, even though you have a learning disability and that there's different ways to create your own path, because right now I feel like that's what I'm doing.

**Supporting English language learners.** In a similar way, Kristina felt a deep sense of commitment to making sure that English language learners have the support they need to be successful in school. She said:

But it has helped me to learn more about where someone has come from, how they were taught and what they learned through the years. Especially if someone that I know that their second language is English, and someone else doesn't understand them, they keep asking like, what? And everything. And when I know, I repeat it out to them and be like, this is what they're saying, so the other person doesn't feel insecure about it, and they have to repeat it and think that they're doing something wrong. It has gotten me out of my shell, and I like that because I can show others what I've been through and help them through their shyness. Or people that want to become president or vice president next after me, I can help them through along that.

Collectively, the participants perceived as a sense of purpose includes translating their experience in the community college system so that others can benefit from their knowledge and accomplishments. Ultimately, the students made sense of their academic achievement by
considering how they can use their success as motivation for others and how they could demonstrate their experience in a way that will a visible show of achievement that will inspire others on campus, at home, and in the broader community to follow their lead.

**Making Sense of Achievement in College and at Home**

Participants acknowledged that making sense of their achievement included making sense of the intersections between what is expected of them at school and the ways that they engage at home or in the community. Several participants described how family or life at home contributed to their ability to stay academically resilient in college. Five participants cited their family as influencing their decision to go to college. As illustrated previously, several participants were motivated to earn a college degree because of their deeply felt appreciation of the sacrifices their parents made on their behalf. For others, their life at home was complicated, and they were motivated to continue with their education despite limited support or recognition of their academic achievement. In any case, participants grappled with navigating the world of home and school as a way to remain academically resilient in college.

**Opportunity and sacrifice.** Most participants saw their current opportunities in light of the sacrifices and struggles parents endured, and this fueled participants’ desire to earn a college degree. Their expressions of gratitude included recognizing the ways that their lives had been altered because of the sacrifices their parents made on their behalf. Participants conveyed how deeply committed they were to making sure that these sacrifices were not made in vain.

Katie’s words beautifully illustrated how she viewed her mother’s sacrifice and how this sacrifice was meaningful and inspired her in her journey through college:

> I know my mom crossed the border and brought me here, and she is the original dreamer and so I'm basically living her dream, so it's kind of like if I don't actually succeed in
what I want to do, I feel like she'd be having a nightmare because ever since she's been [in the United States] her dream became a nightmare. So, knowing that she's been living a nightmare, I know that I have it in my power to make that nightmare into a dream that came true for her.

Luis and Jay expressed a direct knowledge of the sacrifices their parents made as they witnessed them laboring in the fields. These sacrifices created within them a deep awareness of how earning a college degree in the United States will make their lives different from the lives of their parents. Luis stated:

I just to try harder 'cause I see my dad he was in the field he struggles just a lot 'cause of the . . . He works a lot in the summer. Sometimes, he will work 24 hours a day and he would come home really tired and he doesn't want me to be like that, suffering that badly. Yeah.

Maria spoke of sacrifice and loss when she spoke about family. Maria’s grandmother brought her to the United States to save her life. When Maria was 16 years old, her grandmother was deported to Mexico. She explained:

My experience growing up was really hard. My mom died when I was 1 years old, so I grew up with my grandma. My cousin broke the truth to me that my mom died, and it was a big . . . Wow. I found out when I was five, so I was crying to my grandma and it was really hard, because I didn't have my dad either, so it was just me and my grandma. I would constantly think about how it would be if I had my mom and my dad here. What would it be like? Now, I think, just the part of having a better life than what my parents had, and then keeping them around. A better life than they had is the main focus of it. Being able to support my family. Yeah.
Jay interpreted his experiences growing up in a migrant family as one where his parents taught him a different set of skills that he now uses to navigate his way through the college system. He recalls his growing up experiences this way:

I was taught different skills, life skills, and one of those life skills is survival. I was taught how do I keep my life going and I think part of it, where I just mentioned, is that's what the capitalist person does to the workers, the working class. They devalue them, make them feel like they're not valuable and they're just there to produce the money and I've seen that and I've felt that. Coming from an agricultural background family that happens, my parents were overworked where like sometimes I didn't have time to spend time with them. Like dad and I don't have a son and father relationship because of that same reason. We didn't have play time. The only playtime I had was, of course with the neighbor’s kids. I did want playtime with mom and dad, but that didn't happen, which kind of sucked. It feels like a part of my childhood is still missing.

Participants spoke about how heritage language (language spoken at home) and various aspects of their sociocultural backgrounds were central to their experiences at home and in college. Participants were in an ongoing struggle to create meaning around experiences in a way that allowed them to hold both their home and school experiences as significant and important as they pursued their academic goals. An analysis of the interview data revealed that family relationships were a topic that participants described as most significant in how they perceived the experiences that contributed to their resiliency in college.

**Navigating multiple worlds, family influence, and sense of purpose.** *Navigating multiple worlds* became a subtheme as five participants identified their parents’ vision for their
future as the reason they enrolled in college. Katie, Kristina, and Jay knew from an early age that their parents wanted them to go to college. Jay stated:

I think also that little bug that my mom and dad planted in my head about, "You need to go to college or you need to have a better life," because I worked in the agriculture a couple of summers and I did not like it. I experienced that and I did not like it. Then the perspective that my parents were planting in my head were, "Okay, you need to go to college." Then I started questioning that. “How does that look like? How does that work?”

Luis set his sights on graduating from high school and later determined that he would be the first one in the family to go to college. He described what he thought about in high school this way: “focused on high school, just focus, focus. I didn't really think about further on, like with college if I wanted to go there or not. I didn't really think about it.” As a college student, he explained that he is proud knowing he is fulfilling yet another one of his parents’ dreams for him. He said, “Oh, feels great 'cause I just hear my name mentioned to my siblings all the time, and my siblings look that they want to go to college as well. Great stuff from me going to college, yeah.”

Maria’s grandmother encouraged her to pursue a better life, which included going to school. Although her grandmother was no longer in the United States, she continued to be the person Maria attributed with her resolve to earn a college degree. Maria explained:

Yeah, when I was younger, I would always tell my mom I'm gonna be a teacher. She would always tell me it's fine, you don't have to be something major as long as you have enough money to keep yourself alive. I was like yeah, but I'd like to be something big, make something out of myself.”
After Maria enrolled in community college, her grandmother continued to be a source of encouragement. She said: "Yeah, I always call her to talk to her, and she's like how's school? She's always talking about school." Data from Maria and the other participants indicated the important role that family played in motivating them to enroll and succeed in college.

**Family relationships and adapting to college life.** Early experiences in college included feeling challenged to adapt to an environment that felt different from the environment at home. Participants found that their identities were challenged when they arrived on campus because they were not prepared for how different it would be from anything they had previously experienced.

Katie, Jay, Luis, and Kristina describe the transition to college as being largely isolating and uncomfortable. For Katie:

My first quarter I think I attended and I felt really awkward at first because I thought maybe I'm the only one who's struggling about knowing the fact that I'm first generation and my mom doesn't know much about college or how this system in general works, and the whole financial barrier, and the language barrier.

Jay and Luis described feeling they could not relate their experiences on campus to their parents in a way that their parents understood. Jay stated,

From my parents, I have some kind of financial support, but that's the only thing I feel like they're able to do because they haven't gone through the system, and it's really hard for them to understand what I'm talking about or how I'm feeling. And it sucks sometimes because I can't always go to them about certain things I'm going through school, other than they tell me, "Just keep going." Yeah. Just keep going. But I really wish you were there.
Kristina and Abigail described emotional discomfort because of the way that their new life as college students was changing them in ways that family members didn’t understand. For Kristina:

They’re definitely still my family, because I still live with them right now. But I definitely pretty much don't have a connection with them anymore because of school and community work that I'm doing, and just volunteering, just being myself, and everything. They don't like that. They don't understand what I'm doing, so that's also another problem of that. When I try to explain to them what I'm doing is what I love to do, they don't understand that because that's not what they love to do.

In a similar way, Abigail said:

Even though I have a little bit of family here, families probably the worst thing to rely on, I would say, because a lot of them are stuck somewhere. I don't wanna say weak, but in their brain, they can't get out of it, or they don't know how, or they're stuck. When they see that you're succeeding, stuff like that, they don't like it. So family, I would not even rely on them for anything. My cousins or aunts. My mom yes, but my mom lives in Oklahoma. It's just me. I think if you wanna be something or do something, you can do it, and the only thing that is going to keep you down and prevent you is your brain.

Kristina described her early attempts to fill out financial aid forms, which required her to access her parents’ tax information. She stated: “And it was just me learning by myself, and with no guidance. I could do a lot of things wrong. But that can also be a good thing because I also learned from my mistakes, and I keep learning.” Jay described a unique experience he had during his college orientation when he had to act as both student and interpreter for his parents:
When I look around at my fellow classmates, all of them are obviously white Caucasians and I notice that when it comes to orientations, they bring their parents with them. Their parents ask these questions for them, where like in my first orientation I didn't bring my mom or dad because I knew they didn't know how to ask the right questions and they would always put me at a younger age, "Hey, could you figure this out?" Or, "Oh hey, could you do this for us?" Or, "Hey, could you translate this for us?"

Jay captured how he feels in the sociocultural and academic intersections of his life this way:

It's a weird feeling, because here in America, they tell me that I'm not American enough to be here, but if I were to move back home, I'd be too American to be a part of the Mexican culture there. Also, I don't really know much of my history from my home country either, so I probably would feel isolated. Although, the one thing that we would have in common is the language I would say. We have a saying that says nor from here, nor from there, which goes with what I just described. I don't feel like I belong here, I don't feel like I belong there, so I'm in the middle.

**Family obligations and academic commitments.** The researcher captured experiences of how participants saw themselves as balancing academic commitments with obligations at home to understand how influences at home and in the community affected their perceptions of their ability to succeed in college. Students identified their roles as caregivers for family members and translators for parents as equally important to their experience as their college coursework. Participants’ deep sense of obligation at home was a factor in their ability to remain academically resilient. Katie described her experience navigating the college system while maintaining her role as support to her mother and caregiver for her younger siblings. She
expressed how hard it was for her to manage aspects of her life that are outside of her control when she said:

So it's really difficult to say how I navigate because there's really no way of me knowing how I'm navigating through it because I'll always come across something that's like, I'll be doing good one quarter and then the next quarter something hits like family situations where I've got to attend to my younger siblings. I've got to attend to my younger siblings or my mom, and then me talking and communicating with my teachers like, Hey, my attendance may be a little wonky because I have to be home driving people back and forth because I'm the only way of navigating through with them. And then they'll just be like, oh, it's okay, don't worry. Just email me and I'll give you the information. They sound like, yeah . . . at first they sound like they're wanting to help you out, but then when you come back they're like, well, you did miss so much. I was like, well, I did tell you I'm sorry.

In a similar way, Jay, Kristina, and Luis described their roles as translators for their families. They mentioned being asked to support their families in situations such as going to the doctor and attending to immigration and work-related issues. Jay described how this dual role creates tension for him because his family did not understand the commitments he needed to meet in order to be successful in college. He said:

And I think that also comes from a lack of family support in that academic aspect, because yeah my family's supportive, but not in academic aspect, because they're not . . . I'm obviously first generation for a reason, too, so they don't know the struggles I have to face through, or go through, and even itself learning English I felt like I was placed that pressure on top of me of having to translate at an early age, and yeah.
Participants described how roles at home conflicted with expectations at school when families expected them to serve as their interpreter. Luis described his role taking family members to the doctor as an example, stating: “It is my job translating what the doctor is saying to my mom and then what my mom is saying to the doctor, and you have to do that back and forth, yeah.” Kristina acted as a translator for her father who was ill. She said she wanted to be there for him, “so he can have his voice, and to let him know that someone is there to listen to him and speak to him, and talk to him and just be there with him.”

