

CUÉNTENME SUS HISTORIAS: STORIES OF PERSISTENCE  
AS TOLD BY FIRST-GENERATION  
LATINA/O STUDENTS

by

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A DISSERTATION

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## **ABSTRACT**

While colleges and universities around the country are becoming increasingly more diverse, the data on national retention rates indicate that institutions are not doing better jobs of retaining students despite all the initiatives that have been implemented over the last ten years. In fact, the attrition rate for Latina/os was 29.2 percent and 30.1 percent for African Americans. On the other hand, the rates for Asians and Whites were 14.9 percent and 18.8 percent respectively. According to the ACE Report, only 36.4 percent of African Americans and 42 percent of Latina/os had earned bachelor's degrees compared to 62.3 percent of their Asian and 58 percent of their White counterparts. These figures clearly illustrate a great disparity in the educational outcomes of Latina/os compared to that of Whites despite the increased enrollment of Latina/os in higher education.

Given the compelling need to address the outcomes of an increasingly diverse undergraduate student population, I focused this study specifically on the interplay between sociocultural factors and institutional support as related to the experiences of first-generation Latina/o students attending a predominantly White institution (PWI). By exploring the interaction between these factors, this study offers insights into aspects of these students' life experiences that impact their persistence. Three questions that guided this study are:

- 1) What role does family play in the persistence of first-generation Latina/o students attending the PWI?

- 2) What role does institutional support play in the persistence of first-generation Latina/o students attending the PWI?
- 3) What role do peer networks play in the persistence of first-generation Latina/o students attending the PWI?

These questions guided the qualitative research process and are based on a framework introduced by Stanton-Salazar (2001) who explored the experiences of low-income Mexican origin adolescents from immigrant families attending urban high schools using the concepts of *social capital* as well as *peer, familial, and institutional support*. These concepts have been positioned centrally to my research as they remain salient to understanding the experiences of first-generation Latina/o students once they enter higher education institutions.

## **DEDICATION**

*Para mi familia.*

Thank you for your love, patience, and support

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	III
DEDICATION.....	V
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	VI
LIST OF TABLES.....	XI
CHAPTER ONE.....	1
Diversity within the Diversity.....	5
HISTORY OF LATINA/OS IN HIGHER EDUCATION.....	6
First-Generation Latina/o Students.....	10
The Influence of Culture in Higher Education.....	12
Toward a Re-conceptualization of First-Generation Latina/o Persistence in Higher Education..	14
A Sociocultural Interpretation of Latina/o Persistence.....	19
The First Year Movement.....	20
Conclusion.....	23
CHAPTER TWO.....	24
Higher Education Institutions as a Cultural Entities.....	25
Socialization as a Cultural Process in Higher Education.....	28
The Impact of Capital.....	29

The Role of Habitus .....	33
Capital and First-Generation Latina/o Students.....	35
The Interplay between Capital and Institutional Support .....	40
<i>Institutional Support</i> .....	41
<i>Funds of Knowledge &amp; Socialization</i> .....	44
Applicability of Stanton-Salazar’s Framework to Higher Education .....	47
Conclusion .....	50
 CHAPTER THREE .....	 51
Research Design.....	52
Gaining Access .....	53
Methodologies.....	55
Timeline .....	57
Validity .....	58
Data Collection .....	61
Data Analysis .....	64
Conclusion .....	66
 CHAPTER 4 .....	 67
FROM ASPIRATION TO ACHIEVEMENT .....	67
Early Aspirations .....	71
Family Support.....	72
<i>Family Encouragement to Attend</i> .....	73
<i>The Immigrant Experience</i> .....	75

