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Borderlands and Mestiza consciousness in Appalachia: Latina undergraduate experiences in a Predominantly White Institution

Susana Mazuelas Quirce

Dissertation submitted
to the College of Education and Human Services
at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in Higher Education

Erin McHenry-Sorber, Ph.D. Co-Chair
Nathan Sorber, Ph.D. Co-Chair
Daniel Renfrew, Ph.D.
Cris Mayo, Ph.D.

Department of Curriculum and Instruction/Literacy Studies

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ABSTRACT

Borderlands and Mestiza Consciousness in Appalachia: Latina undergraduate experiences in a Predominantly White institution

Susana Mazuelas Quirce

This qualitative phenomenological study explores the experiences of eight undergraduate Latinas in a Predominantly White Institution in the Appalachian region using Gloria Anzaldúa's insights on Borderlands and Mestiza consciousness. A vast majority of the studies focused on the Latinx college student population that takes place in states and tertiary institutions with a dense concentration of Latinx population, leaving rural areas—especially the Appalachian region—unexplored. There is, as well, a scarcity of studies in research focused on four-year-degree-granting institutions in which Latinx are highly underrepresented. A substantial number of studies continue presenting Latinx students as a homogenous group despite their heterogeneity in terms of acculturation and assimilation levels, language(s) fluency and use, race, Hispanic background, and socioeconomic status, to name a few. Particularly, the educational experience of Latinas has been framed under educational deficits and cultural stereotypes.

To counteract this view, the theories and praxis developed by Chicana scholars provide a new lens that emphasizes the singularity of the Latina student in an educational system which oppresses her. Anzaldúa's (1987) idea of *borderlands* explains the physical and metaphorical spaces that Latinas navigate to construct their identity along the Mexico-U.S. border. She overturned the pejorative connotations of the term *mestiza* to posit a history of resistance "by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity" (p. 77). This study transposes these ideas of identity, consciousness, and borders to the Appalachian Mountains to explore how the spaces of a college campus constitute invitations or barriers to trespass borders, promote self-reflection, and create new realities through experiences. Using deep interviews and informal *pláticas,* this study explores how the participants perceive their college experiences, and more specifically, how their identity as Latinas informed such experiences.

The participants shared experiences of microaggressions, isolation, and loneliness, both at individual and institutional level, and both outside and within the Latinx community. The study found intense reflections on the mental, emotional, and spiritual paralysis that implies finding their sense of belonging on campus. The study deepened what the students understood about a Latina identity and an Appalachian identity. Finally, the study used Anzaldúa's path of *conocimiento* to analyze the mental and emotional journey in which the students tried to make sense of their experiences and emerge with a new consciousness of their identities—one that is flexible, resistant, and solidary—in the Appalachian borderlands.

To you, who swims against the tide and finds happiness in strange places. I admire you.

Para ti, que nadas contra corriente y encuentras la felicidad en lugares extraños. Te admiro.

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"Your story's one of la búsqueda de conocimiento, of seeking experiences that'll give you purpose, give your life meaning, give you a sense of belonging" (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 577)

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Background of the problem

Since its establishment in 1990, the White House Initiative on Education Excellence for Hispanics recognizes the critical role Hispanics play in the prosperity of the nation and the federal government's commitment to expand their educational opportunities and outcomes. In a report of 2011, the Initiative recognized that there was still a lot to be achieved in that regard. In its own words: "Hispanics are the largest and fastest growing minoritized group in the U.S. yet have the lowest education attainment levels" (The White House, 2011, p. 1). Other public and private initiatives also started to pay attention to the Hispanic-American population. For example, The Pew Research Center created in 2002 The Pew Hispanic Center to conduct regular public opinion polling, demographic research, content analysis, and other data-driven research to improve public understanding of the diverse Hispanic population and to chronicle Hispanics' growing impact on the nation (Pew Research Center, 2020). These centers reached similar conclusions: Despite the relevance and progress of the Hispanic population in economic, political, and social terms, this group continues facing long-standing barriers that prevent them from achieving their full potential, among them, educational attainment (Cárdenas & Kerby, 2012).

Who are Hispanics? Several terms are used to describe this segment of the American population. Hispanic has been used to broadly refer to individuals with heritages from Spanish-speaking countries. Latino is another commonly used term that refers to individuals with ancestry in Latin American countries which once were colonies of Spain. In the United States, both terms are often used as synonyms. This emphasis on heritage makes Hispanics/Latinos an ethnicity. Ethnicity is a question of group membership usually associated with a geographic region and culture. Although often treated as a monolithic group, the Latino population is remarkable diverse in terms of country of origin, skin color, physical appearance, language use, generational and emigrational status, acculturation level, and ethnic identity status (López, 2008; Marotta & García, 2003; Weinick, Jacobs, Stone, Ortega, & Burstin, 2004). For some of them, Spanish is the native language and for some others, Spanish was the language spoken at home three generations ago. Latinos profess different religious practices, but some of them, none. Cultural traditions also differ strongly among countries and regions of origin, and from one community to the other in the United States. Some Latinos attend schools where they are a majority, but some others are truly a minority. The groups with the largest representations and a long historical presence in the United States are Mexicans and Puerto Ricans; however, the increased immigration in the last decades from other Latin American countries under different circumstances and contexts adds even more heterogeneity to the landscape. Latinos are not exclusively concentrated in the Southwestern states and in Northeastern hubs anymore. They are settling both temporarily and permanently all across the country, to which Murillo and Villenas (1997) denominate the New Latino Diaspora. This new pattern results in different levels of assimilation and acculturation. Likewise, there is not one predominant race among Latinos. The U.S. Census Bureau recognizes five races—White, Black, American Indian, Asian, and Pacific Islander. Latinos identify in any of the afore-mentioned options; however, for the collective imaginaries, Latinos are simply the *Browns*, the in-between. Not completely White, not completely Black, not completely monolingual, not completely Anglo-European, neither Native nor African, and always with the subliminal implication of unfitness.

The use of the term Latino—and Hispanic—is not exempt from controversy among their own community. First, it was an artificial creation of U.S. institutions (Flores-Hughes, 2013). Spanish nouns have a lexical gender of either masculine or feminine. The word Latino is a grammatically masculine term which allows the change to Latina to refer to the Latino woman. Acknowledging the imprecision of attributing individuals a lexical gender based exclusively on the biological sex, the use of Latinx as a gender inclusive term is gaining acceptance and use in academia (Salinas & Lozano, 2017). Latinx is the term used in this study to identify Hispanic/Latino/a students as a group. The term emerged in the LGBTQIA community "to move beyond the masculine-centric 'Latino' and the gender inclusive but binary embedded 'Latin@'" (Sharrón-Del Río & Aja, 2015, para 1). The term quickly spread beyond that community. This intention of going beyond dichotomies and acknowledging issues of intersectionality of language, culture, and gender, is an essential part of this study. However, when citing literature, this study keeps the original terminology used by the cited scholar or study.

Latinx represented 16 percent of the U.S. population in 2010 (Ennis & Albert, 2011), they are the largest minoritized group in the country, and show less educational attainment than other ethnic groups (de Brey et al., 2019). Latinx hold the highest high school dropout rates and have lower high school completion rates than non-Latinx peers; they are less likely to be enrolled in colleges and universities; they are overrepresented in community colleges and underrepresented at four-year degree conferring institutions. They are more likely to still be enrolled beyond six years on their path toward a degree, and they receive less financial aid than other undergraduates. An analysis of postsecondary attainment numbers shows that completion rates are the lowest when compared to White, Black, and Asian students (Villenas & Foley, 2010).

The increasing number of studies conducted to address Latinx education access and success in the K-16 pipeline is spectacular. In response to a proliferation of research, the twenty-first century saw the foundation of *The Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* and *The Journal of Latinos and Education*, peer-reviewed academic journals devoted to issues related to the Latinx student population and the institutions that serve them. Authors such as Tashakkori and Ochoa (1999), Castellanos and Jones (2004), Castellanos, Gloria, and Kamimura (2005), and more recently, Murillo, Villenas, and Galvan (2010), and Murillo (2019) collected relevant studies about the present and the future of the education for and by Latinx. In the studies conducted in the higher education context, the general findings show an urgent need for a strong administration and campus leadership, student services, campus climate, faculty, and mentoring initiatives that address the Latinx student body (Nora & Crisp, 2012).

Although female Latinx are outperforming male Latinx educationally in terms of enrollment and grades obtained, they still have the lowest high school graduation rates, some of the lowest college completion rates of all women, and they are still earning less than their male counterparts in the labor market (Gandara, 2015). Research and data on Latinx undergraduates rarely focus on how they differ by country of origin, class, level of bilingualism/monolingualism, or gender. We know little about how the educational needs, achievements, or challenges for Latinx men may differ from those of Latinx women (Ginorio & Huston, 2001). Moreover, Latinx women are a differentiated student subgroup due to the triple minority status they represent—gender, racial, and socioeconomic background (Chacon, Cohen, Camarena, Gonzalez, & Strover, 1982; Cuádraz, 1996)—that also prevents the application of the conclusions drawn from their male counterparts.

To better understand this subsegment of the student population, a growing number of studies take into consideration gender differences, highlighting the unique challenges Latinas face. Starting in the 1980s, several Mexican-American scholars have analyzed their experiences and struggles in American college campuses as students and as members of the academia. These scholars pioneered the study of the Mexican-American women experience as distinctive and marked by multiple points of oppression and intersectionality. Since the early insights of Chacón on the status of Chicanas in postsecondary education to the prolific work of Dolores Calderón, Dolores Delgado Bernal, Alejandra Elenes, and Gloria Holguín Cuádraz—alone and in collaboration with other scholars—the existing body of scholarship highlights the unique positions of Latina students and academics as an area worthy of further exploration.

A key contribution of these scholars was the separation from a traditional lens to explain the educational landscape of the Latinx population. Instead of repeating the traditional narratives of deficiencies and cultural barriers that prevent Latinx success (Delgado Bernal, Godinez, & Villenas, 2006), these scholars developed alternative frameworks that adjust better to woman and non-White epistemologies. Under these new frameworks, the narratives leverage the cultural background to position the Latina as a student with full potential in an educational system that does not seize her. Chicana feminism emerged in the 1960s to defy the traditional ideal of Mexican identity from inside and to reject the traditional role of the Mexican-American woman, secluded to the home and the family, and subordinated to male authority. Chicana refers to the women of Mexican origin who live in the United States. Chicana feminist pioneers Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, Sonia Saldívar-Hull, Chela Sandoval, and Emma Pérez urged to break the double oppression Chicanas suffer in the Chicano community and in the American society as well. To that end, the Chicana feminist movement differentiates American women of

Mexican descent in their struggle between race, gender, culture, language, spirituality, and sexuality. Chicana and other Latina feminist perspectives inform education as a path to understand how young and adult women experience educational institutions in a segregated society. Influential scholars such as Aida Hurtado, Alejandra Elenes, Sofia Villenas, and Dolores Delgado Bernal employ a feminist lens to explore issues related to Latinx students and faculty, and to the higher education institutions that host them. Research ranges from educational practices and policies, barriers and challenges to educational success, to personal and social identity formation issues, educational strengths, and cultural capital. Moreover, a Chicana feminist lens has proved to be useful not only to understand the Latina experience, but to frame the male experience as well (Hurtado & Sinha, 2016; Noguera, Hurtado, & Fergus, 2012).

As the Latinx population spreads to other states, research in higher education listens and responds to these new demographic patterns (Frey, 1998). The prolific literature on Hispanic Serving Institutions, community colleges, and urban areas is being complemented with studies in rural settings and campuses where the college Latinx population constitutes a minority. The Appalachian region, in particular, is one of the most homogeneous states in the nation and among the lowest ratios of foreign-born and minoritized populations. In 2017, only 5.1 percent of its population was of Latinx origin, whereas the national average was 18.1 percent (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2019). Though small, its presence is getting increasingly visible, especially in the southern Appalachian states. Diversity issues are not new in these contexts. Wortham, Murillo, and Hamann (2001) edited a volume focused on the educational challenges that institutions and Latinx students face in these new regions. Most of the research conducted among Latinx in the Appalachian region was related to the K-12 setting. Regarding the women’s experience in higher education, most studies deal with the barriers Appalachian women in general find to access higher education (e. g., Egan, 1993; Haleman, 2004; Kelleher-Sohn, 2003; Smith & Reed, 2010). Some other studies explore the experiences of African-American female students or included Latina students as aggregated in minority education and multicultural studies. Even though Latinas may share similar experiences to those of African American women, these studies do not take into consideration the intertwined relationship between race, ethnicity, gender, class, language, and culture, as Latinas evidence. Moreover, the use of a Chicana/Latina feminist lens constitutes an underexplored area.

The site of the research, North Central Appalachia University (pseudonym), was the home of slightly less than 1100 Latinx students in Fall 2020 (approximately 3.3 percent of the total). However, little else is known about this student subgroup, and more concretely, about the Latina undergraduate, who comprises slightly less than half of the percentage. With a growing percentage of the nation's population and increasing college enrollment rates, Latinx can make up 16 percent of all students in American higher education institutions in 2022 (Hussar & Bailey, 2004). In these times when universities all over the country compete to attract undergraduates in a pool of youth that is contracting, the Latinx population, much younger than other racial and ethnic groups, could become the new targeted market. However, far from being just a number, the institutions have the responsibility to provide the right support for them to succeed. This research can help to inform leadership on appropriate paths to contribute to Latinas' educational success in predominantly white institutions in the Appalachian region.

Statement of the problem

One in four female students in public schools across the United States is a Latina girl and the projections indicate that by 2060, nearly one in three females will have an Hispanic origin/background (Gandara, 2015). The importance of reaching a higher level of academic accomplishment past a high school diploma is evident in that it provides increased opportunities for career development and enhances the choices that are made available to those with a postsecondary degree. It is critical to raise the education level of Latinas today as they will be the workforce and influencers of the near future. A vast majority of the studies focused on this segment of the college student population takes place in states and tertiary institutions with a dense concentration of Latinx population, leaving rural areas, especially the Appalachian region, unexplored. Moreover, the few studies that exist in this region include the Latinx segment as aggregated in studies on diversity or multiculturalism, without differentiate their experiences or using an intersectional lens. The Latina experience continues to be framed under cultural deficits and stereotypes. The Chicana feminist movement has contributed to position women as active agents. The theories developed by Chicana scholars provide a new lens to analyze challenges and opportunities in which women are active subjects instead of passive victims. Again, these theories have been used mainly in specific contexts and with Mexican-American women students, leaving other contexts pending of exploration.

To help expand the use of a feminist lens to understand the experiences of Latina undergraduates, this study will explore how the Latina undergraduate sees and understands her experiences in a four-year Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in the North-Central Appalachian region. The study is neither an enumeration of experiences nor a comparison. It seeks to fill gaps in the literature to continue to expand research on underrepresented groups in

American college campuses through a transpositions of contexts. First, from Hispanic Serving Institutions and/or community colleges with a significant presence of Latinx students to a Predominantly White four-year Institution where the Latina is a minority in a minority. Second, from the sociopolitical, linguist, and cultural context of the American Southwest—particularly the Mexican-U.S. border states—where the Chicana develops specific strategies to survive, to the rural mountains of one of the Appalachian states, whose differentiated culture marks their inhabitants. And third, from theories framed around the Chicana experience, to the inclusion of women with other Hispanic/Latino backgrounds in other cultural and geographical contexts.

Conceptual framework

To help the discovery and exploration of the Latina undergraduate experience in an Appalachian context, this study uses two specific frameworks—*borderlands* and the *new Mestiza consciousness*—developed by Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa.

In searching for alternatives epistemologies that better suit women‘s perspectives, Patricia Collins (2000) describes the current Eurocentric approach in research that one that relies on the creation of scientific descriptions of reality that produce objective generalizations, the detachment of the researcher from the object/subject of study, and the development of rigid control mechanisms to validate such knowledge. This positivistic nature of academia directly benefits the current status quo of White men who control Western structures of knowledge and validation, therefore leaving women, especially non-White women, without a voice in academia. As Collins, Chicana feminists argue that women voices are “routinely ignored, discredited, or simply absorbed and marginalized in existing paradigms” (Collins, 2000, p. 268). Chicana theorists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Sonia Saldívar-Hull, Chela Sandoval, and Emma Pérez urge their audience to act “on political issues that exploit and oppress Chicanas (and, we argue, Latinas) globally, nationally, and within Chicana/o communities and cultures" (Elenes & Delgado-Bernal, 2010, p. 81).

The collection of writings in *This Bridge Called My Back*, first edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa in 1981, was a successful platform for these and other non-White women to express their ideas without the limits found in the Western convictions and standards. The book's title echoes one of Donna Kate Rushin´s poems, entitled "The Bridge Poem", which discusses the idea that black women live in a third space that comprises race and gender issues, where they are always explaining issues of race to white women and issues of gender to black men. The bridge symbolizes this in-between space that connects two elements of identity—race and gender—which non-white women have to constantly cross and use. The bridge is a connector to other elements of identity, such as sexuality, class, or ethnicity. The bridge has a downside too, which is the idea that non-White women spend a considerable amount of time and effort crossing the bridges and deciding in which side they should stay according to the specific context. This idea of parallel physical and emotional spaces and states is part of Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of *borderlands.*

In her pivotal work *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza,* Anzaldúa (1987) writes that the dominant colonial discourse creates borders that divide geographic as well as theoretical spaces, placing those considered as "others", especially Chicana women, on the margins. She identifies the Mexico-U.S. borderland as a space where the Anglo-American and the Mexican cultures face, interact, and produce new identities for their inhabitants. She acknowledges the inner battles to form an identity that does not adjust to the traditional dichotomies "male-female", "English-Spanish", and "White-non-White". Instead, Anzaldúa argues that the people who inhabit the borderlands, especially women, are in constant movement and transition—both literally and symbolically. The woman in the borderlands is malleable and pursues comfortable spaces from which she can explore, appropriate, and create the elements she finds useful to form an identity that is never fixed. In a traditional Mexican society and the Anglo-American colonial society where Chicana women are racially, culturally, sexually, economically, spiritually, spatially prescribed and confined by everybody else by them, Anzaldúa proposes the enactment of a new consciousness that allow the Brown woman, the *mestiza*, take their fate in their own hands.

The mestiza creates a new consciousness as a product of the borderlands. This approach has been used to face Latinx women's experiences in the American education system and thus to understand how they negotiate among different forces that can be oppressive or liberatory (Elenes, 2006). Mestiza consciousness recognizes the existence of multiple oppressions (Anzaldúa, 1987), a product of a of centuries-long history of colonization (Anzaldúa, 1987; Castillo, 1994; Saldívar-Hull, 2000). It embraces inner conflict and confusion when defining personal and social identities, applying a critical lens of culture and revaluing indigenous and nontraditional perspectives (Anzaldúa, 1981, 1987). The mestiza permanently lives in a third space where preestablished identities and social constructions deconstruct, overlap, and admit the "creative work of putting all the pieces together in a new form" (Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 546). A mestiza consciousness places relevance on self-reflexivity since it recognizes all knowledges as strategic and partial (Haraway, 1988; Pérez, 1999); Sandóval, 2000). This process of awareness, knowledge and gaining consciousness, or "*conocimiento*" is uncomfortable and distressful, but at the same time, it allows "profound transformations and shifts in perceptions" (Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 541) that eventually let the mestiza woman to redefine herself and find solace in the process.

The application of the mestiza consciousness lens allows Ivonne Yarbro-Bejarano (1999), Rendón (1992), and Hurtado (2003) to explore identity issues that have been applied to educational contexts. Chela Sandoval (1991, 2000) develops educational conceptualizations closer to minoritized epistemologies, and Alejandra Elenes and Dolores Delgado Bernal (2010) take a standpoint that question common practices among faculty members and academic departments.

Finally, the Appalachian cultural context and the Predominantly White Institution posit interesting elements that affect the student experience and her identity formation, in ways that could differ from the ones observed in other states or institutions. Anzaldúa rationalized her liminal identity as a Chicana based on the historical and at-the-time conditions developed in the Mexican-U.S. border. The Appalachia region represents a different border and a different borderland itself. The forests of the Appalachian Mountains contrast with the arid land along the Grand River. The traditional economy based on agriculture and livestock requires a substantial amount of land and people in the Southwestern states, whereas the Appalachian geography favors family farms and smallholdings. The coal industry that once radically transformed the region is in dramatic decline. Appalachia’s population is mainly white. Despite these differences with the Mexican-U.S. borderlands and peoples, the Appalachian region was once the frontier that separated the first colonies in the East from the unknown and fear West. Explorers and Irish and Scottish colonizers started to arrive and stay. Some with the idea to migrate to the West, but many others stayed for generations. The Appalachian borderlands, in turn, created its own identity characterized by isolation, fatalism, powerlessness, familism, and exploitation (Elam, 2002). It is to this context to where the Latina student arrive to pursue higher education to find their own ways and to navigate between spaces.

Anzaldúa's ideas of *Borderlands* and *Mestiza consciousness* are used as guiding ideas rather than enforced ones. In fact, part of the attractive of this framework is that they enable the incorporation of flexibility, hybridity, intersectionality, and rebellion to better understand the Latina undergraduates' experiences in a North Central Appalachian PWI.

Purpose of the study

This exploratory qualitative study proposes to explore deeper the experiences of Latina undergraduates at North Central Appalachia University, a four-year Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in North Central Appalachia. Particularly, it would pay attention to how they make sense of such experiences. The study talks about barriers and challenges but also about strengths and support. It is expected that the context of the university—a predominantly white institution in the Appalachian region—shapes these experiences. More importantly, this study delves into their identity as women of Hispanic heritage and how Anzaldúa's ideas on Borderlands and Mestiza consciousness help to make sense of such experiences.

The study does not intent to offer final and conclusive solutions, rather, it aims to study the phenomenon of being a Latina undergraduate in a flagship university in rural North Central Appalachia, a phenomenon that has not been fully explored yet, and therefore, needs a better understanding. This quality opens the possibility to the researcher to alter the research direction as a result of new data and new insights with the objective of exploring the problem in great depth and laying the groundwork for future specific studies.

Research questions

To explore in depth issues on identity and college student success among Latina undergraduates in a Predominantly White Institution in North Central Appalachia, this qualitative study proposes the following research questions:

1) **How do Latina undergraduates perceive their experiences at a four-year Predominately White Institution in North Central Appalachia?**

2) **How does undergraduates' Latina identity inform these experiences?**

Research design

This research seeks to understand the essence of how Latina undergraduates experience their college years in a four-year predominantly white institution in Central Appalachia. For that, this study operates under the constructivist paradigm and more specifically, a phenomenological approach (Glesne, 2003). A constructivist paradigm is understood as a social process where the researcher understands the world as socially constructed through interaction, giving room to multiple realities, and where meaning is agreed upon in social settings (Garman, 1994). This point of view is also a tenant to understand Gloria Anzaldúa's work. Constructivist scholars emphasize the "intersubjective understanding of specific life circumstances" and how "social actors recognize, produce, and reproduce social actions" (Schwandt, 2017, p. 39). Merriam (2009) argued that studies that follow a qualitative approach are interested in describing ways that individuals make meaning from what they say and do in everyday lives.

Phenomenology, as a qualitative research methodology, examines the experiences of individuals who are experiencing the same event and details their interpretations of the event (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Attending to college is a major life event. In the case of Latinas, they might experience this event as an intersection of aspects of their own identity—as Latinas, as Appalachian, as women—with those associated to a PWI in Appalachia. This research is exploratory. It aims to uncover the issues that are relevant to these students and that affect their journey through college. In addition, it is an interpretative study because it aims to offer insights into how a given person, in a given context, makes sense of a given event or experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In such kind of studies, the number of participants is reduced because the main purpose in to conduct a deep analysis of an experience. Participants are invited to take part precisely because of the meaning insight they can offer into the topic (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006).

North Central Appalachian University (NCAU) is the setting chosen to this study for its significance. This university is a public R1 four-year PWI in the North Central Appalachian region that has seen an increase in Latinx enrollment in recent years. Nevertheless, the Latinx population is still low (3.5 percent) and, contrary to the general trend in the nation, it served more male undergraduates than females when the data collection took over (Fall 2020). Latinas were indeed a minority within a minority.

Data collection used interviews as a well-established data collection tool in phenomenology (Marshall & Rossman, 2010; Schram, 2003). With the help of semi-structured open-ended questions, the participants will share experiences not only while in campus, but also at home and in other relevant contexts that may have an effect on their identity and experiences as undergraduates. The study uses Gloria Anzaldúa's perceptions on *borderlands* and *Mestiza consciousness* as frameworks that facilitate the analysis of women identity' issues, which in turn, serve to understand their perceptions of their experiences as undergraduates.

Significance

Traditional approaches to diversity in higher education focus on issues regarding to access, enrollment, persistence, attainment gaps, identity, and institutional policies and practices

(Antonio & Muñiz, 2008). In this study, participants share their experiences regarding the aforementioned topics, but not exclusively. A pilot study conducted showed that Latina students have additional challenges and strengths that are important to them—intermediated by racial gendered, ethnical, cultural, and other social identity conditions—, that make this group very heterogeneous and underserved. This research aims to explore these themes under the particular light of NCAU, giving a valuable insight of the status of diversity and inclusion in Appalachian tertiary institutions. Therefore, this qualitative study contributes to enrich the literature on higher education in the Appalachian region and to move forward statistics to understand the condition of Latina undergraduates. Previous studies on Latina undergraduates dealt with the special characteristics in culture, class, and gender that this collective brings to their college experience. However, these studies have been conducted mainly in states with a high presence of Hispanic population, leaving the Appalachian region out of interest, or have been conducted mainly in community colleges and Hispanic Serving Institutions (HIS), and in turn leaving the four-year Appalachian PWI not enough explored.

Second, the findings serve as a starting point to develop effective initiatives to attract, recruit, serve, and retain this underrepresented minoritized group. Specifically, the findings may help to reexamine institutional practices of recruitment and retentions programs in place at Appalachian universities that address minoritized students, especially, the Latinx community.

Finally, diversity's issues tend to be reduced to numbers and percentages, ignoring the "importance of students' voices and perspectives in higher education research, especially for research on diverse populations on college campuses" (Samura, 2017, p. 43). The feminist framework proposed provides a new lens where the female participants are the principal characters. The study recognizes their voices as individual, to move forward statistics to understand and interpret the condition of being a Latina undergraduate in the Appalachian context.

Limitations

The researcher made some choices that delimited this study. The lack of previous research that address the research questions makes this study an exploratory one. It is difficult to ascertain that the frameworks used are the most appropriated to analyze and interpret the participants' experiences in the Appalachian context. Similarly, the researcher believes that the sample and setting are relevant to the population's demographics; however, there can be no assurance that the final participants' insights can be generalized to other Latina undergraduates in Appalachian universities. The researcher recognizes that they are a variety of backgrounds with complexities that could have not been represented in the participants. It is also commonly expected that qualitative research does not generalize to other populations. The experiences are individual. Transferability is neither possible nor the aim of this study.

Definitions and abbreviations

The study used the following terms and definitions:

Familism/familismo: The "Latino value on family interdependence, loyalty, and obligation" (Taylor, Marron, & Payne, 2012, p. 3).

Fund of knowledge: Essential cultural practices and inherited knowledge embedded in the daily routines of families (Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992).

Hispanic/Latino: "Refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race" (U.S. Census, 2010, p. 2).

Hispanic serving institution (HSI): “An institution of higher education that—(A) is an eligible institution; and (B) has an enrollment of undergraduate full-time equivalent students that is at least 25% Hispanic students at the end of the award year immediately preceding the date of application” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, para. 1).

Latina: A self-define woman who is Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race” (U.S. Census, 2010, p. 2).

Latinx: “A gender-neutral label for Latino/a and Latin@” (Salinas & Lozano, 2017).

North Central Appalachia: Appalachian subregion where the three campuses of North Central Appalachia University are located, specifically, in three different counties of West Virginia (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2020).

Predominantly White Institution (PWI): “Institution of higher learning in which Whites account for 50 percent or greater of the student enrollment” (Brown & Dancy, 2010, p. 524)

Organization of the study

This research has five chapters. Chapter 1 presents a brief overview of the research, specifically, the background and statement of the problem, the conceptual framework used and the specific research questions and purpose of the study. It also presents the pilot study that informed the research and the research design. Finally, the significance and the limitations of the study. Chapter 2 is dedicated to the relevant literature that informed the study, which includes the theoretical framework and subsections to Latinx experiences in higher education and Latinas in the Appalachian region. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology, with includes the paradigm and a description of the setting, sample, and data collection and analysis. It concludes with a subsection for quality aspects of this qualitative study. Chapter 4 reports the findings of the research. These are grouped in four main themes. Chapter 5 synthesizes and discusses the results in light of the research questions, the literature review, and the conceptual framework. Finally, the study includes recommendations and further areas of research.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

To position the relevance of this study is essential to review the research conducted on the inquiry and how the study's theoretical framework has been used to address similar questions. This literature review covers the historical and current state of Latinx in education and in the higher education landscape, with specific sections for barriers and challenges and for the educational strengths these students possess. The second part focuses on research on the Latina experience in higher education with a subsection for the Appalachian region. The literature review ends with the theoretical framework that informs the study, which includes subsections for the Chicana feminist movement, the impact on their theories on education, and Gloria Anzaldúa's insights on *borderlands* and *Mestiza consciousness*.

Latinx in the education system

Latinx hold the highest high school dropout rates and have lower high school completion rates than non-Latinx peers. At the same time, they are less likely to be enrolled in colleges and universities, and when they do, they receive less financial aid than other undergraduates. An analysis of postsecondary attainment numbers shows that even though Latinx is the largest minoritized group in the country, college completion rates are the lowest when compared to White, Black, and Asian students (Villenas & Foley, 2010). Stereotypes about the Latinx' lack of interest in education and a cultural inability to adapt to and to succeed in the American educational system are constantly debunked (Andrade, 1982). Research shows not only how racial and social divisions in the United States exacerbate the inequalities between the dominant

Anglo-American population and the minorities, but how empowering Latinx' identity and culture is a positive asset in education.

Following sociologist Pierre Bourdieu' (1986) ideas on how financial, cultural, human, and social capital transmit social inequality from one generation to the next, Guadalupe San Miguel and Rubén Donato (2010) discussed how the education system contributes to place the Latinx community at the low end of the educational accomplishment scale. They laid out a list of studied patterns in how public education marginalized the Latinx student in the twentieth century and their current repercussions. These are expanded below as follows: a) exclusion from decision-making positions, b) inequitable student access, c) unequal education, d) institutional discrimination, e) deficient curriculum, and f) academic performance.

Patterns in K-12 education for Latinx students

The Latinx community is systematically excluded from important decision-making positions in teaching and administration. Even though some districts and counties had a vast majority of K-12 students and teachers from Hispanic descent—more steeply of Mexican descent and in the Southwest—the leadership positions that affect policies at county or state level lacked the corresponding representation during most of the twentieth century. The authors noted that this pattern of exclusion has been replaced nowadays by a pattern of tokenism. Today, there is an increasing number of teachers, principals, members of boards of education, superintendents, faculty members, and members of board of regents of Hispanic heritage, but this presence continue to be negatively disproportional to the number of served Hispanic students, families, and communities (Hess, 2004).

The inequitable student access does not contradict that Latinx students progressively gained full access to the elementary and secondary grades. Latinx children continue being least likely to attend preschool—approximately 37 percent in center-based preschool, compared to 50 percent of their non-Hispanic white peers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Despite the increasing number of high school graduates, Latinx show the lowest rate of entry into four-year colleges and universities but have the highest participation rates at two-year colleges (Kurlaender & Flores, 2005).

The education provided to Latinx students is separate and unequal. Not only residential segregation and economic conditions impacted the expansion of segregated schools for African Americans and Latinx in the twentieth century, but administrative reasons based on language and irregular attendance negatively targeted the Latinx community in specific. The different levels of English proficiency that Latinx kids showed and the realistic possibility that they would change schools and districts due to the stational and migratory character of their families' employment conditions, made administrators to group students to schools destinated to such a purpose but without providing the support they needed to succeed. Data from 1998 show that 75.6 percent of Latinx children attended schools with over 50 percent of Latinx students, a trend that continues today. Despite the infusion of additional resources, educational buildings and grounds continue being obsolete, and the staff of these segregated schools are less trained, qualified, and experienced that of Anglo schools (Téllez, 2004). Notwithstanding the progress achieved as a result of the 1954 Supreme Court decision on the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case that abolished racial segregation in public schools, the United States has slowly but steadily reversed the advancements in desegregation made in the 1960s. Literature specialized in education, policies, law, and civil rights highlight the irregular implementation of civil rights laws and how schools continue practicing covert segregation practices, calling for the critical role of the education system in supporting social justice (Ayscue & Orfield, 2017; Frankenberg

& Orfield, 2008; Horn, Flores, & Orfield, 2006; Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013; Orfield & Hillman, 2008). The patterns of segregation that start in public school continue in tertiary education. For example, Historic Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) make up three percent of the country's institutions but enroll 10 percent of all African American students and graduate 20 percent of all of them. The case is even more pronounced with the Latinx community. Half of the Latinx who attend college just after high school attend two-year institutions (Fry, 2002).

The discrimination of Latinx students is institutional. The low scores on the intelligence, language, and aptitude tests that proliferated in the second half of the twentieth century were taken as an indication of the Latinx children' innate inabilities. This assumption lead administrators to classify these children as educationally mentally retarded or slow and put them in differentiated classes and curricular tracks, limiting their options of future academic and professional advance (Valencia, 1997). Pennock-Roman (1990, 1992, 2002) concluded in her quantitative studies on standardized testing among English and Spanish speaker students that the results in such tests underestimated cognitive abilities for bilinguals, especially with low levels of English proficiency, since the test scores depended on the examinee's proficiency in English, the degree of difficulty of verbal content of the test, and the specificity of the vocabulary used in the subject domains. Today, Latinx high schoolers continue disproportionally gearing to the general track or the non-academic track with the assumption that they are not "college-bound" material (Fine, 1998; Oakes, 1986, 2005). This would contribute to explain that although being the largest minority in the U.S., only 21 percent of Latinx hold bachelor's degrees, compared to 45 percent of Whites and 32 percent of Blacks (Carnevale & Fasules, 2017).

The curriculum taught to Latinx students in public schools is deficient. The academic curriculum for Latinx classrooms introduces a majority of vocational and general education classes. Without questioning the value of a quality vocational education, the curriculum offered to Latinx students disproportionally include training for low or semi-skilled jobs, which have a minimal participation in American society (Gonzalez, 1990). A rigorous high school curriculum can narrow the college persistence gap for first-generation students (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin 1998; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001). Along with that challenge, the twentieth-century curriculum diminished the children linguistic and cultural heritage and excluded and distorted the foundational role of the Hispanic community in the construction of America (Castaneda, 1943; Cruz, 1994; Gains, 1972; Rodríguez & Ruiz, 2000). Regarding monolingualism and bilingualism in schools, San Miguel and Donato (2010) noted that after a promotion of bilingual education policies in the 1970s, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the enactment of English only policies. At the end of 2016, there were about five million English learners in U. S. public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017) and still most of the schools and teachers are not prepared to help them sufficiently. After three decades of program evaluation research in 36 large and small school districts from 16 different states, Collier and Thomas (2017) concluded that dual-language programs have proved to be effective not only for the acquisition of and proficiency in English, but to close the achievement gap in literacy as well. Nationally, 67 percent of students learning English graduate high school in four years, whereas the national four-year graduation rate for all students is 84 percent, according to statistics from the 2015-2016 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Despite these findings, the general idea that Latinx are not college material persists.

Finally, attrition and underachievement among Latinx students continue being higher than the national averages. Despite the decades-long decline on high school dropouts, Latinx still have the highest dropout rate—10 percent vs. seven percent of Blacks, five percent of Whites, and one percent for Asians (Pew Research Center, 2017). The National Center for Education Statistics conducts a periodic assessment of academic achievement of the nation's fourth-, eight-, and twelfth-graders. In its results, Latinx children are more likely to score in the lowest quartile on the tests (Gándara, 2009). While Latinx have made important strides in educational attainment and enrollment in tertiary education, they are less like than other groups to obtain a four-year college degree: 15 percent vs. 63 percent of Asians, 41 percent of Whites, and 22 percent of Blacks (Pew Research Center, 2017). However, these data overshadow the diverse pattern of school performance, as evidenced by the academic success among Cubans in the United States, for example (Pérez, 1999). This mainstream thinking led some scholars to focus their practice on documenting and explaining a tradition of academic failure, homogenizing the Latinx experience and consequently, minimizing the differences across spaces, race, gender, and assimilation statutes among Latinx students (Gándara, 2009).

Exclusion from decision-making positions, inequitable student access, unequal education, institutional discrimination, deficient curriculum, and academic performance are the challenges that defined the educational context for Latinx during the twentieth century. In response to these institutional barriers, Latinx activists organized and demanded improvements and changes even throughout the latest century. In the same study that presented the challenges, San Miguel and Donato (2010) summarized these educational demands and activism.

Educational demands and activism

Even though San Miguel and Donato (2010) emphasized the fights during the 1960s and 1970s, these demands have been ongoing claims and issues still fully unresolved. Latinx families, communities, and education activists called for increasing the enrollment in public schools and encourage non-public school attendance as an option for addressing better the needs of the Latinx students. Latinx communities welcomed denominational and community-based schools. Activism in the 1960s and 1970s also included campaigns that facilitated the access to positions of power and leadership in the education system and the community at large, promoting quality academic instruction and bilingualism, and more generally, fighting discrimination using the legal system. Despite the advancements, the struggle for power, inclusion, quality education, and pluralism continue in new forms. Some of these issues affect directly to the higher education sphere, such as the advance educational rights of the nondocumented emigrants and the lack of access and representation of Latinx students, faculty members, and leadership positions throughout the country.

Public education has been a site of contestation and advancement for the Latinx population. The accomplishments of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s favored not only the Latinx community, but all the minorities in general. Better education has been a recurrent demand from Latinx activists. During the first half of the twentieth century, Jim Crow-style segregation spread throughout the Southwest, which concentrated the population of Hispanic origin. By the mid-1940s, 80 to 90 percent of all Latinx children in the Southwestern U.S. attended segregated schools. Fighting discrimination using the legal system witnessed an important victory in 1947. In *Mendez v. Westminster*, U.S. District Court ruled that denying Mexican American children access to the “all Anglo” schools was a violation of the 14th Amendment of the Constitution. This case is cited as a precedent in the *Brown v. Board of*

Education of Toluka case of 1954, which ended segregation in public schools around the country. The 1960s witnessed a growing network and activism among Chicano educators and families. In East Los Angeles, Chicano families demanded the inclusion of Mexican history and literature in the curriculum, the teaching of Spanish at the elementary level, and the hiring of bilingual teachers, counselors, and administrators. As a consequence, California State Assistant Superintendent Eugene Gonzales conducted a survey in 1966 that found that the efforts that California made to implement programs to serve the non-English students were ineffective. The vast majority of the districts lacked programs for students with limited English proficiency, did not conduct regularly conferences with Mexican American parents, and did not appropriately serve migrant children (Navarro, 1984). High schoolers and college students revolted in 1968 demanding more college-prep courses for Mexican American and Black students. These and other efforts in other parts of the country resulted in the passing of the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 that allowed districts with sizable populations of Spanish-speaking students provide targeted programs. The 1974's Equal Education Opportunity Act expanded bilingual education programs in public schools. In 1961 and in the east coast, Puerto Rican educators and professionals found ASPIRA, an organization aimed to address the exceedingly high drop-out rate and low educational attainment of Puerto Rican youth. Currently, the organization is present in six states and Puerto Rico. Another breakthrough was achieved in 1963, when Miami's Coral Way Elementary School was the first one to offer a bilingual education program in public schools.

If San Miguel and Donato (2010) focused on the twentieth century, Patricia Gándara and Frances Contreras (2009) coauthored a book detailing the Latinx education crisis at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Approximately 53 percent of Latinx do not received a diploma four years after they entered high school (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). When Gándara and Contreras published their book in 2009, Latinx make up about 48 percent of public-school students in California, 46 percent in Texas, and 20 percent in New York State. With these figures, it is difficult to sustain that Latinx educational needs are not a priority. Regardless the progress made in the last decades, the lag between their accomplishments and the national and other minorities averages is noticeable, and "it's clearly the result of a complex web of social, economic, and educational conditions […] and schools that lack the resources to meet many students' most basic educational needs" (Gándara, 2008, par. 7). As the authors pointed out, the education crisis is not simply the result of immigration or lack of access to bilingual programs. The majority of Latinx students are U.S.-born (Pew Hispanic Center, 2006) and English is either the native language or fluently spoken (Hakimzadeh & Cohen, 2007). Even more, studies noted that Latinx have lost fluency in Spanish by the third generation (Tienda & Mitchell, 2006).

Gándara and Contreras built the argument that failed social policies are the main culprit of the current educational status among Latinx. Their main point is that monolingual or bilingual programs cannot succeed when they are underfunded or bad design. Instead, they insisted on equipping all schools in Latinx communities with the same rigor and quality that it is expected in Anglo classrooms. Equitable education should be the main objective regardless the approach chosen—bilingual or monolingual education. In that line, other scholars advocated and documented the success of quality bilingual education among migrant students (Collier, 1992; Collier & Thomas, 1989; Genesee, 1987; Thomas & Collier, 1997).

Language policies are also the topic of Guadalupe Valdés (2001) work on Californian immigrant students and their teachers in English as Second Language programs. Valdés concluded with a need to a critical pedagogy revision in these programs that integrate language acquisition into the school-wide curriculum as well as opportunities for socialization with native English students. Pandya (2011) centered her study on ‘only-English’ policies in Californian classrooms and their implications in testing and performance. Finally, Menken (2008) reflected on the negative impact of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) of 2001 and other educational policies on English language learners using New York state as an example. She argued that the mandate to these students to pass an exam in English in order to graduate from high school is discriminatory and prevents capable students to advance in tertiary education. She also noticed the decrease in the number of bilingual programs in New York City since the passage of the NCLB.

As pointed throughout this literature review, equitable education is not equivalent to the fully assimilation into the Anglo culture, even more, it is possible to achieve it incorporating and enhancing the Latinx culture. Teachers are key in this role. Teacher preparation programs need to be updated to the new nation’s demography. Irizarry and Raible (2011) identified three key values and practices of effective teachers of Latinx students: respect for students’ cultures and identities; knowledge of the historical and contemporary sociopolitical context of the Latinx community–especially the pervasiveness of race and racialization; and a sustained commitment to and engagement with Latinx communities.

The expectation and the promise that education is the key to social mobility is still a pending task among Latinx. As Joel Perlmann (2005) observed, “larger differences in educational differences also matter more today than would have matters in the 1940 to 1960 period” (p. 122). Given the economic and social advantages associated to college degree holders, the Latinx youth seems to have been systematically and continually relegated by the educational system to a path of underachievement, if not failure.

Latinx in higher education

The crisis in the Latinx education at the K-12 level has subsequent repercussions in the postsecondary education. The elevated high school dropout rate and persistently lower grades result in fewer opportunities for Latinx students of gaining access to postsecondary education and the available financial aid. Statistics from year 2002 show that 72 percent of White students and about 54 percent of Latinx went directly to college after high school graduation; of them, 65 percent of Whites and 51 percent of Latinx were full-time to a four-year institution. That means that half of Latinx who attended college just after high school went to two-year institutions, and many of them, as Fry (2002) found, did it as non-traditional students, since they attended part-time, lived at home, and/or worked. The lower likelihood of completing a bachelor's degree when started at a community college has been widely documented over time. Only 13 percent of the entire 2012 cohort of entering community college students earned a bachelor's degree within six years (Community College Research Center, 2018). Latinx complete bachelor's degrees at less than a third the rate of White students. In most areas of schooling, females now outperform males, a trend that also applies to Latinx students along all the K-16 pipeline. Since 1990s, Latinas entered and completed college at higher rate and with better grades than their male peers (Barton, 2003; Coley, 2001). These statistics had remained similar in the last two decades. The main challenges to the access and success of Latinx students in higher education are detailed below. These have been traditionally explained in terms of cultural deficiencies. Following a guiding principle of this literature review, the section on Latinx in higher education finishes with the educational strengths these students bring.

Barriers and challenges

The main barriers and challenges have been grouped in the following broad categories: access, affordability, parent involvement, community colleges as final destination, the state of Hispanic Serving Institutions, achievement gap, and retention. They are not in order of relevance or impact, but chronologically in an attempt to reflect the timeline when they stand in the way of students' higher education aspirations.

Access

One aspect studied about college access deals with academic preparation, cost, financial aid, and information constraints (Pallais & Turner, 2007). However, only a few studies included Latinx in sufficient numbers. One of them is the volume edited by Patricia Pérez and Miguel Ceja (2015) on the K-12 educational contexts that form college aspirations for Latinx students. One of the studies included in the volume found that roughly 70 percent of Latinx high school students were enrolled in classes that will not prepare them to college (Adelman, 1999). Latinx students are underrepresented in challenging Advanced Placement (AP) courses, which is due in part to the lack of AP course availability in many of the predominantly Latinx schools (Clewell & Braddock, 2000). With low grades and low scores in college access exams, the probabilities of being accepted in college are reduced. With the lack of a rigorous academic preparation, the possibilities to succeed and graduate from college are reduced as well. The disparity in academic achievement between students from high- and low-socioeconomic status backgrounds is well-known in education (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008; Brown, Who, & Ellison, 2016). A substantial number of studies deal with the relationship between socioeconomic status, grades, and scores in college access exams. Almost 40 years ago, White (1982) published a meta-analysis of 200 studies documenting the correlation between socioeconomic status (SES) and academic achievement with an important note: The correlation is modest (.22) when measured at the level of the individual, but much stronger (.88) when measured at the level of school or neighborhood. SES has the potential to be a powerful environmental variable since it implies not only the income and the level of education of the adult members of a household, but to the resources and quality of the school system, the social capital, and to the general prospects of attending college of entire neighborhoods (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008). Just 1 in 10 people from low-income families has a bachelor's degree by age 25 (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). Moreover, lower-SES students are considerably more likely to undermatch their academic credentials with nonselective institutions (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009). This is especially true among Latinx communities. In a study conducted by Smith, Pender, and Howell (2013), researchers estimated an undermatch of 43.8 % of Latinx students in general and 49.6 % if they came from lower-SES.

The lack of institutional information and support regarding postsecondary options is also a relevant condition among Latinx students (Brown, Who, & Ellison, 2016). They may be unaware of the requirements, the process of applying, the real cost of attending college, and the financial aid opportunities. Students from low-SES backgrounds and first-generation students are more susceptible to this challenge since their families are unaware and unequipped to face the process. The work that student counselors perform is crucial to eliminate this deficit. However, this work is difficult for high schools serving predominantly low-income and minoritized students. The American School Counselor Association reported that these schools had 1,000 students for every counselor whereas the national average was 455 students per counselor in 2019 (Bray, 2019).

Many colleges and universities counteract the underrepresentation of Blacks and Latinx in their campuses by applying Affirmative Action policies in their admission practices. The

Affirmative Action policies that started in the 1960s entailed an active effort to improve the employment and educational opportunities of members of minoritized groups and women. These policies date back to the 1960s and early 1970s, when President John F. Kennedy and President Lyndon B. Johnson issued executive orders to ensure that federal contractors did not discriminate in employment and to ensure equal opportunity based on race, color, religion, and national origin. These initiatives were assimilated into the education field, especially after the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Federal law requires government contractors and other departments and agencies receiving federal funding to develop and implement affirmative action plans for the hiring process. Public colleges and universities are considered federal contractors and must utilize affirmative action in their employment practices. Although voluntary, many private institutions across the country have also implemented similar measures in their admissions processes.

The results of these polices show that white women may have been among the greatest beneficiaries in terms of numbers. In a report elaborated by the Pew Research Center, Want and parker (2011) reported that between 1967 and 2009, female college enrollment went from 19 percent to 44 percent. In 2019, the gender split of young college graduates was 45 percent men vs. 55 percent women, with a marked gap among Black students (37 percent of men vs. 63 percent of women) and similar to the national average for Latinx (45 percent of men vs. 55 percent of women). Although affirmative action policies provide opportunities to reduce the representation gap, their implementation and the proclaimed equalitarian effects have been controversial. Blacks and Latinx have gained ground in numbers at non-selective colleges and universities, but not enough. The percentage of students who are black in 45 of the 50 flagship state universities is lower than the percentage of black high school graduates in those states

(Maxwell & Garcia, 2019). Even with Affirmative Action policies, Blacks and Latinx are more underrepresented at top colleges than in the 1990s (Ashkenas, Park, & Pearce, 2017). Moreover, with data collected in 2008, researchers estimated that eight percent of Black and Latinx students admitted in American highly-selective colleges were accepted based on ethnicity or race criteria, whereas 15 percent of the first-year students were Whites who did not fulfill the institution's minimum admissions standards (Schmidt, 2013).

Opponents of affirmative action have argued that it discriminates against non-minorities when it favors demographic characteristics instead of merits (Alon & Tienda, 2007). Some educational systems, such as the state of California in 1996, institutions of higher education within the Fifth Circuit in 1997, the state of Washington in 1998, and the state of Michigan in 2006, ended the practice of affirmative action under the premises that quantitative elements and criteria, such as test scores, GPA, and academic honors, should prevail in admissions policies to guarantee fairness. Since the ban of Affirmative Action in Californian tertiary education institutions in 1998, the percentage of Latinx and Black enrollment in the Berkeley and UCLA campuses dropped sharply in comparison to the state's college-aged minoritized residents. The University of Texas banned Affirmative Action strategies from 1997 to 2005, showing a similar trend, as well as the University of Michigan, Michigan State, University of Washington, and Washington State adopted the ban (Fessenden & Keller, 2015). A similar trend was observed in universities from Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi (Blume & Long, 2014).

Another argument against these practices is that it can stigmatize people of color when they are perceived as less capable than they may actually be (Connerly, 2000; D'Souza, 1995; Heilman, Block, & Lucas, 1992; Nacoste, 1990). Contrary to this argument, Alon and Tienda (2005) and Bowen and Bok (1998) found that the more selective the institution, the greater the likelihood that African American students outperform, graduate, and enroll in graduate and professional schools. Much could be argued on what constitutes ‘merits’ and the majority of public and private higher education institutions follows a holistic approach in their admissions policies, in which race is a factor to consider. Hundreds of studies have demonstrated the benefits of a student body diversity, such as higher levels of intellectual and civic engagement; reduction of students’ racial bias, improvement of satisfaction and intellectual confidence; and enhancement of leadership skills (see Antonio, Chang, Hakuta, Kenny, Levin, & Milem, 2004; Chang, Witt, Jones, & Hakuta, 1998; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Levin, van Laar, & Sidanius, 2003; Marin, 2000; Mickelson, 2008; Palardi, 2008, 2013; Phillips, 2014; Wells, Fox, & Cordova-Cobo, 2016).