The participants’ words and the way that they expressed their thoughts provided the data used to understand the pressure that students felt when their obligations at home and at school conflicted. Students described feeling fatigued and worn out when parents did not understand why they needed to attend classes, and likewise, faculty did not always understand why participants needed to miss class to attend family appointments and meetings. This lack of understanding on both sides placed students in the difficult place of prioritizing their education over supporting their family, a decision that ultimately did not feel good to them.

**Staying the Course**

In this final subtheme, the participants expressed what it meant for them to persist in community college. The participants’ articulated the way that they viewed their academic achievements. The researcher identified places of resiliency when participants spoke about how they overcame obstacles and championed their own efforts to succeed in courses and stay in college. Each of the six participants expressed pride in their accomplishments and confidence in their ability to reach their goals.
Pride. Luis elaborated on how he earned good grades and explained that he perceives that not only is he a good student, but he is changing the course of life for his family members and their future generations. Luis stated:

Yeah. That I am doing this for myself and 'cause my parents, they know that I'm not doing it for them because later in life, I'm going to be alone and then I can't be here anymore and they want me to get those opportunities.

Persistence. Jay was also succeeding in his classes, but he struggled to understand his accomplishments in light of how he viewed himself as “not being very smart” coupled with his sense of identity as a person living between the two countries and navigating between languages and cultures. He captured how this makes him feel when he said:

I always like using the hike method. Like, when you're hiking a super steep hill, and once you get to the top, it's when you can finally relax. Right now, I'm in the middle of that hike, where the slope is really heavy. But I know I'm getting towards it, and I'm aiming towards it, and I think because I also like hikes, I think I find that momentum there, too, even though I get knocked down sometimes, or like I get out of breath. I just keep going.

Confidence. Maria struggled with being isolated in college without too many places to connect. She continued to experience the highs and lows of school to deal with the day-to-day pressures largely on her own, but she was committed to graduating. She expressed confidence when she spoke about the skills she has acquired to overcome the challenges she faced, saying, “then there are the times when I’ve let myself down. I’ve gotten back up. So I feel that I can do that now too.” Maria’s academic pathway aligned with her deep desire to take care of people. She lit up when she spoke about being a midwife and being present when a new life enters the
world. She spoke about wanting to do something in the medical profession so that she could care for her grandmother in her later years in the same way that her grandmother cared for her when she needed her most.

**Self-acknowledgement.** Katie’s voice filled with pride when she reflected on all that she has accomplished during her time in community college:

I guess for first gen students or for students of color, like a Mexican as I am, sometimes we don't tend to give ourselves the credit that we deserve. And I'm still learning to do that, because obviously I feel like I'm bragging. I just feel like I'm bragging. I feel so bad saying that now. I was like, dang. Don't just thank yourself, Katie, because in a situation where we always encounter a lot of hardships, a lot of obstacles, and a situation where you don't get so much resources, we tend to just thank people that are helping us without seeing that we are actually the ones doing some of the work. But in fact, we're standing, we’re still standing and we're in the same classes as the other students who have had a head start in this race. And maybe towards the end of this race, we're the ones that end up finishing first because we may have more of an advantage to actually connect with the students, or to understand how to communicate better because of being bilingual.

In a similar way, Kristina acknowledged her confidence when she described how she came out of her shell to engage in the campus community in order to become a club leader. She expressed pride in the ways that she had been navigating the challenging spaces between college and school to stay on course to complete her degree when she said:

I have definitely grown more through my three quarters I've been here. My family has seen that, and they don't like it. But it's what life is. And it's like I'm finding my own
person, and if they don't accept me, then I accept myself, and I know what I'm going for, and I know who I am.

**Determination.** As a college student, Abigail was proud of her accomplishments and attributed her success to the same determination she applied to other challenges in her life. She said: “I think that some people are just born with it. It's just a feeling inside that you're going to do something. And not really to prove to other people, but to prove to yourself that you can do it.” While in college, she faced challenges such as lack of finances, struggles with the English language, and needing to work while in school, but she knew she could graduate. “I just keep swimming,” she said, “like the movie Nemo.”

**Conclusion**

The participants’ statements related to the super ordinate theme of having a sense of purpose was evidenced in their descriptions of the ways that they were motivated to earn college degrees. The participants’ words illustrated their recognition of how their accomplishments fit within the larger fabric of their families’ trajectory toward creating a better life for generations to come. Participants described sacrifices made on their behalf as a motivating factor in overcoming current challenges as students, but also as a way to explain their deep sense of obligation to give back to their families in a way that would make life better for them too.

The participants described how navigating multiple worlds meant translating among multiple languages and cultural systems, maintaining duties at home while acquiring an understanding of how to be a successful community college student. The participants recognized the enormous amount of effort that it took to ensure that they secured the resources they needed to succeed in a college system. They articulated the ways that they perceived the system as not fitting with the complexity of their lives.
Finally, participants displayed insight into the ways that they had taken ownership over their own destiny. They demonstrated pride in their ability to turn struggles into triumph, pass courses, and stay on track to earn a college degree. The participants acknowledged their responsibility to lead the way and serve as role models for those that would follow them on this journey. To them, paving the way was as much about creating a future for others as it was about realizing their own.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to investigate how community college students from immigrant backgrounds remained academically resilient in their first year of college. The researcher examined the data taken from a series of interviews, field notes, and reflective memos to identify significant themes focused on illuminating participant resilience. The data collected provided insight into how participants made sense of early experiences in school at home, and in the community as first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds currently attending a community college in the United States.

The participant’s descriptions revealed that the educational journey had not been easy for them. All participants began elementary school taking ESL classes and two participants were in Special Education. Two participants had gaps in their schooling at some point in their K–12 experience. Each of the participants described the way that labels used to describe their ability and life circumstances continued to create challenges for them in college. The participants all experienced initial obstacles when they enrolled in college. These obstacles affected their early adjustment to campus life. The participants described linguistic and financial challenges as being the most significant challenges they needed to overcome. Their obstacles seemed harder to overcome because parents, although supportive of their enrollment in college, did not have the
resources or system knowledge to help them once they had enrolled. The participants all
described their early discovery that they had to come out of the shadows and advocate for
themselves if they were going to succeed at school.

Participants described the classroom as a place where they experienced success and faced
difficult challenges. Most participants experienced the classroom as a space where faculty were
willing to help if they were made aware of participants’ struggles. Participants described
meeting high standards in the classroom as a challenge they willingly took on. Conversely, they
perceived a lack of support when faculty were inflexible when setting deadlines and course
expectations. They felt defeated when they were unable to meet the expectations of the course
because of circumstances outside of their control. Participants expressed the ways that going to
class made them feel bad, specifically when text material was presented from a white middle-
class perspective, and they were not able to articulate how their perspectives differed from what
was being presented in class. They expressed a desire to have course curriculum that honored
their background experiences and supplemental support for English language development so
they could fully engage in the classroom. They believed that when people with influence and
authority took the time to understand them, positive change had occurred.

Participants stated that collaborating with peers and mentors were aspects of their college
experience that promoted confidence in their ability to stay in school. These relationships helped
them gather the resources (e.g., financial aid, scholarships) and the emotional support they
needed to bolster their confidence in their abilities as college students. The participants’
experiences with peers in clubs and other social settings helped them feel less isolated and alone
because it provided them with places and spaces to express themselves and to be heard.
Participants identified mentors as individuals who shared their cultural, ethnic, racial, or first-
generation experiences and those who did not judge or label them. The key factor in feeling the support from mentors was the mentors’ ability to ask probing questions and to listen deeply when participants spoke. All participants expressed their desire to talk and to be heard to ensure that things were right for them, not only right for the system.

All participants acknowledged their belief that the college system was not designed for them, and they wanted people with influence to know that they were invested in making changes to improve the system for themselves and for those who shared their background experiences. They described how their college experience was not only about earning college degrees, but included becoming equipped with the skills, knowledge, and credentials that they could use to make a difference for others.

Most importantly, participants clearly identified family relationships as being central to their identities as bilingual and bicultural community college students. Participants expressed the ways in which they felt a sense of obligation to support their family. They spoke of interpreting for them, taking care of younger siblings, and contributing to the family income while enrolled in school as responsibilities they had at home. These obligations provided participants with a sense of purpose but also presented challenges when attempting to navigate the spaces between home and school.

Participants provided details that provided the researcher with insights regarding the perceptions that students brought with them to community college, what they were studying, and ultimately, what they hoped to accomplish. Participants’ descriptions of experiences at home, at school, and in the community provided evidence of how prior experiences motivated them to pursue a college degree. Notably, participants’ pride in what they had been able to accomplish demonstrated how they were experiencing their journey through the community college system.
and the way they saw themselves as pioneers setting a course for other first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds to follow.

The subsequent chapter discusses findings and recommendations for future research.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Research Findings

This study explored the lived experiences of first-generation students in their first year of study at a community college to discover how students’ lived experience impacted how they made sense of academic achievement. The final chapter is situated within the context of literature on how community colleges have historically fulfilled their mission to serve all students while at the same time serving the political, social, and economic needs of society. As demonstrated in the literature review, aspects of traditional models designed around open access to higher education that make assumptions about students, their families, and students’ prior understanding of higher education systems factor into how first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds experience college. Deficit models in education are often built upon a single story that focuses on deficiencies rather than building on the resiliency and personal knowledge that students bring with them when they come to school (Banks, 2006; Baum & Flores, 2011; Shields, 2004; Yosso, 2005). The researcher reviewed literature on community college history and purpose and literature that identifies how experiences on campus impacts first-generation from immigrant backgrounds ability to remain academically resilient within the college environment (Braxton et al., 2011; Jehangir et al., 2012; Kuh & Love, 2000; Kuh et al., 2006; Pascarella et al., 2003; Shields, 2004; Takacs, 2002; Terenzini et al., 1996). The research questions in this study were aimed at expanding what is known about the lived experiences of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds in community college. Specifically, the aim was to provide an insider’s perspective of how participants made sense of their experiences as first-generation students and how they perceived their culture of origin within the identified college culture, systems, and practices.
Critical race theory and academic resiliency theory provided the theoretical context for this study. Critical race theorists analyze and challenge the higher education system to bring about social change by addressing the deficit models of operation that contribute to systematic oppression (Bell, 1992; Freire, 2006; Giroux, 2006; Ospina & Su, 2009). Academic resiliency theorists illuminate the ability of first-generation students to utilize experiences of overcoming adversity as strength as they continue to adapt and grow as part of ongoing human development (Barnard, 1994; Martin, 2013; Masten, 2011) A qualitative IPA approach was the methodological approach used to gather and analyze data that identified the meaning of experiences through the voices of students (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; Smith, 2018).

In this final chapter, three superordinate themes and three corresponding subthemes are discussed and situated in the context of current literature that relates to these themes. As detailed in Table 3, the superordinate themes and their subthemes analyzed are:

1. Challenges as internal factors in resiliency
   a. Personal experiences
   b. Educational environment
   c. Navigating systems
2. Social Competence
   a. Relationships as social networks
   b. Sense of control and labeling
3. Sense of Purpose
   a. Leading the way
   b. Navigating multiple worlds
   c. Staying the course.
What follows is a thematic elaboration of the research findings relevant to the participants’ lived experiences in relation to their academic achievement in community college. The findings for each corresponding superordinate and subordinate theme are reviewed in relation to existing literature. The conclusions of this study are then presented in relation to the thematic findings. The final section offers recommendations for practice and future research.