<i>Educación: The Foundation of Latina/o Learning</i> .....	91
<i>The Power of Family Support</i> .....	93
Institutional Support.....	96
<i>High School Preparation for College</i> .....	96
<i>Support from Teachers and Guidance Counselors</i> .....	106
University Support for First-Generation Latina/o Persistence.....	110
<i>Intercultural Interactions through Institutional Support</i> .....	118
<i>Perceived Validation from the Institution</i> .....	119
Peer Support.....	122
<i>Peer Support from Hometown Friends</i> .....	122
<i>On-Campus Peer Networks</i> .....	129
<i>Intercultural Peer Interactions</i> .....	138
Habitus .....	144
<i>Mobilization of Capital for Habitus</i> .....	145
Conclusion .....	148
CHAPTER 5 .....	149
Telling their Stories.....	150
Conclusion .....	168
WORKS CITED .....	169
APPENDIX.....	178
Student Interview Protocol .....	179
Faculty & Staff Interview Protocol.....	181

List of Students Who Participated in the Study ..... 183

## **LIST OF TABLES**

Table 1:	Stanton-Salazar's Six Forms of Institutional Support (2001)	42
Table 2:	Research Methodology and Timeline	58
Table 3:	Latina/o Cultural Constructs as they Manifest Social Capital	70

## CHAPTER ONE

In recent decades, many campuses around the country have developed and implemented strategies to assist first-year students with their transition to college and retention to graduation (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, & Associates, 2005). These initiatives have varied from campus to campus according to student needs, campus culture, and available resources. Despite institutional attempts to address retention and graduation rates, little improvement has been seen on a national level (American College Testing, 2008). These numbers are foreboding and present a significant loss for both students and their institutions. They are also disturbing since the lack of progress these figures represent is happening as the undergraduate population is becoming more diverse and nontraditional.

Ethnic minorities, who now comprise roughly one-third of the U.S. population, are expected to become the majority in 2024, with the nation projected to be 54 percent minority in 2050. By 2023, minorities will constitute more than half of all children (US Census Bureau, 2008) which will be reflected in college enrollments. These data indicate that colleges and universities will be serving a greater percentage of students that have been historically underrepresented. By 2010, students of color are expected to comprise one-quarter of the population 18 years of age and under in several states including California, Florida, New York,

and Texas (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999). The very population of students who have been historically excluded from colleges and universities are becoming the new majority of students in higher education. Enrollment growth for students of color has increased by 49 percent from 1994 to 2004, while the percentage of growth for White students increased by 6 percent. The greatest growth occurred among Latina/o students who experienced a 67 percent increase during this period and the largest growth, 73 percent, took place at four-year institutions (American Council on Education, 2007).

While colleges and universities are becoming increasingly more diverse, the data on national retention rates indicate that institutions are not doing better jobs of retaining students despite all the initiatives that have been implemented over the last ten years. According to the ACT Institutional Data Files (2008), the percentage of first-year students attending four-year institutions (public and private) that were retained to the following year was 74.5 percent in 1988; however, the figure dropped to 72.3 percent in 2008. The data on five-year graduation rates among four-year public and private institutions paints a similar picture, with 55.2 percent in 1998 graduating in five years and 52.5 percent achieving the same goal in 2008. These figures are even lower when looking at four-year public institutions alone, which had a first-year retention rate of 70.4 percent in 1998 and then slightly increased to 70.9 percent in 2008 (American College Testing, 2008). These statistics are particularly troubling when considering that the first-year attrition which occurs at most four-year institutions accounts for only half of the entering cohort's total dropout rate (American College Testing, 2008).

When attrition rates are examined according to racial and ethnic groups, the data become even more alarming. The American Council on Education's annual status report, *Minorities in Higher Education* (2007), illustrates that in 2003 the persistence rates for African American and

Latina/o students lagged behind those of Asian and White students. In fact, the attrition rate for Latina/os was 29.2 percent and 30.1 percent for African Americans. On the other hand, the rates for Asians and Whites were 14.9 percent and 18.8 percent respectively. According to the ACE Report, only 36.4 percent of African Americans and 42 percent of Latina/os had earned bachelor's degrees compared to 62.3 percent of their Asian and 58 percent of their White counterparts. These figures clearly illustrate a great disparity in the educational outcomes of Latina/os compared to that of Whites despite the increased enrollment of Latina/os in higher education.

