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# Superando Barreras: Exploring Barriers Mexican-American Women Overcame as They Pursued a Higher Education

Emma Santa Maria

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SUPERANDO BARRERAS: EXPLORING BARRIERS MEXICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN  
OVERCAME AS THEY PURSUED A HIGHER EDUCATION

by

EMMA ROMO CARREON SANTA MARIA, MA

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of the University of the Incarnate Word  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2018

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2018

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It is with great pleasure that I acknowledge the thirteen (13) amazing women who became my study. Each of you have overcome so many barriers, and your stories left me speechless. The strength you found within yourselves when it seemed as if the road had come to an end at certain points in your life is admirable. Thank you for sharing your stories with me and for letting me walk alongside you. I consider each of you a friend, and I commend you for making a path for those of us following in your footsteps. You are strong, brilliant, and kind women who I know will continue to break boundaries and be leaders in this country.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS – Continued

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Emma Romo Carreon Santa Maria

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my creator, God. Without you, I am nothing. You instilled this dream in my soul for a purpose, and I pray that you continue to illuminate my path so that I can do your will and never my own. I would not have survived this journey without your comfort and shining light during difficult and dark times.

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Dad, my soldier. It never failed, you were always there giving me the “atta girl” I needed to feel good. Even if I stumbled along the way, you would smile and celebrate a new journey with me. To this day, you are there when I need you, and this journey started with your help. I treasure you, and I thank you for always working from sunup to sundown without complaining so that we could have what we needed in life. Thank you for everything. I love you.

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## DEDICATION – Continued

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Finally, I dedicate this work to all of my Mexican-American brothers and sisters who will overcome barriers of their own in many different forms. Know that you are not alone in this world. God is with you. For those who will cross the border and face death in doing so, I pray that you and your loved ones, for whom you make the sacrifice, will prosper and be blessed in this great country. There will be some who will not survive the journey, but know that your true journey will begin when you enter the gates of heaven. You will live the life you so desperately fought to find. Que Dios los bendiga (May God bless you).



SUPERANDO BARRERAS: EXPLORING BARRIERS MEXICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN  
OVERCAME AS THEY PURSUED A HIGHER EDUCATION

Emma Romo Carreon Santa Maria

University of the Incarnate Word, 2018

Academic achievement in school is a promise for a better future and provides stability for a family. With a growing Mexican-American population in the United States, the need for more research on academic achievement for this demographic is evident. The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory qualitative research was to explore the perceived barriers 13 Mexican-American women overcame as they pursued a higher education. In addition, the sub-question focused on resources used to overcome perceived barriers. Participants were Mexican-American women who completed their terminal or professional degree between 2010–2015. The research design was exploratory and was conducted via an inductive qualitative research approach by using the constructivist grounded theory research design. The constructivist grounded theory design lends itself to be co-constructed by the experience of participants, as well as the researcher. Constructivist grounded theory allowed me to examine the information and co-construct a theory based on different variables connected to each participant. Themes and words were interpretations of the data and are believed to be true. The primary question and sub-question used in the interviews led to answers that shaped the lives of each participant. Open-ended questions allowed participants to express themselves while providing useful information about the experience as Mexican-American women who pursued, and achieved, a higher education.

The constant reoccurrence of adaptation was evident in this study. At different points in their lives, these women adapted to their changing life situations. In order to keep situations moving in a positive direction, these women needed to search for internal strength. All participants encompassed the ability to analyze their situation and identify methods of adapting to change(s). The process of adaptation emphasizes a reflective approach to the circumstance or situation to overcome the affect it has on the individual. Attending and reacting to barriers minimized the long-term affect they had on women in this study. Participants in this study experienced constant transformation. As described by participants, they needed to keep going no matter what. When faced with a challenging situation, fears were faced and the focus remained on the goal. Women in this study reflected on and interpreted the struggles they faced at different times along their journey. In order for transformation to take place, a change (learning) must occur. Participants transformed along their journey. Professional actualization was seen as reaching the end goal of obtaining a professional degree. The pathway to professional actualization was not linear. Not all participants went directly to college after high school. The educational journey took determination and resilience. Through the cultivation of relationships, these women were able to overcome obstacles identified. Those pathways proved to be essential in the success of this group. Professional actualization occurred through the cultivation of relationships.

The substantive theory for this study was termed, *Cultivating Relationships as a Pathway to Professional Actualization for Mexican-American Women Pursing a Higher Education*. Cultivating relationships was something that provided a positive environment for participants. Mentors and Hispanic organizations were the connections that supported a nurturing environment conducive to learning. Each participant mentioned a relationship that provided

continued support (i.e., mentor or Hispanic organization). The need to form relationships appeared early in the interview process. Forming relationships with colleagues, faculty, staff, and administration personnel supported students when help was needed most. Barriers identified in this study may be common among other Mexican-American and Hispanic women or women and men of other ethnicities. Resources utilized by these women are key components, potentially, to help more. This study added to the current body of knowledge in a positive way by identifying resources proven to be successful for this group. Mexican-American women need more exposure to successful women who have overcome barriers and continued to excel in every aspect of their career. Hispanic women may benefit from identifying with someone who they admire.

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## **Chapter 1: Hispanics and Education**

### **Context of the Study**

Academic achievement is a promise for a better future and provides stability for a family. The effort placed toward academic achievement in the early years of education creates a foundation for students to build upon as they continue their education. It is imperative that we provide support and resources for this demographic as they pursue a higher education. The 2015 Factbook on the Condition of Latinos in Education provided a statistical breakdown of graduate education among different groups in 2013. Latinos are the lowest achievement group of doctoral degrees.

With an increasingly visible Mexican-immigrant population in places outside the American Southwest, scholars and others have begun to turn their attention to the profile, trends, and impact of this group, as well as the implications of each at the national and local levels (Covarrubias & Laura, 2014, p. 77). Parental involvement in academic achievement is essential for Hispanic students (Altschul, 2011). In the early years, the comfort of a parent providing support while students completed homework or researched different career paths would encourage students to continue on their journey knowing that there was support on the home front. With a good education, employment will be easier to obtain for job seekers. Obtaining employment without an education is becoming more difficult due to the number of applicants for one position. With a growing Mexican-American community in the United States, the need for more research on educational achievement is evident. As Gonzales et al. (2008) stated, “Latinos of Mexican national heritage account for almost 60% of U.S. Latinos and a substantial portion of this growth rate” (p. 151). In support of this statement, Roach (2006) mentioned, “demographics predict that the United States could become a non-white nation by year 2050. The country’s

long-term economic and social prospect depends in part on boosting the achievement rates of Latinos and other students” (p. 27).

Ream (2005) noted, “over the next 20 years, the number of U.S. Latinos, the vast majority who are of Mexican descent, will approach 60 million” (p. 215). The population growth rate is rapidly increasing, and yet there is limited research on how successful Hispanics met the goals they set for themselves. The future of this country depends on identifying contributing factors in the lives of successful Hispanics.

Uncovering the stories of the past, whether as fully-realized accomplishment or aborted attempt, remains a useful endeavor to those of us who are concerned about educational policies and schooling practices that frequently are less than optimal for Latino/a children. (Barrera, 2006, p. 44)

Insight on how the education system, or lack of resources, failed students during their educational journey would provide a framework for future research.

### **Need for Education**

“Hispanic Americans are the largest- and fastest- growing minority group in the U.S., yet their higher education enrollment and graduation rates lag behind those of other ethnic groups” (Devall, Vail, & Resendez, 2005, p. 50). As stated by Olivares (2011), “despite being the largest growing minority segment in the United States, Hispanics still possess the lowest college graduation rate of any ethnic group” (p. 11). The lack of interest in education among Hispanics is an indicator that a common issue among the group has not been identified nor studied.

Given the current unstable economic conditions in the United States, a college degree has turned into a necessary commodity for individuals nationwide, particularly those of Hispanic descent. The necessity calls for a focus on successful mentoring of Hispanic students in higher education. The in-depth understanding of salient issues, realities, and struggles encountered by Hispanic college students is warranted to fully understand the complex lives of this diverse group, and are of particular importance to counselors and student affairs professionals. (Storlie, Moreno, & Portman, 2014, p. 66)

Society has a concern with the imbalance of education among ethnic groups. “Policy makers are especially concerned about persistently high dropout rates among U.S. Latinos, the largest minority population in the United States” (Ream & Rumberger, 2008, p. 109). In Figure 1, the U.S. Department of Education (2016) provides the dropout rates between 1990 and 2014 by race/ethnicity. The information indicates that although Hispanic dropout rates have declined since 1990, this ethnic group still drops out of school at a significantly higher rate than any other ethnic group recorded.

As mentioned by Krogstad with the Pew Research Center (2016),

Over the past decade, the Hispanic high school dropout rate has dropped dramatically. The rate reached a new low in 2014, dropping from 32% in 2000 to 12% in 2014 among those ages 18 to 24. This helped lower the national dropout rate from 12% to 7% over the same time period – also a new low. Even so, the Hispanic dropout rate remains higher than that of blacks (7%), whites (5%) and Asians (1%). (p. 2)

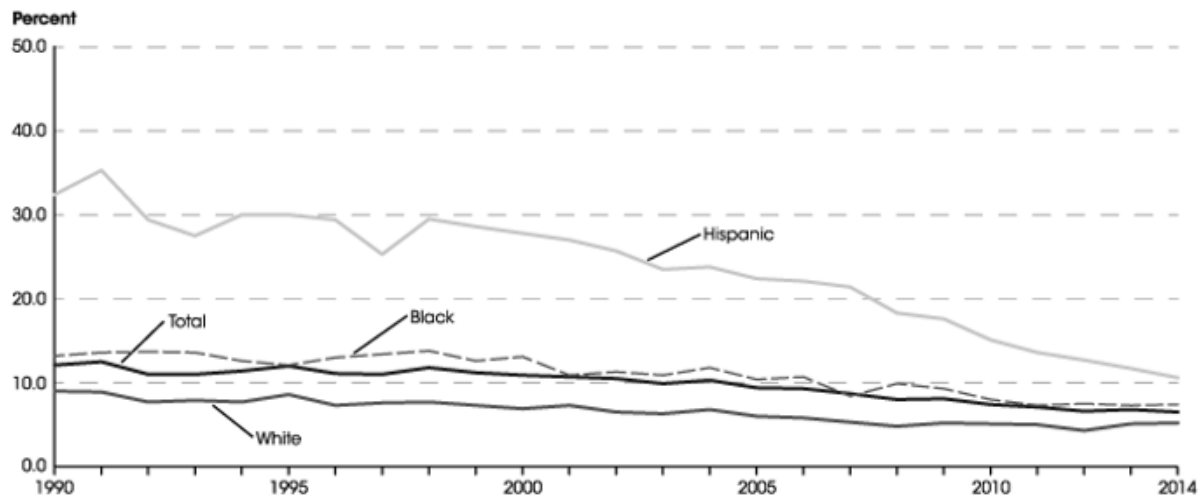
Mickelson and Potochnick (2006) noted, “achievement gaps between Latinos and non-Latino whites have narrowed over the last 20 years, but they persist nonetheless” (p. 636). Research has been done on the decline of academic achievement, but the problem has yet to be identified.

“The mounting statistics on the underachievement of Latino students reveal the need for researchers, educators, and policy makers to address the problem of how schools are failing Latino students” (Bae, Holloway, & Bempechat, 2008, p. 211). With the Hispanic population being the fastest growing group in the country, identifying keys factors that hinder the desire to learn for Hispanics is crucial to the survival of the U.S. economy.

In support of that statement, Carranza, You, Chhuon, and Hudley (2009) explained that “researchers, practitioners, and policymakers are in critical need for information to better understand and serve” the Hispanic student population in academic endeavors” (p. 313).

“Compounding the dismal representation of Latinas/os earning doctorates in the United States is

a small literature base describing the experiences of Latinas/os in doctoral programs” (p. 541). With little to no information addressing experiences of this demographic as they pursue higher education, the gap in educational attainment will be difficult to close.



*Figure 1.* Status dropout rates of 16- to 24-year-olds, by race/ethnicity: 1990 through 2014. Reprinted from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center of Education Statistics. Fast Facts. Retrieved May 1, 2016 from <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=16>. Copyright 2016.

In Table 1, the U.S. Department of Education (2012) provided percentages of degrees awarded per ethnicity during the periods of 1999–2000 and 2009–2010. The figure highlights degrees conferred to females in each race/ethnicity. In this table, a doctor’s degree has been used for other professional degrees. Hispanic females are second to the lowest in achieving a doctor’s degree among all the other race categories.

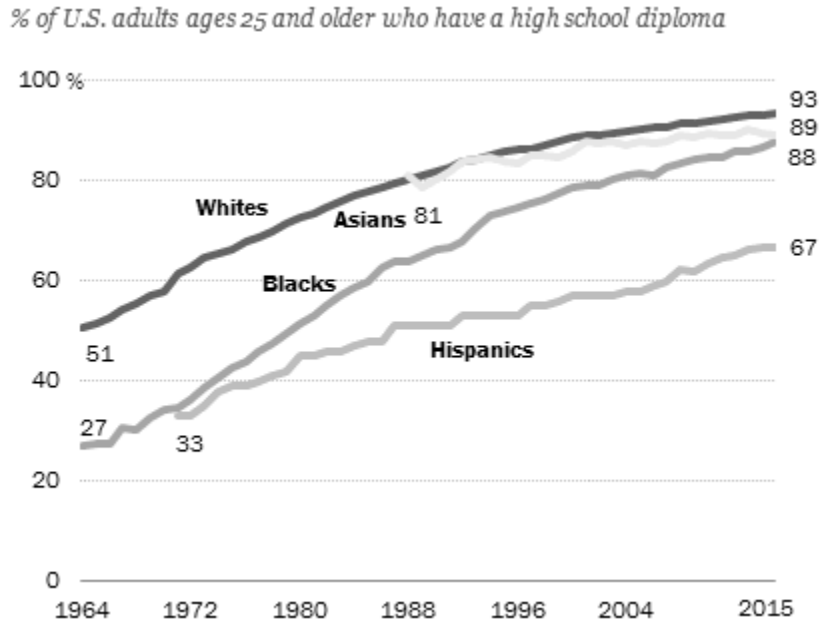
In Figure 2, the Pew Research Center (2016) mentioned that other ethnicities are narrowing the gap of high school completion rates for individuals over 25 years of age. Hispanics are still in a deficit.

Table 1

*Degrees Conferred by Sex and Race*

Number of degrees conferred to U.S. residents by degree-granting institutions, percentage distribution of degrees conferred, and percentage of degrees conferred to females, by level of degree and race/ethnicity. Academic years 1999–2000 and 2009–2010.						
Level of degree and race/ethnicity	Number		Percentage Distribution		Percent Conferred to Females	
	1999–2000	2009–2010	1999–2000	2009–2010	1999–2000	2009–2010
Associates Degree	554,845	833,337	100	100	60.3	62.0
White	408,772	552,863	73.7	66.3	59.8	60.9
Black	60,221	113,905	10.9	13.7	65.2	68.3
Hispanic	51,573	112,211	9.3	13.5	59.4	62.4
Asian/Pacific Islander	27,782	44,021	5.0	5.3	56.8	58.5
American Indian/Alaska Native	6,497	10,337	1.2	1.2	65.8	64.9
Bachelor's Degree	1,198,809	1,602,480	100.0	100.0	57.5	57.4
White	929,106	1,167,499	77.5	72.9	56.6	56.0
Black	108,013	164,844	9.0	10.3	65.7	65.9
Hispanic	75,059	140,316	6.3	8.8	59.6	60.7
Asian/Pacific Islander	77,912	117,422	6.5	7.3	54.0	54.5
American Indian/Alaska Native	8,719	12,399	0.7	0.8	60.3	60.7
Master's Degree	406,761	611,693	100.0	100.0	60.0	62.6
White	324,981	445,038	79.9	72.8	59.6	61.8
Black	36,595	76,458	9.0	12.5	68.2	71.1
Hispanic	19,384	43,535	4.8	7.1	60.1	64.3
Asian/Pacific Islander	23,538	42,072	5.8	7.0	52.0	54.3
American Indian/Alaska Native	2,263	3,960	0.6	0.6	62.7	64.3
Doctor's Degree	106,494	140,505	100.0	100.0	47.0	53.3
White	82,984	104,426	77.9	74.3	45.4	51.4
Black	7,080	10,417	6.6	7.4	61.0	65.2
Hispanic	5,039	8,085	4.7	5.8	48.4	55.0
Asian/Pacific Islander	10,684	16,625	10.0	11.8	48.8	56.5
American Indian/Alaska Native	707	952	0.7	0.7	52.9	54.8





*Figure 2. High school completion rates by ethnicity. Reprinted from the Pew Research Center, Social Demographic Trends. Retrieved December 4, 2016, from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/06/27/1-demographic-trends-and-economic-well-being/>. Copyright 2016.*

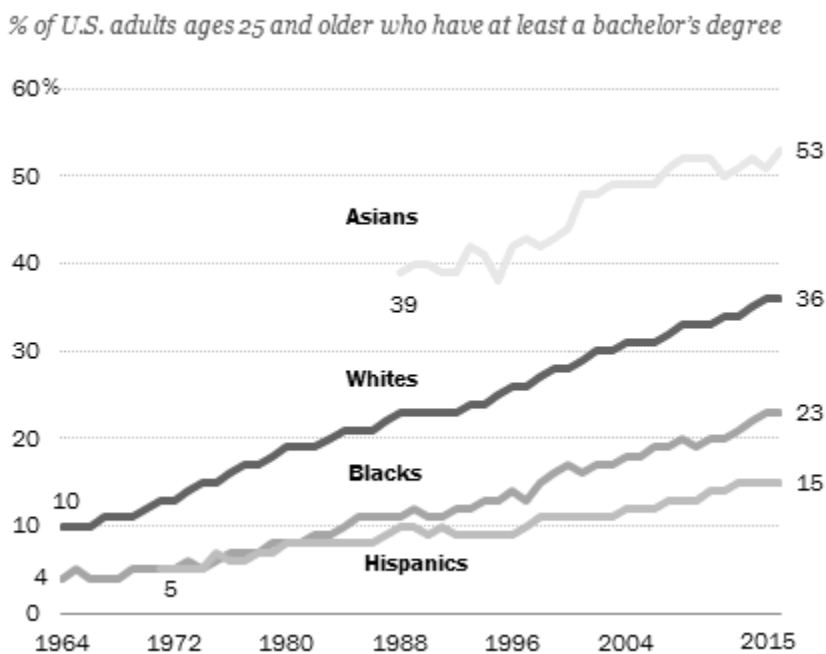
### **Barriers and Family Expectations**

Moving toward academic achievement or success in any field for Mexican-Americans and other Hispanics is often more difficult when compared to other ethnicities due to commonly identified barriers. Schneider, Martinez, and Owens (2006) stated:

For Hispanics in the United States, the educational experience is one of accumulated disadvantage. Many Hispanic students begin formalized schooling without the economic and social resources that many other students receive, and schools are often ill equipped to compensate for these initial disparities. For Hispanics, initial disadvantages often stem from parents' immigrant and socioeconomic status and their lack of knowledge about the U.S. education system. As Hispanic students proceed through the schooling system, inadequate school resources and their weak relationships with their teachers continue to undermine their academic success. (p. 179)

At times, Hispanic parents send their children to school and learn about the education system as the child progresses. In a sense, the parents and children learn together. As students enter more advanced grades and college, parents are no longer able to provide the academic support once given due to the unknown content.

In Figure 3, it is evident that Hispanics also lag behind in obtaining college degrees.



*Figure 3.* College completion rates by ethnicity. Reprinted from the Pew Research Center, Social Demographic Trends. Retrieved December 4, 2016, from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/06/27/1-demographic-trends-and-economic-well-being/>. Copyright 2016.

Lim (2009) mentioned, “the perception of barriers prevents Mexican-American students from achieving their ultimate educational goals” (p. 11). Females, in particular, are not encouraged as often as their male siblings to set or reach education goals. Other barriers also minimized educational attainment for Hispanic women. Bond, Gray, Baxley, Cason, and Denke (2008) identified barriers such as advising and financial support by stating, “financial support from scholarships, family, and employment was essential to student progression. A major academic advising barrier was the lack of specific information provided at the high school and community college levels regarding the importance of grade point average” (p. 139). Not finding support from counselors and teachers hinders the motivation to continue on the educational journey. When grades need improvement, finding guidance on how to improve those grades in a timely manner prior to graduation would be useful in hopes of attending a university.

Barriers and expectations change from one generation to the next generation in the Hispanic culture. Generational gaps affect the perseverance of Hispanic students. Ojeda and Flores (2008) discussed that although first generation Hispanic individuals have more aspirations of continuing their education career, it was actually second-generation students who accomplished more academically. Oftentimes, it may not be until the second generation that barriers faced by first generation Hispanics in the family have been eliminated or minimized.

### **Gender Role**

The traditional gender role in the Mexican-American family has been a barrier for women. Honor and dedication to the family are the priorities for Mexican-American women, and they are not encouraged to explore opportunities if they are not suggested by the father, who is the head of the household. As stated by Devall et al. (2005), “in some cases, Hispanic students are discouraged from attending college by their family. This occurs most often with young Hispanic women who may be taught that they should not leave home until they marry” (p. 52). Marriage itself is often seen as a reward for Mexican-American women. Soon after marriage, children are expected in the household, and the tradition continues based on the gender role. At times, there is support that comes from other females in the family. This support group is often composed of other women who feel as if they have not succeeded in life. The support within this group may be hidden from men in the family, because it would not be normal behavior for traditional Mexican-American women. As identified in the success of a Mexican-American woman in nursing school, “while many family members were described as supportive, others were less so because of gender stereotypes or tension between family values; women felt families did not expect them to succeed” (Bond et al., 2008, p. 139).

During the primary years of education, Mexican-American women are challenged with more than just homework and focusing on their studies. There are multiple levels of responsibility for these young women. Being responsible for more than themselves is challenging and can be difficult to overcome. Gender does play a role in educational outcomes for Hispanic women as Garcia and Bayer (2005) stated:

In terms of differences in educational attainment between genders, the literature indicates that two primary dynamics are gender identification and social structure. Men in many societies have traditionally received certain advantages by virtue of being male. Women are largely precluded from attaining equal educational outcomes and hence they are also largely excluded from entering the best paying occupations. (p. 519)

From an early age, young Mexican-American women are taught to put themselves behind a male figure. Attaining a high-paying job or pursuing a career may not be the primary goal for a Mexican-American woman in her family.

Mexican-American women often take roles in the family into which they are born. The roles may change from one generation to the next generation, but normally a strong-minded Hispanic woman will be the one to change her role in the family once she is old enough financially to support herself.

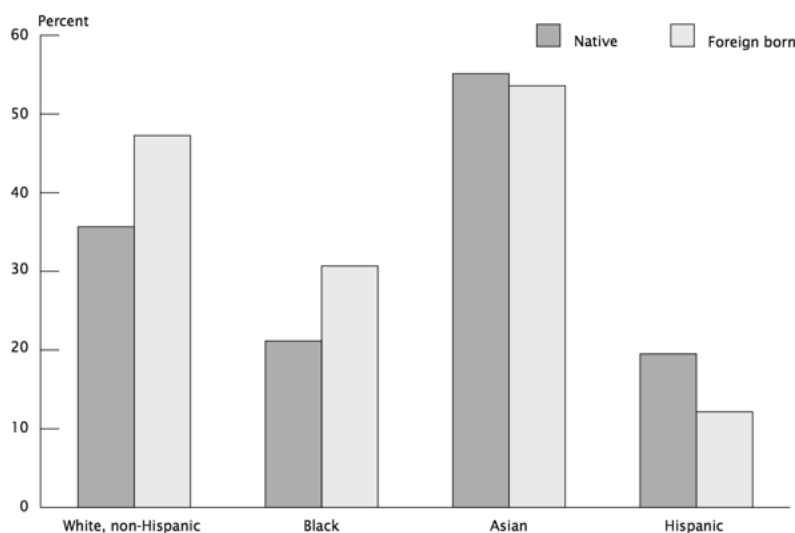
Stereotyped attitudes about role definitions for women (e.g., child-bearers) and role definitions for men (e.g., the “machismo” image) in traditional Latin cultures are examples of sex-role factors suggested to restrict education aspirations and levels of achievement for Chicanas. (Vasquez, 1997, p. 455)

In the early school years, Mexican-American women are encouraged to take classes such as home economics instead of other extracurricular activities such as band or an athletic class. Learning how to cook is important, and some families feel that if women can learn skills that are useful in the household both at home and at school, it is a greater benefit for the family. The possibility for scholarships that could come from class activities such as band are eliminated when the traditional track is taken by female students. “Mexican American students in general,

and women in particular, are often ‘tracked’ into taking non-college preparatory courses” (Vasquez, 1997, p. 459).

### Statement of the Problem

The percentage of Hispanic women not obtaining professional degrees is the lowest when compared to other ethnic groups of women, with the exception of American Indian/Alaska Natives, as identified in Table 1. Even though Hispanic women outnumber Hispanic men in college graduation rates, they continue to be the lowest achieving female group of all ethnicities. As identified by the U.S. Census Bureau (2015) in Figure 4, fewer Latinos have earned doctoral degree than any other group. As of 2015, less than .5% of Hispanic adults had earned a doctoral degree as the highest degree attained, compared to Asian (4.3%), Whites (1.7%), and African Americans (.8%).



*Figure 4.* Percentage of population 25 years or older with a bachelor’s degree or higher by race, Hispanic origin, and nativity: 2015.

*Note:* U.S. Census Bureau. (2015). Current Population Reports. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/demo/p20-578.pdf>.

As identified by the U.S. Census Bureau (2015) in Table 2, fewer Hispanics have earned a bachelor’s degree or higher than any other group. If resources currently set in place contribute to the completion of a professional or terminal degree for some Mexican-American women,

those resources may also provide support to the next generation of female Mexican-American degree seekers.

The rapid increase in the proportion of Mexican-Americans in this country's population, coupled with the disproportionate levels of education attainment for Mexican-Americans, suggests a need to better understand the educational experiences of this group in order to provide more effective educational programs for those women who decide to pursue education as adults. (Zambrano, 2004, p. 11)

The research conducted by Dr. Zambrano suggested that more research was needed on that demographic with the hope of identifying programs that would support those women as they pursued an education.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceived barriers Mexican-American women overcame as they pursued higher education. Identifying those barriers and inquiring why those successful women were persistent in their studies may be beneficial to other Mexican-American and Hispanic women currently struggling with similar barriers.