The Affirmative Action policies might increase the total numbers of Blacks and Latinx students in college, but not the gains in relative percentages neither offset the inequality issues that begin earlier. In other words, segregated and underfunded schools, low-quality instructional curriculum and teachers, and low access to financial aid continue being the hallmarks of the education system for minorities, as acknowledged by the U.S. Department of Education (Office for Civil Rights, 2014) and backed by the research presented in this literature review. Outreach and scholarship programs to minorities present themselves as alternatives to increase their participation (Long, 2007). Mark Long quantitative studies analyze the impact that Affirmative Action policies, its ban, and alternative programs have in the amount of minoritized students admitted to colleges and universities. His conclusion

Since the percentage of minoritized families from a low socio-economic status is greater than White families, a third strategy to increase the number of students from minorities would be the application of class-based affirmative action. However, studies that simulated the effects of such practice reached the conclusion that the principal beneficiaries would be white students (Cancia, 1998; Hacker, 1995; Kane, 1998b; Karabel, 1998). A probable reason is that the cost of attending is not the not the only barrier. The increase of scholarships Niu, Tienda, and Cortes (2006) also found that in Texas, students who attended resource-poor high schools are less likely than typical high school students to enroll in a selective four-year college.

Undocumented Latinx students encounter additional legal and financial barriers to accessing higher education. While there are no federal or state laws that prohibit college entrance based on residency status, policies held by individual colleges may be restrictive (College Board, 2012). A Supreme Court decision on June 2020 suspended—at least temporarily—the Trump's administration plans to eliminate the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and possibly deport the undocumented immigrants who were either enrolled in or qualify for. Approximately 700,000 of these beneficiaries were brought to the country by their families when they were minor. Even though a small victory, the future of this youth is still uncertain as long as their residency status remain in the limbo. This youth is known as the 1.5 generation. They immigrated before their early teens and have different levels of assimilation to their new country. Many of them are bicultural but there is a significant group that only speaks English and only know the Anglo culture. However, their monolingual and monocultural status—and the assumed benefits associated—are threatened by their undefined legal status. Leo Chavez (2001, 2008, 2017) books examine in more detail the stereotypes and misrepresentation of both documented and undocumented Latinx immigrants in the American society, using data to refute the negative claims. William Perez's scholarship gives voice to undocumented high school, college, and graduate students. His essays and studies on this group remark their eagerness to the sustenance of themselves, their current and future families, and a society they consider their own, regardless their country of origin (Perez 2009, 2012). His findings agree with other students about undocumented undergraduates, such as Gonzales (2011) study and Teranishi, Suárez-Orozco, & Suárez Orozco (2015) study, which highlighted the range and complexities of this group of undergraduates and made specific recommendations for what colleges should consider to better serve this population.

Affordability

One of the factors with greatest impact on the decision to attend college is affordability. The Great Recession of 2008 and rising college costs are making higher education unaffordable for many. On one hand, the economic and social outcomes of a degree have been studied. Postsecondary students are more open-minded, more cultured, more rational, more consistent, and less authoritarian. College attendance decreases prejudice, enhances knowledge of world affairs, enhances social status, and increases economic and job security as well (Rowley & Hurtado, 2002). Higher education is positively correlated with good health, lower mortality rates, and a more optimistic view (Cohn & Geske, 1992). A college degree has been the passport to social mobility. A four-year degree holder had an average income of $55,700 in 2008, whereas a high school degree holder made $33,800 the same year (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). A recent study by Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner, and Yagan (2017) explored how college enrollment impacted the life trajectory of undergraduates from 1999 to 2013. Among the findings, the study confirmed that higher education was a gateway to social mobility, particularly for low-income students, and that students from the same institution had similar earnings outcomes regardless of economic background.

On the other side of the equation, the cost of attending college has never been more expensive. After adjusting for inflation, tuition at public four-year colleges has more than doubled, as well as the average amount owed by a typical student loan borrower (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Total student debt now exceeds $1.56 trillion (Student Loan Hero, 2019). For many students and families, the investment is still worth it. When access to financial resources is a challenge, the choice of educational institutions is more heavily influenced by the nature and amount of financial aid, perceptions of the amount of work required, and being able to live and home and/or work while attending college (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). Latinx students' families, on average, have lower incomes and educational attainment rates. Moreover, 62 percent of Latinx children live in or near poverty (Wildsmith, Alvira-Hammond, & Guzman, 2016). Therefore, the benefits to attend college need to surpass the additional and usually drained efforts implied to these families. Alvarez (2015) found that parental knowledge about financial aid is critical in influencing college plans for Latinx students, including their decisions about going to college and whether they enroll at a two- or four-year institution. If the financial risk is too high, college attendance is dependent on the parent's assessment. Heller (2005) found that, even counting with grants, loans, and family financial support, many Latinx students may still not be able to afford college due to the disparity between the family' s income and the cost. Muñoz and Rincón (2015) used data from the National Center for Educational Statistics' High School Longitudinal Survey of 2009 based on a nationally representative sample of 10th-graders and a follow-up survey when they were in 12th grade in 2011 to conclude that Latinx students who expect to pay for college with loans are reluctant to enroll at a four-year university. Since Zarate and Fabienke (2007) found that half of the Latinx high school students who participated in their survey did not received college financial aid information from their high schools, Muñoz and Rincón (2015) suggested that students might be unaware of all the private and public options. Moreover, Zarate and Fabienke

(2007) found that Latinx families prefer to receive this information in person rather than using online sources, and that having it available in Spanish helps them and their parents to understand better the terms.

Swail, Cabrera, Lee, and Williams (2005) reminded that Latinx high school students are the most sensitive to changes in tuition and financial aid. The recent trend to favor financial aid policies based on-merit rather than on-need aid seems to detriment the Latinx higher education aspirations. With this swift, federal and state funds are geared to more affluent schools districts which a student population who historically performs better in standardized tests (Doyle, 2006; Flores, 2010). States with a significant presence of Latinx students such as New Mexico, Nevada, and Florida, have implemented merit-based funding that lay aside the academically underserved students from under-resourced high schools and families.

As mentioned before, legal status is another factor that impacts Latinx. Undocumented families suffer from legal, social, and educational constraints. In the 1982 Supreme Court case of *Plyler v. Doe*, the Court held that "educating children, regardless of their immigration status, is essential for creating individuals who can function in society and contribute to the development of the United States" (Perez, 2012, p. 6). The 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (PRWORA) barred students from access to federal financial aid for postsecondary education, leaving specific treatment undocumented students would receive in the hands of individual states and universities. In all but in 13 states, undocumented students are considered international or out-of-state, which makes their tuition three or more times higher than that of in-state students. Hence, in-state, public, community colleges are often the only viable option for undocumented Latinx students. Pérez, Rodríguez, & Guadarrama (2015) found that for the undocumented college students in California, a sense of obligation and responsibility to give back to their families, their immediate community, and the undocumented community at large is a powerful motivator to attend college. Scholarships, grants, on-campus employment, and work-study opportunities are associated with higher retention and graduate rates, especially for low-income and minoritized students (St. John, 2002; Swail, 2003).

Parent involvement

A large body of literature has pointed to the strong correlation between education and income of parents and the achievement outcomes of their children (Coleman, Campbell, Mood, Weinfeld, Hobson, York, & McPartland, 1966; Jencks et al, 1972; Bowles, Gintis, & Groves, 2005). Parents' education is a relevant predictor of student performance because it is tied to socioeconomic class. Nearly 40 percent of Latinx students come from homes in which parents do not have a high school diploma and one in ten Latinx do not have a parent with a college degree. This translates in the lack of what Bourdieu (1977) called cultural and social capital–the knowledge and access to social networks that helps navigate the education system (Coleman, 1988; DiMaggio, 1982; Lareau, 2003). When parents are unfamiliar with the educational system, the transition to higher education is typically more difficult for first-generation students (St. John, Hu, & Fisher, 2011; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). Despite the lack of experience, Latinx parents report wanting to be a part of their children's education even though they feel they are not listened or welcomed (Ramirez, 2003). In the Torres, Reiser, Lepeau, Davis, and Ruder (2006) study on first-generation Latinx students, most Latinx participants reported that, while their families supported their pursuit of a college degree, their parents did not understand their life at college. Coleman (1988) reported that having closer relatives or friends with higher education experience can help to this transition, but in many cases, Latinx undergraduates find themselves alone in the process. Other studies indicate that Latinx' parents play a critical role in encouraging higher education aspirations (Gándara, 1995; Muñoz & Rincón, 2015). Muñoz and Rincón (2015) even suggested that family input is even more important than teachers and counselors in the process of college preparation and enrollment.

Community colleges as final destination

Most Latinx undergraduates attend community colleges for their proximity to home, affordability, and flexibility in terms of work and schedule (Flores, 2010; Krogstad, 2016; Kurlaender, 2006; Santiago, 2007). However, these benefits contrast with outcomes that show that half of the students do not return to college for their second year of studies and among those who finish, only 39 percent of Latinx students do transfer to a four-year institution for a baccalaureate degree (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, CCSE, 2005). Latinx are disproportionally represented in two-year institutions (65 percent) in contrast to Whites (42 percent) and Blacks (52 percent) (Carnevale & Fasules, 2017).

One of the reasons of these failure is that two-year colleges enroll a disproportionate number of students who exhibit several of risk factors that threaten persistence and graduation from college, namely, being academically underprepared, not entering college directly after high school, attending college part-time, being a single parent, relying on their own income, caring for children at home, working more than 30 hours per week, and being a first-generation college student (CCSE, 2005). Unfortunately, the Latinx population lies on this category of at-risk students. Even for those who successfully graduate, data said the majority of community college students, regardless race or ethnicity, do not transfer to a four-year institution. Only 25 percent of Latinx did in 2003 (Fry, 2004). Community colleges need specific programs that assist students in the transition to four-year institutions.

On a positive note, Latinx community college students reported gaining more in communication skills and personal and social development compared to their Asian counterparts, and greater gains in personal and social development compared to White students (Horn & Ethington, 2002). However, this benefit seems not to be powerful enough to help Latinx students in the path to social mobility that a college degree makes possible.

State of Hispanic Serving Institutions

Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) are also a preferred option for Latinx undergraduates. This category of two-and-four-year public and private institutions was created in 1992 by the Federal government under the Higher Education Act (HEA). Currently, 17 percent of all higher education institutions are Hispanic-serving, enrolling about 66 percent of Latinx undergraduates (Santiago, 2008). Notwithstanding their popularity, they have recently fallen under question by scholars and authorities (Dervarics, 2011). They argue that the simplistic criteria of having at least a 25 percent of Latinx students enrolled and acquiring this designation by the federal government are not enough to define an institution as Hispanic serving (García, 2019). The majority of these institutions are located in California, Texas, and Puerto Rico, following by Arizona, New Mexico, Illinois, Florida, New York, New Jersey, and Colorado, which matches the states with a great concentration of Latinx youth. Many of these institutions did not start out intentionally to serve these students. They become Hispanic-serving often when the Latinx population in the area grew. The argument is that institutional success should be linked to the student body success. Research has shown that Latinx students attending HSIs are earning degrees at lower rates than in other institutions (Contreras, Malcom, & Bensimon, 2008; Malcom, 2010). In 2010, de los Santos and Cuamea (2010) surveyed presidents, chancellors, and chief executive officers of 86 HSIs in the fifty states of the United States and Puerto Rico about the main challenges that their institutions faced. In order of priority, their answers were lack of funding, poor academic preparedness of students, student retention/success, prepared and diverse faculty and staff, and affordability for students. More research is needed to assess the extent to which HSIs have been successful in the development of Latinx students (Benitez & DeAro, 2004; Villalpando, 2010) and in serving the Hispanic community in general (García, 2019).

Achievement gap

Several studies have analyzed academic achievement gaps in postsecondary education between Latinx and non-Latinx students during the last decade (Grodsky & Riegel-Crumb, 2010; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Yazdeijan, Toews, & Navarro, 2009). Data from NCES show that for the 1993-1994 period, only four percent of all the degrees awarded was to Latinx students, comparing to 78 percent to Whites and eight percent to African-Americans. For the 2013-2014 period, 12 percent were to Latinx, 62 percent to Whites, and 11 percent to African-Americans. Despite the large increase in enrollment of Latinx and African-Americans, there is a degree completion gap that needs to be addressed. Even the most prepared Latinx students have trouble graduating. Latinx with high SAT/ACT test scores have similar enrollment rates as Whites, but only 63 percent of them complete a degree compared to 78 percent of Whites (Carnevale & Fasules, 2017).

Table 1

Comparative Degree Completion Trends in Post-Secondary Education

Ethnicity	Degree completion in 1994	Degree completion in 2014
White	1,679,944 (78%)	2,375,031 (62%)
African-American	153,357 (8%)	426,911 (11%)
Hispanic-American	95,495 (4%)	436,112 (12%)
Asian/Pacific Islander	91,607 (4%)	245,744 (6%)
Other	115,061 (6%)	321,435 (9%)

Total degrees awarded	2,135,464 (100%)	3,805,233 (100%)

As previously stated, this educational achievement gap is the result of the unequal or inequitable distribution of resources and opportunities–the opportunity gap. Background factors–such as lack of financial means and being first generation students–paired with institutional factors–such as attending to segregated and under-resourced high schools–translates into poor academic performance, low scores on the required entrance exams, a misfit with the campus chosen, disengagement, and finally, dropouts and low graduation rates, limiting the opportunities in the job market.

For much of the youth, going to college represents the first time they move away from their family homes, leaving behind the security of the childhood neighborhoods, schools, friends, and routines. College first-year students are expected to succeed academically, personally, and socially in a new environment that is new and challenging. This adaptation to the new environment has been widely studied by scholars. For example, Astin's (1991) input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model of student change is a useful framework for assessing this transition experience. Input includes demographic characteristics, family backgrounds, and students' prior academic and social experiences. Tinto (1987, 1993) on his part, argued that students in college navigate through three stages: separation, transition, and identification. During the first stage, students distance themselves from their past, while they know, understand, and try to fit into their new identities as college students. Regardless the framework of study, the literature indicates that these experiences may cause struggle and conflicting emotions; therefore, understanding these transition experiences is crucial for creating effective strategies to promote retention and student success (Reynolds & Sellnow, 2015). Despite all the good efforts that high schools and families bring, studies about students who do not enroll or complete college show that this transition and adaptation is complicated and that it extends before and after the first year in college (Barefoot, 2008). Every campus has its own culture, context, and academic requirements, which have to be experienced and internalized by students in order to succeed.

Social psychological research shows that increasing students' sense of belonging at college can improve enrollment outcomes. Proactive efforts to increase it generate positive impacts on enrollment decisions (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; Walton & Cohen, 2011). However, differences in the transition experiences of non-White and White students persist amidst growing concerns about student adjustment and success in college (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Eimers & Pike, 1997; Fischer, 2007). Traditionally marginalized groups may observe the absence of others who are similar to them and question whether they belong on campus (Constantive, Kindaichi, & Miville, 2007). First-generation college-goers, uncertainty about what life in college would be like may lead students to be heavily influenced by the postsecondary decisions of peers in their schools and social networks who did not attend college (Cialdini, 2001; White, Hogg, & Terry, 2002). Finally, the individualism and the competition that permeate higher education institutions and the American society as a whole have been challenged by many underrepresented scholars who emphasized the collective effort as a valid path to succeed (Valenzuela, 1999). Familism among Latinx families often implies that the well-being of the family and community is as important, if not more, as the individual succeed; therefore, institutions might change their educational approaches inside and outside the classroom to meet Latinx expectations and approaches.

All these concerns are more acute when considering that the most used theories are based on studies with a wide majority of participants that were Whites; therefore, the services that institutions implement to address the transition and adjustment to college tend to address the needs of this population. The demographic swift in the American youth demands more research to address the non-White subgroup of students, but not as a homogeneous group, but separated by race, ethnicity, and gender, as their challenges are different. Jalomo (1995), for example, found that Latinx college students were able to successfully operate in the multiple contexts of home and school, but the transitions were challenging.

Student success in college is defined as “persistence and educational attainment or achieving the desired degree or educational credential” (Kuh et al, p. 11). Santiago, Brown, Gonzales, McNair, Finley, & McCambly (2014) expanded this definition for Latinx listing specific elements and goals: by an increase in completion rates, increased retention rates, academic improvement, increased pass rates, decrease withdrawal rates, or improvement in writing skills. Each higher education institution should evaluate their students’ progress and align their objectives accordingly. On studies about Latinx undergraduates, Octavio Villalpando (2010) noticed the variability of educational attainment by country of origin, generation status, socioeconomic status, and gender. For example, Chicanos/as represent over 65 percent of all Latinx in the United States, but over 10 percent do not finish high school and, among those who do, only about eight percent eventually graduate from college. The same study found that despite the general data, Cuban Americans have greater levels of educational attainment. Regarding gender, males continue to show the worst educational performance and attainment. Therefore, disaggregated data provide a better picture of the heterogeneity of the Latinx landscape.

Attrition and retention

Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) wrote a completed summary of the literature on student attrition and retention. Tinto’s (1987) model of student departure has a significant influence on how institutions understand retention. Tinto’s premise is that students who do not achieve some level of academic or social integration is likely to leave school. Later, Tinto (1993) offered another explanation of student departure: Students remain enrolled in they separated themselves from family and previous friends. The theories, models, and articles that followed have been developed following Tinto’s insights on the different individual and institutional variables that affect student attrition. The current swift in demographic patterns and the broad range of institutions’ contexts posit a reassessment of the utility of those theories and models based on a more traditional student body. Bean and Metzner (1985) developed a theory of retention for nontraditional undergraduate students. For these authors, nontraditional students are older than 25 years old, do not live in college residences, attend part-time, and are not greatly influences by the social environment of the institution. Regardless the targeted body of students, the assumption is that students have to do some kind of compromise to fit and adapt to the culture of the institution, which in turn, try to accommodate itself to the different students’ needs. In a longitudinal study, Torres (2003) studied the ways that Latinx developed their ethnic identity as minoritized students during their first two years of college, and specifically, the choices they make “between their culture of origin and the majority culture” (p. 533). He found that cultural and ethnic sacrifices might be detrimental to the students’ identity development and to their general well-being when they do not find a comfort level between the campus culture and their own culture.

Abundant research shows that student engagement is essential to success in terms of persistence and attainment, and it is a predictor of their learning and personal development (Astin, 1993; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt 2005a; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Tierny, 1992). Student engagement is understood as “the time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities" (Manning, Kinzie, & Schuh, 2014, p. 18). Student engagement is a key component to student success in college. However, the burden falls not only on the student's shoulders, but it is a shared responsibility with the institution. When the institution makes the effort to design learning opportunities, activities, and services that target the interests and needs of specific segments of the student body, these perceive the institutional environment as "supportive and affirming" (p. 19). In their survey on literature on engagement related to diverse students, Harper and Quaye (2009) remind institutions that the profile of incoming college students has changed dramatically in recent years, therefore, traditional support structures may not be as effective as they were once.

Rodríguez and Oseguera (2015) propose higher education institutions to work upon diversity, dialogue, support, and recognition of the strengths and values that Latinx bring to the institution, integrating them in the decision-making process. In the same line, Calderón (2014) insists on the establishment of shared goals and agendas, whereas Vega and Martínez (2012) created a scorecard that can help institutions to measure their performance on Latinx retention and to gather relevant data to prove it. One of the main claims by minoritized scholars is the need to swift research based on the deficits that minoritized students present to an approach that studies and leverages strengths and successful practices. In a longitudinal study of 200 Chicana/o and 200 White college students throughout the United States, Villalpando (2003) found that when these students associate with other Chicano/as, they draw from their cultural resources to mitigate the racialized barriers erected by higher education institutions and that their socially conscious values are reinforced. For example, research shows the relevance of college access programs that focus on preparing Latinx immigrant students and their parents to navigate high school and transition into college (Martínez-Wenlz & Gándara, 2015). Gonzalez and Morrison's

(2016) focus on context and culture challenges directly Tinto's (1993) later transition model based on detachment, arguing that Latinx students should not leave behind their cultural roots in order to success in college. The authors consider the heterogeneity of the Latinx experience and identity as a key factor to understand how to better serve them while in college. Again, differences among country/state or origin, proficiency in one, two, or more languages, spirituality/religion, gender, and other factors shape those experiences.

Ruarte (2018) grouped in three main categories the literature on institutional practices that have been proved to positively impact Latinx attrition. The first is leadership support. This includes a firm commitment for tailored support, communication, and the building of community (Griffin, Muniz, & Smith, 2016; Kezar, Eckel, Contreras-McGavin & Quaye, 2008); the use of data to promptly identify at-risk students and contact them with the right services and help (Miller & Bell, 2016); strategic planning to promote and increase diversity (Wilson, 2015); and systematic analysis on campus climate as evidence of the efficacy of diversity programs (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999). The second category involves mentoring programs where formal mentors provide information, advice, guide, and emotional support to students. Mentorship is mostly seen as graduate level or with new faculty members, but mentoring minoritized undergraduates has proven to contribute to their engagement. Castellanos, Gloria, Besson and Harvey (2016) found that having a mentor was correlated with a higher cultural fit and a higher college and life satisfaction among racial and ethnic minoritized students in a predominantly white institution and in a Hispanic Serving Institution They also found that students with a mentor felt an increased notion of respect by the institution. The third category summarized by Ruarte (2018) involves institutional learning and equity initiatives tailored to the specific context and needs of the institution. Several scholars have developed different tools to assess equity needs and outcomes in quantitate terms. These tools allow to disaggregate data by race, ethnicity, gender, and related variables to have a better picture of performances and gaps. These data allow the implementation of specific and better correctional measures. Examples of these tools are *the equity scorecard* developed by Harris and Bensimon (2007) and the Clark and Estes' (2008) analytical framework to increase organizational performance.

This research on challenges and barriers to Latinx success as college students gives way to a literature review focused on educational strengths and values particular to the Latinx college students. As Murillo (2019) recently recalled, the American educational system is still far from acknowledging and implementing strategies that leverage the Latinx cultural and social capital.

Educational strengths

The following strengths that Latinx undergraduates bring to their education reflect the mechanisms they use to counteract the barriers and challenges they face. The categories are formal education as a valuable asset, familism, and persistence.

Formal education as a valuable asset

The long-standing myth presented before that Latinx families do not value education is strongly debunked by several authors. Rios-Aguilar and Marquez Kiyama (2012) discussed the growing significance of higher education to the Latinx population despite that they are underserved. Richard R. Valencia (2002), on his part, reviewed the making of this myth that pursues to blame the victim instead of analyzing the schooling arrangements that avoid student success. He provided scholarly literature evidencing how Mexican Americans, the largest Latinx origin group, value education, conducting a transgenerational case study to compare findings and establish patterns. In this line, Jasis and Marriott (2010) and Nygreen (2017) conducted studies on migrant Latinx families to discuss their participation in a community-based adult education program in the Southwest and in an urban school district in the West Coast, respectively. Findings in the Jasis and Marriott (2010) study show that parents assumed active roles in the schooling of their children when schools were willing to facilitate the cultural conditions necessary for them to feel welcomed and respected. Nygreen (2017) found that despite exclusionary practices and legal violence, parent organization is a valuable tool to keep fighting for social justice in schools and communities. Latinx parents are and want to be involved in their children´s education at home and in schools.

This parental involvement is not constrained only to the public K-12 system, but influences Latinx undergraduate and graduate students as well. Even though the majority of research on the influence of parental involvement on students' outcomes has been done in the K-12 area, there is emerging research on this involvement during the higher education years (Sax & Weintruab, 2014; Wolf et al., 2009). Underrepresented students who experience higher levels of parental involvement and educational expectations have a higher likelihood of enrolling in college (Choi et al., 2013; Tierney & Auerbach, 2004). Studies of the influence of Latinx parents in their children' educational aspirations have resulted in mixed findings. Unfortunately, for some families from a low socioeconomic status, the financial pressures (already discussed in a previous section) coupled with the lack of time and energy, prevent them to invest as much as they would want. In this line of thinking, Rios-Aguilar and Espino (2016) interviewed five prospect Latinx doctoral students about parental engagement. Some of the participants expressed how education was encouraged as a way for social mobility but the lack of cultural knowledge and the demands of managing the household discouraged more parent involvement, creating disagreement between the students and their parents. For these parents who lack social and cultural capital, outreach programs where educators and counselors work with parents to create a college-going culture have proved to be effective; however, the relationship with the families has to be one of reciprocal partnership instead of one of power differential (Alemán, Pérez-Torres, & Oliva, 2013; Kiyama, 2010; Yosso, 2005). Some examples of these successful programs are *Adelante,* in Utah, *Futures and Families*, at UCLA, and *Noble Academy*, nationwide. These programs are based on the work of Yosso (2005) on family and community capital. Yosso, on her part, constructs on Bourdieu definitions of social and cultural capital to deepen into questions about the ownership and normativity of such capitals. Yosso proposes alternatives to the normative sources of knowledge and networking and highlights the strengths of working with cultural knowledge and assets of communities of color.

The *funds of knowledge* approach places in this line of thinking. Even though it has been implemented and studied mainly in the K-12 context, its promises might be valuable for higher education as well. The concept of funds of knowledge is based on a simple premise: “People are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2009, p. ix-x), which, in turn, has a theoretical foundation on Lev Vygotsky (1978) and Jim Cummins (1996) ideas on how individuals construct knowledge in the classroom, arguing that building on prior knowledge and presenting cognitively engaging input in relevant contexts positively contributes to the learning process. Funds of knowledge is not a list of cultural practices, but an empirical approach to the processes and patterns that shape the community’s perceptions, thinking, and practices. As noted by Lockwood and Secada (2000), Latinx families have social capital on which to build even though this capital might differ from the one the Anglo school system promotes. By understanding how Latinx students process and use experiences, learning institutions can leverage this knowledge to better attract these students and to better response to their needs while on campus.

Familism

Familism ”is a cultural value in which there is a high emphasis on the family unit in terms of respect, support, obligation, and reference” (Valdivieso-Mora, Peet, Garnier-Villarreal, Salazar-Villanea, & Johnson, 2016, p. 1). Latinx exhibit high levels of familism relative to non-Latinx on a variety of structural and demographic indicators (Vega, 1995). There is a general agreement that familism entails the subordination of individual interests to those of the family group (Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal, VanOss Marin, & Perez-Stable, 1987; Valenzuela & Dornsbusch, 1994; Vega, 1995). Some studies pointed out the negative consequences of this subordination (Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994), but there is currently a consensus on the surpassing benefits of extended family networks, family cohesion, and social support on physical and mental health, education, and poverty (Landale & Oropesa, 2001; Valdivieso-Mora et al, 2016; Zambrana, Scrimshaw, Collins, & Dunkel-Shetter, 1997). Germán, Gonzales, and Dumka (2011) found that “supporting familism values among Mexican-origin groups is a useful avenue for improving adolescent conduct problems, particularly in a school context” (p. 16). In this line, Price (2008) found that families of African-American students at predominately white institutions are concerned about health and safety issues and that immigrant families with limited English skills feel isolated. However, Latinx families are also participating in the general changes in family life that are under way in the United States and research suggest a declining familism across generations as well (Landale, Oropesa, & Bradatan, 2006).

Parent orientation programs are a typical way in which higher education institutions involve families in the college experience. Usually, they include family weekends, orientation sessions before and during the course, newsletters, parent websites, and similar activities. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives depends on the quality of the information and services provided. Parents can better support their children if they are aware of the developmental changes ahead and of the campus resources and services. This is especially true for first-generation undergraduates and other underrepresented students. However, further research needs to explore this aspect (Guiffrida, Kiyama, Waterman, & Museus, 2012; Harper, Sax, & Wolf, 2012). A significant amount of literature have already shown the benefits of family engagement in student development (Brow, Love, Tyler, Garriot, Thomas, & Roan-Bell, 2013; Kolkhorst, Yazediian, & Toews, 2010); academic achievement (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; Turner, Chandler, & Heffer, 2009); and social and emotional support while in college (Collins & Steinberg, 2008), but less is known about similarities and differences across cultural, class, and socioeconomic groups (Marquez Kiyama, Harper, Ramos, Aguayo, Page & Riester, 2015). Past research has emphasized the importance of familial ties to Latino student persistence. Rendón (1994, 2002) explained that family relationships were a significant factor contributing to how students felt validated through their process. Research has shown that strong cultural values, caring, and loyalty from family provided supportive structures for Latinx college persistence before and during college (Bordes-Edgar et al., 2011; Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006; Haro, 1994; Ojeda et al., 2014; Rendón, 1994).

Some institutions allocate specific resources for minoritized students, such as African-Americans or first-generation college students, to develop initiatives that help their transition to college life, but more research and initiatives are needed to support these students on the long-term, to graduation and beyond. The relevance of implementing cultural resources to support these groups is exemplified in López Turley, Desmond, and Bruch (2010) study. They found that a close relationship to parents negatively impacted first-generation, Black, Latinx, and immigrant college students in their will to enroll in residential campuses, limiting their college options.

Following Tinto's (1987, 1993) stages on fitness to college life, one can argue that familism is detrimental since it prevents students to detach themselves from home and engage in campus live; however, following Yosso's (2005) insights on *community cultural wealth,* one can argue that institutions continue serving a student profile that does not represent anymore the current student body, and that they should work in partnership with underrepresented communities to adapt the campus and provide them opportunities to make them feel "at home". Olcón, Pantell, & Andrew (2018) used the community cultural wealth approach to understand the success of a Social Work Education program with a 90 percent of its students self-identifying as Latinx in a university in the Midwest. The case study found the effectiveness of using aspirational, familial, linguistic, social, navigational, and resistance capital inherent to the students' Hispanic culture as leverage for their success as students.

Persistence

White and Asian American students are more likely to persist toward a degree than their African American and Latinx peers (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). Even though the factors associated with persistence—academic preparedness, welcoming campus climate, commitment to academic work, social and academic integration, and availability of financial aid—are similar among races (Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003), research also shows that students who enter a college environment where the predominant racial, ethnic, or religious culture differs from their own, may encounter additional adjustment challenges (Allen, 1992). Several research described the tensions first-generation Latinx students feel between college life and home life with different focus (Gonzalez, 2000; Ortiz, 2004; Rodríguez, 1982; Torres, 2003; Turner, 1994). Caroline Turner (1994), for example, highlighted the struggle to feel a full member of the campus and that faculty and staff seemed to be uninterested in their well-being and success, whereas Richard Rodriguez (1982) described his own transformation from “deepest love” to his parents to “embarrassment for their lack of education” (p. 566) and voluntarily distancing from them and home life to pursue a successful professional path in academia.

Despite the angle, these accounts show that Latinx students are usually left of their own to figure it out the best way to adapt to college life, even thought it might imply a reject of family and cultural values, which Tara Yosso (2005) and Yosso and Solórzano (2005) found to be assets in educational settings. In this line, studies show that the following activities and services impact positively on Latinx college student engagement: a) belonging to campus religious and social-community organizations (Hurtado & Carter, 1997); b) continuing relationships with off-campus family and friends (Hernandez, 2000; Kenny & Perez 1996); c) participation in academic support courses and programs for adjustment to college (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005); d) remediation courses focused in improving English as a second language (Swail et al, 2005); e) interacting with faculty and staff of their same ethnicity and race (Dayton, Gonzalez-Vasquez, Martinez, & Plum, 2004; Laden, 2004); and f) establishing indicators to assess efforts to address inequities in educational outcomes (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005b; Nettles et al. 1999).

The lack of college readiness of lower-income, racial minoritized, and first-generation college students is a well-known topic of study (Deil-Amen, 2011). As mentioned before, many Latinx students are the first in their family to attend college and often come from a low-income household. Compared with their peers, first-generation students are challenged in terms of family support, degree expectations, planning, and college preparation in high school (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). These factors indicate that Latinx students’ experiences are different from those of other non-Hispanic backgrounds.

Higher education institutions share the responsibility to provide students the best environment that promotes academic and social success. Hernandez (2002) found that first-generation Latins college students did not adjust well either academically or socially to college life. Rendón's (1994, 2002) research highlighted the importance of students obtaining validation from in-classroom experiences, noting that not all students felt comfortable asking professors questions because previous professors treated them as inadequate students (Rendón, 2002). Faculty and student relationships are some of the most salient relationships to Latinx student success (Barnett, 2011; Castellanos & Gloria 2007; Rendón, 1994, 2002). Previous research suggested that students persisted through education at higher rates when faculty invested in them by offering mentoring, academic assistance, and interaction within the classroom (Bordes-Edgar et al., 2011; Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Rendón, 1994, 2002). The Rivas-Drake (2008) study and the Valenzuela (1999) study concluded that positive teacher perceptions and expectations for Latino students can have a significant impact on their performance, counteracting the initial lack of preparation.

A White paper prepared by Amaury Nora and Gloria Crisp (2012) on participation in remedial college courses among Latinx students stated that this group and African-Americans continue being overrepresented in remedial coursework (Bettinger & Long, 2005; Grimes & David, 1999). Remedial courses are designed to compensate the lack of academic preparation—in terms of knowledge and skills—that students need to fulfill the college demands. However, there is not much research that analyze their effectiveness for Latinx students. Many disagree with providing remedial courses at for-year institutions, arguing that non-prepared students should look for other educational paths to get ready for higher demands, such attending community colleges or pursuing a vocational track (Bettinger & Long, 2005; Merisotis &

Phipps, 2000). Other scholars rather focus their interest on the benefits of participating in remedial courses. With data from the national sample collected by the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study during the 2003-2004 academic year, Nora and Crisp (2012) analysis found that “four-year Hispanic students who remediate during the first year may be more likely to persist or earn a degree compared to two and four-year Hispanic students who do not remediate “ (p. 16).

Summary

Research shows that who you are, what you do before college, and where and how you attend college can all make a difference in your changes for obtaining a postsecondary degree. This is especially relevant for Latinx college students. Race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background and parental education and involvement affect student’s educational aspirations and experiences. This section summarized the findings about academic, financial, and family college preparedness and access to higher education, as well as engagement on campus, highlighting the specific challenges and strengths that the Latinx undergraduate possesses.

Latinas in higher education

Although Latinx females (Latinas) are outperforming Latinx male (Latinos) in terms of grades and graduation rates (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009), they still have a low rate of high school graduation, some of the lowest college completion rates of all women, and they earn the least comparing in the labor market comparing to men and women of all races (Carnevale & Fasules, 2017; Gándara, 2015). Research on the Latinx undergraduates rarely focus on how they differ by country of origin, class, level of bilingualism/monolingualism, or gender. We still know little about how the educational needs, achievements, or problems for Latinas may differ from those of Latinos (Ginorio & Huston, 2001). Latinas in college are frequently the first in their families to pursue a college education (Arredondo, Gallardo-Cooper, Delgado-Romero, & Zapata, 2014). Since Latinas are much more inclined to enroll in a four-year postsecondary institution than any other Latinx subgroup (Arbona & Nora, 2007), it is crucial for these type of institutions to identify as early as possible these students' subgroup, the barriers Latinas face, and how to serve them well. Due to the triple minoritized status that Latinas represent (gender, racial, and socioeconomic background), the conclusions drawn from their male counterparts are not always applicable to them. Fortunately, there are a growing number of studies that focus on Latinas in higher education and investigate the individual and institutional barriers they face. This section does not repeat the research conducted on Latinx undergraduates, as a group, but it specifies the studies conducted of Latinas exclusively.

Challenges and responses

The barriers to Latina participation in higher education can be grouped around factors associated to the socioeconomic status and to cultural and gender-role stereotyping, both before and during their experience in higher education.

Access and college choice

On the educational challenges Latinas students face, some research focus on access and college choice. As well as for their male peers, they experience limitations due to a low socioeconomic status in comparison with national averages and their white peers. Poverty levels and limited workplace opportunities have prevented Latinas from accessing higher education (Zunker, 2002). Financial aid applications can be difficult to read and understand for non-native English speakers; moreover, some financial aid are applicable only to certain schools or specific fields of study, which limit the options for already economically constrained families (Mortenson, 2000). Other studies suggest that high schoolers are aware of the limitations their families face and may curtail their educational goals to remain in line with the perceptions of their parent's ability to support them in their choices (Ginorio & Grignon, 2000; Ginorio & Houston, 2000). As Ginorio and Huston (2001) noted, "one of the most pervasive difficulties with interpreting data about ethnic/racial minorities in the United States is untangling the effects of poverty from the effects of culture" (p. 28). The "cultural deficit" model that focuses on cultural disadvantages to participate in higher education (Escobedo, 1980) portrayed Latinas as submissive, docile, and oversexualized (Andrade, 1982). Latinas seems to be slightly more sensitive than Latinos to financial issues in the selection of a college (McDonough, Nuñez, Ceja & Solórzano, 2004). Much of the college choice literature cites parents as the most important reason for Latinas literature wanting to purse a higher education (Ceja, 2004, 2006; Talavera-Bustillos, 1998), following by other members of the family, dedicated teachers, and counselors (Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003). The decision to attend college and the career decision-making is influenced by culture, values, and expected life roles (Brown, 2002).

Familism

Traditionally, Latinas are expected to be caregivers in the family and put family need ahead of personal interests, educational or other type (Sy & Romero, 2008). This important element is explored from a feminist point of view in the theoretical framework. Tseng (2004) found that home responsibilities often included taking care of dependent family members, providing emotional and/or financial support, and spending considerable time with family members. This dissonance between family values and the requirements of the academic system may explain the elevated high school dropout rates (Arredondo et al, 2014), the low percentage of attainment (Dotson-Blake, Foster, & Gressard, 2009), and the problems accommodating family and work obligations while attending college (Sy, 2006). Family care-giving obligations fall more on Latinas than on their male counterparts (Chacón, Cohen, Camarena, González, & Strover, 1982). Family support has shown to be an essential component to academic success for Latinas (Gándara 1995; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Families believe in education despite the differences in educational backgrounds, where daughters' education is a means to elevate family, siblings, and other family members (Ginorio & Huston, 2001); however, families hold very high expectations for Latinas to fulfill family responsibilities at whatever age (Garcia & Associates, 1998) and, in extreme circumstances, when it comes to choosing between going to school and helping the family, the family will win, as a high school principal in Denver, CO, mentioned in an interview (Vail, 1998). How Latinx college students manage family and college demands seems to vary by gender. Salerno (2018) concluded in her study with 30 Latinx college students that "the ways in which Latinx college students experience familism reproduces gender inequality in higher education". For many, attachment to friends and family makes leaving home a difficult decision. Stacy Salerno conducted 30 in-depth interviews among Latinx in a Floridian university and found that Latinas reported homesickness as a result of wanting to care for family members, whereas Latinos expressed a sense of duty to provide financially to their parents instead of physical or emotional care (Salerno, 2018). Some young women's families support their college aspiration only if they attend school near home (Guerra, 1996; Wycoff, 1996). These factors would explain, for example, that Latinas are less likely to attend school full-time than Latinos (U.S Department of Education, 1996a). Despite this tension, Espinoza (2010) interviewed a cohort of Latina doctoral students to find out what strategies used to successfully maintain family relationships while handling the workload of graduate school. She found that some of them were "integrators" and others were "separators". Integrators explained and shared the nature of their school demands with their families to negotiate compromises, whereas separators organized their daily lives to keep family and schools separate in order to minimize tension and conflict.

Academic preparation

Just like their male peers, Latinas suffer from an insufficient academic preparation for college courses. As mentioned before, the quality of the curriculum and the teachers in segregated schools during the K-12 grades limit the options. For those Latinas who follow a college track, data show that they take fewer AP exams and SAT exams than White and Asian girls (Ginorio & Huston, 2001). Disaggregated data form 2017 show that Latinas comprise a higher percentage of associate's degree recipients and are well-represented at two-year and community colleges (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Latinas are less likely to attend school full-time than Latinos (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Latinas outnumber Latinos in completion of the associate's, bachelor's, master's degrees, and doctorate's degrees (27.1 percent vs. 23.7), but still are less likely to complete a bachelor's degree than their white peers (14.2 percent vs. 62.6 percent), even at Hispanic-serving institutions. Just as Latinx tend to be clustered in particular schools, the majority pursue only a few majors. The most common bachelor's degree majors for Latinas are in education, business management, social sciences and history, psychology, English, foreign languages, and the health professions. Only 5.4 percent of female doctoral recipients were earned by Latinas, and 25 percent of them were in education and psychology.

These trends reflect structural problems in college access and persistence for Latina students, especially in rural settings. However, there are initiatives that have proved to be effective to foster college attendance and graduation among Latinas from these areas. A recent study on Latinas and STEM careers, for example, indicated the crucial role that secondary school and community college collaborations have in rural communities to increase the Latina presence in STEM college degrees (Starobin & Bivens, 2014). One of this initiatives is the Project Lead the Way, a national education organization that provides middle-and-high schoolers with programs and experiences that spark the interest in STEM careers. Moreover, research show that approximately 51 percent of Latinx reported attending a community college prior to earning their bachelor's or master's degree in science and engineering (Tsapogas, 2004). However, Latinas attending colleges and universities are not likely to encounter Latinx on the faculty. Hispanics overall comprised 4.7 percent of the full-time faculty members.

Marginality

Latinx Americans' experiences of discrimination by sociodemographic differences have been noted for decades (Comas-Diaz, 1994). In an analysis of data from the 2010 pilot and the 2011 national administrations of the Higher Education Research Institute's (HERI) Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) survey, Alvarado and Hurtado (2012) found that intersectionality plays an important role to define the Latinx identity. Patterns of less privileged identities were more salient that privileged ones, meaning that social class salience decreased as income increased and that citizenship was more salient for nonpermanent residents, for example. Regarding gender, the study found that females think about gender much more than males regardless race, citizenship status, country of origin, and socioeconomic status; and that Central American females think about race the most. This study shows that identity is complex and hard to capture, particularly for Latinx students. Knowing the salient characteristics of the body student is the base to provide them with better services.

Latinas suffer even more their marginality in higher education than their male peers (Cuádraz, 1996; Rendon, 1992). Melendez and Petrovich (1988) conducted a study of attitudes toward authority figures, expressing disagreement, dealing with conflict, expectations of friendships, motivation, cooperation vs. competition, independence, an verbal and nonverbal patters among Latinas students; their findings showed that their behaviors and communications styles were not well received in the academic context. This reaction created the sense that Latinas cultural background is not accepted in a university setting. Although Latinas are a diverse group, they share commonalities based on language, socioeconomic status, educational level of their parents, biculturalism, ethnic self-identification, and the experience of oppression (Melendez & Petrovich, 1988), characteristics devalued, for the most part, by the Anglo society. Consequently, they feel separate from the mainstream university environment. Alarcon, Cruz, Guardia Jackson, Prieto, and Rodriguez-Arroyo (2011) recalled their own experiences on schooling and college where they felt treated as “alien[s] in]their] own country”. Barajas and Pierce’s (2001) study found that Latinas navigated successfully through negative stereotypes by maintaining positive definitions of themselves and by emphasizing their group membership as Latina. Young Latino men, on the other hand, also saw themselves as part of a larger cultural group but tended to have less positive racial and ethnic identities than women did. The Latina Feminist Group (2001) published a selection of essays, prose, and poetry where the authors reflected on and expressed their emotions and experiences in higher education. In this line of trespassing the traditional methods to conduct research, Aida Hurtado (2003) collected 101 testimonials of Chicanas with some education beyond high school to reflect on their identity and sexuality. Those examples of nontraditional presentation of research, in the shape of biographies, narratives, testimonials, and conversations, are further explored in the theoretical framework section.

Cammarota (2004) conducted an ethnographic study to look at the different ways that Latinx resisted racism and discrimination in their educational setting. His findings showed substantial differences among genders: Latinas resist through educational achievement and conformity to school policies and regulations to graduate, and reported a strong relationship with their mothers. On the other hand, Latino males reported weaker ties with their mothers and fathers and frequently experienced police harassment and racial profiling. Also, Latino males often skipped classes to avoid teacher harassment and conflicts over language and culture. Most higher education institutions offer counseling services for students under stress. A research showed that Latina students underuse these counseling services due to the perception that counselors did not understand their cultural needs and concerns (Miville & Constantine, 2006). On the other hand, positive experiences with peer support, faculty, and university staff have all been identified as critical predictors of Latina student achievement and effective coping (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012).

These financial, academic, social, and identity factors continue being sources of special stress to Latina students, as research from the 1980s started to show (Chacon, Cohen, & Strover, 1986; Muñoz, 1986). This creates feelings of isolation and misunderstanding by families regarding Latinas experiences in higher education (Gloria & Segura-Herrera, 2004; Perez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009; Sue & Sue, 1999). Another set of research deals with high-achieving Latinas and the factors that contribute to their success. If parent support has been proven to be a strong contributor, this is especially true for Latina mothers. Vasquez (1982) found that the mother’s positive influence might mediate the negative effects of low socioeconomic status on Latina college achievement. Many Latinas work outside the home, foster independence in their daughters, and share decision-making power in the family. When parenting styles are not authoritarian and there is an emphasis on education, Latina daughters benefit in their educational pursuits (Gándara, 1982, 1994). The findings also pointed that, similarly to non-Latina women, being unmarried and without children are positively related to academic success. This would imply that Latina students and families who do not stress the traditional gendered roles or at least delay marriage and childbearing plans are more likely to persist educationally.

Acculturation

As implied earlier in the Melendez and Petrovich (1988) study, Latinas who adopt Anglo values have less probability to feel isolated and feel discrimination. This adoption does not require the renounce to their Latina identity. Bicultural and multicultural identity is an advantage for Latina undergraduates in academic terms (Buriel & Saenz, 1980; Gomez & Fassinger, 1994; Torres, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999). In the line to find balance between the Anglo and the Latina identity, Achor and Morales (1999) conducted a study among 100 Chicana graduate students to find that they purposively rejected any stereotyped message by accommodating their behavior to the academic expectations of a graduate student. In a similar study, Cuádraz (1996) found that Chicana graduate students supported each other in a collective effort. The same programs and initiatives that serve the Latinx undergraduate population in general to adjust to college environment have proved to be effective for Latinas, such as special orientation and registration, summer bridge programs, tutoring, and mentoring (Richard & Skinner, 1992). A quantitative study on ethnic identity and the perceived barriers in career decision self-efficacy among Latinx college students showed that being bicultural or having a positive identification with a Latino/a group contributes to a successful college-to-work transition (Mejia-Smith & Gushue, 2014), which corroborates a previous qualitative study on Latina career development (Gomez, Fassinger, Prosses, Cooke, Mejia, & Luna, 2000). The later found that among adult Latinas, those who identified as bicultural felt more efficacious in navigating both the Anglo and Latino cultures, and also, that their commitment to family was a crucial factor in their career path.

Being bicultural do not protect Latinas from questioning their place on campus nor from suffering gender, racial and ethnic microagressions (Barajas & Pierce, 2001). In a qualitative study, Rivera, Forquer, and Rangel (2010) grouped in seven categories the many ways that Latinx experience microagressions in their daily lives, namely, attribution of inferior intelligence, assumptions of illegal status, diminishment of communication style/cultural values, undervaluing speech and accent, assumptions of foreign-born and non-Americans, attribution of criminality, and invalidation of the Latinx American experience. These microagressions compromise the well-being. Latinx undergraduates, therefore, might feel particularly vulnerable on an already demanding and foreign environment while on college. Kevin, Mazzula, Rivera, and Fujii-Doe (2014) found that Latina women were significantly more likely to experience microaggressions in the workplace or educational settings compared with their male counterparts. They found differences among races and country of origin as well. In a study examining gender and skin color, Arce, Murguia, and Frisbie (1987) found that dark skin Latinas perceived more discrimination than light skin Latinas. Barajas and Pierce’s (2001) qualitative study found that Latinas navigate successfully through negative stereotypes by maintaining positive definitions of themselves and by emphasizing their group membership as Latinas, whereas Latino men also see themselves as part of a large cultural group but tend to have less positive racial and ethnic identities than women do. Previous research on minoritized undergraduate and graduate students revealed that minoritized women tend to have significantly lower academic self-concepts that do minoritized men in white campuses (Hurtado, 1994a).

Activism

Latinas have a long trajectory on activism on-campus, as the Chicana feminists of the 1960s and 1970s exemplified (Tijerina Revilla, 2004). Research shows that for members of marginalized groups, structural oppression leads to civic and politic action (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011). Recently, Hope, Keels, and Durkee (2016) conducted a longitudinal study about political activism among more than 500 Black and Latinx first-year students in five predominantly white institutions in the Midwest. Latinas reported greater participation in the Black Lives Matter and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals movements than Latino males. Latinas in general have a long history of political activism, of organizing communities and participating in labor and social right movements throughout U. S. history (Garcia, 2005; Prindeville, 2003; Segura, 2003). The Latina faculty members participating on Segura's (2003) study reported to have entered academia to challenge normativity and to serve as role models to historically underrepresented groups.

Appalachian college students

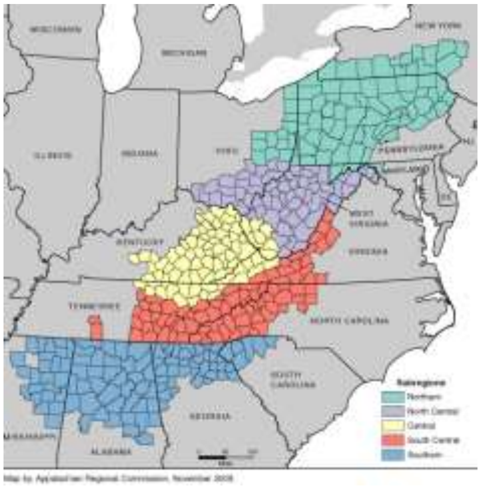
The Appalachia region

The name "Apalachen" appears in European maps as early as 1562 to refer to the native people who lived in what is now northwest Florida. After the American Revolution, "Appalachian" became the official name to designate the Eastern mountain ranges of the new independent country (Williams, 2002). The different and successive explorers–Spaniards, French, English, and later, Americans—tackled the mountains as obstacles to expansion and progress: "a land so poor in maize and so rough and with such lofty mountains that it was impossible for the camp to march through it" (de Soto, as cited in Williams, 2002, p. 20). The particular area's geographical, historical, social, and political characteristics influence the social relations that develop within that area (Colclough & Tolbert, 1993; Lobao, 1993). Therefore, to understand born and raised Appalachian college students, it is needed an examination of the main characteristics of the Appalachian region.

“Appalachia” is the name applied to parts of the region that were long characterized by marginal economy, isolation of its people from the U. S. mainstream, and distinctive identity (Brooks, 1986; Caudill, 1971; Porter, 1970; Shapiro, 1986). The Appalachian region include more than 420 counties in thirteen states from southern New York to northeastern Mississippi, following the spine of the Appalachian Mountains. The region is divided in five parts, Northern, North Central, Central, South Central, and Southern Appalachia, which present great diversity between and among them (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2020).

Figure 1

Map of the Appalachian region and counties.


WISCONSIN
MICHIGAN
NEW YORK
ILLINOIS
INDIANA
OHIO
PENNSYLVANIA
MARYLAND
WEST VIRGINIA
KENTUCKY
VIRGINIA
TENNESSEE
NORTH CAROLINA
SOUTH CAROLINA
GEORGIA
MISSISSIPPI
ALABAMA
Subregions
Northern
North Central
Central
South Central
Southern

Note. “The Appalachian region: A data overview from the 2013-2017 American Community Survey” by K. Pollard and L. Jacobsen, 2019. https://www.arc.gov/research/researchreportdetails.asp?REPORT_ID=159. Copyright 2020 by The Appalachian Regional Commission.

