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# Undergraduate Latinas' self-definition of academic success

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UNDERGRADUATE LATINAS' SELF-DEFINITION  
OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS

BY

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THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

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in

Liberal Studies

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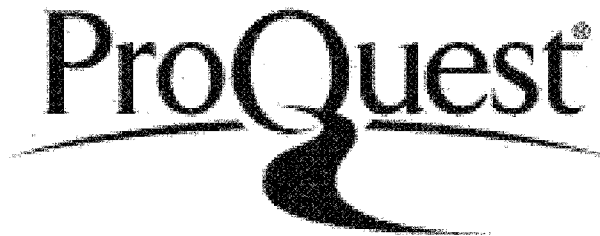


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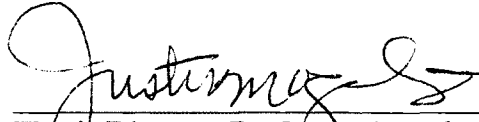
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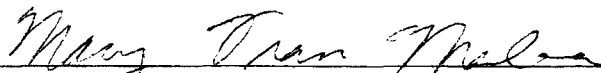
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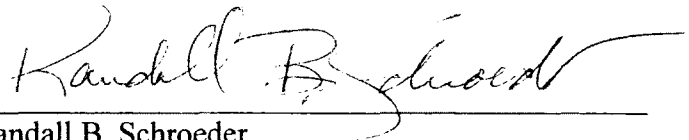
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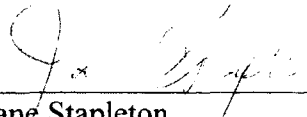
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## DEDICATION

My thesis is dedicated to my family, Jose Carlos Rodrigues, Lucilene F. M. Rodrigues, Claudia M. Rodrigues, Ariana C. Rodrigues, and especially my mother, Neide F. Machado Rodrigues, whose encouragement and support nurtured my academic aspirations.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and thank the thirteen women who participated in this study; their shared experience has given additional insight into undergraduate Latinas' perspective on academics. I would also like to acknowledge and thank my thesis committee, whose time and guidance assisted me through this process.

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ABSTRACT

UNDERGRADUATE LATINAS' SELF-DEFINITION  
OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS

by

Carla Machado Rodrigues

University of New Hampshire, May, 2012

This master's level thesis's objective was to gain a better understanding of how a sample of 13 undergraduate Latinas who graduated high school and immediately enrolled into college define academic success. Through interviews, these undergraduate Latinas explain where these self-definitions came from, mentors that may have influenced these definitions, and if their ethnicity and gender has played any role in the way they perceive academic success. The study also considers findings from previous research regarding academic resilience factors associated with Latinas, such as: being involved in college ready initiatives, obtaining academic support from significant others, having mentors, receiving various messages about the importance of academic success for future success/careers, and socio-economic stability, as well as consideration of cultural capital, social capital, and additional forms of capital. Wanting participants to define their own experiences a phenomenological approach was used, which allows for deep description and rich data collection.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Latinas/os have the highest high school dropout rate of any ethnicity group in the United States. The less education one has completed, the fewer career opportunities, and the less one is paid (Fry, 2000), and the leading cause of poverty among Latinas/os has been contributed to low academic achievement (Jasinski, 2000). In 2009 the National Women's Law Center (NWLS) and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) published "Listening to Latinas: Barriers to High School Graduation," which discussed the issues Latina students face and the high level of high school dropouts in this population. The study surveyed 335 Latinas of various high schools and education programs throughout the United States. Ninety-eight percent of the respondents stated they minimally wanted to graduate high school while 80 percent also stated they wanted to enroll and graduate from college. However, NWLS and MALDEF (2009) reported that 41 percent of Latinas do not graduate on schedule with a standard high school diploma, compared to 22 percent of White girls. Thus, the NWLS-MALDEF study shows that although Latinas have high aspirations the majority will not attain their goals.

More recent research found similar negative outcomes. The National Center for Educational Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, 2011), reported that 62 percent of Hispanics who graduated from high school on schedule immediately enroll in college. This is equivalent to 37 percent of college age Latinas, which is far from the 80 percent of Latinas who aspire to attend college. Of the Hispanic population who enroll in a

bachelor's degree program, 48 percent graduate within 6 years, compared to 60 percent of Whites (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

In 2010 the U.S. Census (2010a) reported that Hispanics comprise 16 percent of the population, yet in 2008 the U.S. Department of Education (2011) found that only 8 percent of bachelor's degrees are conferred to Hispanics, and 61 percent of those degrees conferred go to Hispanic women.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The median income for a young adult with a bachelor's degree is \$45,000, \$36,000 for those with an associate's degree, \$30,000 for adults with a high school diploma, and \$26,000 for adults who never earned their high school diploma or its equivalent (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). In 2011, 74 percent of adults with a bachelor's degree were employed full time, compared to 65 percent of those with an associate's degree, 56 percent with a high school diploma, and 41 percent with those who had not completed high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Also, the per capita income for the overall Hispanic population is \$15,063 (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2010). The 2010 poverty threshold for a person under 65 was \$11,344 (U.S. Census, 2010b), and in 2009 25.3 percent of Hispanics lived in poverty, more than twice the 9.4 percent of Whites (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2010). This disproportionate level of Latinas/os lacking higher education has evidently had a negative socioeconomic effect on the Latina/o population.

According to the U.S. Census (Ennis, Rios-Vargas, & Albert, 2011) between 2000 and 2010 the Hispanic population grew by 43 percent. Hispanics constitute 21 percent of

the population that is under 20 years of age, and based on immigration as well as birthrate the population will continue to rise (Johnson & Lichter, 2010). Gaining a better understanding of successful Hispanic high school student retention may give school and policy makers more insight into what more schools, families, and communities can be doing to prepare a growing number of young Hispanics for post-secondary education.

Latina/o girls and boys drop out of high school for different reasons, and even similar dropout factors affect girls and boys in different ways (Bennett & MacIver, 2009). Latinas' experience is quite different from Latinos', and most likely this is due not only to cultural values and parental and community socialization, but also due to the pressures of compounding racism and sexism (Cammarota, 2004; Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004). Females and males have different experiences related to education, and based on time constraints, understanding that between genders academic perception can be different, and not wanting to compromise the data, I, the principal investigator, chose to focus on women for this study (National Women's Law Center, 2007). Wanting to gain a clearer understanding of how a group of Latina students not only graduated from high school but immediately enrolled in a four-year college, the study focuses only on Latinas and analyzes themes that arose among the participants.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Relatively little is known about the perception of Latinas/os on what academic success is, and how they see themselves as being academically successful. Insight into academic persistence of Latinas may help shed light on how some Latinas successfully make this transition. Further research in this area can give schools and policy makers a

deeper understanding of how to increase high school and college retention efforts as well as how to prepare a growing number of young Hispanics for post-secondary education.

This master's level thesis focuses on a sample of undergraduate Latinas and how they define academic success, where this self-definition comes from, mentors that may have influenced this definition, and if their ethnicity and gender has played any role in the way they perceive academic success. The objective of this study was to gain a better understanding of how a sample of Latinas who graduated high school and immediately enrolled into college define academic success. The study also considers findings from previous research regarding academic resilience factors associated with Latinas, such as academic support from significant others, having mentors, receiving various messages about the importance of academic success for future success/careers, socio-economic stability, being involved in college-ready initiatives, as well as consideration of cultural capital, social capital, and additional forms of capital (Antrop-González, Vélez, & Garrett, 2008; Plunkett, Henry, Houlberg, Sands, & Abarca-Mortensen, 2008; Zalaquett, 2006; Yosso, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Wanting participants to define their own experiences qualitative methods were used. This allows for deep description and rich data collection.

## II. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

### Methods

The research used a phenomenological approach and qualitative research methods to explore the participant's self-definition, and allowed the participant to describe her experience through personal understanding. A phenomenological approach would allow insights into participant's perception and allow themes to arise which may challenge previous assumptions (Lester, 1999). Unlike an ethnographical study, which studies a specific cultural phenomenon, a phenomenological study focuses on the participants' lived experience and allows themes to arise from the data collected.

Using previous studies which focused on Latina/o student's familial support, resiliency factors, academic persistence, and the importance of mentors, a questionnaire was created that would encourage participant's thoughts on experiences relating to academics and messages received (Cavazos et al., 2010; Cavazos, Johnson, & Sparrow, 2010; Plunkett et al., 2008; Hassinger & Plourde, 2005; Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Méndez-Morse, 2004; Arellano & Padilla, 1996; McMillan & Reed, 1994).

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained prior to advertisement and recruitment for the study. The study intended to recruit minimally twelve undergraduate women who self-identified as Latina (or Hispanic); over a two month period, thirteen women agreed to be interviewed. Participants were recruited through advertisements and informal word-of-mouth. These advertisements included the lead investigator's name, email address, and office phone number. Fliers/advertisements were posted in various



university offices and departments which served underrepresented students. The university's Latina/o student organization and other diversity organizations were also provided advertisements and encouraged to mention the study to students. Participants contacted the principal investigator via either email or called the principal investigator's office phone to set up an interview. A snowball sampling method was also used, after interviews participants were given advertisements and encouraged to pass them on to friends who could be potential participants. In-person interviews were conducted by the principal investigator and scheduled at the convenience of the student. Interviews were held on campus at two different locations; students had the option of interviewing in either the principal investigator's office or in one of [the Student Diversity's Offices]. Both locations were quiet, uninterrupted, and confidential spaces. As an incentive participants were given ten dollar gift cards for their time. The gift cards were given to the participants at the end of the interview. The incentive was financially funded by the principal investigator.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, notes were taken throughout the interviews, transcribed verbatim, and a hard copy of transcripts was created and read multiple times. Data analysis only occurred after all interviews were transcribed. Participant responses were segmented by text, a list of common themes and ideas were created, and any relationships were identified, cross-referenced and categorized with other research participants. When themes, ideas, recurring words/phrases were found they were color coded and placed into categories that best captured their essence. I, the principal investigator, worked with my research advisor and

thesis committee members to ensure objectivity and maintain validity with the analysis of the data and in the discovery of meaningful themes that arose.

Individual in-person interviews were conducted, and the interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes. To ensure consistency there was an interview script, including an informal introduction, reading aloud the consent form, which included a further explanation of the study, explanation of any risks involved with the study, requesting to record the interview for transcription, and providing a copy of the consent form and questionnaire to the participant. The interview script consisted of an open-ended questionnaire that was used for data collection, and was designed to elicit the participants' reflection on their definition of academic success, where their definition came from, and what may have contributed to the creation of their definition. Questions also related to parental and mentor influences. At the interview's conclusion, Grade Point Average (GPA) was asked and demographic information was collected as well as information pertaining to parents' education. Participants were requested to select a fictitious name as a method of identification and to ensure anonymity. In the final report the participant's hometown and/or high school were omitted and bracketed.

I, the principal investigator, hold a Master's in Community Counseling with a theoretical focus in multicultural counseling, and my clinical work includes facilitating therapeutic and life skills groups for Latina adolescent women, as well as working with Latinas in a one-on-one and in a family counseling setting. I also have over seven years of professional experience working in student services at both a small private college and a mid-sized public university. I worked intimately with students, providing support

around academics, personal and emotional issues on a daily basis. The thesis committee was carefully formulated, assembling professors from a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, education, student counseling, and women's studies, all of which had a strong understanding of the intersections of race and socioeconomics and how identity relates to education. Committee members also were well experienced with qualitative and quantitative methods and conducting research.

### **Study Sample**

The research sample included 13 participants that self-identify as Latina (of Hispanic origin). Two of the 13 participants identify as being Latina and a second ethnicity, and 1 of these participants has a very strong Latina self-schema even though she identified as having two ethnicities. Four participants identify as first-generation American (immigrated to the United States (U.S.) between 5-15 years ago, 7 participants identify as second-generation Americans. The last 2 participants identify as a third-generation American. Nine of the 13 participants had both parents emigrate from their native country.

Ten participants either self-identify as low-income, or were identified by their participation in academic programs for low-income students; 2 participants identify as middle-class, and 1 participant did not identify her family income level.

The cultural breakdown of interviewees consisted of 8 women identifying as being Caribbean, 2 women identifying as being South American, 1 woman identifying as being Central American, 1 woman identifying as half South American and half Irish, and

1 woman identifying as half European (English) and half Hispanic (father's heritage was Central American and from Spain).

Participants were asked "How do you racially identify?" and were given the options of "Asian," "Black," "Native American/indigenous," "White," and "other" with a space for another response. Five participants identify as "other," 3 participants identify as White Hispanic (although one of the participants felt confused by racial categorization), 2 participant just identify as Hispanic/Latina, 1 participant identifies as other but also said she might also identify as Black, 1 participant identifies as Black, and 1 participant identifies as White.

The study was conducted at a mid-sized Northeastern public university, where all of the participants were enrolled as undergraduates. Although the study was open to all undergraduate students, including first-year students, no first-year (freshmen) students enrolled. Four sophomores, 4 juniors, and 5 seniors enrolled in the study. Seven of the participants were in-state students.

### **Parents' Educational Attainment**

Wanting to gain a better understanding of college navigation assistance from parents, as well as parents' personal experience related to the U.S. educational system, participants were asked:

- What is the highest level of education your father attained?
- In which country did he receive his education?
- What is the highest level of education your mother attained?
- In which country did she receive her education?

The following was reported by the participants:

Father's highest level of educational attainment: 3 of the participants' fathers have a middle-school education, all of whom were educated in their native country. Three participants' fathers have some high school education, all of whom were educated in their native country. One participant's father completed an associate's degree in the United States. Two participants' fathers have some college education; one was educated in his native country and the second in the United States. Two participants' fathers hold a bachelor's degrees; the first was educated in his native country and the second in the United States. One participant's father holds a Doctor of Dental Surgery degree, awarded in his native country. One participant was unsure of her father's educational attainment because they have been estranged since her childhood.