**Challenges as Internal Factors in Resilience**

The first superordinate theme to emerge came about during the interviews as study participants considered how they made the decision to seek a degree in higher education. Participants shared what they recalled from childhood experiences at home and in the K–12 education system. Participants’ stories provided insight into how these early experiences and challenges shaped perceptions of their abilities as learners. As college students, participants viewed their achievements in relation to what they had to overcome to finish high school and the challenges they faced as they persisted in college.

The findings corresponded with existing literature that personal experiences related to characteristics such as country of origin, race, parental socioeconomic status, community schools, and legal barriers all affect the ways that first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds are prepared to experience postsecondary education (Baum & Flores, 2011; Rankin & Reason, 2008). Participants’ responses revealed that although individual experiences varied, common themes emerged as they described early childhood experiences and how their early years in school had been foundational for the resolve needed to persist in college.

Data was gathered from the researcher’s question: What prompted you to go to community college? The participants discussed early childhood experiences at home and in school as shaping their decision to go to college. They described how a lack of familiarity with
the U.S. education system, cultural expectations at home, English language barriers, and immigration status in the United States set them on a different path from many of their peers in K–12. Some participants indicated that their childhood felt chaotic at times due to the frequent moves their families made following seasonal work. Many of the participants became emotional as they described early experiences at home and in school and recalled stressful and painful, yet deeply meaningful, time in their lives. They recognized that early experiences gave them an awareness of how hard life can be, which differed from how they imagined many of their peers had experienced life. What these participants described as hardship, they also described as personal strengths and the foundation of their desire to earn a college degree.

Participants’ words illustrated recognition of the sacrifices their parents made on their behalf. Participants’ descriptions of awareness of the purpose for attending college demonstrated how they made connections between the life they had at home and the valuable lessons learned from overcoming challenges and adversity as part of their lives. A finding in this study was that first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds saw college as an opportunity to change the trajectory of their lives and the lives of others who share their histories. The drive to overcome adversity and challenge comes from a deeply felt sense of resolve to influence systems so that obstacles they faced on their journey are cleared from the path for other students from immigrant backgrounds who will follow in their footsteps.

**Educational Environment Fosters Academic Resilience**

Research has shown that attending college changes the trajectory of people’s lives in terms of the lifelong earning potential for individuals (Baker, 2016; Carneval et al., 2010; DeAngelo & Franke, 2016; Prince, 2008). Recent education reformers have concentrated on redesigning existing college systems and practices to increase the probability that students
graduate (Baker, 2016; Bailey, 2018; Bailey et al., 2015; Scott-Clayton, 2011). However, there is less written about how “the ways in which [educators] teach, think students learn, connect with students, and the assumptions they make about students based on their race or ethnicity—can create the problem of unequal outcomes” (Bensimon, 2005, p. 101). The insights that students shared provided data that can be used to support the need for more intentional support for first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds.

**Building Equity in College Systems**

Recently, Malcolm-Piquex and Bensimon’s (2017) review of data on college completion rates by race and ethnicity signaled the urgent need for “policymakers and institutional leaders to focus their efforts and resources on creating equity in higher education” (p. 1). Research and data in this study found that creating equity in higher education begins by validating prior experiences and identifying the ways that students are prepared to succeed in college.

**Developing Key Relationships With Faculty and Staff**

In addition to understanding how personal experiences affect students’ college experiences, participants reported that personal interactions with faculty, advisors, and peers help them understand college expectations and contribute to their sense of belonging on campus. The data revealed that although educators, parents, and other people in their lives viewed college enrollment as a milestone achievement, participants tended to experience college as a continuation of their previous experiences in school. For this reason, early entry into the college campus is disorienting. The participants in this study highlighted isolation, stereotyping, obligation to family members as aspects of their experience in the community college system. The researcher captured these themes as each of the participants responded to questions that asked how students made sense of early experiences navigating systems in community college.
From the participants’ responses, the researcher could see how participants put into practice a variety of strategies to overcome “feeling bad” (Katie, Christina, Abigail, Jay) and other challenges related to managing systems that they acknowledged did not take into account their language and cultural backgrounds. Participants acknowledged that without the ability to maintain or develop supportive relationships, they would have felt isolated and vulnerable within the college system.

They described positive feelings about their experiences on campus when they felt that people on campus knew them because of time spent getting to know them as individuals. This finding corroborates findings cited in research that identifies relationships with faculty and staff as key in creating a sense of belonging on campus (Baum & Flores, 2011; Braxton et al., 2011; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Jehangir, 2010; Perez, 2010; Pidgeon, 2010; Rendón, 2006; Shields, 2004, Swail, 2014).

Factors That Impact Academic Resilience

Conversely, this study revealed that participants experienced microaggressions in the classroom when their cultural identity was not affirmed, and their families’ histories and experiences were not validated. This finding is consistent with other research indicating that being left out of the curriculum perpetuates the isolation that immigrant students feel on campus (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Jehangir, 2009; Kuh et al., 2006; Shields, 2004; Swail, 2014). The experiences that students have on campus and in the classroom affected how students experienced the college system and how well they were positioned to apply internal strengths to overcome challenges and remain academically resilient. Students provided examples of how their experiences in the classroom challenged their ability to persist when they were asked to read and write about weaknesses and shortcomings of individuals who have the same or very
similar backgrounds to their own. This finding is consistent with literature that found that students who come from immigrant backgrounds are often overlooked and socially marginalized, and many times their talents go unrecognized, unappreciated, and unacknowledged in the classroom (Banks, 2006; Choy 2001; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Kuh et al., 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996). Shields (2004) claimed ignoring different background experiences in the classroom “perpetuates the implicit knowledge that certain lived experiences are more normal and hence more acceptable than others” (p. 120). In relation to this finding, researchers have recommended providing students with “culturally validating experiences” and exploring difference as a part of classroom routines is a way to manage the isolation that limits their engagement in the classroom (Jehangir et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2014, 1995; Rendón, 2006; Sheild, 2004, Takacs, 2002).

Course content. Participants reported feeling defensive when course content or textbooks contradicted what they understood based on their families’ telling of history. This finding aligns with Michael Apple’s (2013) work that investigated how culture reproduction was perpetuated through cultural artifacts like textbooks, films, or books. Apple (2013) suggested that textbook content presented from the perspective of editors and publishing companies perpetuates the perspectives of the dominant culture and consequently educational researchers need to consider this as a fact when selecting textbooks and other culturally relevant materials to support learning in the classroom. Students’ academic achievement and success must be measured within an environment that promotes reflection on prior knowledge and experiences and provides opportunities for students to act as teachers when sharing perspectives and knowledge about histories that contradict what is put forward in text or course materials.
Balancing responsibility and expectations. The majority of participants described balancing dual responsibilities at home and at school as being very stressful and a constant challenge that they needed to resolve or manage and overcome. This finding is consistent with the findings of Hernandez’s (2002) in-depth interviews with Latino students enrolled in their first year in college, where participants attributed family ties and support, proper time management, financial stability, managing anxiety about their schoolwork load, and an organized routine as positive factors in adjusting to college.

By way of contrast, this researcher’s review of the literature identified multiple studies that found that first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds were often left alone to find their own ways of coping or adjusting to the college environment (Baum & Flores, 2011; Hernandez, 2002; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Morales, 2004; Ruth, 2018). Participants in this study who had higher levels of confidence in their ability to manage their dual responsibilities at home and at school had accessed resources on campus such as peers or support networks made up of individuals who understood their commitments at home and at school. Participants described how relationships with staff helped when staff understood their unique life circumstances. Staff directed them toward the right courses and instructors willing to help them meet classroom expectations. The key individuals on campus participants counted on alleviated their bad feelings when they found appropriate resources to help them pay for classes and helped make connections with other support networks on campus. This is consistent with what Yosso (2005) referred to as students building navigation capital in order to manage participation in the education system. It is also consistent with Ruth’s (2018) findings that undocumented students will not disclose their status or seek help unless they know that they can trust the individual and know that the individual is equipped to help them.
It was notable that all participants in this study acknowledged awareness of how the college system was not designed for them, and many stated that beyond earning a degree, using resources and relationships on campus allowed them to gain more direct knowledge of the system itself. Participants used challenging experiences in community college as motivation to achieve because an additional goal is to change the system so that the transition to college would not be so hard for others coming to college with backgrounds similar to their own.

In summary, the findings reflected how first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds applied lessons learned from challenging personal experiences to their understanding of how they can overcome the challenges they experienced college. Students’ ability to persist was negatively affected when they got to campus only to find out that they were not ready to integrate into college life. Because family cannot help them with the adjustment to college life, participants relied on faculty, staff, and advisors to support them in the early stages of navigating the system. Although these supports helped them adapt to campus life, the experience in the classroom was discouraging and silenced them when they found that their experiences were not seen as valuable and they were not given the opportunity to voice their opinions. Participants were unique in terms of what brought them to college, but had similar perspectives on how they used prior and current experience to deepen their resolve to persist in college and make a difference for others. Participants’ persistence and resiliency in the transition to college and their ability to create meaningful and engaging relationships with individuals in and out of the classroom was the foundation for their experience as college students, which is described in greater details in the second finding.

Social Competence
Literature on academically resilient students identified social competence as an aspect of resiliency that is fostered within the environment (Bernard, 1996; Martin, 2013; Martin & Marsh, 2006; Morales, 2008; Museus, Shiroma & Dizon, 2016; Perez, 20100). Social competence is defined as the ability to solve problems and maintain a sense of purpose (Benard, 1991; Bernard, 1991; Martin, 2013), and build autonomy and maintain close relationships (Baum & Flores, 2011; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Hernandez, 2002; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Jehangir, 2010; Jehangir et al., 2012; Kuh et al., 2006; Pidgeon, 2009; Rendón, 2006). An understanding of how students develop personal resiliency within the community college environment and make sense of academic achievements and persist in college came about when participants described who or what helped them conquer the tough moments in college.

**Relationships With Key Individuals on Campus**

Participants identified key individuals in their lives who took an interest in them personally and helped them identify a pathway that aligned with their purpose for seeking a degree. Participants credited K–12 teachers, program advisors, mentors, college teachers, and campus advisors as people who invested in their lives. Participants generally had much to say about the role that these key individuals played in their success. All participants described how important it was for them to be vulnerable when opening up to caring individuals on campus so that they could get the kind of help that they needed.

A finding of this study revealed that as community college students, participants felt supported in formal and informal relationships with individuals on campus. The majority of participants perceived initial isolation and felt overwhelmed when they arrived on campus, but they took steps outside of their comfort zone and developed trusting relationships with faculty,
staff, and peers on the community college campus. They deepened these supportive relationships with faculty and staff when they had time to share openly about their college experiences. Participants saw it as their responsibility to create these relationships and did so by sharing personal information. They were encouraged to continue sharing both good and bad experiences with faculty, staff, and peers when they felt listened to and felt empowered when they saw how the behavior of faculty, staff, and peers changed as a result of these interactions. This finding is consistent with other studies that found that students were more engaged when they had positive trust relationships with faculty (Jehangir, 2010; Pidgeon, 2009; Rendón, 2006; Swail, 2014). In this study, participants identified relationships as the factor that made the campus feel inclusive and the reason they were still in college.