Given the compelling need to address the outcomes of an increasingly diverse undergraduate student population, this study focuses specifically on the interplay between sociocultural factors and institutional support as related to the experiences of first-generation Latina/o students attending a predominantly White institution (PWI). By exploring the interaction between these factors, this study offers insights into aspects of these students' life experiences that impact their persistence. Three questions that guided this study are:

- 1) What role does family play in the persistence of first-generation Latina/o students attending a PWI?
- 2) What role does institutional support play in the persistence of first-generation Latina/o students attending a PWI?
- 3) What role do peer networks play in the persistence of first-generation Latina/o students attending a PWI?

These questions directed the qualitative research process and are based on a framework introduced by Stanton-Salazar (2001) who explored the experiences of low-income Mexican origin adolescents from immigrant families attending urban high schools using the concepts of

*social capital* and *institutional support*. These concepts have been positioned centrally to this research as they remain salient to understanding the experiences of first-generation Latina/o students upon their entry into higher education institutions.

To detail the meaning first-generation Latina/o students derive from their experiences at the university, the study focuses on an interpretation of the interactions these students have with the PWI's organizational culture. The results serve to inform higher education institutions on two fronts. The first is to contribute to the body of research that on persistence and retention issues for students of color. The second is to identify ways that PWIs can transform their institutional culture to better support Latina/o students and decrease their disenfranchisement from four-year institutions.

Researchers studying the persistence of students of color have called for new studies that uncover experiences affecting retention, such as race, family, gender, class, and ethnicity (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007; Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 2000). Persistence has been defined in the research on student outcomes in a variety of ways. In Tinto's (1993) model, persistence is an "interactional system" (p. 136) involving students and their institution. Persistence, according to Tinto, is dependent on students successfully integrating into the social and academic realms of the institution. Those who do not integrate leave the institution. In this sense, Tinto views most student attrition as being voluntary. Braxton et al. (2007), on the other hand, use the term persistence to refer to the continued enrollment of students. A different perspective is offered by Tierney (2000) who advocates that educators break away from interactionist models and develop a framework

...which has the negotiation of identity in the academe as central to educational success. The interactions that students, teachers, parents, and families have and how we approach these definitions of these interactions are salient to students' success, failure, leave-taking, or completion. Rather than a model that assumes that students must fit into what

is often an alien culture and that they leave their own cultures I argue the opposite. The challenge is to develop ways in which an individual's identity is affirmed, honored, and incorporated into the organization's culture. Of necessity, we must seek ways not only to aid the individual in succeeding, but also in developing ways for the organization's culture to adapt to the individuals and groups (p. 219).

The concept of negotiation is important to emphasize when considering persistence among first-generation Latina/o students. Given the variety of relationships involved and the unfamiliarity that some of these students have with the institutional culture of higher education, Tierney's notion of persistence provides valuable perspective when interpreting the impact of their experiences on their persistence at the PWI.

The current study considers how Latina/o students persist at a very diverse PWI at which 48 percent of the undergraduate population identifies as non-White. The site is a four-year public university in the New York metropolitan area, which is referred to as Metro State University in this study. Despite the increased representation of Latina/os on college campuses, most research data on this group have been extracted from larger studies conducted on students of color at four-year institutions (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2006). With only a few such studies focusing on Latina/o students specifically, this particular study serves to fill an identified gap in the literature (Nuñez, 2008).

### **Diversity within the Diversity**

Although Latina/os appear to members of one large population, tremendous similarities and differences exist within the group when considering race, culture, ethnicity, and national origin. Such aspects of the population have become increasingly evident to higher education faculty and administrators as Latina/os became more prevalent on college campuses. The number of immigrants who entered the country in the 1980's doubled the amount that had

entered in the previous decade with about 84 percent from Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America (Rendón & Hope, 1996).