Mother's highest level of educational attainment: 1 participant's mother has some high school education; she was educated in her native country. Four participants' mothers have completed high school, all of whom were educated in their native country. One participant's mother completed an associate's degree in the United States. Two participant's mothers have some college education and both were educated in their native countries. Four participants' mothers holds bachelor's degrees; 2 were educated in the United States and 2 were educated in their native country. One participant's mother holds a master's degree, which she obtained in the U.S.

### **Participant GPA Self-Report**

As part of the demographic collection information participants were asked to report their GPA.

- 1 Participant had a GPA below a 2.0-2.25
- 1 Participant having a GPA between 2.25-2.5
- 1 Participant having a GPA between 2.51-2.75
- 4 Participants having a GPA between 2.76-3.0
- 2 Participants having a GPA between 3.0-3.25
- 4 Participants having a GPA between 3.26- 3.5
- GPA Range: 2.1, 2.3, 2.53, 2.79, 2.8, 2.8, 2.9, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5
- GPA Mean: 2.92

### **Methods Limitations**

There were a few limitations based on methods. The study interviewed undergraduate women who identify as Latina, but the participants come from various ethnic backgrounds, have United States generational differences, have parents with differing levels of educational attainment, 10 participants are identified as being low-income and 3 participants either identified with being middle-class or was unsure of class identity, so experiences are varied. Also, based on this not being a longitudinal study, we cannot be certain if the participants will actually graduate, which may have some bearing on the consistency of their self-definition.

Also, it must be recognized that even though all of the participants identify as Latina, the Latina/o culture is not monolithic. Latin American cultures vary not only by their country of origin (or heritage), but also by regions and ethnicities within those countries. The complexities of cultures create different experiences for these subgroups, and individuals may share similarities but there are also differences.

### **Terminology**

Latino is a non-gendered reference (i.e., can refer to both male and female individuals as a group, or to male individuals only). In this thesis the term “Latina”/“Latinas” will be used to reference only female individuals. “Latino”/“Latinos” will be used to reference only male individuals and Latina/o to reference female and male individuals and Latinas/os as a group. The term Hispanic(s) will also be used to maintain the terminology used in certain literature.

### III. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON LATINA/O STUDENTS

The works that have been cited in the “Theoretical Perspectives on Latina/o Students” section informed my research during its initial stages, interviews, and the data analysis. The research findings were consistent with earlier research related to first-generation college students, first-generation Americans and second-generation Americans, academically at-risk or academic invulnerable students, student resilience, and how all of these topics relate to Latinas/os and education. Also literature on various forms of capital related to students of color was thoroughly reviewed.

#### **Understanding Latina/o Cultural Values**

For youth of color primary socialization occurs within the family (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Immediate family, extended family, community, and friendships are highly valued in the Latina/o culture, as well as interdependence within the family and other relationships (Plunkett et al., 2008). In *The Convergence of Race, Ethnicity, and Gender: Multiple Identities in Counseling*, Robinson explains that Latina/o orientation and cultural values are an essential part of Latina/o socialization, and consists of personalismo, dignidad, familism, respeto, confianza, simpatia, carino, orgullo, loyalty to family, collectivism, service to others, and education as a means of development (2005). Cultural orientation and values that are common among Latinas/os:

- Personalismo is the importance of investing and building interpersonal



relationships, valuing more intimate and personal rather than impersonal connections

- Dignidad, is related to personal dignity, self-worth, and honor
- Familism/familismo, is the high value of maintaining close connection with family, this also extends to extended family and close family friends
- Respeto, is respect for hierarchal relationships, such as parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, teachers, and authority figures
- Confianza, the building of trust within relationships
- Simpatia, values of being polite and pleasant
- Carino, the importance of being kind and helpful
- Orgullo, having a sense of pride and self-respect
- Loyalty to family
- Collectivism, loyalty to community, and thinking collectively
- Service to others
- Education as a means of development

High levels of positive racial-ethnic identity related to cultural heritage orientation, self-perception and self-esteem, can play an important role in resilience and academic achievement (Hill & Torres, 2010; Wilkins & Kuperminc, 2010; Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2008; Plunkett, et al, 2008; Auerbach, 2006; Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005; Zalaquett, 2005).

### **Latina/o Parents' Influence on Children's Academics**

An important factor in high academic outcomes for Latina/o students is related to their parents' high expectations for their children (Hassinger & Plourde, 2005). Previous research has challenged the false beliefs that low-income parents of color do not value their children's education, do not encourage their children to academically achieve and have no participation in their children's education (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Ceja 2004). Raleigh and Kao's study examined perceptions of White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian immigrant parents' college aspirations for their children (2010). The results found that immigrant parents are more optimistic about their children's education than native-born parents, that over time immigrant parents consistently maintained high aspirations for their children, and that immigrant Hispanic parents were three times more likely to have consistently high aspirations when compared to U.S. born parents (Raleigh & Kao, 2010). The parental reinforcement of college aspirations may be a "self-fulfilling" prophecy, transmitting their academic achievement aspirations to their children, creating a type of intergenerational social capital (Raleigh & Kao, 2010). It must be recognized that it is a myth that Latina/o parents are not invested in their child's education; most Latina/o parents want their children to do well and to academically succeed.

Latina/o parents may convey educational beliefs and forms of support differently from White parents (Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Ceballo, 2004). When they don't appear at school, parents' efforts may go unrecognized, but they are dedicated and deeply invested in their children's education (Auerbach, 2006). Immigrant parent's being in a foreign country, where they have little understanding of the education system and may have a

limited level of education, can see their role primarily as an educational motivator. They still encourage their children to achieve even though they are unsure how to navigate the system (Auerbach, 2006). Stressing the value of hard work and persistence and encouraging their children to do well in school may be seen as the only supportive role they can have with their child (Auerbach, 2006). These messages given to students by their families can translate into huge motivators, developing educational resiliency to do well in school and that a college education is attainable (Ceja, 2004).

During their childhood and through high school Latinas/os may have played a role as a translator for their immigrant parents within the school or may have played a primary role in directing their own education. Based on this, low-socioeconomic Latinas/os students frequently have to take charge of the direction their educational pathway leads, and parents expect their children to take responsibility for their destiny (Hill & Torres, 2010). Latina/o parents tend to develop their children's will and drive to succeed and embed the idea that hard work, determination, and being committed will bring them success (Hill & Torres, 2010). Latina/o immigrant parents encourage their children's confidence and autonomy, while simultaneously are deliberate that their children go in a direction that will assure success (Auerbach, 2006). Parents' moral and emotional support has been directly attributed to Latina/o students' perspective of their academic success (Auerbach, 2006).

### **Potential Academic At-Risk Students**

External resources, such as supportive families, mentors and tutoring programs contribute to a student's resilience (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004). The cumulative influence

of role models and connections adolescents have made while growing up highly influence confidence in goal achievement (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998). Supportive adults can play a vital role in promoting Latinas/os motivation and self-determination through their academic journey (Cammarota, 2004). Having multiple support networks can become important across factors that help students become more resilient, not only academically but also with emotional and personal health (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998). When potential academic at-risk students have the encouragement and support of at least one person resiliency factors grow and “risk” factors have less of an impact (Hassinger & Plourde, 2005). When there are multiple support providers resiliency factors increase.

A supportive school environment can give students a sense of belonging and can promote academic success by motivating students to do well and to have high expectations for themselves (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998). In high school teacher expectations, affirmations and student-teacher interactions, can play a huge role in validating student success and academic motivation and in promoting academic success in students’ lives (Plunkett et al., 2008). In college faculty can also be highly important in student academic success (Arellano & Padilla, 1996).

### **Academic Resilience**

Finding strength in the lived experience and adversity of everyday life forms resiliency and helps student redefine the educational opportunities (Ceja, 2004). Resilient students develop coping skills that help them to adapt better to new experiences, recover from stress, and more easily adapt to life changes (McMillan, & Reed, 1992).

Despite issues that may put students academically at-risk, there are still students who sustain a high level of achievement in spite of adversity (Alva & Padilla, 1995). Personal determination is one of the prime factors in students' academic success in college (Campos et al., 2009). Being challenged by adverse situations can also lead students to gain a deeper level of self-confidence based on their resiliency and having a belief with enough perseverance there can be success (Arellano & Padilla, 1996).

Rodriguez's study (2002) showed that by instilling cultural values immigrant families can be cultural buffers and provide coping skills for their children and adolescents and promote resilience and academic success. Resiliency factors allow student to cope, survive, and at times thrive within their given realities (Ceja, 2004). Four elements that are related to academic resilience can be categorized into: individual attributes, family factors, school factors, and positive use of time (McMillan & Reed, 1994). Individual attributes include a strong sense of self-efficacy; students have succeeded because they have chosen to be successful. Individual attributes related to resilience also include students who have set realist goals and are optimistic about the future, despite challenges that they may confront. They have confidence in their achievement of the long-range goals they have set for themselves (McMillan & Reed, 1994).

Resiliency also seems to be highly correlated with good parent-child relationships, parents' commitment to their child's success, and supportive and protective factors from this environment (McMillan & Reed, 1992). Establishing a close connection with a caregiver who gives them attention and support is a huge contributor to success.

Family members may consist of not only parents and siblings, but also aunts, uncles and grandparents (McMillan & Reed, 1994). Latina/o students often look to siblings and cousins for peer mentoring and educational support and direction (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005). Latinas/os value the importance of having multiple support systems and strongly believe that interpersonal relationships are significant in their lives (Robinson, 2005).

### **The Importance of Mentors**

Howard G. Adams (2004) has defined mentoring as a process integrating advising, coaching, and nurturing, creating a relationship that promotes the mentee's personal, career and/or professional growth. The mentoring relationship is an ongoing caring and encouraging relationship that provides support, optimism, and hope. The mentor can give guidance in problem solving, provide constructive feedback, and help the mentee with his/her needs (Young & Wright, 2001).

Formal mentoring is a process where a more skilled individual guides, coaches, teaches, and/or models behaviors in the commitment for the advancement of another (a protégé, or a mentee). The mentor is invested in the mentee and the process of enhancing the mentee's skills (Young & Wright, 2001). A formal mentor relationship's main role is to develop the mentee, and help improve confidence and autonomy.

For individuals who do not have a formal mentor, an informal mentor can still provide advice, support and perspective (Tyler, 2004). An informal mentoring relationship may have similar qualities as the formal mentoring relationship; however, the mentoring is less structured and more casual. In an informal mentoring arrangement, the

mentees often select the mentor, and the mentee is the one responsible for continuing and nurturing the relationship (Tyler, 2004). Different informal mentoring relationships may develop through different stages of an individual's life. Getting the most out of mentoring may include developing several relationships with different mentors (Tyler, 2004).

Having a mentor during high school can help a first-generation college student to select the right college and navigate the application and entrance process. Hu and Ma state: "Mentoring facilitates both social and academic integration, which in turn enhances satisfaction with and commitment to the institution and degree completion, thereby positively impacting students' persistence" (2010, p. 331). It will greatly benefit the student if the mentor relationship is of high quality, i.e., support and nurturance, and that it be ongoing during college, assisting with decisions when the student may be unsure where to turn. If parents have not attended college, a strong mentor relationship can be very important for a student's perseverance (Esprivalo Harrell & Forney, 2003). Mentoring can play a vital role in reversing the percentage of high school dropouts (Dondero, 1997).

### **Particular Importance of Latina/o Mentors**

Latina/o students often lack educational and career role models (National Women's Law Center, 2007). Finding a mentor with a similar ethnicity can provide young Latinas with a role model with whom they can connect their personal aspirations (Campos et al., 2009). Mentors can teach the student a set of skills they may not have obtained in any other way. These role models demonstrate what is possible with

commitment and diligence. Latina/o students may be able to learn about various career options and what it takes to get there. This can give students a clearer understanding on how to prepare for a possible pathway to the future (The PALMS Project, 2006).

Role models can provide students with options and future aspirations, allowing the student to envision what she can become. Having Latinas/os in school administrative and faculty positions is highly valuable for young Latinas/os and can promote career aspirations (Méndez-Morse, 2004). Having Latina/o faculty may increase role models for Latina/o students and a higher sense of belonging (Hagedorn, Chi, Cepeda, & McLain, 2007; Arellano & Padilla, 1996). Such role models may also inspire Latina/o students to have greater academic accomplishments and internalize “possible selves” (National Women’s Law Center, 2007). The influence of Latina/o role models can have a life-altering impact on Latina/o youth.

### **Extracurricular Activities**

For more than just academics, school can be a place where resilient students can also find support outside the home. When students are involved in at least one extracurricular activity, these activities can become additional forms of support, creating a network of people with commonalities. Extracurricular involvement encourages positive engagement in school and provides students with “a sense of belonging, bonding, and encouragement” (McMillan & Reed, 1994).

Extracurricular activity can promote a positive engagement with the school, create an informal sense of support with other participating members, and develop a higher sense of self-esteem related to their ability to succeed (Antrop-González, Vélez, &



Garrett, 2008; Saunders & Serna, 2004; McMillan, & Reed, 1992). School involvement can connect students with like-minded students, creating positive feelings toward education and fostering academic persistence. Through the social networks created in high school involvement and extracurricular participation, students begin gaining leadership skills and the knowledge to qualify for college. Such activities and networks may promote college consideration (Saunders & Serna, 2004). During college extracurricular activities and ethnic affiliation groups can also promote persistence and retention (Rivas-Drake, 2008). Ethnic-like students may have related experiences and possibly similar goal orientation. These similarities create trust and increase the desire to stay and persevere.

### **Friendship Networks**

Previous studies have shown that when compared to other ethnic groups such as Asians, Blacks, and Whites, Hispanic students tend to have a higher regard relating to friendship as an academic motivator (Gordon-Rouse & Austin, 2002). This may be due to their culture valuing interdependence and community. Often Latina/o students select friends who are also children of immigrants and often coming from the same nationality (Portes & Zhou, 1993). Students who connect with cultural group organizations or with ethnic-similar friends these strong connections can help retain students (Freeman, 1999). Connections to other Latinas/os in college or affiliation with Latina/o student groups can at times act as a buffer against experiences of bias that students might experience (Rivas-Drake, 2008). These connections can play a role in retaining students when they are in the numerical minority. By connecting with other Latina/o students at their college

through mentoring programs, student organizations, etc., this can assist in students creating an internal and external university network of support and a sense of family (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005). The support of friends in a student's life can have a significant impact on retention and friendships can play a positive role in students' academic success (Plunkett et al., 2008).