**Relationships and persistence.** The participants identified supportive people on campus as individuals who listened with the intention of understanding their circumstances, not those who quickly tried to solve their problems. This helped because participants had time to identify and access inner resources they used to solve their own problems. As in earlier findings, here the participants stressed that listening for understanding before offering suggestions to overcome challenges moderated the level of disorientation that these participants experienced when they first arrived on campus. This finding is consistent with studies that reveal that when students arrive on campus and find that they cannot understand what is expected of them and do not have people to share their experience with, they become overwhelmed and isolated, which contributes to early departure from college (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Covarrubia & Fryber, 2015; DeAngelo & Franke, 2016; Terenzini et al., 1996). Additional research has supported the claim that disorientation and shock contribute to the length of time it takes for first-generation students to adapt to college routines and expectations, and this is a factor in how quickly they fall behind in
their studies (Baum & Flores, 2011; Braxton et al., 2011; Hernandez, 2002; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Ma & Baum, 2016; Morales, 2004; Pratt, 2017). Arbona and Nora’s (2007) study on the influence of environmental factors on Hispanic college degree attainment where they found that “academic integration, or the degree of students’ academic involvement on campus, both in and out of the classroom, is significant in impacting persistence, transfer, and degree attainment” (p. 251). The fact that participants identified supportive relationships with people who took time to listen to them as key to their success is interesting because it implies that participants become resilient when people take active steps to slow things down and intentionally view the campus environment through their eyes. The result of listening is that supporters develop empathy, which allows students to feel empowered to access their own inner resources to address obstacles that emerge.

The power of empathy and listening for understanding. Participants stated that they were compelled to share details when they were prompted to describe what was going well and what was challenging them. They acknowledged without the understanding and caring support on campus, they would have been lost because nothing in their families’ prior experience had equipped them for this transition. This is consistent with a study of affirmative action policies by Deangelo and Franke (2016) that found that discomfort on campus is amplified because of the ways that experiences on community college campus are different from what they experience at home or have previously experienced in high school. In this way, participants’ descriptions supported what literature has identified as the phenomenon of living in two worlds—the world of school and the world of home. The importance that students placed on how this experience is real for them. When participant's experience was acknowledged by staff and faculty, participants felt confident establishing a place for themselves on campus. This was evidenced by the
multiple ways that these participants interacted on campus: through leadership roles on committees and clubs, volunteer positions that provided advice to peers and teachers, and interactions with people in the campus community.

**Developing Positive Identity as a Place of Resilience**

Related to this finding is how participants perceived overcoming the labels as a necessary part of developing a positive identity as a college student. Again, this was accomplished by exploring and developing their multiple identities through participation in academic and nonacademic experiences on campus. This finding is significant because it indicates that participants were aware of how the labels used to describe them, and felt limited by them. The majority of participants reflected on how they had perceived that labels placed them into categories as necessary so that they could receive some kind of extra support; however, some participants expressed an awareness that they never received the additional resources. This became a key finding because participants described their experiences of being labeled as one of the reasons they are seeking a college degree. Specifically, they wanted to have the knowledge and influence to change how children are labeled in school. Data gathered in the interviews allowed the researcher to understand that labels made participants feel “lesser than” (Abigail), or “not very smart” (Jay), and how their identity as a bilingual and bicultural learner identified them as at risk for failure (Katie, Kristina). These were all labels that participants internalized and had to overcome as college students. This finding highlights how the cumulative effect of labeling as part of the policy and practice in the education system damaged participants’ self-esteem and diminished their ability to identify as a successful learner.

**Stigma and impact of labels**
A secondary finding in this study was that although the education system applies labels based on observable risk factors present within an individual’s learning environment, labeling becomes an individual marker that categorizes students by risk factors most often associated with their background and academic achievement. Students carry these markers with them wherever they go. Factors such as low socioeconomic background, limited knowledge of the English language, and adaptation to new environments were identified as places of adversity and struggle. The participants in this study described how getting out from under these labels was necessary in understanding academic achievement and determination and resolve to change how they were viewed within the campus community propelled them forward.

Each of the participants described how overcoming the stigma of labels they were given in K-12 continued to be a factor in college. Several participants described how the transition from high school to college was more challenging for them because they too had begun to identify with labels and consequently did not see themselves as prepared academically and this impacted their confidence as students. This finding is supported by research that claims that students’ identification with deficit labels reinforced their belief that they were not prepared for college (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Yosso, 2005). This belief can limit students’ potential in college when practices such as placement testing provide test results that confirm they are not college-ready (Bunch & Kibler, 2015; Hughes and Scott, 2011; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Pratt, 2017). Research has shown resiliency is chipped away when assumptions about students result in labels being used to define them (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Yosso, 2005). This is especially harmful when policies and practices are not examined and remain rooted in unconscious biases of well-intentioned individuals and when systems limit students as they develop an identity as a college student (Assalone & Fann, 2017; Gray et al., 2018). This finding highlights the importance of
early success experiences in college including reimagining placement and orientation policy and practices to better reflect and highlight how student’s diverse life experience and prior knowledge are strengths that they will use as college students.

**Embracing Bilingual Ability**

All participants reported that they acquired the English language as part of their experience in school. Participants expressed pride in language abilities and see speaking multiple languages as a strength. However, several participants highlighted how thinking and learning in multiple languages created learning challenges for them in the classroom. The theme emerged as significant when several participants identified bilingual abilities as affecting their confidence in their academic ability. The researcher noted that participants’ opinion of their command of the English language affected decisions about which classes to take and what college degrees they would pursue. The participants’ responses indicated that participants’ college choices had very little to do with their dreams or desires for themselves, but rather how their linguistic ability, cultural background, and family expectations dictated which academic pathway they should follow. Gaining an understanding of bilingual abilities was a factor in how participants made sense of their academic achievement and maintain a connection to family and personal histories. Research supports using culturally responsive and strategic teaching practices such as translanguaging that incorporate the use of multiple languages in the classroom as well as the significant role language plays in student’s ongoing identity negotiation and development (Conteh, 2018; MacSwan, 2017).

In summary, as participants integrated into the campus community, they demonstrated an awareness of the kind of support they needed to have in order to be successful. They recognized the ways that their background experiences made it more challenging for them to engage in the
classroom and how they continued to struggle with the English language in college. Participants showed resiliency when they demonstrated awareness of the need for additional support and identified people on campus who could help them. Consistent with research, students experienced more academic and social success when they had friends and faculty from the same linguistic and cultural background available to help them identify how their multiple and intersecting identities, including their knowledge of multiple languages and communication styles are an asset to them in college. The strengths that participants described were similar to what Yosso (2005) described as a form of linguistic capital. Additionally, Yosso (2005) identified aspirational capital, social capital, and navigational capital as strengths that first-generation students coming from communities of color have in common. The participants in this study identified the ways that they relied on these forms of capital to ensure their own success, the ways that they had been helped, and the way they had committed to using their capital to support others coming from backgrounds similar to their own.

**Sense of Purpose**

The final superordinate theme was that participants experienced a deeply felt sense of purpose regarding their pursuit of a degree. It incorporated some of what has already been identified in previous themes and most directly answers the question this study sought to answer. Specifically, how do students use inner resources such as bilingualism, cultural backgrounds, and personal experiences to remain academically resilient in the face of challenges in a system where they are often isolated and alone (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Kuh, et al., 2006). Each of the participants discussed their journey through the education system in a way that highlighted how language, culture, and relationships have been woven together in a way that gave them a clear
sense of purpose. That purpose brought them to college and provided direction in what they chose to study.

It was clear from the way that participants talked about their experiences that the educational journey had not been easy, and they had been largely on their own when attempting to secure the knowledge and resources they needed to go to college. Participants revealed that their status as the first one in the family to go to college gave them an additional responsibility of finding a way to succeed so that they could be an example for their younger siblings. This finding is consistent with literature that identified the struggle students’ face when they step away from cultural experiences at home and in their communities and embrace the cultural routines of the dominant culture when they get to college (Banks, 2006; Jehangir, 2010; Kuh et al., 2006; London, 1989). The participants’ descriptions of their experiences provided insight into how internal and external expectations affect them. They expressed how expectations felt like a heavy load that they bear alone. Data from the interviews was evidence that participants took personal responsibility for ensuring that they managed academic life on campus and their life at home with the same degree of awareness and care. A sense of awareness of the value in what they are achieving through education and the alignment with a deeply felt sense of purpose was the foundation of their resilience.

Making a Difference for Others

As previously stated, the majority of participants perceived that a part of their own achievement in college included breaking a trail or creating a path and making the system better for others. Participants’ words illustrated their recognition of how they fit within the larger
fabric of their families’ goal of creating a better life for generations to come. Most participants saw the opportunities they had to go to college as a direct result of the sacrifices that family members made on their behalf. Studies that examine experiences of first-generation immigrant students revealed themes such as guilt and loss of connection to family as factors that caused students to drop out before they earn college degrees (Alvarez, 2011; Arbona & Nora, 2007; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Kuh et al., 2006). However, in this study, participants perceived their departure from past traditions as setting a new course and as a source of family pride. Participants’ determination to earn a college degree stemmed from their appreciation and gratitude for the opportunity to pursue a college degree, which gave them a deeply felt sense of responsibility to be an example of success for others to follow.

Navigating Multiple Worlds: Being an Example for Others to Follow

One way that participants made sense of academic achievement was to consider their success as paying tribute to the people who provided a way for them to go to college. They were committed to maintaining a connection to family, language, and culture. They described how they hoped that their ability to navigate the spaces between home and school would translate into learning about how higher education works so they can guide siblings as well as other future students who share their identity into college. They described how they are currently using their knowledge and their support networks to help other students who were not as brave and more inclined to disappear into the shadows. Although not all participants in this study qualified as DACA, this finding is consistent with Ruth’s (2018) findings that DACA students relied on peers to help them because they were uncomfortable disclosing facts about their personal lives with college administrators or faculty. Finally, participants displayed insight into the ways that they have taken ownership over their own destiny and used this as a resource to help others.
Staying the Course

The participants’ ability to persist in college was evidence of resiliency when participants identified times when they struggled to succeed. The responses to questions about who helped them succeed in college were enlightening and related back to the earlier theme of navigating between two worlds. Participants expressed recognition that they were the ones that did the hard work every day to overcome obstacles because very few people understood the effort required for them to stay in school. Ultimately, their experiences navigating the complexity of life at home and in school contributed to how confident participants were in their ability to persist in college long enough to finish their 2-year degree. Participants also spoke to how their heritage language and various aspects of sociocultural backgrounds were central to how they experienced time at home while they attended college. Participants were in an ongoing struggle to create meaning around experiences at home and in college as they perceived both as significant and important in their pursuit of academic goals. Participants described their journey as a continuous battle where they were required to filter experiences through their cultural identity as a first-generation college student coming from an immigrant background.

Meeting Expectations

Data taken from interviews revealed that students recognized the ways that culture shaped participants’ identity and affected them on a daily basis. They described how they became exhausted in their efforts to maintain their identity while adjusting to college life. Specifically, participants described how they were the first in their family to go to college, which means that they were on their own when it came to carving out time to maintain good grades while being available to help at home. In addition to obligations at home, all participants in this study worked part time to pay for college. Participants perceived their peers as becoming more
independent as college students, while they maintained a strong sense of connection to family and acknowledged that maintaining this connection to home was central to their identity. Students had strong reactions when expectations on campus conflicted with their internal desire to maintain their connections at home. Participants described their need to meet both the expectations at home and the high standards in the classroom as equally important and as the key to their success.