Students who “appear to be” Latina/os could have ancestry that hail from Mexico, the Caribbean, Central America, South America, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the United States. Furthermore, Latina/os can be of any race. This dual influence of race and ethnicity has spurred great debate over how Latina/os should be identified. Should Latina/os have to choose a race from a prescribed list that does not include the option of Latina/o or should Latina/os be able to self-identify as a racial/ethnic category of its own? The prescribed race choices force Latina/os to choose between the mutually exclusive options of “White” or “Black” if other categories do not apply (such as Asian or Native American). The challenge for many Latina/os is that they do not identify themselves with either of these races because of the distinct cultural, linguistic, historical, and sociopolitical factors associated with complexity of Latina/o identity. There is growing support in Latina/o communities for self-identification which would allow individuals to choose how they wish to be categorized given the multiple ethnic and racial issues associated with making this choice for themselves (González & Gándara, 2005).

### **History of Latina/os in Higher Education**

Students of color gained access to U.S. higher education only recently and that access is still rather limited given their underrepresentation in higher education. Prior to the Civil War, colleges and universities were populated primarily by White male students. By and large, most colleges and universities systematically excluded Latina/os from the admissions process throughout the twentieth century (Anderson, 2002). The door was forced open for these students with the Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka Kansas* in 1954.

This ruling reversed the Court's 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* which legalized the segregation of school systems yet required that they be equal in service and quality. *Brown* allowed for many new opportunities for African American and Latina/os students that did not exist previously. At the start of the twenty-first century, however, many more opportunities are still needed for students of color to achieve educational equity.

The history of Latina/os in higher education is a story of disenfranchisement. Much like early African Americans, Latino/a families lived in extreme poverty and endured neglect and discrimination. The path to higher education for Latina/os was blocked at the lowest levels of schooling. Consequently, Latina/os did not enter higher education in large numbers until the last quarter of the twentieth century (MacDonald & García, 2003). MacDonald and Garcia (2003) draw a compelling contrast between the history of Latino/as and that of African Americans.

They note:

[n]either the federal government or missionary organizations created historically Hispanic colleges. The rise of what Black intellectual W.E.B. Dubois called the "Talented Tenth," a college-educated elite from which to draw leaders, was thus absent among most Latino communities until after World War II. (p.18)

These historical conditions made for a much slower course toward participation in higher education than occurred in the African American community. In fact, this history continues to be expressed in the low rates of enrollment, persistence, and graduation of first-generation Latina/o students (The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, 2008).

Few Latina/os had access to a formal education during the post-Civil War era; those who did attended schools that were separate and extremely *unequal* in terms of their resources and quality compared to the schools attended by White children. An additional challenge Latina/os faced in breaking down educational barriers was that they were often classified as non-Whites in

certain circumstances yet classified as Whites in others. In the post-*Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka Kansas* (1954) era, many school districts grouped African Americans students with Mexican American students to demonstrate an effort at desegregating their schools. This approach allowed White schools to remain separate and continued to subject the two largest non-White groups in the country to inferior facilities and educational systems, thereby creating an institutionalized process for denying students access to education based on their race and ethnicity.

A court case challenging Latina/os educational segregation was not heard until 1970 in *Cisneros v. Corpus Christi Independent School District*. The ruling of this case declared Mexican Americans as members of their own separate distinct ethnic group and declared that the tenets of *Brown* applied to Latina/os and to African Americans (Contreras & Valverde, 1994). Shortly after this ruling, the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) created the term “Hispanic” in 1977 to refer to individuals of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central American, South American, or other Spanish origin. Although the term was created by the federal government to name this group of people who share cultural and linguistic characteristics, it has been recently rejected by some critics who argue that the term was imposed upon them and does not acknowledge the heterogeneity of the group. Those who share this sentiment have adopted the nongendered term “Latina/o” which refers to peoples with ancestries from Latin American countries in the Western Hemisphere, including Brazil, so the concept is more inclusive than Hispanic (Castellanos & Jones, 2003).