### **Positive Racial-Ethnic Self-Schema and Resilience**

In 1964 Milton M. Gordon, in his Classical Assimilation Theory, purports that immigrants must assimilate if they desire economic and social mobility (Soto, 2009). However, New Segmented Assimilation Theory challenges this view, arguing that having a positive racial-ethnic self-schema, racial-ethnic self-schema meaning how immigrants and minority groups' identify with their race/culture in the United States, can be a positive influence to academic success (Altschul, Oyserman & Bybee, 2008; Portes, & Zhou, 1993).

One may imagine that being faced with negative stereotypes would always have a debilitating factor on Latinas; however, having a strong identification with their parents' cultural values (having a positive racial-ethnic self-schema) can be a protective factor for Latinas/os (Portes, & Zhou, 1993). Achievement for students of color and immigrants have been associated with maintaining positive racial-ethnic identity while also gaining a level of acculturation (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2008; Jaret & Reitzes, 2009). Maintaining a positive connection with ethnicity and culture while overcoming the barriers that society imposes, such as negative stereotypes, racism, sexism, etc., has been associated with academic success (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2008). Students who

have a positive self-esteem about their ethnic identity hold a more negative perception of the university environment if an incident occurs related to their identity rather than internalizing the experience (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005).

### **Accruing Capital**

Human capital can be increased through education (Coleman, 1988) and individuals are given opportunities they may have not had without having a certain education. There are different forms of capital that can be accumulated and can create a set of advantages for the individual. Previously, human capital, cultural capital and social capital have been associated with dominant group standards (Stanton-Salazar, 1997); however, working from a non-dominant cultural and social capital framework allows for recognition of assets that children and youth of color have or can accrue (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Latinos can bring with them various forms of capital based on their cultural values and relationships with family members and their community, capital such as cultural and social capital. Cultural capital includes personal resources, family climate and support, environment, and the resiliency factors created from these areas (Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002). Social capital includes benefits that one can receive based on connections with their family and a mediation of resources by personal connections and nonfamily networks (Portes, 2000). Family's ties to others can be significantly beneficial toward access to certain forms of assets. Community relationships can contribute to a larger network and more resources, adding to social capital (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998; Antrop-González, Vélez, & Garrett, 2008). Through community

relationships, including relationships with friend's parents and intergenerational connections, Latina/o youth can add to their social network and add to their social capital. Creating a larger network can add to a support system, give additional forms of guidance, accessing more avenues of information, and increasing positive help-seeking behaviors which can be helpful in navigating their education and future careers (Antrop-González, Vélez, & Garrett, 2008; The PALMS Project, 2006).

In addition to cultural and social capital, and using a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective, Tara Yosso describes additional forms of capital that are often readily available to Latinos based on cultural values and ethnic experiences. Aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, navigational capital, and resistance capital are all possible forms of capital that Latino students can accrue and assets that are readily available to them based on cultural values. Yosso's various forms of capital will be defined in the "Available Social and Cultural Capital" section of the thesis.

#### IV. SELF-DEFINITION OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS

##### **Academic Success Not Necessarily Related to GPA**

Academic success in university terms is often defined as successful school performance and attaining a certain grade or Grade Point Average (GPA) (Ditcher, 1999). Previous studies found Latina/o college students in agreement that earning high grades was important (Zalaquett, 2005); however, the majority of the participants in this study (n = 12) did not define academic success solely related to performance, such as attaining a high GPA, but rather a combination of elements. There was recognition that good grades and that having a “good” GPA should be valued and should be part of academic success, but several other items seem to stand out for them as being more significant when defining academic success.

Similar to Jodry’s, Robles-Piña’s and Nichter’s research, the participants reported that home support and motivation has been a significant, and often the largest, contributor to their academic success (2004). Contributors such as: having positive relationships and communication with their families, having a caring environment where parents are interested in their education, feeling that their family values their education, their family holding high expectations regarding their academic achievement, teaching their children self-advocacy, and valuing their culture (Jodry, Robles-Penya, & Nichter, 2004-2005). High parental expectations, along with Hispanic students desiring and persevering to achieve those expectations, can be an immense motivator for academic success (Cavazos et al., 2010).

Previous studies have shown that Latinas attributed their academic success to environmental factors, specifically relating their success to the support they receive from their family (Alva, & Padilla, (1995). Many of the participants' (n =12) definition of academic success relates to affiliative achievement motivation, which puts emphasis on the interdependence and success of the group and “familismo” (Wilkins, & Kuperminc, 2010). The participants describe academic success in relation to the messages they receive from their family, and being motivated by their family’s hopes and expectations.

Several of the women describe academic success in relation to family—either messages their family imparted or how family is a consideration in their definition,

*Lily:* It means being more structured, like as family, you want to be able to support your family. With good academic success you can do that, it means really everything because what do you have if you don't have an education, an education it's very rare for people all over the world to have a bachelor's degree. It's making my family proud.

*Laura:* I think for me it was doing better than the last generation. So I think my sister has achieved her academic success in graduating from school already, and I'm still kind of in my process, yeah I made it to college, but it's not really – my sister has set the bar higher than my parents, so for me academic success would be going further.

Laura’s definition of academic success relates to a hypothetical “bar” that was set by her sister, and the need to surpass it so she could consider herself academically successful.

Similar to Laura's definition, academic success is also goal oriented for several of the participants,

*Abigail:* I see it in different ways one of the ways I see it depends where you're from, if you're from, say if my extended family, my understanding of academic success in that area would be graduating from high school and receiving any type of degree: associate's, bachelor's, any type of degree. But for the most part academic success is graduating high school. But for me when I apply it to myself only it's going beyond what I have to do... My parents, I wouldn't say it's my parents' definition because it's more of my definition, but they instilled it into me, getting my four-year degree and even going beyond that no matter how long it takes me to do it and I kind of apply it to me to.

*Adri:* Well, I would say at least graduation from undergraduate and I would say that's like the part of school success, but at the same time then what you do after that if it's not related to what you graduated, just I guess doing something with your life.

*Catherine:* I feel like academic success for myself is me being able to continue like to go to college and have a goal and like what I want to be, and it doesn't mean it's always getting straight A's, like even though that would be wonderful it's just I know myself too much that I now I'm not

getting straight A's and everything, but I think being in school and having, and knowing a goal, I think that's academic success.

For Abigail and Adri academic success is related to the goal of obtaining a degree and going beyond that. For Catherine it is related to knowing her academic goal.

Catherine also explained that achieving an “A” was not necessarily her definition of academic success. Similarly, several of the participants discussed how academic success may not necessarily be related to GPA, and that students may have other strengths that make them academically successful even if they do not have a high GPA.

*Lola:* I think it's doing well in academics, and being enthusiastic about academics and that's why you do well. I know that some people slack and still do well and I don't think that's academically successful, I mean on paper it is, but if you try hard and you do well, even if it's just B's and C's, and you're still pushing and trying your best, I think that's academic success.

*Nicole:* I think it has a lot to do with being well-rounded, like incorporating other activities not just hitting the books all-time ... I don't think a high GPA necessarily means that you're more successful than somebody else because somebody else might have more difficult work than you.



*Yolanda:* I don't think academic success is really reflective of grades, and I feel that way because I think that's kind of a system that not everyone fits under, like certain people have different experiences in schools they went to, where they grew up the access that they had to education, and how their ideas like writing, we talked differently for you to be academically successful, speak a certain way, write a certain way, and take tests a certain way, which is not true for everybody. And that doesn't, I don't think you can measure someone's intelligence based on that. I don't think you can measure someone's intelligence based on like what you consider to be the norm and if they're outside of that, then they are not, they're [not] stupid or something else.

*Abigail:* No. There's people who may not be doing great in classes, and school but you can't really see how much effort their put into it, how much time and effort they're putting into it just by looking at their GPA. It's more like a personal thing, I think.

Both Nicole and Vanessa explain the importance of being involved outside of the classroom and being a well-rounded student which they define as consisting of getting involved in extracurricular activities.

*Vanessa:* I believe that's, academic success means to me is not only being in school, because in college anybody could apply and get in, but really

excelling in academics and getting involved in campus activities, like the groups like [the Latina/o Student Organization], and [the Black Student Organization], there are a bunch of activities on campus; I think really being involved in your own major also is my definition of academic success.

Mastery goals describe achievement motivation related to mastering a particular task and skill, and receiving gratification in this mastery orientation (Wilkins & Kuperminc, 2010). This achievement motivation can be directly applied to Alia's self-definition of academic success,

*Alia:* Academic success would be, I would think like learning something and then passing once you take an exam, but also being able to teach someone else what you just learned, I think that's academic success.

Being competent and succeeding in a foreign country means learning the rules and decoding the system. Decoding the system and learning the rules allows entrance to “participate in power,” tapping into critical resources and fostering individual mobility (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Yolanda explained how as an immigrant child she had to learn how to decode the rules to be academically successful. She describes her initial struggles in a non-Spanish speaking school when she first emigrated from [the Caribbean] and how, for her, academic success can be related to learning the “system” so she could succeed. Yolanda shared a story relating to her second spelling test,

*Yolanda:* I remember in fifth grade, this was like my first year here; I had, I had a spelling test, and I didn't speak any English, and I failed the spelling test, but the next test I took I still didn't speak English, I had another spelling test and I got 100. [That experience] definitely shaped the way I think about it what academic success of. I didn't know what those words were I just memorized them, I just learned hey this is what the system is this, it's how it works. I can crack this, I memorized the words I wrote them down, the teacher read them out loud she dictated to us I had no idea what she was saying it does have the words written down because I memorized them and I got an A. So that doesn't mean I knew anything.

*Interviewer:* It means you learned the system.

*Yolanda:* It means that I learned the system to get good grades.

Mary is the only participant that associates academic success solely with achievement at attaining a certain GPA,

*Mary:* Well I think like getting A's and B's like grade wise, academics is like A's and B's for me. C is not a like a success it's kind of like oh I really I didn't do that well I need to try a lot harder, grades wise it's A's and B's. And like success would mean just mean being able to use those grades and skills that I've learned to get a job eventually in my major?

Academic success was defined in a variety of ways by the participants, and several shared themes arose with these self-definitions. The idea that individuals could have strengths that make them academically successful, but these strengths may not translate into high grades, was mentioned by several participants. Affiliative achievement was brought up multiple times. How academic success relates to family was a prominent recurring theme. Academic success relating to goal orientation and the idea that “well-rounded” students demonstrate the idea of being truly academically successful was also a belief mentioned by multiple participants. The overarching theme was that academic success is not necessarily grade related.

Not only was affiliative achievement brought up by the participants during the “What is your definition of academic success?” part of the interview, but throughout the interviews the importance of family as support, motivators, and mentors was discussed. Many of the participants (n = 10) explained that they hold themselves to a very high academic success expectation because of their families, and that their family’s expectations are a large influence in wanting to be academically successful and wanting to achieve.

Additional themes arose when participants discussed either their self-definition of academic success or how those definitions were created. These themes seemed to bring significant meaning related to their self-definition and academic perspective. The following two chapters will discuss recurring themes that were found in the interviews, and provide a deeper understanding of the participants’ experiences.

## V. MAJOR RECURRING THEMES

This section of the thesis will discuss several themes that arose during the interviews. Examples from the interviews that illustrate these themes will be discussed as well as literature that supports and demonstrate similar research findings.

### **Parental and Family Encouragement**

Twelve out of the 13 participants reported receiving positive and/or encouraging messages around the importance of academic success from their family, and only 1 participant did not; however, she had both formal and informal mentors in her life. Several of these participants explained that the messages they received were directly related to the expectation that they were going to college and that academics is associated with having future success.

Within Latina/o families where parents have not attended college, conversations about college may not necessarily be in-depth, the importance of attending is still emphasized (Ceja, 2004). Moral support around academics and messages about being diligent in school is the foundation of how low socioeconomic Latina/o immigrant parents participate in their children's education (Auerbach, 2006).

When asked what inspired her definition, Lily described how the morals instilled by her parents around education has played a big role in her definition of academic success and with her deep desire to pursue her dream of becoming a veterinarian.

*Lily:* My family, just my want to be a veterinarian. Ultimately just the morals you grew up with.

Similar to Antrop-González's, Vélez's, and Garrett's findings (2008), the participants largely attributed their academic success to their family. Latina/o parents motivate their children to persist despite obstacles and always to keep their goals as a priority (Antrop-González, Vélez, & Garrett, 2008; Auerbach, 2006). All but one participant discussed the huge impact that parents had on the way education was perceived, which is a shared theme found in several studies focusing on Latina/o students (Ceja, 2004).

Here are a few of the responses when participants were asked: "Did you receive any message around academic success from your family?"

*Abigail:* Well, my parents are always encouraging me to do well in school. My father is always, and since I'm first-generation [college student] on my father's side, he is always encouraging me, telling me to do better and better. And that's actually kind of funny, because it's mostly what he likes to talk about when we talk on the phone, well it's not mostly what he likes talk about, but he loves to encourage me to do well in my classes and that's the same for my mom and she really wants all of us to succeed, all of us meaning our family my brothers and my sisters.

*Lily:* Like my family uses “adelante pa'lante,” which is like, just like keep going, push forward, they always instilled like you could, you could always do more than she could always get farther they always wanted me to do more than whatever they could.

*Mary:* They, yeah my family just stressed it in general, like my parents they, they basically told me I'm going to college and I said okay yeah that's fine. I understand why, I believe it's important, but just kind of everyone in my family even like the extended family, they kind of I think expected me to as well. So they've all gone to college and they think it's important to so, it was a positive message definitely.