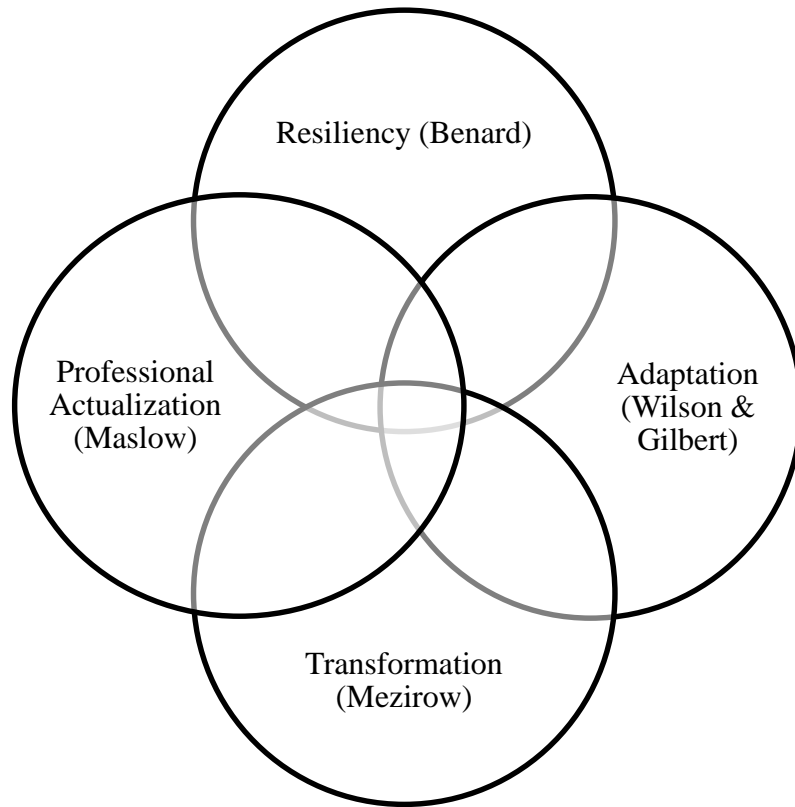
### **Research Questions**

The following research question was used to address the purpose of this study followed by a sub-question:

- What perceived barriers did you overcome as you pursued a higher education?
  - What resources were utilized to overcome those barriers?

### **Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework is not merely a collection of concepts but, rather, a construct in which each concept plays an integral role (Jabraeen, 2009, p. 51). For purposes of this study, Figure 5 displays the concepts, theories, and models that provided the structure for interpretation of data.



*Figure 5.* Conceptual Framework

**Adaptation.** A theory of affective adaptation is represented by the acronym AREA: attend, reaction, explain, and adapt. People attend to self-relevant unexplained events; reaction emotionally to these events; attempt to explain or understand these events; and if, they succeed, adapt to the events inasmuch as they attend less to them and have weaker affective reactions (Wilson & Gilbert, 2008, p. 371).

**Transformation.** When faced with a challenging situation, fears were faced and the focus remained on the goal. Learning is defined as the social process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience as a guide to action (Mezirow, 1994, pp. 222–223).

**Professional Actualization.** As a prophet of human potential, Maslow believed the realization of one's total potential variously described as that self-actualization or self-realization to be the ultimate goal of all humankind (Dhiman, 2007, p. 25).

**Resilience.** Investigating barriers Mexican-American women overcame in pursuing a higher education allowed a closer look at the behavior of women and their resiliency. For the purpose of this study, Bonnie Benard's resilience theory was used. Benard (1995) described resilience as follows:

A term used to describe a set of qualities that foster a process of successful adaption and transformation despite risk and adversity. Resilience research validates prior research and theory in human development that has clearly established the biological imperative for growth and development that exists in the human organism and that unfolds naturally in the presence of certain environmental characteristics. We are all with innate capacity for resilience, by which we are able to develop social competence, problem-solving skills, a critical consciousness, autonomy, and a sense of purpose. (para. 2)

“Resilience skills include the ability to form relationships (social competence), to problem solve (metacognition), to develop a sense of identity (autonomy), and to plan and hope (a sense of purpose and future)” (Benard, 1997, para. 4). The connection between Mexican-American women pursuing higher education and the resilience theory is that this demographic is pursuing higher education knowing that statistics and inherited traits do not provide them a promising outcome in reaching their goal. A common barrier that Hispanic students face is their socioeconomic status. Some barriers facing Hispanic students have been identified in previous research, and, in some cases, resilient Hispanic women have sought out resources to help them overcome those barriers in order to meet their educational goal. In previous research, Unmuth (2012) identified the following barriers for Hispanic women pursuing education: “immigration status, poverty, discrimination, low self-esteem, higher rates of depression, attempted suicide, gender stereotypes, and limited English proficiency” (p. 20).



## Research Design

This study was conducted via an inductive qualitative research approach. “Qualitative research uses non-numerical data to investigate how humans behave, experience, and understand. Data are most often collected by a researcher through interviews, focus groups, or from systematically recorded observations” (Clark, 2009, p. 131).

Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant’s setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. (Creswell, 2009, p. 4)

Qualitative research was appropriate for this study, because it allowed for an in-depth look at each unique educational experience.

Mexican-American women were selected via purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to “select participants or sites (or documents or visual material) that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (Creswell, 2009, p. 178). Participants were Mexican-American women who overcame perceived barriers while pursuing a terminal doctoral or professional degree such as, but not limited to, a PhD, PharmD, DC, MD, DDS, and JD. The constructivist grounded theory research method was used in this research.

Constructivist Grounded Theory is a perspective that shreds notions of a neutral observer and value-free expert. Not only does that mean that the researcher must examine rather than erase how their privileges and preconceptions may shape the analysis, but it also means that their values shape the very facts that they can identify. (Charmaz, 2014, p. 13)

By using the constructivist grounded theory, I was able to view the information via a interpretive lens in addition to reviewing data presented by each participant. “Grounded theory is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher derives a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13).

Grounded theory methods foster seeing your data in fresh ways and exploring your ideas about the data through early analytic writing. By adopting grounded theory methods, you can direct, manage, and streamline your data collection and, moreover, construct an original analysis of our data. Data forms the foundation of our theory and our analysis of these data generates the concepts we construct. Grounded theory leads us to attend to what we hear, see, and sense while gathering data. (Charmaz, 2014, p. 3)

The data collection tool used for this study was unstructured in-depth interviews. This data collection tool allowed the study to document detailed experiences regarding perceived barriers overcome by each participant, as well as to assist in identifying resources utilized to overcome those barriers.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study was to provide detailed information, as well as to add to the current body of literature, concerning Mexican-American women and their experiences in overcoming perceived barriers as they pursued higher education. This study also identified what resources were utilized successfully to overcome those barriers. Identifying resources that were useful to Mexican-American women who reached their educational goal provided insight on how to better meet the needs of other Mexican-American and Hispanic women who are facing similar barriers. Previous studies have provided insight on barriers Hispanic women faced in pursuing education, but little research has been found specifically describing how successful Mexican-American women overcame those barriers in pursuing advanced degrees.

There is a gap in the literature that covers Mexican-American women in higher education, and the information obtained from this study provided insight on this topic. By obtaining information on resources utilized to overcome barriers, stakeholders in higher education may be able to develop a support system to better meet the needs of this particular demographic. Further investigation on how to reach a larger population of Hispanic women in hopes of providing the support is needed.

This study may allow other Mexican-American and Hispanic women to see themselves in the stories and circumstances that will later be described by each participant. Hispanic women who are seeking higher education may be able to relate to the perceived barriers identified by each woman. By describing the method by which each barrier was overcome, current students may see opportunities to facilitate their learning. In analyzing the experiences of each woman, similar characteristics and traits may be identified. These traits and characteristics may be the underlying factors that cause Mexican-American women to break out of the perceived gender role they were born to play.

The data was in-depth and allows readers to examine how Mexican-American women went from a predetermined destiny as wives and mothers to successful career women. Through those experiences, I entered into the world of those women and was better able to understand their circumstances. I was able to meet women who were not afraid of the challenge or repercussions of their choice to pursue an education. As mentioned before, being able to understand and share the stories of these women throughout their educational journey provides useful information to stakeholders by shedding light on how we can better support our female minority students in higher education to guarantee academic success.

### **Background of the Researcher**

I am a Mexican-American candidate for the PhD in Education, with a concentration in Higher Education, at a private university. I had been an active participant in the field of education for over 19 years, beginning with my role as a community educator for a nonprofit organization after high school. The support I had been given by my family and husband had been my driving force. My father was a U.S. Marine who met my mother during his stay at a military base in Arizona. My mother and father married soon after returning to Texas. From there, my

father obtained a job through the civil service as a bricklayer and was successful in his field for over 30 years. My father was an exceptional provider and wholeheartedly worked from sunup to sundown in order to put food on the table. As time passed, the years of physical labor began to show their signs of wear on his hands, which served to remind me that he worked in the sun daily so I would not have to do so. My father wanted to provide the family a better life than what he had growing up and solely asked that we focus on school at all times.

My mother had been my foundation and was the traditional homemaker read about in books. She left her home and family in Mexico to provide a better future for her children. To this day, she is my pride and joy. I strove to overcome barriers and break the mold of what a Hispanic woman was supposed to be in hopes of showing my mother that each sacrifice she made in life was for a good cause. My mother's time and effort caring for her children was not in vain, and the love she showed her children is the most admirable job anyone could ever have.

Being married has also encouraged me to continue my pursuit of a doctorate with the dream of contributing to the field of education. My husband is a successful physician in private practice who provided me the encouragement and stability needed to endure the barriers I had to overcome during my educational journey. The barriers I had overcome to that point allowed me to relate to other Hispanic women. Growing up in a traditional Hispanic family with a structure, similar to the military, encouraged me to strive to break the traditional role of the Hispanic woman.

I experienced the gender role phenomenon and did everything in my power to break out of that mold. I sought to learn about experiences other Hispanic women had lived that encouraged them to keep moving forward when they wanted to give up. The research I had found was limited to barriers Hispanic women had overcome; little to no research provided

insight to the approaches those women took in overcoming those barriers in the pursuit of an advanced degree. Taking a closer look at other resources successful Hispanic women utilized during their educational journey was useful in identifying better commonalities of assistance within this group.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the terms are defined as follows:

**Barriers** are perceived experiences or circumstances that hinder the learning process while seeking higher education.

Regarding the word **Hispanic**, there are several subcategories that fall under the general term. Humes, Jones, and Ramirez (2011) stated, “Hispanic or Latino refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race” (p. 2). This term is also interchanged with words such as Chicano/a and Latino/a when referring to Mexican-Americans. *Hispanic* and *Latino/a* is used as referenced in the sources that served as supporting literature, documents, and data. The cultural origin of all the women in this study is Mexican, and henceforward they are referred to as Mexican American. The preferred term in this study is Mexican-American.

As defined by Lam, Mchale, and Updegraff (2012), **marianismo** highlights women’s roles as mothers and encourages them to be loyal and self-sacrificing (p. 19).

**Professional degree** refers to an MD (Doctor of Medicine), DDS (Doctor of Dental Surgery), or JD (Juris Doctor).

**Terminal degree** refers to a PhD (Doctorate in Philosophy), PharmD (Doctorate in Pharmacy), or DC (Doctor of Chiropractic).

## Mexican Origin Study Population

Women of Mexican origin were selected to participate in this study because the Mexican origin group is the fastest growing population in the United States. As mentioned by Pew Research (2017) in Table 2,

Hispanics of Mexican origin account for 63.3% (36 million) of the nation's Hispanic population in 2015, by far the largest share of any origin group, but down from a recent peak of 65.7 in 2008. But this share has declined in recent years as fewer migrants from Mexico arrive in the U.S. and the number leaving the country rises. Meanwhile, the share among non-Mexican origin groups (36.7% in 2015, up from 34.3% in 2008) has grown as migration from elsewhere in Latin America has increased.

Table 2

### *Hispanic Origin Profiles, 2015*

U.S. Hispanic Population—56,477,000	
Origin	U.S. Population
Mexicans	35,758,000
Puerto Ricans	5,371,000
Salvadorans	2,174,000
Cubans	2,116,000
Dominicans	1,866,000
Guatemalans	1,384,000
Columbians	1,091,000
Hondurans	853,000
Spaniards	799,000
Ecuadorians	707,000

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Each Mexican-American woman has a unique background that molds her into what she has become or what she will become in the future. Overcoming perceived barriers is essential in moving forward and taking the next step toward educating herself. A strong component in eliminating barriers in the Mexican-American culture is acknowledging the fact that these barriers exist. Once an individual is aware of what is holding her back in pursuing dreams and reaching the next level in life, she may be capable of identifying resources to overcome these barriers. Some barriers may be simple enough to overcome alone, while other barriers may take a team of professionals to help the individual continue on the journey she has set out for herself.

Areas such as the American dream, unplanned pregnancy, gender roles, familism, marianismo, academic achievement, and acculturation will be elaborated to provide an insight on the various phases Mexican-American students may experience along their journey in pursuing a higher education. These areas will also provide a background into realms that may be commonly experienced by other cultures.

### **The American Dream**

It is fair to believe that Mexicans come to the United States hoping to build a better life for their children. As stated by Hill and Torres (2010), the American Dream is the premise that one can achieve success and prosperity through determination, hard work, and courage—an open system for mobility (p. 95). Regardless of the passion Hispanics carry within them, the American Dream is not easy to attain.

Despite a strong work ethic, and intense desire to succeed, and understanding of the value and utility of education, and a trust and belief in the quality of the American school system, the academic achievement of Latinos lags behind others in the United States. (Hill & Torres, 2010, p. 96)

Coming to the United States undocumented for a better future and the opportunity for their children to live the American Dream is not foreign to Mexican parents. Most times, these parents are the people one sees working in a mechanic shop or in the blue-collar field where little documentation is needed to obtain employment. These parents strive to provide their children the resources needed in order to become educated so the next generation will not need to work under intense working conditions. Crosnoe (2006) stated:

Day after day, week after week, year after year, Mexicans migrate to the United States through various methods and points of entry, in search of better jobs, expanded opportunities, greater freedoms, new experiences, and things far less specific, such as hazy, ill-defined but powerful images of a better tomorrow. (p. 1)

If barriers can be overcome and Mexican-American children can see themselves as equals, these students may have a fighting chance to be competitive classmates with their peers. As Perruci and Wysong (2008) stated, “education is what gave millions of poor, but aspiring, immigrants in the United States the chance to be whatever they were willing to work for. This is the ideology of the American Dream” (p. 254).

Mexican immigrants come to the United States with the notion that anything is possible. The American dream is what they aspire to achieve to provide a promising future for generations to come.

Throughout American history, immigration has been a route to a better life. Today, given the economic and social realities of the 21st century, gaining access to social mobility often requires gaining access to post-secondary education. As more immigrants enter the United States, it becomes increasingly necessary to ensure that those who want it have the chance to obtain a college education. Both the immigrants themselves and the nation as a whole will reap the benefits of developing better educated workers, potential entrepreneurs, and more engaged citizens. (Erisman & Looney, 2007, p. 17)

The benefit of supporting Hispanic students as they pursue a higher education supports the economic growth for the country. As we better educate this demographic, the contributions they make to the country in return will provide more jobs and economic stability.



Through observation, it is obvious that being accepted into a college program is a great accomplishment for Mexican-Americans. Acceptance is seen as a rite of passage to pave the way toward a promising future. The American dream does not have to be forgotten or pushed to the side, because the land of opportunity is the United States of America.

Once obtaining a college degree, the American dream of working hard and achieving great things is that much closer. "One of the best ways an individual can prepare to succeed in the American work force and realize the dream is to earn a college diploma" (DiMaria, 2006, p. 26). The growing population in the country is limiting job opportunities for individuals without a college degree. Various professional positions are beginning to require a college degree to be considered a suitable candidate for these positions.

The perception of the American dream depends on various factors such generational differences.

To some, it might mean climbing up the corporate ladder. To others, it might mean having enough money to send a child to college. Whatever the image, some Hispanics have realized the dream, while others are still waiting in the wings. (DiMaria, 2006, p. 28)

Being the owner or chief executive officer of a company is considered achieving the dream to some. Other Mexican-Americans believe the American dream is getting a paying job, paying one's bills on time, and being able to take one's family out to a nice dinner every now and again. Not only is the Mexican-American culture responsible for achieving the American Dream, it is the responsibility of every culture in hopes of sustaining the pride and strong foundation of this country.

Achieving the Dream targets the achievement gaps based on ethnicity, race, and social class not only because it is the right thing to do in a society that claims to strive for equity, but also to insure America's place in a global economy. (McGlynn, 2007, p. 44)

The American Dream is attainable through hard work, persistence, and dedication. We, as a society, must fight to provide a stronger foundation for immigrants so they, too, can have the opportunity to live the American Dream. As stated by Pang et al. (2010),

As teachers of immigrant students, we see their amazing potential on a daily basis. They are gifted young people who contribute to and are part of our school community every day. We know that legal, refugee, and undocumented students all make major contributions to their school communities every day. The vibrancy of our democracy demands a diverse young population. Young immigrants bring new ideas and valuable linguistic and cultural competencies that enrich our democracy. They also bring important multiple perspectives and cultural expertise that is needed more than ever as the United States works collaboratively to gain the respect of other nations and bring strong leadership around the world to address complex international issues (Friedman, 2008). We must encourage Congress to develop an active bipartisan agenda where immigration reform is passed and to address the needs of our young immigrants. There are thousands of young people graduating from high school every year who believe in the American Dream. They are the DREAM and vision that this country needs. (p. 193)

Nurturing and supporting these students will allow them to gain the confidence they need as they pursue an education.

### **Unplanned Pregnancy**

An unplanned pregnancy is something that can be detrimental for both men and women as they focus on their studies. Finding the balance between school and being a parent is something to which students may have a difficult time adjusting. In a study conducted in September 2016, a focus group of Latino college students was interviewed at a Midwestern university to discuss infertility and family planning.

The majority of participants, both males and females, mentioned that unplanned pregnancy is the biggest concern for their lives at the moment. They desire small future families and plan to be financially stable prior to having children. One female participant mentioned wanting “an opposite life that is not as stressful as what we grew up with.” Another female participant expressed feeling pressure to “do better than our parents did” economically, which required a college education and time to get established in a career. (Place & Bireley, 2016, p. 4)

For Mexican-American women, the hardship of an unplanned pregnancy is more difficult due to their gender role. They are the ones who carry the child and do not have other options than to raise the child with the father, or alone. At times, men in their lives do not want to take responsibility for the child and may remove themselves from the situation altogether. Being a single mother calls for those women to focus on their studies while finding a way to provide for the new family member.

In another study about college men and unplanned pregnancy, a group of men were asked how they would handle an unplanned pregnancy. Below is an insert from the study,

A second group emerged that consisted of men who did not expect to raise the child in the event of an unplanned pregnancy. Their dominant story line was that their current life stage was not compatible with child rearing. For example, one 19-year-old stated, "If my partner became pregnant, I wouldn't expect to marry or raise a child this early in my life." In fact, several of these men explained they were not ready for the responsibilities associated with fatherhood and marriage. As one 21-year-old explained, "At this point in my life I am not ready to have children or get married." Others focused on their inability to successfully father a child at this stage and age and would choose not to marry and raise a child for the child's sake. (Olmstead, Koon, Puhlman, Pasley, & Fincham, 2013, p. 813)

Six of the women in this study experienced an unplanned pregnancy either during high school or college. They did not shy away from the challenge; they embraced it. These women each played a role in their family. In the traditional Mexican family, women are caretakers and must take care of those around them before focusing on their own needs. In this case, an unplanned pregnancy was a responsibility that added to the other tasks into which they were born.

There were hardships that came along with becoming a mother in high school and college. The six women who lived through that experience had a plan and did everything in their power to remain focused on their goals.

## **Gender Role for Hispanic Women**

Through observation, it appears that gender roles are important in the Mexican. All people are born into the role they will play, and no choice is given as to whether or not they accept their role. For women, family is designated as being the most important, and women are at the core of the family dynamic. These roles are commonly encouraged by the elders in the family as children age.

Gender is a system of classification that describes characteristics and behaviors that are generally ascribed to certain bodies, most often in a dual manner distinguishing male and female. Gender roles are the stereotypical emotions, cognitions, and behaviors associated with being male or female and are presumably acquired through socialization (social learning, modeling, etc.). (Kulis, Marsiglia, & Nagoshi, 2010, p. 284)

Mexican mothers model the gender role for young women in hopes that they will learn to follow cultural behaviors and etiquette.

Mexican-American women are born into their gender role and are destined to be dedicated to obligations set for them by other family members. Women tend to dedicate their lives to their mother and father and then to their husband once married. In most cases, educational aspirations are not the first priority for women, because their gender role does not allow them the option of pursuing an education prior to starting a family. Every so often, there is one Mexican-American woman who tends to her role growing up, but then takes a different avenue in life than what was originally planned for her life by the family. Vasquez (1997) said it best when he stated,

Because she is often the first generation to enter higher education, the Chicana often experiences stresses resulting from sex-role conflicts. Because of the traditionally high value placed on the Chicano family, the struggle between pursuit of education and the traditional roles of wife and mother may cause many Chicanas to doubt the pursuit of an education. They have often seen their own mothers dedicate their lives to the home and children. (p. 456)

The stress that comes with being the foundation of a family and pursuing an education can be a struggle for Mexican-American women. “Latinas may also experience stress resulting from family obligations, educational aspirations that conflict with parental expectations, and gender-role conflict” (Rodriguez, Guido-DiBrito, Torres, & Talbot, 2000, p. 517).

Self-identification is a conflict that is evident within the Mexican-American culture. Women may see themselves as independent, sophisticated, and strong, while siblings and parents view them as caretakers and helping hands around the house. Independence is considered to be isolation from the rest of the family. “This conflict is particularly strong for Latinas who must often deal with the parental expectation of living close to home and staying in close contact both physically and socially” (Rodriguez et al., 2000, p. 517). If a Mexican-American woman decides to pursue an education and not focus on running the household, both internal and external conflicts may arise.

Cultural factors internal to the Mexican American community may exacerbate these largely external obstacles to higher education. For instance, behavior patterns inconsistent with traditional cultural gender roles and attitudes may lead to perceptions of conflict between relationship and education goals. (Niemann, Romero, & Arbona, 2000, p. 47)

When a Mexican-American woman decides to pursue a dream that she envisioned for herself that is unlike anything else the family has known, such as attending college, family members may not be supportive because they do not understand how playing the traditional gender role and achieving a dream are possible. “For Mexican American women, traditional gender roles are associated with prioritizing marriage and family life; women believe that messages to pursue education are not strong for them” (Niemann et al., 2000, p. 48). Women are often not encouraged to find their identity outside the family.

As mentioned before, the gender role for the Mexican culture is that of wife and mother first; everything else is secondary (Vasquez, 1997, p. 455). Focusing on other goals may not be acceptable to the family. Wells (2005) stated:

Traditionally, the role of the Mexican American woman is to be wife and mother. She is expected to bear the children and serve her husband. Her domain is the home. She is the responsibility first of her father then her husband. Self-autonomy and independence are considered inappropriate and selfish values for women. (p. 396)

Carrying the guilt of putting family second while attempting to achieve a goal uncommon to one's culture may be a barrier that some women are unable to overcome after a certain while.

There have been mild changes in the gender role for Mexican-American women, but, often, older generations are not comfortable with women not fulfilling their gender role in the family as previous generations have done.

Intergenerational differences in gender role attitudes and expectations have made traditional gender roles an increasing source of conflict. Conflict may occur when a Chicana pursues a personal goal to obtain a college degree in spite of her perceived family obligations. (Castillo & Hill, 2004, p. 236)

It is important that educators and administrators understand the cultural background of Mexican-American students. This knowledge will illuminate paths to a brighter future for this group due to the ability to provide better support tailored to their background. Within the family, a Mexican-American woman may be expected to carry out certain tasks and is respected for doing so. Mothers and sisters in the family are protected from outsiders. There is limited access to the outside world, even extended family.

The traditional family in Mexico is patriarchal-authoritarian. Family is very important and the father has domination over the entire family. The female, while often placed on a pedestal by father, brother, and husband, is a lesser being. Gender roles in the Mexican culture result from a lengthy socialization process. The male's role is that of sole breadwinner and master of his household; the female's place is in the home. (Gowan & Trevino, 1998, p. 1081)

Regardless of whether the Mexican-American woman is married or unmarried, the father or husband plays the same role for her. Fathers and husbands equally set rules and regulations for the daughter and wife. Mothers and wives tend to do as they are instructed. When a woman does the opposite of what is expected or asked of her, the males in her family are not pleased.

As head of the family, the husband or father is the final decision maker in all matters of importance. As a subordinate family member, the woman is expected to obey the decisions of her husband or father. (Fraga et al., 2012, p. 320)

When a Mexican-American woman gets married and moves from her childhood home into her own home with her husband, she takes the role her mother played in that house with her and imitates those same actions. Holling (2006) stated,

Several Chicana and Latina students do indeed note their families (i.e., their parents) and home spaces as where they witnessed gendered roles being enacted. They describe fathers as performing “outdoor” chores, as the “authoritative figure” who holds power, and who was to be “obeyed,” and mothers as performing “indoor” chores, as “submissive,” as “silent” and as the main person responsible for childrearing. (p. 89)

Women belong inside the home, while men are tasked with caring for external tasks and chores.

Not only are Mexican women seen as homemakers, mothers, and wives, but they are also given specific chores inside the house. Outside work is left for the male family members. Male and female homeworkers take on different identifies in the production activities they perform within the home. Female producers most often perceive themselves as housewives; male producers perceive themselves as breadwinners and their homework as no different from working outside the home. (Segura & Zavella, 2007, p. 273)

Gender roles are critical in order to keep a Mexican family together and strong. Family (familism) is important and is often placed before anything else.

### **Familism**

Decisions are made as a group and are not based only on the wants and beliefs concerning an individual. As mentioned before, thinking of oneself before thinking of the family’s needs is considered selfish. “Familism is a belief system in which the needs of the wider family are thought to override the needs of the individual within that family, and is often

described as a value rooted in Hispanic culture” (Miles, Regina, Joan, Zhou, & Elizabeth, 2012, p. 1). For a Mexican-American woman, attending college is a decision that must be agreed upon by everyone in the household, because the consequences of that decision will alter the dynamic of the household. If the decision is made to pursue an education, the family will be with one less person to assist in the household, and those tasks will be placed on the next sibling in line. Being considerate of family members is a constant reminder for Mexican-American women that they are not independent and are responsible for contributing to the family in all aspects. Once a woman is married, she is expected to redirect her dedication from her parents to her husband and children while maintaining a close relationship with her parents. “Familism is defined in terms of values that support the creation of families (i.e., marriage and fertility), as well as the maintenance of relationships with nuclear and extended family members” (Oropesa & Landale, 2004, p. 206). How well a Mexican-American woman is able to maintain these relationships is how she will be viewed by her elders.

“Hispanic familism has been known to imply a major obligation to the family, sometimes including the sacrifice of the individuals needs for those of the family” (Zayas & Pilat, 2008, p. 335). Achieving the American Dream can be difficult when having to balance support for one’s family, as well as focusing on studying. Mothers who are not educated may encourage daughters to achieve as much education as possible while still tending to the needs of the family. At some point, women attending college may become exhausted and will lose the desire to balance the responsibilities placed on them along with school. The familism cycle often continues from one generation to the next. Obligations may stem all the way to great-grandparents if they are alive. One generation must take care of the previous generation regardless of what that entails. “Regardless of the ethnic group to which it is applied, familism emphasizes prioritizing the



family over the individual, showing respect for elders, and honoring the family name” (Schwartz, 2007, p. 102). Familism is seen as a form of respect for the family.