The Appalachian Regional Commission reported that Appalachia’s population of 25,6 million represented 7.86 percent of the nation’s total population in 2017. Most of Appalachia has lost population since 2010. The five states whose Appalachian sections have grown were all in the South—Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. The state where this study takes place is located in North Central Appalachia, and it is one of the most homogeneous states in the nation, with among the lowest ratios of foreign-born and minoritized populations. North Central Appalachia had fewer residents now than six years ago and they are getting older. The share of residents ages 65 and over exceeded the U. S. average (19.4 percent vs. 15.6 percent). Appalachia is 81.4 percent white, as compared to 60.7 percent white for the country as a whole (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2020).

The same source reported that although the poverty rate declined in all the subregions since 2009-2013, Appalachia's rate remains higher that the U.S. average (15.8 percent vs. 14.1 percent). Appalachian's median household income ranges from $53,358 in Southern Appalachia to $36,993 in Central Appalachia. The U.S. average is $60,293. Employment figures show that 73.0 percent of Appalachia's working-age adults (ages 25-64) participate in the civilian labor force; of them, 95,2 percent is employed, similar to the U.S. rate (77.6 percent and 95.2 percent, respectively). The unemployment rate for these adults is higher in Central Appalachia (6.9 percent) (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2020). The region's economy was once highly dependent on mining and forestry, but now has become more diversified to include manufacturing and professional services.

Lower household incomes and higher poverty rates reflect worse living conditions in the region than in the nation as a whole. In a specific 2017's report on health in collaboration with other institutions, the Appalachian Regional Commission concluded that Appalachia suffered poor heath compared with the rest of the nation. Recent studies have identified higher rates of cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and premature mortality. Mortality due to drug overdoses and suicide is markedly higher in the region than in the nation as a whole. Obesity, smoking, and physical inactivity are all higher. The region also has lower supplies of healthcare professionals (Marshall et al, 2017). All of these facts and figures contribute to portrait Appalachia as a region of deficiencies.

Appalachian identity

As Constance Elam reminds, one cannot examine Appalachia culture without referring to four key works: *Appalachia on our mind* (Shapiro, 1978); *Yesterday's people* (Weller, 1965); *Miners, millhands, and mountaineers* (Eller, 1982); and *Night comes to the Cumberland* (Caudill, 1963). The authors and studies that followed these publications used their insights to outline two models to study the region: a cultural difference model and a colonialism/dependency model (Elam, 2002). Regardless the model, the authors coincide in describing the Appalachian culture as characterized by “geographic and social isolation; the relationship of the people to the land; the value of kinship ties; the relevance of schooling; a stagnant economy; distrust of outsiders and government; powerlessness and reluctance to change; fatalism; and the results of political and economic exploitation” (Elam, 2002, p. 10). Appalachia is portraited as a region of deficiencies rooted on historical and cultural causes, “a poor, isolated, and shoeless mountain people with too many children, little or no formal education, and barely making a hardscrabble living in an inhospitable environment” (Elam, 2002, p. 11).

Similar to the Latino case, this perception is based on negative stereotypes product of a lack of knowledge and cultural sensitivity towards the conditions and context that created them. The Appalachian identity is complex and intimately linked to the geographical and symbolic boundaries of the Appalachian Mountains. Isolated geographically and historically neglected by state and federal governments, the region's inhabitants were forced to be self-sufficient. The harsh conditions of the mountains made the inhabitants to carefully select in whom to place confidence, which in turn created a kinship system that reproduced beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. As Elam (2002) deducts, this geographic enclosure and dependence on family and selected members of the community is interwoven with poverty, creating a circle difficult to break and the impossible task to differentiate causes from consequences. That would also explain the reluctancy to accept external influence, norms, and values, and the negative attitude towards schooling and public education, since the economy of subsistence does not justify an investment in education. Although this observation was made in relation to Appalachian Kentucky, it could be extended to the rest of the Appalachian counties. Similar to the *familismo* in Latinx communities, Appalachian identity deposits a strong value on family ties. The family include not only the nuclear family, but also other close blood relatives, who tend to be geographically proximate. The members of the family gather not only for social events, but they share tasks and responsibilities too (Keefe, 1988). Mainstream Americans show a more flexible designation of those members who are considered close and those who are not relatives, but Appalachians these tend to make a sharp distinction between different categories of close-blood family, blood relatives, and in-laws. These differences have important implications, such as which family members should be included in the decision-making unit (Keefe, 1988).

The peculiarities of the geography and topography of the mountains contribute to create an attachment to the land and a sense of place. Esther Gottlieb (2001) interviewed Appalachian residents and found attitudes and feelings of pride of living in the mountains. Cooper, Knotts, and Elders (2010) found that the higher they live, the stronger is the association with an Appalachian identity, whereas Cooper, Knotts, and Livingston (2010) found that those strongly identifying as Appalachians are more likely to want to preserve the land. The physical connection with the mountains and the land seems to have a parallel emotional connection with Appalachian identity. Obermiller (2012) found another similar connection with the local community. Ties are stronger when close family members live nearby and interact frequently, as it often happens with Appalachian families, which some of them can trace their roots in the region for generations. The closer the ties, the higher the sense of belonging (Gottlieb, 2001).

Regarding race and ethnicity and as already pointed, the vast majority of the Appalachian population is white. Studies found a strong correlation between race and Appalachian identity. Whites show a stronger Appalachian identity, whereas Appalachian African Americans value more their racial identity than their regional identity (Cooper & Knotts, 2013; Cooper, Knotts, & Livingston, 2010; Obermiller, 2012). There are no studies on the Latinx Appalachian population. In studies conducted in other regions, Latinx-Americans identified themselves in terms of their countries of origin (Chicanos or Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans, Dominican-Americans, etc.) more than in terms of place or state of residency in the U. S., and much more than in terms of race (Lopez, 2013). The Melungeon community deserves a particular mention. The Melungeons are mixed-raced mountaineers established in eastern Tennessee and southwest Virginia since the second half of the 19th century (Winkler, 2004). Melungeons have Indian American, White, and African ancestry, therefore, their racial and social identity has been subject of change attending to American social and political mainstream interests. As in the Latinx case, the inclusion on one or in other race had market economic and legal rights implications. Today, Melungeons physically have Mediterranean features, such as dark hair and clear eyes. Related, the term "Affrilachia" was coined by poet Frank X Walker in the 1990s to spotlight the artistic contributions of long dwelled African-American in the Appalachia. Studies on Melungeons and Affrilachia expand the conversations about what it means to be an Appalachian and help to escape form clichés.

Another interesting aspect of the Appalachian identity that has a parallel with the Latinx community is the language. “Appalachian English” is a local English variety of southern Appalachia with pejorative associations. It is associated with laziness and lack of education. It is commonly used in the mass media to exemplify uneducated or unsophisticated people (Dannerberg, 2010). Recent studies show that the use of the dialect has declined (Dannerberg, 2010; Gottlieb, 2001; Hazen, Hamilton, & Vacovsky, 2011). These authors attributed the decline to stereotypes and stigmatization, and the use of “standardized English” in schools and colleges and universities.

Finally, Appalachian religion is one of the most traditional social institutions in the region (Humphrey, 1988). The isolation of the mountains caused a later establishment of organized churches and clergy that in other parts of the country. However, the Bible was studied, and homeland Christian religion was taught and preserved at home. Humphrey characterized Appalachian religion as influenced by the Great Revival of the end of the 18th century, the emphasis on biblical ordinances, and the Calvinist theology. Religion is an individual practice away from formalities. The mountaineer resorts to the family and religion for comfort and security. For Latinx, the influence of the colonial Catholic practices and moral values has a strong footprint. The Pew Research Center reported in a special document that in 2007, among all Hispanics, 68 percent stated that their religion is very important. These figures are especially high among those of Mexican origin and those whose dominant language is Spanish. However, since the 1990s, the number of Latinx who identify as Catholics—the main Christian denomination among Latinx—has decreased, the percentage of Protestants remains roughly the same, and the Latinx who claim “no religion” has increased (Navarro-Rivera, Kosmin, & Keysar, 2008; Perl, Greely, & Gray, 2006).

These identity characteristics found on long-time Appalachian residents affect the approach, the role, and the expectations towards education that Appalachians have.

Appalachian educational attainment

The educational attainment in the Appalachian region is generally lower than the national average (Wright, Cunnigham, & Stangle, 2016). The disparities among the different Appalachian subregions are pronounced in terms of educational attainment. In Appalachian counties, children have been continually scoring below average in standardized test when compared to non-Appalachian counties (DeYoung, Vaught & Porter, 1981; Tickamyer & Tickamyer, 1987; Watson, 1993). The Appalachian Regional Commission reported that 88.7 percent of Appalachian adults ages 25-64 have a high school diploma, similar to the U.S. average of 88.8 percent for the period of 2014-2108. However, whereas the Appalachian sections of Pennsylvania and New York have a share of 87 percent, the percentage drops to less than 75 percent in most of the Appalachian counties of Kentucky. Most of North Central Appalachia shows a share of 80 percent and above (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2020). Achievement gaps among White, Black, and Latinx K-12 students are similar to other regions; however, Hispanic students in Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia score higher than their peers nationally (Wright, Cunnigham, & Stangle, 2016).

The share of these adults with a bachelor’s degree or more was 25.7 percent in the Appalachian region versus 32.9 percent in the U.S. The majority of the Appalachian degree holders are concentrated in metropolitan areas and towns that host a college or university. Central Appalachia, mostly rural, has only 14.8 percent; North Central Appalachia has 21.8

percent. In the Appalachian region, women are more likely than men to have Associates' degrees and four-year college degrees, but as indicated before, still at a lower rate than in the rest of the country. Data from 2016 in reference to the 2012 cohort, show that the national average completion rate for Latinx students at four-year public institutions was 57 percent, a completion gap difference with Whites of 15 percentage points. In the Appalachian region, Kentucky, South Carolina, and West Virginia showed a gap below 5 percentage points (Shapiro, Dundar, Huie, Wakhungu, Bhimdiwala, & Wilson, 2019).

The Appalachian college student

The majority of Appalachian college students are rural youth. That means that they are more likely to live in counties with no college institutions, to have little access to college information, to have parents who did not attend college, and to have less confidence in their academic ability (Beasley, 2015). A large number of Appalachian attending college are first-generation students. That means than neither of their parents had the experience. These students show additional challenges and barriers in two main areas: Lack of family understanding and support in one hand, and cultural identity clash (Dees, 2008; Hand & Payne, 2008).

A 2003's analysis of attrition in a small college in Kentucky with more than 70 percent of students from the Appalachian region, found that their students from low-income families were at considerably greater risk of dropping out regardless the cost of attendance, the level of scholarships received, academic achievement in high school, and scores on college entrance tests (Stinebrickner & Stinebrickner, 2003). This backs the key role that Bourdieu's social and cultural capital plays for college student engagement and success. The authors of the study concluded that a family environment of mistrust of institutionalized schooling and a 'fatalist' vision of limited job opportunities in the area contributed to the high attrition rate (Duncan, 1999). Since college graduates are more likely to move to other counties and states in search of better work opportunities, students might feel the pressure to relinquish college aspirations to stay closer to home (Haaga, 2004). However, this does not imply necessary that families oppose to higher education. In an ethnography case study that examined college pathways of rural, first-generation Appalachian students, Sarah Beasley (2017) found that attachment to family significantly influenced college-going decisions and behaviors, following by lack of local economic opportunities for graduate degrees, cultural legacies, and schools and peers influence. This finding about educational decisions presents similarities to those for Latinx students.

Academic self-confidence and self-efficacy are key elements that contribute to college retention and success (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Lotwoski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004; Walker, Greene, & Mansell, 2006). Beasley (2017) also found that negative stereotypes towards the Appalachian region and its low educational attainment impact on whether or not attending college. In other words, regional higher schoolers whose academic potential was questioned or received negative input about the benefits of getting a college degree are less likely to pursue tertiary education, especially among first-generation college students.

London (1989) and Bryan and Simmons's (2009) qualitative research on first-generation Appalachian college students focused on the family as a factor that contributes to educational success for first-generation Appalachian undergraduates. As their Latinx peers, Appalachian students debate between the family values and expectations and those in the multicultural college campus (Bui, 2002; London, 1992). Students found difficult to achieve the detachment that Tinto (1993) claimed necessary to adapt to the new culture of university life, and similar to the Latinx experience, aimed instead for a higher family involvement and understanding. Even with a small sample of 10 participants, Bryan and Simmons (2009) found recurrent themes among first-generation Appalachian students. All of them reported close ties with their families and communities; struggles to understand the complexities of college life; and some degree of frustration, anxiety, or sadness with their family's inability to fully relate with their experiences.

Although there is a connection between poverty, academic preparation, and educational attainment, assumptions that controlling the first two variables will positively impact educational outcomes and in turn, solve poverty, are not accurate, as Constance Elam (2002) explains. Cultural influence, especially for Appalachian and Latinx students, plays a key role to understand the context and find the appropriate intervention programs and remedies.

Latinas in Appalachian tertiary institutions

The Appalachia region reported in 2017 to have 5.1 percent of its population to be of Hispanic origin, whereas the national average is 18.1 percent. North Central Appalachia reported to have only 1.6 percent of its population to be of Hispanic origin and 3.5 percent of African Americans. The greatest increase in racial diversity is occurring in Southern Appalachia and in counties that are part of large metropolitan areas, such as the counties surrounding Atlanta. Even though the Appalachian region continue being a predominantly non-Hispanic white region, Hispanic groups experience the largest percentage growth in the last ten years, +0.9 percent, comparing to Black alone, +0.5 percent. Opportunities in industries such as food processing and construction and in creating small business have been cited as possible factors fueling this growth (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2019). Another recent report made with data of 2015 noted that some of the fastest-growing number of school-aged English learning students occurring in states and school districts with little prior experience serving English learners: Mississippi, South Carolina, Kentucky, Kansas, Maryland, Louisiana, Arkansas, Iowa, Ohio, and Delaware (Richards & Lam, 2020). All of these states, but Kansas, are eastern of the Mississippi river and all of them, but Kansas and Delaware, are part of or surround the Appalachian region. The immigration patterns of the Hispanic population show that they are spreading outside the Southwest and the big metropolitan areas of the Northeast.

As West Virginian native Suronda Gonzalez (1999) pointed out, scholars have left the topic of ethnic Appalachians virtually unexplored. Works that examine immigration to West Virginia, for example, focus on German, Swiss, and Irish immigrants, but there is limited information on immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. As pointed before, the Appalachia region reported in 2017 to have 5.1 percent of its population to be of Hispanic origin (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2019). Even though small, its presence is getting more and more visible, especially in the southern Appalachian states. As Frey (1998) noted, Hispanics are migrating to parts of the country where more residents have never heard Spanish being spoken. As an example, food processing companies in Georgia and the Carolinas have relocated in small, rural communities recruiting immigrant workers of Hispanic origin as low-skilled, low-wage workers to the sites in the Appalachian region. The early profile of the Hispanic worker as a young, single man looking for seasonal or temporary jobs is still the predominant in these workplaces, but it is not unusual to see couples with children and with an idea to permanently settle. Some of them are newcomers and some of them have been several years in the country. As a result of rapid population changes, communities face challenges to adapt to the demand of schools, housing, and social services (Gozdziak & Bump, 2004).

We know a lot about education of U. S. Latinx in the Southwest (e.g. Foley, 1990; Romo & Falbo, 1996; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, (1995); Valdés, 1996; Vasquez, Pease-Alvarez, & Shannon, 1994), and Chicago (e.g. Guerra, 1998). But there is not much research on areas with much less density of Hispanic population. Wortham, Murillo, and Hamann (2001) edited a volume focused on the educational challenges that institutions and Latinx students face in light of this “New Latino Diaspora” (p. 6). The chapters in their book retook the disconnection between the new families’ and the educational system’ expectations in the K-12 context, the lack of trained teachers in bilingualism and multicultural pedagogies, the implementation of ESL classes that isolate even more the students, and the pressure for a type of acculturation that subtracts the native culture. These issues parallel the ones already observed and criticized for more than 30 years (e.g., Carter, 1970; Erickson, 1987; Vasquez et al., 1994). They also analyzed an initiative by the Georgia Department of Education to establish partnerships with universities in Mexico to assist school districts in their efforts to accommodate the Spanish-speaker students, and some curricular and community initiatives in some school districts of other states to facilitate the integration of the newcomers. Wortham (2001) study in northern New England considered the different ways male and female Latino adolescents construct personal identities and its effect on school success. She concluded that U.S school policy and practice seem to provide a liberating opportunity for many female Latinas but is seems to limit the horizons of the males.

The growing amount of research has focused on Latinx college students have been conducted mainly in states with a high presence of a Hispanic population. As cited before, over 50 percent of all Latina college students are concentrated in community colleges and Hispanic Serving Institutions that are also concentrated in states with a higher presence of a Hispanic population (Fry, 2005). The significative low representation of minorities in higher education institutions in certain Appalachian regions would explain the lack of attention to issues of race and ethnicity (Shaw, DeYoung, & Rademacher, 2004). Most of the research conducted among Latino in the Appalachian region was related to the K-12 setting. Research among Latinx in higher education in the region is included in studies about multicultural education in general. The

African-American undergraduate is the preferred experience studied, such as in the Littleton (2003) and Troutman (2017) studies. Regarding the women's experience in higher education, most studies deal with the barriers Appalachian women in general found to access higher education (Egan, 1993; Haleman, 2004; Kelleher-Sohn, 2003; Smith & Ree, 2010). Although these studies are necessary, it is significant the absence of research focused on the Latina undergraduate' experience in the Appalachian region.

In his dissertation work, Robert Littleton (2001) conducted a qualitative study on academic persistence among 24 African American college students in PWI in Southeastern Appalachia. He discovered individual traits and behaviors that contributed to their success, such as motivation, resilience, adaptability, opened, and faith, as well as important institutional behaviors, such as caring faculty and administrators. He also pointed at that African American females and African American non-athletes represent a minority within a minority more vulnerable. Stephanie Troutman (2015) recently explored the experiences of urban African-American female students in a small private, liberal arts college in rural Kentucky. She took the idea of *Affrilachia*—the study of African Americans born and raised in rural Appalachia (Turner, 1985) to develop *Fabulachia*—the study of African Americans born and raised in urban context who moved to rural Appalachia. The six participants in her study shared narratives of overt racism and microaggressions on and off campus. Diana Haleman (2004) conducted an ethnographic study on ten women who were single mothers, social service recipients, and students at a major research institution in Appalachia. Five of them were black and one described herself as of mixed race (White and American Indian). The participants value post-secondary education as an upward mobility tool, as an opportunity for personal growth, and as an important way of modeling educational success for their children. However, they expressed their concerns about welfare reform, and the difficult task of simultaneously balancing their parent, student, and provider roles. Moreover, they were afraid that they might not be able to escape welfare. This study with single mothers with higher education goals is relevant for the North Central Appalachian subregion, where female-headed households with children make up more than half of families living in poverty (Latimer & Oberhauser, 2004).

Smith and Reed's (2010) study on women leaders in rural Appalachia provided a succinct overview of the cultural expectations and critical life events that would affect rural Appalachian women current and potential leadership styles. The participants in the study were 347 white women completing an MBA and professionals already graduated from the same Appalachian university in West Virginia. The study aimed to provide a model with variables on education, gender bias, family/work life issues, family violence, and culture-style fit that would affect the ability to exercise leadership. One of their observations they made was that the lack of quality education in Appalachian communities limits women's ability to achieve leadership influence, especially in trade and industries. Onorato and Musoba (2015) conducted a research on leadership among 11 Latina student leaders at a four-year Hispanic Serving Institution in the U.S. Southeast. The findings show that the leadership identity development of Hispanic women at an HIS is more similar to the experiences of white students at a PWI than to the experiences of underrepresented minorities at a PWI. Therefore, context matters. What was not different was the confrontation between the gender role expectations as part of the Hispanic cultural heritage and their ideas of what constitutes a woman leader in order to develop a leadership identity. The research also found that the leadership role contained an activism component.

Two studies that deserve special comments are the Boylan, Sutton, and Anderson (2003) essay on the benefits of remedial courses for minoritized students and the Asada, Swank, and

Goldey (2003) study about the acceptance of multicultural education in Appalachian college students. The Boylan, Sutton, and Anderson (2003) essay started acknowledging the overwhelming findings on the positive relationship between the interaction with members of different ethnic groups and the participation in multicultural events and classes, in one hand, and the complexity of students' thinking, on the other hand (Adams, 2002; Gurin, 1999; Terenzini, Cabrera, Cokbeck, Bjoklun, & Parente, 2001). In addition to the intellectual benefits, Chang (1999) found a positive relation with higher student retention, social self-confidence, and satisfaction with the college experience, as well. In a review of 150 published and unpublished studies, Smith, Gerbick, Figueroa, Watkins, Levitan, Moore, Merchant, Beliak, & Figueroa (1997) concluded that deliberate efforts to promote diversity in all aspects of campus life improve the environment for all students. Boylan, Sutton, and Anderson (2003) took these arguments to provide well-known ideas in the literature on how to retain minoritized students—such as institutional commitment and increase representation of minorities among faculty and staff, which in turn will benefit the intellectual and social development of the rest of the students. One of their additional suggestions they made is to "teach students to cope with racism" and "confront it in a positive manner" (p. 16). This statement is controversial because instead of fighting the source of the aggression, it promotes accommodation strategies. Another point the authors made is equally problematic. They support the investment in developmental (remedial) education, since "minoritized students who complete developmental education go on to take upper division courses, participate in campus life and student organizations, and interact regularly with majority students" (p. 13) and therefore, "developmental education can make a major contribution to the level of diversity on many college campuses" (p. 13). The essay seems to imply that remedial classes might be an effective tool to capture and retain minorities. As pointed in other sections of this literature review, remedial classes are effective gateways for underprepared academic students, but they should not be considered the destination of underrepresented students neither “a major potential contributor to that diversity” (p.13).

Asada, Swank, and Goldey (2003) study explored the multicultural predisposition of 437 students in a state Central Appalachian university in Eastern Kentucky. Former studies found that women show more positive attitudes toward race-targeted policies than men (see Hughes-Miller, Anderson, Harms Cannon, Perez, & Moore, 1998; Link & Oldendick, 1996; Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Serra Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1996), with mixed results about the influence of the age of the respondents (Link & Oldendick, 1996; Sears, van Laar, Carrillo, & Kosterman, 1997; Seltzer, Frasier, & Ricks, 1995), their economic status (Quillian, 1996; Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, & Krysan, 1997; Tuch & Hughes, 1996), and their rural vs. urban residency (Frendreis & Tatalovich, 1997; Tuch & Hughes, 1996). These earlier studies on student multicultural attitudes have only looked at national or urban samples, however, students attending colleges in the South or from rural areas might have different attitudes. An old survey of 1983, for example, found that Appalachians were less likely to believe that racism is a large problem in the United States (Smith & Bylund, 1983). In the Asada, Swank, and Goldey (2003) quantitative study, the majority of the participants were rural whites from the Appalachian region. The authors found that they supported institution’s multicultural initiatives and programs, such as hiring more minoritized faculty and staff and availability of multicultural classes–although optional rather than a requirement to graduate–, but one about one fourth of the participants said they felt personally compelled to learn more about cultural diversity. The study also found that the students exposed to multicultural classes and multicultural readings seem to show a higher interest in multicultural learning. Unfortunately, what the study did not explain was if this higher interest was prior or after the involvement in multicultural practices.

Even though these studies indicated the benefits of interacting with students of different ethnic backgrounds and being exposed to multicultural practices on campus, they are focused on the perceptions of and the benefits for the White majority of the student body. What is missing here is research where the main focus is understand and respect the experiences of minoritized students in predominantly white institutions with the goal of improving and enriching them. Hayden (2005) pointed out that "Appalachia is not different than the rest of the nation – prejudice and privilege have negative effects on minoritized groups wherever they are found" (p. 293). This study aims to fill a vacuum in the literature since it addresses the experience of Latina residents in North Central Appalachia who attend a PWI in the region.

Summary

This literature review sets the background to understand the current Latinas' position in the American educational system, and in particular, the "deficit approach" used to characterize the educational crisis of the Latinx. Contrary to the mainstream thinking that the failure of the Latinas in the educational system is due to cultural dislocations, this literature review shows that the financial difficulties Latinas' families live under, the substandard schools and teaching in minoritized schools, and the lack of institutional support in the K-16 pipeline, are the accused reasons (Domínguez, 1992). Scholars have documented the educational barriers and challenges that Latinos and Latinas face, some of them present for more than 100 years, and the tactics that these students and their families used to counteract their pernicious effects. These studies share the relevance of the family support—not exclusively financial, but emotional and cultural—and the institutional support for the students' educational accomplishments. Research also show the existence of gender differences in educational experiences. As Chicana scholars point out, moving away from the dichotomies white/black, man/woman, Anglo/Latino culture, to adopt intersectionality and a feminist lens, have contributed to uncover nuances and explain how Appalachian Latinas' experiences differ from those of their male peers and from those of other woman or Latinas in other regions of the country. The Appalachian identity is rooted in the adherence to the land, familism, hard social and economic conditions, an own 'language', profound spiritualism, and an attributed culture of deficits and unfits. These elements put forward many similarities with the conditions in which the *Mestiza consciousness* manifests itself: In the specific land that the Mexico-U.S. border occupies and from the marginal conditions that the borderlands nurture.

Theoretical framework

Overview

A theoretical framework provides the conceptual skeleton to approach a research. This study aims to understand the undergraduate experiences of Latinas in a PWI in the region. To accomplish this goal, the study uses Chicana[1] feminist Gloria Anzaldúa's concepts of borderlands and Mestiza consciousness. These lens are found valid to frame not only Chicana, but other Latina and Hispanic woman experiences as well in terms of identity and cultural struggle. The study transposes the borderlands theories created in the Mexico-U.S. border to North Central Appalachia to examine the ways in which the different organizational elements and routines of the PWI and of the Appalachian culture interact and impact Latinas' experiences. One of the key consequences mentioned by Anzaldúa is the creation of a new woman consciousness where 'otherness' finds a comfortable place. To understand both concepts, this section covers a brief story of the Chicana feminist movement—in which Anzaldúa engaged—, a review of relevant borderlands theories, and finally, an analysis of the Mestiza consciousness's tenets.

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[1] The term Chicanas refer to women of Mexican origin born and grew in the Southwest of the U.S. The use of other terms, such as Hispanic and Latina, encompasses any woman with a Latin American or Spain background who lives in the U.S. regardless the place of birth. In the literature review, the term Latinx is preferred, since it is not limited to the binary gender. However, when a study refers to a specific subgroup of Latinx, such as Chicanos, Cuban-Americans, etc. the term used by the original author is the one used in the literature review.

The Chicana feminist movement

In her historical analysis of the development of the different feminisms that arose in America during the 'second wave' of feminism, Benita Roth (2004) traces the Chicana feminist movement as a consequence of two concurrent factors: On one hand, the Chicano nationalist movement in a period of intense social protest in America; on the other hand, the formation of a Chicana identity separated from the mainstream Anglicized feminism of the time.

In opposition to the studies on cultural assimilation that foresaw that Mexican immigrants in the U.S. would finally and completely adopt the values, attitudes, and behaviors of the receptor country—even though as a marginal group (Hurtado & Gurín, 2004)—the Chicano movement emerged in the 1960s to fight against assimilation and erasure. Assimilation is "the process by which a minoritized group becomes like the majority group" (Hurtado & Gurín, 2004, p. 129). The assimilation to which the movement opposed was not related to the acquisition of English or the acceptance of the legal, political, and economic system of the U.S., but to the premise that, in order to achieve these goals, immigrants should abandon the values, attitudes, and behaviors of their first culture. The Anglo society required a complete acculturation in order to be considered assimilated and reap the same benefits that European immigrants achieved several decades ago. As Chicana scholar Aída Hurtado (1997) recalled, "In exchanging for assimilating, we were promised the 'American Dream'" (as cited in Hurtado & Gurín, 2004, p. 8). The Chicano movement defied this tenet arguing that Chicanos could be highly functional in the American society without giving up to their ethnic identity. Moreover, and as Aida Hurtado (1997) pointed, "we could not assimilate because of our historical heritage of conquest and because of our mestizaje" (as cited in Hurtado & Gurín, 2004, p. 12). The land and the mixed heritage of Spanish, Indian, and African blood are distinctive elements of Gloria Anzaldúa's thinking.

The Chicano women—the Chicanas—went a step further in this realization and requested similar acknowledgement and appreciation from their peers as intersectional women. They called for a critique of Chicano cultural nationalism, an examination of patriarchal relations, an end to sexist stereotypes, and the need for Chicanas to engage in consciousness-raising activities and collective political mobilization.

Chicana feminists criticized women's studies and the early waves of feminism because they were initially dominated by the experiences of white middle-class women, thus leaving Chicanas, other women of color, women from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, and lesbians, feeling excluded. White feminists addressed gender oppression in explaining the life circumstances of women and overlooked the effects of racial and class oppression experienced by women of color. In that regard, Chicana feminists agreed with their African-American and lesbian peers that the dominant narratives of the White middle-class women's liberation—what Spivak (1988) coined "hegemonic feminism"—did not apply to them (Sandoval, 1991). In this environment of internal division and of intersectional claims, the Chicana feminist movement appeared to differentiate women of Mexican descent in their struggle between race, gender, culture, language, spirituality, and sexuality.

Chicana feminism—or Xicanisma—is an ideology based on the rejection of the traditional role of a Mexican-American woman. Xicanisma is "a sociopolitical movement in the United States that analyzes the historical, cultural, spiritual, educational, and economic intersections of Mexican-American women that identity as Chicana" (Castillo, 1994, p. XX). Xicanisma includes women on both sides of the Mexico-U.S. border. Traditionally, Mexican women were under the authority of men. Their role was to maintain virginal purity at a young age, and later become a capable wife and mother. Men's control over women's sexuality was at the heart of their duties as Mexican men and their reputations were tied to it: "woman is carnal, animal, and closer to the undivine, she must be protected. Protected from herself" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 17). Motherhood was expected and multiple children were synonymous to male success. Male identity was dependent primarily on control and upholding of traditional female identity. Women felt trapped in this role: "Women are made to feel total failures if they don't marry and have children" (p. 17).

Chicano families gradually adapted to the market economy and women were allowed into the workplace to help with the family economy. Chicana feminists are accused of breaking traditional Mexicana roles. In her piece on the hardships of women acting as feminists in Third-World countries, Uma Narayan (1997) explains how they are seen as betraying their nonwestern culture. Women are the symbol of national identity and bear responsibility for preserving cultural pride. Challenges in gender roles are seen as a symptom of cultural threat and loss. Therefore, the preservation of natural identity lies in returning women to their traditional place of obedience and submission. Narayan argues that the larger pictures of nation, national history, and cultural traditions serve to sustain and justify patriarchal and oppressive practices and institutions, that "the National and its Culture are 'natural givens' rather than historical inventions and constructions” (p. 405). Anzaldúa explained it in her own words as well when said that “the welfare of the family, the community, and the tribe is more important than the welfare of the individual” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 18). This familism lays all the burden on the woman’s shoulders. Chicana feminism defies the traditional ideal of Mexican identity from inside. Narayan (1997) explains that “feminist consciousness is not a hot-house bloom groom in the arid atmosphere of ‘foreign’ ideas but has its roots much closer to home” (p. 397). In her review for non-White American women essays, Karen Anderson (1997) observes that “Chicanas who advocate greater autonomy and expanded roles from women have been accused of betraying their people and traditions for a dangerous egoism” (p. 148). A cultural nationalist ideology that perpetuated stereotypical images of Chicanas as “good wives and good mothers” is slow to accept the Chicana feminist lesbian movement advocated by pioneer writers and activists such as Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa herself.

Referring to the experience of Chicanas, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano (1987) remarked that “perhaps the most important principle of Chicana feminist criticism is the realization that the Chicana’s experience as a woman is inextricable from her experience as a member of an oppressed working-class racial minority and a culture which is not the dominant culture” (p. 140). Theorists such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Sonia Saldívar-Hull, Chela Sandoval, and Emma Pérez urge their audience to act “on political issues that exploit and oppress Chicanas (and, we argue, Latinas) globally, nationally, and within Chicana/o communities and cultures” (Elenes & Delgado-Bernal, 2010, p. 81). These issues include sexism, homophobia, institutional racism, patriarchy, and material geopolitical issues. The phrase ‘double consciousness’ or double stigma describes the oppression of the individual both as a woman and as a member of an ethnic minority; or in other words, the divergent experience of what one is in oneself versus the cultural image imposed by others. Moreover, Yarbro-Bejarano (1999) stands up for “the formation of identity in the dynamic interpretation of gender, race, sexuality, class and nation” (p. 340).

Scholar Emma Pérez (1999) challenges normative history. She takes apart both Euro-American- and Chicano male historical bias to propose a theory which rejects the colonizer’s methodological assumptions and examines new tools for uncovering the voices of Chicanas. She creates a “third space feminism” that recognizes the mobility of identities and allows a theory of agency where Chicanas purposively negotiate opposing ideologies to defy colonial processes. Theorist Chela Sandoval (1991, 2000) challenges the postmodern movement with what she calls oppositional consciousness, a concept that links theory and praxis. While there are theories that oppose and resist dominant theories, those are still bound to Western discursive practices. Sandoval (1993) proposes the creation of a different methodological and theoretical tool that is not merely responding in opposition terms, but a specific form of consciousness that takes into consideration social struggles over race, class, sex, and gender justice. Aida Hurtado’s scholarship focuses on social identity issues, paying attention to differences among genders, ethnicity/race, class, and sexuality.

Cherrie Moraga´s activism and writings influenced the early development of Chicana feminist theory. Her scholarship is shaped by the intersection of gender, sexuality, and race. Moraga introduced English, Spanish, and different artistic expressions in her early works, defying the traditional academic representation of knowledge. Moraga and Anzaldúa coedited the anthology *This bridge called my back: Writing by radical women of color* in 1981, which featured women of color writers and feminists in response to the dominance of the Anglo-American feminist discourse. The book and its other two editions combined essays, poetry and intersectionality as the theoretical common element. Moraga is a prolific play writer and advocates for the protection of storytellers and artists as those who produce and transmit cultural memory. Anzaldúa own writing in Spanish is an expression of identity and struggle as well. Emma Pérez (1991) explores the maintenance and use of the Spanish language as a counterhegemonic reclamation of self. Besides literature, Chicana feminists use art and performance as a vehicle of expression. Vicky Ruiz (1998) conducts oral histories as a way to collect data to reveal Chicanas and Mexicanas as agents in the making of history and culture.

Chicana feminist research in education

Chicana/Latina feminist perspectives inform education as well as a path to understand how young and adult women experience educational institutions in a segregated society. As developed in the literature review, Latinx schooling and education has been traditionally addressed in terms of deficits. Chicana feminist theory proposes shifting the term to one of strength and hope. The already mentioned thoughts of Gloria Anzaldúa, Emma Pérez, and Chela Sandoval on identity and epistemologies influence woman-centric curricular practices and pedagogies that empower Latina voices. Gloria Holguín Cuádraz (2005) chronicles the evolution of the field of Chicanas and higher education from the 1970s to the beginning of the 2000s. Although she refers specifically to women of Mexican origin in higher education, her findings highlight the influence of the development of Chicana feminist's theory and practice in other areas and women. Cuádraz found common elements to understand the development of the research, such as the use of autobiographical voice, the combination of traditional scholarship and lived experiences, and purposeful activism. The work of Gloria Anzaldúa had a heavy influence in the 1990s and the subsequent years.

Rendón (1992) used Anzaldúa's idea of fight among the different elements and contexts of identity expression to describe her own struggle to find her identity as student and as a scholar. Similarly, Dolores Delgado Bernal (2001) applied Anzaldúa concept of mestiza consciousness to describe Chicana undergraduate's identity formation as a complex interaction among race, class, and gender. Cuádraz and Pierce (1994) narrated their experiences and relationship with class and race as graduate students who defied marginality. The early 2000s saw the publication of two collections of essays, prose, and poetry to represent diverse manifestations of Chicana identity and thought. *Telling to live*, the one edited by the Latina Feminist Group (2001), featured Chicana students and scholars, and the second one, *Voicing Chicana feminisms*, edited by Aida Hurtado (2003), echoed the views of 101 adult Chicanas.

Undoubtedly, the Chicana studies field has played a key role in the development of studies where Latinas are the protagonists. The early literature dealt mostly to find legitimacy and to refute the prevailing "cultural deficit' notion that blame Latinx for their inability to success in the education system. Currently, the interconnectivity of power, culture, and mainstream ideology continue being central to understand Latinas' experience in higher education.

Another relevant Chicana scholar is Alejandra Elenes. Her interest in Chicana feminist theories and pedagogies explores the educational opportunities Latinx encounter and the disconnection between expectations, identities, and epistemologies. Her prolific research deconstructs the notion of a unified subject and normative notions of culture (Elenes, 1997); discusses ways in which non-white woman faculty can deal with racism existing in many educational settings (Elenes, 2001); explores the spiritual roots of Chicana feminist pedagogies (Elenes, 2014); describes the contribution of advice and respect as elements of a feminist pedagogy in everyday life (Elenes, Gonzalez, Delgado Bernal. & Villenas, 2010); critiques the field of women's studies (Elenes, 2008); and the construction of knowledge (Elenes, 2001).

The borderlands

"From borderlands to border text, border conflict and border crossings to border writing, border pedagogy, and border feminism, the concept of 'border' enjoys wide currency as a 'paradigm of transcultural experience'" (Fregoso, 1993, p. 65). This quote from Rosa Linda Fregoso illustrates how borders and borderlands became the new discourse in the late twentieth century. To consider borders is to consider frontiers, demarcations, separations, and confrontation on one hand, but also communication, exchange, dribbling, and possibilities on the other hand. The concept of borderlands is not new, but Chicano studies appropriated it in a singular way, transforming it from a geopolitical and historical concept to a symbolic and metaphorical one. The appeal of the borderlands is precisely its components of ambiguity, flexibility, and accommodation to two or more contexts combined with the possibility to create new ones where defiance and non-conformism have a place. Colonialism marks the historical borderlands along the Mexico-U.S. border and the symbolic and metaphorical borderlands for people of Mexican descent. Border lines of thinking come from decolonial theory.

Key figures in decolonial theory are Anibal Quijano and Walter Mignolo. The late Quijano developed the concept of *coloniality of power* to explain modernity and eurocentrism as subproducts of the discovery and colonization of America. The coloniality of power lays on two central pivots: The idea of race as a new system of social domination, and the introduction of capitalism as the organization of the means of production in a structure that satisfies the global demand. To Quijano, these two constructions appeared with the colonization of America. To him, "race" is one of the main social categories that characterize modernity. The construction of race was the 'empirical' justification to automatically relegate native populations to servitude and extermination on one hand, and to use black slaves brought from Africa as non-paid workforce on the other hand. Racism was institutionalized to expand the development of a new economic system that sustained the unequal distribution of resources and power between the colonizers from Europe and the colonized in the Americas (Quijano, 2000). One of que products of this process was the establishment of Eurocentrism —the colonizers' hegemonic rationality and thinking that would dominate the world. The manifestations of colonialism —racism, unequal distribution of power and resources, and Eurocentrism —remain in force in the twentieth-century under the umbrella of the neoliberal practices. Quijano's approach to America history has greatly influenced social sciences. One of his disciples, Walter Mignolo, expands the coloniality of power theory proposing an alternative paradigm to Eurocentrism. In an essay from 2013, he summarized his thoughts about *decolonial thinking*, his reaction to Western macro-narratives. Starting in the mid-twentieth century, the so-called third-world countries looked for new theories that would explain in its own terms their relationship with European and Western countries. It is in such spirit of defying the normativity that this study finds its space, giving voices to subjects and methods usually diminished by the educational status quo.

Decolonial thinking is an alternative lens that acknowledges "men and women of color, gays and lesbians, people and languages of the non-European/U.S. world" (Mignolo, 2013, p. 134) as agents which capacity to produce and analyze knowledge, delinking them from the colonizers' categories created to dominate them. To create new thought, theorists needed to "think within the borders they were inhabiting—not border of nation-states, but borders of the modern/colonial world, epistemic and ontological borders" (p. 136). One example of this 'thinking within the borders' would be the acknowledge of the implicit assumptions of power when writing exclusively in English in academia. Regarding her own experiences in the academia, Moraga (1983) acknowledged to have "denied the voice of my brown mother… to have acclimated to the sound of a white language" with the fatal consequence of "disown[*ing*] the language I knew best—ignored the words and rhythms that were the closest to me" (p. 31). In their anthology *This bridge called by back*, Moraga and Anzaldúa (1983) collected pieces from different woman of color about their insights about the meaning of being a woman and the relationships between women. Both of them and some of the invited authors of Chicano/Hispanic/Latin origin used English and Spanish simultaneously in their writings. Anzaldúa mourned that she "feel*[s]* the rip-off of my native tongue" (1983, p. 162). A second example of decolonial thinking would be the analysis of the power dynamics when using the Eurocentric rhetoric and position to explore topics and conduct research. Instead, a new thinking will create new terms to "become epistemically disobedient, and think and do decolonially, dwelling and thinking in the borders of local histories confronting global designs" (p. 137). Being in the borders open the space to experience and think from different points of view. The decolonial thinking is key to understand the Chicana feminist approach to gender construction under the umbrella of the Mexico-U.S. relation.

Chicana theorists explore how the effects of colonialism continue to thrive within U.S. borders in new, more complicated, and invisible forms. In her pivotal work *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza, Gloria Anzaldúa* (1987) writes that the dominant colonial discourse creates borders that divide geographic as well as theoretical spaces, placing those considered as "others", especially Chicana women, on the margins. Castañeda (1990) recalls that historical texts represent Mexican, indigenous, and white women as passive participants in the formation of the Southwest. The colonial patriarchal ideology ignored women and elevated White men as the carriers of the Western civilization to the new territories. When the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 and the Gadsden Purchase of 1854 established the current Mexico-U.S. border, the majority of Mexicans who dwelled in those lands decided to stay and acquired the U.S. citizenship. However, they became segregated from and also within other U.S. communities. Since that day, the fear of violence, the economic necessity in Latin America, and the need for cheap labor on the part of the U.S. has forced thousands of individuals to legally and illegally cross this border and moving north. One could say that migration can be understood in terms of two points —the point of departure and the point of arrival —but it is also a journey that forces migrants to remain in transitional places and states which, for some of them, will become permanent. These borderlands are not only across the border, but they are well disseminated horizontally and vertically across frontiers. Johnson et al. (2011) essay on borders studies concluded that "borders are enacted, materialized and performed in a variety of ways" (p. 62). This new reality informs a current approach to migration and border studies in general, as exemplified by Krishnendra Meena (2014), who reviewed the literature on bordering practices within and beyond the official lines to support the statement, and Wendy Vogt (2018), who conducted an ethnographic study on Central-American migrants trapped in Mexican soil while migrating to the U.S.

A border is a demarcation of a boundary. In this case, the separation between the two countries is a sharp one in cultural, economic, societal, and political terms. This border, wherever it is set, is "una *herida abierta [an open wound]* where the Third Word grates the first and bleeds" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p .3). For centuries, the U.S.-Mexican borderlands has been the dwelling place for tens of thousands of Mexican and Native descendants. For Anzaldúa, the physical borderlands were and are the lands of the indigenous people. The borderlands are neither Anglo American nor Mexican. First Spaniards, then Anglos, dispossessed the natives from the land and with that, from their identity. In Mesoamerican cultures, attachment to the land is linked to religious beliefs—the earth as the Mother—and identity. In the process of the dynamic reinvention of a collective identity, some cultural elements are taken as emblems and symbols to resist, reaffirm differences, unify, and mobilize the group. Claims about a territory supported by the allegation of ancestral occupation are one of the most common elements in ethnic minoritized movements (Mach, 1993). The Aztecs, the pre-Columbus civilization that founded current Mexico City and ruled Central Mexico for XXX years, believed that they came from somewhere north Mexico City, from a homeland called Aztlán, which was revered as an earthly paradise. Anzaldúa (1987) stated that the Aztecs' descendants are currently living in their loved ancestors' land: "Some call themselves Chicanos and see themselves as people whose true homeland is Aztlán [the U.S. Southwest]" (p. 1). This territorial recognition supports a fundamental element for an ethnic group to exist: The creation of symbolic borders that may or may not coincide with the physical limits that separate one group from another and that aim to maximize the peculiarity, the cultural differences (Mach, 1993). For Vélez-Ibañez (1997), this territory stopped to be ideal long time ago. Aztlán are the borderlands where Mexicans are commodified in terms of low wages, prohibition to join labor unions, lack of education, linguistic exclusion, and the underground economy. Despite these conditions, Anzaldúa (1987) predicted that natives will continue coming back to their lost lands: "This land was Mexican once / was Indian always / as is / And will be again" (p. 91). Emigration from the south has never stopped.

In its symbolic meaning, "a borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 3). The Chicana writer agrees with identity and ethnic scholars when stating that the land is a subject under cultural organization and a symbolic model of the world. Borders are not a fixed and immutable phenomenon and, similar to ethnicity, are subject to variation. Hence, the borderlands became a new and autonomous land where current identities clash and new possibilities are embraced. Separated from the ideal Aztlán, Anzaldúa renamed the borderlands as *Nepantla*. In Nahuatl language—the native language spoken by the Aztecs, Nepantla means "in the middle". This in-between-ness refers to a geographic, physical state, and to an emotional state. Despite this vagueness, the middle is not an empty space: "nosotros los Chicanos *[we, the Chicanos]* straddle the borderlands" (p. 62). Physically in-between two countries and cultures, Chicanos receive Anglo and Mexican influence to became both. Metaphorically, Anzaldúa located a specific group who inhabits these lands: the marginals, "the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead" (1987, p. 3). Among this group, she located the women, because "women are at the bottom of the ladder one rung above the deviants" (p. 18). Despite this situation of dismissal and uncertainty, these rejected individuals have an advantage: "Those of us who live skirting *otros mundos [other worlds]*, other groups, in this in-between state I call nepantla have a unique perspective […] The perspective from the cracks gives us different ways of defining the self, of defining group identity" (2015, p. 52). The old beloved Aztlán of the Aztecs became the harsh borderlands of the Chicanos. There, women and other outcasts find their own place and identity in the symbolic state of Nepantla.

Chicana women are constantly on the border between their American and Mexican heritage. Although a border is set up to divide, Anzaldúa reclaimed the border as a transitional space where a new identity can be formed and enacted. Anzaldúa extended the previous views of the borderlands as a distinct geographical location to encompass psychic, sexual, and spiritual borderlands as well. As her college Elenes (2011) explained, "the borderland is the discourse of people who live between different worlds. It speaks against dualism, over-simplification, and essentialism. It is a discourse, a language, which explains the social conditions of subjects with hybrid identities" (p. 12). Chicana women can, hence, claim all their identities: The Anglo, Mexican, and the Indigenous. Anzaldúa simultaneously reclaimed her political, cultural, and spiritual indigenous roots and constructs a mestizaje identity, a new concept of personhood that combines Euro-American and indigenous elements of identity that may seem contradictory.

This proposed study on Latina undergraduates in Appalachia calls upon this conception of borderlands as a metaphorical space which is not limited by the legal borders, but as a place and state of mind where Latinas may feel marginal and out-of-place. These could be as wide as the Appalachia mountains that surround a predominantly white institution, and as precise as an interaction with a faculty member on campus.

Mestiza consciousness

Gloria Anzaldúa's recreation of the borderlands as a ground zero where new valid identities can flourish reflects the experiences of Mexican-American women. The unique social and cultural context of Chicana women finds validation in the Anzaldúa's works. Chicana feminists appeal to their collective experience of oppression to differentiate themselves from the American mainstream feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. As Black feminist, Patricia Collins (2000) discusses how race and gender provide a particular way to create knowledge, as in the case of Black women, experience is vital for Chicana feminist epistemologies. Collective oppression is one of the commonalities of Chicana women.

In Borderlands/La Frontera, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) reviewed her position as a color lesbian women within the Mexican and the Anglo societies. Anzaldúa addressed issues related to the land, race, language, gender roles, power, sexuality, the body, religion, and in general, to what it means to belong to two or more cultural systems and feel strange and unfit in them. As showed in the former section, the Borderlands created a unique context for the development of new identities. Anzaldúa applied a new lens to describe the traditional elements of the Chicana identity to create a new Mestiza which liberate herself from Anglo and Mexican oppression.

Chicana women suffer oppression by their male peers and from U.S. society. As explained before, the traditional role of good daughter first, and wife and mother later, is subjugated to the male figures in the family. Men, on their part, are the providers and the final authority. This attribution of gender roles in the Hispanic culture has been studied under the ideas of *marianismo* and *machismo*. Machismo is the belief and practice of values and attitudes about masculinity, such as bravery, honor, dominance, reserved emotions, aggression, sexism (Niemann, 2004). Marianismo is a set of values and expectations concerning female gender roles, such as family-and home-centered, passive, obedient, and chaste (Niemann, 2004). Historically, marianismo is rooted in Christian values brought to Latin America during colonization, where the figure of the Virgin Mary–and specially in Mexico the Lady of Guadalupe–was portraited as an ideal mother who submits with resignation her will to a higher cause. Hence, there is a hypermasculinity assumption in men that requires a specific type of ideal woman to be fully in practice. These are the gender roles that Anzaldúa rejected: “For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could run: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 17). Under this premise, women are more than the root and cause of problems for their male peers, they are dreaded as the enemy: “woman is the stranger, the other. She is man’s recognized nightmarish pieces, his Shadow-Beast. The sight of her sends him into a frenzy of anger and fear” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 17). Men are afraid of women. Hence the need of subjugating them at all levels.

In a heteropatriarchal society, gender roles and sexualities are defined and set. Anzaldúa addressed the status of homosexuals in the Chicano community. As a lesbian herself, Anzaldúa defied the traditional ideal of Latina woman and womanhood. Homosexuality is a threat to the status quo of the community and gender roles. For women, being a lesbian implies unbinding the dependence on men as partners and husbands. Lesbianism undermines the traditional family unit. Moreover, lesbians take control of her own sexuality as a sign of rebellion: “for the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.19). Equally, Latino homosexual men are perceived as traitors to the Latino culture. The gay movement is perceived as a “White thing” (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2009), hence, being homosexual is being a traitor to the traditional Latino family and cultural values.

Chicanas are oppressed by the Anglo society as well. As physically and culturally different, Chicana women suffer from the diminishing of their language, customs, and productive value in an Anglo society already impacted by stereotypes about Chicanos (and Hispanics/Latinx) as lazy, unable to learn, and sexualized. The Mexican and Chicana culture suffer of an “extreme devaluation of it by the white culture” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 22). As mentioned in the literature review, these stereotypes are reproduced in schools when diluting the contributions of Latinx to American society, building obstacles to the use of the Spanish language, and despising customs and beliefs. As Anzaldúa herself experienced: “…scoffed at these Mexican superstitions as I was taught in Anglo school” (p. 36). Chicana, Hispanic, and Latina women face discrimination, prejudice, poverty, and inequality in an Anglo world that sees them as nothing more than readily exploitable sources of labor (Anderson, 1997).