*Vanessa:* Yes, they're always so (laugh), they always, they're so, my mom especially is always on the website and looking at those programs to take advantage of that will provide scholarships.

Participants also discussed how their parents sought out different school districts in pursuit of giving their children the best education they could,

*Abigail:* One of the main reasons we moved up here was because my parents wanted me to get a better education away from the life that we had in Arizona. Because I wouldn't have been able to succeed as much as I would here.

*Desiree:* He's [referring to father] wanted me to do well trying to get me into a better school because New York sometimes their schools are crap.

In trying to help their children attain a college education, to their best ability Latina/o parents try to get the necessary information for their children in the college application process. Several of the study's participants especially credited their mother as being the largest contributor of academic support and encouraging perseverance. In previous research mothers were often brought up as important morale builders and motivators during their child's education (Ceballo, 2004; Méndez-Morse, 2004; Antrop-González, Vélez, & Garrett, 2008). Several participants (n = 7) discussed a special relationship with their mothers. Participants Adri and Lola explained their mother's expectations when asked "Do you remember about what age you started considering going to college?"

*Adri:* I exactly I don't remember [when] but, from what I remember my cousins would always say when I grow up I want to do this you know, so I guess we knew we had to do something to get there. And then my mom has always said that whatever we want to do is okay as long as we do college education.

*Lola:* [referring to mother's messages around college] It was almost an expectation, and she [referring to mother] just like very real she was like



you need a degree, like there's no way you can succeed knowing your personality you need a degree to do it ... she always just said you know you're going to college just know what you want to do be prepared for your real-life, so she was more realistic and said you're going to need a degree

Additional supportive messages about attending college given by mothers:

*Abigail:* My mom and she really wants all of us to succeed, all of us meaning our family my brothers and my sisters.

*Vanessa:* My mom was really big on calling schools, like talking to the counselors and getting information on financial aid and application process, like FAFSA.

Vanessa reported that when opportunities for leadership involvement have been brought to her mother's attention she heavily encourages Vanessa to participate,

*Vanessa:* My mom was really like you need to do it and this is good and open up a lot of opportunities for you...

Vanessa also discussed how both of her parents often ask her not only about academics but also about her involvement in school, which illustrates their investment in Vanessa's college experience:

*Vanessa:* My parents, they are always pushing me in making sure I'm on top of everything, are you being involved? Are you studying?

Vanessa's parents may not understand how to navigate college, but still want to incentivize her as much as they can by asking about academics and encouraging her to be involved.

Several of the women also discussed how their entire family has given them support around academics:

*Catherine:* Yes. I have my mother, well my family is very supportive. Like so my mother, my father, and my sister, always are like kind of mentoring me on like what academic success should be like, like just making sure that, like how to make it through.

*Abigail:* It wasn't just one person it was a lot of people that encouraged me to succeed in high school and college. It was my tutor in high school, and she was a great person, and she really helped me with my schoolwork, even if I need her now she would still be there for me, just to talk or anything. It was my mother, my father, all my brothers and my sister; it was everybody that encouraged me.

*Interviewer:* You had a lot of people.

*Abigail:* I had a lot of people.

The impact of messages related to academic motivation given by parents and other family members should not be undervalued. Parents and family members can play an integral part in Latina/o student achievement. Even when parents are unfamiliar with the academic terrain and how to navigate through educational institutions, they can still provide important mentoring and instill self-confidence in their children, which can motivate and inspire a deep drive to succeed academically.

### **Mentors**

Mentors played a very important role in providing the majority of participants with academic guidance and support and encouraging their perspective on academic success.

- 9 participants reported that they had mentors who encouraged their perspective on academic success.
- 2 participants out of the 9 who reported having mentors were part of formal academic programs.
- 2 participants out of the 9 who reported having mentors had extended family members as informal mentors.
- 3 participants out of the 9 who reported having mentors had immediate family as informal mentors.
- 3 participants out of the 9 who reported having mentors had high school teachers and a guidance counselor as informal mentors.

Four participants reported that either they were uncertain if they could identify a mentor and stated that they did not have a mentor, further details about mentors and these 4 participants follow:

Two participants reported that they were not sure if there were any mentors that they could identify in their lives. However, both women had parents and siblings who continuously gave them supportive messages about the importance of academic achievement and the expectation that they were to attend college.

Two participants said that no mentors stood out. Both of these women mentioned that even though they hadn't had a mentor, they desired to. However, one of the women had parents and a sibling who continuously gave her positive messages about the importance of academic achievement and the expectation that she was to attend college. The second woman received messages from her mother and stated that during high school she had continuous academic support and messages from both teachers and administrators about the importance of academic success and going to college. I felt it was important to include these additional details about these 4 participants based on how, even though they had difficulty or did not identify mentors, they still received encouragement, support, messages regarding going to college, and the constant emphasis that being academically successful was important.

The common messages the participants reported receiving from mentors on topics related to academic success included:

- 3 participants reported messages around being resilient, that even when there were challenges that they needed to preserve.

- 2 participants received messages around doing what they love and what makes them happy (referring to majors).
- 2 participants said that their mentors discussed and gave advice around preparing for the “real world.”
- Peer mentor gave tangible advice, tips around using academic resources and time management.
- All of the participants who reported not having mentors discussed that even though they could not identify mentors they received support and messages about the importance of succeeding academically from various places.

Mentoring from high school counselors and tutors can be an invaluable resource in college preparation, selection, and application (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004). A few of the women discussed how they considered their high school guidance counselors as mentors. High school teachers were also mentioned, as well as formal mentoring programs that were coordinated by their high schools. Several of the women also mentioned college mentors. Harrell and Forney (2003) suggest that in order to increase the status of Hispanic first-generation college students it is important not only to provide mentors during high school, but to also have various levels of support and outreach through college to improve their success. In preparing for college and during college mentors not only provide academic advising but also role model what is needed to succeed in college as well as offering emotional and psychological support (Hu & Ma, 2010).

Participants were engaged in more informal than formal mentoring relationships. Informal mentors included parents, siblings, extended family, teachers, and guidance

counselors. The formal mentoring relationships included high school mentor programs and college access programs; both formal mentor formats were organized by a third party.

Mentors can provide valuable college information that first-generation students may not otherwise attain (Arellano & Padilla, 1996). Mentors can play several significant roles in transitioning a student's life, such as role models, advisors and as a form of much needed support (Freeman, 1999). Persistence probability increases with college mentors (Hu & Ma, 2010). Mentors can also play a vital role for students of color who are transitioning into an environment which is culturally different from theirs, such as a predominantly White institution (Freeman, 1999).

When navigating college, mentors can help with the uncertainty and having a support system may allow students not to feel so alone on their journey. A mentor can provide positive long-term effects on their mentee, such having a stronger skill set in navigating college, having a greater sense of belonging, significantly increasing their motivation to attend college and satisfaction with their college experience, and playing a significant role in a student's academic outcome (Campos et al., 2009). Vanessa discussed actual skills and tips that her college mentor imparted:

*Vanessa:* she really implemented time management and having that relationship with professors and making sure you go to those office hours and asking questions, no matter whatever question you have always ask it if you're confused about something... she would give advice on what professors were better than others and tips on studying because anatomy

and physiology was a big one, it was a huge class, so she had told us what to focus on and just general tips.

Having a mentor is especially useful for Latina/o first-generation college students because they can address particular needs (Campos et al., 2009). Supportive mentoring relationships can allow first-generation students to see the possibilities that can exist when they are uncertain of what is available for them (Dondero, 1997). Mentoring can be a vital way for youth who do not receive direct adult guidance and can explore career and educational options, especially with youth who have parents with limited college navigation knowledge (Dondero, 1997).

Two of the participants discussed their frustration related to how they couldn't discuss college with either a parent or family member due to their parent/family member's lack of understanding with anything related to college,

*Yolanda:* my dad would always ask me oh how was school and stuff like that, but he, he would never understand, well I don't know, I don't think he would really understand if I ever talked about my classes what I'm studying, we never talked about that. It would just ask how's school going, [and that] it was important ...

*Ana:* I'm in college for myself. I'm a first-generation student actually, so nobody has an idea on what college is all about, I guess the four-year college [referring to family's understanding of college].

Mentoring can provide much needed guidance when students do not have parents with whom they can speak about college related issues.

Having a Latina mentor can inspire young Latinas to aim high with career aspirations and can be a motivating factor in dreams of success; seeing Latinas/os in positions that hold power can encourage young Latinas to aspire to reach similar careers (Méndez-Morse, 2004). Without career mentors Latinas may internalize “possible selves,” internalizing images and messages related to gender stereotypes and what women are expected to be (National Women’s Law Center, 2007). This internalization of ethnic stereotypes can be limiting to their potential.

In *Dialoguing the Latina Experience in Higher Education*, Diana Rios reminds us that faculty of color may be the only role models that students of color have for academic success (Reyes & Rios, 2005). This was evident in Yolanda’s experience. When asked “Do you feel that being a woman who is Latina or Hispanic has played any role in the way you perceive academic success?” Yolanda stated,

*Yolanda:* Yeah, yeah I’ve thought about it, I don’t, don’t really see many Latina women in this environment, or I that identify as Latina women, which is totally different from the way they may identify, obviously. But I don’t see anyone that vaguely resembles me in any of my, not my department, and I am a Spanish major. Like what does that say?



Receiving informal and formal mentoring can facilitate academic aspirations (Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006). Previous studies have demonstrated how Latinas/os benefit greatly from encouragement and support provided by mentors and other support systems (Antrop-González, Vélez, & Garrett, 2008; Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006; Ceballo, 2004; Méndez-Morse, 2004). Even when mentors are informal, Latinas still can greatly benefit. An assembly of several informal mentors, which motivate them along the way, can be very valuable (Méndez-Morse, 2004).

The National Women's Law Center recommends that there be more funding for mentoring and other programs which can provide Latinas with career role models and the support needed to meet their college aspirations (2007). The National Women's Law Center also mentions identifying successful programs and providing funding to enable other school to replicate their success (2007). "College ready" initiatives must also be created, to better inform, guide, and support students who would like to pursue higher education, which includes educating them on financial aid and how to find the resources to pay for school (National Women's Law Center, 2007). It must be noted that all the women received messages around the importance of academic achievement and the importance of attending college from mentors and/or their family.

#### **Academic Success Related to Future Success and Financial Success**

When asked "Do you believe that a person's academic success during college can play a role in her/his life after college? If yes, how?"

- 12 out of 13 participants said yes, and 1 said somewhat.
- 6 stated that education helps prepare you for your future career.

- 6 said it teaches you skills, getting over challenges/obstacles.
- 2 women discussed how extracurricular can teach students certain skills that can transfer to future careers.
- 3 women mention a college education and academic success related to upward mobility, while at other points of the interview 3 additional women discuss this idea. A total of 6 women either influenced by parents' messages, or from their own perspective, believe that academic success relates to upward mobility.

College education is seen as a means for upward mobility and economic stability by many Latina/o immigrants (Hill & Torres, 2010). In 2000 the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education surveyed high school parents in various states on the topic of higher education. The survey found 65% of Hispanic high school parents believe that a college education is necessary for success compared to 32% of White high school parents (Immerwahr, 2003). Low-income Latina/o parents may strongly relate education with economic and social mobility (Alva, & Padilla, 1995; Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Ceballo, 2004). College can be seen as a way of becoming part of the middle-class (Antrop-González, Vélez, & Garrett, 2008). Low-income Latina/o parents often believe that education, coupled with hard work and determination, can be a “ticket” to achieving the American Dream (Alva & Padilla, 1995; Arellano & Padilla, 1996; Ceballo, 2004).

Several of the participants reported receiving messages around academic success from parents and wanting their daughters to “do better than they did.” Lily and Lola explain,

*Lily:* The messages were: do better than I did.

*Lola:* My mom was just like you deserve better, you work much harder.

And that pushed me to do better.

All the women discussed how college can translate into more opportunities, a better future, more control over their lives, and becoming more independent, which is a common theme reported in previous studies (Cammarota, 2004). Many of the participants hold the belief that a college degree can be a pathway to accessing career and life opportunities that might not be available if they did not graduate with a degree. A college education would allow them to attain more life satisfaction and to find fulfilling work. Several of the women also mentioned being excited about a future career in a field in which they would truly enjoy working.

Several of the messages the women reported were around how academics relates to success and upward mobility, or that there is not really an alternative because a college education was necessary to succeed,

*Yolanda:* Well, yeah. For my mom education is always very important, because she sees it as I think upward mobility.

*Adri:* My family that they're always telling me you know if you want to succeed in life, go to college, don't stay stuck in the same level try to move up...

*Laura:* They [referring to her parents] kind of related doing well in school with making money, being financially stable when you're older. So it was kind of like, it was kind of like get good grades so you in the future you won't have to struggle. That was the main message.

*Alia:* They [referring to her mother as well as her mentor] said if I didn't go to college I was not to go anywhere in life, and I'd just be a "bum," and I sure didn't want that, I wanted the best for my family. And that just made me push harder and harder to go to college and stay here and keep going.

A strong belief that happiness is self-determined and that success is attainable can create a deep-rooted desire to persist (Arellano & Padilla, 1996). Discussing more control over career options translates into more of a possibility of job satisfaction and happiness. Catherine describes her definition of academic success,

*Catherine:* I think it's a combination [of things], making sure you're happy being in the major that you're pursuing and being able to move forward eventually graduating and going out into the workforce and doing what you have a passion for.

Self-determination and being goal oriented was a topic mentioned by several participants throughout the interviews. The participants and previous research (Hill & Torres, 2010; Ceballo, 2004; Alva, & Padilla, 1995) discuss the belief that hard work and

being motivated to attain a higher education will provide success, upward mobility, financial stability and having a satisfying career. This belief that hard work in college can “pay off” in the long run was a large incentive to push forward in persevering academically.