For cultures not familiar with familism, this way of life may be different and uncomfortable. However, all Mexicans understand why familism is important and how factors associated with familism are evident on a daily basis. There is a constant need for parents to depend on their children. Stories of parents having children for the sole purpose of having an additional pair of hands to work and help provide are often shared between generations. “It may be the case that in an ethnically diverse community with a large concentration of Latinos living in close proximity to each other, the importance of family and other cultural values are more easily cultivated and maintained” (Rodriguez, Consuelo, Paez, & Myers, 2007, p. 72). In a Mexican community, the need to make excuses for checking on a family member several times a day is not needed, because it would be considered a normal and expected action. Even today, mothers and daughters have an unspoken bond that literally connects them on a spiritual level to one another. Daughters empathize with their mothers and do their best to do what their mothers request of them. “Latin American culture is based on a set of values that emphasize that the most important goals in life are taking care of your family and extended family and having close companionship and friendship with significant others” (Greenwood et al., 2012, p. 96). Mexican-American families care for others in their culture when support or help is needed. There is an unspoken open door policy among families that gives the comfort of knowing there is support for the family around the corner if support is needed.

Mexican families usually are more extended groups than the nuclear family that characterizes most Anglo-American families. Familismo is related to the high importance Mexican Americans attribute to family solidarity and togetherness and also refers to respect for people based on a hierarchical order. (Sotomayor-Peterson, Figueredo, Christensen, & Taylor, 2012, p. 220)

Having noted that, regardless of how many people are considered to be part of the inner circle, the immediate family always takes priority over extended family, friends, and other priorities. With familismo, “the family, as a group, is usually the first and only priority. This is reflected in the educational process within the family as well as in the family’s expectations toward each other” (Valdes, 2008, p. 83). Familism is highly associated with marianismo and how women are the core of each household.

### **Marianismo**

One extremely important cornerstone for the Mexican-American female is referred to as marianismo. A second cornerstone, the most commonly known trait for Mexican-American men, is referred to as machismo. As defined by Lam et al. (2012), marianismo highlights women’s roles as mothers and encourages them to be loyal and self-sacrificing. Marianismo is the female version of machismo. The more women sacrifice, the more women do for their children and family, the more extreme the women’s level of marianismo. Mexican-American women being born into their gender role and pursuing to be great mothers and wives is a good depiction of marianismo. There is nothing more important than filling women’s duties as mothers and wives. Marianismo is what makes Mexican women strong and capable of handling all their duties and allows them to be connected to a higher power religiously. It is known that marianismo is also the ability to connect to La Virgen de Guadalupe, Virgin Mary; this connection provides the endurance for Mexican women to handle all their duties as mothers and wives. They are stronger; therefore, they can handle anything.

Castillo, Perez, Castillo, and Ghosheh (2010) stated,

Female gender roles in Latino culture traditionally are governed by norms that are captured in the notion of marianismo. The term marianismo originated from the work of political scientist Evelyn Stevens. Stevens (1973) coined the term marianismo to bring attention to women’s subordinate position in Latin America and to describe the culture’s

idealized belief of Latina gender role expectations. Some characteristics of an idealized Latina are that they are virtuous, humble, and spiritually superior to men. (p. 164)

Marianismo also supports the notion that women are able to handle more difficulties in life because of their strength in faith and their loyalty to family. Marianismo identifies women as the core of the family who provide religious grounding to all others. The ability to overcome emotions and the desire to venture out into a role other than wives and mothers comes from the strong relationship Mexican-American women have with their religion.

Religion is extremely important in the Mexican culture and the ability for women in this group to seek guidance from the Virgin Mary is considered to be a privilege. Mexican-American men do not have such a strong religious connection, and they lean on the women of the house to bring spiritual guidance to the family and household. Aredondo (2002) stated, “La Virgen de Guadalupe is revered throughout Mexico and Latin America, a symbol of protection, hope, nurturance, and patience” (p. 312). During difficult times, Mexican women will not only lean on their religion for guidance and patience, but they will also lean on other women who have the same spiritual connection. The bond these women have in marianismo, and La Virgen de Guadalupe is unspoken but very prominent. Understanding the marianismo and familismo aspects of the Mexican-American culture brings academic achievement to a new light in the lives of students. Academic achievement may not mean the same thing to two students from different cultures.

### **Academic Achievement**

When students are not confident in the classroom, dropout rates are likely to increase. Mexican-American students may not see themselves as able to achieve what their peers achieve in school; therefore, they shy away from being interactive in the classroom. This behavior starts

at an early age when most students are strictly competing against each other to obtain college scholarships and other forms of academic awards.

Hispanic high school students and their families might value a college education, but Hispanic youths tend to set the bar lower for themselves, personally. Just 48 percent say they expect to get a college degree or more, compared with 60 percent of the overall U.S. population of non-Hispanic youths. (Mary, 2011, p. 54)

Preparing Hispanic students to be academically competitive is important. Preparation tests and academic guidance should be instilled in students as they enter high school so they are prepared when they take college entrance exams. Most importantly, Mexican-American women should be encouraged to prepare for such exams. Taking into consideration the Mexican-American gender role and familism, taking a college entrance preparation course does not seem feasible, which may put this demographic at a disadvantage.

Hispanic females who did take the SAT scored on the average lower than females of all other minority groups. Hispanic females are also less likely to be enrolled in honors type programs and are the least likely of any group to complete a bachelor's degree. (Munoz, Trowbridge, & Loffredo, 2002, p. 23)

There is a grim outlook for college success and career aspirations.

If Mexican-American women are better prepared for exams such as the SAT, the educational attainment would be less elusive for this group. Study guides, preparation courses, tutoring, and other support groups may be foreign to Mexican-American women if the mother and father are not educated and do not understand how to prepare a child to enter college. Mexican mothers and fathers tend to focus on other priorities in life, which puts academia at a lower order. "High academic achievement is naturally a prerequisite for entering the world of academia, but Hispanics generally have a low level of educational attainment and a resulting career disadvantage" (Erlach, 2000, p. 84). Mexican-American women are not expected to take a route different from that of their mothers, so little to no attention is placed on preparing them to

overcome obstacles. “Gender and race stereotypes may create different expectations for different individuals” (Basow, Codos, & Martin, 2013, p. 352). Scoring poorly on an exam or not being competitive enough may lead to Mexican-American women being unsure of themselves and their abilities to succeed in a world unfamiliar to them. Insecurity will play a role in when and if this demographic will proceed to overcome the academic challenges they face. Some women may prefer to wait on continuing education until they feel more secure or ready to enter higher education, but this, at times, may not be the best answer. “Stalling and delaying college almost invariably leads to never attending and earning a degree” (Stern, 2013, p. 23). If too much time is taken to matriculate into an educational program, other variables may affect the outcome, such as insecurity or feeling lesser than other students.

When Mexican-American women decide to follow their dreams as the first generation to attend college, the environment and university culture may come as a shock to them, because their gender role is irrelevant among their peers. At times, these first-generation students may be seen as outsiders or people who don't belong in the classroom. “While the issue of multicultural education is a well-documented topic in the literature, immigrant students continually find themselves at a loss, with regard to their fate in an unfamiliar school environment, saturated by racist and other normatives” (Ogbuagu & Ogbuagu, 2013, p. 76). Not being taken seriously or seen as an outcast is a difficult reality Hispanic woman must face. To overcome this barrier, Mexican women must be willing to find the inner strength to proceed and begin to acclimate to their new environment. “Persons with an internal locus of control take responsibility for their actions, achievements, and consequences” (Christian & Sprinkle, 2013, p. 272). Academic achievement and acculturation are related. To achieve academic goals, Mexican-American

students must learn to modify or set back what they have been taught at home regarding their roles and responsibilities.

### **Acculturation**

Suppressing traditional behavior in hopes of fitting into what society has labeled acceptable may be common in the Mexican culture. Cisneros (2009) made a valid point when he stated,

If our nation is to commit to invest in a future in which Latinos are a major force, there is a challenge to be faced, one that involves the pace and degree of assimilation by Latinos into American Society. The degree to which Latinos can actually participate fully in the American future – as workers, as citizens, as leaders – will depend on their mastery of the nuances of the American way of life – as well as upon acceptance of Latinos by non-Hispanic Americans at all levels – as a population intent on integration into the American Society. (p. 9)

When immigrating to the United States, Mexicans and Hispanics from Central and South America need to adjust to a new way of life that is different than that to which they are accustomed. As new generations are born in the United States, it becomes evident how important it is to incorporate familism with the American culture. “With the growth of ethnic minority and immigrant groups, especially Hispanics, in the United States, researchers and clinicians have been increasingly interested in understanding the process of acclimating to a new culture” (Torres & Rollack, 2004, p. 155). The ability to understand the adaptation process would be beneficial for researchers to better prepare this group as its members enter in a place of higher education.

When a first-generation Mexican-American child is born, parents will strive to instill traditions from the culture at an early age. As the child grows and begins school, the American way of life will also make an impact on the child. As a student, the child will go through the acculturation process and blend Mexican traditions with the American way of life. “One’s

cultural identity could change when contact is made with another culture. The primary mechanisms for change includes the gradual acceptance of language, cultural beliefs, values, and behaviors of the dominant society” (Ramirez, 2007, p. 533). This may not be pleasing to the family since the Mexican heritage may become less evident as years pass. At the same time, families may discriminate within their own culture for being too American. “Studies of academic development and adjustments support the notion that acculturative strains and discriminatory experiences can be unique cultural stressors for Latinos” (DeMargo & Martinez, 2006, p. 268). Merging two cultures together would be a benefit for the student since he or she would be able to acclimate to the new and old environments when needed. However, the Mexican culture may see this acculturation as losing a sense of who one is instead of learning something new about oneself. “One key issue for immigrant parents is the reconciliation of differences between their culture or origin and their adopted culture with regard to socialization beliefs, practices, behaviors, and values” (Cheah, Leung, & Zhou, 2013, p. 31). When two cultures merge, a piece of the original culture may be lost in transition.

There is confusion that stems from the meaning of acculturation. The meaning can be unilinear or bilinear.

Acculturation was typically conceptualized as either unilinear or bilinear. From the unilinear perspective, acculturation is a continuum, whereby individuals identify with either the host (i.e., dominant) culture or their (i.e., minority) culture of origin. Thus, the unilinear model runs from acculturation to enculturation, and biculturalism exists as the midpoint between the two cultures. From the bilinear perspective, acculturation and enculturation are viewed as discrete continua, whereby acculturation is viewed as the level of identification and/or integration with the dominant culture and enculturation is viewed as the level of identification and/or integration with the minority culture. Proponents of the bilinear perspective maintained that individuals may be bicultural without losing their core cultural identity. Other scholars advocated for connecting the acculturation process to specific traditional beliefs across behavioral, cognitive, affective–spiritual, social–environmental domains, resulting in a multidimensional approach to acculturation that is rooted in the unilinear perspective. A criticism of viewing acculturation from the unilinear

perspective was that associated assessments are unidimensional in structure. (Reynolds, Sodano, Ecklund, & Guyker, 2012, p. 102)

As new generations are born and raised in the United States, there will be a lesser need to struggle through the assimilation process, because newer generations may only identify with the American culture depending on how parents decide to raise their children. “Values, beliefs, and practices associated with acculturation processes distinguish many Mexican-origin children of immigrants from their peers (both Mexican and not) whose families have lived in the United States for more generations” (Roche, Ghazarian, & Fernandez-Esquer, 2012, p. 921). For the generations still grounded in their Mexican tradition, acculturation may not be as easy as initially suspected. “Today more is known about the important role that acculturation plays as a moderator of the well-being of Hispanic youth, and it is acknowledged that full assimilation into mainstream U.S. life does not take place in just one generation” (Perez, 2011, p. 205). As generations continue to evolve, the American culture becomes the primary culture to which younger generations can relate.

The fear that stems from acculturation for Mexican parents is that their children will lose a sense of who they truly are and will identify better with the American culture. Some Mexican-American children may find it more appealing to learn about the American culture than to continue their Mexican traditions.

While acculturation is a process that continues for as long as there are culturally different groups in contact, some longer-term adaptation to living in culture-contact settings takes various forms usually resulting in some form of longer-term accommodation among the groups in contact. (Berry, 2005, p. 699)

As this process takes place, there will be a divide formed between the new age Mexican-Americans and traditional Mexicans. Students who learn more about the American culture take the chance of being seen as outcasts of their Hispanic culture. There is a fine line between



identifying with the new culture and actually making that one's primary way of expressing one's thoughts and beliefs.

Sadly, for many Mexican-origin people the pursuit of integration has been accompanied by denial of their heritage. This behavior is well illustrated by scorn for the term "Mexican." Such repudiation stems from the pronounced negative connotation "Mexican" had had in the United States. (Martinez, 2001, p. 73)

Being Mexican has been deemed as a negative association that may cause newer generations to want to be called Mexican-Americans to illustrate there is a sense of belonging in this country.

Acculturation may instill doubt in the mind of Hispanic parents that their children will not be dedicated to the family. "Familism is thought to decrease as acculturation progresses" (Smokowski & Bacallao, 2006, p. 663). Mexican-American students adjust to society in different ways, and one way may be to decrease the practice of Mexican traditions and incorporate more of the American way of life. "The changes that occur are dependent both on characteristics and choices of the individual as well as on the intensity of interaction with the new cultural group. The process of adopting other cultures is continuously evolving through social interaction" (Heck, Franco, Jurowski, & Sheinfeld Gorin, 2008, p. 37). As generations in this country progress, the traditional Mexican culture is left behind by attempting to become integrated in the American culture.

Acculturation plays an important role during the transition into college for Mexican-American students. Maintaining the connection with family while connecting with a group of peers from different backgrounds may cause distress and confusion at some point while attending undergraduate or graduate school. Struggling with self-identity is a phenomenon that is evident when students are undocumented. Being undocumented and remaining loyal to the family are two factors that some students may find challenging during the transition phase into the United States, into college, or at both periods.

## **Transitioning into College and the United States**

Participants in this study who were undocumented had a difficult time transitioning into the United States and college. The difficulty stemmed from insecurity, being away from home, and being in a new environment.

Transition, at any stage in life, can be challenging. The thought of attending college is something that was rarely discussed in the household where the women in this study were reared. Being in a new environment was intimidating. As mentioned by Azmitia, Syed, and Radmacher (2013),

Although many emerging adults look forward to transitioning to college, the changes that accompany this transition can be stressful and impact their mental health and persistence toward graduation; those from ethnic and socioeconomic groups that are minorities on their college campus can experience more challenges than students from groups that are in the majority. (pp. 744–745)

When there is no one who looks or sounds like the students, there is a sense of loneliness.

An additional factor that plays a role during the transition period into college is language. This may become more evident when students feel alone. If students are already insecure because they feel out of place and look different, the language barrier can also hinder the transition process. The country is working hard at identifying students with language barriers at an early age in hopes of providing necessary resources and tools to assist in their adjustment to a new language and environment. However, the lack of support, guidance, and resources does not remain consistent when transitioning from one academic level to the next. More information is needed to obtain a better understanding of what resources would support this demographic with improving their language skills.

There is no coordination between the identification of English Learners in K–12 schools and at the college level. In general, English Learners identification and English as a Second Language support at the college level are far less regulated than in K–12 education. Likewise, there is an unmistakable shift between the sectors in beliefs about

who is responsible for addressing the linguistic challenges of English Learners. (Nunez, Rios-Aguilar, Kanno, & Flores, 2016, pp. 65–66)

Being labeled ESL (English as a Second Language) students may have a negative impact on how well English learners are accepted during each transition phase in their lives. Investigating and developing different approaches for this student population while in college may provide support and insight on additional struggles that are not evident to the outside world. Minimizing the differences Mexican-American students feel, such as language barriers, may lessen hardships they endure as they journey through different transition phases.

### **Summary**

In summary, many first generation Mexican-Americans in this country may never be given the opportunity to realize their dreams and to thrive in this great nation. As Mexican-Americans, the American Dream is often harder to reach for women than for men due to the role into which these women are born. Being at the core of the family is the first priority for most Mexican-American women, which allows for little time to dream about the future or to envision what is just beyond the family wall. For both Mexican-American men and women, academic achievement is not often discussed in the household. When good grades are obtained or an award is earned, a small celebration may take place between mother and daughter or mother and son, but oftentimes, the father is unable to join or reinforce the positive achievement due to work schedules and the need to provide for the family. As new generations grow up in the education system in this country, more is learned on how to cope with changing environments and new experiences, and less is learned about the traditional heritage their parents will work hard to instill in the lives of these students. Learning how to find a balance between acculturation and traditional heritage is a challenge many Mexican-American children will face throughout their lives.

There is little research that exists on Mexican-American women pursuing advanced degrees. This study adds to the body of knowledge that exists and identifies resources that may contribute to other Mexican-American and Hispanic women pursuing a higher education. A detailed look into the experiences lived by all participants identified challenges along their journey and how those challenges were overcome.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### Research Design

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory qualitative research was to explore perceived barriers Mexican-American women overcame as they pursued a higher education.

“The significance of qualitative research comes from the role it plays in investigating the reasons and processes leading to certain results” (Oliver-Hoyo & Allen, 2006, p. 42).

The constructivist approach perspective shreds notions of a neutral observer and value-free expert. Not only does that mean that researchers must examine rather than erase how their privileges and preconceptions may shape the analysis, but it also means that their values shape the very facts that they can identify. (Charmaz, 2014, p. 13)

This chapter elaborates on research methods and data collection procedure, research design and approach, comparisons of grounded theory, credibility of the study, participant selection, research strategy, protection of human rights, setting, data analysis, coding process, and role of the researcher. While investigating this area, resources each Mexican-American woman utilized to overcome perceived barriers were also identified. The research question that was used to guide this study was: What perceived barriers did you overcome as you pursued a higher education? This question was followed by a sub-question: What resources were utilized to overcome those barriers? Those questions allowed us to enter into the journey of all participants as they pursued their education.

The constructivist grounded theory qualitative research method was used to guide this research. Interview questions stemmed from the four categories in Bonnie Benard’s resilience theory: autonomy (developing a sense of identity), social competence (forming relationships), metacognition (problem solving), and plan and hope (sense of purpose and future).

The research design was exploratory and was conducted via an inductive qualitative research approach by using the constructivist grounded theory research design. There were two

different approaches this study could have taken, qualitative or quantitative. The most practical approach was qualitative, because the topic would gather and view information through the experiences of the participants. Those experiences were descriptive and allowed the study to develop themes with meaning. The findings of this study are interpretations of what participants shared with me. Quantitative analysis would have been difficult to accomplish with this study, as there was little statistical analysis to grasp further into the study. Only the qualitative approach could do justice to this topic and thus allow the information to be interpreted accordingly.

### **Grounded Theory**

Through the work of Glassier and Strauss in 1967, “they crafted a method that enabled the researcher to generate systematically a substantive theory grounded in empirical data” (cited in Walker & Myrick, 2006, p. 548). That new development called for researchers to begin developing theory based in the data rather than attempting to prove a theory right or wrong. In time, those two researchers took different paths and continued to work on their own views of grounded theory. In 1987, Strauss branched away from the original view of grounded theory; in 1990, Strauss paired up with Corbin to attempt to explain his view on grounded theory (Walker & Myrick, 2006, p. 539). That was where the original version of grounded theory split into two paths, because Glasier responded to the modified approach Strauss was now leading. The two pathways for grounded theory were different in their way of analyzing the data. It is important to understand the following:

Both Glaser’s and Strauss’s version of grounded theory use coding, the constant comparison, questions, theoretical sampling, and memos in the process of generating theory. Moreover, both versions adhere to the same basic research process: gather data, code, compare, categorize, theoretically sample, develop a core category, and generate a theory. The problem is that these similarities in language and process make any discussion of differences confusing. What is crucial, however, is that the differences lie not in the language or general processes but in how these processes are carried out. (Walker & Myrick, 2006, p. 550)

One of the differences between Glaser and Strauss's view on grounded theory was their coding process. Glaser used substantive and theoretical coding, while Strauss used open, axial, and selective coding. As stated by Gamm (2014),

In the decades since Glaser and Strauss first introduced grounded theory, there has been a division with two separate paths or approaches to grounded theory. Grounded theory as advanced by Strauss and Corbin (1990) emphasizes data interpretation through reliable measures congruent with objectivist understandings. Glaser (1992) harshly criticizes the positivist conception of grounded theory for forcing data into preconceived categories, a stance indicative of a division in grounded theory. (p. 31)

Studies have been done through each method and the choice resonates with the researcher and how best the researcher feels he/she can analyze the data.

### **Why Constructivist Grounded Theory?**

The constructivist grounded theory design lends itself to be co-constructed by the experience of participants, as well as the researcher. Researchers cannot separate themselves and their experiences from the research, or be objective about the data (Higginbottom & Lauridsen, 2014, p. 11). Outcomes are an interpretation of different realities. Experiences discussed by participants are critical and lead the design to a higher processing level by allowing the researcher to interpret multiple realities. With constructivist grounded theory, interpretation of the data or what was felt to be significant enough to be themes, might not be interpreted by another researcher in the same way.

Constructivist grounded theory allowed me to examine the information and co-construct a theory based on different variables connected to each participant. Those themes and words were interpretations of the data and are believed to be true. In constructivist grounded theory, Charmaz supports a subjective reality.

Bennion (2015) identified the difference between grounded theory and constructivist grounded theory. Constructivist grounded theory adopts the inductive, comparative, emergent, and open-ended approach of Glaser and Strauss's original statement. It includes the iterative logic that Strauss emphasized in his early teaching, as well as the dual emphases on action and meaning inherent in the pragmatist tradition (Charmaz, 2014, p. 13).

### **Trustworthiness and Credibility**

In quantitative research, in order for a study to be credible, the data and outcome must be reproducible. However, in many cases with qualitative research, the outcomes may not be generalizable. As mentioned previously, various measures were taken to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of this study.

**Credibility.** Triangulation was a key component for credibility and trustworthiness. All interviews were audiotaped, transcribed by me, and provided to each participant for feedback. Member checks were used to ensure accuracy and dependability and to confirm that the meaning or reflection in all interviews was not changed. The intent was to keep the story and experience exactly as told through the lens of the participant. Some participants asked for changes to be made to add to their interview or to provide a clearer story. In most cases, the turnaround time for accuracy and edits was 2 to 3 weeks, but with a few participants, the verification process took 6 to 8 weeks for turnaround time and additions. Deadlines were flexible for me to eliminate, as much as possible, the potential of losing participants. It was important to keep in mind that those participants were actively working and, in some cases, were still in their professional training period (postdoctoral fellows), so their time was limited.

**Dependability.** An audit trail of each interview was kept via transcription, a memo and a research journal. Thoughts, ideas, and internal bias were recorded with each memo and journal.



The memo served as a key element in taking notes as interviews took place. Elements such as emotion and anger were noted during interviews. Memos and journals were used as a cross-reference tool in case further clarification was needed when reviewing data and codes.

Reflexivity was also noted in the research journal. It was important to me that I reflected on the similarities I shared with those participants in all attempts to eliminate bias.

**Confirmability.** An audit trail and member checks met the criteria for confirmability. Interviews, thoughts, and emotions were cross-referenced with memos and the research journal. Memos helped in taking a step-by-step encounter of the interview and data analysis process. The research journal was used to keep track of thoughts and codes as they emerged in the data. It was also used as a cross-reference tool between interviews and coding.

**Reliability.** In qualitative research, reliability can become an issue. To best meet the criteria for reliability (replication of the study), interviews, memos, member checks, audio recordings, and a research journal (thick descriptions) provided a framework from which to work. In constructivist grounded theory, the views and codes may not be the same from one researcher to the next because of the realities experienced by each researcher. As realities and theories are co-constructed, meanings may differ from one person to the next.

Qualitative research must meet certain criteria to be credit worthy. As Houghton, Casey, Shaw, and Murphy (2013) identified, in Table 6, qualitative research must follow four approaches to rigor. Those approaches ensured that the data collection and evaluation were credible, dependable, confirmable, and were supported by thick descriptions.

**Peer reviewer.** A peer reviewer was utilized in this study to provide feedback and guidance on constructivist grounded theory. As an expert in the field of constructivist grounded

theory, the peer reviewer was able to provide feedback on better approaches to take that would elaborate on the results.

### **Participant Selection Criteria**

Purposeful and snowball sampling were used to gain insight into this topic. Meeting with faculty who were involved with graduate studies was most beneficial. One of the deans from a graduate school program within a health science center in South Texas proved to be most useful in recruiting participants. She was the gatekeeper to other faculty and students. Graduate student faculty work with students of all ethnicities, ages, and areas of practice, so the input they were able to provide was invaluable during the recruitment period. Some faculty had already identified former students who met the criteria as I had informally previously discussed the basis of the study and the ideal participant with them. After discussing the study further, faculty began sending contact information of former graduate students, so that I was able to reach out directly to them and invite them to be part of the study.

In hopes of recruiting women suitable for the study, I also met with the research director at a private university in South Texas to obtain demographic and contact information of former students who graduated with terminal degrees and who fit the criteria for the study. During my doctoral studies, ideas and plans were discussed with faculty, and a handful of participants had been pre-identified as potential participants before the data gathering began. All willing participants were provided consent forms in hopes that they would complete the forms and return them promptly. To participate in the study, individuals did not need to be located in the state of Texas; however, that is where the search was based.

Initially, permission was requested for this study to focus on women who graduated between 2009–2014; however, a revised request was submitted to the University of the Incarnate Word’s Institutional Review Board for approval to encompass graduates between 2010–2015.

The initial step of recruitment began with a presentation to a small group of individuals within a health science center in South Texas. This allowed me to provide background information about the study and describe the group of women who would be useful for this study. Once informed, they were well prepared to provide additional information of potential participants. By using purposeful sampling, the recruitment process took a focused approach. Suri (2011) stated, “purposeful sampling requires access to key informants in the field who can help in identifying information-rich cases” (p. 66).

The targeted group of women for this study needed to meet the following criteria:

- a. Must have graduated from a professional or terminal doctoral degree program between 2010–2015
- b. Must hold a professional or terminal degree such as, but not limited to, MD, DDS, PhD, DC, JD, or PharmD
- c. Self-identified as Hispanic
- d. Overcame perceived barriers as they pursued a higher education
- e. Utilized resources to overcome perceived barriers while pursuing a higher education

As an individual became interested in the study, a relationship was formed between the participant and myself in hopes of retaining the interest of the participant. The goal was to build a commitment level for this study in order to eliminate or minimize the dropout rate. Recruitment was difficult. Finding women who met the criteria and who were willing to participate was less than encouraging. A synopsis of the study was sent to a total of 17 organizations and institutions

throughout the United States. In turn, women from those organizations, universities, and/or groups provided their assistance in recruiting by posting the study request for participants on their networking pages or website pages (Appendix D).

An initial e-mail was sent to potential participants to discuss the study in further detail and to answer any questions they might have had early in the process. The benefit of this study for all individuals and stakeholders was elaborated in hopes of keeping the commitment to the study strong. Once all questions participants posed regarding the study were answered, the consent form was e-mailed to provide ample time for review prior to committing to the study. As mentioned prior, return of the consent form was not guaranteed, so the groundwork put toward the partnership during initial e-mails was critical for the success of this study. Those women all held professional positions at work and had little to no time to spare on other projects, so their time was valuable. The option of withdrawing from the study was clearly stated to all parties in the study with no penalty involved. Other details, such as no compensation for their time, was also discussed between the first and second meetings.