**Achieving in the Classroom**

Above all, meeting faculty expectations was seen as necessary for making them into stronger and better students. At the same time, they felt defeated when they were unable to meet these expectations due to circumstances outside of their control, such as family obligations or work schedules. Participants expressed frustration when family members did not understand the demands of being a college student. As stated previously, most participants described a process of seeking help that involved disclosing aspects of their personal story as necessary when helping faculty understand how accommodations in class would help them be successful. Participants identified the ability to self-manage daily schedules that included additional responsibilities such as taking care of siblings, acting as a translator for family members, and contributing to the families’ income as critical to their academic success. The method described by participants for navigating the spaces between school and home was to develop a strong sense of how their identity is evolving. They attributed their growing awareness of their cultural identity and a relentless determination to succeed as key factors in how they remained academically resilient.

**Cultural Identity in the Community College**

The way that students described their ability to adapt to new environments aligns with Morales and Trotman’s (2004) definition of resiliency as the process of adapting to new
situations and creating a new picture of reality. Also, Torres and Hernandez (2007) found that students who internalized personal choices and engaged in developing an informed identity that incorporated their cultural values in diverse environments were more likely to persist. Conversely, students who were externally defined by negative stereotypes that implicitly or explicitly devalued their multiple identities experienced diminished confidence and lowered the likelihood that they would act outside their comfort zone, which led students to withdraw from the campus community (Gray et al., 2018; Shields, 2004; Torres and Hernandez, 2007; Vega, 2016). As previously mentioned, participants in this study identified the ways that they have sought out the networks on campus and in the community that would support them in their growth and development, but it is worth noting that the majority claimed that this was not typically the case for their peers. A significant finding in this study was the participants’ awareness that many first-generation students of color from similar backgrounds to their own do not persist because they cannot overcome the stigma of negative stereotyping that can make navigating the spaces between school and home unbearable.

The finding that academically resilient students adapt to cultures at home and on campus is consistent with the literature review, which found that because enrolling in college breaks rather than continues family traditions, students are often required to ignore cultural heritage as part of becoming educated (Pascarella et al., 2003, Tierney, 1992). Students who are not successful in adapting to the college culture and who feel ignored, misrepresented, or unaccepted by faculty, peers, or staff are less likely to persist in college (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004). Ultimately, students who identify with multiple identities as students of color, immigrants, workers, caregivers, and cultural translators, are better equipped to tolerate ambiguity when adapting to new expectations within the campus culture (Alverez, 2011; Arbona & Nora, 2007;
Gray et al., 2018; Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Jehangir, 2009). The findings from this study, which are supported by literature suggest that developing multicultural interdisciplinary campus learning communities where human stories and histories can be used as resources for valuing students’ experiences could expand the awareness of all students in the classroom (MacSwan, 2017). Also, such learning communities could help students to cultivate strength by providing opportunities to reflect on experiences of coping with challenges faced at school and home (Gray et al., 2018).

In summary, when reflecting on their academic resiliency in college, the participants explained how their personal histories played a central role in forming their identities and helping them to become agents of their own success. They overcame challenges in their learning environments as they navigated linguistic and culture differences between themselves and the college system. Participants conveyed how stereotyping and labeling were negative aspects of their transition to college. They describe overcoming these aspects of their experience as necessary to achieving the academic goals they have set for themselves. Added to this is their understanding of the sacrifices that parents and other key individuals in their lives made on their behalf and this understanding was a motivating factor that kept them strong as they navigated the complex college systems and achieved good grades in their classes. Participants indicated that choosing a college pathway had to do with how a degree will equip them to be change agents and an example for others. Consistent with research, these participants remained resilient and continued to persist in seeking a college degree as they deepened their appreciation for how their multiple identities and lived experiences were strengths that they drew on as they adapted to the new culture of school. Participants were validated by their relationships with peers and others in the community who listened to them, and they actively worked to develop the skills they needed
to manage their time and to access the resources they needed to contribute at home while also meeting the expectations of the classroom.

**Conclusion**

The research question guiding this study was: How do first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds make sense of their experience at home, at school, and in their community to remain academically resilient in community college? Through this question, this researcher explored the lived experiences of first-generation students enrolled in the community college system. The researcher applied interpretative analysis in this qualitative study to answer this question. The answers were found by listening for how participants made sense of their journey through the education system. Embedded in their life experiences were stories of being resilient when they became aware of how they used inner resources to overcome adversity as part of their solo journey through the education system.

Participants acknowledged that being isolated and invisible on campus contributed to feelings of being overwhelmed and disoriented. They understood that they needed to be vulnerable and that disclosing the circumstances of their lives was essential to securing resources that would provide them access to the information and funding they needed to stay in school. The rich data gathered during the interviews provided evidence of how students viewed the system from the outside looking in and how they recognized the need to step outside of their comfort zones in order to make themselves visible on the college campus. Participants intentionally created relationships and support networks to ensure they got what they needed from faculty and staff who could help them be successful community college students. They sought out people who could translate what was expected of them in the classroom and on the community college campus. They offered examples of how disclosing their personal histories as
language learners and as individuals coming from immigrant backgrounds was uncomfortable but necessary for faculty and staff to understand how to support them.

Congruent with the literature review, the first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds in this study did not share the same experiences navigating the challenges of the first year of college with peers who came from homes where parents had graduated from college (Gray et al., 2018; Jehangir 2009; Jehangir, 2010; Kuh et al., 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996). This population of first-generation students is unique in the college system because of their varied cultural experiences, linguistic abilities, and educational backgrounds (Kuh et al., 2006; Swail, 2014; Szelenyi & Chang, 2002). Participants indicated that they felt supported and strengthened when people took time to deeply listen to their explanations of how their experience differed from their peers. Because of their uniqueness as the first students in their families to go to college, being listened to ensure that people knew them and feeling heard and understood was critical in how well they felt supported. Participants’ identified compassion and empathy as behaviors that were exhibited by those who understood them best. The caring people in their lives helped them to remain visible on campus and stay engaged in the classroom.

Each of the three themes was supported by the research literature, however, literature that specifically focused on the academic resiliency of first-generation community college students was limited. The majority of the literature focused on first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds identified how the challenges that students faced on campus left them isolated and most often contributed to their early departure from school (Banks, 2006; Covarrubias and Fryberg, 2015; Gray et al., 2018; Jehangir, 2009; Rendón, 2006). Although literature on academic resiliency exists, research identifying how first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds have used adversity to create strategies to overcome current challenges in
community college is limited. There is even less written about how academically persistent and resilient students navigate the system and how their experience is used to inform policies and practices focused on equitable practices that increase the graduation rates of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds (Gray et al., 2018; Pratt, 2017). Thus, the theme of resiliency and equity was woven throughout the study. Research has identified a lack of precollege preparation and an inability to navigate the expectations of home and school as contributing to isolation and the high drop-out rates for first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds (Baum & Flores, 2011; Choy, 2001; Hernandez, 2002; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Jehangir, 2010; Teranishi et al., 2011). The findings in this study highlight the strategies the participants used to develop identities as successful college students that allowed them to remain academically resilient despite challenges they faced as community college students. The journey through the community college system for these six participants required them to acknowledge adversity related to language barriers, cultural differences, and the ways that college systems did not account for the complexity of their lives. They translated adversity into internal fortitude and a system know-how as they focused on what they hoped to achieve, navigated the obstacles they encountered, and advocated for themselves in the classroom and on campus.

The data presented in this study provides evidence of how first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds are supported when their background experiences are validated and their bilingual abilities are acknowledged as an asset in the classroom. The participants identified faculty as the change makers and the essential people on campus who could support them in integrating their histories and stories into their learning, which they saw as critical in ensuring their academic success. The participants in this study were encouraged when faculty took time to get to know them as individuals and demonstrate compassion and empathy regarding their
situation. Participants were also encouraged and more likely to persist when faculty took steps to establish a caring environment by adjusting classroom routines and course content to better reflect the contributions these participants made in the classroom.

The research reinforced how deficit models lead to labeling and categorizing students in a way that discourages their full participation on campus and inhibits their academic growth and achievement. Participants in this study articulated how their attempts to understand how the labels used to describe them and their experiences affected them. The majority of participants found labeling to be a form of stereotyping that limited opportunities for them in the K–12 system and continued to limit them as college students. This finding is supported by the literature, which found that the long-term consequences of negative stigmatizing decreases students’ ability to access experience as strength and chips away at their resiliency (Gray et al., 2018; Terenzini et al., 1996; Yosso, 2005). How we engage students as individuals from the first day on campus plays a critical role in how students construct knowledge of themselves as learners and whether they actively or passively access the content of the courses they study.

Participants embraced the opportunity to be the first one in their family to go to college. Supporting the claim that access to higher education provides a transformative experience that can “eradicate the inequities” (Gray et al., 2018), these participants took on the challenge of setting a new course and navigating the higher education system with pride and determination. They recognized that navigating priorities at home while embracing the challenges at school was not easy, but viewed this task as a necessary burden to bear. They felt a deep sense of gratitude for the chance to change the course of their lives and felt deeply committed to influencing the lives of others who needed guidance through the complexities of a system not designed for them. The participants used adversity as a strengthening factor to approach and remove obstacles on
their way to achieving their goal of earning a college degree. The next section offers recommendations for practice, which are intended to help first-generation community college students complete a college degree.

**Recommendations for Practice**

This study’s results indicate several potential areas to improve professional practice. The findings imply that experiences on campus must foster students’ ability to rely on prior experiences as relevant in the classroom and capitalize on inner strengths that result from experiences adapting to multiple environments at home and school. Participants’ descriptions of being excluded from the curriculum and isolated in the college system supports the need to reject deficit models built on previously held assumptions and preconceived ideas about students and their families. Educators should address structural practices that force students to step away from cultural norms and values held at home in order to adapt to the expectations in the community college system. For example, a priority on integration of prior experiences into the classroom could foster students’ confidence and encourage engagement. The participants in this study emphasized how much they valued engaging with faculty, staff, and peers and noted how conversations about issues related to race, ethnicity, gender, and culture in combination with the opportunity to share their personal experiences allowed them to maintain pride in their cultural identity and engage in the intellectual challenges in the classroom. A recommendation from this study is to formalize the practice of establishing multidisciplinary learning communities where all community college students examine topics of interest and concern through facilitated conversations that integrate students’ multiple identities as communities of learners within the context of their area of study. A practice that encourages community rather than completion could promote engagement and academic resiliency while dismantling systems of oppression by
placing a priority on listening to student voices and building cross-cultural understanding on campus.

**Recommendation 1: Build Capacity for Inclusive Teaching Practices**

The college classroom is where the majority of community college students spend their time. Participants in this study viewed faculty as the change agents on campus and the people who supported their success. Professional development that provides faculty with skills and strategies that they can use to integrate students’ traditions, language, and worldview into course content would create an inclusive and equitable classroom environment. Ongoing professional development that highlight assumptions about students are effective in promoting deepening cross-cultural awareness when used with culturally relevant strategies applied in the classroom should be supported through teaching and learning centers on campus (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Possible frameworks include MacSwan’s (2017) conceptual framework called translanguaging that expands upon Noam Chomsky’s (1976) theory of the internal language and Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of *habitus*. These theorists prioritize social construction as a way to bridge content with students’ language of origin, prior knowledge, and lived experiences. The tenets of the translanguaging framework include providing students with access to different languages and different cultural lenses as a way for students to utilize their cultural background and linguistic abilities as resources in the classroom. This practice requires teachers to share the role of content expert in the classroom with students when faculty do not share the same cultural experiences and have limited understanding of the multiple languages represented in the classroom. Being open to new ideas, refraining from giving advice, and maintaining cultural sensitivity and awareness is essential when actively listening for the purpose of building community (Shields, 2004; Takacs, 2002), and this practice can be emotionally taxing and takes
individuals to the edge of their comfort zone (Bettez, 2011; Block 2018). It is critical to vet professional development activities to ensure that they are high quality and that professionals are supported and outcomes of the intervention are tracked at an institutional level. Funding and time are needed to ensure teaching strategies are integrated into the college system in a way that is supported and sustainable.