### **Persevering and Being Resilient**

Throughout the interviews, the theme of academic perseverance was brought up in relevance to both messages and support from families, mentors, personal experiences within their education (when facing challenges), and how they perceive attaining future success. Perseverance and resilience are the most common themes found in the interviews.

Finding strength in the lived experience and adversity of everyday life forms resiliency and helps the student to redefine the educational opportunities they have (Ceja, 2004). Resilient students develop coping skills which help them to adapt better to new experiences, recover from stress, and more easily adapt to life changes (McMillan & Reed, 1992). Despite issues that may put students at academic-risk, such as being raised in a lower-income or poverty-stricken environment, living in a community or attending a school that may have few resources, there are still students who sustain a high level of achievement in spite of adversity (Alva & Padilla, (1995). Personal determination is one of the prime factors in students’ academic success in college (Campos et al., 2009). Being challenged by adverse situations can also lead students to gain a deeper level of self-confidence based on resiliency, fostering a belief that with enough perseverance there can be success (Arellano & Padilla, 1996).

Similar to previous studies involving resilient Latinas/os (Cavazos, Johnson, & Sparrow, 2010), the participants are highly active in the direction their lives will go and in adapting to negative circumstances and persevering. Various coping strategies have been used either in isolation or in combination with each other to overcome challenges and to achieve their final goal (Cavazos, Johnson, & Sparrow, 2010). Eight of the participants discussed success relating to pushing through barriers, persisting, and becoming more resilient. A few examples participants gave related to perseverance in college to future success and being able to face challenges.

*Abigail:* If you decide to keep going with college and get a degree, it pushes you to do anything if you're having trouble with that, some people think it comes easy to them but for some people it comes more difficult. And for those people that it comes easy to them, it'll be easier for them to excel, finding a career and succeeding in that way, but for those people who have trouble and run into obstacles if they get through college and succeed they will be able to overcome anything.

*Ana:* College kind of prepares you for reality I guess, I mean there are a lot of struggles that you get through, that you gain, kind of like learning from your mistakes, that's what college is all about.

*Catherine:* (long pause after the question was asked.) I think what inspired my definition of academic success is, my path through college has been

rough in some points, so kind of you have to, I always like tell myself like I can do this, I can do this make it through each semester I will reach my goal of graduating and doing what I really love to do.

Earlier Lily described messages that her family gave to her about academic success, and she used the Spanish phrase “adelante pa'lante,” which as she defined it, is to push forward. During the interview Lily also described her aunt as giving her messages around being motivated and persevering,

*Lily:* I had an aunt who was a, she went to a community college and she didn't know the language at all, she didn't know anything. [She] graduated on Dean's list and, in choosing a bio field as well, so when I struggled with micro and stuff like that always, she was like don't worry about it, you, if I can get through and I didn't know the language than you can get through.

Ana also discussed how academic success for minority students can be more challenging, based on having more possible obstacles to overcome, and that one of the obstacles relates to being financially capable of affording college,

*Ana:* My definition for success is trying to overcome all those social issues going on especially with minority students, I mean lack of money, and some other problems, family problems, and trying to overcome all those, how do you say that, boundaries I guess. And just proving to yourself that you've made it.

I, the interviewer, then clarified, making sure that her definition was for academic success,

*Interviewer:* Okay. And so do you feel like that applies directly to the idea of being successful in academics?

*Ana:* Oh definitely, if you have the support throughout college I think life would be much easier, but if you don't have that support, let's say don't have money, your mother doesn't understand what you are talking about, don't understand what college is like, I think if you seek for more resources in school you'll be more successful.

Ana's definition of academic success relates to being able to afford college as well as finding a support system in college, which is a common issues for low-income students and attaining their college education (Waldron, 2007).

The importance of determination is highlighted and the majority of the participants discuss how challenges that are faced when trying to receive an education can contribute to becoming a more resilient person after college. There is also recognition that some barriers can be at times too overwhelming.

### **Negative Stereotypes and Positive Resistance**

High levels of positive racial-ethnic identity attributes to a higher level of self-perception and self-esteem, and can be a positively associated with academic achievement with students and upward mobility (Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2008). Identity can provide important motivation for academic success, allowing students to dispel myths about Latinas/os not being good students (Antrop-González, Vélez, &



Garrett, 2008). All of the participants who reported having a high ethnic self-schema (participants who discussed being connected and/or having a deep sense of pride in their culture) connected personal motivation with their ethnic identity (n = 11). The majority of the participants speak Spanish at home (n=11) and all are fluent English proficient, tying them both to their Latina/o cultural heritage as well as to the U.S. (Portes, & Zhou, 1993). This is demonstrated by their strong affiliation with their ethnicity and parents' cultural background, as well as having lived in the United States for a minimum of five years, considering the United States as their home, and having the majority of their connections within this country. The participants have become bicultural, successfully accessing and functioning in mainstream society while maintaining their cultural identity and pride in their cultural heritage (Arellano & Padilla, 1996).

When compared with other races and ethnicities, Latinas/os are often more attuned to negative stereotypes about themselves than White students at college (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005). In their 2008 study René Antrop-González, William Vélez, and Tomàs Garrett, discuss “marginalization as motivation concept” in their findings, which was also found in this study. Antrop-González, Vélez, and Garrett’s participants used the negative cultural stereotypes as a motivating tool to prove to others that they can be academically successful. The participants expressed frustration with negative stereotypes associated with Latinas/os and the belief that Latinas/os do not have a desire to achieve academically. Based on this, participants report feeling compelled to dispel this myth and are motivated to prove to those who hold these beliefs (such as

teachers, classmates, and society) wrong by achieving success. This theme is also present in my study.

Similar to the marginalization as motivation concept, several of the participants discussed a “prove them wrong” attitude when confronted with stereotypes. Valenzuela described “positive resistance” as a way that students combat social oppression related to their identity by academically achieving (1999). This was a strategy of not following the stereotyped patterns which they described as the “traditional Latina” role of being more submissive. Participants assertively wanted to challenge pejorative beliefs. Similar to other research, the participants mentioned their frustration with how their ethnicity was often negatively portrayed in society. They believed that by being academically successful and attaining a college education, they might be able to dispel some of the negative stereotypes (Liou, Antrop-Gonzalez, & Cooper, 2009).

Frustrated by discrimination against Latinos, participants explained how they believed that a college education may be one way of combating negative stereotypes of Hispanics, which was similarly reported by participants in Ceja’s 2004 study. When asked, “Do you feel like your cultural background has played any role in the way you perceive academic success?” 12 out of the 13 participants stated that they believed their cultural background has played a role in the way they perceive academic success.

Alia responded yes, and explained that by being a Latina you might be able to reverse more stereotypes because of being a woman and being Hispanic (challenging both sexism and racism),

*Alia:* Even though people kind of look down on you because you're Spanish in a predominantly White community it's still like a shadow, like, no it's like stands out if you succeed when you're there especially if you're a woman and Latina.

Lily also described how she felt that society has different standards for Hispanics, that there is a stereotype that Hispanics won't go far, which has motivated her to push forward,

*Lily:* I really feel that because I'm Hispanic, I mean I feel like were put to a different standard, we're very much stereotyped to not go far in that definitely gives me motivation to push forward, and to be like yes I'm Hispanic and look what I'm doing and I can do that and it doesn't matter if you held back by a, by you know your Hispanic background you can still do it.

Nicole also discussed confronting stereotypes and wanting to prove negative stereotypes wrong,

*Nicole:* Let me see, I think that yeah it's kind of like something you have to prove to society I think as a whole, like I'm not speaking just for myself I feel like as a whole women who come from Latin backgrounds I think, and men too you know, I think men also have something to prove because a lot of people, again the stereotype of like Latinas/os work on farms, in

my factories, illegal immigrants, but people perceive, as a whole perceive us in a certain way, and so yeah I think definitely is an incentive to do better in academics. Until I prove them wrong, I don't know.

Nicole also discussed how her parents came to the United States for an education, that they are proud to be educated Hispanics, and yet they still face challenges around stereotypes about Latinas/os and the expectation of not being educated,

*Nicole:* well my family is [Caribbean], my parents are from there, born and raised, and they moved here for college. And I think that it definitely plays a role in how I perceive academic success because my, my parents take great pride in the fact that they're educated people and that since they have accents it's kind of like, the American way is like, it's not, people don't mean to be like that but if you hear someone with an accent you kind of automatically think they are less educated than you are. Which is the way that my parents have viewed things, so when they moved here they made it a point to do really well and show people that they're just as educated as they are. They can matriculate just like anybody else...But yeah I definitely think it's important for me to do well if it comes to my race because it's kind of like, it's like going against the stereotype like people who are foreign are less than you know kind of under the regular Caucasian Americans, which is a horrible way to look at it but it's kind of reality.

When asked “Do you feel that being a woman who is Latina has played any role in the way you perceive academic success?” 12 out of the 13 participants said that being a Latina has influenced their perspective on academic success; the 13th participant said she was not sure if gender played a role in how she perceives academic success. The 13th participant also stated that she was not sure if her cultural background has played any role in the way she perceives academic success. (It must be noted that this participant did identify as White, middle-class, identified as half Latina, and was raised in a predominately White rural area with few Latinas/os, which may have played a role in her experience of “not being sure.”)

Lily discussed how women may have to work harder than men to get recognition:

*Lily:* Being a woman usually it's the men who do stuff who you see going farther and granted that happens so much like, and like the United States, in being an American but like being Hispanic it's just the old Hispanic women is in the kitchen like know when we decide to branch out we're looked upon differently. You have to work harder than others, you have to show that you're better, better and you can do better and get better grades, but the way I see it it's almost with, I want work because I am a woman and because I'm Hispanic.

As mentioned in the “Theoretical Perspectives on Latina/o Students” section of my thesis, a positive ethnic self-schema can provide protective factors for Latinas/os

(Altschul, Oyserman, & Bybee, 2008). Positive cultural self-esteem, when faced with negative stereotypes such as sexism and racism and the beliefs that Latinas/os are low academic achievers, has been shown to be an incentive to academically achieve as a form of dispelling this myth. The participants found motivation to actively resist pejorative beliefs based on strength from dignity and cultural pride, which are both Latina/o cultural values.

### **Gender Stereotypes and Independence**

Latinas' advancement can be a challenge. On one hand they are personally advancing through educational achievement, and on the other there are gendered cultural norms, which may be instilled by the family (often by mothers), create a contradiction in wanting to be educated and have a career, and gender traditions (Cammara, 2004).

When reflecting on being an Hispanic female, several participants discussed traditional gender expectations and their desire for independence and self-reliance,

*Adri:* Like I don't want to be the woman that's always taking care of my husband I want to be the one that can take care of myself.

*Vanessa:* I don't know my parents, my parents are really, because I always talk to them and they're like you know, I want you to be like an independent woman and I want you to not depend on a man for anything to have your own things and I don't know that whole topic I guess because my older sisters have definitely depended on men for that reason, and they've been in like really bad relationships and I think they haven't been

able to get out of it because of money reasons. So I don't know I think my parents just want me to have that freedom, that life that I want to live in that I don't have any restrictions or anything because I'm at the point where I would have a career and able to provide for myself, live independently and live a happy life... I can't wait to just say I did it I'm that independent person I can do whatever I want and I don't need a man to depend on him.

Several of the women discussed traditional Latina/o gender expectations and the desire to be independent and be able to care for oneself, which is dissimilar to the role traditionally assumed by Latinas (Robinson, 2005). Gaining insight into how Latinas see themselves as being women, being Hispanic and the links between gender, culture, institutional dimensions, and the personal effects of these interrelationships is necessary when considering not only education but identity in relation to any system (Zambrana, 1987). The participants can be understood as being bicultural because they have been raised in a Latina/o home with strong Latina/o ethnic cultural ties and values, while at the same time attending school and living in the United States. Here they successfully live in United States mainstream society. This bicultural identity may have allowed these women to desire some autonomy from their family and the desire to become self-sufficient women. These desires may have also been influenced by United States culture and valuing self-sufficiency and autonomy (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

## VI. MINOR RECURRING THEMES

Themes that are not overreaching and only arose in a few of the interviews, yet seemed significant in the participants' experience, will be discussed in this section.

### **College Application Process**

Similar to previous research that focused on Latina/o students, there were several participants who sought out information about colleges and worked through the application process by themselves (Immerwahr, 2003). There were also several participants whose parents tried to assist them in getting connected to either someone or a network who could further provide assistance to their child during the process because they could not.

College assistance with completing application, financial aid forms, and additional college entrance paperwork:

- 2 participants had to seek out information on their own.
- 3 participants' parent assisted in seeking out information (including finding someone in their personal network).
- 3 participants participated in college access programs for low-income students (either Upward Bound or another college access program initiative).
- 1 participant was involved in a mentoring program, which gave college information help.
- 3 participants reported that their guidance counselor informed them.



- 3 participants explained that various college admissions' offices held information sessions at their school.
- 3 participants explained that applying to college was somewhat built into a class.

Providing students, especially low-income and/or first-generation college students, assistance with the college application process and financial aid paperwork can be a determining factor in their college consideration process (The PALMS Project, 2006). If parents are unfamiliar and students are unsure where they can turn for assistance the process can be intimidating.

### **Privileged Education**

Ceja's study discussed how a few of the Latinas/os he interviewed did not take their education for granted; they considered their parents' education level but also other Latinas/os (2004). Also during the interviews this theme arose. A few of the participants discussed feeling privileged that they were attending college because they were aware of statistics related to Latinas/os in college, and recognized that they make up a small minority,

When asked "Do you feel like your cultural background has played any role in the way you perceive academic success?" two participants discussed the disparity of the population of Latinas/os attending college,

*Ana:* well, I'm [Caribbean], I guess, Latina, [and the] the population of Latinas/os in college is not that great compared to the White population, so I think that definitely that plays a role.

*Catherine:* I feel like it does.

*Interviewer:* Okay?

*Catherine:* It has. In a way because a lot of Hispanics, a lot of Hispanic students do not attend college so it's, I feel kind of in a way privileged to be here.