The demands that Latina/o students made for increased access, participation, and representation in higher education between the 1960’s and 1980’s came in response to the environment they experienced at PWIs, but also because of the lack of recognition their issues

received in contrast to African American students (MacDonald & García, 2003). Institutions saw a sharp increase in the number of enrolled Latina/o students and a handful of new Latina/o faculty in the 1960's and 1970's. *El movimiento* gathered momentum in the mid 1960's as Latina/o students formed their own organizations on several college campuses and voiced their dissatisfaction with their lack of representation in the faculty and the curricula (MacDonald & García, 2003).

Fundamental issues such as access, equity, and attending to the public good are still at the crux of Latina/o experience in higher education. Many interventions and remedies have been introduced to support underrepresented students from lower socioeconomic groups, such as the federal TRIO programs and state funded opportunity programs, yet little has changed in student outcomes on the national level over the last thirty years for these groups. Race and class stratification within higher education continues to be a grave problem in the United States despite the promise of social mobility that education offers its citizens. Organizational changes are needed at the federal, state, and institutional levels to ensure that their progress can continue to move forward to allow for their full representation and success. The Census Bureau's data on degree completion during the decade of 1992 to 2002 reveal considerable disparity and a troubling forecast for the nation if its largest minority group continues to be in the minority in its educational attainment. The percentage of non-Latina/o African Americans who began a college education and completed their bachelor's degree by age 25 to 29 increased from 31.1 percent to 33.8 percent. Latina/os, on the other hand, experienced a decline during this period, dropping from 33.2 percent to 28.8 percent. White non-Latina/os also experienced an increase of 51.0 percent to 54.6 percent (Mortenson, 2003). The increase among White non-Latina/os is

comparatively significant when considering that the overall percentage of White non-Latina/os represent a decreasing portion of the general population in this age group.

As Green and Trent (2005) argue, “These demographic shifts give leaders legitimate reasons to pause and rethink the notions of leadership, diversity, democracy, and the public good.” The self-perpetuating cycle of disenfranchisement that has been quietly operationalized on many college campuses is based on sociocultural and racial barriers to students of color. If the purpose of higher education is to generate knowledge that serves the public good, then a compelling need exists for colleges and universities to address this issue in order to break the ongoing cycle of exclusion and disparity. Such efforts would help grant students equal opportunity to reap the benefits of higher education and offer the country the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of a workforce that is fully representative of the larger society.

The national retention and persistence data presented here beg the question of whether a relationship exists between the changed demographics of the undergraduate student body and these outcomes. This diversity has occurred not only with respect to students’ racial and ethnic backgrounds, but also in terms of their socioeconomic status and parental educational attainment levels. Such demographic changes have resulted in an increased enrollment of first-generation college students at college campuses.

### **First-Generation Latina/o Students**

First-generation students continue to be a group that is increasing in prevalence among Latina/os higher education institutions. This group is defined as “college students from families where neither parent had more than a high-school education” (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004, p. 249). While first-generation students represented 39.3 percent for all first-

time, full-time first-year students in 1971, this figure dropped to 16.5 percent by 2005. This trend was very different among Latina/os. In fact, the proportion of first-generation Latina/os was much higher in 1975, 57.7 percent, and remains the highest of all groups in 2005, 38.2 percent (Higher Education Research Institute, 2007, pp. 5-6).

First-generation students as a group have a more difficult transition from secondary school to college than their peers. In addition to the challenges that first-year students typically face as they enter higher education, the transition of first-generation students often involves considerable cultural, social, academic, and financial obstacles. These students are more likely to be female, have lower incomes, and be Latina/os (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007).