The inclusion of the Hispanic category in the U.S. Census as an ethnicity could be seen "as somewhat of an accomplishment" (Fergus, Noguera, & Martin, 2010, p. 170) since it gave Hispanics and Latinos the ability to identify themselves in separate terms of race and ethnicity. People who are Hispanic may be of any race, and people in each race group may either Hispanic or not Hispanic. The term Hispanic was adopted in the early 1970s to refer to "a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuba, South or Central America, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race" (U. S. Office of Management and Budget, 1997a) and has been used in the U.S. Census since 1980. The term Latino was originally coined in the mid-nineteen century in France. Etymologically, it encompasses all people descending from nations that spoke languages descending from Latin; hence, this definitions would include countries in Europe such France, Italy, Portugal, and Romania, and practically all countries in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. Initially ideated as a cultural fit to justify the Napoleonian intervention in Mexico, the U.S. Census Bureau adopted the term Latino in 2000 as a synonym to Hispanic in response to its growing popularity in the Southwestern states. The use of the terms Hispanic and Latino interchangeably is not exempt of controversy. Not everybody celebrates the creation of these categories. Some argue that the terms were not created by the people to whom they try to describe, but by external entities in an attempt to homogenize them and establish their position in the White-Black dichotomy. Two surveys conducted by The Pew Research Center in 2009 and 2013 showed that most Hispanic do not prefer the term Hispanic or Latino when it comes to describing their identity. They rather use their family's country of origin.

Hispanics/Latinos are of all races. Race was once thought to be biological. Today, the dominant view is that race is a socially constructed concept (Castañeda & Zúñiga, 2013; Gould, 1996; Haney López, 1996; Omi & Winant, 2015; Patton, McEwen, Rendón, & Howard-

Hamilton, 2007; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This implies that the understandings associated with race are “created from prevailing social perceptions without scientific evidence” (Witzig, 1996, p. 1). Therefore, the meaning of race and of the different racial categories varies across space and time. American Federal agencies currently accept the following five racial categories: White, Black or African American, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and American Indians/Alaska Natives. However, these five categories do not represent the spectrum of possibilities. Apart from the possibility to choose more than one race, the Census included he box “Some Other Race”. This was the third largest option selected by participants in the 2000 and 2010 Census (Cohn, 2017). Interestingly enough, the majority of those who marked this option identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino.

The ways in which racism shapes Latinx experiences have important historical roots (Acuña, 2014; Feagin & Cobas, 20134; Valencia, 2008). The Hispanic influence in the U.S. dated from the first years after Cristopher Columbus’s discovery, however, “Latinos have been dehistoricized in American history” (MacDonald & Carrillo, 2010, p. 10), where Spaniards dominance first and Anglo-Saxon dominance later established the White and whiteness as superior. From the Mexican-American War (1846-48) that fueled anti-Mexican sentiment to the 20th century immigration waves of Mexican *braceros* to the West; from the Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Dominicans emigration to the East Coast to the more recent exodus of Central and South Americans, American landscape has always been impacted by the Latino presence and the Hispanophobia (MacDonald & Carrillo, 2010). Fergus, Noguera, & Martin (2010) pointed out that, in Latin America, racial categories differ from the black and white binary system implemented in the United States, where the designation of Hispanic or Latino/a often implied the automatic category of *Browns* in such binary. The label of *Brown* may be seen as a recognition of Latinx *mestizaje*; however, many considered it a way to separate Latinx from the privileges of Whites and whiteness. Skin color is an important premise to understand how Latinx have been treated historically in the U.S. Anzaldúa acknowledged it and bestows a new sense of pride to the indigenous and nonwhite elements of a Mestiza.

The white/black dichotomy makes the Mestiza to be repudiated by Anglos and Mexicans equally. Her skin color, her hair, her body do not fit the expectations of White and whiteness. Among Mexicans, the Mestiza is ostracized because she is a visual reminder of their own indigenous past that Eurocentrism condemns as savage and uncivilized. Anzaldúa condemned the long artificial association of the physical appearance to a low character when said that Mestizas should disengage from "the false racial personality that has been given to us and that we have given to ourselves" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 87) and from the enforced necessity to 'bleaching' or hiding their native languages and nonwhiteness. To escape Anglo and Mexican oppression, some Chicanas "conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 20) with the result that "our cultures take away our ability to act—shackle us in the name of protection" and that "we do not engage fully. We do not make full use of our faculties" (p. 21). Anzaldúa proposed the creation of a new identity with Chicana women's own tools, "making a new culture—una cultura mestiza—with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture" that recovers "the Indian woman's history of resistance" (p. 21-22). This new identity is a product of the borderlands where, race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity are integral elements. The Chicana author recovered the pride of being a descendant of ancient Meso American civilizations, in where women were originally sources of wisdom and power. The new Mestiza has an "identity grounded in the Indian woman's history of resistance" (p. 18).

The return to the native origins means to rescue the power and significance of female deities and figures previously discredited and the revalorization of native connections with the spirit and the soul, which contradicts Western epistemologies. For Anzaldúa (1987), "… the spirit is just as real as physical reality. In trying to become 'objective', Western culture made 'objects' of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing 'touch' with them" (p. 37). The indigenous ancestors believed "in an ordered, structured universe where all phenomena are interrelated and imbued with spirit" (p. 66). The Mestiza has "the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities […] It is an instant 'sensing'" (p. 38). Anzaldúa denoted this ability as *la facultad*, or the result of being "against the wall, when we have all sorts of oppressions coming at us, we are forced to develop this faculty […] It's a kind of survival tactic" (p. 39).

This new Mestiza questions borders and norms. As Anzaldúa herself, the new Mestiza challenges monotheism, mainstream culture, and heterosexuality in her own body and thinking. The new Mestiza does not fit within cultural standards and expectations but feels comfortable in her identity as indigenous. The new Mestiza identity is relevant to women of Mexican heritage who struggle in the borderlands regardless of class, race, and sexual orientation. All these identities have their space and function in *Nepantla*. Anzaldúa asserted that Mestizas must reconcile the "split between" their multiple identities "to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory" (1987, p. 78-79). She reckoned "I am a woman with a foot in both worlds; and I refuse the split. I feel the necessity for dialogue. Sometimes, I feel it urgently" (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983, p. 34). Therefore, Mestiza consciousness embraces inner conflict and confusion, finding comfort in ambiguity. Mestiza women "never wholly occupy either the Angla or the Latina identity […] in white society I feel my Latinness, in Latin society I feel my whiteness" (Anzaldúa, 2000, p. 160). Maria Lugones (1987) compared what is like to shift between identities as traveling to different worlds, along with the different levels of (dis)comfort and (un)familiarity that it entails. The goal is to find comfort in ambiguity and flexibility to adapt swiftly between contexts. This is a painful process, one that creates "mental and emotional states of perplexity", "psychic restlessness", "a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war", and "a cultural collision" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 78). The Chicana writer elevated this state to one with its own independent life that does not have to be subjugated to dichotomies or definitive stances.

The dwelling in *Nepantla* gives spirituality and indigenous worldviews a prominent role in this consciousness. Unlike Western traditions, Anzaldúa does not separate between mind, body, and spirit, because she believes "in an ordered, structured universe where all phenomena are interrelated and imbued with spirit" (1987, p. 66) where "the world of the imagination—the world of the soul—and of the spirit is just as real as physical reality" (p. 37). A Mestiza consciousness adopts a holistic perspective that uses her *facultad* to sense and give meaning in a process called *conocimiento*–the process of gaining consciousness. The author rescued feminine Nahua deities to explain different Mestiza states during this process of opening all senses and escape from categorizations and labels. Chicana feminists, and particularly Anzaldúa and Chela Sandoval, understood the project as one where agency and multiple subject positions were constructed through an understanding and awareness of states and experiences—*facultad* and *conocimiento*. The experience of oppression and marginalization can lead people in general, and women in particular, to make in-depth analyses of their circumstances and develop the ability to see deeper structures and connections. *Facultad* and *conocimiento* are signs of agency.

The new Mestiza speaks of inclusion instead of exclusion. Coalition with Chicano and Latino men is crucial to fight marginalization. For Anzaldúa, Chicano men were victims of a systematic oppression that, to a certain extent, forced them to oppress women in their communities. Chicano male culture is shaken due to the difficulties of providing economically and being the traditional head of their families. That along with the racial oppression they experience in the Anglo world cause them to unleash their frustrations on women. Understanding the roots of their situation does not condone their behavior; on the contrary, men should be held accountable for their behavior and change it with a new masculinity and a new man's movement (Anzaldúa, 1987). A similar responsibility applies to Anglo society, from acknowledgment and restitution to coalition. At the end, "we need to allow whites to be our allies" (p. 85) to form a coalition across gender, race, and sexuality towards social justice.

Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of the new mestiza has been influential in Chicana thinking. It goes beyond biological identity categories to incorporate other forms of identity as well. For Anzaldúa, the new mestizas are women who inhabit multiple worlds because of their gender, sexuality, color, class, personality, spiritual beliefs, and other life experiences. Chicana feminists urge action "on political issues that exploit and oppress Chicanas globally, nationally, and within Chicana/o communities and cultures" (Elenes & Delgado-Bernal, 2010, p. 81). For that, an important process in this reclamation and recovery of identities is the rewriting of history so that it includes Chicana women's experiences, knowledge, and forms of expression.

Positioning Borderlands and Mestiza consciousness in the study

Anzaldúa's ideas on borderlands and mestiza consciousness have guided the work of scholars in the fields of Chicano and cultural studies, women and gender studies, and education. The appealing of the concepts of borderlands and the mestiza consciousness in the context of scholarship is that they take up Chicana feminist perspectives as a decolonizing framework. Also inspired by postcolonial scholars insights about oppression, consciousness, and power, Anzaldúa proposed an identity that integrates all of the deficits established by the current American status quo—color (nonwhite or *prieta*), nationality (Mexican), language (Spanish and *deslenguada*,[foul spoken]), origin (native or *india*), sexuality (queer, lesbian, as Anzaldúa)—and proposes a hybrid, transnational identity, a new Mestiza who relocates and negotiates her differences. She is a woman who transitions from difference and submission to agency and action. She is a product of migration, borders, borderlands, and intersectionality. She is a manifestation of their indigenous ancestors, from physical, emotional, and spiritual surrender to empowerment. Finally, the mestiza is a survivor among ambiguities and contradictions who transforms herself and takes advantage of her own malleability.

The concept of *Mestiza consciousness*, as a product of the *borderlands*, permits not only the search for different formal and informal elements that are part of an educational setting, but to explore how they operate and connect, and how individual agents negotiate among different forces that can be oppressive or liberatory (Elenes, 2006). Dolores Delgado Bernal’s research uses diverse concepts of Anzaldúa’s framework to analyze aspects of the Latina experience in the education system, as active students, teachers, parents, and members of the academia. The findings challenge current pedagogies to embrace not only a multicultural perspective but also an acknowledgment of the Latinas’ capacity to create and use unique and valid knowledge (Delgado Bernal 1998, 2001, 2006). Alejandra Elenes focus on Chicana feminist theories allows her to explore activism (Elenes, 2014), pedagogies (Elenes, 2013, 2001, 1997), women’s studies programs (Elenes, 2008), and identity issues (Elenes 2014, 2011, 2000) through Anzaldúa’s concepts of *Mestiza consciousness* and *borderlands*. Aída Hurtado (1998, 2003) research deepens on the formation of a social and ethnic Latina identity and uses Anzaldua's thoughts to analyze bilingualism and language attitudes (Hurtado, 1987), body beauty perceptions and sexuality attitudes (Hurtado, 2015), as well as Latino masculinities (Hurtado, 2012). Chicana feminist Chela Sandoval advanced in 1991 her idea of a differential oppositional consciousness, which developed later in 2000, and presents commonalities with the concepts of ambiguity and contradiction exposed by Anzaldúa. Sandoval uses this consciousness to explore mestizaje as a research method (Sandoval, 1998).

Anzaldúa's approach was pioneering. Two years before Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term "intersectionality" to refer to how race, gender, class, and other aspects of identity overlap to shape an individual experiences the world, Gloria Anzaldúa used the symbolic meaning of the U.S.-Mexican border to refer to the barriers that divide communities and individuals along race, class, gender, and cultural experiences. Anzaldúa coined the idea of *borderlands* as a physical, material, emotional, psychological, social, and symbolic space where Chicanas had to find their own identity and purpose. The author focused on the living experiences of Chicanas—the Mexican-American woman raised in the Mexican traditional way but living in an American society—to highlight the struggle of these women to find identity and purpose in the physical and cultural liminal state where they permanently reside. To provide meaning to this unfit, Anzaldúa reclaims indigenous spirituality and feminist cultural archetypes to offer *mestizaje* as a survival strategy, since "indigenous like corn, like corn, the *mestiza* is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of condition" (p. 81). This resilience is crucial to survive in the inhospitable environment that a predominantly white institution might be. This "new Mestiza consciousness", a "racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollinization…*una conciencia de mujer*. It is a consciousness of the

Borderlands” (p. 77) could be of utility when exploring the Latina undergraduate experiences in rural Appalachian higher education institutions. The originality of this proposal is the consideration of Appalachia as a sort of borderlands. Its condition as the former border between the original American colonies and the West allowed Appalachians to create their own borderlands. The Latina undergraduates that attend the site of the research might face multiple and new challenges in the confluence of the Appalachian, the Latino, and the academic cultures that institutions might have omitted.

Summary

The Latina undergraduate population has been one of the most forgotten in the literature. The literature review conducted found that the deficiency model is used to describe their challenges and barriers. However, there also studies centered on the strengths this segment bring to their college years, specifically, how the cultural elements that are traditionally assumed as barriers in fact contributed to their success as students and how Latinas navigated stereotypes and hostile campuses. Chicana feminist scholars are very productive conducting research on topics related to education and identity among Latina students and faculty. In the 1980s, feminist Gloria Anzaldúa talked about the relationship between context and identity elements among Chicanas who lived in the Mexico-U.S. border. For her, there is a connection between physical space and identity, between borderlands and the new identity Chicanas develop to adapt to this context, which she named the new Mestiza consciousness. It is Mestiza, because it represents the multiracial and ethnic background of Chicanas. It is a consciousness, because it is a deliberate act for survival. Space and identity are also two essential elements in the Appalachian region that impact campuses across rural Appalachia.

A feminist lens helps to study Latinas in their own terms, acknowledging their condition not only as women but as of different races, socioeconomic backgrounds, and levels of acculturation and assimilation to mainstream society; as well as with a disparity of experiences regarding education. Anzaldúa transformed borderlands in a symbolic space characterized by contradictions, ambiguity, hybridity, flexibility, and also with balance, sensemaking and self-awareness. This study aims to understand the negotiation processes that Latina undergraduates carry out to actively accommodate all these elements and show resilience, if any.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore deeper the experiences of Latina undergraduates at North Central Appalachia University (NCAU), a four-year Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in a rural setting in North Central Appalachia. Specifically, the study sought answers to these questions: 1) How Latina undergraduates perceive their experiences at a four-year Predominately White Institution in North Central Appalachia. And 2) How the Latina identity inform these experiences. To provide the answers, the study follows a constructivist approach. This section justifies the approach, and describes the sample and setting for the study, the data collection, analysis instruments, and procedures in the study.

Feminist lens and paradigm

A paradigm is a foundational set of beliefs that norms the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Kuhn, 1962; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). These beliefs and values inform the specific methodological aspects of a research project. In other words, a paradigm determines the research methods that will be used and how the data will be analyzed (Guba & Lincoln, 1988). Paradigms not only inform the methods used in research but every decision in the research process, from what should be studied to how results should be interpreted (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Paradigm is inclusive of the epistemology or the beliefs about how knowledge it is created (Schwandt, 2007); the ontology, or the assumptions made by the researcher about the nature of the reality under study–the research problem, its significance, and how she might approach it (Scotland, 2012); the methodology, or the research design, methods, and procedures used in an investigation (Keeves, 1997); and the axiology, or the ethical issues, the approach to making decisions of value or the right decisions in a study (Finnis, 1980). The constructivist paradigm of this study is justified by the feminist perspectives found in Borderlands and Mestiza consciousness.

Western traditional research oscillates in the positivism-constructivist continuum. Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins explores this idea of conflicting epistemologies, paradigms, and methodologies to describe the current Eurocentric approach in research. Collins (2000) characterizes the Western methodology as one that relies on the creation of scientific descriptions of reality that produce objective generalizations, the detachment of the researcher from the object/subject of study, and the development of rigid control mechanisms to validate such knowledge. Collins states that the positivistic nature of academia directly benefits the current status quo of the White men who control Western structures of knowledge and validation, therefore leaving women, especially Black women, without a voice in academia. The scholar attributes this state to the long-standing oppression that nondominant groups suffer in academia. Even though alternative knowledge claims are becoming more and more common, they are "rarely threatening to conventional knowledge" and are "routinely ignored, discredited, or simply absorbed and marginalized in existing paradigms" (p. 268). Collins proposes a disruption to traditional epistemologies and develops an alternative that recognizes the "intersecting oppressions in shaping the U.S. matrix domination" (p. 251) and the "values, vested interests, and emotions generated by a [*researcher*]'s class, race, or sex , or unique situation" (p. 255) as valid sources of knowledge. Moreover, with respect to women's issues, Namaste (2009) stated that "one of the central tasks of feminist theory has been to expose the manner in which androcentric theories have framed the place of women" and that "feminists have first set out to account for the ways in which the existing theories have excluded the complexity and diversity of women's lives" (p. 20). Chicana researchers challenged Eurocentric approaches as effective in understanding Chicana experiences, and argued for a new lens that enables an intersectionality of application to the Chicana reality (Bernal, 1998). Hence, *Mestiza consciousness* allows participant and researcher to understand and create knowledge without the traditional Eurocentric methodological constraints.

The researcher agrees with the feminist position that there is not a unique way to understand and construct knowledge. Humans construct meaning from reality as they engage with the world they are interpreting, making sense of the world based on their historical and social perspectives. The researcher relies on the participants' points of view of the phenomenon under study. From the researcher's interpretation of the participants' experiences, she develops patterns to apply the particular findings to a broader context, setting, or population. This inductive process goes from the particular to the general, aiming to generate theory. These premises agree with the objective of the researcher's study: to understand the experiences of Latinas in Appalachian PWI.

A feminist epistemology, ontology, methodology, and axiology are exemplified in Anzaldúa's ideas of *Borderlands* and *Mestiza consciousness*. Borderlands are singular places to operate. These physical and psychological blurred spaces provide a lens to not only understand experiences, but to generate valid knowledge as well. It is in this place where women can find meaning and sense to their own existence. This place is inhabited by the Anglo and Mexican deviants, "the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 3). It is the place inhabited by the Latina women of this study, because "women are at the bottom of the ladder one rung above the deviants" (p. 18). The researcher and the participants on this study are self-defined Hispanic/Latina women;

therefore, the study asks for a paradigm that allows for the hybridity, flexibility, and multiple and parallel subjectivities that leaving in the borderlands requires. The researcher acknowledges that inductive tools and working with multiple meanings are possible under a constructive approach and qualitative methods. This research approach highlights the processes of interaction among individuals and focuses on specific contexts to understand the historical and cultural settings. The assumption that the generation of meaning is social makes qualitative research an appealing option for social sciences research. This worldview is characteristic of the philosophical system of constructivism, which this study follows.

Constructivism

The aim of this study is to understand the experiences of being a Latina undergraduate who grew up and currently studies in a PWI in the Appalachia region, to understand the subjective world of their experience. In that regard, this study fits into the constructivist paradigm and the phenomenology tradition. The constructivist paradigm is a social process where the researcher understands the world as socially constructed through interaction, giving room to multiple realities, and where meaning is agreed upon in social settings (Garman, 1994; Glesne, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Reality is socially constructed (Bogdan & Bikle, 1998). Constructivist scholars emphasize the “intersubjective understanding of specific life circumstances” and how “social actors recognize, produce, and reproduce social actions” (Schwandt, 2017, p. 39). Merriam (2009) argued that studies that follow a qualitative approach are interested in describing ways that individuals make meaning from what they say and do in everyday lives (p. 23). Crotty (1998) as cited by Creswell (2014), identified several assumptions in the constructivist worldview that are relevant to this study:

1) Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences, and these meanings are varied and multiple: Individuals construct their own realities "for the most part in interpretive communities" (Garman, 1994, p. 5). This study is interested in how Latina undergraduates interpret their own experiences.

2) Individuals make sense of the world based on their historical and social perspectives. The context of the experience shapes its meaning. In this study, the context is a PWI in the North Central Appalachian region. The Latina student experiences might be shaped by the social characteristics of the institution, the social interactions in which they engage, and the Appalachian culture.

3) The inquirer generates meaning from the data collected in the field in an inductive process. The researcher spends time in the setting to know the specific characteristics that frame the students' meaning of their experiences and analyzed the data accordingly.

In summary, the assumptions that inform this study— knowledge is socially constructed, the object of the study has multiple realities, data are better gathered through interviews and *pláticas*, and that the outcome of the research reflects the researcher's values, are characteristics of a subjectivist epistemology, a relativist ontology, a naturalist methodology, and a balanced axiology, specific to the constructivist paradigm (Kivunja & Kuyino, 2017).

Phenomenology

Research traditions are "rigorous, discipline-based carefully specified ways to conceptualize, describe, and analyze human social behavior and processes." (Schram, 2003, p. 66). Phenomenology applies to the study of the phenomena, understood as "that which shows itself, that which reveals itself" (Heidegger 1996, p. 25). Phenomenologists "insist on careful description of ordinary conscious experience of everyday life" (Schwandt, 2017, p. 225), and "focus on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied" (Merriam, 2009, p. 3). Alfred Schutz's ideas about the relevance of the experiences' accounts from the point of view of the subjects influenced the development of phenomenology from its origins as a philosophical thought to become a research methodology in the twentieth century. His ideas agree with the social constructivism perspective that informed this study. As Shutz (1962) explained,

> [The] social world is not essentially structureless. It has a particular meaning and relevance structure for the human beings living, thinking, and acting therein. They have preselected and preinterpreted this world by a series of common-sense constructs of the reality of daily life, and it is these thought-objects which determine their behavior, define the goal of their action, the means available for attaining them—in brief, which help them find their bearings within the natural and socio-cultural environment and to come to terms with it. (p. 6)

Among the three main approaches to phenomenology as a qualitative research method—descriptive, hermeneutic, and interpretative—this study follows Jonathan Smith's interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA seeks to understand how particular events and life episodes are experienced by particular individuals, offering detailed explorations and analyses of concrete cases. Interpretation is a basic and unavoidable structure of life (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Phenomenologists are interested in the *how* rather than in the *what* of the experience, uncovering what is not immediately obvious. The objects in this study are experiences. Phenomenology asserts that there is a particular meaning of being, thinking, and acting. Hence, this study proposes to explain, understand, and interpret the phenomenon of being, thinking, and acting of a Latina student in a PWI in the Appalachian region. It uncovers the thought and emotional process that affect the student's actions and reactions in a specific spatial and temporal context. Experiences are embedded within a larger context; hence, the common-sense constructs may differ among settings, regions, circumstances, and individuals. This study aims to explore the daily experience of Latina undergraduates from their own voices, to unravel the distinctive elements of their experiences and to find the elements that could help to interpret how the higher education institution and its context affect these experiences and subjectivities.

To understand the participants' meaning-making process, phenomenology "focuses on the essence or structure of an experience" (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 7) and "involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for reflective structural analysis that portrays the essence of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). This reflective analysis upon concrete experiences shifts attention from universal knowledge or experience to a particularity. In phenomenology, one important aspect is intentionality–being conscious of the experience in a particular way or perspective. One of the tasks of phenomenology is to analyze these perspectives in detail, mapping out the ways they are interrelated. Moreover, this study seeks to examine how participants experience their social reality as undergraduates upon the phenomenological premise that individual subjectivities are not only molded by social forces, but also that these same subjectivities shape social reality (Garfinkel, 1967).

In order to be intentional, the researcher seeks to take advantage of what Anzaldúa's denominated *la facultad*. In *Borderlands/La Frontera,* Anzaldúa (1987) explains that many habitants of the borderlands develop *la facultad*, or “the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities” (p. 38). This acute awareness,

> is a deeper sensing that is another aspect of this faculty. It is anything that breaks into one's everyday made of perception, which causes a break in one's defenses and resistance, anything that takes one from one's habitual grounding, causes the depths to open up, causes a shift in perception.(p. 39)

La facultad is the ability to capture the self. To achieve it, the individual must break the habitual modes of seeing and thinking of reality. First developed as a survival tactic to warn about dangers and threat, the habitants of the Borderlands finally deploy *la facultad* to understand oneself, to “experiencing the soul” (p. 39), and to find comfort in one’s identity. For Anzaldúa, this process does not involve the reason, but the body and the spirit. These forces have been present in the ancient Aztec goddess of life, death, and rebirth, a belief suppressed by the Spanish colonialists first, the Anglo culture later, and finally, among Chicanos as well. Practicing phenomenology as a research method would imply using *la facultad* to see and to explain in depth.

Abduction

A researcher may use traditional deductive and inductive reasoning to help understanding and interpreting experiences. Deductions allow for confirming or refuting theories and hypotheses; therefore, in a strict sense, do not allow the discovery of something new. Living in the borderlands is characterized by a state of perplex and oddness due to the presence of new and changing elements. Induction, the other traditional reasoning, approaches data as raw elements which tries to organize, understand, and provide meaning. Induction is typical in phenomenological qualitative research. In these studies, the researcher approaches data without a fixed set of rules in mind, allowing participants to share their experiences in their own words and terms, to unfold the deep meaning and understand a particular situation. In this process of collecting and analyzing data to find meaning, the researcher may come across data for which there is no existing or appropriate explanation under previous theories and assumptions. This oddness forces the researcher to an intellectual process where a new rule, explanation, or pattern might be discovered and, at the same time, the data and the case become clear. Peirce (1931, 1934) described this process as *abduction* in his treaties on logic. For Peirce, the arguments of deduction, induction, and abduction should be integrated into a systematic procedure for seeking truth and follows the scientific method.

Abduction is "the logic used to construct descriptions and explanations that are grounded in the everyday activities of, as well as in the language and meanings used by, social actors" (Blaikie, 2007, para.1). The participants and the researcher in this study are the social actors who seek to uncover the meaning of the experiences as Latina undergraduates in a PWI in the Appalachian region. Reichertz (2004) explained abductive inferencing not as a new mode of reasoning but as "an attitude towards data and towards one's own knowledge: data are to be taken seriously, and the validity of previously developed knowledge is to be queried" (p. 160). Although Peirce justified the validity of induction as a self-corrective process, he asserted that neither induction nor deduction can help us to unveil the internal structure of meaning. To reveal meaning, a process of *abduction* is needed. *Abduction* does not attempt to overthrow previous paradigms, frameworks or categories. Instead, the continuity and generality of knowledge makes intuition possible and plausible. For Peirce, the knowledge is continuous and cumulative. Knowledge is self-corrective insofar as we inherit the findings from previous scholars and refine them. The process of *abduction* is the one that promotes the generation of new knowledge. This process consists in a continual gathering and analysis of data to unveil and understand experiences. This study employs *abduction* as a logic model to gather and analyze the data. This capacity of intuition and ability to use deduction and induction logic is key to understand the Mestiza consciousness. *Abduction* is the reasoning that occurs in the Borderlands.

This study uses the theoretical framework outlined by Anzaldúa as a guideline to understand the complexity and intersectional experiences on Latinas in PWI. It may find similar patterns found in previous research, but it may also find different and unique elements. Living in the borderlands requires flexibility and room for the inexplicable. Abductive reasoning helps the researcher to collect, review, and analyze data an all phases to provide the interpretation of the experiences. *Abductive* reasoning enables the use of the theoretical framework and the literature as tools that guide—never enforce— researcher and participants' sense-making processes, and in particular, how the researcher uses *la facultad* to "see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 38).

Setting

North Central Appalachia University is the setting chosen to this study for its significance. This university is a public R1 four-year PWI in the North Central Appalachian region that has seen an increase in Latinx enrollment in recent years. This tendency is expecting to continue due to the strategic location of the campuses (close to large hubs of Latinx population on the East coast) and the relatively affordable cost of living and studying comparing to other similar institutions in the adjacent states. This critical sampling strategy allows the researcher to identify NCAU as a unique setting to explore the phenomenon in depth (Creswell, 2014). Its identity as a flagship university in its state makes NCAU unique for its combination of a public land-grant institution, its marked Appalachian environment, but also for a continuous presence of students from other states and cultural backgrounds.

The university system consists of a main campus, two small campuses in two other locations in the state, and two health sciences centers in two separate locations. For the 2019-2020 school year, the university web site stated a total of almost 30,000 students in its three campuses. Of them almost 90 percent attended classes in the big campus. Here, students came from 118 nations, all 50 U.S states, and all the state counties.

Data from the University's Office of the Registrar showed that at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, 51.5 percent of undergraduates were female, turning over the traditional male majority among the student body. Of the current student body, 79 percent are non-Hispanic Whites; 92 percent attend full-time; 46 percent are from within the state; and 60 percent of students are in the age 18 to 21 bracket. Hence, the "average" undergraduate at the beginning of the Fall 2020 semester was a White female between 18 and 21 years old who attends full time. It is important to highlight that this wase the first time that female undergraduates exceeded their male peers in numbers. The male/female ratio among faculty is almost 50/50 but the distribution varies significantly across departments; approximately 83 percent of them are Whites, almost 5 percent are Asians, 3.5 percent are Blacks or African Americans, and 1 percent are Hispanic/Latino. Table 2 provides a summary of the undergraduate composition at NCAU, in which Hispanic/Latinos are the lowest represented (4.2 percent vs. 4.5 of Asians, and 6.2 of African-Americans).

Table 2

Undergraduate Composition at NCAU for the Fall 2020 Semester

Race & Ethnicity	Undergraduates
Non-Hispanic White	87%
African American	6.2%
Asian	4.5%
Hispanic/Latino (included all races)	4.2%
Other	2%

At NCAU, the racial diversity is below the national average, there is a high probability that the undergraduate is from within the state, and, contrary to the general trend in the nation, it serves more male undergraduates than females. In Fall 2020, when the study was conducted, the university had slightly more Latin/Hispanic male undergraduates than female (440 vs. 416) and slightly more Latina/Hispanic female graduate students than males (95 vs. 91). The Latina/Hispanic female undergraduate is a minority among a minority in this setting.

Through the departments of History, Sociology, and Spanish, the university offers several courses whose subject matter is related to Latin/Hispanic issues. It also offers a master's degree and a major and minor in Spanish language and literature. For a few years, it offered a major and minor in Latin American Studies, but the program was discontinued in 2018 due to low enrollment. All these courses and degrees are open to all students. The university only has one course whose audience are specifically students with a Latino/Hispanic background. The class is Spanish for Heritage Speakers. This class focuses on grammar, reading, writing, and culture for heritage speakers with little or no formal education in Spanish language. The assumption is that these students already are fluent in spoken Spanish. This class is offered in the spring semester. In 2019, it had 14 students. It was not offered in Spring 2020.

Currently, the university has six student organizations whose focus is Latino/Hispanic issues and/or members. Three of them, the Association of Latin American Students, the Hispanic Law Student Association, and the Society of Hispanic and Professional Engineers, target Latin and Hispanic students. The other three associations are open to all students with an interest in the Latino/Hispanic culture and language.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a different scenario for the 2020-2021 school year at NCAU. Campus life was undoubtedly changed in Spring 2020. The extraordinary measure of finishing face-to-face classes, closing building, and sending students and faculty members home to finish Spring semester in an online format became the default option for summer and the opening of the 2020-2021 academic year. Higher-education leaders faced difficult decisions about the reopening of campuses. NCAU created a plan for a phased return to campus. Among the measures and changes that directly impact the student experience are the following:

1) Base tuition and fees remained unchanged.
2) In the main campus, nearly 60 percent of the courses are offered online. Labs and the remaining courses are offered face-to-face or in a hybrid mode. The majority of upper-division undergraduate courses are online and hybrid delivery. Study abroad trips are cancelled for the Fall semester and on-hold for Spring semester.
3) Classrooms, labs, cafeterias, libraries, study rooms, dorms, and other closed spaces have been conditioned to reduce density by 50 percent and enable physical distancing. Advising and faculty office hours are conducting remotely whenever possible. Academic and student services are moved to an online and/or remote format whenever possible.

4) Personal safety and behavior expectations establish physical distancing, the use of masks or plexiglass options, hand sanitizer, wipes, and other personal hygiene measures. There are restrictions to congregations in hallways and other common places. Mandatory (and free) COVID-19 screening for all returning students, faculty, and staff members before the beginning of the academic year. Implementation of self-isolation and quarantine measures for positive cases.
5) The university modified its Code of Student Conduct to include sanctions for the breach of the personal safety and behavior measures.

Indeed, these changes alter the traditional student experience and campus life. In an April 2020 survey of 2,086 college students, the majority indicated that COVID-19 caused stress or anxiety (91 percent), disappointment or sadness (81 percent), loneliness or isolation (80 percent); financial setbacks (48 percent) and relocation (56 percent) (Brown & Kafka, 2020). The same study found that 76 percent of students found difficult to maintain a routine, getting enough physical activity (73 percent), and staying connected with others (63 percent). The changes and socio and psychological pressures fueled by the pandemic require additional adaptations to which minoritized students might not know how to respond. An ongoing longitudinal study showed that Blacks were the most likely to have suffered layoffs, and that Latinx suffered the most widespread reduction of income (Center for Economic and Social Research, 2020). This unexpected financial hurdle pairs with safe and health care issues related to Latino students who juggle multiple responsibilities in multigenerational households. The same study reported that even though the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the value of post-secondary education among minorities, almost 25 percent of the Latino respondents and seven percent of Black students said they expected to take a lighter course load in Fall 2020. This change will delay the time to degree and possibly incur on additional costs. The change to the virtual teaching and learning environment that many institutions made highlights technology disparities regarding access to devices and infrastructures in low-income homes. This new landscape posits challenges to the mechanisms of learning and social engagement which are based on the traditional physical presence in the campus (Kuh et al., 2005)

Pilot study

In Spring 2018, the researcher conducted a qualitative pilot study to explore a Latina's experiences in higher education and her capacity to succeed at a four-year Predominately White Institution (PWI) in the Appalachian region in the United States. The study focused on one participant as she navigated through college and how she viewed her experiences as a Latina undergraduate. Under the constructivist perspective and the phenomenology tradition (Moustakas, 1994), the study designed and conducted a semi-structured interview. The participant shared her experiences and how she perceived her ethnicity, academic and personal preparation, her ability to succeed, and the personal and institutional support received. The pilot study proved to be helpful in three ways.

First, it gave advance warning about where the main research project could fail. The pilot study served to test the participants' recruitment strategies, to assess the acceptability of the interview protocol, and to exercise *epoché* or bracketing according to the phenomenological tradition. Bracketing refers to the ability to set aside assumptions and beliefs about a phenomenon to examine how it presents itself in the view of the participant (Christensen & Brumfield, 2010). The pilot study also tested the choice of interviews as the instrument to collect data for a potential wider study (Baker, 1994), and more specifically, a) the adequacy of the guiding questions to allow the participant to share their experiences and thoughts in depth; b) the schedule, duration, and number of interviews needed to collect relevant data, and c) the adequacy of interviews over focus groups as data collection's instrument in the phenomenology tradition.

A second and important benefit of the pilot study was the preliminary findings. The findings related to the challenges and barriers to college student success agreed with what the literature has been pointed out: The influence of personal, financial, and academic preparation for entering college (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; San Miguel & Donato, 2010); and the impact of the right institutional support before entering college and throughout the undergraduate years (Castellanos et al., 2006; Dabbah, 2009; Delgado-Gaitan, 2013; Santiago, 2011). Institutional and family support continue to be a relevant factor in navigating higher education. Additionally, the lack of preparation in high school and language barriers could be counteracted with a dedicated faculty and administrative support. A relevant finding in the pilot study was the positive influence that dedicated faculty members could have not only on first-year or first-generation students, but especially on students with language barriers. Finally, the reality that a great body of Latinx undergraduates come from low socio-economic families forces them to juggle studies and work, harming their academic performance and jeopardizing retention.

The findings that encouraged the main research project were related to identity issues. Findings indicated that Latina identity is a complex set of characteristics that differ among individuals, showing that the multiplicity of the Latina reality cannot be constrained to physical appearance, country of origin, or native language spoken. The Latina identifies herself in different ways that deserve individuality and respect. Finally, the pilot study found a positive view of the Appalachian context for this Latina undergraduate. Holland (1973) and Strange and Banning (2001) mentioned that one of the factors that affects success in college is the fit between the individual student's characteristics and the dominant characteristics of the individuals on campus. The pilot study raised questions about the interaction of the elements of an Appalachian university campus with those of a Latina identity that could positively and negatively affect the success as college students. If research found this interaction as positive and beneficial for both parties, Appalachian campuses could leverage this advantage and posit themselves ahead to attract and retain this growing segment of the student population.

Participants

The participants in this study were eight female undergraduates with at least one semester completed by Fall 2020 at NCAU, and who self-identified as Latina or of Hispanic background. Since the objective of this study was not to generalize to a larger population but to develop an in-depth description of their experiences in the setting of interest, the selection of the participants and the site was intentional or purposeful (Creswell, 2014) and took place prior to starting the data collection. The participation was voluntary, and the participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time. Purposive sampling involves the selection of cases to study based on their relevance to the research questions (Mason, 1996). In accordance with this objective, sampling was conducted at two different levels:

Level 1: Identification of potential participants. Two main sources of recruitment were identified. The first source was the University's Office of the Registrar, which identified 416 Latina/Hispanic females enrolled as undergraduates in August 2020. The second source were the university student organizations whose members were of Latino or Hispanic background. Upon NCAU's Institutional Review Board approval, the university office and the student organizations were asked to send the recruitment email and the prescreening questionnaire out to students via email list-servers. Students were also asked to share the invitation with other Latina undergraduates they knew personally (snowball sampling, Auerbach & Silverstein, 2006). The email contained a) a letter from the main researcher explaining the purpose of the study, and b) a link to a questionnaire to complete by interested students (Appendix 1). Due to the COVID-19 context, activities and gatherings on campus were very limited. The five organizations contacted did not organize activities for the Fall 2020 semester, when the recruitment for this study took place. They were contacted via the email address listed in the general web page for all the student organizations. Of the five organizations, two of them replied and agreed to redistribute the invitation to their members. Finally, the researcher contacted the faculty of the Spanish department to request them to distribute the recruitment invitation among the students they think might qualify for the research. The eight final participants were recruited through an email sent to all undergraduates requesting their participation.

Instrumentation. This first level of the recruitment strategy employed a self-report questionnaire which was administered online using Qualtrics. It contained 12 questions in a multiple option format and two open-ended questions to identify students with a broad spectrum of backgrounds. The data collected from the prescreening questionnaire included information about age, race, gender, number of semesters at NCAU, years in the country (to know if they are immigrants), state of residency, if any of the parents attended college, if they worked or plan to work, if they were full-time or part-time student, citizenship status (with the options of citizen, permanent resident, conditional resident, non-immigrants, undocumented, and prefer not to say), perceived English and Spanish proficiency, and two open-ended questions. At the end, it included the option to provide an email address to be contacted if they wanted to be part of the interviews. The two open-ended questions included in the questionnaire were *In a few words, list some of the elements that help you to succeed in college* and *In a few words, list some of the challenges/barriers you face to succeed in college* (Appendix 2). Of a total of 416 Latina undergraduates enrolled in the Fall 2020 semester who received the invitation via email, 64 returned the questionnaire (15.30 percent). Of them, 22 showed interest to be interviewed. These potential participants were contacted via email to confirm their interest and check that they fulfilled the initial requirements:

1) Students over the age of 18 and self-identified themselves as 1) women, and 2) of Hispanic/Latino background.
2) Students with permanent residency in Appalachian counties/states and non-Appalachian counties/states, as listed by The Appalachian Regional Commission.
3) Completion of at least one semester of undergraduate studies at any of the university three campuses by August 2020. This requirement allowed the researcher to explore how assumptions, expectations, and experiences might have evolved from the beginning of the college years to the moment of the interviews.
4) Representation of a variety of majors–or prospective majors–of study (stratified purposeful sampling, Patton, 2014). This criterion allows to count with a wide representation of contexts and experiences in different campuses, colleges, and departments, as well as social contexts.
5) Answers to the open-ended questions. These questions aimed to identify main and singular challenges, barriers, and strengths the participants had and affected their college experience.

Level 2: Identification of final participants. Of the 22 survey respondents contacted, eight replied confirming the requirements and asserting their interest in conducting an interview. Seven of them had permanent residence in the U.S. and one of them was an international student. International students were not part of the intended research. The researcher wanted to focus on permanent residents both from and outside the Appalachian region to see whether this fact had an impact in their experiences as college students in a predominantly white Appalachian university. However, this respondent reported to have experience “racism and lack of cultural understanding” in her comments. Only another student from outside Appalachia reported similar direct insights. The researcher wanted to know more details about such experiences and decided to include the international student as a potential participant. Among the elements that were helping students to succeed in college, they mentioned support from friends, family, professors, and professional mental wellness services, as well as scholarships. Among the challenges, they mentioned financial and family pressures, being a first-generation student, lack of connectivity with the community and/or the campus, and racist and cultural insensitivity encounters.

The low participation rate might be due to the dates in which the recruitment took place: the week of Thanksgiving and the following one. Students already returned to their family homes to finish the semester and their minds were into final exams and the upcoming Winter break. Despite that, the researcher was able to schedule interviews with these eight participants once the semester finished. The idea was to check the effectivity of the interview questions and gain a sense of what students had to say, and consequently, a second recruitment round would take place at the beginning of the Spring semester. Plans changed after the initial interviews. These first participants provided rich and sufficient data for the purposes of this research. First, they showed a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and contexts. Second, they were unique cases for the insight shared. And third, their allowed to apply the study’s framework: borderlands and mestiza consciousness. Magolda (1993) vast research on young woman concluded that “as each person provides a context for other stories, they together discover, recognize, or create patterns to make sense of their collective experiences” (p. 17).

In summary, the recruitment and sampling strategy was divided in two phases. Phase 1 consisted of sending of invitations and prescreening questionnaire and the reception of questionnaires, whereas Phase 2 consisted of the screening to identify the final candidates. Phase 1 resulted in 416 Latinas/Hispanic females contacted; 64 of them completed and returned the questionnaire; and 22 of them showed interested to be interviewed. Phase 2 resulted in the selection of eight final students to conduct the deep interviews. Table 3 summarizes the participants' main demographic characteristics. To protect their privacy, the study uses pseudonyms for names and for some places. Due to the relevance of the family's' countries of origin, the states where they established residence, and their fields of study, these data are not anonymized. The researcher discussed these points with the participants, and they agreed to the terms.

Table 3

Participants' Demographic Data

Participant	Age	Race	College rank	Full/Part-time student	Employed	First-generation student	State of residence	Hispanic heritage	Legal status	Language proficiency	
										English	Spanish
Katrina	21	Other	Graduated	Full time	No	No	NJ	Guatemala	US citizen	Native	Proficient
Gabriella	19	White	Freshman	Full time	Yes	No	In state	Mexico	US citizen	Native	Native
Amber	20	White	Sophomore	Full time	No	Yes	Mexico	Mexico	Mexico citizen	Proficient	Native
Jessica	28	White	Senior	Part time	Yes	Yes	CT	Puerto Rico	US citizen	Native	Conversational
Carly	19	White	Sophomore	Full time	Yes	Yes	VA	Mexico	US citizen	Native	Proficient
Georgia	20	Other	Junior	Full time	Yes	No	MD	Nicaragua	US citizen	Native	Native
Sophia	21	White	Senior	Full time	Yes	Yes	In state	Chile	US citizen	Native	Proficient
Aria	20	Other	Sophomore	Full time	No	No	In state	Mexico	US citizen	Native	Native

Amber

Amber is an international full-time student in her second year in the Music program. She is from Mexico DF and attends NCAU with a student visa. She is 20 years old, white, and highly proficient in English. Both parents have a college degree and support her financially in what her scholarship does not cover. She now shares a room with a classmate in a college dorm. NCAU was not part of her initial plan for higher education. Amber remembers the difficulties meeting new people and making friends as an international student who did not know anybody on campus. Accustomed to the diversity of options and people of her hometown in Mexico, she noticed the lack of diversity in NCAU, the difficulty to meet other Latinx students, and the responses of puzzlement when interlocutors discovered that she is *"actually from Mexico".*

Aria

Aria is a Mexican and American citizen who currently resides with her parents and two siblings in a town near the university's main campus. She is 20 years old and a sophomore in the Food and Nutrition program. Her father lived in other states for a while before opening and establishing a business in her current hometown. Few years later, he brought the family he left behind in one of the most populated cities in Mexico, with more than 1.7 million inhabitants, to this American hometown of nearly 20,000 inhabitants. Her father wanted a calmer environment to raise the family. Aria was seven years old at that time and learned English at school. The family still has strong connections with their hometown in Mexico and tries to visit every summer and Christmas. One of her older brothers moved back to Mexico and their parents are thinking about retiring in Mexico. Aria's three older siblings have college degrees from nearby American universities. She commutes every day from home to the campus.

Carly

Due to Carly's father's position in the military, the family had lived in different states before settling down in the East Coast. Carly owes her Spanish heritage to her father, whose family has been Mexican-American citizens for several generations. Carly's mom is Anglo. Both parents and her sibling hold bachelor’s degrees. She learned Spanish from her dad and in mandatory school, but at home, they talk mostly English. NCAU was not her first choice for college: “*I was expected to end up somewhere in the northeast and New York or Boston even*.” Carly is 19 years old and a sophomore in the neuroscience and psychology major. As her mother, Carly is white and has blonde hair, passing easily as Anglo.

Gabriella

Gabriella is a first-generation student from a southern U.S, state and a middle child in a family with Mexican roots. Her mother was born in the U.S. and her father was born in Mexico. Gabriella is fully bilingual, and Spanish is the language her family speaks at home. Her family visits Mexico as often as possible and owns a house there. While in college, she lives in a house that her parents bought for her and her older sister in the university main campus. Some weekends, she drives the three hours that separate the campus from her home to help her parents’ business. In her small hometown school of barely 4,000 inhabitants, Gabriella was very involved in sports and political activism. As a 19 year-old first-year student, she has only known the campus under the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions

Georgia

Georgia grew up in a pretty culturally and racial diverse area near Washington, D.C. Half of her teachers were white and the other half was non-white. She had her first white classmate in high school. Her parents are emigrants from Central America. Returning had been in their minds at the beginning, but they saw more possibilities for the family in the U.S. She moved to her mother’s hometown on two different occasions for extended periods of time. Communications with her parents and brother is always in Spanish. A first-generation student, she is in her third year as a music education major at NCAU. Georgia is not the only woman in her program, but the only person of color, and the only Latina as well.

Jessica

Jessica was born in Connecticut from Puerto Rican parents. She is a first-generation college student. After two unsuccessful attempts to finish her bachelor's degree in psychology in Connecticut and encouraged by her current work supervisor, now she is closer to graduation at NCAU. She moved to the campus main location in January of 2020, following her boyfriend's career in the military. Jessica is 28 years old, a full-time worker, and a part-time student.

Katrina

Of all the eight participants, Katrina is the one who already graduated—she did it in December 2020 with a degree in Psychology—and the only one to whom the COVID-19 pandemic arrangements affected minimally. Her nuclear family and an uncle are the only members of her family who live in the U.S. The family lives in a small community in New Jersey but surrounded by several Latinx hubs. As a first-generation college student, her older sister set the example and studied in Florida. She discovered NCAU by chance after receiving marketing material by regular mail. The evangelical faith is an important element in Katrina's experience as a college student, She joined an interfaith college student organization in which she held a leadership role.

Sophia

Sophia is 20 year-old full-time junior year student from the campus main location with plans to attend graduate school out-of-state. She was born in Chile from a Chilean father and an American mother. Both of them are white and her mother speaks Spanish. Both of her parents work for NCAU and have college degrees, as well as her older brother. She learned Spanish at home, where Chilean culture and traditions are very present. She studied in Spain one semester in a study abroad opportunity. For her, NCAU was the logical option for a college degree.

Data collection

The method used to collect data was a one-on-one in-depth interview with open-ended questions and *pláticas*. Interviews are a standard data collection procedure in phenomenology (Marshall & Rossman, 2010; Schram, 2003; Seidman, 2006). Seidman (1991) defined interviewing as "an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 3). This study aimed to provide a description of the experience of being a Latina undergraduate through their voices, by integrating multiple perspectives, describing processes as well as results, learning how events are interpreted, and bridging intersubjectivities (Weiss, 1994, pp. 9-11). Therefore, conducting in depth interviews was a good fit for this study. Giorgi (1997) stated that when interviewing, "questions are generally broad and open ended so that the subject has sufficient opportunity to express his or her view extensively" (p. 245). Phenomenological research uses the analysis of salient statements from the passages, the generation of meaning units, and the development of what Moustakas (1994) and Riemen (1986) called the *essence* of the experience to interpret it from the participants' point of view.

Pláticas

Chicanas and other Latina/Hispanic women rely on *testimonios, consejos y pláticas* [testimonials, advice, and small talk] as sources and transmitters of knowledge and community builders in spaces when they are a minority (Flores & Silva, 2009). *Plática*s are intimate conversations (Ayala et al., 2006), popular conversations (Godinez, 2006), and intellectual dialogues (Guajardo & Guajando, 2006; Moreno, 2003). For this minority, it is important to find places, people, and ideas that "take a holistic approach to self that includes spirit and emotion, and recognizes our individual/communal struggles and efforts to name ourselves, record our history, and choose our own destiny" (Trinidad Galván, 2006, p. 173). The use of interviews as a method to gathering data for this study was envisioned originally more with the format of a *plática* rather than a sequence of formal questions and answers where participants and researcher keep a strict professional relationship. Building rapport with participants is a crucial element in qualitative studies. A good rapport ensures trust and respect between researcher and participants, increases the communication, and generates rich data and (Elliot & Martin, 2013; Guillemin & Heggen, 2009; Youell & Youell, 2011). The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way people communicate and socialize. The researcher considered that, in order to establish rapport–a trust relationship with the study's participants–and to counteract physical distance measures imposed by the pandemic, it was important to move away from the traditional role as strict listener and to incorporate elements and features more common in dialogues during the interviews. Moreover, the use of *pláticas* in academia as a research instrument agrees with the Chicana feminist epistemology: On one hand, the principle of finding and working with culturally accepted values and tools to describe and understand the Latina experience, and on the other hand, the principle of participants and researcher as cocreators of knowledge (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016).

Interviews

In-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were used in this study. A semi-structured format allows the preparation of questions in advance that serve as guidelines and enable the expansion to subsequent questions and conversations. The study designed an interview protocol with information about the study, instructions, questions, and the different steps. Face-to-face interviews have the advantage of picking up on social cues such as voice, intonation, and body language, which provide additional information about the interviewee and the verbal communication of her experiences (Raymond, 2006). The safety measures adopted due to the COVID-19 pandemic moved the interviews to a remote format. The interviews were conducted and recorded using the software for video and audio conferencing ZOOM.