### **Research Strategy: Interview Protocol**

The primary question and sub-question used in the interviews led to answers that shaped the lives of each participant. The interview guide (Appendix A) provided additional insight into the lives and experiences of those research subjects. By using Bonnie Benard's resilience breakdown, the study process enabled a design of the question template that was submitted and approved by the dissertation committee. "Good research questions have several characteristics in common. They are stated clearly, are researchable, and involve some concept related to either theory or an applied context" (Bradley, 2001, p. 574). When developing research questions, it is important for the researcher to have an understanding of the topic's background. It is also

important for the researcher to frame the questions so the answer will provide useful information toward the research topic.

Open-ended questions allowed participants freely to express themselves while providing useful information about the experience as Mexican-American women who pursued and achieved a higher education. Being in a comfortable environment allowed both participants and me to be comfortable when responding to questions that may have triggered certain emotions during the process. It is important to keep in mind that those questions may have led to areas in the lives of the women that had not been discussed in the past for reasons not identified.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

The protection of all participants in research was important. Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden (2000) stated, “The difficulties inherent in qualitative research can be alleviated by awareness and use of well-established ethical principles, specifically autonomy, beneficence, and justice” (p. 95). Prior to beginning data collection, permission was obtained from the University of the Incarnate Word’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix B). The application for IRB approval provided the university with important information pertaining to the proposed study. All individuals involved in the study were asked to sign a consent form soon after recruitment (Appendix C). The consent form provided information pertaining to the study. Once IRB approval was granted and consent forms were signed, participants were contacted and data collection research process began.

Each participant was informed that she would be identified by a pseudonym. Only the researcher would know what pseudonym was assigned to each participant. This seemed to bring a sense of comfort to participants. At times, there was still hesitation in sharing details about

certain events, but as soon as each participant was reminded of her anonymity, she continued with her story.

### **Setting**

Due to demographic constraints, all interviews took place over the phone by using the program GoToMeeting. There were two participants who lived in Texas who still elected to complete the interview over the phone and not in person. Participants selected to remain in their home or office during the interview.

The application GoToMeeting allowed participants and me to connect by calling a 1-800 purchased phone number. This approach made it possible for participants to be in a safe zone of their choice.

### **Data Collection**

The initial step in the data collection process was to recruit participants. As individuals started agreeing to meet about the study, a relationship was built with them. Periodically, individuals received an e-mail expressing interest, so they knew their story was very important and would serve a greater purpose. This alleviated stress in case further contact with participants was needed for additional information. During initial meetings, the study and the desired outcome from their interviews were discussed. The background of the topic was explained, and how the study would benefit stakeholders in higher education and ultimately would benefit Mexican-American students in a positive manner were briefly mentioned. It was extremely important to make participants feel comfortable in hopes of obtaining rich data.

Recruitment and data collection took 6 months. Information was gathered systematically so as to sort through the data with ease. During the initial meeting, other areas of the study were also discussed. The consent form was a critical part of the research, as no progress could be

made until participants returned the consent form to me. The consent form was e-mailed to the potential participant as soon as it was felt that she committed to this study. Return of the consent form was not guaranteed, so it was helpful that the initial conversation was followed up with an e-mail asking if each woman had any questions regarding the consent form.

**Interviews.** In-depth interviews were the key component to this study. During each interview, permission was asked to record (audio) the interview (initial and follow-up). It was important to make the participant well aware that she was able to withdraw from the study at any time without a penalty. Due to each participant's location, an in-person interview was not an option. In most cases, a participant was contacted with follow-up questions or clarification on answers given. Each initial interview took 1–4 hours in length. Follow-up interviews took between 30 minutes to 2 hours.

It is important to state that initial and follow-up interviews were lengthy and were analyzed several times each to ensure that the correct concept was obtained in addition to any emotions expressed by the participants. During several interviews, stories triggered emotions that had not been tapped previously since those women had not shared their story before.

**Memos.** In order to decrease the possibility of bias, memos and handwritten notes were kept to track reflections and themes that stood out early in the process. As Creswell (2009) stated, “researchers record information from interviews by making handwritten notes, by audiotaping, or by videotaping” (p. 183). Having the opportunity to memo each detail of the interview was important to this study. Memos were raw data and recorded what I was thinking while listening to the educational journal being shared by each participant. Thoughts and emotions were carefully recorded and referenced often during data analysis. Strong reactions to

certain timeframes of the story supported how important overcoming perceived barriers and utilizing key resources could be to other Mexican-American women.

**Research journal.** Journaling was important during the transcription and analysis portion of this study. Those notes recorded key elements as each interview was listened to several times and analyzed section by section. Emotions were noted and analyzed (sadness, happiness, intimidation, relief, etc.). My thoughts were also noted to eliminate bias. At times, participants would begin speaking about other experiences that were entangled in their educational journey. Those journal entries provided a good outline of codes that were strong enough to stand alone.

All interviews were transcribed by me. Also, all translations from English to Spanish included in this study were provided by me. Once data was gathered, coding began.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process was timely and in-depth. With constructivist grounded theory qualitative research, the data was analyzed constantly throughout the data collection process. As stated by Pyett (2003),

In the process of analysis, our initial interpretations are tested by further examination and checking, including the examination of our own role in the construction of meaning. Good qualitative researchers know that there is no avoiding the tedious work of returning again and again to the data to check, Is my interpretation true to the data? Does this apply to other individuals in my study? Was this topic raised in all the interviews? Reflexivity operates here, as we ask ourselves, how might my knowledge, position, and experience be shaping my analysis? Reflexivity can include checking our method, our analysis, and our interpretation not only with the academic literature but also with the population we are researching. (p. 1171)

All data was referenced to the purpose of the study, as well as the research questions. That technique ensured the desired data sought was obtained to address each question. Due to the intensity of data collection, constant data analysis took place. Constant analysis allowed me to navigate through data, which led to coding. Due to the quantity of data anticipated from the



interview process, data was analyzed after each interview. That method alleviated the hardship of analyzing all data at one time after all participants had been interviewed. Because of the different types of data collection tools used, triangulation was used to confirm that all information was being interpreted accurately. “In qualitative research, one procedure that almost always produces better data is triangulation: using multiple methods to view a single object” (Huetttman, 1993, p. 42).

In summary, the data analysis process was completed as follows: initial coding led to focused coding, which then led to categories. Once categories were identified, themes that were most prevalent were developed. Throughout the entire coding process, comparing cases was constantly done to find as many commonalities as possible. Patterns emerged that ultimately assisted in identifying themes. Those themes addressed the research question and sub-question.

### **Coding Process**

**Initial coding.** Initial coding is the first step of coding in constructivist grounded theory. Initial codes are provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data. They are provisional because the aim is to remain open to other analytic possibilities and create codes that best fit the data (Charmaz, 2014, p. 117). Initial codes often range widely across a variety of topics. Because even a short statement or excerpt may address several points, it could illustrate several different categories (Charmaz, 2014, p. 125).

From the start, careful word-by-word, line-by-line, or incident-with-incident coding moves you toward fulfilling two criteria for completing a grounded theory analysis: fit and relevance. Your study fits the empirical world when you have constructed codes and developed them into categories that crystallize participants experience. (Charmaz, 2014, p. 133)

As much as we would like to think that coding is universal and each person would develop the same code, this is not accurate. Charmaz stated:

We may think our codes capture the empirical reality. Yet it is our view: we choose the words that constitute our codes. Thus, we define what we see as significant in the data and describe what we think is happening. (p. 115)

This coding process allows the researcher to implement higher order thinking through analysis and evaluation.

**Focused coding.** Focused coding is the second step Charmaz suggested in constructing grounded theory. These codes appear more frequently among the initial codes or have more significance than other codes. In focused coding, these are used to sift, sort, synthesize, and analyze large amounts of data (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138). Focused coding allows the researcher to highlight what is emerging from the data and to develop categories. The transition from initial coding to focused coding is smooth and can occur without even noticing. During initial coding, categories can be identified, which would mean that the researcher goes back-and-forth between initial and focused coding. Sometimes students believe that the same code must reappear time and again to be used as a focused code and subsequently a possible category; this is not true. If the code is telling, the researcher should use it (Charmaz, 2014, p. 145). During focused coding, constant comparative analysis was conducted. The study focused on barriers Hispanic women overcame as they pursued higher education in addition to the resources they utilized to overcome their barriers. Initially, it was thought that once focused coding was done, everything would be clear and everything would stand out, but that was not the case.

**Categories.** After careful reflection and review, all focused codes were merged into 14 categories, because there was some correlation that tied them together. Some categories stood alone, but they were important to mention because they triggered emotional distress when

participants talked about the struggle. Participants, at times, would come out and [openly] say, “this was the barrier that could have ended it all.” Those categories were flagged as early concepts during the interview, because of the weight they held in the lives of those women.

**Constant comparative analysis.** Constant comparative analysis is used to establish analytic distinctions—and thus make comparisons at each level of analytic work (Charmaz, 2010, p. 132). Comparing codes with codes heightens the researcher’s sense of the direction the analysis is going and clarifies the theoretical centrality of certain ideas (p. 140). Data was constantly compared to other data. As concepts emerged, they were compared to other concepts to analyze whether similarities existed between concepts.

**Theoretical sampling.** Theoretical sampling keeps data analysis moving. Charmaz (2014) stated,

Theoretical sampling means seeking pertinent data to develop your emerging theory. The main purpose of theoretical sampling is to elaborate and refine the categories constituting your theory. You conduct theoretical sampling by sampling to develop properties of your categories until no new properties emerge. (p. 193)

Theoretical sampling in grounded theory provides a valuable tool for developing the analysis and correcting trouble spots. Theoretical sampling provides the material to compare theoretical category with category that might call for constructing separate, distinctive categories (Charmaz, 2014, p. 212). That part of the coding process reassured that the categories were strong and as compressed as possible with similar data.

**Theoretical saturation.** Categories are saturated when gathering fresh data, no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of these core theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2014, p. 213). Theoretical saturation is not the same as witnessing repetition of the same events or stories, although many qualitative researchers confuse saturation with repetition of described events, action, and/or statements (Charmaz, 2014, p. 213). Saturation was reached

in this group when the experiences being shared no longer provided new avenues to support theory development. For this group, there were many similarities, and saturation was met through continued constant comparison.

**Theoretical sorting.** Theoretical sorting encourages the researcher to go back to the data analysis and confirm that the order in which was data was presented was the most supportive to the study's developing theory. In grounded theory, sorting gives the researcher a logic for organizing the analysis and a way of creating and refining theoretical links that prompts the researcher to make comparisons between categories (Charmaz, 2014, p. 216). Several changes were made as I analyzed data until the path became clearer as to how codes and categories would best outline the research.

**Conceptualization.** Conceptualization is the process of building something from the data. At each step, the analysis was building toward a concept or theory. Each stage is critical to help guide the process. This portion of data analysis led to themes.

**Substantive theory.** Substantive theory is the cumulative result of each step taken during the data analysis. Charmaz (2014) defined a substantive theory as “a theoretical interpretation or explanation of a delimited problem in a particular area, such as family relationships, formal organizations, or education” (p. 344). A constructivist approach theorizes the interpretive work that research participants do, but also acknowledges that the resulting theory is an interpretation. The following sentence is critical to know in Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory: The theory depends on the researcher's view; it does not and cannot stand outside of it (Charmaz, 2014, p. 239). Ultimately, the theory development process is a culmination of analysis and interpretation.

The coding process ultimately produced the foundation for the formulation of a theoretical interpretation. “In discovering theory, one generates conceptual categories or their properties from evidence; then the evidence from which the category emerged is used to illustrate the concept” (Grubs & Piantanida, 2010, p. 104). During the manual process of data analysis, going through the information segment-by-segment is critical, as the thoughts that come to mind during this process are reflected in the research memo. As Ivey (2012) mentioned, the process of analyzing qualitative data also differs from that used in quantitative studies. Interviews are analyzed line by line, and tentative notes are made about what the researcher thinks might be a theme (p. 319). Data analysis allows for different categories and themes to surface that provide a theoretical framework to address this phenomenon. Rabinovich and Kacen (2010) mentioned,

This analysis engages text substance and structure alike and assists in uncovering properties, repeating patterns, variations, and extraordinary situations. At the first stage of analysis, researchers break down text into its component parts, whereas at the second, they reassemble them. This process of linking similar and contrasting categories with one another lays the foundation for derivation of interpretation, i.e., sets of statements that innovatively integrate previously disassembled text components. (p. 699)

Data analysis led to codes, codes led to categories, and categories led to themes. All codes were tracked on an Excel spreadsheet. After constantly comparing codes and categories, themes emerged that addressed the research question and sub-question.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I was able to identify with the women in the study. Mexican-American women have different barriers to overcome depending on the environment in which they were raised. Being an active member of the medical education community at a health science center, I was able to form close relationships with participants in hopes of having them become more comfortable during the data collection process. I had contributed over 20 years to the field of education, and it

was rewarding to be able to contribute through research as well. As a Mexican-American doctoral student, I had utilized different resources, such as academic counseling, tutoring, financial counseling, and faculty support, that allowed me to get to this point in my educational journey.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

This study was designed to examine the stories of Mexican-American women who utilized resources or sought support from family, friends, or colleagues to turn their dreams of success into a reality. The first three chapters focused on different areas of this study. Some of the areas discussed in Chapter 1 were the context of the study, gender role, the need for education, and the significance of the study. Chapter 2 elaborated on the literature review, which encompassed the American dream, familism, gender roles in a Hispanic family, acculturation, academic achievement, and marianismo. Chapter 3 went into detail about the methodology used in this study. Chapter 4 will provide an overview of the purpose statement, research questions, participant backgrounds, data analysis, and summary of analysis.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this constructivist grounded theory qualitative research was to explore the perceived barriers Mexican-American women overcame as they pursued a higher education. Identifying barriers and inquiring how these obstacles were overcome may be beneficial to other Mexican-American and Hispanic women currently struggling with similar issues. Experiences shared by these women framed the interpretive theory in this study.

### **Research Questions**

The following research question was used to address the purpose of this study, followed by one sub-question:

- What perceived barriers did you overcome as you pursued a higher education?
  - What resources were utilized to overcome these barriers?

## **Analysis and Interviews**

Through purposeful and snowball sampling, in-depth interviews were the key interpretive component in this study. Data analysis also incorporated literature participants recommended about Hispanics and the struggle in higher education. Initial interviews lasted 1–4 hours, with follow-up interviews lasting 30 minutes to 2 hours. To refine categories, I utilized theoretical sampling through follow-up interviews. Theoretical sampling provided a better understanding of developing concepts.

Data was coded segment-by-segment using the gerunds coding process. Charmaz (2014) stated, “coding means categorizing segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for each piece of data” (p. 111). Gerunds allowed the process of coding the action taking place in each segment. The analysis of data presented a wealth of information that painted the lives of each participant. Each participant had a different story, but it was clear that barriers each participant encountered were life changing in her educational journey.

In order to decrease the possibility of bias, memos and handwritten notes were kept to track reflections and themes that stood out early in the process. As Creswell (2009) stated, “researchers record information from interviews by making handwritten notes, by audiotaping, or by videotaping” (p. 183). Having the opportunity to memo each detail of the interview was important to this study. Memos were raw data and recorded what I was thinking while listening to the educational journal being shared by each participant. Thoughts and emotions were recorded and referenced often during data analysis. Strong reactions to certain timeframes of the story supported how important overcoming perceived barriers and utilizing key resources could be to other Mexican-American and Hispanic women.



Journaling was important during the transcription and analysis portion of this study. Those notes recorded key elements as each interview was listened to [repeated] several times and analyzed section by section. Emotions were noted and analyzed (sadness, happiness, intimidation, relief, etc.). My thoughts were also noted to eliminate bias. At times, participants would begin speaking about other experiences that were entangled in their educational journey. Journal entries provided a good outline of codes that were strong enough to stand alone.

Coding with gerunds by segments led to provisional codes. Through further analysis and focused coding, larger amounts of data were coded to highlight what was emerging that would provide an interpretation of the phenomenon. Theoretical sampling was critical at that point to ensure data analysis was accurate. Theoretical sampling led me to further data analysis and follow-up interviews for additional information or clarification. Theoretical saturation was reached once data was no longer able to produce new theoretical categories.

All interviews were transcribed by me. Also, all translations from English to Spanish included in this study were translated by me.

### **Participant Demographics**

A total of 13 women participated in this study through purposeful and snowball sampling. Initially, 10 women were interviewed. As concepts began emerging from the data, theoretical sampling was used with the recruitment of 3 additional women. Theoretical sampling allowed me to build on the emerging theory. New data was analyzed through constant comparison.

To protect the identity of participants, each participant was given a pseudonym. Table 3 provides demographic information of the participants. Participants were composed of 8 Doctorate of Philosophy's, 2 Doctorate of Juris Prudence, 1 Doctorate in Educational Leadership, 1 Doctor of Medicine, and 1 Doctorate of Pharmacy. Seven participants were located

in Texas, 1 in Minnesota, 2 in California, 1 in Massachusetts, 1 in Arizona, and 1 in New Mexico. Ages ranged from 26–56.

Table 3

*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Age	Degree*	Graduation Date	School Location	Occupation
Brycenia	43	PhD	2015	California	Counselor
Panchita	34	PhD	2014	Texas	Postdoctoral Fellow
Irma	33	PhD	2011	Minnesota	Postdoctoral Fellow
Blanca	30	JD	2012	Texas	Attorney
Delfina	35	EDLD	2014	Massachusetts	Research and Development
Brianna	33	PhD	2013	Arizona	Assistant Professor
Susanna	44	PhD	2015	California	Investigator, Law Enforcement
Ronnita	29	PhD	2013	New Mexico	Clinical Translational Scientist
Errica	26	PharmD	2015	Texas	Pharmacist
Luisa	35	PhD	2014	Texas	Postdoctoral Fellow
Lupe	31	JD	2015	Texas	Attorney
Adrianna	56	PhD	2012	North Carolina	Professor
Berenice	37	MD	2015	Texas	Doctor of Medicine

*Note:*

\*PhD: Doctorate in Philosophy

\*JD: Juris Doctorate

\*EDLD: Education Leadership Doctorate

\*PharmD: Doctorate in Pharmacy

\*MD: Doctor of Medicine

**Participant Backgrounds**

**Brycenia.** Brycenia was 43 years of age, married, and a school principal. She attended a state university in California and graduated in 1995 from her undergraduate school program. For her doctorate, she attended a university that has chapters throughout the United States but is mainly located in California. She obtained her Doctorate in Philosophy in 2015. Born in Guadalajara, Mexico, she was brought to the United States at the age of 2 and settled in Southern California. In third grade, she moved into a house with her siblings. Considered the peacemaker, she wanted everyone to get along at home and desired for her mother to be happy and content.

At school, she played the same role by always trying to find a middle ground on which peers could agree so there would not be dividedness. She had a rebellious side to her in that she would try to find ways around house rules. Questioning authority allowed her to ask why certain rules were in place. School was not something that was discussed regularly. The family rule was, “you have two choices—you are either going to go to school or you are going to work, but whatever you do, you’re going to do it well.” Her family was very hardworking and resourceful, because money was limited. They had to find a way to survive on a continuous basis.

**Panchita.** Panchita was 34 years of age, engaged, and a postdoctoral fellow at a health science center in Texas. She obtained her undergraduate and graduate degrees from a public university in South Texas and graduated with her doctorate in 2014. She had an older sister who obtained a graduate degree from a private Catholic university in Texas. As a child, Panchita was quiet and preferred to observe those around her. She had a traditional upbringing with both parents still married. She was so eager to start school when she was a child that her parents had to find a program for her age group earlier than expected. Once she started school, she never looked back. Although college was never mentioned in her household, it was understood that they, she and her sister, were expected to pursue it.

When she was applying for college, her parents did not want her to leave Texas. There was so much going on during high school and the early phase of college. It was during that time she found out she was pregnant. She took some time off to have her son but returned to continue school where she left off. During the transition from student to motherhood, she stayed at a shelter, because her father was disappointed with the pregnancy. A resource that helped her continue her educational journey was the use of free daycare. It was considered a Head Start program. She was not working at that time so she could focus on school.

Ever since she was in high school, she found answers to her questions. She did not wait for answers to come to her. She had a goal in mind and she was dedicated to getting it done. Initially, her dream was to attend medical school. Once she had her son, she had to re-evaluate the length of the program and determine how to proceed. During her senior year in college, she took a course that focused on the brain. That piqued her interest. She sat with her mentor to get more ideas on what other options she could pursue in place of medicine. They discussed the study of science. He encouraged her to apply to graduate school.

After doing more research, such as shadowing in a research lab, she applied for graduate school through a minority program her campus offered where half of her tuition would be paid by the program. She was accepted into the program and completed it successfully. By the time she graduated from her graduate school program, she was teaching at a local middle school. Being a middle school teacher was difficult. She went back to her mentor and asked if he would hire her to run his lab and he said, "I'll hire you only if you apply to the PhD program." That was their deal. She agreed and began her doctoral program journey soon after.

**Irma.** Irma was 33 years of age, married, and a postdoctoral fellow. She obtained her undergraduate degree from a private Catholic university in Texas and then pursued a doctorate in the Midwest where she graduated in 2011. Her parents divorced at an early age, and she moved in with relatives. It was a large family dynamic. She did not consider herself as poor while growing up. She was the first person to attend college in her family.

Irma began her educational journey at a community college where they offered a program that allowed her to take 2 years of classes at the college and then transfer her hours to a partnering 4-year university. During her transition to the university, she felt the financial strain of

attending a larger school. It was also at that time that her mother was diagnosed with cervical cancer. She took on the role as her mother's caregiver, which was a lot of responsibility,

She was the person upon whom her family depended for guidance and support. While acting as her mother's caregiver and taking her to appointments at a cancer center in South Texas, she became interested in science. She was familiar with the language during those visits, because the job she obtained while in college was that of a research assistant at a health science center in South Texas that involved the collection and study of cancer specimens.

Leaving home to attend college was a difficult adjustment. She was instantly seen as different when she relocated to the Midwest. In the small town into which she moved for college, the population consisted of 99% Caucasian people. Coming from a Hispanic family, she was taught to be respectful and not to cause any disruptions. As a graduate student, she was taught to forget everything she learned while growing up and was encouraged to ask questions, to speak out, to challenge her peers and faculty. Critiquing papers was part of her role as a graduate student. She had to be strong and play by the rules. As an educated Hispanic woman, she was seen differently by other people in her culture, because they were surprised to find she had a degree. In addition, people were also puzzled by her because she was the head of the household. She did not fit into the gender role associated with her culture. During college, she became actively involved with a minority group that provided the support she needed.

**Blanca.** Blanca was 30 years of age, single, and an attorney. She attended a public university in Texas for undergraduate school and a different university in Texas for her law degree. As a child, she was extremely shy, and that characteristic continued to the present depending on the situation. Her shyness also depended on with whom she was associating. Growing up, she was given the task of being the family translator, which forced her to grow up

quickly. She had to lead adult driven conversations for her family as a young girl and felt the stares coming from adults in disapproval.

Blanca recently lost her father but continued to say that her mother was the center point of her family. Growing up in a large city in Texas, she experienced diversity in that she was the only Hispanic in the classroom among other minorities. Something internal made her work hard to be better as a student. Friends also provided support by challenging each other to do better than the other people in the group. Her group of friends was not dominated by a certain ethnicity; it was a diverse group of friends. When she faced a challenge, something within herself made her want to overcome the challenge.

Becoming a lawyer took some reflection and a few years of being in the workforce to come to that conclusion. She worked at a law firm, because she did not think she was capable of being one of the lawyers. Eventually, she went back to school. There was a personal connection between immigration law and her childhood. The stares she experienced from adults when she was translating for her parents came from her family's time during the immigration process. She was the first person in her family to go to college, and she leaned on friends for understanding and advice. Her family was not sure as to why she would want to continue going to school after getting a bachelor's degree.

Seeing women like her in the field of law helped her stay on the right path. She expressed the importance of having a mentorship program so that women following in the footsteps of other women from the same background can see how attainable their goal truly is. The struggle of financial support was also a factor that weighed heavily on her early in her educational career.

**Delfina.** Delfina was 35 years of age, single, and working in research and development. She obtained her undergraduate, graduate, and doctorate from an Ivy League school on the east

coast of the United States in 2014. Growing up, she was the kind of child who played around the neighborhood. Being shy brought her to stay close to her mother when they were at family gatherings or around her family. She was raised in Tijuana, Mexico, and transitioned to the United States at 11 years old. Her immediate family moved to the United States, while her extended family remained in Mexico. Her family would visit Mexico often, because it was less than 1-hour travel distance from where they lived in the United States.

Transitioning into the United States as an 11-year-old girl was not an easy thing to do. Her older brother entered English-learning classes in middle school and was never given a solid platform from which to grow in that area. He was given busy work and never learned English well. Her mother did not want to put her in those same courses. She had to pretend to know more English than she really did. It was a difficult adjustment and a lot of pressure. At one point, Delfina learned how to block those memories from her mind. Adjusting continued through middle school. Simple things like her nationality were things upon which she never reflected because all of her peers in Mexico were Mexican, so she did not have to label herself there like she did in the United States.

She and her mother worked together with dictionaries to try and figure out her homework. She knew a little English and her mother knew a little English, so they would put their knowledge together to complete a task. There was no micro-management involved in regard to schoolwork. Her parents just wanted her and her siblings to do the best they could. If getting an A was what they could do, that was okay. If getting a C was the best they could do in class, that was acceptable, too. She always had the support of her family along her journey in school. They knew she would go to college, because she always had the desire to be a leader. Both her parents went to college in Mexico, and they encouraged her to focus on whatever her current

project was. During her educational journey, she realized how undereducated she was once she reached her Ivy League campus. The transition from her high school to her new school on the East Coast was culturally challenging.

**Brianna.** Brianna was 33 years of age, divorced, and an assistant professor in English at a university. She obtained her undergraduate degree from New Mexico. Her master's degree was in Spanish, and she received her doctorate in 2013. Growing up with five siblings in her family, there was nothing out of the ordinary that caught her attention. Financial struggles never really geared her to attend college; however, it was something that was expected. She pursued scholarships and was able to apply for a scholarship lottery.

The high school she attended did not provide students any guidance on scholarships or grant opportunities. One day, she recalls the entire class being taken to the high school cafeteria and given an application to apply to a local university. Everyone filled out the application and everything else fell into place. When she started college, she received C's for the first time in her life. At certain times, she had to drop courses in order to keep her grade point average at a certain level. There were no places of support on campus. During her second year of college, she became pregnant by someone she had known for 4 months. She never thought about leaving school.

The thought of how everything was going to work out made her nervous. The father of her child was from a different background, more privileged. They were different on many levels, but they moved in together to try to make it work for the sake of their child. The semester she had her baby, she spoke with her professors, and they helped her work around the birth. It was the first semester she received straight A's in all of her course load. She was working hard and



out to prove to people that she was not a statistic. Her desire to be successful and continue on the path she started remained strong.

**Susanna.** Susanna was 44 years of age, married, and a law enforcement investigator. She received her doctorate in May 2015. Born in west Texas to a single mother, she is the third generation born in the United States, with her family originating from Mexico. She comes from a long line of single mothers. Staying true to her culture was very important to the family. Fieldwork was the way people supported the family in those times in that area. Watching them work so hard, just backbreaking work, in the hot sun in New Mexico still brings back difficult memories.

When she started school, she didn't know English. Some students would not return to school, because they were not able to learn English. While she was a student, she made a connection with a teacher who was a positive influence in her life. Her parents were very supportive of her as well; however, there was never any talk about advancing in school or what would happen after high school.