Based on this belief of being privileged, several of the participants considered themselves as being different from the stereotypical Latinas/os' experience, either based on the educational opportunities they were given or based on receiving messages to achieve. As Rivas-Drake points out in her study, when Latina/o students reported similar beliefs, these women “consciously or otherwise reinforced others’ pejorative views of the group” (2008, p. 120).

Participants discussed stereotypes related to Latina/o students; however, Lola was the only participant who brought up the negative stereotype that there are Latinas/os who may not be interested in getting out of poverty or are unwilling to “work hard enough.”

*Lola:* Yeah. I mean I come from a town that's majority minority, and so many people fall through the cracks, and they live the stereotypical lifestyle, they like, where they come from that's where they end up its cycle, you see it's the ghetto they live in the ghetto they end up in the ghetto. And I knew that's not what I wanted. I knew that's not what every Hispanic wants. I wanted better for myself, I knew I deserved better than the stereotype. So I lived in a very stereotypical ghetto, low-income town.

And my mom was just like you deserve better, you work much harder and that pushed me to do better.

Even though the messages that Lola's mother had given her relates to pejorative beliefs about Latinas/os and the assumption of having low-aspirations it also coincides with McMillan's and Reed's (1992) findings: having parents that have higher expectations for their education adds to student's resilience. Lola's mother's beliefs may have a higher association with wanting a different life for her daughter and instilling the desire and motivation to move out of poverty.

Several of the participants recognized that statistically they are considered success stories just based on being Latina and making it to college. A few women discussed feeling a sense of privilege based on this. There was also a belief that they possibly had a different experience than Latinas who do not complete high school, or Latinas who do not enroll in college, believing that maybe they have had opportunities or support that others may not have. This belief is that their experience is different from the "majority" of Latinas, and can be seen as having both a positive and negative perspective related to other Latinas/os who have a different life trajectory. This may be rooted in the myth that the majority of Latinas/os are not encouraged, or are uninterested, in academically achieving and/or pursuing higher education.

There must be recognition that these participants have accrued and understood how to utilize very important forms of capital that facilitated their pathway to college which has not been the experience of all Latinas/os.

### Intrinsic Motivation

Zalaquett found that several of the Latina/o students he interviewed in his study felt a responsibility toward others (2005). Several participants also discussed their desire to achieve academically so they can either assist or be a role model to other Latinas/os. They have an intrinsic motivation to assist other Latinas/os and value the idea of “moving up to give back.”

*Adri:* [I] want to help people from my culture, because not that many Hispanic people, not only here but where I grew up in [South America], like they're not as advanced, so I feel like if I go to college and somehow find a way to help them through my major.

Abigail discussed the importance of being a role model to other Latinas/os,

*Abigail:* [Abigail was born and raised in Arizona] I see a lot of people in Arizona were not going to college, or not graduating from high school, and even if it was for Latinas and Latinos, so it's both male and female so for me it's going beyond and kind of like showing people that it's possible for people to go on.

Both Adri and Abigail shared how they want to have an impact on the lives of other Latinas/os and how either, through example or actual career direction, can influence younger Latinas/os. They desire to be role models and demonstrate the influence of their

achievement. The value of giving back when you have become successful is rooted in valuing community for Latinas/os.

### **College, an Opportunity to Get Away from Low-Income Neighborhood**

Lola and Anna discussed how they were extremely attracted to the college campus, and that the college location had significant bearing on their decision to attend. This desire to move to another environment away from the adversity of their neighborhood is described as “adaptive distancing” in Morales’s research (2008). Both women came from the same town, a low-income industrial town (their hometown has a poverty rate of 31%). Lola described her hometown as a “ghetto.” Anna described the college town as “peaceful,” unlike where she came from. There was an appeal to going to a college that was in a rural area, which was an hour away from home. In considering colleges one of the motivations for their choice was to live in a completely different environment than what either had known while growing up. “Adaptive distancing” can be seen as a controversial topic (Morales, 2008) because of the desire to remove yourself from the community you were raised in. However, it is still a theme that arose and was acknowledged by these women as part of their lived experience and as an influence in their choice of colleges.

### **Coping Strategies: Factors that Promote Resiliency and Persistence**

Where does resilience come from? What promotes resilience factors in students who are faced with adverse situations which may make them more vulnerable or place them at academic-risk?

Cavazos, Johnson, and Sparrow interviewed eleven Latina/o college students desiring to gain insight into coping responses which these students used to overcome challenges (2010). The coping responses that were discussed in the study were: positive reframing, acceptance, self-talk, maintaining focus on final goals, using low expectations as motivation, self-reflections, taking action, and seeking support. These “coping responses” can also be seen as factors which promote resiliency. The participants in my study reported similar responses/factors. I will describe these coping strategies and will also be applying them to the methods used by the women I interviewed.

Positive reframing: The belief that one can overcome difficulties; being optimistic and remaining positive when faced with challenges.

Acceptance: Accepted challenges as being part of life, and hope that they will overcome the situation. Acceptance is often taught by parents.

Self-talk: In remaining optimistic one keeps reaffirming positive messages that they will get through the tough times and get through challenges.

Maintaining focus on final goals: Focusing on their goal and being motivated to overcome obstacles to get to their goal.

Self-reflections: Reflecting and analyzing what they’ve learned from previous experiences.

Positive reframing, acceptance, self-talk, maintaining focus on final goals, and self-reflection are all part of the recurring themes that the participants brought up relating to academics and succeeding in college and are further discussed in that section.

Additional coping strategies that Cavazos, Johnson, and Sparrow (2010) discuss:

Taking action: Taking action and initiative when either faced with particular challenges or when wanting to attain a goal. All of the participants were aware and used several academic resources on campus, which I believe demonstrates taking action. When the participants felt that they were at academic risk, they used resources that would help them become more successful, which I believe relates directly to taking action when faced with a particular challenge and wanting to attain a goal.

Using low expectations from others as motivation to succeed: Motivated to overcome and challenge perceived negative stereotypes by succeeding. Cavazos, Johnson, and Sparrow (2010), discuss this in relation to teachers and faculty who held these negative stereotypes. However, the participants in my study discussed how their experiences relate more to the messages they received from media and society. Several of the participants hold a “prove them wrong” perspective and as Venezuela (1999) described as having “positive resistance.” They are motivated to be academically successful and go against the negative stereotypes given to Latina/o students (which I defined in the “Negative Stereotypes and Positive Resistance” section).

Seeking support: The importance of seeking support when faced with challenges, adversity, or stress and finding encouragement. “Seeking support” is also defined as help-seeking in other literature (Antrop-González, Vélez, & Garrett, 2008; Saunders & Serna, 2004), and can include the utilization of various college resources. An example of the positives of help-seeking behavior was given by Vanessa who discussed how helpful it was for her to have a peer mentor during her first years in college.

*Vanessa:* I remember sophomore year so that was last year, I kind of was struggling in one of my classes and over winter break I called her [mentor] and was texting her the whole time, she told me it'll be okay and this is what you do. She like, step-by-step knew everything I is him needed and she gave me all the online resources. It was so nice to have someone that knew exactly what I was going through.

Through seeking support from her mentor, a trusted source, Vanessa was supported, given additional skills and encouraged to persist.

Personal and environmental factors are the two largest resources in resilience. Personal resources are attitude, personal characteristics, and motivation, while environmental resources can be support systems such a family, school, and community can translate into a reserve where Latina/o students can get their strength (Alva & Padilla, 1995; Arellano & Padilla, 1996). These resources become coping strategies that can assist better maneuvering when faced with challenges. Personality can be a significant contributor to how resilient a student will be; however, there are certain skills that can be fostered by not only parents and communities, but also by mentors, as well as educators and by schools. Teachers and school officials can provide students tools by having intentional conversations and giving guidance.

### **Programs that Assisted Students in the College Consideration Process**

Several of the women participated in college introduction, access, or mentoring programs, and one of the women participated in Upward Bound. Upward Bound's effectiveness has helped students attain the skills necessary to attend college (Fashola &



Slavin, 1998). College access programs can introduce students to colleges by coordinating college introduction activities such as college fairs, campus visits, and educating students about the college entrance and application process (The PALMS Project, 2006). Low-income first-generation Latina/o college students who participate in college access programs gain additional skills which are transferable and allow them to succeed better in a college setting (Saunders & Serna, 2004).

There are several forms of intervention and college access information programs. Involved programs such as Upward Bound may be expensive to run, but the long-term cost, such as developing students' talents, decreasing the high dropout rate, and in turn creating potential mentors for other students is well worth the investment (Fashola & Slavin, 1998). Alia was the only interviewee who participated in Upward Bound, and she credits the Upward Bound Director with being a large influence on her perspective on academic success, specifically his need for structure and wanting things to be done well.

There were also several other women who participated in programs that assisted them with college consideration and application process. (These programs were not as involved as Upward Bound; however, they still were highly beneficial.) Ana's mentoring program was coordinated by her high school, while Lola's program was coordinated by a non-profit organization in her hometown,

*Ana:* I was attending a program, it was a mentoring program for my calculus class, which helped me academically and they had this little group for seniors to help them out with the college process with applications

*Lola:* There's this program called [college introduction program] and I did it after my junior year. And they, and it was just for students in [hometown], and any other [hometown] high schools, private schools too, so I think, my group is kind of small, it was 30 of us and they took us to colleges, and they did, they went through the college application, and we had an essay ready senior year. It was a really great program. We visited Fenway schools, they took us, and they didn't take us to not great schools I mean we had a chance to go to Harvard, I missed the train then couldn't go to the Harvard tour, but they exposed us to a lot of great schools. Like really got kids excited about applying to the tougher schools and not just the reach schools or the safety schools.

Catherine and her family received assistance with her college application from a non-profit agency that provides college guidance for immigrant and first-generation college students' families,

*Catherine:* We kind of had to figure it out on our own because I'm a first-generation college student, so it was kind of tough to figure it out. Actually we went to like, I feel like what it's called [states name of a non-profit agency which assists first-generation low-income college students with college preparation] or something? It's in [state capital] and you go,

it's like a nonprofit organization, which kind of helped with the college process after.

*Interviewer:* oh okay, and is that available, I don't know anything about that program, is that available for high school students?

*Catherine:* Yeah, they kind of talk about it I guess, I guess I don't remember exactly how I knew about it, but they kind of passed out stuff to I think like juniors and like seniors.

College access programs, structured intervention programs, and mentoring programs can play a key role in high school retention and the college consideration process, as well as academic motivation (The PALMS Project, 2006; Fashola & Slavin, 1998). Having intervention and college guidance programs can foster vital skills, as well as provide necessary information and powerful direction for low-income and first-generation students on their academic path.

Preparing low-income first-generation Latina/o college students for education beyond high school should comprise of having institutionally and community organized programs that will educate these students and their families about the college entrance process as well as what to expect after students are admitted.

## VII. SUPPORTING LATINO STUDENTS

### Use of Campus Resources

In trying to gain a better understanding of the college academic resources the students utilized, the questionnaire asked “Do you use any of the resources on campus?”

The following is a summary of use of academic resources on campus used by participants:

- 9 participants reported using [the Academic Resource Office], which provides academic support services, as well as mentors and tutors for students.
- 3 participants reported specifically using tutors services at [the Academic Resource Office].
- 4 participants reporting using the Math Resource Center.
- 5 participants reported using the Writing Resource Center.
- 10 participants reported using [the Student Diversity Office] specifically for printing that was associated with coursework and studying.
- 9 participants reported participating in [the Academic Connections for Students of Color Program], which is a program that provide incoming students of color academic and social support; educating students on the available resources and support services on campus during a first week orientation and providing yearlong assistance.

Several of the participants mentioned utilization of other resources which may have been used but not recognized by other participants, meaning there may have been other participants who also used these resources but did not report it:

- 3 participants mentioned use of the Library.
- 2 participants reported using professor's office hours for extra academic help.
- 1 participant reported use of college study groups.

All of the participants reported being connected to various academic resources and support services on campus and reported frequently using academic support services. Participants also reported that the academic resources and support services on campus contributed their academic success.

This data demonstrates that all of the participants seemed to have well developed help-seeking skills. They know how to self-advocate and are equipped with understanding the value of navigating through campus and utilizing resources.

### **Institutional Role in Fostering Resilience and Retention**

Colleges are recognizing the importance of educating Hispanic families around entrance information, financial aid options, increased post-secondary education expectations, and including these topics with recruitment and orientation efforts. Colleges that are Hispanic Serving Institution—which means that minimally twenty-five percent of their enrollment are Hispanic students—are aware of the important role of engaging the family with these efforts (Santiago, 2011). For parents of first-generation college students, completing the financial aid paperwork can be a lengthy and complicated process and often this population has the least ability in knowing all that

needs to be completed (Esprivalo Harrell & Forney, 2003). The financial aid paper work may even be more challenging for parents who are immigrants who are not primarily English speaking. The lack of understudying about the cost of college can also have a negative impact the initial decision to attend college (Esprivalo Harrell & Forney, 2003). Educating parents about financial aid and receiving assistance in completing paperwork can be an important step in the college entrance process. Without assistance, parents may feel overwhelmed and uncertain about what to do. Several of the participants discussed how either they independently completed all the college paperwork or how they assisted their parents with completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Participants also discussed how they, or their parents, had to seek out additional assistance during this process.

To increase retention and degree completion for low-income first-generation college students of color, intervention programs on campus should consider a multipronged approach (Fashola & Slavin, 1998). College attendance intervention programs differ considerably, but they often do share several themes, such as personalization and creating personal bonds between teachers and students. Other intervention methods include mentoring and/or small-group intervention to encourage student's attachment to school, which is an effective method for dropout prevention (Fashola & Slavin, 1998). Educational consultant Kevin Crocket explains that retention efforts must be done systematically and proactively with the student's needs in mind. Successful retention efforts must be intentional and include collaboration between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs. A strategic retention plan must include three

components: unifying offices and personnel across campus in this effort, promote resources that exist, and assess what is working and what is not working and create action plans based on the data (as cited in Stover, 2007).