The legacy of parental education attainment and socioeconomic status can be difficult for Latina/o students to overcome. Parental education directly influences parental expectations for their children's college attendance. Given their lower levels of educational attainment, Latina/o parents are less likely to have high postsecondary expectations for their children (Swail, Cabrera, Lee, & Williams, 2005). In fact, students whose parents held a bachelor's degree or higher were five times more likely to earn a bachelor's degree than were similar first-generation students (50 percent versus 11 percent) (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 590). Latina/os from lower socioeconomic communities attend schools that devote less attention to college preparation and planning. Given these circumstances, these students are less likely to enter higher education with the types of social capital that would grant them leverage and privilege at PWIs. Consequently, first-generation Latina/os tend to not have access to support networks that could connect them to status providing opportunities, such as selective higher education institutions, internships, or social organizations. Having not inherited the knowledge and capital from their parents and

communities about the details and subtleties of college attendance, these students face difficulty negotiating between their home cultures and the culture they encounter at their institution.

As first-generation status is often linked to socioeconomic class, it is important to note that issues of culture and capital are significant to the transition and persistence of first-generation Latina/o students. Values, lifestyle, and ideology all shape individuals' worldview and are often class and culture specific. Students who enter into a higher education institution that has a culture that is different from their own can confront adjustment challenges that compound those experienced by first-year students. This incongruence often results in feelings of marginalization, confusion, and alienation, despite these students' academic abilities. Given these obstacles, first-generation college students are more likely to drop out (73 to 60 percent) or stop out for a period of time (19 to 8 percent) (Kuh et al., 2007).

### **The Influence of Culture in Higher Education**

This study focuses specifically on the interplay between sociocultural factors and institutional support as impacting the persistence of first-generation Latina/o students at PWIs. An exploration of the role of culture in higher education, therefore, is significant to establish for this research. Culture is a construct through which social groups and organizations find meaning in their shared beliefs, values, traditions, and practices that guide individual and group behavior (Tierney, 1988). Very subtly, culture provides an organizational framework in individual communities. Cultures are dynamic and constantly evolving while interacting with others from outside the culture. When an individual joins a group, interactions between the individual and the group influence the larger environment and its sub-environments.

This cultural perspective translates well to the interactions in higher education between students and their institutions (Kuh & Love, 2000; Tierney, 2000). Colleges and universities are cultural organizations and their institutional cultures stream through them as undercurrents shaping their structure, programs, and the manner in which support is offered to students. Contextualizing the interactions between students and their institutions as such allows researchers to take a closer look at the nature of these interactions and the impact that culture has on its various members. Organizations are also dynamic and undergo cultural change. This concept is important to consider when exploring how institutions can become more responsive to an increasingly more diverse student body (Kezar, 2005; Kezar & Eckel, 2002).

A cultural perspective is instrumental to educators in gaining a better understanding of the experiences of students of color as they proceed through their college careers. Researchers focusing on the persistence patterns of these students have pointed to gaps in the literature, citing that not enough is known about their experiences at PWIs. They posit that more findings are needed with respect to the issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and culture (Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendón et al., 2000; Tierney, 2000). By focusing on the interpretations that students ascribe to their higher education experiences, researchers can gain insights that contribute to the re-conceptualization of the larger phenomenon of departure among students of color.

Confronting persistence issues as ones that need to be addressed within the organizational culture would be more effective than implementing additional intervention programs to prevent attrition. Individual intervention programs that are add-ons to the institution do little to alter the campus' institutional environment (Tierney, 2000). Much of the earlier work done on student persistence was conducted using individualistic conceptual frameworks based primarily on the experiences of White male students. These studies, such as those conducted by Tinto (1987), for

example, were seminal in establishing a much needed theoretical framework for examining student persistence. The theories that emerged from this research, however, fall short in explaining the higher educational experiences of students of color, but have been broadly applied by researchers and practitioners alike. A sociocultural perspective, on the other hand, sheds light on first-generation Latina/o student persistence by analyzing the social and cultural factors that impact their experiences at PWIs. Insights gained from this perspective could be used by campus leaders to bring forth transformative changes to their institutions and make them more inclusive and accessible to these students.