Throughout Susanna's life, she and her family traveled back and forth between Mexico and the United States due to financial hardships. During high school, when she lived in Mexico, she made a friend who was a neighbor's cousin. They would spend time together and enjoyed each other's company. Her mother was strict, so when she found out that there was a boy in her daughter's life, she assumed the worst. She forced her daughter to get married. After the wedding, she had to move to a different part of Mexico to be closer to her husband's family. Due to abuse and loneliness, she moved back home with her mother not long after, and they began working on the process of getting her husband immigrated into the United States. She obtained her GED in place of a high school diploma, because the program had the flexibility she

needed so she could work and support the family. Once she graduated from the GED program, she enrolled in a transcription service program in hopes of obtaining a trade. She worked, supported her family, and took the bus to the program every day. It was a struggle, but she remembers that journey fondly.

**Ronnita.** Ronnita was 29 years of age, married, and worked as a research protocol specialist. She obtained her doctorate in May 2015 from a well-known university in the Midwest. Born and raised in New Mexico, her desire was to be a doctor when she was growing up. During high school, she volunteered at a local surgeon's office in hopes of getting more exposure to the field of medicine. After high school, she began taking courses at a local community college, where one of her professors introduced her to research. She joined a research program that allowed her to carry out research on cotton. This experience piqued her interest in research. Throughout college and even after graduation, she was heavily involved with a minority research group. This group allowed her to travel to different areas in the United States to conduct research. While conducting research, she was also studying for the Medical College Admissions Test. After careful review of the medical school program and duration of study, she made the choice that she did not want to get into so much debt while attending medical school.

Ronnita studied hard and entered a prestigious university for her doctorate. Her skills were so advanced in research that she was able to get into a grant program that paid for her salary and tuition. Moving from New Mexico to the Midwest was a difficult transition (culture shock). Fortunately for her, the program in which she participated had a campus in Arizona to which she was able to transfer and continue her studies. The move brought her closer to home. Even though the program was difficult, Ronnita felt the need to continue because she had already

made a commitment. In order to survive, she formed her own community in hopes of feeling a little piece of home with her.

**Errica.** Errica was 26 years of age, married, and graduated with her Doctorate in Pharmacy in 2015. She came from a family of four siblings and grew up in South Texas. Since she was a child, she wanted to take control of her future. Her dream was to become a doctor until she realized how long the education path was for that profession. After careful reflection, she redirected her future toward a different path that would allow her to obtain a doctorate and still be involved in patient care.

During high school, she took the initiative to research programs that interested her. One critical change in her path occurred during her senior year in high school; she became pregnant. This challenged her to continue moving forward and working hard to reach the goals she had set in place for herself and now her growing family. The person she was dating in high school supported her throughout the pregnancy, and they both worked together to keep moving forward. Errica attended her high school graduation while 8 months pregnant and was the senior class president. She felt the doubt of her success coming from people around her. That fueled her desire to continue. She started college right after graduation and had her baby 1 month after she started school.

At that time, she was overcoming being a mother, finding a place to live, and making her marriage work. Class by class, she continued to push forward. Her grade point average was not competitive enough for the pharmacy program at the school. She reached out for help by speaking to an advisor. This advisor guided her in what courses to retake to improve her chances of being accepted into the program.

Pharmacy school was a challenge. Her husband was also attending school, and he had shift work, so they would alternate taking care of their son. She worked as a pharmacy tech at night, and he worked during the day. Before exams, she would stay at school to study while her husband managed the family. Getting into the new routine and study habits needed for the program was difficult. After a few years, the routine of studying and balancing family became second nature.

Throughout her educational journey, she felt determined to make her marriage and studies a success. Her husband was supportive and seeing her parents stay together for so many years was encouraging that a family could remain strong throughout the years and hardships. Her family loved and supported each other, and she wanted her son to witness the same kind of love. Growing up, she felt that she had to be a role model for her younger sister who was following in her footsteps. Having a child during high school deterred her in that she could not be as social as her friends were, but she considered that a blessing. She focused on school and her family. Her sense of culture and staying true to the traditional the Mexican woman's role in the family remained the same throughout her educational journey.

**Luisa.** Luisa was 35 years of age and a postdoctoral fellow on the west coast of the United States. She obtained her doctorate in Texas. Luisa grew up in both El Paso, Texas, and Chihuahua, Mexico. She attended school in Mexico because she had family there. Her mother would commute to El Paso every day for work. After elementary school, she had to begin school in the United States full-time, because Mexico charged for students to attend middle school and high school. She had two siblings who had different ambitions than she did. With a little observation of her surroundings, she realized she had a lot more motivation to venture further into education than her peers. Since her grandmother attended school to the second grade and her

mother was always working, she relied heavily on her peers and tutors to help with homework. Luisa worked hard to learn as much as she could in order to help her younger siblings with their schoolwork. Her younger sister did not attend college, and her younger brother obtained an Associate's degree and was a mechanic.

Her aunt watched them when they still lived in Mexico, and she was very protective. Her aspiration to continue in school was internal. After making the transition to Texas in middle school, she sought opportunities to grow by joining the band at school. Her family was not accustomed to having her participate in extracurricular activities, so it took time for them to adjust to a new routine. Being a band member meant she had criteria to meet in order to continue on that journey. It was a new exposure to accountability, and it sparked her desire to be more accountable for her future.

As the first person in her family to attend college, she had to pave the way and learn through her own experiences. Her family was surprised that she wanted to keep going to school and they could not understand why. After starting college, she moved out of her grandmother's house to experience a little more freedom. In order to support herself, she worked three jobs. Trying to balance school and work was difficult, and she had to take some time away from school to focus solely on work. There was a new void that surfaced; something was missing internally after she left school. One day, while working, she noticed people needing flex schedules in order to work around their schoolwork. That triggered something inside her, and she realized she was no different than they were and decided to return to school.

The support she felt from teachers made her more intrigued about the opportunity of going to college. Initially, her friends were her support system when she needed the extra encouragement. In hopes of fitting in with her friends, she did well in school. It was peer

pressure, in reverse. Her grandmother also played a vital role as a supporter of education. Along her college journey, well into her doctoral program, her grandmother passed away. That was devastating to her. It was the one thing that made her want to leave school. The point and reason for continuing on her educational journey no longer existed.

English, being her second language, brought a different aspect of learning to her. Encountering culture shock not once but twice in her life allowed her to grow mentally and emotionally. Studying in mid-Texas for 6 months allowed her to spread her wings before starting college. It took some adjustment, but she learned to work through difficult times.

**Lupe.** Lupe was 31 years of age, married, and an attorney in Texas. She obtained her doctorate in Texas. Although she was born and reared in Texas, she had strong roots in Mexico through her mother's side of the family. Her grandfather was born in Mexico and had dual citizenship. When he turned 18 years old, he had to choose between living in Mexico or the United States. Ultimately, he chose to live in the United States. Soon after, he was drafted into World War II.

Lupe was taught to be independent at a young age so that she would always be able to support herself. Education was an important factor in her life, because her mother always reiterated how important it was. Her mother was confident and strong. Having that strong woman mentality prepared Lupe to accomplish her dreams of getting an education and entering the legal workforce that was dominated by male attorneys.

Each phase of education was a transition for her. Being outside her environment and getting to know people from different cultural backgrounds were positive changes from what she was accustomed. Her passion was to prove people wrong when they set limits or low expectations. Many times, people thought she was not educated because she was Hispanic, until

they were informed she was the attorney in the room. As an attorney, she felt the need to set a precedent that Hispanic women could be assertive and educated like any other student. When there is a passion for something, there needs to be a focus to reach that goal and to bring positive attention to the Hispanic culture through education, service, and hard work.

**Adrianna.** Adrianna was 56 years of age, single, and a professor in Texas. She was very active throughout her years in early education and went through a shy period in middle school. She became more outgoing during her high school years. Education was important to her family from the time she could remember. The focus on education stemmed from the background from which her mother came where they were treated as second-class citizens inside the classroom. Her parents wanted her to have a well-rounded education in all aspects—culturally and intellectually.

Growing up, she was exposed to different culturally rich venues, museums, and environments since her father was in the military. Adrianna was able to see the world through a diverse lens that had no boundaries. Her experiences triggered her passion for education, the arts, and seeking education opportunities outside of her normal environment. Attending college away from home was a learning experience that exposed her to a cold environment, something to which she was not accustomed. She often felt out of place because there was double the number of men at the university than there were women. Regardless, she was focused and persisted through her academic journey. Adrianna met women professors who added a piece to her journey that she carries internally still today [to the present]. She was the only Hispanic in her doctoral program, which automatically set her apart from the group. The number of Hispanics with a doctoral degree are few, and she was able to overcome the possibility of isolation by venturing toward her goal and leaning on support from mentors to reach the finish line.

**Berenice.** Berenice was 37 years of age, married, and a medical doctor in Texas. She was very active in school as a child and realized early that she did not want to be a follower but rather a leader. Restless describes her way of being, in addition to interactive and curious. One particular memory came to mind when she thought about her educational journey. Her father would push the children in her family to be better than average. Everything they accomplished made both her mom and dad proud. Early on, she knew she wanted to be a doctor. She realized there was only one way to reach that goal. Berenice recalled the need to get perfect scores on all assignments and in all classes to make sure her dad was pleased. If anything less than an A was scored, he would ask if there was a problem with understanding the material and always encouraged his children to do better. Having her father as the enforcer of her studies was critical along her journey. When she went to medical school, he was still actively involved and would follow-up with her to ensure things were going well.

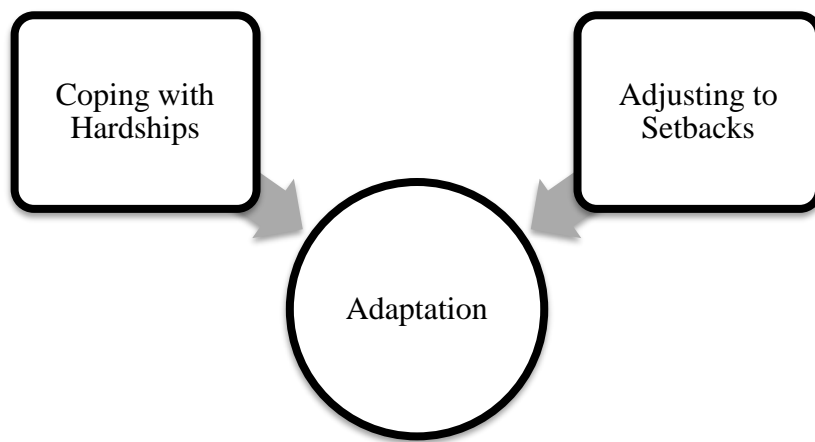
Her mother was the disciplinarian and enforcer in the family. Everything had to be clean, organized, and in place. As a child, her mother was the leader and later all the children did their best to take care of her. Decisions were no longer dependent on what her mother wanted, but Berenice did everything in her power to make sure her mother was very well provided.

### **Theme 1: Adaptation**

The constant reoccurrence of adaptation was evident in this study. At different points in their lives, these women adapted to changing life situations. In order to keep moving toward a positive direction, these women needed to search for internal strength. Some adaptations were physical, while others were emotional or psychological. All participants encompassed the ability to analyze their situation and identify methods of adapting to change(s).



**Categories leading to theme 1: Adaptation.** Figure 6 is a presentation of adaptation. Adaptation was composed of two categories: (a) coping with hardships and (b) adjusting to setbacks. Experiences shed light on the process of adaptation. These two categories revolved around experiences from childhood throughout the women's college experience. Figure 6 depicts the relationship between properties.



*Figure 6.* Adaptation.

**Category 1: Coping with hardships.** Hardships were identified by all 13 women at different stages in life. Data analysis shed light on important experiences participants survived. Those hardships exposed raw emotion as stories were shared during interviews. From physical abuse to coping with pregnancy, experiences were delicate and personal. Some participants had not reflected on their story until the day of our interview, so the need to pause during interviews must be acknowledged. Category 1 was composed of two properties: (a) suffering from abuse and (b) experiencing unplanned pregnancy.

**Property 1: Suffering from abuse.** Divorce and some form of abuse (physical and/or emotional) were mentioned during interviews. It became a challenge when participants were working so hard toward reaching a goal and they did not have the support of their spouse. The

following sections provide insight on the emotional and physical experiences shared by these women.

Brycenia recalled the support she received from her family and husband; however, the support for her husband was not always apparent. There were times when she felt he did not want her to focus on what she was doing (earning her doctorate) because it could have caused her to put family behind her schoolwork (emotional abuse); her daughter was young and she needed all of her attention. Brycenia felt the lack of support at times and felt guilty. During her time as a student, Brycenia's daughter acknowledged how hard her mother had to work to find the balance between being a student, wife, and mother. Brycenia's dedication piqued her daughter's interest also to earn her doctorate one day regardless of what obstacles come into play. One night, Brycenia's daughter made a comment about wanting to pursue a PhD and was clear in stating that this goal needed to be reached before she got married and had a family. Her daughter witnessed the lack of support at times from Brycenia's husband. Regardless, Brycenia pushed through and succeeded in reaching the finish line.

Susanna was forced to get married at the age of 16 to a nearby neighbor in Mexico who was 21 years old. Her parents were religious, and when they found out she had a friendship with a boy, they assumed the worst. Her parents figured that marriage would take care of any underlying issues. After she was married, Susanna's husband wanted to go back to his part of Mexico. She recalled:

I never protested. I just did not have that will to fight my parents or say anything, so I ended up going back to his part of Mexico. After 6 months or so, I realized I had to return home no matter what the cost. I was in survival mode. It was during this same time that I found out I was pregnant. In Mexico, getting married at a young age and starting a family is normal. If you do not have kids, there might be something wrong with your marriage; at least that is the perception.

During her time in Mexico with her new husband, she felt alone and experienced abuse. Soon after the abuse started taking place, Susanne reached out to her mother and they found a way to bring her back to the United States. Bringing her back to a place where she felt comfortable and knew people would be beneficial to Susanna and the family. She did not return to the United States alone; she brought her husband with her. He did not know English and could not get a job; therefore, she had to find a job to support the entire family. Not only was Susanne the sole provider for her family, but she worked hard to go back to school and obtain a GED. She then worked her way through college, all the way through a doctorate degree. During her studies, she had another child with her, then, husband. She endured abuse for 10 years before deciding she could no longer be married to that person.

To tell you the truth, survival for me was the only thing I could think of. My schooling was really sort of on the back burner. I actually started schooling after I had my second child, my daughter, 4 years apart from my son. I was still with their father. The reason I stayed with him even though it started getting really bad was because there was not the option of divorce. It never crossed my mind. Amidst all of these problems, additional problems were alcoholism, domestic violence, and adultery on his part. It was 10 years from hell.

Abuse and neglect were common among participants. Brianna experienced psychological and emotional abuse. Brianna shared,

We were from very, very different backgrounds. He was Anglo, grew up in a very affluent neighborhood. I was a poor Hispanic. In many ways, our worlds collided. At the very end, I realized we were too culturally different to make this work. I remember certain things where he would make fun of me for being poor and having grown up in a trailer. We would not share finances, because he said that, at the time, I did not make as much money as he did so he did not want to give me his money.

Her marriage was difficult to work around because of the constant belittling that took place.

Brianna acknowledged that she was from a different background than her husband, but it was hurtful to be belittled for something in which she had no fault. Feeling alone, disenchanting, and disappointed, Brianna filed for divorce during her graduate studies. The emotional and

psychological abuse endured was difficult to overcome. Divorce weighed heavy on the shoulders of participants, and it was a barrier that had several layers associated with it. These women tapped into their resilience and learned to overcome emotions and hardships in order to reach their dreams. Regardless of what the circumstances were before, during, or after divorce, they were in control of their future, and there was nothing that could stop them from succeeding. In addition to overcoming the experience of divorce, Brianna also overcame one of the most heartbreaking experiences a mother or father could ever imagine. She was forced to choose between her studies and her son. After being accepted into a program in a different state, her ex-husband was not okay with her taking their son from home. He harbored negative feelings toward her because she chose to pursue her education. Brianna felt that she was being punished for leaving an abusive marriage. She recalled,

I did not necessarily feel like I needed to be punished for getting out of a situation that I knew was not going to be a productive marriage. I did not have any money at the time and, of course, my parents did not have any money. Getting a lawyer to figure all of the details out did not cross my mind at all. I thought that would be expensive and I could not do it, but the courts offer this free mediation service for anyone seeking help. We went to mediation, and it was this long 2-hour session; here my ex-husband did not budge. One of us had to budge, and it ended up being me. Interestingly enough, he did not start budging until I started crying about things. He reassured me we would make the arrangements work with our son. He promised to pay for their son's travel to see her. It was a very haphazard type of agreement that we came to that day, which came down to leaving my son to further my education.

She had no choice. She left her heart (her son) to create a better future for him. She spent every free minute she could with him while balancing her sanity in graduate school. She visited her son every 2 weeks back home. It was an open wound that ripped her to pieces every time she left him to return to school. Brianna was on a mission to create an amazing future for her son. The thought of why she was working so hard was what kept her going. They spoke on the phone every night and, to date, are well on their way to reinforcing their strong bond. Brianna and her

son started journaling every day and sharing their reflections with each other. Truly, her courage and sacrifice were for the greater good of her son, and that is a true demonstration of a mother's love.

***Property 2: Experiencing unplanned pregnancy.*** Pregnancy during high school or college was another barrier mentioned by 6 out of 13 participants during interviews. There were difficult struggles that accompanied being pregnant, and each struggle was different. After finding out they were pregnant, participants never thought of putting up their babies for adoption or having abortions. They were strong-willed and welcomed the opportunity of being mothers. Not all women welcome becoming mothers while they are students, and it is important to consider those struggles while pursuing a higher education. Losing sight of their goals was not an option. If anything, becoming pregnant fueled their desire to work harder. Not one of the 6 participants contemplated not having a baby because of their career goals. It was something they embraced. At times, they were judged by peers or faculty, but that did not matter to them. They refused to become a statistic. In a sense, having a child encouraged them to dream bigger in hopes of providing a better life for their unborn child.

Being pregnant was a different experience for each participant. Brianna's experience with pregnancy was difficult in more ways than just becoming a mother in college. She reflected,

I got pregnant during my second year of college. I was dating this guy for about 4 months, and then we were going to have a baby. I did not have any plans to drop out of school, but I certainly was a little worried about how this was all going to work out. We were from different backgrounds, and we had little in common. I had my child at the end of November. I had to do a lot of wiggling around with my responsibilities. Talking with a lot of my professors and letting them know I was going to have a baby. We all worked together to make sure it was going to be a successful semester. It was pretty amazing, because I was out to prove to myself that a Hispanic teenager having a baby could still be successful. I was 19 when I found out I was pregnant.

She worked hard during her pregnancy and noticed the interest of others in her child while she was pregnant. The interest was not that of happiness for her pregnancy but of other people wanting to take her child from her. As she remembered this experience, she shared what was going through her mind,

There were some weird people that approached me wanting to keep my baby. I was working at this restaurant, and the UPS man would come in pretty often. He sat me down one day and explained how he and his wife had not been able to conceive a child. He said, “you don’t have the financial means to raise this child.” It was really unsolicited information. He continued, “My wife and I would be able to provide more for him than you would be able to.” I told him, “I’m good.”

It was not the first time someone had offered to take her baby after she found out she was pregnant. She continued,

It is weird the perception people have of you and the perception about whether you can raise a child. My high school math teacher, I told him I was pregnant. He called me and said, “my wife and I really want to have a baby. Would you consider giving us your baby?”

Not one time did she consider having her child raised by someone else. Looking back, she reflected how difficult it was to be a mother while attending school. Class schedules were hectic, and there were not enough resources available to provide the childcare she needed. Trying to balance everything meant she had to make tough decisions at times. She recalled one day when she had to take her child to class because she was not able to find childcare,

I remember one time going to class and taking my son with me. And my professor said, “do we need to move the class time so that you don’t have to bring your child with you?” She wasn’t trying to be nice, she was like, you can’t bring that kid with you, so if we can avoid this next class, I’ll do that.

The responsibility of being a good student, working full-time, and being a great mother was tiresome and challenging.

Susanna’s experience with motherhood started out differently. She moved from the United States back to Mexico due to her family’s financial hardship. After being forced to marry

her husband at the age of 16 because her parents thought there was something more than just a friendship happening, she moved to Nyarith, Mexico, to be closer to his family. She was alone in a foreign place and needed to find her way back home. By this time, her parents had moved back to California. Susanna was able to rebuild the communication with her mother in time for her to move back home after finding out she was pregnant but before she gave birth to her son. They were able to get her husband to come over to California with them as well. Susanna recalls,

I ended up with a husband who could not support the family. I knew I had to find a way to support my son. I think my son was a huge turning point in my life, because at that point, I knew I had to do something. I ended up going back to the same high school that I dropped out of a few years back and went through the whole, Let's get you your high school diploma; let's get you graduated. All I could think of was that I needed to make money. I needed to go to work; I needed a job; I needed something; I needed a skill. What ended up happening is that I enrolled as a GED student, because I did not have the time to go to regular school. There was a new concept back then where pregnant teenagers had their own classes and their own schedules, and everybody would take their babies with them.

Resilience and determination were sparked by the birth of her son. She was focused to get to the finish line and make something of herself. The more she felt closed in, the harder she fought to overcome the barriers in front of her. She kept referring to resilience as "survival mode" when she talked about the difficult times in her life. The resilience she exhibited dominated her fears and struggles.

Errica was in high school when she found out she was going to have a baby. Similar to the other participants, she was focused and did not let this circumstance stand in the way of achieving her goal. She recalled,

When I was in high school, I was looking into all these things, and I had all these things planned, and then I found out I was pregnant. I found out around December, and we decided, my husband now, that we were going to find a way to continue with our plans. I was still going to go to college. At that point, I was a senior. When I walked the stage, I was about 8 months pregnant and was the senior class president.

She felt confident that she was going to reach her goal. There was a sense of doubt among her community. She continued,

Of course, nobody thought we were going to do anything with our lives because I got pregnant. Soon after I graduated high school, that same summer, I started college. That was a challenge itself, because we were trying to find a place to live.

Her desire to succeed was evident, and she stayed focused. She needed to learn how to be a mother and college student at the same time. There was a struggle with grades, but the challenge made her work harder. Errica's main focus was always her husband and son. No matter what was going on, she wanted to be the traditional Mexican mother who cooked dinner for her family and had family time before she started studying. At the end of the day, she never put school before her family. Resilience and determination made her work that much harder to find a school-life balance.

It is critical for society to find ways of helping pregnant students and mothers in college find the balance they need to remain focused in school. Getting pregnant in high school or college comes with judgment and doubt all around. Pregnant women are the ones who must carry the stigma of being pregnant students and must cope with the hardships that come with this responsibility. Participants struggled with balancing motherhood while they were students. Difficult decisions had to be made during that time. To date, some of the participants were still working to recover from the decisions they had to make in order to pursue a higher education.

Brianna became pregnant early in her college career from someone she hardly knew. Their two worlds collided, and there was a sense of resentment and constant struggle to support each other. The disconnect came from different factors but mainly the difference in cultural background.



**Category 2: Adjusting to setbacks.** Setbacks were mentioned by all women in this study. Relocating from one country to another country was a hardship for participants. Several factors played into these experiences. From not fitting into the environment to not understanding the culture, adjusting to the new culture was challenging. The inability to communicate effectively or to understand new surroundings proved to cause insecurity. The “secret” of being undocumented was evident in the data. Not feeling like a real person because of that situation caused identity issues and internal struggles. Working toward achieving a higher education was the goal for those women, and their constant need to adjust to new experiences, situations, and surroundings proved to be difficult. Category 2 was composed of two properties: (a) hiding undocumented status and (b) learning English as a second language.

***Property 1: Hiding undocumented status.*** Being undocumented presented a barrier for 5 out of 13 participants. Living in fear of being discovered caused uneasiness. For one participant, having to put a smile on her face when deep inside she carried a secret that, if discovered, would change life forever was difficult. The experiences lived by those students may never fully be understood. Every experience was different. Through no fault of their own, educators may not understand how better to meet the needs of this demographic, which may be interpreted as an injustice to this group. Not being able to identify which students are undocumented only provides more obstacles for both educators and students. Children are taught to keep this secret close to their heart, and only the family must know the truth, even though sharing this secret with certain teachers may provide a more solid foundation for their educational needs and resources.

Having the feeling of always needing to hide was uncomfortable. Those who were undocumented could never be themselves. They were living a lie, and the guilt of that lie weighed heavily on them when they were in school. Brycenia recalls,

That has kind of been one of those things that never let me feel fully real. With everything else, it was me, but they didn't know the real me. I was carrying this deep, dark secret.

It was a burden she carried with her since she arrived in the United States. She recalled enjoying her friends and attending school, but she felt the weight of that secret often, and it was a constant reminder that she had to hide something from the world.

Delfina had a similar experience by needing to travel to San Diego on a daily basis to attend school. She lived in Mexico and shared that folks who live in Mexico would send their kids to school in California because the kids live on both sides (United States and Mexico). She stated that people pretended that it was separate but it was not. People really did live on the frontera (border). They lived two lives and were in constant adjustment and transformation. As undocumented students, those participants had to live two different lives at one time. At school, they were like everyone else; they did their best to fit in. Outside of school, they were undocumented; they were out of place. In addition to struggling with the need to fit in, they also had the need to be the best they could be with the opportunities this country provided to them, but there were struggles both inside and outside the classroom. Whether it was feeling inferior, out of place, or not academically prepared, there was a sense of being held back emotionally and academically. For Delfina, the drive to succeed encouraged her to keep pushing forward.

Without legal documents, the opportunity for a better future was limited. In order to be eligible for government support for college, she had to be a United States citizen. She stated,

We became residents through the amnesty program. The idea of going to college became a real possibility. Once I was legal, then I could qualify for grants and I could qualify for loans.

The secret an illegal student internalizes can cause a change in personality and withdrawal from school, friends, family, and society. Some individuals have the preconceived

notion that illegal students are stealing education from American students. Being undocumented not only calls for people to remain secretive about where they originated, but it also presents barriers in planning for the future. Those undocumented women, like other undocumented students, often encountered barriers. Undocumented students come to a crossroads after high school. The insecurities experienced by undocumented students held a heavy weight during this group's educational journey. Students who are granted legal citizenship, and presumably all its privileges and resources by virtue of birthright, perform much better than those who are foreign.

Relocating from one part of the world to a foreign place was scary and intimidating for 7 out of 13 participants. For different reasons, families must leave Mexico for what they consider to be a better life for the family. Families that move from Mexico to the United States have the tendency to stay along the border. That makes crossing over to visit family or to meet other needs easier. Not only does relocating mean that people leave behind a piece of their identity, but they face many struggles, both physically and emotionally, during this movement. Some people are not capable of completing the journey. In this study, families stayed as close to the border as possible in order to keep as much contact to their home country as they could. As in many cases, living on the border lent itself to the opportunity of leaving small connections to their home country and, quite often, those women went back home to visit relatives they left behind. In all cases, starting over in a new country was brought on by financial struggles. Whether it was because school was no longer free once students entered high school in Mexico or blue-collar work was more attainable in the United States, the need to make a change was evident in their homes.

Brycenia recalled that school was no longer free once a student was ready for middle school in Mexico.

After elementary school, I left because in Mexico they started charging for school. I felt that I could get a better education if I left Mexico.