The protocol featured some open-ended questions (Appendix 3) that allowed the researcher to inform her work without forcing the participant to provide specific or limited answers (Seidman, 2006). Seidman (2006) proposed conducting three separate interviews to the same individual to explore in depth the meaning of the experiences. For this study, the researcher chose to conduct a first interview following by *pláticas*. A quick analysis of the first interviews sparked new questions seeking for clarification and more details, which caused the participants to be contacted again for informal and quick follow-ups. These *pláticas* helped to generate richer data and to establish and maintain long-term rapport with participants. Moreover, the results from the interview with the first participants were used to modify and add follow-up questions for the subsequent participants, whose answers, in turn, guided the subsequent *pláticas* with other participants. This interwoven process provided being useful to generate reflections about the experiences, or in other words, their *essence*. This method allowed the use of the *abduction* reasoning model to go back over the data that provokes oddity or needed more detail. *Abduction* allowed the reflection on the data while collecting them; the adaptation of the questions to the participants and the experiences; and the constant use of induction and deduction logic reasoning. The interviews and *pláticas* finished when the researcher achieved data saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), when “no new information or themes are observed in the data” (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006, p. 59).

Data analysis

Data analysis is "the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that you accumulate to enable you to come up with findings" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 159). The purpose of the data analysis was to identify and describe aspects of each student's experiences and the associated meanings in great detail. This process started during data collection. During and after each interview and *plática*, the researcher wrote analytic memos. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) argued that analytic memos are mechanisms that help the researcher to portray first impressions, make connections among different pieces of data, make sense of data, and raise further questions. In a sense, the memos were an initial and quick analysis of each interview in relation to the research questions and the theoretical framework for the study.

The interviews' recordings were uploaded into DEDOOSE, a web-based application for qualitative data analysis. All the transcribed interviews were manually checked for accuracy before starting the analysis. The first step in the analysis process involved the repeated and careful reading of the transcriptions to extract texts that could be of significance and interest for the study (McCracken, 1988; Wolcott, 1990). The selected passages helped to identify repeating o singular ideas, which were coded developing a codebook. Again, the selection was based on the research concern–the Latina experiences as undergraduates in a PWI in the Appalachian region–, the research questions, and the theoretical framework. This first step is called open and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During this step, analytical memos were also used to establish connections.

In the second step, the analytical process guided by *abductive* processes and the theoretical framework enabled the researcher to identify commonalities and differences among the ideas behind the codes to identify patterns among them, which in turn, were grouped in coherent categories or themes (Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). To develop meaning from the experiences, the texts and codes were connected using the theoretical framework. The analysis followed Moustakas' (1994) three basic steps that allow the researcher to uncover the structure of the experience under the participants' point of view: 1) bracketing, consisting of awareness of the researcher's own background and experiences to avoid transmitting any preconceived notion about the phenomenon or the participants; 2) reduction, consisting of isolation of the phenomenon to identify its elements and characteristics. In this process of reducing the more complex parts to fewer complex parts, the researcher applies explanatory reasoning. And 3) imaginative variation, consisting of the description of the essence of the phenomenon under the participants' point of view. This process allows the researcher to describe the experiences as the participants shared, not as the researcher thought they should be, and equally important, to expand her attention to unnoticed aspects on such experiences.

Finally, the themes that emerged from the interviews and *pláticas* are described and explained in the Findings chapter. Chapter V provides the answers to the research questions in a narrative form (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2006; Josselson, 2007, Kim, 2016).

Rigor

Scriven (1972), Peshkin (1998), and Morrow (2005), and many others, argued the presence of subjectivity in all kinds of research, regardless the paradigm chosen. The constructivist approach focuses on "relativist ontology" and the ability to have a "mutual understanding of the experience" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 24). Therefore, the interpretation of being a Latina undergraduate is shaped not only by the student's approach, but by the subjectivity of the researcher when designing and conducting the study. Typical in qualitative studies, the researcher herself is the instrument to collect, organize, and analyze the data (Glesne, 2003; Locke, Spirduso & Silverman, 2013). In the process of interpreting the student's experiences, the researcher makes important decisions and choices about the participants, the settings, the timing, the data collected, used, and discarded, the relevant and non-relevant themes arose, and the study's conclusions. Scholars recognize the important of being reflexive about how constructivist researchers collect, analyze, and interpret data (Denzin, 1989). Moreover, researchers are encouraged to reflect on and record their interpretations, and they are also reminded that the accuracy of their interpretations is dependent on being able to demonstrate how they were reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Recognizing the social construct of experience among the participants and the researcher is vital to representing and interpreting the experiences of the Latina undergraduate in this constructivist study (Garman, 1994, p. 5). The researcher in this study identifies herself as a Hispanic student in a PWI.

However, the researcher acknowledges that her perspectives are individual and do not necessary apply to the participants. As the father of phenomenology pointed,

> There is still more to see here, turn me so you can see all my sides, let your gaze run thorough me, draw closer to me, open me up, divide me up; keep on looking me over again and again turning me to see all sides. You will get to know me like this, all that I am , all my surface qualities, all my sensible qualities. (Husserl, 2001a. p. 41)

However, the researcher should adopt measures to minimize bias. Educational research scholars generally accept Lincoln and Guba's (1986) postpositivist four criteria of trustworthiness and authenticity in constructivist research, namely credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility refers to confidence that the results (from the perspective of the participants) are true, credible, and believable. Dependability refers to ensuring the findings are similar if the research is repeated with the same participants and settings.

Constructivist inquiry implies that reality is dependent on the specific context and on the particular interactions between specific subjects in specific places and times; therefore, qualitative studies are almost impossible to replicate. Confirmability refers to extending the confidence that the results would be confirmed or corroborated by other researchers. In other words, that the findings are solely based on the data and the analytic process. Finally, transferability refers to the degree to which the results can be generalized. This criterium is controversial due to the intrinsic difficulties in qualitative studies to replicate the context and experiences.

The difficulties to ensure strict dependability and transferability standards lead more and more qualitative researchers to argue the need to move from positivist and postpositivist criteria to embrace new standards of quality research more adequate for their constructive perspectives and objectives. In line with this idea, Patton (2014) suggested dependability, triangulation, and researcher reflexibility, as key standards which define a high-quality qualitative research and embrace subjectivity at the same time. Dependability is understood as “a systematic process systematically followed” (p. 546); triangulation is “capturing and respecting multiple perspectives” (p. 546);and, reflexibility as an opportunity for the researcher to understand how her own worldview and experiences might affect the development of the research. Reflexivity is defined as “self-awareness and agency within that self-awareness” (Rennie, 2004, p. 183). In the phenomenological tradition, bracketing defines the process of becoming aware of one´s implicit assumptions and predispositions, to setting them aside and avoid interference with data collection and analysis (Husserl, 1931).

This research employed different strategies to ensure that the findings were solely based on the data and that the collected data accurately reflect the participant’s experiences, in other words, that the research design and findings are trustworthy, authentic, and credible. The researcher employed different credibility strategies. One of them was the *member checking* umbrella. Traditionally, member checking consists of sending the interview transcripts and preliminary findings to the participant for feedback (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This strategy is improved thanks to the use of the *abductive* processes and the *pláticas* strategy. The researcher did not wait to finish the data collection and analysis phases to communicate with the participants. She engaged in an ongoing conversation with them via email and short video calls that allow the seek for clarification, retrieve more data, confirm or reject first impressions, and to create rapport. This rapport was increased adding the informal *pláticas* or friendly conversations. This prolonged engagement with the participants was accompanied with familiarity with the setting. The researcher has lived in the Appalachian region and studied/worked in the research setting for twelve years. This familiarity with the setting and contexts allowed her to see nuances and establish connections to uncover sense making processes and meanings with the participants' experiences that are described in detail. The continued engagement and familiarity provided the researcher with several opportunities and means to collect rich data which are shared with the reader. The research provides a detailed description of contexts, experiences, participants, sites, and the themes arose, for the reader to judge the connections and logic between the data, the findings, and the proposed implications. This strategy is known as *thick-rich description* (Denzin, 1989), which also enables the establishment of an *audit trail* (Creswell & Millar, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to confirm that the codes, categories, and themes presented are based on participants' responses. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommended the use of *disconfirming evidence* as a strategy to search for evidence through collected data that is consistent or disconfirms the themes. In this process, the use of the literature and the theoretical framework informed the researcher with some preliminary themes or categories that could arise–or not–during the interview sessions. The *abductive* logic process included these considerations.

It is important to notice that transferability was not the main goal of this study. This research did not aim that the findings were applicable to any other Appalachian predominantly white institution neither that the experiences and comments provided represent those of all the Latinas/Hispanic women undergraduates. However, the study provided details of the context and participants for the reader to be able to decide whether the environment, participants, and findings can justifiably be applied to other similar settings. In summary, all the above-mentioned strategies were part of a reflexive process where the researcher kept track of the decision-making process to ensure it was bias free. These individual efforts were complemented with the help of knowledgeable colleges engaged throughout all the research' stages for critical discussion, what Rossman and Rallis (2003) denominated a *community of practice*.

CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

The literature review uncovered the need to address the Latina student context in higher education as a differentiated student subgroup. The interview was designed to address how the students' experiences are explained by their own perceptions about their identity as Latina woman in a PWI in the Appalachian context. The meaning of being a Latina in college is not as straightforward or uniform as some may think. The participants' insights differed depending on their own background and previous experiences within the Latinx community in one hand, and on their expectations about what the university should offer to them as a Latina student.

In answering the research questions of this study—*How do Latina undergraduates perceive their experiences at a four-year Predominately White Institution in North Central Appalachia?* and *How does Latina undergraduates' identity inform their experiences at a four-year Predominately White Institution in North Central Appalachia?*—the study found four major themes:

1) *Identity*: In this section, the participants shared their reflection about *Latinx and Latina* identities on campus and their insights about the *Appalachian* context of the university.

2) *Isolation*: The students shared events and reflections on feelings of isolation and sense of belonging on campus.

3) *Microaggressions*: Analysis of racial and ethnicity attacks the students suffered grouped by the content of the attack (stereotypes about the Latinx culture and about the Latina as a woman; assumptions of Americanism; and tokenism).

4) *Support*: This theme is divided in two subsections: *Institutional support* and *Family and friends' support*. The first subtheme refers to the instances where NCAU and its

representatives offered formal and informal support to the students. The second one analyzes the role played by family members and friends inside and outside the campus.

Theme 1: Identity

Several studies highlight that one of the factors that affects success in college is the fit between the individual student's characteristics and the dominant characteristics of individuals on campus (Braxton, 2000; Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Holland & Holland, 1973; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strange & Banning, 2001). This section analyzes the participants' reflections about *Latinx and Latina* identities on campus and their insights about the *Appalachian* context of the university.

Latina identity.

One of the requirements to be part in this study was for the participants to self-identify as a Latina student. Therefore, all of them identified as such. However, what they understood about being a Latina turned to be less unified. Their diverse backgrounds and previous experiences within the Anglo and the Latinx community had an influence on their ideas about what being a Latina means.

Carly's mother is Anglo and does not speak Spanish, but her father's Mexican family has been in New Mexico for generations. Her father's career in the military moved them several times across the country, but never had the chance to meet another Latinx families. Carly grew up in an Anglo environment. Carly's attachment to Latinx culture is limited to the occasional trips to New Mexico to visit family. When asked if they have Mexican traditions, she mentioned cooking Mexican food and celebrating Christmas Eve: *"I kind of always grown up with that as my identity."* English is the language spoken at home, and Spanish was learned primarily in grade school even though her father knows the language: "*I did some at home and I did some at* *school […] I used to be a lot more fluent back in high school*". Carly does not talk much about her Hispanic heritage unless directly asked and it seems comfortable with that: *"There's kind of used to being around whoever we were assigned to be around with. We definitely did miss, you know, having a lot of good Mexican food, a lot of good green chips, but we don't proactively seek other people that were Latino or Latina."* In her second year at NCAU, she still does not have a Latinx classmate. She remarks that "*at NCAU, I don't' think I know anyone else who is Latino or Latina*." She acknowledges that ethnicity and race are two different concepts. When asked how she fills out forms that ask for demographic questions, she mentioned that "*I put Hispanic, Latino, and them for race, I put Caucasian*". Carly identified herself as Latina because of her father's heritage, clarifying that being a Latina is not limited to blood ties:

> *Being only half Latina, most people are often shocked to hear I am Latina until they hear my last name [XXX]. There are many stereotypes in society as to what being Latina should be. To me however, being Latina is about being a part of a community who is passionate, strong, and fearless […] being Latina is not about where you're born, what language you learned to speak first, or how many generations have been in the U.S.*

For Carly's father, it is important that neither she nor her older sister forget about that background: "*And, you know, he told me, it's a big part of me, and I'm just kind of always gone with that*".

Sophia was raised in a mixed family as well but her connection with the Latinx culture is stronger. Her mother is Anglo-American but speaks Spanish very well. The family lived in Chile several years before moving to the U.S. when she was two years old. Spanish is spoken at home on a daily basis and the family actively maintains connections with their country of origin and with the local Latino community. In her words, her family "*was probably like a perfect mix of*

Chilean and Anglo." Sophia has a double major in International Studies and Spanish. It was important for her to learn about the Spanish language and culture in a formal environment, and specially, the Spanish class for Heritage Speakers: *"it was really nice being in an environment with people in a similar situation to me"*. Since she had that opportunity every day, she did not look for additional involvement with other Latinx students on campus. However, she spent one semester studying in Spain: "*I always knew I wanted to study abroad, and I knew I wanted to study abroad in a Spanish speaking country*". When asked about her understanding of the meaning of Latina, she explained that she identifies as Latina and Hispanic: "*Hispanic ties me to my linguistic identity of being able to speak Spanish. And, you know, Chile's, Spanish language, but then Latina is more like the cultural identity of being from South America."* She emphasized that her family has always been involved in the local Latinx community, on and off campus: *"I think being a part of this community is really worth […] because you really do learn about different parts of your culture that you wouldn't normally learn about […] I really like how ethnically diverse Latin America is, but how united they are and how interested they are in one another's culture"*.

Gabriella and Katrina are first generation students and daughters of immigrants from Mexico and Guatemala, respectively. Their ties with their home countries are tight. Gabriella's family has a house in Mexico and visits as often as possible. Katrina's family's economic situation does not allow them to travel as much as they would like, but their communication and involvement with the family in Guatemala is constant. Gabriella was a first-year student and Katrina just graduated at the time of the interview. Both sought out the Latinx presence on campus and in the local community when arriving to NCAU. Katrina grew up in a diverse community in New Jersey and attended a multiracial and multiethnic high school. She regretted the lack of opportunities to experience her Latinity at NCAU but offset that disappointment with the faith shared with her Anglo friends on campus. In contrast, Gabriella's hometown is a conservative, small, rural, and majority white community located two hours south of campus. Yet, she describes her family home like being in Mexico. She considers herself more Mexican than Anglo and she is eager for the pandemic to end to be able to connect with Latinx students and organizations on campus. Both Gabriella and Katrina see their futures in the U.S.

When asked how they identified, Gabriella pointed out that "*I'm a Mexican woman, and you know, soy Latina, […] But also, I am slightly whitewashed at this point, coming from southern state."* She continued reflecting*:*

> *No one had ever explained to me what I was. So obviously I'm white. I'm a city, Latina, my nationality, technically American, but I still consider myself Mexican. I know that now. I didn't know that at the time. And when we would have to fill out surveys for exams and stuff like that. They would ask, you know, what is your race be Asian, black, white, etc. And obviously, I wasn't any of the other ones. So I put white, and then it asked ethnicity and I'd say Hispanic or not Hispanic. And those were the only two options. And I was like, Well, I guess Hispanic, but Hispanic can be anyone who speaks Spanish, not necessarily a Latina. And then eventually, it switched around my senior, junior year [in high school]they switched it from ethnicity to Latino, not Latino, which I noticed. I learned officially what I was around my junior year because no one would ever explain it to me.*

Katrina identifies herself as Latina, highlighting that her parents migrated from Nicaragua and that the family's native language, culture, food, and traditions are important elements in their routines. She reflected about the meaning of being a Latina and the stereotyping involved. This insight is further explored in the Microaggression subsection. However, her remarks about the campus environment are relevant here:

> *It was kind of a given that I was Latina. And it wasn't necessarily anything out of this world. And as much as I love being appreciated and recognize that, yes, I'm Latina. And I'm proud of it. But at NCAU, it's also sometimes gets to the point where it feels like that's your only personality trait.*

She continued reflecting about the effect of this classification. As a Latina, she was expected to be and behave in a specific way: *"it just kind of got annoying that I had to be some spit like specific way to be able to fit the mold of Latina"*

Aria, Jessica, and Georgia's experiences in the markedly Anglo campus of NCAU proved to be difficult as well. Aria and Georgia are first-generation students and daughters of immigrants, and Jessica's parents moved from Puerto Rico to Connecticut before she was born. Jessica grew up in a Latinx community and attended two different in-state public campuses. The absence of a Latinx community on these campuses caused a negative experience as a college student. Now at NCAU and far from home, she knows that these connections are important and part of her identity. In her late twenties and with a full-time job, she thinks that she does not have a lot in common with her classmates and she longs for a more active Latinx presence on campus and in the community. As Katrina, she also encountered situations where she had to fight stereotyping, but among their own Latinx community at home. Because of her native English language abilities and her light skin, she had been taken as a non-Latina by her local Latinx community in Connecticut, which caused distrust. As she explained: "*I have problems with trying to even connect with other Hispanic people […] when I try to connect with certain Hispanic people, some people are very biased when they see me thinking that I understand them* *in their culture, because the way I look and then very light skinned."* When she arrived to NCAU one year ago, she feared that she would experience the same rejection from the local Latinx community in campus. At the time of the interview, she had not met any Latinx student, faculty member, staff, or local yet to find out.

Aria immigrated to the U.S. when she was seven years old. The family still has strong connections with their hometown in Mexico, and one of her older brothers recently moved back. She learned English as a second language and the family speaks only Spanish at home. The small town where they reside is not very diverse, as in Gabriella' s case. Aria identifies herself as a Mexican: "*I identify as female or Mexican female, for sure. I don't think even Latino and Hispanic [...] Maybe if I was from a smaller country, I would use a broader term like Hispanic or Latino. But definitely Mexican [...] I'm from Mexico, because I don't identify with being from [state's name]".* She thinks she has more in common with international students than with American students with a Latinx heritage. She does not identify as American: *"even having the citizenship, it's just not, it feels very unnatural."* Aria and Gabriella show a similar background, but Gabriella seems to function more comfortably in an Anglo environment. Aria is open to returning to Mexico if she finds a good opportunity there.

Georgia's ties with family in Nicaragua are significant, and she even lived and studied there on two separate occasions as a child. In a sense, her identification with the Latinx community is not much different from Aria (who also knows the experience of living in the family's country of origin), or Gabriella and Jessica (who only speak Spanish at home), or the participants who grew up in Latinx communities but did not find the same diversity at NCAU. Of all the participants, Georgia had the darkest skin color. Georgia considers her as a white person:

> *Do you identify as Latino? Like, yeah. But I just put white because, like, I feel like given the history, that's what I am. […] I guess you can say I am white. But yeah, I never really know what it is to identify my races. But that's what I put on paper*.

However, during the interview, the researcher and she talked about the experience of being a Black student, about being the only black Latina woman in her academic program. Even her therapist referred to her as a Black woman. This raised several questions about how Georgia sees herself and how other people see her. In her instance, not only ethnicity, but also race became key elements in her social identity on campus. Once again, the Latina students in this research faced discrepancies about the elements that form their identity and how were understood by other people.

International student Amber provided interesting insight. To the question of whether she identifies herself as a Latina, she denied it at first, saying that she identifies herself first and foremost as Mexican. She did not define herself as a Latina, but as a Mexican. She thinks that her Mexicanity will be perhaps the only constant element in her life. Now in the U.S. where she has had to fill out forms that ask her to identify in terms of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, she ponders that "*this is something that the more time I spend abroad the more I wonder."* Her identity has been questioned these two first years as a college student because she does not conform to the stereotypes of what a Mexican individual should look like or do: "*I'm not white enough to be with the white American kids. I'm not dark enough to be with the Latin kids*."

Amber disagrees with the category of Latina to which she was assigned upon arrival to the U.S.:

> *Everybody is getting so specific about what they are […] I think that so many labels are creating the opposite. Why does it matter? You know, that I'm Latina, white, black, Asian, I'm gay, bi, straight, Catholic. Nowadays, everyone is so fixated on that, you can't even*

> *get a glance of what someone really is, you already have all this information about [them] and that creates preconceptions […]so many labels are just telling you things about people that may or may not be true.*

Later in a follow-up session, Amber continued reflecting about the complications of defining what is a Latinx individual:

> *I also think Latinos born in either the U.S. or Latin America have equal rights to identify themselves as such, although I would argue those born in the U.S. may not be as "authentic" for being born in a country with a different culture. I also think you are as much of a Latino as you want to be.*

Amber's comments agree with those of the other participants that defy the homogeneity of the Latinx identity and experience. This homogeneity translated into stereotypes against which the participants are judged. These expectations occur not only on campus, but also among the Latinx community.

Perceptions about the Appalachia region

The eight participants in this research were asked about their opinions about and identification with the Appalachian culture and identity. Aria, Gabriella, and Sophia grew up in the Appalachian state where the university is located, whereas Carly, Georgia, and Jessica grew up in other states. Amber is an international student from Mexico.

Aria, Gabriella, and Sophia's parents decided to reside in the Appalachian state where the university is located for economic reasons. Aria and Gabriella's families own businesses in their local communities, whereas Sophia's parents found jobs at NCAU. The families like to live in small communities where everybody knows each other, providing them with a sense of safety. As Aria explained: *"[my dad] has experienced some other parts. And he really likes how calm* *[state's name] is. And it really is. It's nice."* Gabriella agreed and described their hometown as *"a really safe place. And it's very good for business. It's a small town. […] I like where I live. And I'm very glad that I was raised here. It's safe."*

Aria, Gabriella, and Sophia have good memories of their school years. Aria and Gabriella were the only Spanish speakers in their schools. Despite that challenge, Aria quickly made friends when she arrived from Mexico at the age of seven: "*I've been able to get along with everyone in school, really."* Gabriella enjoyed her high school years: "*I was still the only Hispanic. I was fairly popular at school, I played sports. I was the class president.*" Sophia's experience was a little different. The town where she lives is home to the main campus of NCAU; it is more populated, and therefore has more schooling options. Her parents purposely enrolled her and her older brother in "*the most diverse school in the county […] so that was really important for my parents to expose us to, if they had the opportunity to do so, which they did. And because of that, all of my friends when I was younger, were from other culture*s." Despite this diversity, she did not have any Spanish-speaking peers. Sophia had the opportunity to meet some in high school: "*And that is probably the first time I'd ever been in a group of like, Hispanic people that were my age because prior to that, the only Hispanic people I knew in [hometown name] were my dad's age.*"

Neither of the three has other relatives in the area besides their nuclear families. Aria and Gabriella's families employ other Latinx people in their businesses. However, this does not imply an automatic friendship. As Aria argues: *"I do kind of meet a lot of them. But it's just like any other people. Being Latino does not make me want to join them. I don't really have a reason to get involved with people just because they are Hispanic."*

Gabriella describes her community as “*white, very white […] most of the people here are Trump supporters. So it's very, like a conservative environment. And then everyone's kids are also very conservative and small minded. They like what they know. And they don't like what they're not comfortable with.*” Aria indicates that “*they are very kind, I think they're very welcoming. And they've never, ever been mean to me or anything […] But I think whenever you get to know them a little more, they're very not inclusive.*”

Gabriella was more vocal and shared specific moments when she felt excluded and even attacked when interacting with peers: “*I experienced a lot of racism and a lot of discrimination because it was 2016 and that was when the presidential election started.*” At that time, she and her classmates started to be more aware of political trends and candidates. Discussions about politics became more common during her last year of middle school, specially about immigration and the relationship with Mexico and Mexicans. Gabriella was surprised to hear pejorative comments about Mexicans from their classmates and some friends. They knew she was of Mexican ancestry and that her family were immigrants. *“I'm a U.S. born citizen. But I feel that pain with my parents and I feel that pain with my people.”* The situation repeated four years later as a senior in high school. During the presidential campaign, Gabriella had several opportunities to discuss political points of view with classmates, friends, and even teachers on a regular basis, since “*there were a few that had some of [Trump’s] merchandise in their classrooms, which I don't think is appropriate.*” During that year, she learned “*how to handle these types of situations*” and decided to distance herself from some classmates and friends: “*I don't need that bad energy in my life. And I learned to let it go.*” She treated this challenge as a growth opportunity and joined a high school group that helped students register to vote. She even won an award for it: “*I got honorary Secretary of State.*”

Sophia shared a similar opinion about taking small steps that promote change in the state: "*I'm part of a growing amount of a growing minority of [state's gentilic] that are like changing what it means to be a [state's gentilic].*" She admitted that "*when I was younger, I definitely thought a lot of negative things about people from [state's name], Appalachia, I definitely fed into a lot of the stereotypes."* Now she is more aware of the historical and socioeconomic factors behind Appalachian descriptions and argues that *"[hometown's name] is the most globalized city in [state's name], in terms of being able to offer a globalized connection to the world [...] [hometown's name] is a little different than [state's name] as a whole.*" When asked if she described herself as a [*state's gentilic]*, she answered: "*I don't think I identify with the entire state. I just identify as being from [hometown's name].*" Some of Amber's classmates who are from the state are of the same opinion: "*my friends who are from [state's name], they say, I hate [state's name],[…]I just want to get out of [state's name], I want to see the world.*"

Amber, Carly, Georgia, Jessica, and Katrina are not from Appalachian states. All but Amber came from North-Atlantic states. As analyzed in more detail the Support section, the decision to attend an Appalachian university was based on a mix of serendipity, financial aid, and research. All of them agreed that they and their families had stereotyped assumptions regarding the Appalachia region and the state where the university is located.

Amber's interactions with in-state residents led her to generalize her observations to the American population at large. She initially described the town that houses the main campus as *"scary,"* and went on to explain that:

> *You get off the plane and before you know it, you are living in one of the whitest places in the world, and no matter how much you try, you don't fit in […] you can't help*

> *wondering what they think every time they hear you speak in Spanish, when they listen to your accent, when it's clear that even if you look like one, you are not American.*

She mentioned that she was scorned by strangers when she committed the cultural mistake of leaving her shoes right next to the pool instead of right next to the towels. She is slightly annoyed when people questioned her Mexican nationality because she has blonde hair and pale skin. She then proceeded to generalize these encounters: *"This says more about the American culture than anyone else's and [state's name] represents such culture perfectly, the good and the bad things about it."* Despite the generalization, she noted a distinction between the students that are from *[state's name]*and the ones from other states. She thinks that classmates from the state are "*very patriotic, but know very little about their own country"* and *"less willing to listen sometimes,*" whereas out-of-state classmates are "*more open, [...] have a little bit more general knowledge of culture, even within their own country."* Some of her friends have the same ambitions as Sophia, Gabriella, and Aria to *"see the world."*

When Carly was preparing for her visit to NCAU, she was "*a little scared about [state's name]. I never really visited prior to coming to NCAU."* Besides the nervousness that can be expected from any prospective first-year student visiting a campus, she admitted that she was also uneasy because of *"all the stereotypes.*" The first visit went well: "*I noticed something different, that everyone was so happy about NCAU."* After two bad experiences with her professors regarding her placement in the wrong math class and the unsolicited change of the language of the learning management software used in another class, she felt "*kind of hurt*" and thought that "*the stereotypes are true.*" After three semesters as an undergraduate, she now thinks that the *"[stereotypes] are completely false at NCAU"* and she feels "*like a part of a community."* When inquired about this shift, she explained the following: "*I realized that some* *people are just like that. It sucks. But, there's also a lot of great people here too. I can't judge this entire university for two people.*" For her, those incidents were isolated and not representative of the larger NCAU culture.

Georgia came to NCAU following a recommendation from a private music teacher. When visiting NCAU, she had the chance to interact with several professors and students, and they *"were really welcoming."* Georgia and her mom fell in love with the mountains and the clear skies that they did not enjoy in her family apartment near Washington D.C. They also noticed that the people on campus were mostly white, but did not put much thought into it. During the interview, Georgia did not express her opinion about the Appalachian region or people before starting her classes, nor did she share her thoughts after three years in town, but she was most vocal about her opinion about the university as a whole. She identified it as a "*predominantly white institution*" and described it as a "*sour experience.*" She regretted her decision to attend NCAU because the isolation as a minoritized student at this PWI has greatly affected her mental and emotional wellness. She "*just feel[s] pretty, pretty lonely.*" Georgia did not generalize her regrets to the local community, but to PWIs in general. She asserts that a cultural fit is as important as an academic fit, and she did not find it at NCAU: "*PWIs are kind of built to help and empower white people, you know, have been made for them. And HBCUs are made for people of color. They're made for black people […]. I thought about that, even now, sometimes, like the environment is meant to for other people to thrive in."*

Jessica did have an opinion about the state. She described her experience in the state as shocking: *"I did go through culture shock a little for some bit. Mostly because everyone that I was talking to were white, but they were really Southern."* However, she did not provide a description of what being Southern means. She does not think that the local community offers options to socialize: *"I hoped that, by moving, I would have a fresh new start or have more progress. But I noticed when I was in Connecticut, there were so many more opportunities to meet other people."* Jessica moved in January 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Jessica is 28 years old—older than her classmates—and works full-time. She was excited to make friends in the virtual classroom, but "*they are not as engaged I am."* She thinks she does not have much in common with them because *"they were all majority white."* Regarding the local community, she was surprised to find *"a lot more Asian families that are living here compared to Hispanic*." Despite this element of diversity, she *"didn't feel connected, and even living in [name of the campus town], I honestly didn't feel connected."*

All the non-Appalachian residents but Georgia shared thoughts about the Appalachian stereotypes they had and how they were debunked when attending NCAU. Amber extended her perceptions to the American population at large and Georgia based her ideas on the fact that NCAU is a predominantly white institution. The in-state participants agreed in the observations about the lack of diversity and the conservatism of the state residents; however, the campus and its local community provided an oasis in the perceived lack of inclusiveness among state residents.

Theme 2: Isolation

College student development theories point out that fitting into the academic and social requirements of campus is a key component of their satisfaction and success as students (Braxton, 2000; Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The study's participants did not report special academic difficulties, and expressed an intention to finish their studies on time at NCAU. Yet, social integration was a still-pending goal for some of them. While Gabriella and Jessica have only known the university's routines in the context of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions—which indeed presented more challenging scenarios and rules for socializing—the participants with more years on campus experienced isolation even before the restrictions. By contrast, sophomore Carly and junior Sophia did not share major difficulties to adapt to campus.

Carly and Sophia shared a common background as raised in bicultural families. Carly immediately clicked with the campus, her program, and her professors. She did not have problems making new friends among classmates, sorority sisters, and the members of the student organization to which she belongs. She met her boyfriend on campus as well. Sophia maintains some friendships from high school who are also undergraduates at NCAU and made new ones in her classes and during her study abroad semester. The COVID-19 confinement at home during the Spring and Summer of 2020 caused Carly to miss campus and return as soon as she had the option, whereas Sophia realized that being at home with her parents *"just felt weird…I just felt like, confined"*. She prefers to stay in her apartment on campus. Besides these comments, they did not share any negative experience about being alone or rejected by the campus community. Both were very involved in different student organizations as well.

Katrina also belonged to a student organization, but her experience was different. Katrina arrived to NCAU from a *"very Latino"* high school and community in New Jersey. She describes herself as an introvert who had a hard time meeting new people as a first-year student, *"especially with college students, because either they're very willing to talk to you, or they're just there for class, they're not really wanting to have a whole relationship with the person that sits next to them, you know, and the classes are big."* She enrolled in Spanish classes to keep connected with her Latina background and possibly find friends: *"I knew that I was going to miss being around speaking Spanish, because I grew up with it. And so in addition to going to NCAU that's* *predominantly white, I knew I wasn't going to be hearing that much Spanish when I was here."* She made two female friends in her Spanish classes, which were much smaller than other classes. At the same time, she became an active member of an interfaith student organization. There, Katrina found long-term friends and her fiancé. Katrina's best and worst memories are related to her involvement in the organization. Despite the commonalities and intimacy she shared with the members, she felt that sometimes they could not provide the comfort she needed to offset the lack of Latinx friends. For example, she remembered feeling sad when Latinx students did not show up to the activities she planned for the organization. As she explained, the other members of the organization, all of them Anglo and one African-American, "*wouldn't understand that this was my opportunity to remind myself of home and feel understood and feel accepted.*" On the other hand, she observed that despite having met some—albeit few—Latinx students, she did not have a lot in common with them. For her, the Latinx students at NCAU are *"very one dimensional […] everybody was all about the parties and drinking.*" In reference to the perceived lack of interest from the NCAU Latinx community in religion or spirituality in general, she reflected that in those moments were "*I felt the most kind of alone."*

Of all the participants, only Gabriella, Georgia, and Katrina talked about the role of faith in their lives. Gabriella mentioned that her family is Catholic but that they do not practice; they only attend services on special occasions and major social events. Georgia and Katrina identified themselves as evangelical, but Georgia did not practice. Only Katrina indicated that spirituality and faith are important elements in her life. Her older sister belongs to a similar interfaith student organization at her college, as well. Katrina also expressed a need to share her beliefs with the student community, especially with the Latinx community. Spirituality and faith were an integral part of her identity as a student.

In-state first-year student Gabriella did not seem to have problems making friends. She arrived on campus in Fall 2020. Half of her classes were online and half of them were in-person for the first weeks of the semester. She managed to make at least one friend, if not more, in every class she attended in the business college and in the women's and gender studies program, including some Latinx students. She is not shy to start a conversation with students she thinks could be Spanish speakers. Sharing a house with her older sister and driving to her hometown over the weekends makes her feel connected with home: "*I'd rather live with my sister. She's my best friend*. […] *My dad takes very good care of my car because of that. He wants to make sure that I can come back."* She hopes to meet more people and Latinx students when classes return to normality: "*I would love to meet new students that are Latinas or Latinos. I'd love to make new friends like that."* She appreciates assignments that must be done with other classmates because they give her an opportunity to socialize. For Gabriella, making connections and networking are an important part of the college experience: *"Networking is really important. And I think the more people you know, the better you are. And that's with making connections with the students, making connections with the staff as well."* In contrast to Sophia and Carly, she remembers the COVID-19 confinement at home as very pleasant. She felt more connected to her parents and enjoyed spending time together:

> *We would cook everything we would cook three times a day, all five of us together[…]And then at night, we'd like get snacks and then we'd all watch like a Disney movie[…] And we got like really close, my relationship with my parents is very different from how it was probably like two years ago.*

As an international student, Amber did not know any other student nor understand well how colleges operate in the U.S. before her arrival. She admits that her first week on campus was so bad that she seriously thought about returning to Mexico. She was not able to attend the events planned for students for the first week because she did not have a functional phone to download the credentials: "*What am I doing here?[…] This is the worst idea ever. […] I'm getting on the next plane back home."* She did not connect with her assigned roommate, and she did not recognize anybody from her major in the dorms. She requested to change dorms and "*that completely changed everything.*" Her new dorm was populated by students from her college and she had more opportunities to run into the same people and make friends: *"It's the same people I've always had breakfast with, then you walk to school together, then you have class, then you go have lunch, then you go back to school, have more classes, then you go back, have homework, dinner together[…] I wasn't like alone anymore."* Similar to Gabriella, Amber likes to introduce herself to other Latinx students or international students. Without the immediate support of her family, Amber relies in a small group of close friends made in class when she needs immediate assistance or a place to go during college breaks.

Sophomore Aria is a commuter and does not live on campus. She does not take part in any extracurricular activities, and she usually drives home when she finishes her last class. Between classes, she likes to sit in the student union to do homework and eat what she prepared at home. She *"ha[sn]´t really met anybody at school."* Her first year, all her classes were large and she did not feel confident enough to introduce herself to people that she probably would not see after that. As Katrina, Aria described herself as shy. She does not like to interact with professors unless she has a question. In these instances, she prefers a one-to-one interaction instead of speaking up in the class, and she *"usually never developed too much of a relationship with any of them*." She knows two students from her high school who are in the same major but in different classes. She does not reach them often: "*I'm not with other students, I don't really talk to very many other* *students.*" However, Aria does have friends among students. These are foreign exchange students. She voluntary enrolled in a program to link foreign exchange students to local students to act as a kind of mentor. She did this as a first-year student and she enjoyed it: *"I do feel like there's more people that are like me who have parents who are not American who speak another language, who have different experiences."* Aria argues that she has more in common with these students than with locals. The exchange program was cancelled due to the pandemic, creating a vacuum in her life, and Aria misses this interaction. When asked about the services that the university offers to commuters, she mentioned that she knows them, she receives information through email, but the activities and services are not relevant to her. When asked about meeting Latinx students from the area, she explained that on campus, *"I'd never really met somebody who is here the same way that I am."* When the COVID-19 pandemic moved all her classes online for two semesters, she felt isolated: *"it's very alone, kind of in my room alone."*

Aria and other participants had the same feelings about studying completely online. They reported difficulties adapting to the remote and online learning environment in such a short time, but the most significant challenge was finding the motivation to keep up with classes and the feeling of being alone for extended hours. The COVID-19 pandemic also limited the organization of in-person events. The first-year students in this study had not had the opportunity to attend many events and organizations. When classes were moved online, participants expressed screen fatigue and lack of motivation: "*This last semester was a little bit more challenging, being online. And that was kind of my first like, hard semester*" (Aria); "*I didn't know how to work a lot of stuff. But I slowly got better at it got a routine. Another big issue was motivation"* (Gabriella). They preferred to wait to return to normality to be able to attend in-person to these extracurricular activities.

Georgia and Jessica's experiences with isolation are more impactful. Both of them grew up in Latinx communities and schools. Coming to NCAU as college students caused a major shift in their routines. Georgia is a junior. She recalled that when she visited NCAU and auditioned for the music program, *"students were really cool, they were very welcoming, they have students to kind of like show me around campus."* However, this first good impression did not last long. After five semesters, she "*can't wait to get out of here.*" In her music program, she is the only woman and the only person of color: "*There's not a lot of women in jazz, and it was no different in [NCAU] School of Music. And on top of that, of course, there wasn't a lot of people of color involved in jazz program. And so those first two years, I was heavily involved in that. I felt pretty isolated."* In reference to the presence of Latinx students, she continued: "*I can honestly count on my fingers how many Latinos are in the School of Music.*" She is friends with one of them. The COVID-19 pandemic forced her to isolate in her apartment, making her practices more difficult: "*It's really hard for a music education major, honestly, because a lot of what we do is interacting with others. So pretty difficult transition."* Regarding her relationship with classmates and professors, she barely had any: *"I talk when I have to, I try not to talk too often.*" She shares an apartment with other female students, but *"I don't interact with my roommates, all that often, what we do is fine, you know, kind of like small talk."* She does not feel like going out or meeting new people either.

Georgia was receiving mental health support from a university specialist. Jessica was receiving professional mental health counseling as well. Jessica had two previous unsuccessful attempts to go to college in Connecticut. She had a rough time on both family and personal levels and she did not find the support she needed. Her grades were not good enough even though she used the academic and counselling services that the institutions made available. When asked about why the help did not work, she quickly mentioned that "*I didn't have anyone to connect with me"* and *"if I had received counseling that is outside of academic work, then I would have been able to manage.*" At NCAU, she is also experiencing isolation. Jessica has been able to attend classes in person for only nine weeks; the rest of her campus experience has been remote. As an older student, she struggles to find connections with her classmates: *"I think it was because I don't know if they're not as engaged as I am.*" Her Latinx background plays an important role in her life. She proactively looked for local Latinx associations or events even before arriving to the campus, but could not find them. Once on campus, she attended a diversity day event for graduate students. The officers "*made it very informative that there's diversity[…], and there are black people, and Asians, but I didn't hear anything about Hispanic people."* Jessica thought about enrolling in Spanish classes *"so that I can have some kind of foot in the door to network with someone who is Hispanic."* She added that her previous college experiences in Connecticut and this initiation to NCAU made her feel *"like I couldn't finish because of my culture barrier."* Jessica used the university mental health center services, but she expressed the desire to have a Latina health counselor to find more connections and feel more understood: "*I just wanted to give up because it felt like I wasn't being understood in a cultural sense."*

Lack of diversity affects students' ability to make friends and find connections with classmates with whom they could have *a priori* commonalities. Katrina remembered the following when walking into a classroom: "*I feel like without even saying anything I walked in and I was loud […] I noticed my ethnicity, I just walked into a classroom and I was like, Oh my gosh, everybody looks the same […] white, blond hair, blue eyes or green eyes."* The feeling of being the odd one was even more acute for Georgia, as the only woman of color and one of the few Latinx students in the School of Music. Georgia knew before coming to campus that NCAU was a predominantly white institution, but as she shared: *"I knew what I was getting myself into, you know, because I already visited it and I did a little bit of research about it. And I'm like, Okay, yeah, this was a, obviously a PWI. Right. But I didn't realize the effect."* Being the only Black student, the only Latina student, and the only woman in her program affected her profoundly. She thought of herself as being unqualified for the program. She understated her value and talent and justified her acceptance into the program and the scholarship she received as a strategic decision from the department. Moreover, she even thought that professors gave her good grades and good feedback not for her talent, but because she was the only student from a minoritized group*:*

> *I wonder if they gave me this much money just because I'm like your little token prize, like, Hey, we have a little Latina in our studio[…], I've always wondered if I'm like, their little token to see woman of color or whatever […] he kind of treats me a little bit nicer, he tries to be a little bit more flexible. And sometimes I wonder if it's because that I'm Hispanic or whatever.*

Her mental health therapist helped her to identify these feelings as 'imposter syndrome.' Georgia does not enjoy the program anymore. While she used to perform in public, she acknowledged that "*whenever I just had to, like, do anything jazz related, that's when my stomach would turn, when my palms start being sweaty, when I would start getting like a headache. You know, it's just any time it came to that. That was when I would just, I would feel absolutely terrible."* Georgia does not even see herself as a musician anymore. Asking about her plans after graduation, she mentioned the following: "*I'm thinking about joining a program like the JET Program, or Fulbright to kind of teach English somewhere else, like maybe like South Korea, or like Japan or China, somewhere around there.*" However, her happiest and proudest moments as a student haven been related to music experiences: "*I vividly remember this one time where we were playing, I was trying very hard to learn this to call recorded on it. And so we were learning it and I was taking the lead, I thought it was really cool."*

Most of the participants looked for opportunities to engage socially and academically with students with similar interests. However, for some of these Latina undergraduates, it was difficult to find similar interests even in the Latinx community. For example, Katrina was aware that her commitment to her faith was not very popular among college students nor even among Latinx students. She went further and said that "*there's not diversity within the Latino communit*y" on campus, highlighting that Latinx were interested mostly in partying and drinking. In contrast, she perceived more heterogeneity among Anglo students:

> *There's a bunch of different types of white people, if that makes sense. Like, there's athletic white people, there's studious white people, there's white people that are into music. There's white people that are into art. There's white people that's into sciences and STEM, and veterinary, there's some in clubs for pets. And all this stuff, there's just, a wide, there's a bunch of dimensions for white people. But within the Latino population at NCAU, it's pretty much the same, like everybody's into the same thing*.

Aria was of the same opinion when said that she did not think she had a lot in common with other Latinx undergraduates and found more connections with international students: *"I think just having friends who were raised a little differently, was easier to connect with."* She also mentioned that she was not friends with all Latinx people in her hometown because she thinks that they do not have a lot in common. Jessica had problems in Connecticut as well when trying to connect with other Hispanic people:

> *My parents still retain their language and talk to other people with comfortability, whereas with me, I had trouble with that because I grew up over here, and then went through like, through the schooling in America and sometimes when I try to connect with certain Hispanic people, some people are very biased when they see me thinking that I understand them in their culture*.

The participants shared experiences and feelings related to isolation. Each one, however, has a different experience and history of success and failure. All but Carly and Sophia experienced isolation. They highlighted the relevance of making connections. The rest had difficulties in several degrees to make those connections, regardless of their status of in-state or out-state student and the impact of the pandemic in their ability to go to class and participate in activities and events. Meeting in the same classes is not sufficient to make friends among classmates. Amber highlighted the importance of running into the same people outside the classroom, like in dorms and cafeterias at lunch time. Katrina made her friends in the student association she led. Gabriella forced herself, in a way, to talk with classmates during her first semester as college student since events and after-school activities were minimized due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. The online environment makes it harder to socialize. Aria, Johanna, and Georgia seem to be the most isolated. In-state Aria does not think she has a lot of common with other students due to her self-identification as an emigrant primarily. Out-of-state Johanna is much older than her classmates and joined NCAU at the beginning of the pandemic restrictions. Finally, out-of-state junior Georgia is aware that her condition as the only Black, female Latina in her program had a negative impact in her sense of belonging.

Theme 3: [Micro]aggressions

Solórzano (2010) described microaggressions as “one form of a systemic everyday racism that are subtle, layered, and cumulative verbal and non-verbal assaults directed toward people of color that are committed automatically and unconsciously” (as cited in Huber & Cueva, 2013, p. 394). This section is divided in four subsections based on the focus and content of the attacks the participants suffered and shared: Stereotypes about Latinx ethnicity and culture; stereotypes about the Latina woman; assumptions on what a real American should be; and, tokenism.

Stereotypes about the Latinx ethnicity and culture

The four participants in this study who traced their heritage to Mexico were the ones who reported suffering more microaggressions related to assumptions about their ethnicity and culture. In casual conversations with strangers or acquaintances, Amber, the international student, often had to clarify that she was born and raised in Mexico. Amber has blonde hair, pale skin, and light-colored eyes, and so she does not fit media stereotypes of what a Mexican person should look like:

> *I have noticed that people's reaction when I say I'm international is like, ‘Oh, where are you from?’ And the minute I say, ‘I'm from Mexico,’ things change a lot [...] I'm actually from Mexico, I'm Mexican. And [she] goes, ‘Why are you white?’ I've been asked this 1000 times [...] ‘Why don't you look Mexican?’ or ‘Why do you speak English?’*

A similar experience is shared by Gabriella, who despite being born and raised in the U.S. and a native English speaker, she has been told several times that her *“English is pretty good”* and that she does not sound *“like [a] Mexican.”*

A classmate was surprised by Amber’s fluency in French. Amber commented that the classmate was not interested in when or how she learned French, but rather by the fact that a

Mexican could speak several languages: *"And she goes, if you're from Mexico, if you're from a place from Mexico, how do you speak French?."* Amber rephrased what she thought the interlocutor wanted to say: *"with all the preconceptions they have with Mexico, like, if you're from Mexico, how come you know more than us?"* Another example is Gabriella's soccer skills. She used to play competitive soccer in high school. Some people assumed that she was naturally gifted for soccer: *"people expected me to be really good just because I was Mexican."* She added: *"When I played soccer, I was good because I tried hard. I wasn´t good because I was Mexican."*

Mexican history and culture were the object of attack when assumed to be inferior—or at least not as developed as the U.S. In her undergraduate history class, Amber had to clarify that pyramids are not a typical dwelling among Mexicans, nor are donkeys the main system of transportation. She mentioned that Mexico is portrayed in the media and in people's minds as a dangerous place to live: *"I have noticed that the questions I get asked for being Mexican are very different from what Tim from Greece gets."* The questions she usually got dealt with violence and illegal drug traffic: *"Isn't that like, so dangerous? Like, does your father work with Chapo Guzman or something like that?"*

Gabriella's experiences with racist (micro)aggressions started in middle school: "I *experienced a lot of racism and a lot of discrimination because it was 2016 and that was when the presidential election started."* As the only Mexican in her school building, she took as directed to her the friends' comments about Mexican immigrants as rapists and drug dealers: "*I was just standing right there. I was like, do you guys not see me? What, would you say you hate all people that are named Kevin right in front of Kevin? Why? What did we do to you?"* The story repeated when she was a senior in high school during the 2020 presidential election: "*I got* *rid of a lot of friends."* She also mentioned that her opinions were not taken seriously because she had been all her life in the community, implying that her classmates did not see her as a real Mexican: *"I'm a U.S. born citizen. But I feel that pain with my parents and I feel that pain with my people. And I often get discredited a lot because I am light skinned."*

Stereotypes of the Latina woman

In a study of white undergraduates, Landrine (1985) found that their stereotypes of women differed significantly by race and by social class. Black women were perceived as more religious, loud, and tough, and less sensitive and educated than white women. In a similar study, Ghavami and Peplau (2012) asked psychology undergraduates from different races and ethnicities to list current cultural stereotypes of different races/ethnicities and found that, for Black women, the most commonly listed attributes included having an attitude, being loud, having a big butt, being overweight, being confident, and being dark-skinned. For Latina women, the most commonly listed attributes were being feisty, curvy, loud, attractive, good cook, and dark-skinned. At NCAU, the Latina participants were subject to these stereotypes as well.

Gabriella's body was subject to scrutiny way before, in high school. She was told that: *"[Latinas] are curvier. I'm not that curvy."* Her dark, hooded eyes made some guests in her family's business to express surprise to see what they thought was an Asian waitress: *"Wow, I've never seen an oriental person work at a Mexican restaurant."* At home, she also experienced racial comments. Nicknaming seems to be common in her family and she was called *"chinita [little Chinese girl]"* because of her eyes. Gabriella's body was policed at home as well. Her mother made comments about the clothing she wore to school: "*what are you wearing? Those are too tight. You're gonna look too suggestive.*" Gabriella said that her parents are more relaxed now, but that it is normal for Mexican parents to closely supervise and intervene in their children's affairs, even when they are older. This does not seem to bother Gabriella excessively and she pointed out that, in comparison with other Mexican families, her parents give her and her siblings a high degree of freedom.

Beyond appearance, expected attitudes and personalities were subject to scrutiny and comparisons. Gabriella's high school friends were of the opinion that *"Latinas are feistier."* Gabriella seems to be very outgoing, but she regrets having to mold her behavior according to her environment:

> *It's kind of confusing. When I'm in the States, I have to act as American as possible. And when I'm in Mexico, I have to act as Mexican as possible [...] And that's really confusing. I don't know which one is the original one. I'm adapting in [campus town name] [...] Sometimes I don't know which one I'm supposed to be.*

Jessica shared having struggles to fit in with the Latinx community because she does not look like a typical Latina. In her words: "*I don't look like the typical Hispanic. I guess the typical Puerto Rican because they have very dark skin. So I get confused sometimes that I am like Polish, from how I look."* She mentioned that *"when I try to connect with certain Hispanic people, some people are very biased when they see me, thinking that I understand them and their culture, because the way I look, very light skinned."* As Gabriella reflected about her classmates in high school rejecting her Mexican identity and background, Jessica's pale skin seems to disqualify her from being a real Latina in her local community in Connecticut.