**Recommendation 2: Assess Course-Taking Trends in High School**

The majority of students in this study began community college by taking remedial or developmental coursework because of earlier academic experiences. Consistent with what was found in the literature, participants were not always aware of the rigorous courses they needed to take in high school or how to otherwise prepare for college. They were therefore surprised when they were enrolled in remedial or developmental classes at community college (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Swail, 2014; Terenzini et al., 1996). The data gathered during this study supports research that identified the connection between students’ experiences in the K–12 system and how well they integrated into the system of higher education. As college campuses consider how to onboard and orient students to college, faculty and staff must intentionally develop partnerships with K–12 teachers and counselors as well as the students’ parents. These relationships are key to preparing students for college by providing appropriate guidance for course selection in high school and by providing information regarding what to expect from the transition between two distinctly different education systems. For example, students may not have access to the high school courses that prepare them for college-level work, so they may need to take a math or English placement test when they get to college.

The participants in this study were not aware of how high the stakes were if they did not meet the placement testing threshold needed for college-level courses. Data taken from
interviews highlighted how test anxiety, and more notably, test apathy resulting from the many 
tests taken in K–12 as language learners and as Special Education students affected how 
seriously they took the college placement tests. When participants got to college and found that 
they had to take one more test and then were placed into precollege classes, they did not question 
the validity of the placement, but questioned their academic capabilities and their ability to stay 
in college long enough to earn a degree. The recommendation from this finding is to align 
curriculum and placement practices between high school and higher education. This requires 
that stakeholders from across systems meet to design a smooth transition. The transition should 
take into account the courses offered and taken in high school and should make skilled 
professionals available to help first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds understand 
how the difference between the academic rigor of high school and college. Additionally, the 
researcher learned from the literature review that placement test practices should be examined to 
ensure that stereotyping and negative labeling are not occurring because they limit students’ 
academic achievement potential from the start of their college experience (Bunch & Panayotova, 
2008). All educators should be exposed to literature that demonstrates how testing and 
placement practices that norm toward white middle class values disproportionately place first-
generation students from immigrant backgrounds below college level classes (Bailey et al., 2015; 

**Recommendation 3: Use Equity Frameworks to Assess Access to Resources**

The majority of participants in this study reported that they developed supportive 
relationships with individuals on campus; however, they generally viewed the community 
college system as isolating and marginalizing. The data indicated that although participants 
secured admission to the college and enrolled in classes, they experienced challenges when it
came to accessing resources in the same way as their white and continuing generation peers. Based on this finding, the researcher recommends that stakeholders use an equity frame rather than a diversity frame to examine system policies and practices. This researcher defines a diversity frame as an approach that promotes policies and enrollment practices that focus on access to education for underrepresented populations while the equity framework promotes ongoing examination of how students’ cultural backgrounds and personal histories factor into school policies and practices that are designed to address the uniqueness of each enrolled student (Bensimon, 2015). Choudhury (2015) said: “By guiding our conscious attention, we may be able to undo the conscious habits of the mind that hinder fairness between individuals and groups” (p. 67).

**Recommendation 4: Prioritize Creating Leadership Opportunities**

Participants felt they influenced systemic change by taking opportunities to serve in leadership positions and collaborate with other groups on campus. This engagement helped them develop personal skills as speakers and advocates on campus. Providing role models for students to look up to is one way to encourage active involvement on campus and role models to follow as they advance through their degree and into their career. Another way is to increase opportunities for students to develop leadership skills and form interest and support networks where they can align their sense of purpose with a meaningful career path. In other words, educators and new students should be exposed to first-generation community college students from immigrant backgrounds to reveal students’ academic resiliency and highlight the ways that students draw on internal strength and their ability to problem solve to be successful in higher education. First-generation students from immigrant backgrounds should be invited to speak
during campus events, orientations, and recruiting efforts to promote positive perceptions of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds to incoming students.


In the review of literature, the importance of creating policies and practices that address systemic issues was identified as recurring and as a necessary part of increasing graduation rates for first-generation students coming from immigrant backgrounds (Giroux, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2003). Policies and practices that promote equity could bring to light the individual characteristics of students to breaks down stereotypes and divisions and allow for a deeper understanding and empathy as a way to promote and appreciation of difference. First-generation students from immigrant backgrounds are often victims of the deficit models used to construct institutional policy and systems. As the population of first-generation community college students from immigrant backgrounds continues to grow on most campuses, the difference between diversity and equity needs to be studied in a way that will allow educators to see students in a way they may not have previously considered. Studies that use an equity frame move away from deficit thinking toward considering inequity as a “problem of practice rather than a problem with students” (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017). A focus and intention within the institution on closing equity gaps supports the need for studies that extend understanding of how immigrant students experience college (Bensimon, 2005; Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Malcom-Piquex & Bensimon, 2017; Szelenyi & Chang, 2002). Educators should be exposed to studies that reveal the ways that well-intentioned practices built on hidden biases promote practices that place students in a position where they experience microaggressions that leave them feeling defensive and burned out. To this end, action steps and strategies in the equity framework put forward by Choudhury (2015) and the equity framework identified by
Bensimon (2005) could be used to examine how campus practices can become skilled at implementing strategies for overcoming implicit bias on an individual and institutional level. The outcomes in these frameworks are accomplished by examining the nature of emotions, the role of unconscious bias, the importance of role models and relationships, and influence of intergroup power dynamics. These frameworks can function as a tool when disaggregating student outcomes in institutional data. The foundation of this recommendation is the belief that equity and inclusive practices must go beyond the construction of strategic plans to the action steps that stakeholders can take to change the systems within the institution. One way to accomplish this is to set a professional development goal to ensure that campus leaders who come from immigrant backgrounds have opportunities to lead sessions and workshops that are open to all faculty, staff, and students in the campus community. The implication of this practice is that it promotes the hiring and retention of more first-generation professionals and cultivates a campus environment where first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds see individuals like themselves leading efforts on campus that promote change.

**Recommendation 6: Create Central Places on Campus for Students**

Finally, although this study was conducted with a small sample from two college campuses, the results indicated that for students to see themselves as contributing members of the campus community, inclusion must be practiced throughout campus. Participants found support and felt included in spaces like the intercultural centers on campuses that were dedicated to serving students from nontraditional backgrounds. This suggests that college campuses would do well to ensure that students are not isolated in these areas on campus. Educators should increase the visibility of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds on campus. This can be accomplished by ensuring that the curriculum offers students a way to construct meaning
using personal and cultural knowledge as a bridge to understanding academic content. In other words, in order to be effective, equity and diversity practices cannot happen on the margins of campus.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

As noted throughout the study, participants felt supported in a way that prepared them to navigate the system when they had relationships with people on campus who took time to get to know them. The researcher recommends that additional studies situated in the community college system focus on interventions that support motivation and academic resiliency of first-generation students with specific attention to how interventions align with college policies and practices currently in place. Researchers who have conducted the majority of studies on first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds in higher education have identified the barriers and achievement gaps students’ face when they get to college. More research is needed to fully reveal strategies that can be used when creating practices that increase graduation rates for the growing population of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds attending community college (Gray et al., 2018). Included in this research should be a way to assess and evaluate the effectiveness of the practices.

The researcher recommends that future research investigate how speaking languages other than English factors into how well students master content in the college classroom. In this study, participants reported that they felt the English language limited them in their classes when they could not learn the vocabulary, making them less able to contribute in class. This became a frustrating experience for participants when peers and faculty did not acknowledge that they needed additional support in translating English into their native language in a comprehensible way. Participants felt alone in their efforts to identify strategies that they could use to understand
academic English vocabulary and sentence structures. Based on this finding, the researcher recommends that future studies identify professional development activities for faculty and staff designed to inform them about how students’ linguistic and cultural backgrounds affect their ability to interpret text material and manage conversations in the classroom. Another qualitative study could provide insight into how explicit teaching practices can support students in acquiring content knowledge while simultaneously learning English.

Finally, further research using qualitative methods to capture students’ perspectives could provide greater awareness of how historical structural inequities continue to factor into how students experience college. The recommendation is for scholar practitioners to conduct in-class research to identify equity-oriented practices used to promote system-level policy changes. Specifically, a case study is needed where researchers use qualitative and quantitative measures to assess how implementing equity practices impact the degrees students pursue, to measure student’s campus engagement, and to measure campus graduation rates of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds.

**Limitations**

One of the limitations to this study is consistent with IPA methodology: the data gathered is unique to only the six students included in the study. The researcher gathered data from students from different backgrounds enrolled in two different colleges in Washington State, but the lived experiences from these six students may not represent the experiences of all students from similar backgrounds. These unique experiences do not necessarily reflect the experiences of other first-generation students across the community college system in the State of Washington. Another limitation is the researcher’s identity as a white woman. Although the researcher shares first-generation status and experience as an immigrant to the United States with
the participants, there may have been some limitations in how students shared details of their experience because of the researcher’s identity as a white woman and as a college administrator. Another limitation is that the study took place in the Washington State community college system and might not reflect the experiences of students studying in community colleges in other states across the country.

**Implications**

The findings in this study can contribute to positive outcomes for first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds by contributing to the scholarship regarding academic resiliency and persistence in community college. It was the overarching goal of this study to discover how the experiences first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds in community college can predict academic success and their ability to earn degrees. The implications of this study align with studies that indicate a need for additional support for these first students as they pursue their dream of earning college degrees (Bailey et al., 2006; Bailey et al., 2015; Jenkins, 2011). The findings in this study may provide evidence that supports the need for first-generation students from immigrant background to acquire resources that will help them as they transition from the K–12 system into the community college system. The findings may inform stakeholders of the ways that policy and practices that fail to acknowledge students’ experience navigating the intersections between school, home, and the community limit students’ ability to fully participate in the classroom and on campus, which ultimately isolates them within the system of higher education. By understanding the lived experiences of students who have been successful in college while maintaining connections to the language and culture of their home and community, we may be in a better position to improve the systems and consequently
the persistence rates of other first-generation students as they enter college with a dream of earning a college degree.

Conclusion

The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis study was to examine the lived experiences of six first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds in their first year of community college. This researcher sought to answer a specific question: How do first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds make sense of experiences in school, at home, and in their community to remain academically resilient? The study participants described experiences related to their status as first-generation college students from diverse cultural, ethnic, and language minority backgrounds. The data gathered during the interviews provided evidence of how this unique population viewed their experiences in their first year of college and the strategies they employed to ensure their visibility and academic success in the community college system.

The themes emerged as the researcher listened to participants’ stories and heard about the adversity that they overcame in their journey through systems of education. The words used to describe experiences provided the data used to interpret how campus environments informed by college policies and practices affected students on a daily basis. First, participants identified critical times in their lives when they faced adversity at some point in their lives and identified how these experiences were foundational in helping them develop internal strength, self-awareness, and the resolve that created within them a determination to earn a college degree.

Remembering their histories and engaging in critical reflection helped the participants stay academically resilient because it provided a sense of purpose beyond their own individual benefit as they saw how they could become informed change agents for a different future. Third,
academic resiliency was fostered when students’ cultural backgrounds and linguistic abilities were positively represented and incorporated in the classroom and on campus and students were supported in maintaining their connection to their cultural backgrounds and personal identities at home. The recommendations based on these findings provide steps that educators must take to depart from deficit models that label students to a model that liberates students by allowing them to explore and develop their inner strength and identity as learners.