That posed a barrier for her family as funding was limited, and education in the United States would be a better option. In Mexico, people need to have financial stability if they want their children to be educated. It is a struggle to become financially stable if there are limited opportunities for employment or fair pay for labor.

Irma mentioned “recent immigration to this country” in her early years. She came over years ago and recalled the struggle her entire family endured during the transition.

Surviving in this country was difficult for the family. Money was scarce. Memories of being a migrant worker as early as age 5 was vivid; there was chiles, cebolla, algodón [peppers, onion, cotton]. That is where my parents would work. When I was growing up before the age of 5, I would actually be there in the agriculture fields with them at times; I would watch them work. My earliest recollection is of actually sitting in the car waiting for them and watching them work so hard. Just backbreaking work, hot sun. Right now it just gives me chills to think of what they went through.

Another participant stated,

I grew up in Mexico and moved to the states when I was 11, so I finished elementary school and started middle school in San Diego. I moved across countries but always around the border too, which is a different immigrant story. The thing about school on the border is that there is a lot of fear that people are stealing education, because a lot of folks that live in Tijuana, Mexico, will send their kids to school in San Diego, California.

Families who live on the border tend to transition often from Mexico to the United States and then back to Mexico depending on their financial need.

Transitioning from Mexico to the United States is a barrier in that causes many children to seek comfort and acceptance in their new environment. After the transition, parents and caregivers spend the majority of their time working to support the family, so there may be times when there is a lack of stability and sense of direction. Children are left to find comfort and

guidance from different resources that may hinder their future. The new life participants encountered during their transition into the United States caused them to be vulnerable and to adjust to living situations that were not comfortable at times. Physically adapting to a new environment was one barrier that was evident, but these women also experienced an emotional and psychological adaptation process that could not be seen on the surface. During the transition, for some Mexicans, strong relationships change in dynamic.

For Susanna, moving more than once between the United States and Mexico was common. Situations changed, so they needed to adapt to those changes by any means necessary to survive and provide for the family. She stated,

In border towns, it always seems as if it is one town, because people go back and forth between the border for economic reason several times throughout life.

Regardless of where she relocated, she always felt emotionally connected to Mexico. Every now and again, she would experience an identity conflict because of the constant transition but she worked through those circumstances by using resources around her.

***Property 2: Learning English as a second language.*** English as a second language was a barrier 6 out of 13 participants faced along their educational journey. The inability to communicate effectively was, at times, looked down upon by society when they were in public. Americans would stare and, from what they could tell, pass judgment on them. As elementary school students, they learned to adapt and fit into the classroom. Moving from another country to the United States and starting classes in a place very different than what was normal to those women was shocking. The need to learn English has been interpreted as a negative experience. English was forced upon them with no regard of how they felt or how the change would affect them. Educators and administrators may not be aware of the difficulties experienced by this group and, therefore, are not prepared or aware of how to provide the necessary resources for this

group to succeed. The ability for teachers and faculty to understand what was occurring in the classroom with those women while they were young students could have made the adaptation phase more comfortable. When a student does not know English, he/she is lost, and people around the student may not be comfortable or know how to assist with coping strategies. Delfina recalled,

It was being intimidated and scared. People were not very nice, including adults. I went to public school where being the quiet one meant that you were well behaved. I would hide that I did not know English.

Delfina had an older brother who was also trying to adjust to school in the United States as well. At the time, the state of California did not allow bilingual classes. Students were tracked into English language learner classes. Her brother was placed in those classes, which basically meant that he was given busy work and not taught English. Delfina's mother did not want her to be trapped in the same system, so she worked with Delfina to hide the lack of English. Delfina recalled,

There was this fear of my mom that she did not want me to go into the English language courses. My brother took a couple of those classes, and the level of academics were just terrible. This meant that in order to stay out of the class, I had to pretend to know more English than I actually did. I had no clue what was going on.

She continued,

We would sit there and read up on topics on the Mexican encyclopedia and try to figure out what the hell the homework was. Whatever little worksheet I was assigned would take us 3 hours. I knew three words; she knew five words; we would put them together.

Susanna had a more negative experience in school because of the language barrier. She attended school when the rules were much stricter than they are today.

When I started school, we were borderline Texas and New Mexico. I have experience in old schools, but when I first started schooling in New Mexico, I did not know any English. Back then, there was not anything such as English as a Second Language. You had to know English. I remember in my early years, kindergarten through second grade, if you did not speak English, they were sending you to the principal's office to get

paddled. What I did early as a child in order to stay out of trouble, I just started memorizing everything. All of my words, reading, speaking ... it was all memorization. By the time I was in third grade, I was winning spelling bees, because I was memorizing the darn words. Maybe I could not pronounce them, but I could memorize them. English was not an easy language.

A role she had to play for her family was that of a translator. Her father never learned to speak English, so she would read papers for him and complete formal documents that needed his information.

As a child, this is another experience that is huge and really makes you grow up fast. When you are 7 or 8 and you are helping to translate for an adult man to another person who cannot speak Spanish, you can see the looks on people's faces. Sometimes you see how disrespectful they can be.

To the time of this study, Susanna still got nervous giving presentations, because English was her second language. It was a difficult transition for her to learn to speak English, because Spanish was, and continued to be, the primary language in her home.

Errica had a similar experience in that her parents did not know how to speak English. She was the translator in her family and would take care of important matters when documents were involved. She was always motivated to do more and to learn more. She would take the initiative to sign herself up for science fairs on her own.

The whole science fair thing, I would sign myself up because my parents did not speak English. Even until now so they pretty much just thought—go to school and learn something. They were never really involved just because that is how they grew up. My dad had a third-grade education, and my mom did not go to school at all. My dad learned to read and write over the years in his job, and my mom never learned.

Although her parents did not know English, they were hardworking people who wanted her to be successful no matter what she put her mind to. They set a good example for her and supported her along her educational journey. Her dad was always working and was not home too often. Her mother was a hardworking woman who taught her the value of being driven.

Luisa learned English as her second language. Reflecting back on her schoolwork, she stated,

Sometimes interpreting some things in English became a little bit difficult just because Spanish was my first language.

English as a second language can be a challenge that some may not be able to overcome. There was uncertainty and intimidation when learning a new language with Luisa. The learning process took years for those women, well into adulthood for some, for them to feel comfortable speaking and writing in English. In the back of their mind, there may always live a piece of insecurity when English is the second language.

Educators have the opportunity to play a critical role during the learning phase. Building a strong connection with students on their background and future plans can lead to successful career planning. Those women, at times, felt judged and excluded. Not to mention, pressure came with adjusting from their safe home environment where only Spanish was spoken to a place where Spanish was prohibited. There was a harsh reality that presented itself to those students, which made it clear that a piece of who they were needed to be left at the door once they entered the classroom, and they must become who society expected them to be in hopes of being accepted and being successful.

Getting families involved in a student's education early on would be beneficial to all stakeholders. The initial comfort level and communication lines that form between teacher, student, and family may be a determining factor in how successful a student will be. The language barrier was a challenge to overcome. Resources were not available to meet the needs of those students. Participants had to become resourceful to ensure they would not fall behind in their studies. The education system failed by not preparing them for the next step in their educational journey.



Delfina faced the challenge of learning English on her own, because her mother did not want her to attend English learning classes in school. She recalled,

There was this fear of my mom that she did not want me to go into what was bilingual education at the time. In California, at the time, it was referred to as English language learner class. I had to sort of pretend to know more English because otherwise they would put me in those classes. I was like, catch up on the language so that you can continue to go to college. That meant I had to hide how much English I did not know. I had no clue what was going on.

Susanna struggled with learning English as well. Her primary language was Spanish and that is all her family spoke at home. She reflected on being the first generation of her family to be in the United States.

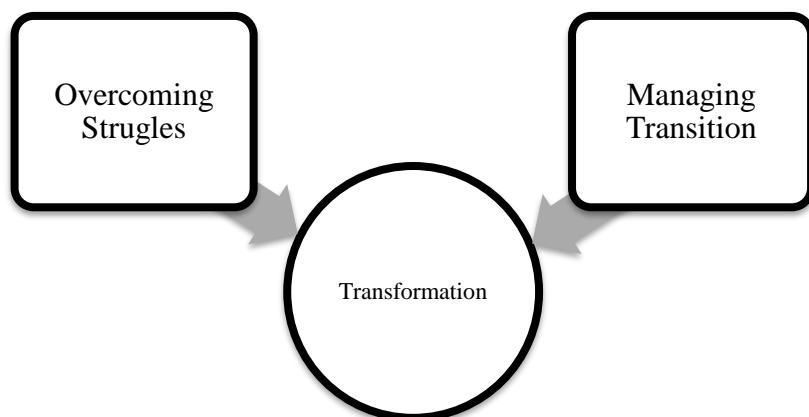
We go back again into that first generation into this country. In the home, all we spoke was Spanish. There was no English as a second language; you just had to know English. If you did not speak English, they would send you to the principal's office to get paddled. I still remember this little boy who dropped out of school because he could not learn English.

Not only did she face the hardship of feeling lost in class, but she always witnessed the struggle and abuse her peers experienced as a result of not knowing English in school. They were from the generation when Spanish was not acceptable, and there was little to no room for remediation.

## **Theme 2: Transformation**

All participants in this study experienced transformation. Adaptation continued during transformation and was, at times, a lonely journey. As described by participants, they needed to keep going no matter what. When faced with a challenging situation, fears were faced and the focus remained on the goal. Women in this study reflected on and interpreted the struggles they faced at different times along their journey. In order for transformation to take place, a change (learning) must occur. These women experienced constant transformation through the process of adaptation and transformation.

**Categories leading to theme 2: Transformation.** Transformation was composed of two categories: (a) overcoming struggles and (b) managing transition. Transformation was identified by all 13 women at different stages in life. Data analysis shed light on experiences and exposed raw emotion as stories were shared during interviews. Figure 6 is a presentation of transformation.



*Figure 6.* Transformation.

**Category 1: Overcoming struggles.** All participants experienced several levels of elevated emotions and struggles. During their professional program, some shared their desire to leave college because of the death or illness of a loved one. Overcoming that hardship was unimaginable. There was a psychological struggle that occurred while they pursued an education. Also, the feeling of inferiority was mentioned. That feeling was something that continued to this study time. Inferiority was evident during data analysis as an important category because it was mentioned by all participants. The continuation of that complex was mentioned as identified in the following data. Category 1 was composed of two properties: (a) struggling with death or illness of a loved one and (b) feeling inferior.

***Property 1: Death or illness of a loved one.*** Death and illness of a loved one was a barrier mentioned by 5 out of 13 participants. As a college student, dealing with the grieving process while attending school can be detrimental. Some people are more resilient than others when it comes to overcoming the loss of a loved one. The degree of closeness can also change how students are affected by the death of a loved one. Dealing with the impending death of a loved one or caring for someone with an illness was a challenge. Coping mechanisms varied from one person to the next and were intimate and private emotions that were kept close to the heart. Participants had to deal with the illness and death of individuals who were their driving force; they credit those situations as to why they were successful. Each difficult experience occurred during a critical point in college.

Irma had to deal with the illness of her mother. When asked about the relationship she had with her mother, she replied,

When my mother got diagnosed with cervical cancer, I ended up becoming her caregiver. Obviously, that is a lot of responsibility. I basically took her to all her appointments. At that time, I actually got interested in science. It was very helpful when I took her to all of her appointments and had to ask my boss what all of the medical jargon meant. I made sure she was getting what she needed and things like that.

She continued,

I actually wanted to be a pediatrician. All throughout college, I was actually premed. I graduated premed. Then it was not until my mom got cancer that I decided I did not want to be an MD; I wanted to be a PhD. I looked up to my mom; I still do. She had to work two jobs just to make sure that our family was well taken care of. She is a survivor. I think seeing her go through her treatment and how tough she was; I think she is still motivation for me.

The motivation that came from seeing her mother go through such a terrible illness was inspiring. Instead of shying away from the world or not knowing how to cope with all of the changes happening around her, she took control of the situation and used her barrier as a motivation tool toward success.

Delfina experienced the illness of her mother in a different way. She took the role of being the emotional cornerstone of the family during that time.

Being the only girl, I have taken a more sort of emotional center of the family and, in some ways, leading the care of my mother. Because of my background in psychology and my closeness to her, I just knew a little bit more. In some ways, I had to educate my siblings and my dad around it and figure out how to take care of her and how to get her the care she needed while she went through all this mess. It did create this sort of stiff and different relationship with my mother. It was like role reversal. She would call me at certain milestones, and I would cry. She drove to the grocery store, and I would be cheering her on.

Role reversal was a big responsibility for Delfina. She wanted to take care of her mother and be there for the family. At the same time, she did not want to overstep her boundaries and push her dad aside, as she wanted him to understand and be an integral part of her mother's healing process. In no way did she want to take his place as the primary caretaker, so she had to be mindful of how to approach her mother's treatment while including her father in the process.

Luisa struggled with the devastating loss of her grandmother while she was writing her dissertation. While discussing the role her grandmother played in her life, she became overwhelmed with emotion.

It's something that I always talk about. Most of the time, it was for her and for my siblings a lot of things that I have done. Now I think I am doing it for myself, because my brother and sister have their own lives. When my grandmother passed away, she passed away when I was starting to write my dissertation to finish my PhD.

When I asked how she got through that very difficult time, she recalled,

My PhD boss sat me down, because I actually wanted to quit because I just felt that it was not worth it anymore, because I could not show her what I was doing. He sat me down and said, "you know I think your grandmother will be very, very upset if you quit right now." He just snapped me out of it, because I didn't have the motivation to do it anymore.

She had the option to give into her grief and stop where she was in the learning process, because the person she was working so hard for was gone. Instead, she was resilient and did not let this traumatic experience keep her from what she had set her mind to do.

When the death or illness of a loved one was discussed during interviews, emotions became elevated. Those who had passed away were very close to participants and the emotional setbacks faced during those periods in time were challenging. In most cases, the individuals mentioned as having become ill or having passed away were the closest female figures in the lives of the participant.

***Property 2: Feeling inferior.*** The sense of feeling inferior or out of place at certain points in their lives was mentioned by 13 participants. That feeling was something that continued to resonate within them through this study period. The process of transitioning from one environment to another or one feeling to another was not comfortable for participants. They described those transition periods as stressful. Developmental transition is linked to a life event that provokes a crisis in the personal system of those who experience it, with inevitable consequences at the structural, functional, and emotional levels. There was a sense of not belonging in the environment in which they operated at different times in their lives. Each time they felt inferior, these women found a way to overcome the internal struggle to continue moving forward. The transition period was a time to reflect on how they had reached new heights in their academic journey. Those times also triggered them to find resources that would provide them the support they needed to overcome the feeling of not being good enough.

Some participants felt inferior when they transitioned from schooling in Mexico to the United States, while others felt inferior once they started college. Below are comments from

participants expressing their feelings of inferiority in their settings. Those emotions triggered resilience to push past the feeling of inferiority and to continue along their path.

Brycenia had to work in the common dining hall while attending college, which she referred to as a humbling experience. That experience elevated her feelings of inferiority. She recalled,

Making breakfast for people who were going to eat. That was very humbling, because I am at the dining commons with people that I am studying with. And yet I am having to get up 3 hours earlier, while they roll out of bed and tell me how they want their pancakes and eggs. It was a sacrifice that I was willing to make, because school was important enough for me to do that. To stay in school, that is what I wanted.

On another occasion, she first-handedly experienced someone speaking about her socioeconomic status when discussing a tutoring service that was made available to first-generation college students. Students who were not first-generation college students on her campus were not able to participate in the tutoring program. She recalled,

I remember I lived in the dorms early on with other people. There was someone in our dorm who was very sweet. On campus there were resources made available to certain students, and this made this person upset. This other person said, "I can't believe that because my parents are educated, I do not get free tutoring. I have to pay for it." I remember telling her, "well, my parents are educated, too. They might not have those degrees that your parents have, but my parents have educacion (education)."

Brycenia was offended and made to feel inferior so much that she had to stand up and say something to make her point to her dorm mate. Coming from different socioeconomic backgrounds can lead to there being a disconnect between peers. As mentioned previously, inferiority still resonates in these women today at different times. Panchita needed to get a sense of her surroundings before deciding if she was comfortable enough to speak up or would rather stay in her comfort zone.

I am observant. More reserved. I think I feel out people before I talk to them. I just want to feel out the room before, I guess, act however I'm going to act. Whether I want to stay quiet or interact with whomever I am with. I've always been like that.

As our interview continued, she discussed how feeling safe in her environment determined how active or engaged in the discussion she was going to be. If the comfort level was not adequate, she would remain an observer and only engage if she was called to answer.

When referencing inferiority, Irma had to overcome some emotions when she realized she was the only person in her graduating class of Hispanic descent.

Just leaving home—that was a big culture shock. I think that was a big barrier. If I was not comfortable with myself or as open, I think that would have really pushed me to not continue. I was the only Hispanic in the entire graduate school. There were 130 people so I stood out. There were a lot more international students, and I was singled out as the person who would handle all of the diversity events.

The need to acknowledge that she would be the face of diversity for the program and the school was something with which she finally became comfortable once she was able to process the idea. It was one thing to be the only Hispanic women in her class, but to be labeled as the face of diversity based on that fact took time to accept.

Blanca also shared her experiences with being an introvert and needing to adjust to her surroundings.

I am still a total introvert, and I have learned to admit that and own that in the last few years. I get overwhelmed. I need like a quiet place. I am a very social introvert and that really confuses people. I work with people a lot. I do not love being in front of a room, but that is what my job entails. People get surprised that I am an introvert. When I am done for the day, I need to go. I am much more comfortable with myself and being by myself in a way that I was not before when I was younger.

As much as she enjoys working with people, being alone was how she was most productive. As the interview continued, she mentioned that she had recently started dating, and her boyfriend encouraged her to be social and to get comfortable outside of her comfort zone.

Brianna's experience with inferiority was a little different. She studied Spanish throughout her college career and up to her doctorate. She felt she had so much more to prove because she was a Hispanic woman who did not speak Spanish.

I'm getting my doctorate in Spanish, so I had to figure out a way to work on improving in Spanish. The first thing I heard was, "you are not a good writer in Spanish, and you are pursuing a doctorate in Spanish?" I'm not a native Spanish speaker; I am a heritage Spanish speaker. My parents speak Spanish to a certain extent, but my grandparents did. It was something that I recuperated later on in life. In high school, I took 4 years of Spanish, and then I got by bachelor's and master's in Spanish. Then I'm getting my PhD in Spanish, which was kind of overcompensating for all those people who are like "Oh, your last name is so-and-so, and you don't speak Spanish?" Then another professor told me that I came from a deficient program at a deficient university. For a lot of people, that would have given them enough motivation to leave. I felt like, *I'll do it and I'll do it well*. It was a lot of work. This wasn't the first time I heard this, but people would tell me, "you are a Chicana, so you have to work twice as hard as everybody else." I never understood what that meant in terms of other's perceptions of Chicanos as being deficient and lacking in areas.

She experienced the sense of feeling out of place, inferiority, and doubt from her surroundings, and it only made her work harder to prove everyone wrong. The negativity she faced made her stronger and more focused on what she needed to do in order to get to the finish line. The support she had around her made the difference in her success.

Luisa recalled feeling out of place and isolated during her college career. She found resilience within herself to keep working toward her goal.

I guess one other thing that worked toward my advantage was that I took any opportunity that came in front of me. I did not want to stay at home where I was and staying working in the same place. I could have just gotten a job and stayed there, but I was not comfortable. I was able to leave my hometown for a summer program in Houston, Texas. There, I experienced big culture shock. For those 6 months, I was really depressed because I was not used to the environment. I did not see a lot of Hispanics. I felt isolated. Now, in graduate school, I did not really experience it as much, but they did tend to be a little sexist. They believed that because I was a woman, that I should be shy and not proactive. I did all I could do to prove people wrong.



Feeling inferior was something that participants experienced to-date. During her experience in Houston, Luisa reached out to people from other minorities who were not Mexican. It provided a small sense of being a part of something and helped alleviate her feeling of loneliness.

Delfina's experience with feeling inferior occurred in the form of bias that she noticed taking place around her through micro-aggressions. She recalls,

People would say things to me like micro-aggressions in a way that I had not experienced in California in so long. It was really weird. When I say the culture of the bear, I mean, the dominant culture and expectations of not having the cultural capital. Also, having the only mention of your culture being this exotic type of thing or as a put down. I had been hearing about Mexican immigrants being every disgusting thing you can think of since I was a little kid.

This negativity stayed with Delfina as she continued her education in an environment where minority students were not often seen. During the interview, she recalled people around her referring to Mexicans as the lowest kind of person who existed. There was never any positive association related to her culture, so the struggle was embedded deeply within her personality and emotions.

**Category 2: Managing transition.** Transition was mentioned by all participants in this study. In some cases, the most difficult transition occurred when relocating from one country to another illegally. The promise for a better education and future was enough to uproot the entire family. Unfortunately, the transition from high school to college as an illegal immigrant was difficult. These women needed to work around that barrier to be successful. They would not be able to reach their goal if they could not go to college. The emotional and psychological hardships overcome during academic hardships were evident in the data. Whether it was the inability to gain acceptance into a program the first or second try or the difficulty of transitioning into a program with self-doubt, these women grasped at their internal strength to remain focused.

Nothing would deter them from their path. Category 2 was composed of two properties: (a) coping with denied entrance and (b) difficulties of transition.

***Property 1: Coping with denied entrance.*** Being denied entrance to a higher education program was a challenge to participants. The passion to further their education was halted immediately. They reached a dead end in their journey. Regardless of being denied entrance to a program, they continued to seek guidance in pursuing their dreams.

Errica was denied entrance into a program more than once, but she never gave up. Although her grade point average was not where it needed to be, she repeated courses in hopes of scoring higher grades. The first time she was denied into her program, she made it a point to focus on retaking courses in which she had not done too well. She figured if she bettered her grades, she could gradually improve her grade point average. After being denied entrance a second time, Errica did not give up and continued to work hard, knowing that her struggle was worth the time and effort needed to be successful.

Luisa's experience was similar. When she applied to graduate school, she did not score well on the entrance exam. Luisa recalled,

My GRE score wasn't very high. I did good in the math part but the verbal part wasn't really good. I was really happy to prove to them that a standard test doesn't really indicate your success. Every time they say something about the GRE, I just think it is a bunch of BS.

Although she did well during her graduate school interview, she does not feel that the entrance exam she was forced to take was a good indicator of the scientist she would become. Luisa struggled with convincing the interview panel that her intelligence should not be based on a standardized test but, instead, should be based on other factors such as emotional intelligence.

***Property 2: Difficulties of transition.*** One of the most prominent barriers identified in this study was the difficulty participants experienced when they first began attending college.

This barrier was mentioned by 13 participants. This section is important and needs special attention, because the outcome of success for these students is critical for the improvement of this country. By educating the largest growing minority group in the United States, the US is creating people who will be better prepared to contribute to the economy in several ways.

We cannot simply believe that as soon as Mexican students enter college, they will be successful.

There are various outcomes that can take place. Ultimately, either the students will seek guidance and support from faculty, staff, and peers, or the students will become discouraged and not want

to continue in their studies once they run into challenges. In many cases, Mexican students are

not at the same level as their peers when transitioning into college. There may be remedial

courses that are needed. Remedial courses are not a negative thing. Students must realize that

taking remedial courses is the first step toward a successful academic future. The fundamentals

of education must be understood and practiced in hopes of pursuing their ultimate goal. All

participants struggled academically when they entered college. The environment was different.

Courses were a lot more challenging, and they were not sure how to minimize their

disadvantage. Regardless of how hard they tried to succeed, they were doing something wrong.

During the interview, Brycenia recalled,

I was called in because my grades were so horrible. They wanted to go over my GPA. We (Hispanics) do not like our business being everywhere. Nobody needs to know our business. The fact that my grades were so horrible and the fact that I was on the verge of having to leave was like, No, this doesn't happen to us, and if it does, you don't talk about it. There was no way I could go back to my house with the shame of not being successful. If I asked for tutoring, it would be shameful. In our family, honestly, my dad refused to ask for assistance from the government. My dad was like, we will eat rice and beans. I will work three jobs, but we will not ask for help.

Asking for help was an embarrassment and would be a sign of letting the family down. She was

taught that you work as hard as you need to work to get the job done without asking for help.

Irma recalled her culture being a barrier in itself.

Just being Hispanic was a barrier in college. I think growing up especially in an area where everyone is like you, you do not really think of yourself as different. Then when you have to leave and go out into the world, you notice that you actually are a minority. Going to the Midwest for a post-doc fellowship was difficult. Everyone was conservative; not many minorities. I would say 99% of the population was Caucasian. I think that was a really big culture shock.

The need to transition into a community that was unlike one in which she had every been was difficult, and it took time to adjust.

Delfina felt very unprepared as she transitioned into college. Not only did she need to work through the new experience of college, but she had an extra layer of struggle because she went to an Ivy League university that was composed of predominantly Caucasian students who were much better prepared for the curriculum than she was. She recalled,

The barriers, I mean, I always say moving to the States was just as much immigration or migration as living on campus at both Ivy League schools I attended. Those were crazy places. I experienced a whole lot of cultural crap. I was really unprepared. I thought I knew what it was like to be around privileged, and I thought I knew what it was like to be in some fancy school and feel poor. It was 100 times worse. People would say micro-aggressions in a way that I had not experienced in California in so long. When I say, *the culture of the bear*, I mean the dominant culture and expectations and not having the culture capital and then also the only mention of your culture as being this exotic type of thing or as a put-down. I had been hearing about Mexican immigrants being every disgusting thing of since I was a little kid.

She continued,

The other barrier or the other challenge is that I was really undereducated for the Ivy League school. I graduated valedictorian from my high school and did, by any means, everything possible and I still showed up unprepared.

That participant not only attended one Ivy League university, but continued her studies at another Ivy League university. Being a minority and feeling the need to catch up to her peers was pressure of a new kind.

Brianna felt the pressure of transitioning into college as well. She was going from a very small environment to a much larger school, which was intimidating. She recalled,

The shift from high school to college was a little bit difficult only because you come out of a small high school where you are very smart and very well esteemed. Then you get to college, and all of a sudden, you do not know anything. It was the first time I got C's in my courses, and I had to drop courses to pass other ones and still did not pass the other courses. I did not really find a lot of places of support.

Understanding that college would be a new environment where standards must be analyzed differently was a challenge.

Ronnica's transition into her postdoctoral fellowship was a challenge in that she had to deal with discrimination, as well as being away from her culture, family, and friends. She stated the following regarding her transition experience.

There was a really strange dynamic. There was a postdoc who was very intelligent. During one of the many Happy Hours I was not able to attend, I was informed that another postdoctoral fellow was saying the reason why I got to where I am today is because I am a Hispanic woman. The majority of them are white. This was very hurtful. It did make me want to disengage and hurt my pride and confidence. I decided I got into the prestigious program on my own and that I am intelligent. I passed the tests needed for me to be here. Yes, I did have a lot of opportunities, but I took those and it was my work and my decisions. If I am not as quick as they are, I put in enough effort and work to get to where I am now.