Katrina shared similar struggles to fit in the Latinx community. When she was in high school, she felt *"less Latina"* than her Latina friends, who were outgoing and more interested in dancing than religion. Similar stereotyping was common during her years as undergraduate: "*the same stereotypes that I was judging myself or comparing myself on with my friends about, like,* *oh, you're not outgoing, or you're not spicy or fiery, those kinds of stereotypes that I was even feeding into when I was at NCAU, I noticed them even more like being projected onto me."* When she joined the student organization, the members were happy to have a Latina member; however, Katrina's personality clashed with their expectations of what a Latinx student should be. The stereotypes she mentioned were "*just personality traits like outgoing and loud and the fashion sense, and that [we] could dance."* That was what the members expected. Similar to Gabriella, Katrina found herself more conscious about how she behaved because *"when I went to NCAU that was pretty much all what people saw me for."*

(Micro)aggressions related to expectations about the Latina body and character happened not only when the participants were in predominantly white spaces on campus and high schools, but also within the Latinx community and in their own homes. Katrina and Gabriella highlighted how the lack of diversity made their bodies stand out in a classroom and be the object of unsolicited comments about physical appearance and personality. Katrina also shared how she and her Latina friends policed their appearances to fit into the expected mold of how a Latina woman should look like. Gabriella's wardrobe was controlled at home to prevent the manifestation of the sensual Latina body. Regulating the Latina body serves two purposes. On one hand, to accommodate to the expected stereotypes of the brown body, but on the other hand, to escape the concurrent burden of the brown body as symbol of sensuality and sexuality.

How to be (or not to be) American

Amber is still getting used to American socialization practices. She is afraid of saying or doing something that is culturally inappropriate, like "*leaving your shoes right next to the pool instead of right next to the towels."* However, one of the (micro)aggressions that proved to be traumatic happened in her choir class. The choir was invited to perform the U.S. National

Anthem at a sporting event. During rehearsals, the instructor suggested that, if they agree, the members could put the right hand on the heart while singing. Amber politely declined the offer. The instructor showed disappointment and remarked that because of her, no one would do it now, since all the choir members should look uniform while performing. After a short discussion where Amber explained that she would not feel comfortable showing allegiance to the American flag, *"[the instructor] was like, Alright, you don't want to be here? So, if you don't want to be here, like just don't sing, it's fine. I won't jeopardize your grade about it."* Amber felt embarrassed and *"cried for hours."* She talked about the incident with a singing professor. He supported her and let her know that she could refuse to sing the anthem the same way some people who are not Christians refuse to sing Christmas songs. "Y*ou can file a lawsuit,"* the professor reminded her. Amber did not want to go to that extreme: "*you know, it always ends up in lawsuits.*" She did not intend to cause trouble for the choir instructor, who was a graduate assistant. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the performance was cancelled and Amber only attended a few more classes in person. She felt relieved. Yet, her attitude toward the class changed after the incident: "*no hello, no good morning. I don't care."* She concluded that, to avoid a similar problem in the future, *"I will be saying that I don't want to sing the national anthem. I will say like, No, I don't sing any American anthem."*

Carly had to fight the assumption that being of Mexican ancestry implies lack of academic preparedness or rigor. Carly narrated two incidents she suffered during her first semester. In one of her science classes, the professor set the interface of the educational tool they used into Spanish for her. Carly immediately requested the professor to change it back to English. She was surprised that the faculty member made the decision without checking her preferences first. The second incident happened when she was enrolled in "*what I thought is like* *a segregated math class because it was only minority students."* When she asked the reason for her placement, she was told that this class was usually intended for students of *"low socioeconomic status, a first generation student, or [with low] test scores."* Her SAT score was in the range to qualify for her assigned placement, but she did not fit the rest of the criteria, nor was this option discussed with her before enrolling. Thus, she and her family thought that the people in charge saw her Spanish last name and directly enrolled her in that class: "*that's why I'm just assuming they're like, [last name]. Yep. Get in there!"*

Tokenism

Tokenism is a concept that arose from theories of group composition which states that members of a minoritized group experience negative effects in performance, self-esteem, and satisfaction as a consequence of their position as a minority (Kanter, 1977, 1993). The singularity and distinctiveness of the member of the minoritized group provide both benefits and handicaps at the same time. The participants shared to be objects of tokenism.

One of the manifestations of tokenism is the expectation for minoritized individuals to act as experts in issues related to the gender/race/ethnicity they represent (Niemann, 2020). Amber felt compelled to clarify misconceptions about her country and culture when the history professor did not do so. A related manifestation is the erroneous idea that minoritized individuals act and speak in representation of their own group, becoming a spokesperson. The participants expressed this thought during the interviews in different ways; first, when trying to define what a Latina student is. They struggled to list defining characteristics and experiences and argued that Latinas do not form a homogenous group, but rather each one of them had different experiences and backgrounds. Even though their identity as Latinas is important to them, it is not the element that they highlight when they introduce themselves. As Katrina explains: "*you're proud of being*

Latina, you're proud. And you want people to see that, and you don't want people to ignore it. But also, you don't want to be known for only that." Some of the participants insisted on emphasizing their uniqueness, such as Amber's obsession with unicorns or Gabriella's interest in Korean pop. They want people to know about it also. Katrina further analyzes the expectation to act as a spokesperson. She explained that sometimes in her student organization she was not seen as an individual, but rather as the representative of the Latinx community. As such, she internalized her expected role, producing discomfort:

> *I felt like a lot of pressure speaking for the entire Latino culture, because I was scared that my experience is not the same as everybody's, like every Latino person has experienced. So, in that organization, I was viewed as the Latina who, I feel like was representing, which is kind of cool. But also, scared, because that's kind of heavy, 'cause I was like,' What if I say something that doesn't apply to somebody else?'*

Georgia was even more aware of her uniqueness as the only non-white Latina woman in her program. She even called herself the 'token Latina': "*I wonder if they gave me this much money just because I'm like [your] little token prize, like, 'hey, we have a little Latina in our studio. Look at that!' I've always wondered if I'm like, their little token, to see women of color or whatever*." Georgia questioned her value as a student and her talent as a musician. She did not have those thoughts as a high schooler, but at a PWI, she distrusted recognition and compliments given by faculty members or peers. The environment in which she was immersed caused her to develop imposter syndrome. When asked if she thought she was discriminated against, she replied with the following explanation:

> *Actually, you know what? Yeah, I think about it. So, it's really funny, because when you think about treating differently, you would think: Oh, they treat you poorly. And I*

> *wonder, with my current teacher, now, you know, I have a friend in the studio. Her name is Haki [pseudonym]. She is white, and she's a girl. So for whatever reason, my teacher doesn't treat her all that well. And I've always wondered about this, but he doesn't treat me quite the same way. And when I think he kind of treats me a little bit nicer, he tries to be a little bit more flexible. And sometimes I wonder if it's because that I'm Hispanic, he doesn't kind of work me up, like tippy toes around […] I wonder if he is trying actively to not be mean towards me because I'm the only person of color in my studio.*

The participants in this study experienced different types of (micro)aggressions due to their condition as Latinas. For some of them, the NCAU campus was one more context in which they were object of stereotyping, as Gabriella illustrated in her experiences while working in the family's restaurant and the presidential elections. (Micro)aggressions are suffered at home and in the Latinx community, as Gabriella, Katrina, and Jessica related. For others, interactions in the campus were the first time they faced obstacles because of their ethnicity. Carly and Amber shared that commonality despite having opposite backgrounds: Carly does not have much contact with the Latinx community, whereas international student Amber left Mexico City to pursue a higher education in a PWI in the Appalachia region. Interestingly enough, the only one who did not share (micro)aggression incidents was in-state bicultural Sophia.

Theme 4: Support

Under this theme, this section deals with the participants' experiences with formal and informal support received in their journey as undergraduates. The section is further divided into two general themes: the support received from the educational institution on one hand, and the support received from family and friends on the other.

Institutional support

This theme refers to the elements and practices that the institution offers to support the fulfillment of students' academic and social expectation of college. The interviews centered around recruitment and admission processes, financial aid, the role of faculty and classmates, and finally, participation in student organizations, especially in Latinx student organizations.

Recruitment efforts

Of the eight participants, three were in-state residents, four were from northeastern states, and one was an international student. For the in-state residents, in-state universities were the logical option from a financial point of view. The three residents decided to attend NCAU for a combination of reasons such as proximity, financial aid offered, range of majors, and previous experience from a family member. The three participants qualified for the merit-based state scholarship, which provides in-state high school seniors with up to four years of financial help when they pursue post-secondary studies at eligible in-state institutions. Additionally, NCAU is Sophia's parents' workplace. Gabriella visited other major four-year institutions in the state as part of her exploration as a high school senior, but she opted for NCAU for its bigger size and the possibility to have more experiences. For out-of-state Georgia, the choice of NCAU arrived after considering a shortlist of recommendations made by private music teachers during high school. For the other four participants, NCAU was not even on their minds. Amber considered NCAU after having a positive experience with one of the voice professors while on vacation. Carly and Katrina received unsolicited marketing material in their mailboxes and decided to explore the university's website. Jessica moved to the campus to be closer to her boyfriend and found a job at NCAU. Her boss encouraged her to enroll and finish her degree. For all the participants, NCAU was an attractive financial option. All but Katrina received some type of scholarship and/or discount.

Amber, Carly, Katrina, and Georgia had positive experiences visiting the campus during their senior year as high schoolers. Amber, Georgia, and Katrina were impacted by the nature that surrounds campus and the local community. Amber, Carly, and Georgia mentioned positive interactions with faculty members and students at the time. They could experience a typical day as an undergraduate. Amber was impressed by the generosity of one of her current voice professors, who gave her a free-of-cost master class while she was vacationing in the state just before her senior year in high school student. Carly *"got to interact with a few biology professors and also a few prospective students and also current students at the time, and really got to know what it would look like to be a student at NCAU on that day."* Georgia followed the advice of her teachers when selecting NCAU for the quality of the music professors. During her audition, "*students were really cool, they had students to show me around campus, which I thought was really nice. And, yeah, I just thought it was a pretty decent school* […] *The students were really welcoming.*" Carly noticed that *"everyone was so happy. Like it was the first university where I went where it looked like the students were actually enjoying their lives and like happy."* On campus visits and interactions with prospect faculty members and classmates proved to be an important part of the participants' decision to attend NCAU.

Financial support

All participants but Katrina received scholarships and/or financial aid. Aria, Gabriella, and Sophia received an in-state academic-based scholarship. They expressed that having good grades is important for them in order to keep the scholarship. Sophia also received additional help as dependent of university employees, and Jessica also received financial support as an employee. Amber, Carly, and Georgia received different funds from their respective colleges. Along with a good first impression when visiting the campus, Georgia committed to NCAU because it was the one that offered her the highest scholarship. Some of the participants relied on loans (for complete funding in Katrina's case, the first two years in Georgia's case, and a small loan as a first-year student in Aria's case). Jessica supports herself with a full-time job and a Pell Grant; Gabriella works regularly for her family's business for extra money. Aria also had this option, if wanted. Georgia was a student worker this year and hopes to renew the appointment next year. Amber, Carly, Katrina, and Sophia did not work. Jessica was the only participant with a full-time position that sometimes left her too tired to study, even though she was also the only part-time student. Of all of them, Sophia is the one who will graduate debt-free. She wanted to take advantage of her proximity to campus and her scholarships; for her, finishing her undergraduate studies debt-free was a priority: "*that is probably the number one reason why I take NCAU because I did not want to go into debt for my undergrad, considering I knew I wanted to get more than an undergrad.*" For Katrina, how to repay the loans is an important issue: "*My parents didn't want me to have a job because they wanted me to focus on my studies [...] we are all just like super-duper in debt."*

College enrollment process

All participants but Katrina found the enrollment process easy and completed it online. Carly applied to several universities and used the Common Application to streamline the process. She also mentioned that NCAU did not require an essay as part of the application process, which reduced her stress. Gabriella and Sophia spent around 30 minutes completing it and did it by themselves. Aria, Carly, Gabriella, Katrina, and Sophia have older siblings who were also college students and helped to fill out the forms. Katrina found the application and enrollment process stressful and complicated. She is a first-generation student and could not get much help from her older sister, who was at college out-of-state at the time. Specifically, she mentioned having problems understanding what she was required to send, and that the wording used too many acronyms and few explanations:

> *The vocabulary that they used was kind of catered towards people that have already been around, this kind of language […] the things that they would say and reference or the documents were so specific, and they wouldn't really explain them. So I had to do so much extra research to figure out what it is that they're talking about. And then once I figured that out on my own, then I would have to go see what they say to do with that.*

These comments apply to the application process and the financial aid process. Katrina also was scared when she arrived on campus as an undergraduate for the first time*: " I was so scared that I missed something or I just didn't know that I had to do something […] that I was going to have all my bags packed, and I was going to be ready to move in and somebody was going to be like, 'we have no record of you' like 'who are you'."*

Role of faculty and classmates

This subsection deals specifically with experiences surrounding direct support received from faculty and classmates, regardless of their race/ethnicity. The participants had both positive and negative experiences.

Carly appreciated the encouragement and attention that faculty offered her: *"The people and professors I have met here have taught me I don't need to feel down because I don't know something, I just need to work to understand."* All the participants checked in with their advisors for academic issues. Carly's advisor is *"very helpful with picking out classes."* Katrina did not know that she could take advantage of her proficiency in Spanish and declared a minor in

Spanish after talking with her advisor: *"my advisor told me, 'if you want to graduate early, you can claim those 12 credits that you tested out of Spanish.*" She was able to graduate one semester earlier and reduce the final cost. Interested in psychology, she did some research and made some academic decisions on her own. She later changed her minor from Art to Spanish to be more suitable for graduate school. However, she admitted that she should have checked with her advisor first to find good accompanying minors instead of relying exclusively on her online findings. For first-year student Gabriella, one of the professors is already making a difference in her experience. As a bicultural and bilingual student, she was invited by one professor to be part of a 'virtual study abroad project' with students from another country and to attend a student club meeting the professor was supervising. She also thinks that this professor is doing a great job with being inclusive: *"she really stresses on stuff like that."* This professor's interests are related to gender in business and business communication. Gabriella and Sophia shared a special connection with professors that value their singularities.

Professors and advisors are the main source of information for the participants when they had an academic question. Even Sophia, whose parents work for the university, preferred to check first with her advisor when she had academic questions. Georgia's feelings of isolation significantly limited her interaction with professors and classmates to when it was strictly necessary, which in turn, probably intensified such feelings. Aria thinks that "*classes are pretty fast paced; you don't have time to even ask the person next to you a question sometimes. I mean, the professors are just lecturing, and there's not much time for interaction with other people.*" General first-year classes are usually very large and with students from different majors. Aria has a shy personality and went through these classes without having really met people: *"I was in class, I just kind of keep to myself."* Concerning professors, she remarked: "*I've also never really* *met very many of my professors very well.*” Sophia and Katrina took classes in the Spanish department and they talked very highly of one of the faculty members, also Latinx: “*Carlos [pseudonym] was probably my favorite professor that I had. But of the classes that I have done at the University, and the Spanish department, I really enjoyed. Yeah, I really liked Carlos's class, I took both of his classes”* (Sophia). Thay said that he was probably one of . Gabriella has the chance to interact with the former dean of her college, also from Mexican ancestry, which causes her a great impression: *“We could interact and we could talk about our different experiences. A lot of the stuff that he said, I could relate to.”* Katrina recalls the following:

> *I really, really enjoyed my Spanish minor just because, once every semester, I had one class to look forward to that reminded me of home. So there's specifically a professor, Carlos, I don't actually even remember his last name because everybody just called him Carlos. But I had him for three classes of my five or six classes for my Spanish minor. He really made stuff feel home. I remember, just being really excited for his classes, because he reminded me of home*.

Faculty are valued not only for their content and academic expertise, but for how they interact, manage, and solve students’ problems in the classroom. The incident about singing the U.S. national anthem changed Amber’s impression of her graduate assistant choir teacher. Amber did not complain about the matter of the request, but rather the graduate student’s reaction to her rejection. Amber felt embarrassed and humiliated, and she attributed it directly to the graduate student’s actions and words. Amber looked for formal support from her singing professor, the same one that attracted her to NCAU. She acknowledged she felt uncomfortable the next day of class and she was thankful that the classes were moved online soon after that.

For Gabriella, however, it was important to make a friend in each one of her classes. She did so while her classes were still face-to-face and also started to make connections with some of her professors. The COVID-19 pandemic restrictions moved the majority of classes online, limiting the interactions that foster engagement. Aria mentioned that *"this last semester [Fall 2020] was a little bit more challenging, being online."* It took time and some bad grades for Gabriella to get used to the new format and the changes on the syllabus. She would have appreciated more flexibility from professors and classes to help smooth the transition.

Classmates are a valuable source of support. Carly went to them for advice about future classes and professors. Gabriella highlighted the importance of *"making connections with the students."* She made sure to have a close classmate in every class with whom she could check things in and outside the classroom. Classmates were a major source of support for Amber after the choir incident: *"everyone told me I should report [the instructor] to the Dean."* She received support from classmates in her music classes, yet, the environment was different when she was in a general education class with students from other majors and with a professor with whom she did not have much opportunity for interaction.

Access to information and student services

Gabriella, Carly, and Aria mentioned her first-year seminar class as a channel to familiarize themselves with services and to start meeting people. Aria appreciated that in her first-year seminar class *"it was all students from my major and my School of Agriculture. And that really forced us to meet other students and I met some other nutrition students, they made you do activities in group work."* The university has two commuter lounges for students like Aria. The service organizes regular social activities for commuters. Aria has not used these services yet, but she receives updates via email. Talking about student services in general, Gabriella mentioned that *"while I know those services are available to me, I don't know how to get to them."* Only Sophia mentioned having used student services, specifically, the Career Services and the Writing Center. Katrina and Jessica, however, did not know where to look for academic help besides their advisors. Georgia and Jessica used the free-of-charge mental health services that the university provides students to cope with their feelings of isolation; however, research shows that both are exceptions.

Carly and Sophia seemed to have the most knowledge of what the university offers to students. Senior Sophia's parents worked for the university and her older brother had just graduated from NCAU. She also knows where to find information on the website. Sophomore Carly shared that she had access to this knowledge through their membership in different student organizations. Graduate Katrina, however, expressed that she was not aware of all the services that the university offered to students even though she held a leadership position in her student organization. One reason for this difference could be that Katrina was a first-generation student and her social capital seemed to be lower than that of Carly and Sophia.

Access to the right information and services is crucial even before a student steps on campus for the first time. Aria, Gabriella, and Sophia were in-state residents but mentioned dissimilar awareness of scholarships available to them. Aria discovered the day of her graduation that she was the recipient of some kind of financial aid from the College of Agriculture. As far as she knew, neither she nor her teachers applied for it. She thought these were automatic grants to every first-year student because two of her classmates also received them. When asked if she was aware of any other scholarship to which she could have access, her answer was negative. Yet Sophia's tuition, also in-state, was fully covered by scholarships. A closer and transparent collaboration between Aria’s high school and the university might have helped her to apply to other scholarships.

Latinx student organizations

Student organization involvement has shown to be an important component of collegiate success for Latinx and African American students at PWIs (McClure, 2006). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, the participants who were first-and-second-year students did not have the opportunity to attend many of them. Even though some events were moved online, participants expressed screen fatigue and lack of motivation. They preferred to wait to return to normality to attend these co-and-extra-curricular activities in-person. Some of the participants who were sophomores and of a higher rank at the time of the interview were actively involved in student organizations before the pandemic restrictions. Katrina was an officer in her interreligious organization; Carly was a member of the student government and was involved in a project in partnership with NASA. Sophia was involved in a national and community organization. Amber acknowledged the importance of attending the campus events to meet new people after she missed the events planned for the first week of classes as a first-year student. On the other hand, commuter Aria did not participate in any extra-curricular activities. She wanted to focus on her studies, but she has in mind to be more active in a student organization related to her academic field in her last two years as undergraduate.

The university listed five organizations aimed at Latinx students. Only Gabriella and Katrina were aware of them. Gabriella knew of one of them because her older sister, a graduate from NCAU, was part of it. Katrina contacted them to invite their members to attend activities sponsored by her religious organization, without much success. This study tried to contact these organizations to know more about their activities and members, but only one of them replied to explain that there was a lack of activity because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It seems that they are in a stand-by position, waiting for college-wide face-to-face classes and activities to continue with their activities. This may explain why Jessica could not find information about them; however, the rest of participants, who were sophomores and of higher rank at the time of the interview, were not aware of their existence. Carly, for example, mentioned that she followed *"bulletin board postings, school emails, and social media"* but she did not recall any announcement about Latinx student organizations or activities. Jessica mentioned that she tried to look for them on the university website without success. The lack of awareness implies that these organizations need to increase their visibility on campus. Katrina was the one with more chances to interact with other Latinx students, but *"first of all, there are hardly any Latinos."* This absence hit her hard. Katrina found good friends in her religious organization, but she longed for friendship with other Latinx students to "*remind me of home and feel understood and feel accepted.*"

Family and friends' support

The eight participants remarked on the important role that family and friends' support had on their success as students. This type of support is grouped under three categories: financial support, emotional support, and social and cultural capital.

Financial support

All participants but Jessica relied on scholarships and their parents' support while in college. As first-generations students, navigating financial options might seem strenuous. Conversations about financing education were had before enrolling in college. In Katrina's case, they decided that the cost of financing out-of-state tuition entirely with loans was worth it to give her a good college experience and concentrate on finishing in four years. Regardless the economic situation, the participants appreciated their parents' effort. The socioeconomic status of the participants is diverse: Gabriella and Aria's parents own businesses; Sophia's parents work for the university; Carly's father is in the military; and Georgia, Jessica and Katrina's families are blue-collar workers. Aria acknowledged all the diverse ways their parents were economically contributing, such as buying a used car for her, but specifying the following: "*it is his car. Well, he has his own car. I mean, I guess technically it's my car. But they're the ones that pay for it."* Sophia, Aria, and Gabriella agreed with their parents on the best way to finance education, and they decided to take advantage of in-state tuition and their geographical proximity to NCAU. Sophia's family probably could have afforded out-of-state college pursuits for her and her brother; however, they decided to keep that option for graduate studies and finance a room in one of the dorms first, and in an apartment later, to live on campus despite the fact that she could easily commute. For the out-of-state participants, the only one who did not look for scholarships and relied completely on loans was Katrina. When asked about the decision process, she commented that she and her older sister did not limit their choices when considering colleges and universities. Katrina acknowledged that *"I'm definitely paying the price for it now, because the only way that I'm getting through college is like through student loans [...] we are all just like super-duper in debt."*

Emotional support

All the participants mentioned that college aspirations were always a theme in their homes. Katrina commented that, when looking for houses to settle in New Jersey, her parents moved to their current neighborhood because the K-12 system was better than the other options they were considering: *"they came here for us, education was very important to them."* All of the interviewees have older siblings who went to college first, except Amber, who is the oldest.

Their positive experiences smoothed the way for the participants. Aria, for example, cited her sister as an example: "*I think my sister kind of set the work for that everybody was going to go to college, I think we all kind of followed in her footsteps."* Katrina and Gabriella's older sisters helped them with the enrollment process. Katrina mentioned that she could not ask their parents for help because they did not know how to manage the process. For the majority of these participants, parents had to trust their daughters' initiatives and decisions about college. This trust is an important factor for the participants. As Aria said: *"I think my parents really trusted me with everything, they just kind of knew that I was going to go to college, they weren't worried about anything."*

Carly makes sure to keep her parents updated about her progress: *"Definitely, both of my parents, they're very, very involved in my college education."* Amber's father's opinion about NCAU was important for her. When she returned to NCAU for an audition, she requested her father to be present. Georgia's and Katrina's mothers let them know that they liked the NCAU campus when they visited it together. The participants appreciated their parents' support when visiting campuses. They shared their daughters' excitement. As Katrina described:

> *So if I told them, oh, I scheduled a visit, can we go? Can you drive me here? They were like yes! Let's go! And if I showed excitement, they were like, yeah! they bought a bumper sticker for the car, you know? So, whatever they could do to help me, like, stay excited.*

All the participants communicated often with their parents. Aria is a commuter; therefore, she sees them every day. Sophia and Gabriella live on campus and visit their parents as often as they want to or need to. For the out-of-state students, visits were limited to the college official breaks. Technology allows them to keep in touch. Carly has regular communication with her parents: *"I make sure to call my parents at least every other day."* Georgia does the same and calls her brother frequently as well. However, the conversational topics were different for each participant. Whereas Carly shared a lot of details about her life as student, Jessica and Georgia were much more reserved. Both of them felt isolated and found hard to find happiness in their tasks and routines. Georgia's parents are divorced. She felt closest to their mother, but:

> "*I try not to talk to my mom too much about it, mainly because I just don't think she quite knows how to support me in that aspect."* Jessica is also reluctant to share her struggles with her parents: "*No, I don't want to worry them. I think they're more worried of me being here, because I am far away from them."*

Despite this lack of understanding, all participants' parents agreed with their daughters' choice to leave home for postsecondary studies, seemed to have a good relationship with them, and gave them a high level of independence. When questioning their plans for the future, all of the participants expressed the will to continue with graduate studies and/or to start working wherever they find a good opportunity. All of them contemplate moving out to other states, and for Amber and Aria, even moving to Europe or to Mexico, respectively.

Friends are also important players in the participants' experiences. All of them recalled having good friends during high school and stated the desire to make new friends while in college. The outcomes, however, have been different. Some of Aria's and Sophia's high school (Anglo) classmates were attending NCAU as well. Sophia still had connections with them whereas Aria admitted that, despite even being in the same program, she did not have much contact with them. The pandemic restrictions were not an obstacle for first-year student Gabriella to meet new people. Amber relied in several of her classmates who were also friends. Katrina and Carly met friends among the members of the student organizations to which they belong. Jessica, however, does not have friends nor any close relations with any of her classmates.

However, her supervisor encouraged her to keep studying: “*my supervisor and director were very supportive, and encouraged me to make sure if I was okay, they always check up on me.”* Georgia’s circle of connection was reduced to six friends: four are high school classmates studying in other towns, only two are students at NCAU and are in other majors.

Social and cultural capital

Knowledge of and access to social networks that help navigate the education system is what Bourdieu (1977) first called cultural and social capital and Yosso (2006) defined as one’s network of people and community resources in which peer and social connections offer critical emotional support. As it was mentioned in other sections, most of the participants relied in older siblings or professors to navigate through college. All of them showed independence, but, when they encountered a problem, they reacted differently. Carly’s reaction to her placement in the wrong math class and the unsolicited program interface in the Spanish language was to go and talk directly with the professors in charge and her advisor. When the advisor could not help her with the math class, she went to speak with the dean of the college. Amber did not know exactly what to do and vented with her friends and a close professor. She refused to make an official complaint.

If Carly checked in and shared issues closely related to college with her parents, Gabriella had difficulties sharing her college experiences: *“every time I learn something new, I try to tell my parents about it. And they're like, ‘Huh, that's great. That's great, sweetie,’ but they don't really listen.”* Gabriella explained that even though she was excited to share new facts with her parents, they were not very active in the conversation because they lack the knowledge and experience; yet, “*at least they're listening to me talk.*”. Moreover, she continued justifying their reaction and restating all the sacrifices made:

> *My parents, they're super hard working, my dad was an immigrant. My grandpa, my grandma, they were immigrants, a lot of my family were immigrants. And they worked very hard to get where they are today [...] my dad is very proud of us. My mom's super supportive in anything we do, really. I have pretty great parents.*

The participants' families believe in education as a social mobility tool and acknowledge the different starting points that they and their parents have. Jessica said: "*I want to do more for myself and for my family [...], we were low-class. So we were struggling a lot. And I think that was the eye opener for me that I need to do better with my life if I want to give my future family a happier lifestyle."* These parents also agreed with their daughter choices regarding college issues. Georgia was indecisive between becoming a veterinarian or pursuing a degree in music. Some relatives were excited about the veterinary degree: "*They're like, Oh, my gosh, you're gonna have so much money. Veterinary is such a good career."* However, her mother "*was the main person who was kind of like advocating for me and she was like, she doesn't have to support anybody by herself*." Likewise, Katrina and her sister got the green light to attend out-of-state universities far from home and incurring in debt. Sophia, Aria, and Gabriella's decision to study close to home was a personal decision based on financial practicality rather than imposed by their parents. Sophia had the option to live independently on campus or to stay at home and have a car instead. Aria commutes to reduce expenses but she is not required to work in the family's business to cover other expenses.

Gabriella was the one who talked most about her relationship with her parents. She recalled being policed about clothing options in high school and not being allowed to date until she was 16 years old. She thinks that her parents were not very *"cariñosos" [affectionate]* with her and her siblings, but the mobility restriction imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring

2020 forced the family to stay at home and positively changed their family dynamics. In her words:

> *During quarantine, they started changing a lot […] we got really close, my relationship with my parents is very different from how it was two years ago. My dad used to be very macho, alpha male kind of guy. They're showing their love more. Like, I don't know, he kissed my sister on the head, on the forehead the other day. And I was like, Wow!*

Going to college allowed first her sister, and now her, to gain more independence. She is willing to drive home the weekends to help with the business, if needed. However, when they are at home, they follow their parents' rules. This and Aria's acknowledgement that the car she uses is paid for and maintained by her parents are examples that illustrate an internal sense of family hierarchy in which the participants respect their parents' authority and position at home.

The findings in this section reflect the need to approach the Latina identity by taking into consideration the multiple elements and manifestations that conform such identity. This multiplicity cannot be constrained to physical appearance, country of origin, languages spoken at home, or ethnicity of close friends; rather it is one that relies most heavily on experiences and contexts. Research has shown that the level of ethnic identification plays a role in the academic experiences of Latinxs in PWIs (Flores Niemann, Romero, & Arbona, 2000; Telzer & Vazquez Garcia, 2009). Thus, the Discussion chapter aims to help to understand this intersection of race, gender, and ethnicity for these Latina undergraduates in the Appalachian context.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The discussion chapter is divided in two sections, each one dedicated to answer one of the two research questions that guided this study. For the first research question: *How do Latina undergraduates perceive their experiences at a four-year Predominately White Institution in North Central Appalachia?,* the discussion will analyze the themes laid out in the previous chapter by making connections between the participants' experiences as Latinas. For the second research question: *How does Latina undergraduates' identity inform their experiences at a four-year Predominately White Institution in North Central Appalachia?,* the discussion will use Gloria Anzaldúa's concepts of Borderlands and Mestiza consciousness to interpret the students' insights and experiences.

Research question 1: How do Latina undergraduates perceive their experiences at a four-year Predominately White Institution in North Central Appalachia?

The findings chapter grouped the experiences in four big categories: Identity, isolation, (micro)aggressions, and support. These themes, however, are profusely interrelated. When the students explained their feelings of isolation and loneliness, one cannot avoid making connections to their singularity as Latinas in a PWI to explain the presence or absence of the sense of belonging to the campus and to the Latinx community. Likewise, some of the incidents about the institutional support received are related to the connections made with specific professors, staff, and administrators of Latinx ancestry, and to the (lack of) services and programs targeted to Latinx students. Even the (micro)aggressions, which per definition deal with race, gender, and ethnicity issues, are experienced differently according to the students' identification with the Latinx community and their level of social acculturation and assimilation to the mainstream Anglo environment at NCAU.

Identity

Several studies highlight that one of the factors that affects success in college is the fit between the individual student's characteristics and the dominant characteristics of individuals on campus (Braxton, 2000; Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Holland & Holland, 1973; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Strange & Banning, 2001). The transition model created by Tinto (1993) posits that detachment from former contexts facilitates the integration of students to their new college life. Yet, current scholars agree that minoritized students should not leave behind their cultural roots in order to succeed in college (Gonzalez & Morrison, 2016). Ethnicity, race, gender, and sexual orientation are elements subject to individual and others' judgments, ultimately shaping the student's social identity as well (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010; McEwen, 2003b).

Torres (1999, 2003) developed a theoretical framework to study the ethnic identity development of Latinx college students, wherein the researcher classified students as Anglo-Oriented, Bicultural-Oriented, Hispanic-Oriented, and Marginal-Oriented based on their degree of ethnic identity and acculturation to the mainstream Anglo environment of a PWI. Acculturation is understood as "a multidimensional process consisting of the confluence among heritage-cultural and receiving-cultural practices, values, and identifications" (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010, p. 237). Ethnic identity is understood as the person's social identity within a larger context based on membership in a cultural or social group (Bernal, Knight, Ocampo, Garza & Cota, 1993; Phinney, 1991). In Torres's model, a student with a high level of acculturation and a high level of ethnic identity has a Bicultural Orientation, indicating that they can, and prefer to, function competently in both Hispanic and Anglo cultures. A student with a high level of acculturation and a low level of ethnic identity has an Anglo Orientation, indicating a preference of functioning within Anglo culture. A student with a low level of acculturation and high level of ethnic identity has a Hispanic Orientation, in which they prefer to function within Hispanic culture. Finally, a student with low levels of acculturation and ethnic identity is not able to function adequately within Hispanic or Anglo cultures. Carly and Sophia showed indications of an Anglo-Oriented profile; Gabriella and Katrina showed different degrees of a Bicultural-Oriented profile. Aria, Georgia, and Jessica, however, showed a much more Hispanic-Oriented profile, with varying degrees of acculturation and ethnic identity.

Carly and Sophia grew up in an Anglo community, attended high schools with a predominantly white student population, their friends were Anglo, and both see their futures in the U.S. Both described their families as bicultural, but Carly shows a more strongly Anglo orientation whereas Sophia leans more toward a bicultural-oriented profile. Both noticed the lack of diversity on campus but it did not represent an issue for them. Carly mentioned she did not pay attention to the ethnicity or race of people when looking for friends: "*I don't really seek like meeting certain groups of people or Latinos, Hispanics, just if I do, I instantly feel kind of, cool!".* These students were used to having entirely white teaching staff. One can say that the transition to the atmosphere of a PWI was not hard for them. The fact that academia is still a white-male domain in terms of actors, sources of knowledge, distribution of power, practices, processes, and beliefs (Acker, 1990, 2012; Carter-Sowell, Vaid, Stanley, & Petitt, 2019; Collins, 2002; Wooten, 2019) might have contributed to Carly and Sophia's smooth transition to NCAU.

Moving towards a more Hispanic profile are Gabriella and Katrina. Both show a bicultural orientation yet with stronger connections with their Latinx backgrounds. They looked for opportunities to strength this connections while in college. Just graduated Katrina missed these connections, and first-year Gabriella is eager to find them at NCAU. Both expressed the struggling of having to navigate between two cultures and identities, and juggling between how they see themselves and how other people see them. Social identities are often viewed as an individual's personally held beliefs about self in relation to social groups and the ways one expresses that relationship (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010; McEwen, 2003b). In a way, it is a compromise between internal and external perspectives. Katrina expressed the disappointment of being seen exclusively as the fixed category of "a Latina", by disregarding individualities: *"when I went to NCAU that was pretty much all what people saw me for"*. Gabriella expressed her internal struggle when trying to accommodate different expectations: "*The way I present myself is very different from where I go, […] So it gets, it gets exhausting and it gets confusing. I don't know what I'm supposed to be playing that day*." These comments were made when explaining how she acts when she is Mexico visiting family and friends, in the U.S. with relatives, or in an Anglo environment, concluding that *"I've gotten really good at adapting to things and I don't want to adapt anymore. I want to be an original version of me."*

Gabriella and Katrina not only expressed concerns about how non-Latinx people understand their identity, but they, along with Aria and Jessica, also reflected on how they situated themselves within the category of Latinas. Aria and Jessica indicated a strong Hispanic-oriented profile as well, according to Torres' model. Aria and Jessica provided examples of internal unfitness. Aria mentioned that she did not find commonalities with other Latinx people who have been in the country longer than she and her family have, and that she feels more comfortable with international students, regardless their country of origin. Despite that Aria came to the US when she was 7 years old and one can say that she grew up in the US, she did not consider herself immersed in the Anglo culture or in the Latinx community. When prompted to identify herself, she did not use the terms Latina or immigrant either. She used the term “foreign”:

> *I think I haven't had a lot of the experiences that a lot of immigrants, even younger immigrants have had. I think I would just identify as foreign. But immigrant, I've never really thought too much about it. I would just say foreign. I'm not from here. And I don't look from here. But I don't have trouble finding my way around here. I also don't have trouble understanding the people I know.*

These comments imply that Aria does not feel comfortable in the category of Latinx, as generally understood as people living in the U.S. with a Hispanic background. For Aria, this categorization was imposed, not acquired. She mentioned to not find commonalities with other Latinx members of the community. She feels different from them. As a first-generation family, she stated that her immigration history did not have similarities with those of other Latinx people. She feels as a foreigner among them as well. The Latinx ethnicity, as a social construct, is created and assigned under Anglo terms and Aria does not agree with them. On the contrary, Jessica identifies herself as a Latina and as an inland American. As a Puerto Rican, she and her family had the opportunity to mingle with other peers. However, the Latinx community in which she longs to fit is the one that rejects her: “*I don't look like the typical Hispanic[...]“when I try to connect with certain Hispanic people, some people are very biased when they see me thinking that I understand them and their culture, because the way I look, very light skinned.”* This rejection is shared by Katrina, who thinks that her religious believes and personally did not fit the assumptions of their Latinx peers in high school: “*I let myself feel less Latina because I was comparing myself to them;”* and while at NCAU: *“Oh, you're not outgoing, or you're not spicy or fiery, those kinds of* *stereotypes that I was even feeding into when I was at NCAU, I noticed them even more like being projected onto me."*

In an essay on interracial kids and the expected identity of mixed-raced people in the U.S., Dalmage (2018) highlighted that some individuals feel the pressure to conform to a White/Nonwhite dichotomy in which they constantly have to prove on which side they position themselves. Under this oversimplification lays the assumption that "multiracial people must have separate races compartmentalized within them" (p. 101) and that they voluntarily pick the aspects of their identity they want to show. This assumption dismisses the complexity of the formation of the identity and reinforces a dualistic approach to it. This reflection can well be applied to bicultural people, in which the individual might be forced to display certain elements of a specific culture to show alliance and prove membership. Such may be the case of Gabriella, in which she deliberately displays such elements. This could also explain why Jessica experiences initial rejection by the Latinx community, since she does not easly display her membership.

In Georgia's case, not only ethnicity, but also race and gender became key elements in her social identity on campus. Georgia's comments on the impact of being the only woman of color and one of the few Latinx in the School of Music were poignant. As the only diverse student in her program, the elements that make her unique are more salient. Moreover, she embodies race, ethnicity, and gender at the same time. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality to describe how race, gender, class, ethnicity, and other individual characteristics intersect and overlap to create complex experiences, points of view, and discrimination as well. Georgia's experiences are mediated by this intersectionality, since one cannot separate the different elements that make it up. For example, talking about the future and the possibility of pursuing graduate studies, she had some clear requirements in mind: *"I think I would really appreciate if I had a female instructor, but I still need to look for areas where it's more culturally diverse."* Her needs will not be satisfied by tackling only one of her identity's elements, rather she is aware of the interwoven relationships and of the longing to fulfill of all of them. This finding aligns with other studies on intersectionality as an effective approach to explain women of color and Latinas' experiences in higher education (Harris, 1990, Gutierrez, Gonzalez, & Seshadri, 2022; Perez-Huber, 2009; Gloria et al., 2005; McCabe, 2013). Georgia's insight has two implications for NCAU: first, the underrepresentation of woman faculty in certain programs; and second, the need for a more racial and ethnically diverse campus community at large. These contextual factors must be considered when trying to understand why particular subpopulations remain so underrepresented at PWI.

Finally, Amber's case is also peculiar. As an international student, she sees herself as temporarily relocated to NCAU and to the American context and culture. Her future career as a lyrical singer will probably require her to change residency often and interact with people from different cultures. For her, NCAU is only a first step. Amber identifies herself as Mexican. She thinks that her Mexicanity will be perhaps the only constant element in her life. That would also explain that she did not identify as a Latina. She agrees that she comes from a Latin American country, but the concept of Latina as it is understood in the US is a new concept for her with which she disagreed and judged as damaging:

> *Everybody is getting so specific about what they are [...] I think that so many labels are creating the opposite. Why does it matter? You know, that I'm Latina, white, black, Asian, I'm gay, bi, straight, Catholic. Nowadays, everyone is so fixated on that, you can't even get a glance of what someone really is, you already have all this information about*

> *[them] and that creates preconceptions […]so many labels are just telling you things about people that may or may not be true.*

This insights aligns with Aria's thoughts about not considering herself as a Latina, but as a foreigner. As an international student, Amber is *a priori* the foreign, but both agree in pinpointing that Latinx is an imposed social construct to classify certain segments of the population with unclear boundaries. Amber, however, seems to feel more comfortable with this situation, maybe because it is a temporary one for her, whereas Aria is in search of a social group with which she could identify herself in a regular basis.

The differences in ethnic orientation among the participants might explain how they approached social integration on campus. Of the eight participants, Carly and Sophia seem to be the most satisfied with her experience at NCAU and the most likely to be involved in opportunities for student involvement, such as Greek life, student governance, and other student associations. The absence of Latinx classmates, professors, and curricular offerings does not interfere with her satisfaction. These findings align with the transition model created by Tinto (1993). On the other hand, Georgia's engagement is negatively affected by the lack of a Latinx environment, and racial and gender diversity. Even though both students are gender minorities in their own programs (Neuroscience and Psychology in Carly's case and Jazz music in Georgia's case), the impact and how they approach this situation is very different. Carly sees an opportunity to excel: *"You're gonna be a perfect student,"* whereas Georgia doubts her own merits. Both received a merit scholarship, but Georgia struggles with imposter syndrome. Carly seems to feel comfortable in a white-and male-dominated environment whereas Georgia's life has been constantly influenced by the Latinx culture and a diverse environment. Gabriella appears to adapt well to different contexts and both cultures. But this flexibility concerns her because *“I've gotten really good at adapting to things and I don't want to adapt anymore. I want to be an original version of me.”*

Bicultural and multicultural identity is an advantage for Latina undergraduates in academic terms and career development (Buriel & Saenz, 1980; Gomez & Fassinger, 1994; Torres, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999; Gomez, Fassinger, Prosses, Cooke, Mejia, & Luna, 2000). Yet, students have to find the right balance between the Anglo and the Latina identity, and institutions need to provide the right context to leverage their strengths (Richard & Skinner, 1992; Cuádraz, 1996; Achor & Morales, 1999; Mejia-Smith & Gushue, 2014). for some of the students in this study, this balance proved to be difficult at NCAU.

This study also wanted to include another identity element in the NCAU context: Its location in the Appalachian region. As noted in the literature review section, the Appalachian identity is complex and intimately linked to the geographical and symbolic boundaries of the Appalachian Mountains. The peculiarities of the geography and topography of the mountains lend to a sense of place and an attachment to the land which in turn seem to have a parallel emotional connection with Appalachian identity. Studies found a strong correlation between race and Appalachian identity. Whites show a stronger Appalachian identity, whereas Appalachian African Americans value more their racial identity more than their regional identity (Cooper & Knotts, 2013; Cooper, Knotts, & Livingston, 2010; Obermiller, 2012). The majority of Appalachian college students are rural youth. They are more likely to live in counties with no college institutions, have little access to college information, have parents who did not attend college, and have less confidence in their academic ability (Beasley, 2015). These students face additional challenges and barriers in two main areas: lack of family understanding and support, and cultural identity clashes (Dees, 2008; Hand & Payne, 2008). Bryan and Simmons (2009) found that first-generation Appalachian students report close ties with their families and communities; difficulty understanding the complexities of college life; and some degree of frustration, anxiety, or sadness with their family's inability to fully relate with their experiences. Aria, Gabriella, and Sophia shared some similarities with this description, alongside some important differences.

Even though Aria, Gabriella, and Sophia appreciate their hometowns and had a relatively good experience and good friends at school, these three participants raised in this Appalachian state did not show emotional attachments to the region nor to the local communities. They do not plan to settle down in the state after graduation, and they aspire to pursue postgraduate education and job opportunities beyond the Appalachian counties. In contrast with other residents, they do not have close ties with the region nor a sense of duty to stay closer to their nuclear families, as mentioned in the literature review. Amber's classmates from the state are of the same opinion: "*My friends who are from [state's name], they say, I hate [state's name],[…]I just want to get out of [state's name], I want to see the world.*" These students seem to challenge what they perceived to be cultural norms associated with residents in rural Appalachia, as well as debunking the stereotype that Latinas, and Latinx people in general, sacrifice their educational and professional opportunities to fulfill perceived duties to the family. None of these three participants' parents expressed the idea that they should limit those opportunities.

The out-of-state students shared a stereotyped idea of the Appalachian region. Carly reflected that NCAU proved to be an exception: "*I noticed something different, that everyone was so happy about NCAU.*" After two bad experiences with her professors regarding her placement in the wrong math class and the unsolicited change of the language of the learning management software used in another class, she felt "*kind of hurt*" and thought that "*the* *stereotypes are true.*" After three semesters as an undergraduate, she now thinks that the *"[stereotypes] are completely false at NCAU"* and she feels "*like a part of a community."* When inquired about this shift, she explained the following: "*I realized that some people are just like that. It sucks. But, there's also a lot of great people here too. I can't judge this entire university for two people.*" For her, those incidents were isolated and not representative of the larger NCAU culture.

Curiously, the participants' comments did not show a marked distinction between in-state and out-of-state students when asked about Appalachia. Out-of-state participants shared assumptions based on negative stereotypes about the Appalachian people and culture, as a region of deficiencies (Elam, 2002). Even the in-state students resorted to the same stereotypes to describe their communities, and asserted they do not define themselves as Appalachians. Studies show that Latinx-Americans identified themselves in terms of their countries of origin more than in terms of place or state of residency in the U. S., and much more than in terms of race (Lopez, 2013). This is the case for the in-state participants as well, who have the additional caveat of having moved to the state when they were young kids and lacking other relatives in the area besides their nuclear family. Thus, their ties and identification with the region are weak.

To survive as a student, Georgia asserts that a cultural fit is as important as an academic fit, which she did not find at NCAU. Her considerations have to do with the university context as a PWI more than as an Appalachian institution: "*PWIs are kind of built to help and empower white people, you know, have been made for them. And HBCUs are made for people of color. They're made for black people [...]. I thought about that, even now, sometimes, like the environment is meant to for other people to thrive in."* Even though NCAU serves students from all the states as well as to a growing community of international students, diversity is also measured in racial, gender, and ethnic terms. When the interviews took place at the end of 2020, 79 percent of the students at the institution were non-Hispanic Whites, 4 percent were Blacks or African Americans, 3.6 percent were Hispanic/Latino, and 1.5 percent were Asians. Even though for Sophia and Gabriella the campus is more open and diverse than her local communities: "*college has so much better people [who] are way more open minded,*" for other students coming from other regions, this is not enough.

Isolation

College student development theories point out that fitting into the academic and social requirements of campus is a key component of their satisfaction and success as students (Braxton, 2000; Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Academic integration occurs when students become attached to the intellectual life of the university, while social integration refers to when students create relationships and connections with people inside and outside of the classroom. Social integration is the framework for the "sense of belonging" experiences in this study. For underrepresented students, the challenge of becoming socially integrated is greater since often they have to adjust to beliefs, practices, and identities that might differ greatly from their own and their home communities. Research shows that underrepresented college students are likely to experience feelings of isolation and social disconnection at PWIs (Smith et al. 2014; Smith & Moore 2002). As research shows, alienation among underrepresented students has been linked to higher attrition rates and poor academic performance (Benette & Okinaka, 1989; Gloria & Robinson-Kurpius, 1996; Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Mayo, Murgia, & Padilla, 1995; Murgia, Padilla, & Pavel, 1991).

As illustrated by Carly and Sophia and backed by research, Latinas who adopt Anglo values have less probability to feel isolated and feel discrimination (Melendez & Petrovich, 1988). However, this adoption should not imply they renounce their Latina identity. Literature positively correlates both elements to student engagement. NCAU is a PWI, thus, students coming from similar communities might experience a smoother transition to an environment which is not very different from their own, as discussed in the previous section. Likewise, involvement in campus organizations promotes feelings of inclusion, social connectedness, and sense of belonging (Brown & Evans 2002; Civitci, 2015; Kuh et al., 2008).

The participants shared experiences and feelings related to isolation. Each one, however, has a different experience and history of success and failure. All but Carly and Sophia experienced isolation. They highlighted the relevance of making connections. Carly quickly found friends among classmates, members of students associations, and roommates. The rest had difficulties in several degrees to make those connections, regardless of their status of in-state or out-state student and the impact of the pandemic in their ability to go to class and participate in activities and events. Meeting in the same classes is not sufficient to make friends among classmates. Amber highlighted the importance of running into the same people outside the classroom, like in dorms and cafeterias at lunch time. Katrina made her friends in the student association she led. Gabriella forced herself, in a way, to talk with classmates during her first semester as a college student. They also acknowledged that the online environment makes it harder to socialize.

At the other end from Carly and Sophia, students Aria, Jessica, and Georgia seem to be the most isolated. They explained it this way: In-state Aria does not think she has a lot of common with other students due to her self-identification as an emigrant primarily; out-of-state Jessica is much older than her classmates and joined NCAU at the beginning of the pandemic restrictions; and out-of-state junior Georgia thinks that her condition as the only Black, female Latina in her program had a negative impact in her sense of belonging.

To cope with these feelings, students resort to a variety of mechanisms. One of them is spirituality. Studies found that spirituality seems to be an important factor among Latinx students, even though its expression varies greatly (Cervantes & Parham, 2005). Of all the participants, only Gabriella, Georgia, and Katrina talked about the role of faith in their lives. Gabriella mentioned that her family is Catholic but that they do not practice; they only attend services on special occasions and major social events. Georgia and Katrina identified themselves as evangelical, but Georgia did not practice. Only Katrina indicated that spirituality and faith are important elements in her life. Research also indicated a relationship between cultural identity and manifestations of spirituality, in that students who more strongly identify with Latinx cultural values show more expressions of faith (Campesino, Belyea, & Schwartz, 2009). Katrina seems to fit this description. Faith experiences among Latinx students are more often contextualized in family and community activities than individual practices (Elizondo, 2000). Gabriella acknowledges the community ties as the main reason for her involvement in faith expressions. Katrina's family is actively involved in her faith community. Katrina also expressed a need to share her beliefs with the Latinx community. Spirituality and faith were an integral part of her identity as a student. The Latina students of this study debunked the myth that Latinx are religious and mainly Catholic. Whereas it is true that 68 percent of all Latinx stated that their religion is very important (Navarro-Rivera, Kosmin, & Keysar, 2008), more recent data from the Pew Research Center (2014) show that only 34 percent of all American Catholic adults identified themselves as of Hispanic origin. Latinx constitutes 32 percent of Jehovah's Witness and 11 percent of Evangelical Protestants. Twelve percent of the surveyed adult Buddhists identified themselves as Latinx, and among the self-declared atheists or agnostics, 13 percent identified themselves as Latinx.

International students such as Amber are even more prone to alienation due to challenges in adjusting to campus practices that might be quite different from those of their home countries (Klomegah, 2006; Misra, Crist, & Burant, 2003; Wilton & Constantine, 2003). Social connectiveness, and perceived English skills, are two important contributing factors to the successful adjustment of this student body (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015; Li et. al, 2010; Yeh & Inose, 2003). Amber showed a high level of proficiency and perceived skills in the English language, but she longed for social connectiveness and more information resources, especially at the beginning of her journey at NCAU. Such findings strengthen recommendations to enhance orientation and support programs for international students in the first few weeks at US institutions.