In sum, the voices of the participants in this study provided insight into how community colleges can be places of hope when higher education systems are designed in a way that validates the lived experiences of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds. First-generation students thrive and persist in earning college degrees alongside their peers when there is an explicit intention to foster their academic resilience. This occurs when educators place value on each individual’s linguistic and multicultural contributions and backgrounds in the classroom and when college policies and practices include strategically aligned reform efforts that account for the different ways that students experience the community college system.
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Appendix A: Permission Letter to Conduct Research

Dear [Name],

I am a doctoral candidate through Northeastern University (NEU). Currently I am working on a thesis proposal to study the lived experiences of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds in community college. The purpose of this letter is to request permission to conduct a research study at X community college. I have spoken about my interest and he/she has consented to work with me on the study.

My interest is to study the unique experiences of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds to understand how these students make sense of their experiences and remain academically resilient during their first year in college. My plan is to identify themes that emerge from students experience as a way to inform educators on how to support students as they enter college. I have been a faculty and administrator working with English language learners and first-generation students in the community college system for eighteen years. I see my background as an asset to approaching this proposed Interpretative phenomenological analysis study. Data will be collected from individual interviews with six students. The voluntary participants will be students in their first year of college who come from homes where parents were not born in the United States and participants are the first in their families to pursue a college degree. Following your approval I will apply to the NEU Internal Review Board for further approval to conduct research with human subjects.

The proposed study will provide educators with an insider’s perspective on the strategies that students employ to overcome challenges and remain resilient in their first year of college. The study will explore the unique ways that students experience school that may or may not be factored into how systems are designed to support their success.

Please contact me directly at (509) 301-4479 or via e-mail if you have additional questions, or the chairperson of my committee, Dr. William Ewell at Northeastern University, can be contacted at (857) 295-1492. Thank you in advance for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you regarding this request.

Respectfully,
Darlene Snider

Doctoral Candidate 2018,
College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University, Boston, MA

LETTER OF PERMISSION WAS ATTACHED HERE.
Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

Dear Student:

Recruitment Letter

I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University (NEU) and I am working on my dissertation. I have received permission from the office of Institutional Research and approval from the NEU Internal Review Board to conduct my research study at XXX Community College (MM/DD/YR). I am asking that you consider participating in the study. Your participation is completely voluntary, and if you decide to participate, you may opt out of the study at any time.

The title of the research study is *The Solo Journey: Ed in America for First-Generation Immigrant Students*. The purpose of the study is to understand the lived experiences of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds in their first year of community college. Data collection will include individual interviews with students. There will be two individual interviews per participant and a follow up to ensure that the data from the interview accurately reflects the student experience. Each individual interview will take approximately 45 minutes. All interviews will be held outside of student’s class times at a mutually decided location.

Your participation is meaningful to the success of the research study, as we will have the opportunity to capture the unique experiences students have in community college. These experiences will contribute to the literature on how best to support first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds that may be helpful to community college administrators, faculty and staff. You do not have to be interviewed on campus. You will choose the location of your interview. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

I want you to know that confidentiality will be strictly adhered to, and I will use pseudonyms to protect you. In addition, the data collected will primarily be used for the student researcher’s doctoral thesis project, and potentially for future journal articles.

Please email me at snider.d@husky.neu.edu if you are interested in participating in this study or would like more information. Emails to any other email address must be deleted without response per Northeastern University’s IRB.

Thank you for your attention and consideration. Thank You,
Appendix C: Signed Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies Principal Investigator – Dr. William Ewell
Student Researcher – Darlene Snider

Title of Project: *The Solo Journey: Ed in America for First-Generation Immigrant Students*

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

Students who are first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds where parents have not attended college are being recruited to participate in this study. You are a first-generation college student at one of the WA State Community Colleges. You were selected with the assistance of college Staff that work with first-generation students and I proposed to conduct two forty-five minute interviews with six students. You have been successful in completing their first year of college and all have a goal of earning a college degree. Field notes will be maintained and training materials will be reviewed as part of this research study.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of the study is to explore the unique experiences of first-generation students as a way to inform stakeholders currently undertaking steps to creating a more supported and guided pathway to ensure that students complete programs and graduate with college credentials. The procedure will be to conduct interviews with students who are impacted by the reforms currently taking place in the system.

What will I be asked to do?

The student researcher will be looking for you to participate in the following ways:

1. Participate in an interview session that will be audio taped and transcribed.

2. Participate in a member check process to verify the contents of the interviews and interpretations of the primary research.
3. The researcher will collect field notes.

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

Individual interviews will take approximately forty-five minutes each. Individual interviews will take place outside of class time at a location that is mutually agreed upon between participants and myself. You are not required to be interviewed on your school’s campus.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

There are no significant risks involved in being a participant in this study.

Will I benefit from being in this research?

There are no direct benefits for your participation in the study. However, the information learned from this study may provide valuable insights to educators who work collaboratively to implement new process and procedures for working with first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds. Your participation and experiences could potentially assist in providing strategies to colleges in other states that are implementing similar mandated change.

Who will see the information about me?

Your part in the study will be completely confidential. Pseudonyms will be used for all study participants. Only the researcher will be aware of the participants' identities. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way.

As an individual in this study, your part will be confidential. The data collected for this study will be kept by the researcher, including audiotapes, but will not be shared with others. Only first names will be used in transcriptions. False names will be used in reports related to individual interviews. All audiotapes will be destroyed following transcription of the interviews.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. The researcher would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as Northeastern University to view the study data. No identifying information will ever be shared with people at the Public Schools or other institutions.

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

You are not required to take part in this study. If you do not want to participate, you do not have to sign this form.
What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?

There are no known significant risks involved in being a participant in this study.

Can I stop my participation in this study?
Participation in this study is voluntary, and your participation or non-participation will in no way affect other relationships (e.g., faculty, administrators, school). You may discontinue your participation in this research program at any time without penalty or costs of any nature, character, or kind.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

Contact : Dr. Ewell- Principal Investigator, Tel: (857)295-1492 or email w.ewell@northeastern.edu

Darlene Snider- doctoral student researcher, Tel: (509) 301-4479 or email snider.d@husky.neu.edu

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: (617) 373-4588, Email: nregina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?

There is no compensation for participation in this study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

There is no cost to participate in this study.

I have read, understood, and had the opportunity to ask questions regarding this consent form. I fully understand the nature and character of my involvement in this research program as a participant and the potential risks. I agree to participate in this study on a voluntary basis, and understand that I can depart from the research study at any time.

____________________________________________________________

Research Participant (Printed Name)

____________________________________________________________

Research Participant (Signature)

Date
Appendix D: Interview Schedule

RESEARCH QUESTION:

How do first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds make sense of their experience at home, at school, and in their community to remain academically resilient in community college?”

Sub Questions:

1) How first-generation participants from immigrant backgrounds remain resilient within their academic environment,

2) How participants perceive their sociocultural, environmental, and interpersonal experiences as contributors to their academic success?

3) How participants make sense of their academic achievement.

Introductory Session: (5-10 minutes): Build rapport, describe study and nature of questions.

Request signing of the consent form. No data collection questions were asked. Clarify interview schedule and schedule a formal interview.

Part I:

Introductory Protocol:

You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about your experiences as a first-generation college student. I’m interested in knowing more about your background along with your perceptions of school inside and outside of the classroom. There are no right or wrong or desirable or undesirable answers. I would like you to feel comfortable with saying what you really think and how you really feel. I want you to feel asking me to repeat questions or to ask the questions in another way if you don’t understand what I am asking you. You also have my permission to ask me to move to another question.
My research project focuses on the lived experiences of first-generation students from immigrant backgrounds in college. Through this study, I hope to gain more insight into what students experience during their first year of college so that data can be used to understand how the college system can support students in achieving their goals.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and I won’t use your name when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the tape, which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. (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 how your data will be used?

This interview should last about 45 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

Part II: Interviewee Background (5-10 minutes)

Objective: To establish rapport and obtain the story of the participant’s background in relation to the research topic.

1) Interviewee Background

Could you please tell me about your background?

Part 2:

One of the things I am interested in learning about how you have navigated the college system. I would like to hear about your perspective/experiences transitioning to college and your experiences during your first year in college in your own words. To do this, I am going to ask you some questions about your educational background and the kind of support you have received during your time as a college student. This could begin with your experience in school as a high school student. I’m also interested in knowing a little bit about how you manage challenges at school. If you mention other people, please do not mention names. If it’s easier for you to use a name, please give the person you are talking about another name. Are you ready to begin?

1) What prompted you to go to community college?

1) Tell me about some challenges you face as a first-generation student coming from an immigrant background?
a. What were some of the cultural, language, academic challenges you faced?

b. Can you provide me with an example?

c. Can you name some of the cultural influences that are most important to you today?

3) Can you describe a couple of experience early on (or in high school) that prepared you for community college? Or conversely, are there experiences that you see as challenges that you have to overcome to stay in school?

4) What do you see as your strengths, or experiences that have prepared you for community college?

d. Can you provide an example of a time when you overcame a personal challenge?

e. Can you name personal strengths or personality traits that you accessed to help you address this challenge?

f. What does this mean to you?

1) Can you describe some of your current successes and challenges? (prompts: at home, in the community, or at school).

6) What support do you have? In what ways do supports make a difference in your current experience?

7) How do you see your support systems more or less helping you to achieve your academic goals?

8) Can you think of a recent example of a time when you had to access personal resources, skills, or abilities to overcome a challenge?
9) How do you think your experience would be different if you weren’t a first-generation student coming from your background?

10) Is there anything else that you would like me to know about school and success?

11) Do you have any questions for me?

**Part 3: The Second Interview**

*Thank you for meeting with me to go into a bit more depth about what we discuss in our first interview. I have listened to the transcript of our session several times and I have a few additional questions. In our last conversation the topics that you talk about were (this is a unique list for each student). Do you agree with these topics or did I miss something? Or, do you have another topic that you considered important to your academic success that you would like to talk about today? Are you ready to begin?*

1) Last session you talked about (unique for each student)…… Can you tell me what strengths you associate with this specific experience? How is being a first-generation student in this situation make things more or less challenging for you?

2) Please describe the situation X (probes: experiences in the classroom, your interactions with peers, interactions with teachers, interactions with family) How do you feel in this situation? Is there anything you tell yourself when you experience success or challenges in these kinds of situations?

3) Can you provide a bit more detail around situations at home or in the community that make you think about being the first one in your family to go to college? Can you provide a few specific examples of how these have a positive or negative impact on your confidence in your ability to graduate from college?
4) How does your bilingual ability help or hinder you in college? What strengths or assets do you associate with being bilingual? Being from your cultural background? Being first generation (please explain).

5) In the first interview you talked about X when you talked about challenges you have experienced in community college. Who has contributed to your success? (probes: family, community, college staff, faculty, resources, self?) Can you provide me with examples of how this support made a difference?

6) How was this interview experience for you? Is there anything else that you would like me to know? Is there anything that you wish that I had asked you?

7) How do you hope that the information gathered in this study will be used?