Adjusting to a new study pattern and schedule were challenging for Errica. Not only did she need to adjust to being a full-time professional student, she also had to adjust to being a student while being a wife and mother. Family was always a top priority for Errica. She recalled,

Pharmacy school needed my full-time dedication. If you did not study enough, you would fail. It was just a guarantee, so I had to do a new adjustment in my studying, in my living. I would come home from school, cook dinner for my family, put my son to bed, and then study. I would be up until about 4 a.m. because I wanted to spend time with my son before he went to bed. The first and second years were the hardest. I was just adjusting my time, and it became easier. I knew how to study now, but I failed at the beginning.

She adjusted her schedule to work around the needs of her family. Even after failing courses in the beginning, she was resilient and was able to adjust successfully.

Coping with the transition period was important to the success of all participants. The transition period was the time they could have elected to leave the program and take an easier

approach to life and their future. Instead, they were resilient, endured the hardships, and overcame that period. At different points in the lives of participants, they had to deal with difficult situations and transitions; most likely, all were not shared during this study. Whether it was transitioning to a new country, school, or program, the process was a challenge. Internal strength was tapped during those times.

### **Theme 3: Professional Actualization**

Professional actualization was seen as reaching the end goal of obtaining a professional degree. All 13 women, 100%, in this study were able to self-actualize. The pathway to professional actualization was not linear. Not all participants went directly to college after high school. The educational journey took determination and resilience. Through the cultivation of relationships, these women were able to overcome obstacles identified. Those pathways proved to be essential in the success of this group. Professional actualization occurred through the cultivation of relationships.

**Category leading to theme 3: Professional actualization.** Professional actualization was composed of one category: relationships. Professional actualization was identified by all 13 women in this study. Through resilience and relationship, all participants were able to reach their end goal of obtaining a professional or terminal degree. Figure 8 is a representation of professional actualization.

**Category 1: Relationships.** All participants experienced the benefit of relationships throughout their journey. Relationships surfaced during difficult times when they needed support, guidance, or reassurance. These partnerships developed at different stages and while some were short lived, other partnerships remain active. These women demonstrated the ability to connect with individuals outside of their environment in order to continue working toward

their ultimate goal. This category was composed of two properties: (a) mentorships and (b) Hispanic organizations.

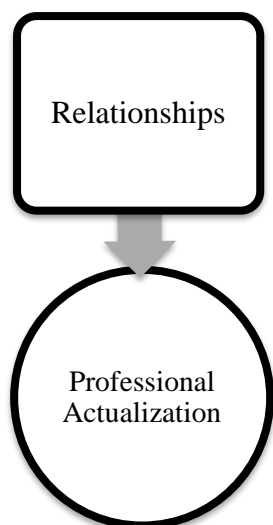


Figure 8. Professional actualization.

**Property 1: Mentorships.** Mentorship was mentioned by all 13 participants as having played an integral part in their success. Some mentors provided a voice of reason, while other mentors provided a safe haven. Mentors were mentioned as being essential in the lives of this group. Playing a key role in the success experienced by these women, mentors were described in a positive light and with respect. The role played by those individuals bridged the gap between these women and their new experiences.

Brianna had 2 Chicano mentors in her program. Both mentors helped her on an emotional level and one mentor helped her on a financial level. The financial support provided by that mentor changed her life. It gave her a second chance of fulfilling her destiny and reaching her dreams. Brianna shared,

They were the ones who helped me through personal and academic issues. When I was applying for a graduate school program, I did not have money for the application. One of my mentors took her checkbook out and paid for my application. She told me it was a loan, because she really wanted me to go to the program I had my heart set on. When I graduated from the program, I had a check for her. It was a very proud moment for both of us.

The connection she felt to her support system provided the foundation needed for her to continue moving forward in her education. The adjustment to college was difficult, but mentors made a difficult situation more manageable. No one had ever taken the chance on her like they did.

Those mentors saw her as a successful woman and they understood from where she was coming because of the cultural connection they shared; those mentored wanted the best for her.

Mentors provided support for this group in different ways. At times, these women just needed to feel the connection with their culture as they transitioned to a new environment. An emotional connection was needed based on something with which they could connect such as the use of a different language. Brycenia shared,

When I look back, I think that obviously there have been mentors throughout my life and that is why I am where I am now. I was struggling my first year in college, and I was called in—I think it was the office of the registrar—and they told me, “you need to get your grades up. You have this many semesters in order to do so. If not, you are going to be looking at possibly not being able to come back.” They kind of were just the facts, here it is. That was pretty hard. Then I was called in by a counselor/advisor, and he said, “okay you know what? Stop it. This is not okay. I don’t want to hear excuses. Tu padres no te mandaron qui para esto. [Your parents didn’t send you here for this.] What do you need? I’m going to check in with you regularly, and this is not going to stay this way. I expect more, and this is what I am going to do for you.” Anyway, that became a real network for me there. Then I met other people that were very much like me within our stories.

The connection was rooted in culture and the language connected them at a level to which they could both relate. The mentor reminded her of someone in her family who was straightforward and wanted the best for her. She felt a connection with him and felt obligated to redirect her academic focus. Everything her mentor shared with her was true, and he made it clear that he only wanted to see her succeed. The fact that her mentor was from a similar cultural background allowed for a comfortable connection.

Irma described a different approach her graduate school mentors had with her cohort. In



her experience, she needed to connect with someone on an emotional level, but she also needed to hear about and witness success stories from women who walked in her shoes. She recalled,

My graduate school mentors, I think they were the ones who really helped me a lot. They were great. They allowed us to see other minorities who are also PhDs or MD/PhDs, so that we can see that there are others who have accomplished these things.

The insecurity she had in the back of her mind was quieted by the ability to meet other women with similar backgrounds who had met their goals of finishing their higher education program. Meeting those women provided a sense of reassurance and security. If finishing the mission was possible and those women were successful along their path, she could do the same thing. The support provided by her mentors proved to be beneficial.

Susanna's success was attributed to the guidance and support of a peer mentor. This mentor sparked the desire for her to become interested in school and succeed. She shared,

There was a lady, very educated, who worked at the Welfare Department with me. She was an attorney from Mexico and immigrated to the US because her father was a US citizen. She was born in Mexico, but yet they chose to live their entire life in the United States, so she gained her citizenship through her father. She came to the US, knew enough English. I think she was the first person that I saw as able to tell me, "why don't we start going back to school together, to college?" I didn't know what she was talking about. Because of her, I started taking my criminal justice courses ... one class every semester, one class a semester. And every semester I went. It was like the never-ending thing, like I was never going to get there.

As the interview continued, Susanna's respect for her peer mentor was evident. She acknowledged that if her peer mentor had not been there to push her, things might have turned out differently. Eventually, they lost contact with each other, but the respect and gratitude Susanna had for her mentor remained the same.

Mentorship from teachers and counselors was identified as having had a positive impact during the educational journey of these women. For some, their teacher or counselor guided them

down a path they did not know existed. For others, teachers and counselors saw something in them that other people did not notice.

Susanna was excited in sharing the story about the teacher who encouraged and educated her on what life looks like after high school. There was a world not yet tapped that was full of opportunity. She recalled,

I ended up having a teacher, and she was an incredible influence in my life. For some reason, she opened my eyes to school, because I always knew I was in school but I had no idea why I was going. I had no idea that there were colleges and universities. It just was not in my world. She was very, very, very encouraging. She made sure that I went to spelling bees, she noticed that I was able to learn, that I ... I don't know, I guess maybe I really do not know what she saw in me, but she really helped me along the way.

Even now, Susanna was not able to identify what her teacher saw in her many years ago that interested her to invest time and effort into that one student. The interest of that one teacher opened Susanna's eyes to the possibility of achieving more in life than just a high school diploma. Terms she had never heard before intrigued her to find out more about life after high school.

Errica's experience with her mentors was academic based. She did not have one mentor but, rather, a team of mentors. After being denied entrance into her professional program twice, she realized she needed help. As she reflected on her experience, she recalled,

I finished my first year, I finished my second year, and then I applied for pharmacy school. But my GPA was not competitive enough to get accepted, so they denied me the first time. Then one of the counselors was very influential in helping me get accepted. She told me what exactly I needed to do, what classes I may need to retake, what grades I needed to get to fix it. Once I started the program, and I was making bad grades, I started going to every professor letting them know who I was, what my difficulties were, and they would help me, and not one denied me help. They all helped. By the time the exam came around, I felt really prepared versus before I felt scared, and that's how my grades started changing.

Faculty were supportive of her success and went out of their way to ensure she was provided the resources necessary to reach her goal. With their help, she learned how to study and how to

balance life and work to be successful. Counselors provided guidance on how to prepare for certain entrance exams or how to overcome the struggle of not knowing how to study while they were balancing motherhood along with school.

Parents were also seen as mentors. The encouragement by parents was mentioned as having been an extremely influential part of the upbringing that led this group to the path they took. Parents take pride in seeing their children succeed and reach new heights. College was not only a new adventure for the students, but it was also a new adventure for their parents. They provided guidance, support, and a moral support.

Brycenia's testimony was insightful in that her parents were open to supporting her decision whether it revolved around going to school or working. Her parents wanted her to be the best at whatever she was doing in life. They mentored her in life and supported her decisions.

She mentioned,

I say very early on with all of us, they never pushed that you have to go to school. You had two choices. You are either going to go to school or you are going to work, but whatever you do, you are going to do it well. That was a really common theme in my family, which is whatever you do, you do it well and you do not give up. The obstacles, they are just those hidden opportunities. We did not have a lot of money growing up, so my parents just figured things out. They worked harder, they were really creative, and again those were the examples that we got. My parents are go-getters; they are risk-takers themselves, although it may look differently. They left a country with three young kids knowing no English and they sold everything. I have their legacy of being a risk-taker and setting goals and going after them. That strength, that resilience, that realness, is because my parents are very real.

The mentorship Brycenia's parents provided not only guided her to work hard to get what she wanted but they also reminded her that nothing good in life comes easily. Working hard and not giving up were part of being successful. Setting a positive example of how hard work paid off provided a good foundation.

Regardless of whether or not the family understood the educational journey upon which these women had embarked, the support was there. Mother and fathers wanted their kids to do the best they could in whatever journey they were on; school was seen as a positive thing in their lives. Delfina's testimony stands out because her parents wanted her to be do her best. Doing her best did not mean being at the top of her class, it meant doing what she could do to give her task everything she could. With their mentorship, they provided guidance, support, and a safe haven for her to rest her head when she became weary and tired. Delfina stated,

People always ask me if my parents wanted me to get straight A's or if grades were important. My parent's policy in grades is that they would celebrate any grade I made as long as it was the very best I could do. There was never any pressure because they trusted that we did our best and worked as hard as we could. They are very supportive and proud of where I am in life today. It is a testament to the sacrifice they made many years ago when they left their home country for a better future.

She admired her parents for many reasons, and one of them was for the mentorship they provided to her when she needed a sense of direction.

***Property 2: Hispanic organizations.*** Belonging to Hispanic organizations was mentioned by 13 participants and played an integral role in the lives of these women. In majority of these cases, women felt like Hispanic organizations were their home away from home. There was a sense of belonging on campus when they entered the doors of the organization. Those organizations proved to be a strong support system for participants. The notion of joining a Hispanic organization was presented to them when they encountered a barrier. Brycenia's experience with Hispanic organizations presented itself when she was placed on academic probation for not doing well in class. Once on academic probation, the organization reached out to her.

I was on that list of people were on the verge of failing, and this Hispanic organization gets the list ... They called me in and said, "hey, you know what? This is not okay." I remember one of the ladies saying, "what, is it a boyfriend? The boyfriend, te voy a jalar

las orejas. [I am going to pull your ears]. Oh no. No, no, no. This is not okay.” They spoke to me very much like family, like my parents would. I was like, *Okay, this is home*. It became a true family.

There was a sense of belonging, familiarity, and home. The connection Brycenia was able to make with the organization was what she needed to get refocused on school. They were not going to accept anything other than success. Before joining the Hispanic organization, something was missing. She was not able to focus. With the organization, the tough approach they took with her made everything feel like home.

Delfina attended an Ivy League school. The Hispanic organization with which she became involved was her lifeline to success. She recalled,

Yeah, so at this Ivy League college, there is a Hispanic organization. It was my saving grace. It is literally a community center that is small. It is terrible, but it was the most beautiful haven to me. Something about it; it was like a Cueva—it was a safe space and I got lucky. I showed up to campus, and it was a beautiful campus. I became a coordinator for it a couple of months later, so that meant that I had keys to my safe haven. The coordinators were really close; they were not all Latino. There were different kinds of Latinos, too. I found my little nook, people that I felt comfortable with who understood where I came from.

She needed to feel nurtured. The sense of familiarity helped her immediately feel more comfortable. Even though not everyone was Hispanic in the organization, she felt the connection with the other minorities who participated. On campus, she was the minority and felt out of place. She mentioned that she did not feel prepared to be there on several levels. Having to leave her family to obtain an education was difficult and she felt alone. The Hispanic organization provided a safe place where she could be herself.

For Ronnica, her collaboration with a Hispanic organization was seen as a weakness by others. There was a negative association that came along with joining a support system. She recalled,

I always participated in the minority groups. Some people saw that as weakness, as if you needed that to succeed, but really it was just an additional benefit training. Why wouldn't you take it? Also, you learned a sense of community and got to know people a little bit better.

She went on to discuss the positive impact it had on her when she was able to meet and speak to someone from the same cultural background who was experiencing similar struggles. Seeing their success was motivation in its purest form.

The support of Hispanic organizations was a critical part in the success of these women. Each of them had a support system in place. Some experienced that support during undergraduate school when they were attempting to get into a graduate school program. Others experienced the support while they were in graduate school and were coping with the transition of being in an environment away from home.

### **Summary**

Adaptation encompassed two categories: coping with hardships and adjusting to setbacks. Adapting to a negative environment or situation triggered resiliency in this group. The ability to identify alternative pathways to reach their goal was needed. Being a traditional student was not the pathway for individuals who had to balance being a full-time mother in addition to being a full-time professional student. These women were able to identify resources made available to them to redirect their path. Struggling with the identity crisis of being undocumented and living two lives caused for reflection and constant adaptation. Understanding why you needed to be one person when you were in school and adapting to that environment and then having to come home and be the person you really were brought out insecurities. Not only was the need to adapt to two identities essential in reaching the ultimate goal, but the ability to maneuver through the educational system and build relationships with those around was insightful and proved to be beneficial. The struggle with learning English was challenging, defeating, and discouraging.

Adaptation was witnessed with the language barrier. Their own language was looked down upon. Hearing other people speak negatively about their culture and home country without being able to be true to who they were was something that stayed with them to this study's time.

Transformation encompassed two categories: overcoming struggles and difficulty with transition. Being in a constant state of transformation was evident throughout this study. Transitioning into a university setting even after being denied entrance to a program was difficult to accomplish. Not understanding what it would take to meet the goal they set for themselves caused them to become more insecure. Self-doubt would present itself at various times during their education journey. Many times, these women would hold their feelings inside, because they did not want to seem unfocused, less-than, or insecure. They wanted to be like everyone else in their program. Carrying those emotions and doubt transitioned with them after graduation. At times, the emotional challenges this group faced were too much to withstand alone. They needed a support system to continue. Experiencing the loss or illness of a loved one was something that triggered emotions during this study. These women pursued a higher education because they wanted to make family member proud. When those family members passed away or became ill during their studies, it was a difficult time to overcome. The continuation of transformation was obvious; they needed to leave the heartbroken women who were dealing with hardship behind to be the focused students necessary to complete the task they had started.

Professional actualization encompassed one category: relationships. Hispanic organizations were identified as safe "havens" in this study. It was a piece of home for these women when they were insecure in school. There was a sense of comfort that came from seeing other people who looked like them. Those who attended Ivy League universities worked toward taking ownership of taking over their save haven. The connections built with members of the

Hispanic organization were critical in ensuring these women did not leave campus to return home where they could blend back in—they had ventured out too far. Women were empowered by the connections formed with members of the Hispanic organizations. Some families in the area who were associated with the Hispanic organizations would adopt these women and take care of them as if they were their own children. The familiarity felt by these women provided a protective barrier for them emotionally.

Mentorships came at different times, more than once, and in different forms. Mentorships included faculty, family, peers, friends, and community. The guidance provided through this resource was essential and was identified by all participants as having had a tremendous impact in their lives. Mentors played different roles for these women. At times, mentors were counselors, and other times, mentors became friends. That resource not only allowed these women to overcome challenges faced during undergraduate and graduate studies, but their support continued with many of them to the time of this study. During those moments when insecurities and the lack of will came into play, it was those mentorships they had built with those around them that made the difference and kept these women focused on the end goal.

As mentioned before, mentorships continue today for these women in some capacity. For many, family mentors will be lifelong. Colleagues and professor mentors had a positive impact in ensuring these women did not leave their program when they encountered hardships. Mentors were remembered as the one thing that made a difference when nothing else seemed to work. Being able to discuss problems, negative feelings, sadness, insecurities, and loneliness with mentors was helpful and proved to aid in their success.



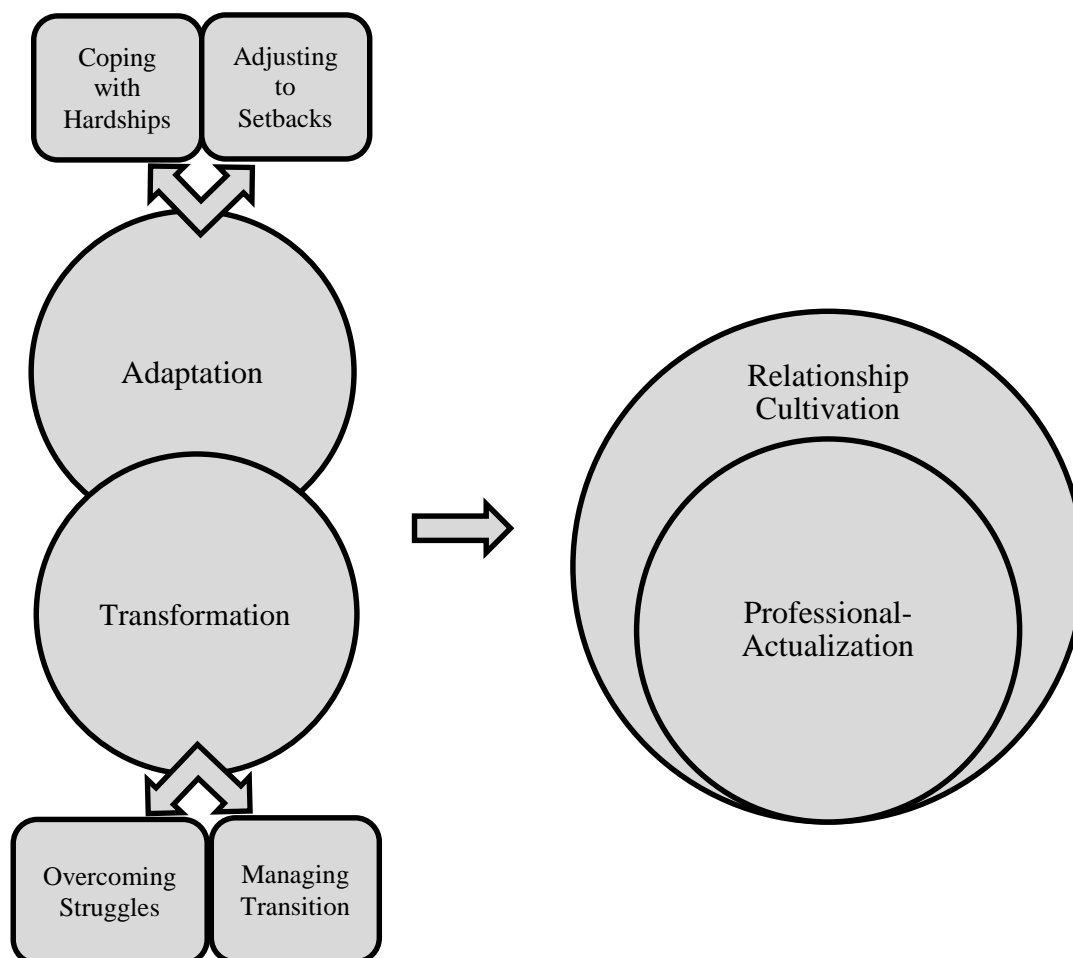
## **Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations**

This chapter provides a summary of outcomes along with research interpretations. As interpretations are discussed, current literature will support those interpretations. Implications of the study, along with suggestions for institutions of higher education, are included. This chapter concludes with final thoughts, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

The aim of this study was to explore barriers 13 Hispanic women overcame as they pursued advanced degrees. During the process of identifying barriers, all participants opened the door to their past, and we walked their journey together. Barriers identified were difficult to overcome. Overcoming each barrier identified made them stronger and more dedicated to reaching their goal of achieving a higher education. Participants became vulnerable when they shared stories and memories. It was humbling that each participant supported the purpose of this study enough to share past hurts and struggles that, to current time, still caused some pain. These women should be seen as shining stars in the darkness of education for Mexican-Americans. Barriers identified led to discussion of resources used to continue on their journey. Resources came in various forms and at different times for participants. For some reading this study, the resources identified may seem trivial, but for these women, the resources identified were their keys to success and strength.

The theory for this study was termed, Cultivating Relationships as a Pathway to Professional Actualization for Mexican-American Women Pursing a Higher Education. This theory was comprised of three themes: (a) adaptation; (b) transformation; and, (c) professional actualization. All participants experienced adaptation and transformation at some point in their educational journey. Each theme was composed of different properties that encompassed

experiences participants shared during initial and follow-up interviews. Figure 9 is a presentation of the theory.



*Figure 9.* Substantive theory: Cultivating relationships as a pathway to professional actualization for Mexican-American women pursuing a higher education.

Mentorship and Hispanic organizations provided a pathway for these women to reach the ultimate goal of obtaining a professional degree.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

This study revolved around one primary question: what barriers did you overcome as you pursued a higher education, and one sub-question: what resources did you utilize to overcome

those barriers? These two questions worked together to provide data that may be beneficial to stakeholders, the most important being Hispanic students.

### **Adaptation and Transformation**

Adaptation and transformation were the themes that guided this study. These themes were mentioned together due to the nature of experiences shared during each interview. As women adapted to their situation or negative experiences, they experienced transformation simultaneously in the process. Each participant was in a continual phase of adaptation as they needed to cope with culture shock of a new environment, study habits, new academic standards, and a new sense of self. As Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, and Todman (2008) suggested,

The ‘stress and coping’ approach derives from early psychological models of the impact of life events (e.g., Holmes and Rahe 1967; Lazarus and Folkman 1984). ‘Shock’ stems from inherently stressful life changes, so people engaging in cross-cultural encounters need to be resilient, adapt, and develop coping strategies and tactics. Adjustment is regarded as an active process of managing stress at different systemic levels – both individual and situational. Relevant variables include degree of life change (Lin, Tazuma, and Masuda 1979), personality factors (e.g., Ward and Kennedy 1992) and situational factors such as social support (Adelmen 1988). Whereas the culture learning approach considers the behavioral component, stress and coping focuses more on psychological well-being – the affective component. (p. 65)

The data suggests that there is a process of adaptation occurring for these women still today as some shared their level of insecurity when adapting to a new environment. The process of transformation was continuously in action as well. Several emotional and psychological challenges were overcome as each participant walked through the principles identified by Poutiatine as essential to enforce transformation on a personal level. In agreement with Maslow’s interpretation of transformational learning, Poutiatine (2009) identified 9 principles that are critical to developing a clear understanding of transformation and transformational process (p. 192–193).

It is important that we mention the overlap of Mezirow's Phases of Meaning in Transformation Learning, as listed by Erickson (2007, p. 67), as there is an overlap between these principles and phases.

During the move from Mexico to the United States, the transition to different environments was a struggle for those with that particular experience. Not only did they need to form a new identity, but they needed to adapt to the fact that they were different from other children in their class and school. These women needed to observe how American students maneuvered their way through the education system and mimic that behavior. Regardless of their citizenship status, there was a transition period that took place that called for a lot of strength and perseverance on their part. That process goes back to the phases and principles identified by Mezirow and Poutiatine on how an individual experiences transformation.

Unfortunately, faculty in the United States were not very familiar with students transitioning into schools from other countries during the time when some of these women needed their support. That was a hardship that could have been avoided or improved had there been proper training provided for faculty. If faculty had the opportunity to be educated on undocumented students early in the students' careers, faculty could have served as a support system on many levels such as mentoring. Mentoring was such a life changing experience for these women.

Mentoring comes in many forms and was a vital resource in this study. At times, women being mentored may not feel comfortable to speak about what they are experiencing in their lives. Finding new avenues to connect with mentees is important. One approach research supports when mentoring is the process of journaling with a person's mentor. This provides a safe environment, and some students may be more comfortable writing their fears or concerns

instead of meeting with someone face-to-face. A form of transformation takes place when mentoring occurs. The mentee is open to learning new things from his/her mentor or being exposed to a new idea or thought process. In a 2014 study about Latino/a students'

transformational learning process through journaling with their mentors, Nieves mentioned,

Should they choose to, adult educators can be ready to participate in the personal and political praxis of their adult students. That may include immersing themselves in the students' multi-layered ways of thinking and living. Any adult educator that is willing to emotionally unfold a learning partnership with their students through participatory critical reflection will establish a foundation for transformational learning. (p. 13)

Adapting to a new environment did not help with their feelings of inferiority. These women are well educated, dominating people in their field, and strong advocates for women in education; however, some continue to feel insecure and out-of-place in different situations. Some participants need to become familiar with their surrounding (other people in the room) before they feel comfortable enough to speak up or contribute to the discussion. Others spoke only when spoken to, even when they were just as educated, if not more educated, than everyone else around them. Some of the women learned how to begin minimizing that behavior in graduate school, when they were forced outside their comfort zone and asked to critique their peers and different processes.

### **Cultivating Relationships**

Cultivating relationships was something that provided a positive environment for participants. Mentors and Hispanic organizations were the connections that supported a nurturing environment conducive to learning. It is unsafe to say that these women would not have succeeded had they not had the supporting systems in place. It is safe to say that each participant mentioned a relationship that provided continued support (i.e., mentor or Hispanic organization). Hispanic organizations play a very important role in the lives of minority students, especially if

the students are the first in their family to attend college. As mentioned by one of the participants, organizations provide a “safe haven” to students. As mentioned by Delgado-Romero, Hernandez, and Montero (2004),

The role of HSO (Hispanic Serving Organizations) for Hispanic or Latino/a students has been to provide a needed balance between the mainstream culture and their culture of origin. Without the HSO, Hispanic or Latino/a students on predominantly White university campuses may feel a sense of isolation, confusion, disempowerment, misunderstanding, a lack of belonging, and fear. HSO’s serve to bridge the safety and stability of their culture or origin with that of the institutional culture, which often can lack awareness and sensitivity to the plight of Hispanic or Latino/a students on college campuses (p. 250). In an ever-increasing globalization of our economy, institutions of higher learning cannot afford to ignore the education, support, and awareness of multiculturalism as it impacts all segments of the U.S. culture. HSO’s provide a vehicle for this exposure to diverse student organizations on university settings, and they also contribute to the recruitment and retention of Hispanic or Latino/a students, who without higher educational opportunities, would not be able to compete in today’s demanding workplace. (p. 251)

There was a sense of caring, positive emotions, and pride when the interview led participants to speak about their organization. One participant recalled being given the keys to the organization’s office on her Ivy League campus, and she remembered how good she felt. She described it as somewhat of a basic little office, but it was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. Her support system was housed in that area and that made it much easier to adapt to the college environment.