Cultural sensitivity and ongoing professional development should occur for Student Affairs and Academic Affairs personnel in retention efforts and in promoting student of color academic success (Solorzano, 2005; Mills-Novoa, 1999). At colleges, like the University of Texas – Pan American, there is a year-long training program. New faculty members participate, and educate themselves on issues such as how to be culturally sensitive to Hispanic students (Cortez, 2011). Such efforts should be going on-going through colleges and universities to be able to better serve their student population.

Students who feel they are accepted into their school community perform better academically (Campos et al., 2009). Support from friends, mentors, and the perception of the university environment as supportive play a large role in Latina/o undergraduate persistence (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005). Based on this, it is important that there be a support program that fosters a sense of belonging in institutions where Latinas/os are culturally or numerically in the minority (Campos et al., 2009).

### **Forms of School Support for Students of Color**

Extracurricular activities during high school can facilitate relationships between students and teachers, build leadership skills and self-confidence, as well as add to their repertoire of high school involvement, which may be beneficial to applicants during college admissions' consideration. While attending college, extracurricular activities can also play a significant role for minority students in adapting to a new environment and

making connections with students who have similar interests, may come from similar backgrounds, and can provide important forms of much needed support (Rivas-Drake, 2008; Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005). Several women discussed the importance of having departments or student clubs/ organizations which focus on students of color and how those relationships and support assisted them with their academics. Adri related her extracurricular involvement as part of her success at college,

*Adri:* From, from my personal experience; I know everybody sees different, from my personal experience I know that if I wasn't involved in [the Student Diversity Office], [the Latina/o Student Organization], stuff like that, than I would probably just be alone in my room all the time or, or and wouldn't get the leadership experience either, which I think is a big part [of academic success].

Several of the participants share similar beliefs with highly valuing various institutional forms of support,

*Laura:* The people that work there at [the Academic Resource Office], [the Student Diversity Office], especially [the Student Diversity Office], so they kind of deal with multicultural students on a daily bases and their events, their individual programs like [the Black Student Organization], and [the Latina/o Student Organization]. I think that helps out a lot and academic success because you, because you can be in college and you can and do academically great but it's also about having a social life and being



able to connect with other people you feel more comfortable with, because of your cultural background - is awesome!

*Vanessa:* Just going to [the Student Diversity Office] in general and seeing everybody else there, we talk and get advice on how to study. [The Academic Connections for Students of Color Program] mentors would have times to study we would meet in library just as a group, oh you can come to study, everybody would just sit there and study and we would talk and you know it was never just about academics it is about anything really.

Vanessa also discussed how [the Academic Connections for Students of Color Program] made a huge impact on her getting connected to academic and leadership opportunities in college,

*Vanessa:* I think after, because I did the [Academic Connections for Students of Color Program] here, I think it really opened up my mind to a lot of the activities and everything you can do on this campus so they really pushed us to, not only did we get here because that's a huge step, being a minority to be in college, but, being that involved in getting those leadership roles

Extracurricular activities are beneficial for students throughout their academic career, not only by increasing positive engagement with the school, but also by creating a support system with other participating members and proving leadership skills and developing self-confidence and self-esteem (Saunders & Serna, 2004; Antrop-González, Vélez, & Garrett, 2008; McMillan, & Reed, 1992). Various forms of institutional support are necessary to increase Latina/o student academic persistence and retention in college (Kane & Henderson, 2006; Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005; Consolvo, 2002). Students organization and clubs are one of the multiple ways students of color can feel supported in an institution where they are part of the minority. College programs and departments which focus on underrepresented students also play an important role in college student persistence and retention. Several participants discussed the importance of having institutional support and how such forms of support promoted their academic success.

## VIII. DEVELOPING LATINA/O STUDENT CAPITAL

### **Available Social and Cultural Capital**

As demonstrated through the concept of cultural wealth, Critical Race Theory (CRT) research comes from the perspective that communities of color can bring with them multiple strengths (Yosso, 2005). Earlier I discussed the cultural and social capital that Latinas/os can have, but in “Whose Culture has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth,” Tara Yosso describes various forms of capital, such as aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistance capital. These categories may allow for a more tangible understanding of the assets that Latina/o students can hold. I will explain each category and give examples provided by my participants during their interviews.

Aspirational capital is the ability to maintain hopes for the future. Even when faced with barriers, several of the participants discussed the importance of persevering when faced with challenges. Lily even mentioned a popular Spanish phrase “adelante pa'lante,” which means to push forward.

Linguistic capital is the attainment of intellectual and social skill through being raised within a home that speaks a language different from the dominant language. Alia described her bilingualism, being fluent in both English and Spanish, as an asset. When asked if she felt her cultural background has played any role in the way she perceived academic success, Alia answered,

*Alia:* Of course, knowing that, knowing that Spanish is my second language I feel like it's more of an advantage, because I feel like I know the stuff in my language and in somebody else's language so I'm like, I'm ahead a step from you, like I'm ahead...

*Interviewer:* So do you feel that being bilingual is an asset; it's really helpful?

*Alia:* Yes it is!

Familial capital, similar to familism/familismo, refers to cultural knowledge nurtured among familia (kin), which honors a sense of cultural and community history. For Latina/o children the family is a powerful and protective support system (Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004). All the women discussed the importance of their family as a support system and many also mentioned siblings, cousins, extended family, and friends. These familial support systems all add to their familial capital, and as demonstrated throughout the study, is directly related to the participants' academic achievement and perseverance.

Social capital, as discussed earlier, is the network of people and community resources. Parent, family, and community interrelationships and networks can provide investment in individual and human capital. These relationships and other social connections they create can provide various support systems to help navigate through institutional realms. Several of the participants (n = 10) explained that multicultural student organizations (the Student Diversity Office and the Academic Connections for

Students of Color Program) were instrumental in their concept of academic success, such as their extracurricular involvements with these student organizations and supportive departments. The connections and relationships that were built with students, staff, and faculty through these student organizations and supportive departments add to their social and navigational capital. All of the participants discussed their community connections, their participation in extracurricular activities, the relationships with mentors, faculty, staff, and several college offices, and how important networking can be. These are all components of actively accruing capital.

Navigational capital refers to skills students have in maneuvering through various institutions. Navigational capital recognizes the connections to certain networks that can facilitate navigation through different institutions such schools, the job market, health care, and the judicial systems. At colleges it can be being aware of the institution's physical geography, what departments do, who to speak with about certain issues, such as academic, financial, housing, resources, etc., as well as creating the connections necessary to enable the navigation of this sphere. All of the participants discussed their connections with college programs and departments, as well as different student clubs and organizations, which not only added to their social capital but also their navigational capital. They all seemed to be aware and well connected with the college resources available to them.

Resistant capital refers skills that are fostered through oppositional behavior that challenge inequality. Transformative resistant capital includes knowledge and behaviors that challenge the institutions and structures of racism and encourages motivation to these

oppressive structures. Similar to Valenzuela's "positive resistance," which was discussed earlier, students want to confront and have a "prove them wrong" attitude with negative stereotypes and as a way of combating social oppression (1999). Several of the participants discussed that part of their drive to be academically successful was to help prove the stereotypes wrong about Latinas/os not wanting to academically achieve.

Regardless of background, children bring their experience, cultural knowledge and their accumulated family and community knowledge that allow them to negotiate and succeed in everyday life (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Children of color bring with them various forms of capital rooted in the knowledge that their homes and communities have provided. Working from a strengths-based approach, it is important to consider the assets that Hispanic students bring with them to their academic environment instead of considering cultural differences as a deficit (Jodry, Robles-Piña, & Nichter, 2004-2005; Hassinger & Plourde, 2005).

Saunders' and Serna's study on first-generation Latina/o college students found that Latinas/os are as likely as White non-Hispanic students to enroll in four-year institutions after adding social and cultural capital that first-generation Latina/o students possess to control for issues related to financial resources (Saunders & Serna, 2004). Considering Yosso's categories, schools may be able to recognize various strengths that students bring with them and additional forms of capital that can be tapped into as well as fostered. If schools work from a perspective that focuses on the assets Latina/o students have and build on the capital that already exists, they can promote and increase students' resilience.

### **Parents Promoting Networking Behavior**

One way of measuring social capital can be the relationship one has which connects them to potential resources (Saunders & Serna, 2004). Students' social capital and navigational capital is increased by their connections with teachers, counselors and school administrators. Social capital is crucial in accessing college and can be augmented by various sources, including adults who can facilitate network connections (Saunders & Serna, 2004).

Lack of connections outside the community may restrict some Latinos, and may inhibit them from making important career connections which can facilitate future opportunities. Parents who may not have the experience of going to college can still instill the importance of school and opportunity. Latina/o parents may try to connect their children with mentors in their community who can assist them as they gain insight into college (Ceballo, 2004). Parents can encourage their children to take advantage of free services that schools provide, which can help them academically succeed. Recognizing that available services such as after-school help and tutoring services, give their children not only additional forms of academic guidance, but also connect them with potential mentors who can give them direction toward college and postsecondary education (Antrop-González, Vélez, & Garrett, 2008). Instilling these behaviors can promote academic resilience and aid in facilitating career connections.

Some Hispanic parents have insight into the importance of educating their children about the advantages of establishing a social network. This can help them maneuver through education as well as having benefits after obtaining a degree (Ceja,

2004). Two of the participants discussed the importance of creating connections for future success. These messages are often stressed by Nicole's parents, who encourage her to seek out a mentor that can help give her guidance. Based on these messages, Nicole understands how networking during college can further assist her in her career aspirations. Nicole explained,

*Nicole:* My family has been really encouraging about making contacts with people especially like trying to find a mentor here [referring to college].

*Interviewer:* Okay.

*Nicole:* They've really been pushing me towards that, I haven't really found a mentor, I have people that I can talk to, but since I don't want to, I don't know what I want to do with my life yet, I can't really have a specific person being like okay do this and then this.

Latina/o parents can foster the importance of connections, asking for guidance, and help-seeking behavior (Antrop-González, Vélez, & Garrett, 2008). They can urge their children to connect with support services, resources available on campus, and institutional agents that will facilitate their academic success and retention (Antrop-González, Vélez, & Garrett, 2008).

Fostering the importance of building a network in college can assist young Latinos in their future careers. Yolanda seems to understand the importance of networking for future success. When asked about academic success, she discussed how



networking can prove to be important when considering access to jobs and career opportunities.

*Yolanda:* I don't think it has so much to do with your GPA [discussing her thoughts on academic success], or the grades you get but I do think it has to do with networking, and the relationships you build in college, and what you see, the access that you seek. And if you, I don't know, use those.

*Interviewer:* Okay, so networks?

*Yolanda:* Networking and building up your résumé, doing things that make you marketable in whatever environment that you want to be in, I think that has a lot to do with it.

Yolanda did not reveal where she received messages that networking can be highly beneficial especially with career navigation. Yolanda may have been given messages from parents, extended family, friends, institutional agents, or possibly various other sources. Also, she may have arrived at this conclusion on her own. Regardless of where these messages may have originated, Yolanda understood that there are many advantages to networking.

Instilling the importance of networking behavior can have long-term benefits related to navigating institutions and future career opportunities. Fostering these skills early on can connect low-income first-generation Latino college students to important assets and capital building opportunities.

### **Schools Promoting Networking Behaviors**

Martinez, DeGarmo and Eddy discuss the importance of schools putting forth more systematic efforts to integrate families and communities in fostering problem solving, networking, advocacy, and the mobilization of resources for their students (2004). This system will better prepare low-income first-generation students for college. I believe that this is necessary to create the most effective environment where Latinas/os can prosper.

To succeed in college students must learn a set of skills that are seldom taught (The PALMS Project, 2006). During high school, college-related information is essential when considering post-secondary education (Liou, Antrop-Gonzalez, & Cooper, 2009). Preparing first-generation Latina/o students or “getting ready” for college can include socializing them about what attending college and succeeding at college is like. This “high-stakes” information prepares students, specifically underrepresented students, for college entrance (Liou, Antrop-Gonzalez, & Cooper, 2009). High-stakes information includes getting to know the campus academically and socially, and knowing how to navigate through the institution’s physical geography, i.e., not only knowing academic buildings but where administrative offices are located (Oliva, 2004). High stakes information builds on students’ navigational capital. First-generation college students need a system of support to assist them with their transition and in adjusting to college (Freeman, 1999).

Forming relationships early in college can play an important role in transitioning and adjusting to college. It is essential for first-generation Latinas/os college students not

only to be able to create a support network, but also to sustain these relationships, which can play an important role in navigating and persisting in college (Saunders & Serna, 2004). Reciprocal relationships can add to one's network as well as add to one's social and navigational capital (Antrop-González, Vélez, & Garrett, 2008).

Resilient students are adept at recognizing when they need help and seeking it out (McMillan, & Reed, 1992). Also, when compared to White students, Hispanic and "other" students are more likely to seek out support and encouragement from mentors and to consider mentoring as important (Hu & Ma, 2010). For Latinos this may be due to being raised in an environment where interpersonal relationships are valued.

First-generation college students must feel supported to excel in their academic environment (Kane & Henderson, 2006) and the use of academic support services increases students' success in course work (Kane & Henderson, 2006). When considering retention efforts and encouraging graduation persistence, university offices should have a collaborative effort to support student's success (Consolvo, 2002).

Help-seeking strategies can give students a mechanism to find resolutions to problems with the help of others who can give guidance (Saunders & Serna, 2004). Fostering help-seeking behavior can enable students to identify resources which can guide them during challenging times (Caldwell & Siwatu, 2003) as well as create self-advocacy skills. Working from a perspective that encourages Latina/o students to utilize resources and make important connections with institutional agents can promote life-long asset building behavior.

## IX. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### **Limitations with Generalizability**

Based on a relatively small sample size, that participants are undergraduate Latina students at a mid-sized Northeastern public university, and that all of the participants reside in the Northeastern United States, the findings may be limited in generalizability.