Amber's experience with the changing of dorms supports the increasing establishment of living-learning communities (LLC) on campuses. LLCs are physical and curricular spaces aimed to satisfy students' academic and social integration needs, especially for college freshmen or other vulnerable collectives (Engstrom & Tino, 2008; Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990). Their benefits are numerous. LLCs foster engagement, relationship building, leadership abilities, and use of student services, which in turn contribute to higher academic performance and degree completion (Inkelas, Vogt, Longerbeam, Owen & Johnson, 2006; Lennin & Ebbers, 1999; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Blimling, 1994; Pike, 1999). In LLCs, students like Amber can easily find classmates or friends with similar passions and interests. NCAU hosts LLCs in their current housing offerings that target students with specific majors such as engineering, agriculture, sports, or creative arts; as well as students of color, LGBTQ+ students, and ROTC students. Amber moved from her first dorm assignment to an LLC aimed at students with creative arts majors and interests, immediately causing her to feel connected. An LLC that corresponds to a student's interests can be a good starting point to foster engagement and a sense of belonging among first-generation Latinx students (Hartfield, 2013; James, Bruch, & Jehangir, 2006).

Despite finding some social connections in her religious student association, Katrina needed to search further a sense of belonging at NCAU. She found it in her Spanish classes and in Carlos' *[pseudonym]* classes, in which she "*felt at home*." Sophia also took classes in the Spanish department and praised this professor. Sophia declared a second major in Spanish to reinforce her major in International Studies, but Katrina initially took the classes as the only way to stay connected with her Latinx background: "*Once every semester I had one class to look forward to that kind of reminder of home."* Several factors contributed to this experience: the classes were held in Spanish, the topics were relevant to their interests, and the professor tried to make the classes special. For some bicultural students, the foreign language departments served as a gateway to find peers with a similar background or at least with an interest for their culture. For other race/ethnic/gender minority students, this connection could be found in the Women and Gender Studies program, the African Studies program, or the Chicano Studies program. Katrina wanted to find comfort and a sense of belonging. One can argue that this is not the best motive for pursuing an academic minor in Spanish, as she did, or in any other discipline or any class at all; but for her, Spanish was the only department that provided academic experiences and faculty members with which and whom she was able to engage on a cultural level. Higher education institutions should reflect on their practices and process to uncover the ways in which they are influencing their minority students to follow certain academic and social paths and experiences.

Ironically, these departments and programs tend to be underbudgeted and under constant threat to be cut on a rationalized and efficiency basis, jeopardizing the liberal arts in general, and the well-being of the underrepresented and first-generation faculty and students that populated their classrooms in particular (June, 2015; Sheth, 2019; Scott & Kossyln, 2015).

Limited coping abilities and a perceived racially tense campus climate have shown to contribute to the psychological distress of college students (Byrd & McKinney, 2012). Recent studies reveal the increasing prevalence of depression and anxiety among college students across the country due to the coronavirus pandemic, political unrest, and systemic racism and inequality (Eisenberg, Ketchen-Lipson, Heinze, & Zhou, 2021). For first-generation Latinx students, the risk is even higher (Suwinyattichaipom & Johnson, 2020). It is not uncommon for colleges and universities to offer mental health services to their students and NCAU houses a center for counseling and psychological services. Georgia and Jessica utilized these services. However, research shows that these students are exceptions. Latinx college students underutilize university counseling services (Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014; Sullivan et al., 2007) often for reasons related to perceptions of multicultural competence among service providers (Miville & Constantine, 2006). Jessica's experience is related to the lack of Latinx professionals to serve these students needs and the lack of cultural understanding of the current professionals: "*It felt like I wasn't being understood in a cultural sense of why I wasn't connecting, or I wasn't feeling like I belong over here and why I was having trouble making friends.*"

Most of the participants looked for opportunities to engage socially and academically with students with similar interests. However, for some of these Latina undergraduates, it was difficult to find similar interests even within the Latinx community. These insights are in line with Willie (1981) and Loo and Rolison's (1986) findings on how minoritized college students look for a fit not only with the overall student community, but with their ethnic student subculture as well. For example, Katrina was aware that her commitment to her faith was not very popular among college students nor even among Latinx students. She went further and said that "*there's not diversity within the Latino communit*y" on campus, highlighting that Latinx were interested mostly in partying and drinking. In contrast, she perceived more heterogeneity among Anglo students:

> *There's a bunch of different types of white people, if that makes sense. Like, there's athletic white people, there's studious white people, there's white people that are into music. There's white people that are into art. There's white people that's into sciences and STEM, and veterinary, there's some in clubs for pets. And all this stuff, there's just, a wide, there's a bunch of dimensions for white people. But within the Latino population at NCAU, it's pretty much the same, like everybody's into the same thing*.

Aria was of the same opinion when she said that she did not think she had a lot in common with other Latinx undergraduates and found more connections with international students: *"I think just having friends who were raised a little differently, was easier to connect with."* She also mentioned that she was not friends with all Latinx people in her hometown because she thinks that they do not have a lot in common.

Jessica had problems in Connecticut when trying to connect with other Hispanic people:

> *My parents still retain their language and talk to other people with comfortability, whereas with me, I had trouble with that because I grew up over here, and then went through like, through the schooling in America and sometimes when I try to connect with certain Hispanic people, some people are very biased when they see me thinking that I understand them in their culture*.

The heterogeneity of backgrounds and experiences pose an additional challenge to these Latinas. In a PWI, it is more likely that a minoritized student may feel alienated from the campus community at large; however, this same student might also feel alienated from his/her own ethnic subculture in some degree, as some of the participants expressed. Hurtado and Carter (1997) contended that traditional measurement approaches of students' sense of belonging may not adequately capture this variable. They argued that these measurement tools are based on expected behaviors, such as effort or time spent on specific activities or objective performance criteria. However, they might not reflect the internal and subjective perception of belonging. This is especially true for minorities at PWIs and when the expected behaviors should conform to mainstream practices. Engagement and integration "can mean something completely different to student groups who have been historically marginalized in higher education" (pp. 326-327). Using data from a national longitudinal study of the 1990 cohort of 493 Latinx college students, these authors found that not all activities in which these students engaged created a sense of belonging. Another important finding was that underrepresented Latinx students felt more connection with the campus community when they were involved in activities both within and outside of the college community, as well as activities that furthered interests they had prior to enrolling in college. These findings would explain the purposeful selection of extracurricular activities made by some of the eight Latina participants in this research: Katrina devoted her time and efforts to the religious organization, Georgia was part of a jazz ensemble, Aria volunteers in the student exchange program, and Sophia was involved in an organization that worked with local youth. These Latina students look for activities that do not require a strong separation from their background and former experiences to cultivate a sense of belonging.

[Micro]aggressions

Solórzano (2010) described microaggressions as “one form of a systemic everyday racism that are subtle, layered, and cumulative verbal and non-verbal assaults directed toward people of color that are committed automatically and unconsciously” (as cited in Huber & Cueva, 2013, p. 394). The effects of racial microaggressions on college students of color have been well documented in the literature (Powell, 2022). Students experience social isolation and discrimination, which leads to adjustment difficulties, anxiety, poor performance, and ultimately, attrition and low degree completion rates (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Muses, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008). Studies on racial microaggressions show that the prefix “micro” does no justice to the frequency, intensity, and negative impact of these so-called minor racist incidents (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013). Yosso, Ceja, & Solórzano’s (2009) study with college students from three different institutions found that Latinx students experienced three general types of microaggressions, namely interpersonal racial microaggressions, racial jokes as microaggressions, and institutional microaggressions. The eight participants in this study experienced mostly interpersonal microaggressions, yet with varying frequency and intensity. Whereas most participants shared incidents that occurred on campus, Gabriella and Jessica showed the recurrent cumulative and negative aspect of these microaggressions over the time and in other contexts (Huber & Cueva, 2013). Finally, Amber and Carly suffered institutional microaggressions as well.

Latinx ethnicities and cultures are subject to homogenization. In an analysis of the advertising trade press of stereotypes of the U.S. Latinx population, Astroff (2009) documented how these myths were redefined—but not eliminated—to create a simplistic Latinx market. Similarly, in the education field, simplification allows the differences to be minimized across space, race, gender, and assimilation status among Latinx students and to homogenize their educational experience and uphold the dialog of deficiencies and failures (Gandara, 2009).

Mexican Americans are the largest Latinx origin group in the US—62 percent (Bustamante, Flores, & Shah, 2019). Therefore, their experiences are extrapolated to the rest of the Latinx groups. The four participants in this study who traced their heritage to Mexico were the ones who reported suffering more microaggressions related to assumptions about their ethnicity and culture. In casual conversations with strangers or acquaintances, Amber, the international student, often has to clarify that she was born and raised in Mexico. Amber has blonde hair, pale skin, and light-colored eyes, and so she does not fit media stereotypes of what a Mexican person should look like. Despite that 70 percent of Mexican Americans were born in the US (Bustamante, Flores, & Shah, 2019), in places like this Appalachian state where Latinx populations are scarce, it seems that the prevailing perception is that they must be foreign-born, as Gabriella was reminded while working in a restaurant. Not only are Mexicans assumed to have dark skin and hair (Ghavami & Peplau, 2012), but their ethnicity also seems to call their intellectual ability and educational attainment into question (Appel, Weber, Kronberger, 2015; Fisher, 2010; Guo & Harlow, 2014; Rodriguez, 2014). This is exemplified in Amber’s classmate wondering about her ability to speak French.

Mexican history and culture were the object of attack when assumed to be inferior—or at least not as developed as the US one. In her undergraduate history class, Amber had to clarify that pyramids are not a typical dwelling among Mexicans, nor are donkeys the main system of transportation. Mexico and other Latin American countries are portrayed in the media in stereotypical ways or as dangerous places to live (Canepa Koch & Kummels, 2016; Chavez, 2001; Santa Ana, 2002; Reny & Manzano, 2016; Pobutsky, 2020). As avid media consumers, college students might be influenced by this misrepresentation of Latinx cultures and people, which in turn, shape their relationships with the Latinx peers. Whereas Amber's corrections were welcomed and accepted, Gabriella did not have the same reaction from her high school classmates when debating the impact of Mexican immigrants in the US. She felt that her opinions were not taken seriously because—according to her classmates— she and family did not represent a real Mexican family. In other words: "*the image that they had of Mexicans was very different from the image that I had of Mexicans."* Contrary to Ambers' experience, Gabriella's opinions were disqualified because she did not conform to the stereotypes of *"rapists, drug-dealers, kidnappers.*"

In a study of white undergraduates, Landrine (1985) found that their stereotypes of women differed significantly by race and by social class. Black women were perceived as more religious, loud, and tough, and less sensitive and educated than white women. In a similar study, Ghavami and Peplau (2012) asked psychology undergraduates from different races and ethnicities to list current cultural stereotypes of different races/ethnicities and found that, for Black women, the most commonly listed attributes included having an attitude, being loud, having a big butt, being overweight, being confident, and being dark-skinned. For Latina women, the most commonly listed attributes were being feisty, curvy, loud, attractive, good cook, and dark-skinned. Gabriella's high school friends were of the opinion that *"Latinas are feistier."* At NCAU, the participants were subject to these stereotypes as well.

Katrina and Gabriella highlighted how the lack of diversity made their bodies stand out in a classroom and be the object of unsolicited comments: *"When I went to NCAU, my brown eyes were amazing to everybody. Everyone was like, Oh my gosh, they're so dark"* (Katrina). Amber mentioned that her Anglo features caused surprised because they deviated from the stereotypes:

"W*hy you don't look like Mexican?"* (Micro)aggressions were not only related to expectations about the Latina body but also to the character. When Katrina joined the religious student organization, the members were happy to have a Latina member; however, Katrina's personality clashed with their expectations of what a Latinx student should be. The stereotypes she mentioned were "*just personality traits like outgoing and loud and their fashion sense, and that they could dance."* (Micro)aggressions happened not only when the participants were in predominantly white spaces on campus (and high schools) but also within the Latinx community and in their own homes.

Jessica shared having struggles to fit in with the Latinx community because she does not look like a typical Latina. In her words: "*I don't look like the typical Hispanic. I guess the typical Puerto Rican because they have very dark skin."* Katrina remembered that, when she was in high school, she felt *"less Latina"* than her Latina friends, who were outgoing and more interested in dancing than religion, and how they policed their appearances to fit into the expected mold of how a Latina woman should look like. Gabriella's wardrobe was controlled at home, but in her case, to prevent the manifestation of the sensual Latina body. Regulating the Latina body serves two purposes. On one hand, to accommodate to the expected stereotypes of the brown body, but on the other hand, to escape the concurrent burden of the brown body as symbol of sensuality and sexuality (Guzmán &Valdivia, 2004; Arrizón, 2008; Martinuska, 2016). As these students illustrated, beyond appearance, expected Latina attitudes and personalities are subject to scrutiny and comparisons. For some of them, as Katrina, this realization provoked sadness and disappointment: *"when I went to NCAU that was pretty much all what people saw me for."* Gabriella regrets having to mold her behavior according to her environment:

> *It's kind of confusing. When I'm in the States, I have to act as American as possible. And when I'm in Mexico, I have to act as Mexican as possible [...] And that's really confusing. I don't know which one is the original one. I'm adapting in [campus town name] [...] Sometimes I don't know which one I'm supposed to be.*

Related to the accommodation to Latina stereotypes is how these students dealt and conformed to the expectations about their Americanness. As already explained, navigating between two cultures, Gabriella was never sufficiently American or Mexican to have a valid opinion about politic issues. Amber found herself in a similar crossroads when the woman choir was invited to sing the US national anthem. What she assumed to be a consequential decision based on her condition as an international student, was instead perceived as a lack of commitment with her peers and the program. This experience and the one in the history classroom offer two different but related points on which reflect. First, that being non-Anglo should not prevent a student from academic opportunities that the rest of the class is afforded, and second, that being non-Anglo does not imply to have an inferior level of education.

Discriminatory practices are not isolated cases caused by specific individuals. As pointed above, higher education institutions should reflect on their practices and process to uncover the ways in which they are systematically and institutionally undermining underrepresented students. It was Amber’s instructor’s comments and behavior the ones that made her uncomfortable. All instructors, regardless their condition as temporary or non-tenured faculty, are representatives of the institution’ culture and obliged to represent the values of equity and inclusion embedded in their mission statements. Carly suffered two institutional incidents of discrimination in her first semester as a first-year student: She was assigned to a wrong class and had a program interface changed into Spanish language without permission. These decisions, in her opinion, were based on academic and intellectual assumptions related to her ancestry. Even though well-intentioned to serve underprepared students, these programs and practices might be biased and based on wrong assumptions instead of on evidence. The consequences might be a lack of effectiveness when including students who do not need it and excluding students who could benefit from them.

Tokenism is a (micro)aggression related to inclusion and exclusion issues. The singularity and distinctiveness of the member of the minoritized group provide both benefits and handicaps at the same time. As Linkov (2014) explains, tokenism is mainly an advantage for the majority group, which satisfies the pressure to be more diverse, but at the expense of the individual in the minoritized group, who is often ostracized. Tokenism, therefore, serves the mission of fulfilling quotas instead of challenging what the diversity of experiences, ideas, and people really means. The elements and effects of racial and gender tokenism are well documented in the literature, especially in the workplace (Jackson, Thoits, & Taylor, 1995; Kanter, 1977, 1993) and in academia (de la Luz Reyes & Halcon, 1997; Tierney and Rhoades, 1993; Turner, 2002, Yoder, 1985). One of the manifestations of tokenism is the expectation for minoritized individuals to act as experts in issues related to the gender/race/ethnicity they represent (Niemann, 2020). This added pressure Katrina to be overly aware of what she said and did: *"What if I say something that doesn't apply to somebody else? […] So I was scared that they would apply what I said to like, everybody"*. Georgia rejected to assume the role of spokesperson: " *Oh my gosh, look at you like you're one of the only girls there. Look. You're a woman of color. Look at you go. And I'm like, I don't want to do this. I frankly, I don't want to be like the face of the movement or whatever.*" Her comments also expressed the desire for underrepresented students to be normalized and not a rarity with the additional task of erroneously representing other students' experiences. Tokenism wears out. The participants were proud to be Latinas, but again, their identity is more complex than that.

A common experience studied among tokenized woman in academia is that their actions and words are subject to scrutiny and that they do not receive proper recognition (Niemann, 2012; Zimmerman, Carter-Sowell, & Xu, 2016), but in the case of Georgia, she thinks she is an overvalued student. Georgia's experiences are extreme. Aware of her condition as a minoritized student, she perceives that her classmates and professors treated her undeservedly favorably. These unsolicited behaviors regarding her race, gender, and ethnicity caused her to have the imposter syndrome. As the Latinx community grows and enter the higher education classrooms, many find themselves unsure of their abilities. Women, specially Latinas and women of color are most susceptible to imposter syndrome (McKee & Delgado, 2020; Humphrey, 2020; Rodriguez & Blaney, 2021), negatively affecting not only their academic performance, but their social and mental health (Collins et al., 2020; Haskins et al., 2019).

The majority of the students in this research experienced different types of (micro)aggressions due to their condition as Latinas. As explained before, no aggression is small enough that it does not leave a negative impact in the participants' lives. For some of them, the NCAUS campus was one more context in which they were object of stereotyping, as Gabriella illustrated in her experiences while working in the family's restaurant and the presidential elections. Microaggressions are suffered at home and in the Latinx community, as Gabriella, Katrina, and Jessica related. For others, interactions in the campus were the first time they faced obstacles because of their ethnicity. Carly and Amber shared that commonality despite having opposite backgrounds: Carly showed to have a high Anglo-Oriented profile in which she does not have much contact with the Latinx community, whereas international student Amber left

Mexico City to pursue a higher education in a PWI in the Appalachia region. Both of them discovered the effects of a racialized America in which their ethnicity preceded them. For Carly, her Hispanic last name created a disadvantage when automatically assigned to what it seemed to be a remedial math class. For Amber, her non-American background might have prevented her from participating in cocurricular experiences. Upon her entrance into American soil, Amber received the categorization of being of Latinx/Hispanic heritage, with all the negative implications about being of an inferior culture. Even well intentioned, these interactions negatively impacted the students well-being. Finally, Katrina, Gabriella, and Georgia suffered another modality of (micro)aggression in the shape of tokenism, in which they were supposed to represent an homogenous thinking and expertise in Latinx issues.

Interestingly enough, the only one who did not share microaggression incidents was in-state bicultural Sophia. She, as Carly, presents an Anglo-oriented profile and has a Hispanic last name, but her involvement with her Latinx heritage is higher. Sophia's doble major in International Studies and Spanish might have placed in a more diverse environment in terms of individuals and study programs, which might have benefited her to feel included and to not report microaggressions.

On racism and diversity, Ahmed (2003) argues that the numerous statements of commitment to diversity and equity made by higher education institutions are often not accompanied by the corresponding changes in practices and attitudes. Those need a thorough action plan that involves the right processes and people first, with the hope that changes will eventually happen organically. The university's official position is to respect and make reasonable efforts to accommodate the needs of students and faculty of diverse cultures and practices. Providing a software tool in several languages and "remedial" classes to students in need are excellent ideas when they do not facilitate stereotyping or profiling, as Carly illustrated. Each employee of the university is a representative of the institution. As such, and regardless of their position or rank as faculty member, graduate teaching assistant, or staff in student services, they should receive appropriate training in diversity issues to avoid incidents like the one in Amber's choir class. Students of color who experience (micro)aggressions at campuses experience more depression, self-esteem, frustration, and isolation (Nadal, Wong, Griffing, Davidoff, & Striken, 2014; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). As Amber summarized it: *"sometimes it does get tiring, sometimes it's like, leave me alone."*

Support

Students' comments about the process of recruitment and admissions, financial aid, the role of faculty and classmates, and the offering and participation in student organizations provided insight about the quality of the practices that NCAU offered to support the fulfillment of students' academic and social expectation of college (Braxton & McClendon, 2001-2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

First, a mix of convenience, serendipity, academic reputation, and economic reasons brought the participants to NCAU. For Amber, Carly, Katrina, and Georgia, the pre-enrollment campus visitation and a positive interaction with prospect classmates and faculty made the difference. Research shows that a student who visits a campus is twice as likely to enroll (Brown, 2010) and that a direct contact with faculty and students is key for prospective students to make a final decision (Hodges & Barbuto, 2002). Amber, Carly, and Georgia received scholarships, and the in-state students benefited from an in-state scholarship. These students were part of the 14 percent of Latinx undergraduates who receive a scholarship nationwide (Kantrowitz, 2019). For African Americans, the scholarship recipient population stands at 13 percent, whereas up to 62 percent of White undergraduates receive some type of scholarship (Kantrowitz, 2019). Research shows that despite approximately 45 percent of full-time students being employed without significant differences among race/ethnicity (NCES, 2018), higher-income working learners are White (73 percent) and low-income working students are disproportionately Black, Latinx, women, first-generation college students, and new citizens (Carnevale & Smith, 2018). Research also shows that minoritized students who work are at higher risk of dropping out of college (Carnevale & Smith, 2018). However, none of the part-time workers in this interview expressed struggles to balance work and academic responsibility. This could be due to the flexibility of working for one's own family (Aria and Gabriella) and of being a student worker (Georgia). While Latinx students borrow at about the same rate as White students, they are 61 percent more likely to default on student loans (Scott-Clayton, 2018). Jessica was self-sufficient (she also lived with her boyfriend), but the other participants relied on their parents' financial support.

Regarding the college enrollment process, Kirst and Venezia (2004) found that few minoritized students and their families fully understand the requirements of college admissions and financial aid. Carly, Amber, and Sophia had the advantage of having parents and siblings with college experience to guide the process. First-generation students Aria, Georgia, and Gabriella were able to do everything by themselves, yet, it is difficult to explain why Katrina found additional difficulties despite having an older sister already in college. One difference could be in the support received as seniors in their own high schools. The other participants might have been more exposed to the college language and process (as Gabriella's high school did) or some other kind of source. Tertiary institutions should constantly review and update their application and matriculation processes to make it understandable and easier, and to provide clear communication and follow-ups for students as Katrina, who was not sure if she did it everything right.

Faculty and student relationships are some of the most salient relationships for Latinx student success (Barnett, 2011; Castellanos & Gloria 2007; Rendón, 1994, 2002). The theme of Isolation analyzed the relevance for minoritized students to have faculty of the same race/ethnicity and how this lack of representation affected some participants' sense of belonging. Previous research suggests that students persisted through education at higher rates when faculty invested in them by offering mentoring, academic assistance, and interaction within the classroom (Bordes-Edgar et al., 2011; Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Rendón, 1994, 2002). The participants had several positive experiences that illustrated this point, but Amber did not have it. Even though graduate student teachers are not considered faculty members per se, they represent the department and the college, and they should receive appropriate training to comply with all the academic and department policies and good practices when interacting with students. Amber found institutional support from another of her professors. As research shows and the participants illustrated, feelings of belonging on campus and at the college are influenced by the acceptance, support, and encouragement imparted by their faculty (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977). Recent studies caution the teaching community to redouble the effective strategies for engaging students under the current COVID-19 pandemic scenario, where attitudes, affect, and motivation among learners might be particularly at risk (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020).

Borrero (2011) and Boden (2011) previously documented the role that supportive school personnel play in promoting a sense of belonging among the student body, especially to support Latinx and other underrepresented students (Clark et al., 2013; Tovar, 2014; Hodge, 2017). NCAU offers a variety of academic and social services to its students. The eight participants were aware of these services, but to different degrees. Georgia was using the mental health services that the university provides to students. She was happy with her female therapist; they worked together to find patterns to her experiences and to learn how to avoid the negative thoughts. Jessica used the mental health center as well, but she expressed the desire of having a Latina mental health counselor to find more connections and feel more understood: "*I just wanted to give up because it felt like I wasn't being understood in a cultural sense."* The center did not have any Latinx professionals. Georgia and Jessica benefit from these services; however, research shows that these students are exceptions. Latinx college students underutilize university counseling services (Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014; Sullivan et al., 2007), often for reasons related to perceptions of multicultural competence among service providers (Miville & Constantine, 2006), as Jessica thought.

Access to the right information and services is crucial even before a student steps on campus for the first time. High school counselors play a crucial role to help minoritized students and their families with college planning. When families lack college experience, as in five of the participants, students should find help through their offices (Gilfillan, 2018). Once on campus, the participants also showed different degrees of knowledge and access to the university services. One reason for this difference could be that some of the participants were first-generation students and their social capital seemed to be lower than that of Carly and Sophia, for example, whose parents have college degrees. The university should continue finding ways to make relevant campus information accessible to all students. Emails and social media have become the preferred methods of communication by the university, yet, a 2016 survey from Bowling State University found that up to 72 percent of students treat emails from student groups like spam; more that 50 percent of students do not read all emails from their institution or academic departments; and nearly 40 percent of students skip emails from their advisors (Ha, Joa, Gbay, & Kim, 2016).

Student organization involvement has shown to be an important component of collegiate success for Latinx and African American students at PWIs because they create meaningful opportunities for socialization and academic and social integration (McClure, 2006). It has a positive effect on their mental health and academic performance (Billingsley & Hurd, 2019). Participation in campus organizations can foster a feeling of community for Latinx students which may positively impact their academic outcomes (Garland & Grace, 1993). This involvement promotes feelings of inclusion, social connectedness, and sense of belonging (Brown & Evans 2002; Civitci, 2015; Kuh et al., 2008). The COVID-19 pandemic limited the organization of in-person events. However, universities should evaluate which types of organizations and activities benefit underrepresented students the most and satisfy their specific needs. Some of the participants expressed lack of awareness of the different student organizations, and specifically, of the existence of Latinx student organizations. This implies that these organizations need to increase their visibility on campus. Katrina was the one with more chances to interact with other Latinx students, but *"first of all, there are hardly any Latinos."* This absence hit her hard. She longed for friendship with other Latinx students to "*remind me of home and feel understood and feel accepted.*" One final observation about student organizations. Both Carly and Katrina occupied position of leadership in their organizations, but whereas Carly mentioned that she received abundant information about events and other news about the campus and the university in general, Katrina mentioned that she felt disconnected from what other organizations were doing. One can also speculate about the different degrees of organization, access, and mentorship that student organizations received. There could be differences between the connections that members of the student board have, as in the case of Carly, and religious organizations. This discrepancy did not favor Katrina.

The eight participants remarked on the key role that family and friends' support had on their success as students. This type of support is grouped under three categories: economic support, emotional support, and social and cultural capital.

Financing college is among the main worries for minoritized students. Heller (2005) found that, even counting grants, loans, and family financial support, many Latinx students may still not be able to afford college due to the disparity between the family's income and the cost. Katrina relied exclusively on loans. Her parents contributed economically but as she explained, things that other college students take for granted, were luxuries for her: "*I needed a car to get somewhere I needed money, you know. So, those were kind of the things that I ended up needing, like, needing help with instead of like tutoring.*" Her example illustrated research that states that Latinx parents are more likely to underestimate the costs of college than White parents (Velez, Horn, & Christopher, 2018), especially for first-generation college students. Thus, it is vital that educational institutions that want to increase their participation consider how targeting scholarships and financial aid to this group can make a substantial impact in their enrollment and persistence. As Jessica pointed:

> *We're not given the resources out of the community that is out there, or the education, we have to go find it ourselves. And I'm not getting the resources. So I think that's a lot of the pressure of growing up in like, as a Hispanic is that there's not a lot of support for minorities like us to get a higher education.*

What all of them shared was the emotional support provided by their families. All the participants communicated often with their parents. Research has emphasized the importance of familial ties as relates to Latinx student persistence. Rendón (1994, 2002) explained that family relationships were a significant factor contributing to how students felt validated through their process. Research has shown that strong cultural values, caring, and loyalty from family provided supportive structures for Latinx college persistence before and during college (Bordes-Edgar et al., 2011; Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006; Haro, 1994; Ojeda et al., 2014; Rendón, 1994). The findings in this study supported those statements.

Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield, and Burgos-Cienfuegos's (2015) study and Gloria and Castellanos's (2012) study examined college educational and coping responses among first-generation Latina students. They found that this subgroup experienced conflict with their families based on their decision to leave home for college. However, the participants in this study did not appear to experience issues in that regard. All these parents agreed with their daughters' choice to leave home for postsecondary studies, seemed to have a good relationship with them, and gave them a high level of independence. When questioning their plans for the future, all of the participants expressed the will to continue with graduate studies and/or to start working wherever they find a good opportunity. All of them contemplate moving out to other states, and for Amber and Aria, even moving to Europe or to Mexico, respectively.

Social capital can be thought of as one's network of people and community resources in which peer and social connections offer critical emotional support (Yosso, 2006). When parents are unfamiliar with higher education, the college admissions process and the transition to higher education is typically more difficult for first-generation students (St. John, Hu, & Fisher, 2011; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002). Katrina was the only one who found difficulties. Most of the participants relied in older siblings or professors to navigate through college. All of them showed independence, but, when they encountered a problem, social and cultural capital differences might explain how they reacted to it. Carly's reaction to her placement in the wrong math class and the unsolicited program interface in the Spanish language was to go and talk directly with the professors in charge, her advisor, and finally, she reached the dean of the college. As an international student, Amber did not know exactly the right processes and channels to raise a complaint. She vented with her friends and a close professors. Carly, however, knew the right channels and used them.

Social and cultural capital differences also might explain the variety of approaches and relationships of parents to their daughters' college education. Carly checked in and shared issues closely related to college with her parents. In the Torres, Reiser, Lepeau, Davis, and Ruder (2006) study on first-generation Latinx students, most Latinx participants reported that, while their families supported their pursuit of a college degree, their parents did not understand their life at college. Yet, the lack of opportunities to engage in deep conversations regarding academic content did not seem to frustrate the participants.

The participants' families believe in education as a social mobility tool and acknowledge the different starting points that they and their parents have, as stated by Gabriella when mentioned the family pride of owing a business, and Jessica when mentioned that she did not want to struggle as their parents did. The economic incentives of earning a degree are well documented (Kane & Rouse, 1995; Shapiro, 2004; Brand & Xie, 2010) and these students pursue a degree to be economically independent and safe. Because of cultural stereotypes and a lack of role models, Latina students are frequently steered into career and technical programs that prepare them for traditional female occupations (National Women's Law Center & Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, 2009). Perna (2000) found that Latinx parents of ninth graders had lower college expectations and lower involvement discussing school-related issues than White parents. However, that was not the case for this study's participants. Contrary to familism's assumptions that Latinx parents closely manage the lives of their children, the participants showed a high level of independence regarding college decisions and aspirations for the future. For example, neither Gabriella and Aria nor their siblings were forced or required to help in the family business.

The interviews did not cover a potential submission to gender norms applicable to traditional Latinx families, such as current family caregiving responsibility and marriage and childbearing as the ultimate goals for women (Cuellar, Arnold, & Gonzalez, 1995; Gil & Vazquez, 1996). While the participants do not discard the thought of having a partner or starting a family in a future, college education and financial independence were more important for them and their parents at the time of the interviews. Yet, some research links behaviors like keeping problems and challenges a secret from family members as a sign of this *familism* for Latinas, who want to avoid being considered a burden (Martinez-Ramos, Garcia Biggs, & Lozano 2013). As other studies found, the students form this research also gained social and cultural capital from their relationships and interactions with family members, faculty members, and support services, which impacted favorably their college outcomes (Sandoval-Lucero, Maer, & Klingsmith, 2014)

To answer to the first research question, How do Latina undergraduates perceive their experiences at a four-year Predominately White Institution in North Central Appalachia?, the discussion reflected how different college student development theories and studies on social identity formation impacted on how the students explained their college experiences. Research has shown that the level of ethnic identification plays a role in the academic experiences of Latinxs in PWIs (Flores Niemann, Romero, & Arbona, 2000; Telzer & Vazquez Garcia, 2009).

However, their identity cannot be simplified in terms of ethnicity, gender, or socio-economic background. It is more complex. The interpretation made in this section highlighted how different elements of their identity interacted and shaped their relationships with different institutional individuals and processes at NCAU. Yet, the influence was reciprocal: The analysis covered not only how students perceived their identity and experiences, but how their perceived identity mediated how the institutional forces interacted with them. Most of the findings aligned with past research on Latinas and other underrepresented students in PWI. However, despite the evidence that pointed at the urge to make PWI colleges and universities more welcoming to underrepresented students, students like these at NCAU continue reporting isolation, mental distress, and (micro)aggressions on campuses across the nation.

To further explore the complexity of these Latina undergraduates in an Appalachian campus, the discussion on the second research question—*How does Latina undergraduates' identity inform their experiences at a four-year Predominately White Institution in North Central Appalachia?* —proceeds to include Gloria Anzaldúa's approach to *borderlands* and the *new Mestiza consciousness* to provide insight about how the participants make sense of these same experiences.

Research question 2: How does undergraduates' Latina identity inform their experiences at a four-year Predominately White Institution in North Central Appalachia?

As the participants shared their experiences, the difficulties they had fitting in to a campus space which was different from the one left back home became a recurring theme. The impossibility of replication of the home environment caused isolation and confusion for the students with a more Hispanic-oriented ethnical profile, including in-state students, who expected a more open and diverse experience promised in the university's marketing efforts. The two students with a more Anglo-oriented profile were the ones who adapted better and experienced less incidents related to their ethnicity. The internal struggles to fit without sacrificing individuality while searching for social integration were not limited to the moments when students were on campus; they were also present at home and in their home communities.

In the preface to her book *Borderlands/La frontera: The new mestiza*, Anzaldúa states that "Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (1987, para. 1). Upon this definition, the Appalachian region and the NCAU campus may well be a borderland where the eight Latinas interviewed in this research coexist, interact, collide, and compromise with people, ideas, and with their own selves, "[A]nd before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country-a border culture" (para. 1). The internal and external conflicts experienced by the Latina undergraduates are manifestations of this open wound. For some of the participants, their wounds keep bleeding at different paces and intensities; for others, the scab is hard enough to prevent further bleedings, but the possibility lies there. Both the blood and the scab merged to create a third space that overlaps the initial two distinguished by the border.

The Appalachian region and the NCAU campus as borderlands

The Mexico-US borderland area has been the home of Mexican-Americans for centuries. For them, the U.S. Southwest is their homeland Aztlan, that ancient Mexicans located in the northern parts of their empire (Anzaldúa, 1987). For their current descendants, this was and is home regardless of the changes made to the demarcation through different centuries, governments, and wars. More to the north and in the pre-Civil War period, the Mason-Dixon

Line was drawn along the parallel 39°43′ N to separate the states of Pennsylvania and Maryland. With this demarcation came the separation between the slave-states south and free-states north of the line, and with it, the symbolic separation of two different conceptions of the world. This border also created borderlands as a place for encountering and negotiation. The north central area of the Appalachian region lays in this borderlands and NCAU campus is located barely south of the Mason-Dixon line. Thus, for out-of-state students, coming to NCAU might be the first time that they cross borders and live in the borderlands. For in-state students, mostly from rural areas, coming to NCAU might be the first time that they are in a big town surrounded by people with different backgrounds and are exposed to different ideas. This was the case for the eight participants in this study. The Appalachian region constitutes a borderlands, and the university creates a distinguished environment where different worlds collide as well.

The participants discussed cultural clash encounters and pointed at regional differences between the northeastern states and the Appalachian region. In their comments, the out-of-state participants mentioned assumptions and negative stereotypes attributed to the Appalachian region and people. For example, international student Amber heard that the educational attainment in the Appalachian region is generally lower than the national average (Wright, Cunnigham, & Stangle, 2016). She perceived a gap in general education for in-state students when compared to out-of-state students. Katrina observed that people seems to not care about the way they look whereas in their home state, people "*put effort into their outfits.*" The out-of-state participants mentioned not only the lack of diversity, but the homogeneity of the residents. Katrina said that her classmates "*look the same […] white, blond hair, blue eyes or green eyes.*" Jessica went further and described the local people as "*really Southern.*" In-state-students described their hometowns as a "*very conservative environment*" with "*small minded*" people

(Gabriella). However, they also highlighted that the town where the campus is located is an exception. Carly mentioned that the state stereotypes "*are completely false at NCAU*" and Sophia said that the town is "*the most globalized city in [the state].*"

Latina students negotiate their position in the borderlands created by the campus from different starting points. Whereas Katrina, Jessica, Georgia, and Carly deal with a less diverse environment and a perceived downgrade, Aria, Gabriella, and Sophia see the campus as an upgrade compared with the rest of the state. These students entered the borderlands of NCAU with the idea of building the next steps, and eventually leaving the university behind. This might be the obvious case for Amber, Carly, Georgia, Jessica, and Katrina, who came from different regions. But for Aria, Gabriella, and Sophia, who spent their childhood and teenage years in these borderlands, one can think that their feelings and connections with the town, the state, and the Appalachia region are different. However, for them, the Appalachian region is not home. Home is restricted to the walls and to the people in their family house. Thus, all the participants might be considered in-transit individuals on campus and in the Appalachia region.

Borderlands are also created within the campus. The students did not share any incidents where the intellectual work expected in higher education collided with their preparedness or own assumptions of college work. They were academically prepared to the rigor and none seemed to be struggling. Colleges and universities typically provide students services to help students to succeed academically, but as Jessica mentioned, they also needed targeted social support. Within the academic services and offerings, students found borderlands. Carly was automatically assigned to the math class aimed to struggling students in what she considered a biased assumption based on her Hispanic last name. However, she did not express bias incidents related to her gender in her male-dominate major, as it might be expected. On the contrary, she thinks she has equal access to many opportunities and that she is treated equally. For example, she is part of a project in collaboration with NASA. When asked why she thinks her project was selected, she mentioned the following: "*I believe I was selected because my research proposal is more on the biological processes side, rather than the engineering side like most.*" Carly was member of the Student Government Association as well, "*due to [her] background in health and advocacy."* Carly found her place in the neuroscience and psychology departments, and in the student association, clubs, and sorority in which she is member, but even Carly, who seems to be well integrated in the campus dynamics had doubts about how to fit on campus:

> *When I came to NCAU I was seventeen years old. I was full of insecurity academically and personally and my mind was always clouded by this. To walk by my peers, I felt the need to hide by burying my face in my phone to not make any eye contact. I was afraid to speak in class, and to people I didn't know, simply because I had no idea what my place in the world was and felt as if I was an outsider.*

Katrina and Sophia felt more engaged in a space more aligned to their Latinx identity: their Spanish classes, in which they felt "*at home*" (Katrina). There, they found friends and cultural alignment. Gabriella felt the same in their Woman and Gender classes. As non-heterosexual, she looked for places in which their identity and experiences are validated and part of the curriculum. For example, she mentioned that it was in these classes where she learned the concept of microaggressions. She felt relieved when she could assign a term to her experiences and feelings and know that she was not the only one: '*that's a big open minded group. It's just good. I feel so much better."* The benefits for underrepresented students from culturally relevant teaching practices and active inclusion in the classroom has been widely studied (Klein, 1987;

Statham, Richardson, & Cook, 1991; Maruyama et. al., 2000; Locks et al., 2008; Tanner, 2013; Lawrie et al., 2017).

Jessica was still finding spaces where she could feel validated. The COVID-19 pandemic restrictions forced students to move to the online space to keep up with their academic commitments. This created new borderlands in which expectations and relationships varied and were designed on the fly for some of them. The interviews took place during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemics, in which the restrictions to social contact were stricter: *"I didn't really have much of an opportunity to engage with other people or join with other groups. So that definitely caused a big problem. When it comes to like, the college experience with connecting with other students"* (Jessica). Sophia, Carly, and Gabriella also expressed difficulties to connect and be engaged when all the classes were virtual and the campus was closed. Studies about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the academic and emotional effects of the move to a complete online learning environment. Among these effects, students reported lack of connection with other students and teachers, unstable workspace conditions, boredom between time points (Balta-Salvador et al. 2021;) and sedentarism, anxiety, and depression (Lischer et al., 2021). Elmer et al. (2020) note females appear to be at higher risk of facing negative mental health consequences from this move. For the participants in this study, the online space proved to be more social, emotional, and mentally challenging than academically challenging. Gabriella was the only one to mention that the adjustment to the online environment negatively impacted her grades.

Aria seemed to have found her space among international students. In a way, she appears to be secure when the marks of who is an insider and who is an outsider is more defined. Curiously, she leans more toward the position of an outsider. The difference is that whereas these international students are on campus temporarily, Aria's situation is more permanent and she will eventually need to navigate both worlds. Aria wants to become a bridge for these students to easier their acculturation to the American campus. Anzaldúa and other Chicana scholars resort to bridges as "passageways, conduits, and connectors that connote transitioning, crossing borders, and changing perspectives" (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002, p. 1). For these women, to bridge, means "loosening our borders, not closing off to others. Bridging is the work of opening the gate to the stranger, within and without" (p. 3).

Aria is indeed in need of a similar figure for her, a mentor who guides her on how to navigate through the different elements that conform her identity. However, she does not have or know a Latinx classmate, professor, or staff that could help her transition to a more comfortable space.

Among all the participants, the one who does not find comfort anywhere on campus is Georgia. Neither in her classes, nor in her apartment with her roommates, nor when communicating with home. Borderlands has proved to be a hostile environment for her. Immersed in a white, Anglo, and male environment, she does not feel represented and validated on campus. Her isolation is growing and affecting other aspects of her college live. Despite of having been close to one of her roommates in the past, now, she does not interact with them anymore: "*I don't interact with my roommates, all that often, what we do is fine, you know, kind of like small talk.*" When communicating with home, Georgia does not share her struggles: "*I try not to talk to my mom too much about it, mainly because I just don't think she quite knows how to support me in that aspect."* She cannot find comfort and understanding back home.

Borderlands are also found in the students' hometowns and families. Georgia and Jessica do not share their mental health problems because they do not want to worry their parents.

Sophia and Carly seems to be the ones with less conflict at home. But new borderlands were created also at home for both of them due to their condition as college students. Sophia acknowledged that she felt trapped at home during confinement and Carly missed the campus so much that she came back as soon as students were permitted. Gabriella's relationship with her parents improved emotionally but an intellectual border were created when she expressed a disconnection talking with her parents about what she is learning on campus. Katrina and Gabriella bodies and expressions of individuality were policed at home, especially when they did not fit the cultural expectations fixed at home, for example, how a Latina's hair should look (Katrina), which cooking is eating at home (Katrina), or which clothing style is appropriated for a Latina body (Gabriella).

It is in this borderlands where the participants have to negotiate their identity as women of Latinx heritage. Anzaldúa explained in the preface to *Borderlands/La frontera* that in the Mexico-US border, the Anglo and the Mexican cultures collide, being the Anglo one the so-called superior and first world. The Mexican culture and people are the third world, which "grates against the first and bleeds" (1987, para. 3). The Latinx identity confronts the mainstream identity of a the predominantly white region and campus. Amber felt compelled to debunk myths about the Mexican people and culture. Gabriella's legitimacy to be American was questioned in high school and when working in the restaurant. The interrogation into the citizenship and the legal status of non-white immigrants and Latinx people is pervasive (Chavez, 2013, Willis-Esqueda et al., 2012) and it seems that it is not going to end soon as a significant amount of the US population continue to see whites as more American than Latinx and other citizens of color (Devos &Banaji, 2005; Huerta et al., 2015).

The interview questions prompted to reflect about how they position themselves within a Latina identity and lead to insights about cultural assumptions, misunderstandings, and aggressions, to which they referred in terms of conflict. The participants' comments show that the Mason-Dixon line still exists to separate lifestyles and conceptions of the world. They also evince that the US-Mexican border is not static but travels whenever Latinx people move, to create other borders and borderlands and to continue bleeding. It is in this borderlands where the Latina students negotiate their identities and find strategies for survival. This process is an intimate one, as pointed out by Anzaldúa, and as such, it is personal and unique.

Nepantla and Mestiza consciousness at NCAU

People who inhabit the borderlands are in constant movement and transition. The spaces and borderlands where the students dwell were often more challenging and hostile than welcoming. The mental and emotional struggles living in borderlands is what Anzaldúa defined as living in Nepantla, "a Nahuatl word meaning *tierra entre medio* [*in-between*]" (Anzaldúa, 2002, p.1). This liminal state is full of possibilities for exploration, accommodation, and rebellion, it is a place for internal change: "transformations occur in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries" (p. 1). Being the only Latina student in class, being a first generation student, and/or being the woman in the program creates new soil for discomfort and otherness that the study's participants might have never confronted before. In fact, "Nepantla es tierra desconocida [*unknown land*], and living in this liminal zone means being in a constant state of displacement—an uncomfortable, even alarming feeling" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p.1). As she further explained, women, specially Chicana women, are prone to experience those feelings since they are constantly under scrutiny and subject to an overlapping mesh of norms, expectations, and self-impositions. When they fail to think and behave according to the imposed structure, they are cruelly stigmatized because "women are at the bottom of the ladder one rung above the deviants" (p. 18). As deviants, foreign bodies in a predominantly white and Anglo higher education institution and region, the experiences the Latina students narrated might be understood using this lens.

For a Latina woman to survive the forces colluding on the borderlands, Anzaldúa (2002) proposes to develop a Mestiza consciousness that allows her to detach from binary frameworks, "colored/white, female/male, mind/body are collapsing" (p. 556). In this unconstrained space, the individual embraces ambiguity to construct an identity based on fluidity and movement. One of the benefits of living between spaces is that "the perspective from the cracks gives us different ways of defining the self, of defining group identity" (p. 52). The cracks represent the torn woman face when they have to live between worlds, the open wound borders are. To facilitate the process of rebirth to a new identity, the Latina should embrace her Indigenous roots, "the Indian woman's history of resistance" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 22) that would serve her to "putting all the pieces together in a new form" (2002, p. 546). This study found that the NCAU Latina students interviewed not only physically lived in borderlands, but that also their mental, emotional, and spiritual state is in the liminal space Nepantla. Thus, living in borderlands triggered the Nepantla state which could develop in a mestiza consciousness (Sandoval, 2002).

In Borderlands/La Frontera, Anzaldúa (1987) targeted the culturally determined racial and ethnical roles imposed on the inhabitants of the US-Mexico border, which favored the Anglo culture over the Mexican and Chicano culture. She targeted the gender and racial roles within the Mexican communities as well. The interviewees narrated experiences in which they tried to fit sometimes and others to reject. Through metaphors, poetry, imaginary, and personal narratives, Anzaldúa rescued the indigenous elements of her identity, rejected by both the Anglo and the

Mexican cultures, to create a new identity in which mestiza women may flourish and find peace. “a new value system with images and symbols” (p. 80). To construct this new consciousness, the mestiza faces oppression and resistance. For some of the participants, oppression came in the shape of the (micro)aggressions from classmates, patrons in a restaurant, and members of the same student organization. For others, it came from institutional practices, as Carly and Amber experienced. Anzaldúa described two states of being oppressed: intimate terror and the Coatlicue state.

In the intimate terror, the mestiza feels petrified trying to fulfill all the imposed expectations. International student Amber recalled her nervousness when a stranger tried to initiate a small talk with her: “*Do I speak with her? What do we speak about? What do I tell her? How much is too much? What is rude? What it's not, and I freak a lot. Like, I freak out about that stuff. And my friends are like, Why do you get so nervous about that?”* Katrina struggled to fit into the personality expectations of a young Latina. She, Jessica, and Amber did not fit the Latina body assumptions, and Carly suffered the assumptions of lack of academic preparation among Latinx students. The oppression also happened at home, as Jessica, Katrina, and Gabriella narrated. When the self is being oppressed, she might be forced to choose. Gabriella decided to alternate identities according to the people with whom she is surrounded: “*when I'm in the States, I have to act as American as possible. And when I'm in Mexico, I have to act as Mexican as possible.”* There is a fear of being alone, of being rejected and abandoned “for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 20). This is what happened to the Mesoamerican goddesses Coatlicue. She and other goddesses were expulsed to the underworld by their male peers when they challenged their power and authority. Women should be dominated and controlled by men. Women should not trigger sensual of sexual thoughts in men, as Gabriella was taught when trying to wear tight jeans in high school. Katrina's experience applying for a job in a Mexican restaurant during her senior year at NCAU illustrates this point:

> *He was asking me if I was married, he was asking me if I had kids. And he was asking me, he said, don't worry, that won't influence anything. But a lot of times, if we hire women, their husbands get mad that they're working late. So then, they come in and they cause a scene. So it's kind of a problem to hire women. And sometimes, if women have kids, it interferes with the schedule, because they have to go take care of them, or they have to go pick them up from school. And that interferes with scheduling hours. And then he also said, he literally told me, 'the majority of our staff is male in the kitchen[…] and the waiters are also majority men[…] I feel I have to tell you, you have to be very, if you get hired, you have to be very professional around these men. Because if you smile, or if you talk to them too kindly, they will read into it, and they will try and flirt with you.'*

The daughters of Coatlicue represent "the dark sexual dive, the chthonic (underworld), the feminine, the serpentine, movement of sexuality, of creativity, the basis of all energy and life" (p. 35). And as thus, they have to be controlled. However, the theory of the mestiza consciousness is a theory of the flesh. Leaving behind the intellectual way to know, Chicana feminists argue for a material, corporeal, sensorial way to learn and know, in which living experiences, the "flesh and blood experiences of the women of color" (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981, p. 23) are key. Related to this is the Latina body as subject of analysis and source of knowledge. The students' Latina bodies are odd and in need of control. On campus, Katrina noticed that her brown body stand out in the classroom: "*I feel like without even saying anything I walked in and I was loud.*" Georgia discovered that she was the only woman and the only non-white person in her program. Amber learned that her pale skin did not fit the expected brownness of the Mexican body in the US: *“I'm not white enough to be with the white American kids. I'm not dark enough to be with the Latin kids”*. Jessica experienced similar incidents in her Latino community back home. Gabriella´s hooded eyes were confusing for some customers in a Mexican restaurant. And at home, hairstyle and clothing elections were deemed as not appropriated. Katrina´s hair highlights were too Anglo according to her mother: ¨*oh, you pick that up from the white people*¨; and Gabriella’s jeans were too revealing: “*what are you wearing? Those are too tight. You're gonna look too suggestive.”* The body is punished for existing but at the same time, the body and the senses allowed students to experience and understand their position at home, in their local communities, and on campus.

Coatlicue also represents the power of life and creativity. The Coatlicue state is one of resistance. However, to get there, the woman should first go to the underworld and experience pain and rejection. Here, the woman needs to strip herself of all what controls her, to acknowledge what oppresses her from every direction, every culture, and also from herself. She has to reject everything that once was part of her identity and self. From this nakedness and vulnerability, she will be able to see herself as who she really is and accept it. This necessary step is extremely painful:

> “She has this fear that she has no names that she has many names that she doesn’t know her names… She has this fear that is she takes off her clothes shoves her brain aside peels off her skin.. strips the flesh from the bone… than when she does reach herself…she won’t find anyone…She has this fear that she won’t find the way back” (p. 43).

Georgia and Jessica seemed to be trapped in this stage. They were able to identify what oppressed them and what could help them to leave this state behind. The *Coatlicue* state “slow us up so that the psyche can assimilate previous experiences and process the changes” (p. 46). For these two students, the *Coatlicue* state seems to last too much. Moreover, the NCAU context does not offer them the tools and resources they need to leave this underworld sate, to be safe, and to feel at home. Whereas Gabriella felt comfortable with her context but wanted to find a more genuine version of her: "*I've gotten really good at adapting to things and I don't want to adapt anymore. I want to be an original version of me."* Georgia and Jessica decided that their true self is intimately linked to a Latinx heritage that they cannot find at NCAU. In the case of Georgia, the complex relationship between ethnicity, race, and gender made her dwelling in borderlands a constant mental Nepantla state and a Coatlicue form of suffering.