Mentorships were also a key component in the lives of these women. Each participant had a mentor, whether it was a faculty member, teacher, counselor, or parent. Mentors provided guidance, a caring nature, and a judgment-free zone. These women felt comfortable letting their guard down and sharing their insecurities with their mentors. Mentor-mentee relationships mean a lot more than just providing support to get good grades. Mentorship is a well-rounded system that connects the student to his/her mentor on several levels. In order to be effective, the

partnership must be a good fit culturally. As suggested by Castellano, Gloria, Besson, and Harvey (2016),

Students who reported having a mentor evidenced higher cultural fit (i.e., cultural congruity in combination with perception of the university environment), more mentoring (i.e., psychosocial support, instrumental, and networking), a general perception of being mentored, and higher college life satisfaction. Consistent with the mentoring literature, students who have connections to faculty members expressing interest and concern for them (i.e., faculty-student interactions) are associated with increased positive perceptions of cultural fit (Gloria et al., 2005), and college and life satisfaction (Constantine & Watt, 2002). Clearly the role of mentoring is important for student development, regardless of the university context. (p. 91)

We cannot assume that all mentor-mentee partnerships will be successful. There are different components that must correlate for a partnership to be effective. The gateway for building a successful partnership begins when a student is able to connect with his/her mentor on much more than a superficial level.

Peer mentors were also very effective. A peer mentor was seen as a hybrid between a Hispanic organization and a faculty mentor. There is a dual purpose. The first purpose is to form a peer-to-peer connection, so the student feels comfortable in his/her new environment while he/she is in the adaptation phase of change. The second purpose would be to provide guidance as a mentor. A safe environment is provided on two fronts instead of one. In a recent quasi-experimental study on peer mentorship, Asgari and Carter, Jr. (2016) asked students to evaluate their peer mentorship experience and the results were as follows.

Sixty-two percent of students indicated that “the peer mentor encouraged them to study more,” 70% believed “the peer mentor made them more confident in their own ability to do well,” 73% thought “peer mentor motivated them to succeed,” 92% were “satisfied with the overall experience,” and 98% thought “the peer mentoring should continue. (p. 134)

In addition, the results of this study are consistent with findings in two particular research studies evolving around Hispanic students. The first research study was a dissertation by Dr. Rose

Zambrano (2004). Dr. Zambrano's multiple case-study examined the journey of 9 women who pursued a professional degree. That study was a multiple-case study. All participants ranged from 38–61 years of age and graduated from their professional program between 1976–1999. Her group was composed of 3 Doctors of Juris Prudence, 3 Medical Doctors, and 3 Doctorates of Philosophy. Some of the factors mentioned by the women in her study as having helped them overcome challenges were motivation, family support, spirituality, activities, and adversity. The overlap between Dr. Zambrano's study and this study were family support, adversity, and motivation. In her study, the central theme was "ganas," (the need or desire), which was also mentioned by participants in this study. Dr. Zambrano's study concluded her overall analysis by recommending factors that would enable Hispanic women to better reach their goals:

- a. Unsilencing voices
- b. Creating persistence
- c. Setting the example
- d. Knowing the system
- e. Strengthening personal identity

The connection between the findings of this study and findings in Dr. Zambrano's study occurred in item d, knowing the system and item e, strengthening personal identity. Knowing the system intertwines with the resource identified by participants in this study, Hispanic organizations. By connecting with Hispanic organizations, students were better able to communicate what they needed or wanted in order to reach their goal of attaining higher education. If students needed tutoring, the organization would guide them toward the tutoring center. Knowing how to maneuver the system through student organizations was important and essential in the success of women in this study.



The second was a dissertation study by Dr. Robert Olivares conducted in 2011. His focus was to explore successful career patterns in undergraduate Hispanic students. Although his study was quantitative in nature, he did have open-ended questions that provided insight into what this demographic found to be useful along their journey in obtaining a bachelor's degree. His outcomes had some overlap with this study's outcomes.

In the study conducted by Dr. Olivares, 63.2% of the Hispanic students selected to stay near their family for college. As a whole, the study group took 6 years to complete an undergraduate degree. Challenges they identified were meeting family responsibilities (43.5%), finding academic assistance (46.1%), and finding a mentor (35.3%). Important factors during college that helped them reach their goal are listed below:

- a. Family (parent support)
- b. Belonging to organizations
- c. Learning centers
- d. Mentors
- e. Advisors

The two top contributing factors to completing their undergraduate degree were self-motivation (43%) and peers and family (31%). The overlap between Olivares' study and this study are family support, organizations, mentors, and advisors. Further research should be conducted on whether challenges and factors for success change during the transition between undergraduate, graduate, and professional studies. Students in the study Dr. Olivares conducted were very self-motivated, which also led into the resilience factor mentioned in this group of women.

## **Resiliency**

Resiliency was evident in this study. Each participant utilized her resilience to overcome setbacks during her pursuit of a higher education. Bonnie Benard's (2004) resiliency theory is composed of the following four categories:

**Social competence:** Social competence includes the characteristics, skills, and attitudes essential to forming relationships and positive attachments to others (p. 14).

**Problem-solving skills:** This category encompasses many abilities, from planning and flexibility through resourcefulness, critical thinking, and insight. The glue that holds them together as a category is a figuring-things-out quality (p. 17).

**Autonomy:** This category of autonomy includes many inter-related and overlapping subcategories of attributes revolving around the development of one's sense of self, identity, and power. Autonomy involves an ability to act independently and to feel a sense of control over one's environment (p. 21).

**Sense of purpose and planning for the future:** This category of inter-related strengths ranges from goal direction to optimism to creativity to a sense of meaning and coherence—the deep belief that one's life has meaning and that one has a place in the universe (p. 28).

Although each person has a set of innate resilient skills, it is important to know how to utilize those skills. As Benard (2004) mentioned,

These internal assets can also be deficits if they are out of balance. For example, too much caring without the balance of autonomy can result in being co-dependent. Too much autonomy without the balance of caring and connection can result in being self-centered and greedy. (p. 37)

All of the women in this study were confronted by various barriers along their educational journey. This does not mean that each barrier was related to their education; some barriers were at home, while others were internal. It was evident that these women did not see

themselves as resilient. Some referred to their resilience in the following ways: I needed to survive; something inside of me made me keep going; I didn't want to be a statistic; if other people can do it, why can't I? I can do this; or I had that desperation inside. All of those internal feelings were their resilience shining through. Seibert (2005) stated,

Resilient survivors handle their feelings well when hit with unexpected difficulties no matter how unfair. When hurt and distressed, they expect to eventually recover and find a way to have things turn out well. They bounce back after the bottom drops out of their lives, and often end up stronger and better than before. (p. 29)

As mentioned before, resilience skills include the ability to form relationships (social competence), to problem solve (metacognition), to develop a sense of identity (autonomy), and to plan and hope (a sense of purpose and future). The 13 women encompassed each of those skills in order to overcome their barriers in the following ways.

There were three phases identified that placed a role in the use of their resiliency as depicted in Figure 10.

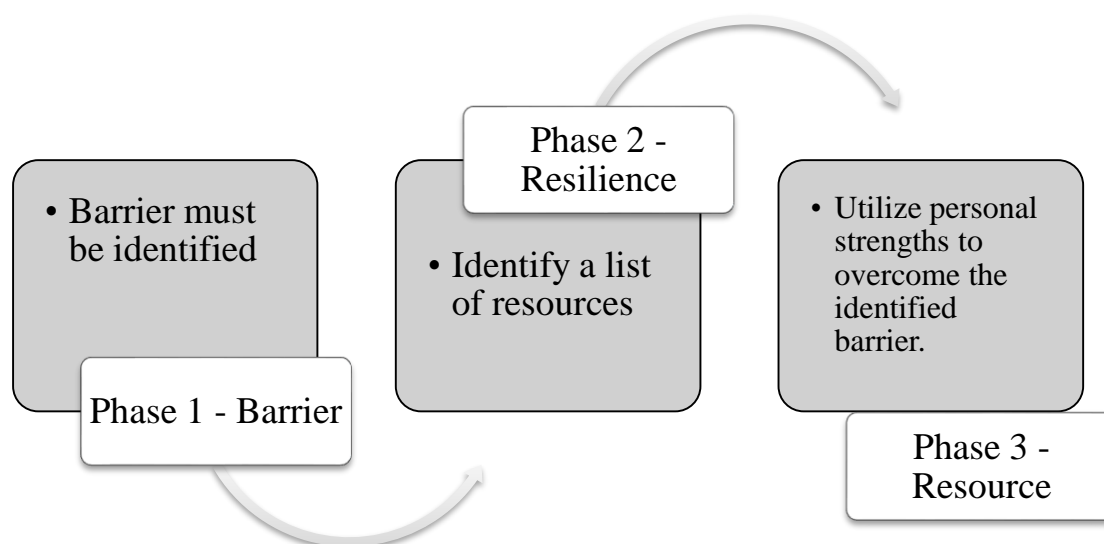


Figure 10. Resilience process.

The initial phase of the resilience process was that each woman acknowledged her barrier(s). The second phase of the resilience process was for women to try and find solutions to

overcome those barriers by utilizing the four parts of the resiliency theory: (a) social competence, (b) problem solving, (c) autonomy, and (d) sense of purpose. There needs to be a goal in mind for individuals to tap into their resilience. Resilience is dormant and comes out when individuals seek to find a solution. Not everyone opens up to his or her resilience. As indicated in the percentages of Hispanics in higher education, some individuals do not accept to face their barriers, and they let these barriers overcome their goals. They stop moving forward. The third phase of the resilience process was that after participants identified or accepted they faced a barrier, they were set on a mission to find a solution. The solution, in this study, came in the form of various resources. The following resources were identified in this study: (a) mentors and (b) Hispanic organizations. Those resources played a critical role in the success of the 13 women. Without those resources, barriers might have been too difficult to overcome alone.

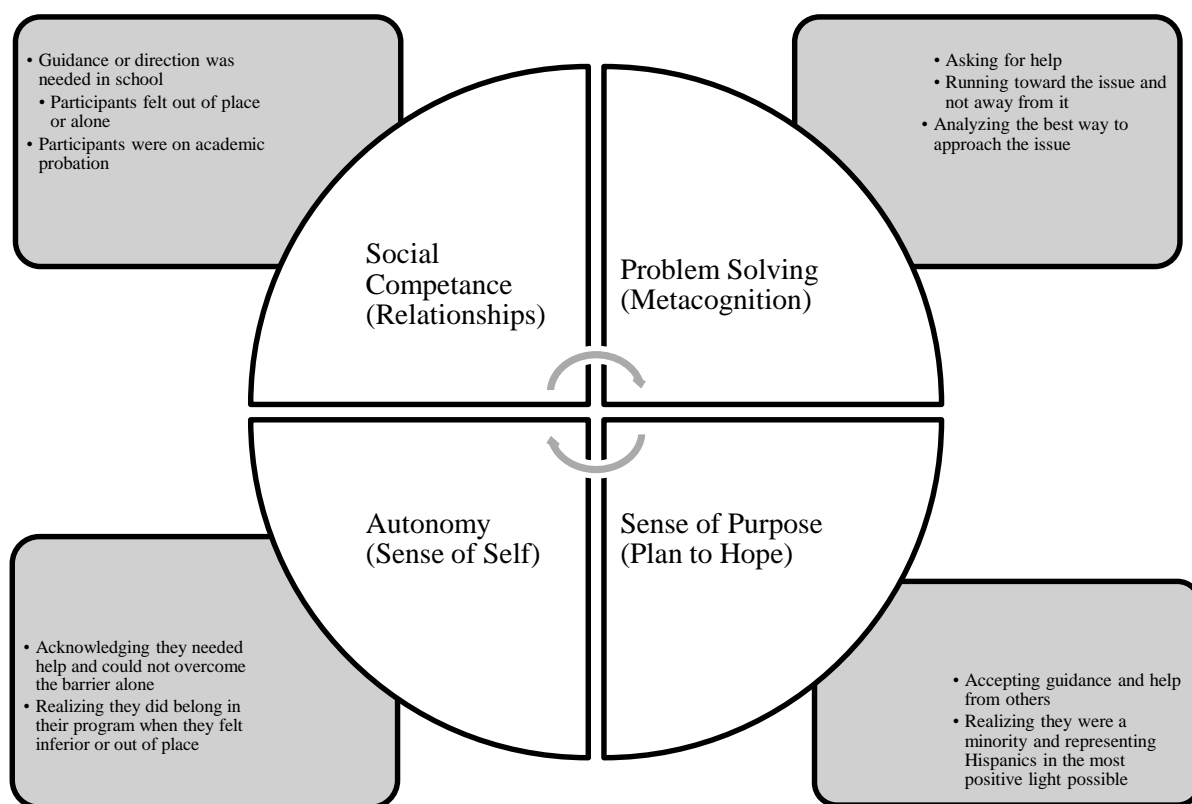


Figure 11. Process of resilience in this study.

Each phase had to be experienced before moving toward the next phase. The ability to identify and acknowledge a barrier may be difficult for some individuals. Other factors may play a role in the lives of students who are not able to overcome their own barriers. Figure 11 provides the process of resiliency in action.

### **Implications of the Study and Recommendations**

The aim of this study was to investigate barriers Mexican-American women encountered as they pursued a higher education. In addition to providing insight on this topic, the study also identified resources utilized to reach the ultimate goal of obtaining a terminal degree. Institutions of higher education should be aware of the multidimensional social support needed by Mexican-American and other Hispanic women working to obtain a professional degree. The findings would be beneficial to university administration personnel by providing a platform for further research on support groups and systems for minority students.

The need to form relationships appeared early in the interview process. Forming relationships with colleagues, faculty, staff, and administration personnel supported students when help was needed most. These women were dedicated to succeeding and acknowledged they needed an outside source to overcome the dilemmas they encountered. Current research shows that university personnel are aware of the need students have as they transition into college. As mentioned by Hazard (2013), “college and university personnel understand that first years are in the process of a huge transition. We expect students to ask for help, so we must give students the message not to be shy about it. Any successful person can tell students that they ask colleagues, mentors, and friends for help on a daily basis” (p. 46). Initially, participants in this study found it difficult to ask for help, because it was a behavior that was not supported in their culture while growing up. They were raised with the outlook that asking for help was a negative behavior. The

ability to overcome that negative suggestion, that asking for help was for the weak, was difficult to accomplish but was achieved.

### **Limitations**

This study was limited on different levels. A higher number of participants may have provided other data not mentioned by this group. The difficulty in recruiting participants limited this study to a total of 13 Hispanic women who had earned a professional degree. Other women were interested in participating in this study, but they did not meet one out of the five requirements outlined for this study.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study is the first step toward exploring ways the field of education could better support this demographic in pursuing higher education. The two resources that were most mentioned in this study were the support of mentors and the sense of belonging to Hispanic organizations on campus. Based on the resources identified in this study, the following recommendations for future research may serve to be valuable to stakeholders:

- a. Explore different mentorship programs across Hispanic-serving institutions and identify how accessible these programs are to professional students. Some universities may not be effectively marketing or promoting their program, which may cause Hispanic students to carry out their journey without knowing these resources are available to them.
- b. Explore the experiences Hispanic women lived as members of Hispanic organizations on a Hispanic-serving institution versus experiences Hispanic women lived as members of Hispanic organizations at universities not identified as Hispanic-serving institutions. This study may provide insight on self-segregation.

- c. Mexican-American men are also minorities in obtaining a higher education. This study could be replicated to delve into their resilience and the resources they utilize to overcome perceived barriers and how they differ from barriers and resources identified in this study.
- d. The same study could be conducted on a group of Mexican-American graduate (master's) students to identify resources that could contribute to enhancing the possibility of pursuing a graduate degree.
- e. Another study could be conducted on 13 Mexican-American women who pursued doctoral or terminal degrees but were not able to complete their programs. Obtaining insight on what resources could have assisted them in their journey may make a difference to women having similar issues who are actively enrolled in programs of higher education.

### **Conclusions and Final Thoughts**

In conclusion, these women were exceptional in overcoming the barriers they encountered as they pursued a higher education. Each Mexican-American woman was able to acknowledge barriers and identify resources that would be useful to reach the end goal. Each woman came from a different background, yet, they were all connected by their sisterhood of being Mexican-American. At some point in their lives, they learned to utilize their resiliency. They underwent several transitions during their journey. To the time of this study, there was still a sense of being different. A sense of insecurity within themselves lingers.

Barriers identified in this study may be common among other Mexican-American and Hispanic women or other women and men of other ethnicities. All people are different in how they see themselves. The way some people overcome barriers may not be similar to the way

other people overcome barriers. Resources utilized by these women are key components potentially to help more Hispanic women overcome barriers they come encounter while pursuing higher education.

It would be beneficial for stakeholders such as institutions of higher education to research these resources further in the hopes of assisting, not only Mexican-American students, but all students. It is critical for this country to prepare for the continued growth of the Hispanic population by educating them in hopes of continuing to rebuild America to the point where the American Dream is attainable by everyone.

There is little research that focuses on Mexican-American and Hispanic women in higher education. The body of literature that currently exists must be developed further. This study added to the current body of knowledge in a positive way by identifying resources proven to be successful for this group. Others who decided to work on a similar study with a different group of men or women can also add to the body of knowledge from a different perspective. Mexican-American women need more exposure to successful women who have overcome barriers and continued to excel in every aspect of their career. Hispanic women may benefit from identifying with someone who they admire. There is something special about meeting a female professional who has a similar upbringing to one's own life. An instant connection is formed, and there is sense of comfort that allows one to share insecurities or doubts that could hinder academic growth.



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## Appendices

## Appendix A

### Interview Guide

My questions are based upon the four categories in Benard's Resilience Theory.

#### **Autonomy (Developing a Sense of Identity)**

1. What were you like as a child?
2. Were you expected to play a certain role in your family?
3. Did you always want to go to college?

#### **Social Competence (Forming Relationships)**

1. What role did your mother play for you while growing up?
2. What role does your mother play for you today?
3. Do you find forming relationships easy?

#### **Metacognition (Problem Solving)**

1. When faced with barriers relating to academic achievement, how did you overcome them?
2. Did you utilize any resources? If so, how did you learn about these resources and how did they help you overcome these barriers?
3. Do you always try to find a solution to problems? If so, were you always like that?

#### **Plan and Hope (Sense of Purpose and Future)**

1. What did you want to be when you grew up?
2. Did you aspire to be successful? If so, what is your definition of success?

Other questions: What else can you tell me about the barriers you have been faced with during your educational journey? How do you think these barriers have changed you? Do you see yourself as resilient? What resources helped you achieve your goals? Would change these resources in any way?

## Appendix B

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**Protocol Revision and Amendment Request**  
**University of the Incarnate Word Institutional Review Board**

This application is to be used for revision or amendment of currently approved IRB protocols only. Complete the form below and attach any revised documents **with changes highlighted**. Sufficient time must be allowed for IRB review of requests. Incomplete requests will be returned without review.

Submit the completed form to the Office of Research Development by email or to CPO 1216 for review and IRB representative signature. **Do not send directly to the IRB representative**, as this form will be electronically routed to them for review after a continuing review request has been logged into the IRB database.

1 Protocol Information			
IRB Number: 15-06-010		Approval Category: Expedited	
Title of Study: Superando Barreras: Barriers Hispanic women overcame as they pursued a higher education			
Principal Investigator:			
Name: Emma Santa Maria	Phone #: 210-643-3266	E-mail: <a href="mailto:ecarreon@student.uiwtx.edu">ecarreon@student.uiwtx.edu</a>	PIDM (if student): 530310
Faculty Supervisor (if Principal Investigator is a student):			
Name: Dr. Noah Kasraie	Phone #: 210-829-3133	E-mail: kasraie@uiwtx.edu	
Current Status of the Project:			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Project not yet started (no subjects enrolled) <input type="checkbox"/> Currently in progress (number of subjects enrolled: <a href="#">Click here to enter text.</a> ) <input type="checkbox"/> Closed to subject entry (active interventions, data collection, or data analysis)			

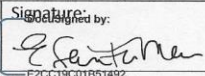
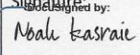
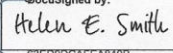
2 Protocol Change Request
Indicate the changes requested:
<input type="checkbox"/> Research procedure(s) including manipulations, assessments, etc. (describe and justify changes below): <a href="#">Click here to enter text.</a>
<input type="checkbox"/> Survey/interview/data collection instrument(s) (describe and justify changes below): <a href="#">Click here to enter text.</a>
<input type="checkbox"/> Study title (list new title below): <a href="#">Click here to enter text.</a>
<input type="checkbox"/> Approved research sites (list changes below and attach letter of support if adding outside site): <a href="#">Click here to enter text.</a>
<input type="checkbox"/> Funding status (describe changes below): <a href="#">Click here to enter text.</a>
<input type="checkbox"/> Addition to the investigative team (complete section 3)
<input type="checkbox"/> Deletion from investigative team (complete section 3)
<input type="checkbox"/> Number of approved subjects (describe and justify changes below): <a href="#">Click here to enter text.</a>
<input type="checkbox"/> Consent form(s) (describe and justify changes below): <a href="#">Click here to enter text.</a>
<input type="checkbox"/> Translation of consent form to an additional language (list additional languages below): <a href="#">Click here to enter text.</a>
<input type="checkbox"/> Recruitment materials, flyers, etc. (describe and justify changes below): <a href="#">Click here to enter text.</a>
<input type="checkbox"/> Duration of study (describe the necessity for a change in the listed duration of the study and indicate the total anticipated duration of the study from start to completion – including study period to date): <a href="#">Click here to enter text.</a>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other (please describe): Graduation dates of participants. Currently approved 2009-2014, would like to change to 2010-2015.

3 Change in Study Personnel
List additions to the investigative team including:

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Principal Investigator(s), Faculty Sponsor, Co-Investigator(s), and</li> <li>All study staff who interact with subjects or private identifiable data</li> </ul> <p><b>All study personnel must complete CITI Training prior to approval.</b></p>				
<b>Additional Personnel</b>				
Name: Click here to enter text.	Role in Research: Click here to enter text.	CITI Training Date: Click here to enter text.	Email: Click here to enter text.	PIDM (if student): Click here to enter text.
<b>Personnel to be Removed</b>				
List by Last Name, First Name separated by a semicolon: Click here to enter text.				
Justify the removal of personnel below (include plans to compensate for any loss of specific expertise, if appropriate): Click here to enter text.				

**This Section for Office of Research Development Use Only  
Signatures will be applied electronically upon approval**

Investigator Signature(s) & Assurances		
I certify that the information above is accurate and complete. I will request prior IRB approval for any changes to the approved protocol and/or informed consent forms, and will not implement those changes until I receive IRB approval. I will report any adverse effects to the IRB immediately. I agree to comply fully with the ethical principles and regulations regarding the protection of human subjects in research.		
<b>Principal Investigator:</b>		
Name: Emma Santa Maria	Signature: Signed by:  E2CC19C01B51492...	Date: 8/26/2015
<b>Faculty Supervisor (if Principal Investigator is a student):</b>		
Name: Noah Kasraie	Signature: Signed by:  B5CE39550341480...	Date: 8/26/2015
Approval Signature(s)		
<b>IRB Representative/Reviewer:</b>		
Name:	Signature:	Date:
<b>IRB Chair (or Chair's Designee):</b>		
Name: Helen E. Smith	Signature: Signed by:  63ED9DCAFEA840B...	Date: 8/26/2015

## Appendix C

**Informed Consent Statement/Information Letter**

My name is Emma Romo Carreon Santa Maria and I am a doctoral student at the University of the Incarnate Word with a concentration in Higher Education. My dissertation topic is *Superando Barreras: Barriers Mexican-American Women Overcame in Pursuing a Higher Education*. You are invited to participate in this qualitative research study.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perceived barriers that Hispanic women overcame in pursuing a higher education as well as to identify resources and/or programs utilized during the educational journey in order to overcome these barriers. By obtaining information on resources utilized to overcome barriers, key elements can be identified in each resource that triggered the act of resilience. The qualitative study will be done using a selected sample of Hispanic women that have overcome barriers while pursuing a terminal (PhD, DC) or professional degree (MD, DDS, JD).

Data will be collected via in-depth interviews. The questions used in the interview will reflect answers that shaped your life. The interview process will allow you to answer questions as well as provide you the opportunity to speak freely about your experience as Hispanic women pursuing a higher education. Interviews will take place in an environment of your choosing. Each interview may take 2–3 hours. More than one interview may be necessary to gather an adequate amount of data or additional information on new categories that emerge. Data will be gathered within a 2-month timeframe. All interviews will be recorded and transcribed; this will aid in the member check process. All information gathered during this study will be strictly confidential and will only be reviewed by the principal investigator and selected members of the research team; your name will not be used in my results section. Participation in this study is voluntary. There are no potential risks associated with this study. If you choose to withdraw from this study at any time, all information gathered will be destroyed.

You may contact me at any time during this study with questions and/or concerns. By signing this form, you agree to participate in the study mentioned above.

**Participant's Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Investigator's Signature**

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*Contact Information:*

*Emma Romo Carreon Santa Maria, M.A.*

*Phone: 210-643-3266/Email:ecarreon@student.uiwtx.edu*

## Appendix D

### **PhD Study - Volunteers Needed**

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I am in the final stages of obtaining my PhD from the University of the Incarnate Word. Recently, the IRB approved my study (15-06-010) and I am now able to recruit participants. I will only need to meet with participants for 1 hour (at the most) to answer a list of questions. All names and identities will remain anonymous.

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I am seeking to recruit 2-15 Mexican-American women for this study. Below is a brief explanation of my study along with criteria for participation.

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**Purpose**?? The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the perceived barriers that Hispanic women (Mexican-American) overcame as they pursued higher education. Identifying these barriers and inquiring why these successful Hispanic women were persistent in their studies would be beneficial to other Hispanic women currently struggling with similar barriers. ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~

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#### **Methodology**

By using the constructivist grounded theory method, I seek to understand the phenomenon from the view of Hispanic women who have pursued higher education and form the theory of my own.

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The qualitative study will be based upon a selected sample of Hispanic women who have overcome perceived barriers as they pursued a terminal (doctoral or professional) degree such as, but not limited to, PhD, DC, MD, DDS, and JD. Participants should have graduated within the past five years (2010-2015) from a professional or terminal degree program. This study seeks to explore the experiences and perceived barriers overcome by these women as well as to identify resources used to overcome these barriers.

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#### **Participant Selection**

In order to get the appropriate information, a specific group of Hispanic women must be identified to participate in the study. In order to obtain a group that would be useful to this study, each Hispanic woman must meet the following criteria:

1. Must have graduated from a professional or terminal degree program within the last five years (2010-2015)
  2. Must hold a professional or terminal degree such as, but not limited to, the MD, DDS, PhD, DC, JD, or PharmD
  3. Self-identified as Hispanic (Mexican-American)
  4. Overcame perceived barriers as they pursued a higher education (any barrier you feel you overcame)
  5. Utilized resources to overcome perceived barriers while pursuing a higher education
- Do you meet the criteria listed above? Would you be willing to participate in this study? Or, do you know of anyone that would be interested in participating in this study?

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Contact:

**Emma Santa Maria, M.A.**

Email: [santa@uthscsa.edu](mailto:santa@uthscsa.edu)

Office: 210.567.4047

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