### **Discussion**

All participants had various sources of support in their lives which provided motivation for their academic success. Achievement and perseverance (n =12) defined academic success and not necessarily performance, such as attaining a high GPA, but rather a combination of elements. Academic success was defined in a variety of ways, but affiliative achievement was brought up multiple times, and how academic success was related to their family, either in the creation of their definition or as part of the expectations they hold for themselves. The majority of participants (n =12) discussed how their family's support and encouragement played a vital role not only in their academic success but how their definition of academic success was created. Also, the majority of the participants (n = 10) hold themselves to very high standards with regards to being academically successful. Nine of the 13 participants reported having formal or informal mentors in their lives that influenced the way they perceive academic success. These mentoring relationships played a very important role in providing the participants

with academic guidance and support, especially related to college preparation and transition.

Persevering when faced with challenges and pushing through barriers to achieve goals was brought up several times. Many of the participants explained how dealing with perceived barriers can make someone more adept when faced with challenges. The majority of participants received messages from their family members and other support systems about the importance of persistence and resilience.

Participants explained how their parents encouraged college as a means for upward mobility and financial stability, which was a belief that participants shared, and was also a motivator in college. A college degree, which facilitates career and life opportunities that might not be attainable without a degree and a college education, which might allow for more career and life satisfaction based on being able to find fulfilling work, were also themes that arose.

Gender and cultural background was seen as playing a significant role in how 12 out of the 13 participants perceive academic success. The 13th participant said she was not sure if gender or her cultural background had played any role in how she perceives academic success. Also, many of the participants demonstrated “positive resistance” or a “prove them wrong” attitude and wanted to dispel myths and negative stereotypes about Latina/o low academic achievement by academically achieving and being successful.

Based on the participants’ reported experience and the literature that was reviewed, families must be recognized as being paramount in students’ academic success and educational trajectory.

The majority of the participants also identified mentors who played an important role in their pathway to and at college. Strong mentor relationships when parents have not attended college, or have not attended college in the United States, can be very important for students' persistence (Esprivalo Harrell & Fomey, 2003).

Through their various supportive relationships and the knowledge that these participants had obtained, they had accrued a variety of different forms of capital which helped facilitate their path to college and in creating networks that promoted their academic success. The participants reported being well connected at college; utilizing various resources and participating in various extracurricular activities, which continued to add to their social and navigational capital. These women employed valuable skills such as help-seeking behaviors and finding a support network during their time at college.

Gaining this understanding of how a group of undergraduate Latinas defined academic success, where this self-definition came from, mentors that have influenced this definition, how their ethnicity and gender has played any role in the way they perceive academic success, and their use of help-seeking skills has created possible implications for institutional consideration and future research.

### **Implications**

The cultural values that are often emphasized in the United States are related to individualism, self-sufficiency, autonomy, competition and meritocracy (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Although these values are endorsed, the social networks that come with middle-class Whites' lives through their education, professional networks and social connections,

give them a high amount of privilege and an advantage to attain success “independently.” For a low-income Latinas/os to accumulate the social capital that is related to network building, specifically related to career connections, networking skills and behaviors should be fostered early on. Latina/o values encourage personalismo and community connections, so creating and nurturing friendships and building additional connections have been encouraged by their culture from an early age and may seem like second nature.

The various forms of support the participants had prior to college helped prepare them for college, facilitated their college application process and their transition into college. These women brought with them multiple assets. Asset building through relationships, networking, and promoting help-seeking behaviors seem to be the prominent way to prepare a growing number of Latinas/os for postsecondary education.

Working from an asset-based perspective and valuing Latina/o cultural values, there should be encouragement for young Latinas/os to foster supportive relationship with peers, teachers, school personnel, administrators, and other institutional agents. Young Latinas/os should be encouraged to collaborate with others when opportunities present themselves. By doing so young Latinas/os can become skilled in creating and sustaining important relationships that can add to their social and navigational capital and future career success.

Promoting help-seeking behaviors can also be important, not only when considering student resilience and retention, but also adding to students’ networks. Promoting help-seeking behavior, such as urging students to reach out when they need

assistance, utilize resources that are available to them early, including academic and tutoring services, and making important institutional connections (with staff, faculty, and other institutional agents), can be very beneficial for them. Building relationships with school professionals can assist students with future recommendations, creating mentor relationships, making contacts, job opportunities, and important skill building in professional relationships, and many more benefits. Ultimately, promoting help-seeking behavior can increase Latina/o students' available capital and can be very valuable in their future.

Interdependence is highly valued in Latina/o families and communities. It is important for academic and student support services to collaborate in ways which can increase first-generation students' academic success (Kane & Henderson, 2006). Stanton-Salazar describes the term "bridging" as "the process of acting as human bridge to gatekeepers, to social networks, and to opportunities for exploring various 'mainstream' institutions (e.g., university campuses)," or in other words acting as a connector for students and potential networks (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 11). Creating a bridge between academic and student services can facilitate student's academic, personal, and career needs for students (Consolvo, 2002).

Schools can be important institutional agents in connecting students to special services, resources, and educational opportunities. This should not be left to one specific department, such as an office that focuses on student diversity issues or the admissions office, but rather a collaborative institutional effort that is promoted from the top administration to all offices. Creating supportive networks with educators, school



personnel and administrators at every level is needed in creating a system that promotes academic perseverance for students who may face various challenges due to coming from a different cultural perspective, having parents who do not have strong understanding of the United States' educational system, and may be low-income or lack resources (Larrance, 2007). Schools should also take the initiative to educate parents about the benefits of encouraging their children to take advantage of these resources so that they will add to their children's social and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Previous beliefs that Latina/o parents are not invested in their children's academic success have been dispelled and parents should be considered as willing and eager partners in their children's academic achievement. Gaining this understanding is the first step in creating important alliances that will benefit Latino students.

### **Recommendations for Practice and Research**

#### **Recommendations for Practice**

Tapping into student's potential and talent should be approached by various retention methods. Through collaborative effort and supportive relationships, Latina/o students are more motivated to achieve in school and will more likely persist. To promote academic success and help students develop as leaders, educational institutions should focus on drawing on the assets and resources, such as families and communities, which are already available to the students (The PALMS Project, 2006).

High schools should consider a holistic approach when trying to assist their students in reaching their academic potential and preparing them for college. This includes advocacy, tutoring and connecting them with academic resources, counseling

and other support services, educating them about their health and wellness, and parent involvement (Larrance, 2007). Social ties with institutional agents can be life-altering for low-income first-generation college students who do not have anyone to educate them about navigating college (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

I will make various recommendations based on the participants' experiences and ways that schools and communities can foster behaviors in students as well as create opportunities which will promote low-income first-generation college students retention:

- Opportunities for formal mentoring relationships should be coordinated through schools, which would allow for advocacy and individual attention. If we want to better prepare our students for future success we should be connecting them to mentors and other potential capital building opportunities.
- Educating parents early on about encouraging their children's academic achievement and the importance of supportive messages. Consider parents eager partners in wanting their children to academically succeed, and create alliances with these families even if an interpreter is needed.
- Foster help-seeking behaviors by encouraging Latino students to get involved early on in different clubs and organizations, getting to know the campus and where offices and departments are located as well as what their functions are within the first weeks after arriving at the institution. Also, encourage students to reach out and find support immediately when they realize they need it.
- When recruiting low-income first-generation college students college Admissions Offices should intentionally work with school guidance counselors and the

community organizations to connect with parents and provide assistance with completing financial aid forms and additional college paperwork.

- Academic Affairs and Student Affairs should be collaborating on efforts to retain students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students. Creating a retention committee which focuses on for vulnerable students, as well as a college strategic plan with specific steps and a timeline for implementation. Vulnerable student retention should be a university effort, and all departments should be involved and on the same page.
- Teacher in-service trainings on issues related to culturally sensitive of Hispanic students, low-income students, and first-generation college students, as well as the intersections of these identities, and how to create alliances with parents and community members to promote student achievement.
- Similarly, training programs for college faculty members educating them on issues related to cultural sensitive to Hispanic students, low-income students, and first-generation college students, as well as the intersections of these identities.
- High school teachers, school officials and administrators should take on formal and informal mentoring roles when opportunities arise and give guidance to students who need some direction, keeping in mind that students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students often need additional support and guidance to be prepared for college and being college ready.
- Similarly, college faculty, and college personal (both Academic Affairs and Student Affairs) should take on formal and informal mentoring roles when

opportunities arise; recognizing that students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students often need additional support and guidance in college.

A multipronged support system includes school personnel actively and intentionally bridging relationships between students and other institutional agents across the campus. This intentionality must have a well-defined strategy, which includes creating a vision for your institution, and constructing a plan to get there. A strategic plan has multiple steps and a timeline. Educational institutions should evaluate what is working and what might not be working for your institution through assessment. Assessment includes various components, and should include getting students' honest feedback about their perceptions/experiences (getting feedback from targeted group is most relevant). It is important to recognize problem areas, create goals and an objective, formulate an action plan that has clear steps in addressing these areas of concern, and have everyone on the same page with the process and what needs to be achieved. After the objective has been met there should be further assessment, reevaluating if the new system is actually working, what needs to be tweaked, or if additional issues (or new issues) exist, and how to address them.

#### Recommendations for Further Research

Latinas experience is quite different from Latinos, and most likely this is due not only to cultural values and parental and community socialization, but also due to issues related to racism and sexism (Cammarota, 2004). Because the study was limited to Hispanic females, conducting a study that focuses on undergraduate Latinos (Hispanic

males) may shed light on better ways to serve this population. Alva's and Padilla's study discusses that Latinos are more likely to attribute their academic success to hard work and ability, unlike Latinas who more often attribute academic success to environmental factors, such as family (1995). The findings from such a study could prove important in retention efforts specifically oriented toward Latino boys and men.

## X. CONCLUSION

The importance of cultural identity, familial support, resilience, perseverance, and goal achievement in relation to academic success were all important themes which arose during this study. All of the participants had various forms of support to encourage their academic achievement and foster their educational persistence. Beliefs about resilience and persistence were discussed continuously throughout the interviews. For many of the participants, academic success translates into to future success as a means for upward mobility and financial stability and that a college education will allow for more career and life satisfaction based on being able to find fulfilling work. For most participants (n =12), academic success is not necessarily related to performance such as attaining a high GPA, but rather a combination of elements. Academic success was defined in a variety of ways, but affiliative achievement was brought up multiple times, and how academic success relates to their family, either in the creation of their definition or as part of the expectations that they held for themselves. Family is perceived as paramount in the participants' academic achievement.

Twelve of the 13 women believe that their cultural background, as well as being a Hispanic woman, has influenced their perspective on academic success. Many of the participants also discussed "positive resistance" or having a "prove them wrong" attitude and want to dispel myths and negative stereotypes about Latina/o low academic achievement by academically achieving and being successful.

Based on themes that arose during the interviews, several recommendations have been made for educational institutions. Recommendations include, promoting asset building for young Latinas/os, and providing direction for Latinas/os who are interested in attending college, how to better prepare these students for college, and assisting them and their families in navigating the process.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A - Interview Questions

For confidentiality and to protect your privacy we request that you choose a fictitious name with which you can be identified, or we can assign one: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is your age?
2. What is your class year (i.e., first year, sophomore, etc...)?
3. What is your college major?
4. Why did you choose to attend [this university]?
5. Do you remember just about what age you started considering going to college?
6. Can you please describe what (or who) encouraged you to think about college?
7. While in high school did you participate in any college access programs (meaning a program that informed you or your family about the college application and/or entrance process)? If so, please describe it.
8. What is *your* definition of academic success?
9. What did you think inspired your definition (of academic success)?
10. Do you feel like you fit into your definition of academic success? Please explain.
11. Do you believe that a person's academic success during college can play a role in her/his life after college? If yes, how?
12. Did you receive any messages about academic success from your family? If you did, what were the messages?
13. Have you had any mentors in your life that encouraged your perspective on academic success? If yes, who? You can state the relationship (i.e. sister, coach, mother, spiritual leader, teacher, etc.); please do not give a specific name.
14. If you had a mentor(s), what were the messages your mentor(s) gave you around the topic of academic success?
15. Has your cultural background has played any role in the way you perceive academic success? Please explain.
16. Do you feel that being a woman who is Latina or Hispanic has played any role in the way you perceive academic success? Please explain.
17. Do you use any of the academic resources on campus? If yes, which ones?
18. If you do (or have) used the academic resources on campus, has their assistance contributed to your current academic success. If yes, how? If no, how not?
19. If you do not use any of the academic resources on campus, can you please explain why?
20. May I contact you if there are further questions in regards to your self-definition or perception around academic success? If yes, please provide an email address:



APPENDIX C - IRB Approval Letter

University of New Hampshire

Research Integrity Services, Service Building  
51 College Road, Durham, NH 03824-3585  
Fax: 603-862-3564

14-Sep-2011

Rodrigues, Carla Machado  
MALS Program, Horton SSC  
Residential Life  
5 Quad Way  
Durham, NH 03824

**IRB #:** 5257

**Study:** Undergraduate Latinas' Self-Definition of Academic Success

**Approval Date:** 12-Sep-2011

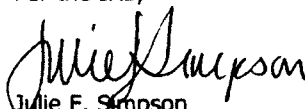
The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has reviewed and approved the protocol for your study as Expedited as described in Title 45, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 46, Subsection 110.

**Approval is granted to conduct your study as described in your protocol for one year from the approval date above.** At the end of the approval period, you will be asked to submit a report with regard to the involvement of human subjects in this study. If your study is still active, you may request an extension of IRB approval.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined in the attached document, *Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving Human Subjects*. (This document is also available at <http://unh.edu/research/irb-application-resources>.) Please read this document carefully before commencing your work involving human subjects.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to contact me at 603-862-2003 or [Julie.simpson@unh.edu](mailto:Julie.simpson@unh.edu). Please refer to the IRB # above in all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,

  
Julie F. Simpson  
Director

cc: File  
Ogembo, Justus