Thank you for participating in my study.
Appendix E: Memo and Member Check Form

Date: 45 Minute interviews - January and February

Member Check- April

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews</th>
<th>2 45-Minute Semistructured Interviews</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who is in front of me?</td>
<td>The participant is a woman 19 years of age, in her first of college. Her grandmother brought her to the U.S. when she was a baby. Both her parents died in Mexico. Maria did not find out her grandmother was not her mother until she was five years old. It was devastating to her when her grandmother was deported from the U.S. when Maria was in high school. Maria Speaks Spanish and understands Mixtec (her grandmother’s native language). Maria was forced as a high school student to live alone- working and going to school to support herself. An experience that she now attributes to her success in college. Maria is kind, compassionate, and brave.</td>
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<tr>
<td>How do they present themselves?</td>
<td>She has a deep desire to make a future for herself. In part, because she wants more for herself than to live in poverty, and in part as a way to honor her grandmother (mother’s) sacrifices on her behalf.</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are the main topics in their story?</td>
<td>The participant discussed her life as being hard because the need to provide for herself at a very early age. “High school was really hard for me, because my grandma . . . I call her mom, so when I refer to mom, I'm talking about my grandma. She left when I was 16, so I turned 16, which was my junior year, the beginning of junior year. I was fine for my first quarter that I had really begun, but then once she left, it was all about me paying my bills, me paying my rent, my food and all of that. Yeah, I lived with my family members, but I would also didn't feel comfortable just staying there. Even though I was still in school, I just didn't feel comfortable, so I would pay them the rent and stuff like that. It was constantly like do I go to school or do I go to work? It was always that tough decision.” Maria eventually dropped out of high school because of the pressure. One of the things Maria is most proud of is the fact that despite taking a break, she graduated from high school on time –despite everything thinking that she would not make it. She attributes her vision for her own future to her grandmother’s deep desire that Maria have a better life. It really pushes me because she tried so hard to give us something good, and for me to just graduate high school and say that's it, it doesn't seem fair. I want to make her proud.”</td>
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“A better life than they had is the main focus of it. Being able to support my family. Yeah.”

Now, as a college student, struggles with isolation, English, and needing help from others.

“I think I just come and do my own thing and then just leave,”

“In English, if I don't understand it, I don't understand it at all. I need her to sit down with me and talk to me about the whole thing.”

“I feel like she {English Teacher} said, or her standards, it's pretty clear, no late work, no nothing. So I feel like it would mainly be like, "You didn't really try to be in class. You didn't really try very hard to stay focused." I'm like, it hasn't really come up to me, to succeed in the class, so I feel like it's going to be a very hard thing to get over.

“Yeah, just the grammar {Spanish}. And then, the new words. Learning new words as well is kind of difficult because there's, like, home words, that you learn at home, and that's one version of it, but the right way to say it is a different way. I don't know.

Strength comes from her insight that she has committed to going to school.

’. Then there are times that I have let myself down, I've gotten back up. So, I feel like I could do it.’

Not seeing obstacles as barriers

“So I just tend to tell myself things and then just not make it a bigger thing because sometimes when you tell your friends something, they like to be like, "Oh, no. This, that, this, that." But to me, it's just one thing and that's it.”

Giving Back

“I feel like once my grandma comes to that point, I wanted to try to bring her back legally to the United States and just have her living with me. Then, me being able to care after her instead of sending her to a retirement home or something like that.”

“I think so. It was always just me wanting to help other people because all my life I've seen her struggle. I think that nobody should be struggling to go to an appointment, just because they don't understand what you're saying.”

“So, I want to set a good example for them to look up to instead of just being like me, having my older siblings, not having anything to look up to.”

Making a different Choice
“Then we just had to go a lot of struggles with my brothers and my sister, and I feel like part of just having to walk all the time with my mom just made me realize I really don’t want to put her through the same thing that they did.”

“I feel like it's weird because I never go beyond thinking of everything that I'm doing. Most of the time I do think about why I'm doing this, and it is because of my grandma, I'm trying to make her happy and pay her back everything she did for us.

| What happened to me during the encounter with the other person? | I was struck by how little the campus community would know about Maria’s experience by observation or even in advising her. She is determined, brave, and intelligent. She appears fun loving and light hearted, and I would not have identified her as having the kind of internal struggle she says she faces on a daily basis. College for her is not a place where she feels connection, but her ed is fulfilling her ambition to have a better future. She has a deep sense of pain when she speaks about losing her grandmother, the only mother that she ever knew. This happened at such an early age, she has been alone since that time. I was deeply moved by her story and her insights into how this has shaped the person she is becoming. Also, her insights into how her experience is different from so many other students that she went to high school with and now in college. I am moved by her compassion, empathy, and openness. It is clear that she seeks guidance and connection and doesn’t find it in college. How do we create classrooms that meet students where they are in their lives, and people on campus develop empathy and compassion so they are prepared to relate to student’s unique set of circumstances? |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Contextual Evaluation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interactional dimension</td>
<td>This is particularly relevant for her as she is aware that other people’s lack of belief in her ability is what drives her to access her strength and determination. For example- No one expected her to graduate from high school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Temporal dimension</td>
<td>How the participant shared her life history and how she makes sense of her past experiences now shows that her experiences moves her to be attentive to other people’s stories and voices. This comes from her experience of feeling of isolation and loneliness after her grandmother left the country.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spatial dimension</td>
<td>When the participant mentioned her teachers, her counselors and her peers, it became apparent that she uses her background knowledge to assess the current situation before seeking help from others.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Socio-cultural dimension</td>
<td>1) The participant feels that she needs to make a difference in the way that individuals who have not have every advantage are treated in the classroom. She acts as a language and cultural translator for her community college peers.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
2) She believes that cultural values and expectations at home mean that not all students meet the high expectations of faculty.
3) Maria referenced obstacles as different from barriers because obstacles can be expected and strategies for overcoming are anticipated and in place.

Interpretation - Resilience happens when the obstacles are put into perspective and inner strength is applied to navigating them in a way that allows for on-ward movement toward the goal.

### Third phase: Identification of Themes

| Themes: Adversity as place of resilience, Purpose and resolve, Social Competence- seeking relationship |
| Method |
|---|---|
| Triangulation with participants: Review transcript and analysis with Maria – Member Check | Meeting |
| Triangulation with other researchers: Literature review | Literature |
| Triangulation with the initial research questions- How do students make sense of experiences in school, at home, and in their community to remain academically resilient in community college? | |

Appendix F: Audit Trail

Audit Trail- Identity and Student Experience

Katie: “I consider myself a Latinx. I was born in Mexico, but I don’t really consider myself Mexican at times because I don’t have much connection back to my cultural roots and where I was born. I mean, I do say I’m Mexican, but when people ask me, what part of Mexico, I will say, oh, well, I was born in Manzenia Colima, Colima, which is where I was born, but I don’t have connection there.”

“..consider myself Latinx”
“I don’t consider myself Mexican”
“Don’t have a connection there [Mexico]”

Caught between worlds. Identifies as Latinx, and Mexican. Katie was born in Mexico, but doesn’t feel connected either.

Luis: “Yeah, in my family we have Mexican food, and then American food. You see that a lot. This got to be like multicultural and as well like different taste of music like in Spanish and English, I think this could be multicultural.”

“Could be multicultural”

Questions how his cultures fit together. What does this mean to him?
He is making sense of this now as a college student.

Luis “No. I think I’m used to when focusing on English and when I’m focusing on Spanish, mainly Spanish is at home and everywhere else is English”

“[English] sounds like gibberish”

He’s not sure how his two identities fit together.
Thinking in two languages- How does he make sense of how this impacts him at school?

Luis: This is my English and this sounds like all gibberish when I read it out loud.

How does he complete his assignments if they sound like “gibberish”? This impacts his academic experience in the classroom.
Christina: I don't really know because I was just kind of raised into it, but then I was the one that branched out of that and became my own person since I was really young. But there's a lot of meaning to the culture that I've been grown into, and I still have some of that today with some of our culturally do with like a family member is passed away, we celebrate their death when they die as a commemoration of them. Something that you wouldn't normally do in other cultures."

Christina: It is just hard when something you have to come home to every day is just bashing on what you love to do. You have to live through it every day, at some point you feel like you're not going to break because you hold firm. But one day you will lose it, and it will just become like a repeating pattern of you holding in your burdens, and then you just break and do something crazy.

Katie: And then I did want to do a Spanish teacher because Spanish is my first language. I don't consider my native language because it was a language forced onto my people from the Spaniards, but I still ended up being fond of it because my people made it their own after years of colonization. We have different slang in Mexico. We use different words. And I did take AP Spanish and it was so rough because I would get graded down because I wasn't using the formal Spanish. I was using my Spanish that I know.

Audit Trail - Identity (Con't)

“Branched out”
“there is a lot of meaning”
“Wouldn’t normally do in other cultures”

Realizes that she has departed from her cultural background. She uses “branched out” to describe the contrast between where is has been and where she is headed.
Both parts are her life now.

“Bashing on what you do”
“You have to live through it everyday”

Conflicting goals, and values feels violent and harsh, and is a daily struggle.
This impacts the way she experiences home and school.

Doesn’t consider Spanish her first language but made Spanish her own.

Caught between languages and culture.

“graded down”

Use of home language in school was not validated –
This is isolating for her because she can’t get the help she needs.
Audit Trail - Student Perception of Navigating Systems

Abigail: Every time my dad moved, I lost that ... In school, the new school, I would be behind or they had already past that. So, I didn't learn anything. So, going to college now, it's like I'm learning. But I missed everything else. So right now, I'm learning. I don't even know how I got through last semester

Loss of learning opportunities when she was young - no stability at home contributes to her struggles in college now.

Feels unprepared for academics in college. Doesn't credit self for the success she is having now.

Kristina: Things that have not prepared me was like not the help from my family, because I was basically kind of just thrown into something that I don't know what I'm doing. I had to do a bunch of ... When I was doing financial aid, I had to go through a bunch of mom's taxes. And I didn't know what was going on, so I did a bunch of things wrong when I turned in the application, so I had to do that again.

No support with completing the application process left her feeling alone in trying to figure it out. Represents another gap at home. Parents can't help.

Feels uncertain, frustrated and alone trying to figure out the financial aid system in college. The transition to college is disorienting and lonely.

Katie: We just have to be mentally prepared for a lot of these things that most people don't have to be prepared for.

“Just have to be mentally prepared”

Perceives the system, or processes as being something to overcome. Mentally prepared - sounds like going into a sporting match.

Luis: Maybe just a little bit more pressure like for us to do better in life based from them[parents], that they have been suffering.

“suffering”

“Us”

Wants to relieve his parents suffering and believes that the way to do that is to navigate the system and graduate. He believes other students with a similar background share this experience.
Audit Trail - Perceptions of Environment

Katie: “I was hoping to go into science and teach science because I never see people of color teaching science or in the STEM field but I ended up not enjoying the classes here in bio, chem, and math. I ended up not enjoying them. I didn't like my class, and it's not that I didn't like my classmates, I just never found anyone that I could relate to in my class”.

She never sees people of color teaching science or in the STEM field. Didn’t find anyone to relate to in class

Having a relationship with a faculty member of color would have made a difference.

She did not feel supported in the classroom and this caused her to dropout.

Katie: I do struggle still nowadays to understand what the teacher’s saying, and with science there are so many terms. It's like a language of its own. I struggled with that, understanding like, okay, why is that working out. Why are you saying it this way. I think it's also something within myself too to just try and understand Spanish and English more, and once I'm able to understand that I can teach it and then finally get into STEM.

“I do struggle still”

“I think it’s something within myself”

Place of resilience - struggles but finds inner strength that helps her persist.

She found a way around the obstacle.

Kristina: I guess also the language barrier. English is a second language, Vietnamese is my first. And when you come to school, like a teacher is saying like the simplest things, but you still don't process it in your brain, even if it's so simple because our wording, it'd be known is like backwards than it is here, and so it's kind of hard to scramble it all back in different ways because then everything gets all confusing.

...is hard ...you get everything mixed up.

Perceived language barrier. This barrier causes confusion and takes time to sort out.

“you still don’t process it in your brain”

“even if it’s so simple”

Recognizes that language learning is taking place... extra strain on the brain to learn causes fatigue.

Possible frustration if she perceives this as something that should be simple.