### **Toward a Re-conceptualization of First-Generation Latina/o Persistence in Higher Education**

Thirty years of research into student persistence has produced a great deal of literature that attempts to identify student factors that contribute to attrition and departure (Braxton & Lien, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1993) asserted that full academic and social integration is essential to student retention and that students need to separate from their homes and communities to fully immerse and assimilate into their campuses. This perspective has been critiqued increasingly as the student demographics have become more diverse. In response, Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) argued that Tinto's framework lacks empirical consistency and is inconclusive for women and students of color. Attinisi (1992) offered similar critiques, stating that the anthropological concepts that Tinto utilized in his theory fail to align with the student experiences to which they were applied.

Tierney (1992, 1999) also raised objections to Tinto's misuse of anthropological terms and to the broad application of this conceptual model in higher education which has resulted in

the marginalization of students of color. To break from this theoretical framework, Tierney (1992) advocates that educators and practitioners re-conceptualize their view of academe to redistribute power and shift from “a model of social integration and assimilation” to “a framework of emancipation and empowerment” (p. 616). Such an approach recognizes and celebrates students’ diverse sociocultural characteristics rather than imposing an institutional expectation of conformity.

While integration (Tinto, 1993) has been emphasized as a critical process to promoting student retention, a recent wave of research focusing on the persistence patterns of Latina/o students have pointed to the gaps in the literature citing that not enough is known about the interplay of sociocultural factors of Latina/o students and higher education institutions (Gándara, 1995; González, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendón et al., 2000; Tierney, 2000). These researchers posit that more findings are needed related to the issues of race, class, ethnicity, and gender as they are experienced by students in the cultural environments of their campuses. By focusing on such interpreted meanings, insights can be gained to inform a new understanding of persistence among first-generation Latina/os.

Using a cultural lens several student retention researchers (Gloria & Castellanos, 2003; González, 2000; Rendón et al., 2000) have examined the role of culture and race in the experiences of first-generation Latina/o students attending PWIs. Their research has demonstrated that the power of the dominant culture at these institutions has contributed to student perceptions of cultural incongruity. Other research has uncovered the negative impact of unwelcoming or hostile campus environments on their adjustment and sense of belonging for Latina/o students (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman, & Oseguera, 2008; Lopez,

2005). These experiences can negatively impact first-generation Latina/o students' first-year and indirectly contribute to their decisions to not persist.

The role of family and extended family members on Latina/o student persistence has been well documented, suggesting that their influence can have both negative and positive effects on educational attainment (González et al., 2003; Perna & Titus, 2005; Tierney & Venegas, 2006). *Familismo*, the strong attachment and identification to immediate and extended family members, is a Latina/o cultural value that manifests itself through feelings of loyalty, responsibility, and solidarity within the family unit (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). This familial characteristic can be a source of encouragement and promise to Latina/o students and is often accompanied by a familial interest in ensuring financial, emotional, and social stability, which are often the outcomes of having secured a college education. In fact, Perna (2007) discovered familial support to be profound even when parents had no familiarity of their own with higher education systems; that is, although these students had not inherited the social capital that comes with educational attainment from family members, the support these students received from family and extended family members had a positive impact on their persistence. Furthermore, Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, and Rosales (2005) asserted that family shapes students' personal, cultural, and community values, which in turn, affect students' perceptions and navigation of the university environment, integration within the university, and sense of purpose toward their education (pp. 215-216). While this influence can promote persistence, such influence can also create a sense of conflict. Latina/o students, particularly those who are new immigrants to the United States, can often be pressured to adhere to traditional patriarchal Latina/o gender roles and fulfill expectations that may exist for them to support their families (González, Jovel, & Stoner, 2004; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). These expectations can be stressful for those students

attempting to invest time and energy into their educational pursuits yet still honor the expectations associated with *familismo*.