Anzaldúa provides a description of the emotions and feelings that this accommodation entails. The author differentiated seven stages in a desired process that does not lead to acculturation, but to the creation of a differentiated mental and spiritual place that provides calm. Analyzing the position of the study participants through these stages would help to understand their reactions and reflections to their experiences. Again, Anzaldúa stands up for embracing the new possibilities that conflict and struggle create for women instead of surrounding to the pressures of selecting one option and abandoning the others. Nevertheless, this mental process is uneasy and reopens the wound. Anzaldúa (2002) describes this process as *conocimiento*. *Conocimiento* is the Spanish word for knowledge, understood not as the accumulation of facts and information, but to the apprehension and comprehension of the reality. *Conocimiento* is a "knowing within, an awareness and intelligence not grasped by logical thought" (p. 539), a "consciousness-raising tool, one that promotes self-awareness and self-reflectivity" (Keating, 2012, p. 178). This *conocimiento* serves to discern between different options and accept personal choices. Equally important is to highlight that these stages are not in a temporal continuum nor in a circular framework. The stages are interconnected and individuals experience transformations at different paces, going back and forth between stages.

The first stage is the *arrebato,* [fit, outburst]. The *arrebato* is triggered by major life changes that force individuals to evaluate their life situation and to question for which they stand. Stage two is called Nepantla. As already mentioned, Nepantla is a zone of ruptures, changes, and equilibrium. In this state, there is a feeling of being torn between identities and "you don't know whether to assimilate, separate, or isolate" (2002, p. 563). The third stage is the Coatlicue state. Here, the individual faces her pain and confront her demons and fears with two different outcomes. It is "the hellish third phase of your journey (2002, p. 566). In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa (1987) narrates her intimate journey through the Nepantla and Coatlicue states. The fourth state: the call, allows reflexivity and dialogue to identify similar experiences and start building community. The fifth state: putting Coyolxauhqui together, refers to the process of reassembling experiences and emotions to construct meaning. The sixth stage: the blow-up, establishes a change in perspectives. The final stage: spiritual activism, transform the previous shift in paradigms in a compassionate strategy "to negotiate conflict and differences within self and between others" (p. 545).

This study considers that attending NCAU and staying in the Appalachian region is a major *arrebato*, since it positions the students in borderlands territory. Yet, being physically in the borderlands is not enough per se to produce *arrebatos*. The intellectual, mental, emotional, and spiritual *arrebatos* that trigger the process to *conocimiento* should cause discomfort. Sophia did experience *arrebato*s; however, her reflections showed to have an equilibrium between her Anglo and Chilean identities, probably forged through the years. Carly also showed a great sense of belonging, but she experienced two big *arrebatos* as a first-year student, which shook her high level of Anglo acculturation and her low level of Latinx ethnic identity (in comparison with the other participants). Yet, the *arrebatos* were quickly resolved, restoring equilibrium. Gabriella suffered *arrebatos*. Two of them took place in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, in which she reconsidered their high school friends and how her Mexicanity shaped how people saw her. For Katrina, the apathy from Latinx undergraduates towards spiritual issues made her realize the role of faith as an intrinsic part of her identity and experience as a college student. The adaptation to the demands and expectations of a college student is hard, but for the participants, their Latina identity added additional moments of *arrebato* in which they questioned their survival.

Gabriella illustrates the feelings of being in Nepantla in her comments about being flexible to adapt to the American environment and to the Mexican environment, but she regrets that she has to constantly analyze and choose which elements of her identity she had to show. In-state Sophia quickly defined herself as a perfect mix of Latin and Anglo cultures, but she dismissed her Appalachian roots. The feeling is shared by Gabriella and Aria, who also moved to the state when they were young. They actively rejected the negative associations with the region but still, they do not consider themselves as Appalachians. Jessica is torn between her Puerto Rican and her Anglo backgrounds. The rejection comes from her own peers, who see her native English and her light skin as elements that exclude her from fully participate in her Caribbean heritage. As explained before, these contradictions and conflicts are the essence of the goddess Coatlicue, “fusion of opposites: the eagle and the serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror” (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 47).

Some of the experiences reflected the third stage: Coatlicue state. Anzaldúa understands this state as a preparatory one to becoming a “full-fledged member of the borderlands” (Lugones, 2008), a new mestiza. Georgia and Jessica show the higher levels of discomfort. They are aware of their uniqueness and isolation on campus. Their ethnicity, race, gender (in the case of Georgia), and age (in the case of Jessica), and faith (in the case of Katrina) caused them pain. Students started to be aware of the impact of each of this elements, “clutching the fragmented pieces and bits of yourself you’ve disowned” (p. 566). Anzaldúa explains that the individual might be psychologically paralyzed, or she might discover meaning of her experiences, allowing the *conocimiento* to take place. The author describes this process of knowing as painful because after it happens, the individual “can’t stay in the same place and be comfortable” (1985, p. 48). Georgia and Jessica’s desires to finish their degrees and move out of the campus are signs of this discomfort. Georgia already abandoned the idea of looking for new friendships or connections; she even does not enjoy performing as she did before. Amber promised herself to never again participate in any choir activity that requires singing the U.S. national anthem. Katrina counteracted her negative feelings by immersing in her faith and assuming leadership responsibilities that occupied almost of her free time and mind.

Aria, however, seems to be comfortable in the Nepantla state. Her experiences seemed to be a slow but steady process of accommodation that started way before entering college. She already embraced her position as an outsider. This is one of the risks of living in Nepantla: not belonging anywhere, becoming an alien. She defines herself and her family mainly as emigrants: “we have the tradition of migration, a tradition of long walks” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 11). Aria feels more comfortable with other emigrants and international students. Aria has lived so long in Nepantla that she has started to feel comfortable there. As Anzaldúa (2002) reflected about herself , “most of us dwell in nepantla so much of the time it’s become a sort of ‘home’” (p.1). When asked about her plans for the future, Aria said: “*I've thought about moving to another* *place in the US but not so much I came to really like it here.*" One can say that Aria found calmness in the identity that she created and accepted. However, Anzaldúa cautioned about complacency. There is a risk in accommodation and inactivity: "[…] cradled in the arms of *Coatlicue,* who will never let her go. If she doesn't change her ways, she will remain a stone forever" (p. 47).

Stages four to seven are related to making commitments to allow change, to constantly reinvent the self, and to embrace spiritual activism and forgiveness where needed to allow healing. Stage four, the *compromiso* (commitment), is "a call to action [that] pulls you out of your depression" (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 555). Anzaldúa describes this process as leaving the body to fully expand and express itself: "it dawns on you that *you're not contained by your skin*—you exist outside your body, and outside your dreambody as well" (p. 570). Both the bodily experiences and the acknowledgement that the body does not have boundaries allow for the realization that "if you're not contained by your race, class, gender, or sexual identity, the body must be more than the categories that mark you" (p. 555). These categories restrain the individual to niches and reflect the power dynamics in society: "though these markings are outworn and inaccurate, those in power continue using them to single out and negate those who are 'different' because of color, language, notions of reality, or other diversity" (p. 556). Trying to adjust to the expectations creates confusion. As Gabriella explained: "*Sometimes I don't know which one I'm supposed to be [...] So it gets, it gets exhausting and it gets confusing. I don't know what I'm supposed to be playing that day [...] I'm always playing a role. 100%.*" Categorization was what these Latina students experienced. These labels, for Amber, are "*making everybody get more apart*". Mainly, because they create presumptions: "*you can't even get a glance of what someone really is, you already have all this information about and that* *creates preconceptions",* reducing the individual to a small set of characteristics that shadows the rest of experiences. External pressures forced Katrina to shape to this mold: "*it just kind of got annoying that I had to be some spit like specific way to be able to fit the mold of Latina."* If the intention of creating these boxes is to find commonalities and make it easier for people to find each other, Amber thinks that the outcome in the opposite: *"in their need, or their want to make everything more inclusive, all this tiny little labels are actually doing the opposite."* She extended her comments to the Latinx community: *"now, between minorities, they exclude themselves."* Katrina had an interesting comment about the perceived one-dimensionality of the Latinx student at NCAU: "*there's not diversity within the Latino community".* She thinks that "*how they bond is partying, and drinking and that kind of stuff"* and she did not share the same interests.

This categorization of Latinx people as mainly party-going persons is precisely what she and Gabriella have been rejecting since their years in high school. One wonders if what Katrina perceived was precisely a bias against Latinx students. For example, data show that almost 53 percent of full-time college students ages 18 to 22 drank alcohol in a given month (SAMHSA, 2019), however, it might be perceived that it is more common among Latinx students when they are seeing in groups. Amber was able to notice categories and labels that others applied to her as a Latina. She tried to face them from a safer position. Knowing that her staying in borderlands is temporal, she is not urged to defy these categories. For the rest of participants, leaving the borderlands might not be so easy. Gabriella and Sophia want to leave the state to pursue graduate studies, but Aria still does not know what to do after graduation. Jessica's boyfriend is stationed in the state, but she already expressed her desire to move to a more diverse community.

Georgia’s time at NCAU is so agonizing that she only wants to finish her degree to leave the campus. Leaving the Nepantla state might be even more difficult.

To some degree, it is difficutl to assert if the students have entered any of the last three stages of the path to conocimiento. Sophia did not seem to have experienced *arrebatos* while in NCAU, but showed to be already in peace with her Anglo and Latina identity. It is difficult to say how she reached this state, but she was more vocal about her position living in the Appalachian region. She rejected any Appalachian identity; moreover, she disassociated herself from the negative stereotypes of an Appalachian identity; however, she was able to show understanding, empathy, and a critical reflection of her state. Specifically, talking about political orientation, she mentioned the following:

> *When I was younger, I definitely thought a lot of negative things about people from West Virginia, Appalachia, I definitely fed into a lot of the stereotypes[…] But, I think there's definitely other factors and it would be ignorant of someone like me to not consider other factors that would cause you know, people to vote for Trump despite all the hateful things he said.*

Sophia attributed this reflection to her major in International Relations, which made her to have a critical thinking mindset. She also mentioned that it is habitual for her and her family to have discussions about current issues in Latin America. This close contact with different sides of borderlands allowed her to develop *conocimiento* and to avoid stereotyping.

Defying and denying stereptyping and the categories that allow it is a liberatory movement. When the individual acknowledges that she is categorized and that it is imposible to separate mind from body, matter from spirit, “body is both spirit and matter” (p. 570), she can enter the fifth stage, putting Coyolxuahqui together. Here, the woman starts to analyze and live her experiences under a new lens in which she does not allow other people define her, but she puts all the pieces and stories together to interpret and reinterpret again “saying good/by to old ways of relating” (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 568). In stage six, the Latina woman realizes that her new vision of herself contrast with what the exterior world considers her to be. Instead of suffering an *arrebato* and have the process begin, the individual faces the initial upsetting with another set of mind, with more peace and less resentment. Aria seems to be in this stage. Finally, in stage seven: spiritual activism, “you’re able to slip between realities to a neutral perception” (p. 584). Being neutral does not mean lack of care, but the ability the grasp and understand different points of view and positionalities. In contrast to the Coatlicue state, here the individual faces the *arrebato* with “love, peace, happiness, and the desire to grow.” *Conocimiento* implies activism. Based on their own experiences of oppression, the individual is moved to empathy towards others. This activism is a spiritual one. Anzaldúa echoes other feminists who describe love as a radical political act (Lorde, 1984), a practice of freedom (hooks, 1994), and a motor for social transformation (Sandoval, 2000).

Anzaldúa describes these stages of *conocimiento* as a process to make sense of the self, in which the woman “sees things in a different perspective. It is only then that she makes the connections, formulates the insights. It is only then that her consciousness expands a tiny notch” (p. 49). In this study, the participants shared these moments of pain, the outcomes, and how they deal with the process of being a Latina student in a PWI. Anzaldúa posits that:

> In our efforts to rethink the borders of race, gender, and identity, we must guard against creating new binaries. Though most people self-define by what they exclude, we define who we are by what we include—what I call the new tribalism. Though most of us live entremundos, between and among worlds, we are frustrated by those who step over the

> line, by hybridities and ambiguities, and by what does not fit our expectations of "race" and sex. (2002, p. 3)

Creating more categories, more options, more programs, might not be the right solution, but it is often the most used. For example, NCAU is currently revamping its Latinx student associations. Although it is a great opportunity for the Latinx voices to be grouped and heard, it might not provide an escape from the Nepantla state in which the study's participants inhabit. Anzaldúa asserted that the mestiza needs to undergo an internal upsetting process from which they could emerge cross-pollinated and ready to absorb the crash of diverse cultures. For that, she needs to embrace ambiguity and fluidity to be able to resist new *arrebatos*. The new mestiza endorses the hybrid character of her existence and recuperates the ancient indigenous traditions based on the blurred distinction between material and spiritual matter. Mestiza consciousness goes beyond intersectionality in the sense that whereas the former focuses on how each of the different socially constructed identities intersect—race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, class, religion, etc.—, the latter is not the mere sum of the, but a new entity characterized by ambiguity and fluidity (Hernandez, 2020).

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSIONS

Around 20 percent of all U.S. students enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions are of Hispanic background (de Brey et al., 2019). Even though classrooms are becoming more racially and ethnicity diverse than ever, the Latinx student population is highly concentrated in community colleges and urban areas in the Southwest, the Northeast, and specific locations of the Midwest. Consequently, research has been done primarily in these areas, leaving the four-year degree institutions, rural areas, and the Appalachian region behind. Research among Latinx in higher education in the Appalachian region has been included in studies about multicultural education in general, thus more is needed to address these students in this regional context. Traditional research on underrepresented students is shaped in terms of deficiencies (Antonio & Muñiz, 2008). Moreover, research shows that the Latinx youth seems to have been systematically relegated by the educational system to a path of underachievement (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Rodríguez & Oseguera, 2015). Among the individual characteristics that a student brings to college, the literature agrees that the socioeconomic background, the social and cultural capital, and the academic preparedness have a significant impact in the access and success of college students (Kuh et al., 2006). Yet, for Latinx students, differences among country/state of origin, language proficiency, years living in the U.S., race, gender, and the campus climate, to name a few, do indeed matter. The findings of this study supports it: The location and mainstream culture of the higher education institution have an acute impact on underrepresented students, in this case, on Latinas in a four-year Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in the Appalachian region.

The Chicana feminist movement contributes to position women as active agents, validating the clash of the different interwoven elements that make up their identity. Intersectionality, therefore, helps to frame the complexity and vulnerability of the Latina student on one hand, and how their cultural assets might become a powerful tool to navigate successfully through the education pipeline in a flexible context (Yosso, 2005). Diversity scholars pointed out the central piece of students' voices and perspectives in higher education research, especially if they belong to underrepresented populations (Samura, 2017). Thus, deviating from positivist approaches and following a Chicana feminist lens, this study gave prominence to the voice of Latina students.

Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) framework proved to be useful for that purpose. The study used her concepts of borderlands and Mestiza consciousness. The appeal of the borderlands is precisely its components of ambiguity, flexibility, and accommodation to two or more contexts with the possibility to create new ones where defiance and non-conformism are powerful tools. Hence, the borderlands became a new and autonomous place where current identities clash and new possibilities are embraced. This state of the mind and soul is not strange for individuals who experience disruptions that make them question what they used to take for granted and to rebel to the imposed status quo. The eight Latina undergraduates in this study dwelled in the Borderlands created by the Appalachian region, the NCAU campus, and their own home communities and families. To survive and make sense of their experiences, they developed a mestiza consciousness in different degrees. A Mestiza consciousness adopts a holistic perspective to give meaning to her experiences in a process of self-reflection called *conocimiento*. Through interviews and *pláticas*. the study gave the students the opportunity to explain and reflect on ideas, intentions, and behaviors, contributing to the literature that uses personal stories as a method to generate data and create experiential knowledge (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

The study found that ethnic identity is a powerful lens in the life of these students. Moving to the Appalachian borderlands and to the NCAU campus borderlands allowed them to experience the conflict of cultures, as Jessica pointed out: *"I did go through culture shock a little for some bit. Mostly because everyone that I was talking to were white."* Living in the borderlands also allowed them to debunk some of the negative stereotypes about the region: "*I realized that some people are just like that. It sucks. But, there's also a lot of great people here too*" (Carly) and for the in-state participants, to reflect on their own perceptions about Appalachia as their home: *"When I was younger, I definitely thought a lot of negative things about people from [state's name], Appalachia,[…] as I've gotten older, I've really understood why [the state] is the way it is. And the socio economic impacts and the historical impacts that have really fed into all of that.*"(Sophia). Borderlands, indeed, made possible the clash of identities, the moments of *arrebatos* that sparked introspection and change.

Several of these *arrebatos* arrived in the form of (micro)aggressions with negative consequences for the students. The participants of Mexican ancestry were the ones who suffered it with more intensity. Not only the culture was targeted, but the presumed Latina body, intellect, and behavior. Living in the borderlands deprived herself of all what once she thought she was. These (micro)aggressions took place in the boundaries of the NCAU campus. They happened in classrooms and other common spaces. They happened with classmates, graduate assistants, professors at an individual level, but it also occurred at an institutional level--understood as the systematic process to execute activities, sending the message that the students do not belong. Stereotyping and (micro)aggressions occurred within the Latinx communities as well. As a PWI institution, the sense of belonging needed for underrepresented students to succeed was indeed a challenge at NCAU. The students did not encounter academic misfits, but they experienced barriers to social integration.

Students received institutional and home support to deal with college demands. The institutional help mentioned came in scholarships and mental health services, but as they argued, these were not enough or adequate. Students mentioned lack of information and resources to access such information, and lack of professionals of a Latinx background or without the training to work with Latinx students. Some of the positive experiences with the institutional support received were related to the connections made with specific professors and administrators of Latinx ancestry, and the participation in specific programs and classes which are currently in jeopardy due to low enrollment and financial constraints.

This study found that family provided significant financial aid and emotional comfort. Parents and families trust in higher education as a tool for socioeconomic mobility and they are willing to make sacrifices for their children's education, even to the point of being in severe financial debt. Emotional support is shown in small tokens such as driving with excitement to visit different campuses and buying a sticker for the car. However, some of the participants struggled to communicate with their parents about the difficulties of being a college student. Familism is exemplified here in the deep care that these students showed to not worry their parents while they are away from home. This study contributed as well to debunk the marked gender role attributed to Latinx families in which the main role of daughters is being wives and mothers (Ayala, 2006; Denner & Dunbar, 2004; McLoyd et al., 2000). These students did not discard the idea of starting their own families in the future, but at the moment, their priority is becoming professionals and financially independent. Nevertheless, as Katrina experienced when looking for employment in a local Mexican restaurant, there are still toxic environments in which women suffer (micro)aggressions and whose job conditions do not allow a work/life balance. The gendered corporate culture of these places perpetuates harmful attitudes and behaviors. Some places, instead of correcting them from within, opt for rejecting women from their work settings.

The study's findings also stressed the key role of social and cultural capital for Latinx college students. Carly and Sophia not only brought the family and high school's knowledge and preparedness to attend college, but their Anglo background prepared them specifically to face the social demands of a PWI. Therefore, college was a smooth and straightforward experience compared to those of other participants. For the former, the process to figure out the next movements seemed to be an act of faith. As Katrina mentioned, she was not even sure if her application to be in a dorm was received. Her faith and spirituality helped her not only during the transition but all along her four years as a college student. The rest of the participants did not mention attending religious services or that religion was an important part of their lives, although Gabriella admitted that it was a social tradition for her family. Anzaldúa (1987) advocated for recuperating a spirituality free of the religious boundaries. For her, a spiritual individual should be more in contact with her ancestors' beliefs attached to nature and to the flesh. There is not a separation of flesh and soul, but all the elements are one. Spirituality helps to interconnect all of them. This idea challenges the traditional separation of body and mind in dominant Western rationality, which demands the removal of the subjective from the thought process and to ignore emotions. Instead, Anzaldúa states that immersing in the blurred state of Nepantla is essential to experience the embedded relationship of what positivist reasoning perceives otherwise as separated elements in a person's identity.

Thus, what does it mean to be a Latina undergraduate in a PWI in the Appalachian region? First, the complexity of the Latina identity cannot be constrained to physical appearance, country of origin, or native language. Instead, each of the participants identified herself in different ways that highlight not only individuality, but intersectionality and the intricacy of the self. In this line, participants rejected categorization and labeling as attempts to forcibly match people into fixed boxes. Borderlands and the Nepantla states allow Latina students to deconstruct race, gender, ethnicity, class, and other assumed fixed elements to create endless possibilities of self: "*Soy un amasamiento,* I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 81).

Second, being a Latina student in a PWI implies suffering for some of them. The physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being is negatively impacted by (micro)aggressions and feelings of isolation, loneliness, and incomprehension, attached to being a minority in a PWI. These findings have been well documented in the literature (Cabrera et al., 1999; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; McCabe, 2009; Harwood et al., 2012; Huber & Cueva, 2012; Liao, K. et al., 2019). For the Latina woman, this pain might be used to start the process of rebirth under a new powerful identity, "because most of you are wounded, negative emotions provide easier access to the sacred than do positive emotions" (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 587).

And third, when Latinas try to make sense of their experiences as students, they are in a Nepantla state. Some of them confronted their fears and reshaped them in the Coatlicue state to embrace contradictions and conflicts. For others, like Jessica and Georgia, the painful Coatlicue state is so powerful that it is difficult to find a way out. Aria decided that she does not belong anywhere and made Nepantla her home. Amber is temporarily navigating through borderlands and Nepantla. She perceived the clash of cultures and identities as a temporal burden; however, her professional goals will take her around the globe and will probably put her in other borderlands that might trigger the subsequent Nepantla states, which might force her to reevaluate her identity. Although she already feels exhausted sometimes, she will have to eventually face the Coatlicue deity and decide what the outcome will be. At the beginning of Carly's journey as a first-year student, she experienced the taste of systematic discrimination as a member of the Latinx community. These isolated events were rapidly solved and, as a second-year student at the moment of the interview, did not have any other encounter that triggered a Nepantla state. Katrina just graduated when she was interviewed, but her emotional state continued to be struggling and finding a comfortable place in her own Nepantla.

Gloria Anzaldúa´s work continue inspiring scholars to find new ways to study and understand the Latina experience, for whom ethnicity, gender, and race continue to being important elements that shape their college experiences. In this line, the marginal position of the Latina student might explain their feelings of marginalization, isolation, and self-doubt (Rodriguez & Blaney, 2021; Gonzalez et al., 2020; López et al., 2020), but it could be used as well to develop targeted mentoring efforts (Figueroa & Rodriguez, 2015; Espino, 2021); to enact critical consciousness in classrooms (Gaxiola-Serrano et al., 2019); to create pedagogical interventions in classrooms (Paccacerqua, 2015; Garcia & Delgado Bernal, 2021), and to understand the contradictions between home and schooling experiences (Marrun, 2015). Borderlands and Nepantla theory might help to explain the situation of Latinas in STEM disciplines (Camacho & Lord, 2013) and to advocate for more flexible theories and methodologies to study the Latinx diversity and experience in general (Garcia et al., 2021).

To consider borders is to consider frontiers, demarcations, separations, and confrontation on one hand, but also communication, exchange, dribbling, and possibilities on the other hand. Where there are borders, there are borderlands, and “nosotros los Chicanos straddle the borderlands” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 62). One can say that whereas there are Latinx communities, borderlands are created. As the Mexico-U.S. border for Anzaldúa, PWI as NCAU is “una *herida abierta [an open wound]* where the Third Word grates the first and bleeds” (p.3).

Implications

In these times when universities all over the country compete to attract undergraduates in a pool of youth that is contracting, the Latinx population, much younger than other racial and ethnic groups, could become the new targeted market. NCAU and other tertiary institutions in the Appalachian region could be well positioned to attract Latinx students, especially those from the surrounding states and from Northeastern states, where 15 percent is of Hispanic heritage (Census Bureau, 2020). The work is not complete when the student is officially enrolled. The term *student success* is often used at the institutional level to encompass the entirety of positive student action and achievement, including student learning, student development, and student persistence. From this perspective, the goal of the institution is to become an educationally engaging one that creates experiences, conditions, climates, opportunities, and expectations that promote student success. Hence, the institution takes into consideration the characteristics and background that their students bring to the campus to design the best environment that, in turn, will produce the desired outputs.

The participants mentioned the positive impact of dedicated Spanish language and culture classes for Heritage Speakers and of the presence of Latinx faculty and staff in their programs and colleges. They also mentioned the negative impact of the lack of racial and gender diversity in fields that are traditionally white-male dominant; the need to have mental health specialists trained in diversity issues to serve diverse populations; and the relevance of having a same race/ethnic mentor. Equally important is the work of admissions and recruitment offices when dealing with first-generation students, who lack the cultural capital needed to navigate the admissions process. The presence of bilingual and bicultural administration staff and faculty members could help with the transition and adjustment to the college environment. Equally important is to acknowledge the financial burden that attending college might impose on some families, which might force the student to make harsh decisions that might harm her academic performance and jeopardize retention. As some of the participants showed, more can be done to publicize scholarships and other types of financial aid available to all students in general and to underrepresented students in particular.

A quantitative analysis of a medium-sized liberal arts college in upstate New York by Schneider and Ward (2003) suggests that institutions that strive to increase Latinx perceived support from peers, faculty, and institutional programs and services might see a greater impact when they focus on these three sources of support combined instead of only one of them. Thus, institutions should develop a three-pronged approach if they want to see an impact. At NCAU, the rise of Latinx faculty members and administrative leaders across colleges, the intentional recruitment of students of Latinx heritage, and the purposively maintenance of offering of classes, programs, services, and activities aimed to satisfy cultural and identity needs, would address the needs of their current and future Latina and Latinx students.

Finally, this study emphasizes the accountability of PWI to provide spaces that welcome the expression and development of a Latinx identity. As the literature shows, college student development encompasses not only cognitive, social, and moral elements, but identity issues as well (Evans et al., 2010). This study contributes to the literature on Latina identity issues. Identity formation is the development of a distinct personality, a uniqueness that is achieved through the navigation of life experiences and is situated in a particular stage of life. Identities are how we see ourselves and are known to others. Our identity includes numerous commitments and affiliations that can help guide our actions, beliefs, and life purposes. This individual identity is closely related to our social identity, or membership in social categories, which influences who we are, how we see ourselves, and how we relate to others. Social identities are often viewed as an individual's personally held beliefs about self in relation to social groups and the ways one expresses that relationship. In order to effectively work with today's college students, institutions must understand the current changing demographic characteristics and appreciate how these characteristics relate to the intellectual, emotional, cultural, moral, physical, interpersonal, and spiritual dimensions of a student's life (Maples, 1995). This study found that the students are still in the process of developing a Mestiza consciousness, in which Latinas "share a category of identity wider than any social position or racial label" (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 573). This study found that their sense of belonging was closely attached to the (mis)alignment of their ethnicity with the mainstream values. In borderland spaces, the expression and development of the Latina identity might be an arduous task.

Even though Nepantla demands isolation and seclusion, Anzaldúa's notion of identity formation is a community-sensitive one: "identity is a relational process. It doesn't depend only on me, it also depends on the people around me" (Anzaldúa, 2000, p. 239). Therefore, a PWI should provide safe community spaces for the Latina student to join after she emerged from the Coatlicue stage. These spaces are materialized in Latinx personnel and professors, in Latinx leadership, and in the commitment to keep the programs and activities from which the Latinx community benefits the most, regardless of their cost-effectiveness. Anzaldúa (2002) also provided the key for institutions to commit to change: "change will happen when you stop resisting the dark side of your reality" (p. 569). Therefore, the experiences of the eight Latina undergraduates who participated in this study are an invitation to institutions to acknowledge that they could do it better.

Future research

In the course of the interviews and the *pláticas* and their analysis, several topics arose that, albeit interesting, were not the object of this study. For example, the relevance and degree of the use of the Spanish language. Most of the participants spoke Spanish at home and with their family members. For some, Spanish was the preferred language at home. As Aria expressed: *"I can't speak English with my family. I just think it sounds a bit awkward. I don't like it. Especially with my mom, I can't imagine speaking English with her."* Speaking Spanish was not an imposition due to the condition of emigrants or to the lack of fluidity in English, it was a choice. The study did not explore the degree of the use of Spanish on campus, which for some of the students was limited to the classes taken in the Spanish department. As they expressed, those were the only spaces on campus in which they could use the language and talk and learn about their own culture. Some of them missed being able to speak Spanish on a daily basis. For example, the processes of recruitment and preparation for the interviews was initiated in English; however, when the participants were offered the option to answer in English or Spanish, two of them switched constantly between both languages during the conversation, adding remarks such as: "*You know what I mean, right?"* or *"As we say at home…"* before speaking in Spanish. At the same time, this interaction in Spanish created some complicity with the researcher. As

Anzaldúa echoed, “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity--I am my language” (1987, p. 59).

Sexuality and gender expression are important parts of identity; however, this study did not cover these two elements. Two of the students mentioned to have a boyfriend, a third defined herself as bisexual, but the rest did not disclose their orientation. The questions in the interview did not ask for it specifically and the students did not mention any experience related to this part of their identity. Anzaldúa, as a lesbian woman herself, suffered rejection from both the Mexican community and the Anglo community for her sexual orientation. She expressly wrote about the traditional Mexican ideas about gender roles and how different expressions of sexuality clash with them.

During the recruitment process, prospective participants were given the option to disclose their residency status. For those who disclosed, they selected “American citizen”, and in the case of Amber, a Mexican citizen. The study would have want to include students with other legal status, in light of recent immigrant policies and changes to the DACA legislation. Related to the legal or migratory status, it is important to remark that 91 percent of the Latinx young adults and teens were born in the US (Krogstad & Lopez, 2014). A related approach would be the examination of how Latina college students position themselves within the Gen Z. This generation has a strong sense a community, authenticity, and inclusivity, and does not like to define themselves according to any labels. Latinx Gen Z-ers are looking for new ways to express their identity and cultural fluidity. This aspect is related with the concepts of ambiguity, mobility, and the erosion of borders exposed in borderlands thinking and the path of *conocimiento*.

Finally, the use of borderlands and Mestiza consciousness as tools to understand the Latina experience might be used in other contexts, not only in the educational field. Where a border is found, there are physical and spiritual effects, both individual and collective. Borders define us and mark our personalities and psyches. The liminal state of Nepantla occurs during the many transitional stages of life and describes both identity related issues and epistemological concerns:

> In nepantla you are exposed, open to other perspectives, more readily able to access knowledge derived from inner feelings, imaginal states, and outer events, and to 'see through' them with a mindful, holistic awareness. Seeing through human acts both individual and collective allows you to examine the ways you construct knowledge, identity, and reality, and explore how some of your/others' constructions violate other people's ways of knowing and living. (Anzaldúa,2002, p. 544)

A Mestiza consciousness is an intimate process of self-love only possible after rejection, struggle, inquiry, uncertainty, and reflection. Indeed, she should descend into the Inferno to explore her vulnerability and to dispose of what it is dragging her down. This decision is indeed painful "because it reveals aspects of yourself (shadow-beasts) you don't want to own" (Anzaldúa 2002, p. 568). Even though it is usually triggered by external forces, "grief and depression may originate in the outside world" (2002, p. 568), ultimately, it is the supreme act of agency for the Latina woman because "the struggle has always been inner" (1987, p. 109). The participants in this study experienced moments in which they were questioned about the validity of their identity.

One can say that whereas there are Latinx communities, borderlands are created. As the Mexico-U.S. border for Anzaldúa (1987), a PWI as NCAU is "una *herida abierta [an open* *wound]* where the Third Word grates the first and bleeds” (p.3). When the Latina woman is in Borderlands, the inquiry may be exhausting and endless. Anzaldúa described her own experience with the burden of choosing between cultures: “I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one” (1987, p. 63). But it is in these agonizing moments when a Mestiza consciousness allows her to emerge and realize that even when she is nobody and nothing, even at those moments, *she still is*: “Nothing is fixed. The pulse of existence, the heart of the universe is fluid. Identity, like a river, is always changing, always in transition, always in nepantla” (2002, p. 556).

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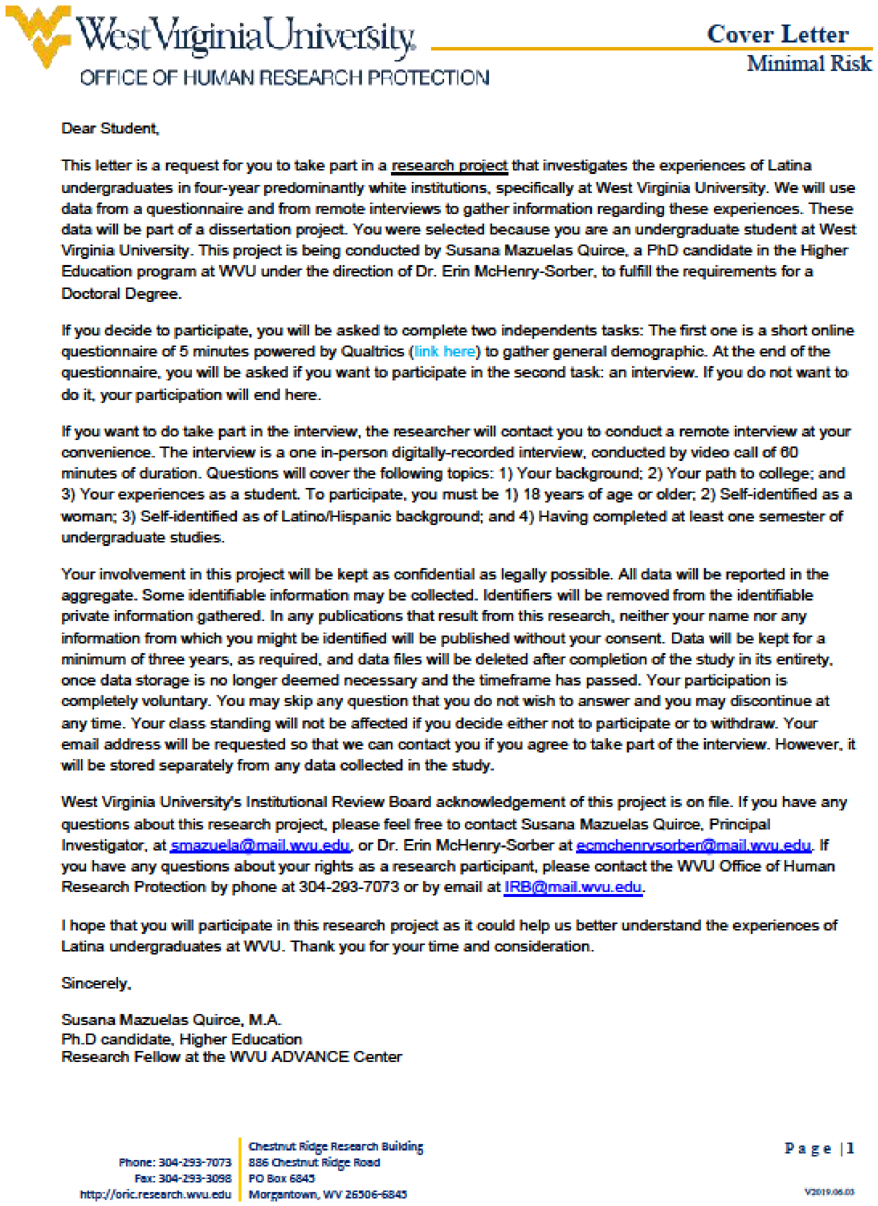
Appendix A: Recruitment Email



WestVirginiaUniversity
OFFICE OF HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION

Cover Letter
Minimal Risk

Dear Student,

This letter is a request for you to take part in a research project that investigates the experiences of Latina undergraduates in four-year predominantly white institutions, specifically at West Virginia University. We will use data from a questionnaire and from remote interviews to gather information regarding these experiences. These data will be part of a dissertation project. You were selected because you are an undergraduate student at West Virginia University. This project is being conducted by Susana Mazuelas Quirce, a PhD candidate in the Higher Education program at WVU under the direction of Dr. Erin McHenry-Sorber, to fulfill the requirements for a Doctoral Degree.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete two independents tasks: The first one is a short online questionnaire of 5 minutes powered by Qualtrics (link here) to gather general demographic. At the end of the questionnaire, you will be asked if you want to participate in the second task: an interview. If you do not want to do it, your participation will end here.

If you want to do take part in the interview, the researcher will contact you to conduct a remote interview at your convenience. The interview is a one in-person digitally-recorded interview, conducted by video call of 60 minutes of duration. Questions will cover the following topics: 1) Your background; 2) Your path to college; and 3) Your experiences as a student. To participate, you must be 1) 18 years of age or older; 2) Self-identified as a woman; 3) Self-identified as of Latino/Hispanic background; and 4) Having completed at least one semester of undergraduate studies.

Your involvement in this project will be kept as confidential as legally possible. All data will be reported in the aggregate. Some identifiable information may be collected. Identifiers will be removed from the identifiable private information gathered. In any publications that result from this research, neither your name nor any information from which you might be identified will be published without your consent. Data will be kept for a minimum of three years, as required, and data files will be deleted after completion of the study in its entirety, once data storage is no longer deemed necessary and the timeframe has passed. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may skip any question that you do not wish to answer and you may discontinue at any time. Your class standing will not be affected if you decide either not to participate or to withdraw. Your email address will be requested so that we can contact you if you agree to take part of the interview. However, it will be stored separately from any data collected in the study.

West Virginia University's Institutional Review Board acknowledgement of this project is on file. If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact Susana Mazuelas Quirce, Principal Investigator, at smazuela@mail.wvu.edu, or Dr. Erin McHenry-Sorber at ecmchenrysorber@mail.wvu.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the WVU Office of Human Research Protection by phone at 304-293-7073 or by email at IRB@mail.wvu.edu.

I hope that you will participate in this research project as it could help us better understand the experiences of Latina undergraduates at WVU. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Susana Mazuelas Quirce, M.A.
Ph.D candidate, Higher Education
Research Fellow at the WVU ADVANCE Center

Phone: 304-293-7073
Fax: 304-293-3098
http://oric.research.wvu.edu

Chestnut Ridge Research Building
886 Chestnut Ridge Road
PO Box 6845
Morgantown, WV 26506-6845

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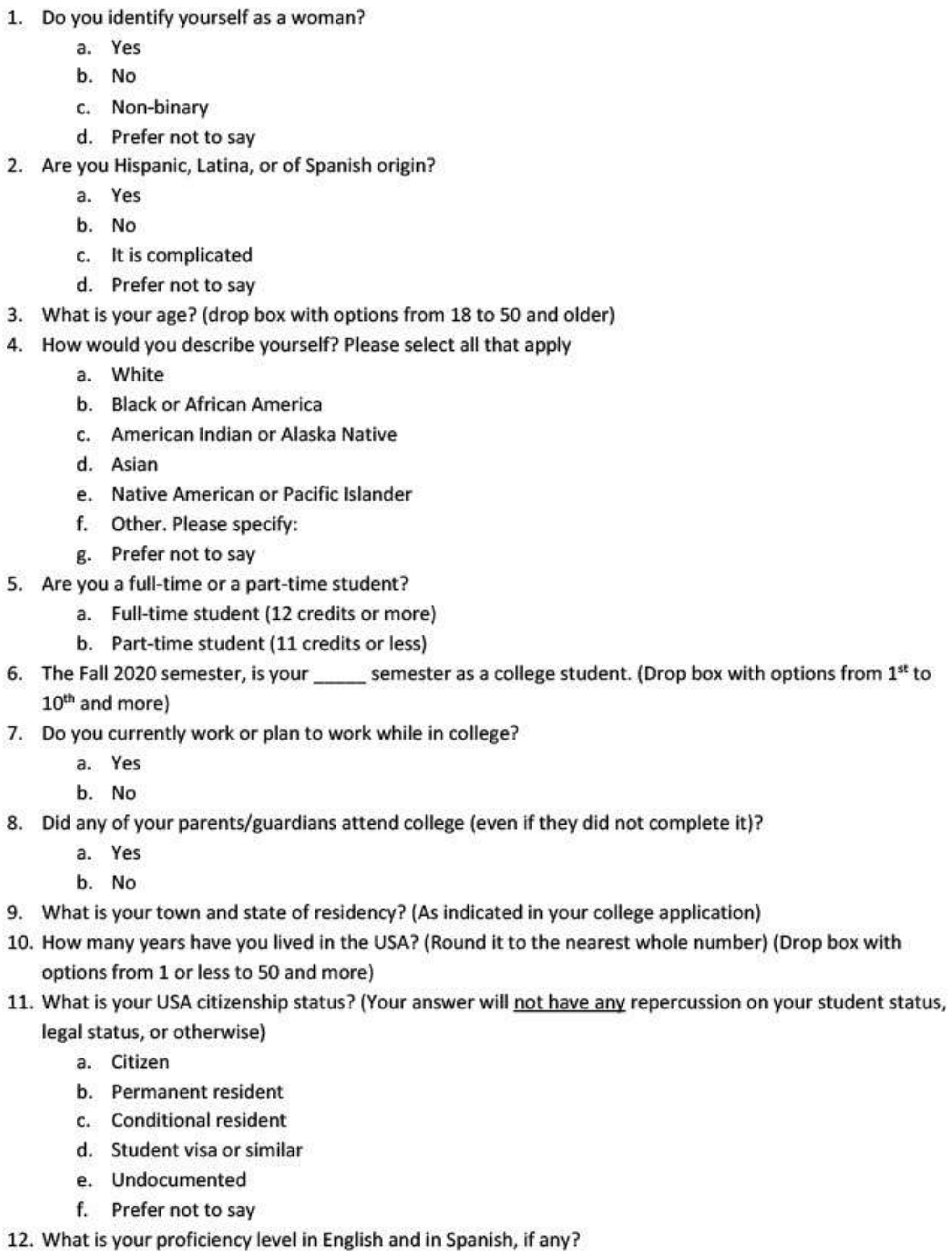
V2019.06.03

Appendix B: Questionnaire



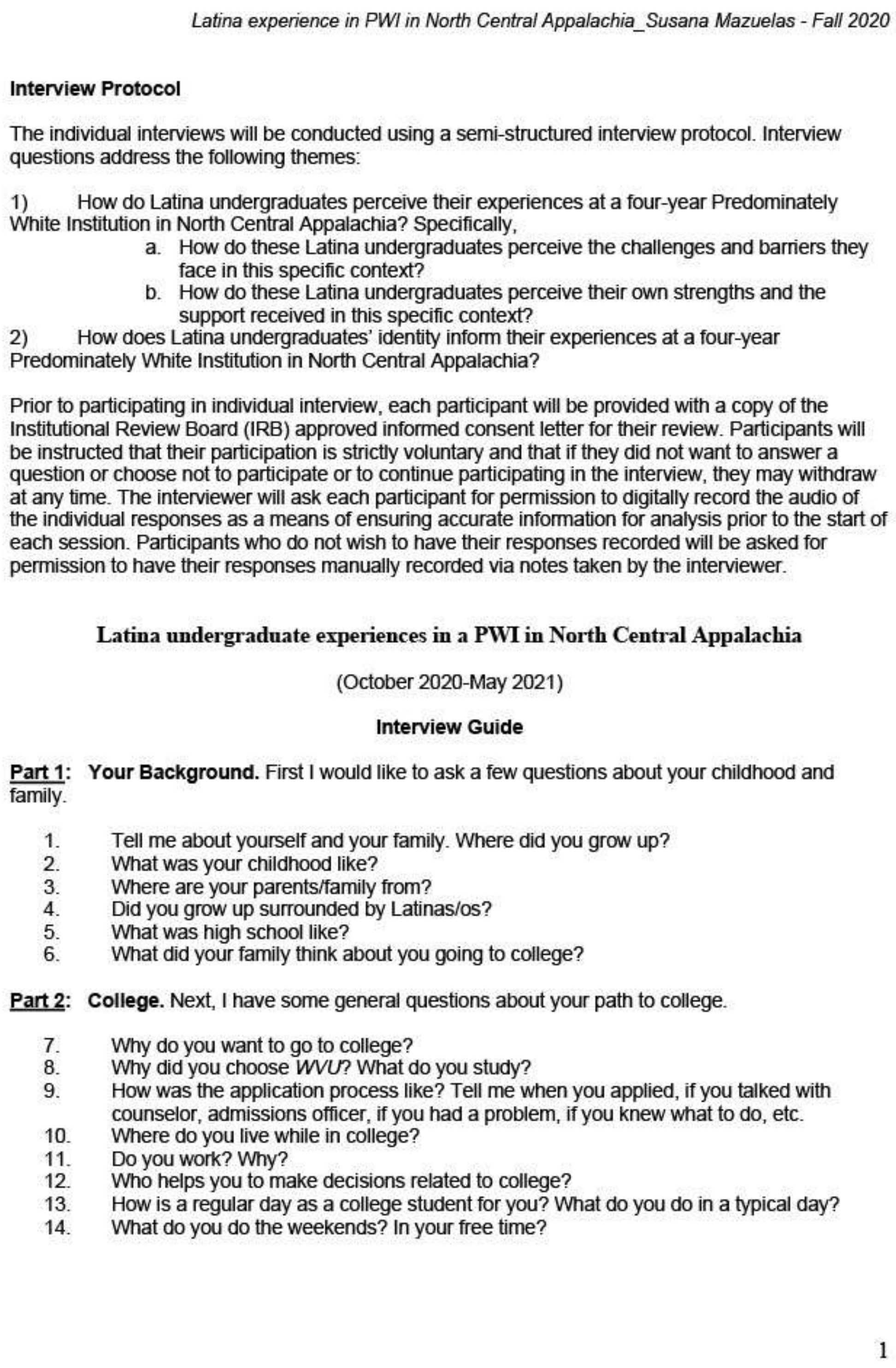
1. Do you identify yourself as a woman?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. Non-binary
    d. Prefer not to say
2. Are you Hispanic, Latina, or of Spanish origin?
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. It is complicated
    d. Prefer not to say
3. What is your age? (drop box with options from 18 to 50 and older)
4. How would you describe yourself? Please select all that apply
    a. White
    b. Black or African America
    c. American Indian or Alaska Native
    d. Asian
    e. Native American or Pacific Islander
    f. Other. Please specify:
    g. Prefer not to say
5. Are you a full-time or a part-time student?
    a. Full-time student (12 credits or more)
    b. Part-time student (11 credits or less)
6. The Fall 2020 semester, is your _____ semester as a college student. (Drop box with options from 1st to 10th and more)
7. Do you currently work or plan to work while in college?
    a. Yes
    b. No
8. Did any of your parents/guardians attend college (even if they did not complete it)?
    a. Yes
    b. No
9. What is your town and state of residency? (As indicated in your college application)
10. How many years have you lived in the USA? (Round it to the nearest whole number) (Drop box with options from 1 or less to 50 and more)
11. What is your USA citizenship status? (Your answer will not have any repercussion on your student status, legal status, or otherwise)
    a. Citizen
    b. Permanent resident
    c. Conditional resident
    d. Student visa or similar
    e. Undocumented
    f. Prefer not to say
12. What is your proficiency level in English and in Spanish, if any?

	Native or almost native	Proficient	Conversational	Basic	None
English					
Spanish					

13. In a few words, list some of the elements/people that help you to succeed in college.
14. In a few words, list some of the challenges/barriers you face to succeed in college.
15. Thank you! We would like to invite you to a 60-minute follow-up interview to discuss your experiences as a Latina undergraduate. Your participation will help a PhD candidate to complete her dissertation. Please, provide your email address in the box below if you want to participate. You will receive more information before making a final decision.

Thanks for your participation! You can always come back later and retake the survey.

Appendix C: Interview protocol



Interview Protocol

The individual interviews will be conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol. Interview questions address the following themes:

1) How do Latina undergraduates perceive their experiences at a four-year Predominately White Institution in North Central Appalachia? Specifically,
    a. How do these Latina undergraduates perceive the challenges and barriers they face in this specific context?
    b. How do these Latina undergraduates perceive their own strengths and the support received in this specific context?
2) How does Latina undergraduates' identity inform their experiences at a four-year Predominately White Institution in North Central Appalachia?

Prior to participating in individual interview, each participant will be provided with a copy of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved informed consent letter for their review. Participants will be instructed that their participation is strictly voluntary and that if they did not want to answer a question or choose not to participate or to continue participating in the interview, they may withdraw at any time. The interviewer will ask each participant for permission to digitally record the audio of the individual responses as a means of ensuring accurate information for analysis prior to the start of each session. Participants who do not wish to have their responses recorded will be asked for permission to have their responses manually recorded via notes taken by the interviewer.

Latina undergraduate experiences in a PWI in North Central Appalachia

(October 2020-May 2021)

Interview Guide

Part 1: **Your Background.** First I would like to ask a few questions about your childhood and family.

1. Tell me about yourself and your family. Where did you grow up?
2. What was your childhood like?
3. Where are your parents/family from?
4. Did you grow up surrounded by Latinas/os?
5. What was high school like?
6. What did your family think about you going to college?

Part 2: **College.** Next, I have some general questions about your path to college.

7. Why do you want to go to college?
8. Why did you choose *WVU*? What do you study?
9. How was the application process like? Tell me when you applied, if you talked with counselor, admissions officer, if you had a problem, if you knew what to do, etc.
10. Where do you live while in college?
11. Do you work? Why?
12. Who helps you to make decisions related to college?
13. How is a regular day as a college student for you? What do you do in a typical day?
14. What do you do the weekends? In your free time?

Part 3: **Family experiences.** Next, I have some questions about your relationship with family and friends back home.

15. How often do you communicate with your family and friends back home?
16. What do you talk about? What do you like to do together?
17. Are you homesick?
18. Do you feel like you behave different or you are a different person when you are at home than when you are on campus?
19. Do you think your family/friends back home support you? Describe

Part 4: **Campus experiences.** Next, let's talk more about the experiences you have with faculty members, university staff, and classmates. Your daily experiences as a college student.

20. What do you think about your classes, you major?
21. What do you think about your professors?
22. How are your interactions with support services and staff members?
23. How are your interactions with classmates?
24. Are there moments in school when you feel proud?
25. Are there moments in school when you feel uncomfortable?
26. Do you think you are different than other students on campus?
27. Do you feel like you have the same opportunities as other students?
28. Based on your experience, what is the easiest part of being a student at *WVU?*
29. And the most difficult one?
30. How do you deal with it?
31. Is there something that *WVU* is doing great to help you while in college?
32. What else should *WVU* be doing?

Part 6: **Identity.** These questions are about you as an individual.

33. How do you describe yourself?
34. Who are your friends in campus? How did you meet them?
35. Do you feel comfortable sharing your Latina background? Where? With whom?
36. Do you feel comfortable speaking Spanish? Where? Does your comfort level change?
37. What is your opinion about the Latino community in the campus? Do you know any other Latinx student, faculty, staff member?

Part 7: **Suggestions**

38. Finally, is there something that you would like to add to this interview that has not been addressed?