Literature on first-generation Latina/o students also illustrates that the relationships they develop with individuals who serve as culturally relevant advocates and sources of institutional support was most significant to their persistence and to their sense of belonging on campus (Bordes & Arredondo, 2005; Torres, 2006; Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006). These individuals include institutionally sponsored mentors, faculty, peers, and administrators, who play key roles in assisting Latina/o students in navigating their way through the unfamiliar institutional culture of higher education. Rendón (1994) noted that that Latina/o students, particularly those who are nontraditional students, rely on specific experiences and institutional sources for meaning and significance. Her research discovered that rather than becoming involved in co-curricular activities on their college campuses, students in her studies perceived involvement to occur when someone took an active role in assisting them. According to Rendón's validation theory, "validating agents" are interested in their students' success and social adjustment, which in turn helps the institution to create a campus atmosphere which fosters persistence and inclusion. These types of experiences assist nontraditional Latina/o students in becoming effective learners and in persisting at their institutions since they validate their membership in the institutional culture both in and out of the classroom (Jalomo & Rendón, 2004).

A two-year study was conducted by González (2000) at a PWI to evidence the elements of campus culture and climate that help or hinder first-generation Latina/o student transition and persistence. Through interviews and observation, González concluded students at the institution were marginalized and alienated by three systems in the campus culture: 1) the social world, 2) the physical world, and 3) the epistemological world (p. 75). This research has shed light on

aspects of the culture at PWIs that can be problematic for first-generation Latina/o students and also provides a framework for addressing these aspects as well.

The three worlds as described in González's study help to gain a better understanding of Latina/o student participation at PWIs. The social world is a system of cultural elements that include the racial and ethnic composition of the campus members, the representations of the racial and ethnic makeup of the groups on campus, the political power held by these groups, and the degree to which Spanish is spoken on campus. The physical world involves the cultural representations included in the campus architecture, structures, images, and the degree to which Latina/os are represented on campus. Lastly, the epistemological world is comprised of a system of representations that make up the knowledge shared both in and outside of the classroom and the degree to which Latina/o culture is represented in the curriculum. González asserted that Latina/o students often attend PWIs where their culture is underrepresented in these three worlds which contribute to their marginalization and alienation on their campuses. In sum, González discovered through his study that Latina/o students found ways within each of these worlds to receive "cultural nourishment" from fellow students acting as "cultural workers" and that these efforts can transform the institutional culture to be more representative of Latina/os at the PWI which they attend.

Additionally, González's study demonstrated that students found ways to access culturally relevant social capital and to use habitus as a transformative tool. González extended the role capacity for "cultural workers" to beyond that of students and includes family, faculty members, administrators, and other role models who can provide support and "cultural nourishment." The theoretical framework that was produced from this study can serve as a template for assessing the inclusiveness of groups within a campus culture as well as identify

areas in which their representation and participation need to be increased to create a truly multicultural campus (González, Olivas, & Calleroz, 2004).

### **A Sociocultural Interpretation of Latina/o Persistence**

Focusing specifically on the interplay between sociocultural factors and institutional support, this study explores the experiences of first-generation Latina/o students at PWIs as they relate to student persistence. The approach looks beyond cognitive factors, such as grade point averages and standardized test scores, used in traditional predictive retention studies. Rather, Latina/o student persistence is contextualized and interpreted using the social and cultural factors that shape experiences while enrolled at a PWI.

Sociocultural factors influence Latina/o students, regardless of their ascribed academic abilities, manifesting themselves negatively through variables such as campus climate, isolation, and stereotyping or positively through peer networks, cultural affirmation, and mentorship. From this perspective, retention is not simply a numerical representation of the percentage of first-year students that have remained at an institution after their first year. Retention can also be interpreted as an institution's success in maximizing the entry characteristics of its students by providing them with an inclusive and intellectually enriching learning environment. When considering that first-generation Latina/o students encounter several distinct yet interrelated barriers as they enter higher education, contending with such challenges can heighten the complexity of their first-year transition as well as present difficulties to their continued enrollment. Furthermore, the sense of cultural conflict experienced by Latina/o students presents a deep challenge to their likelihood of perceiving their campus as a welcoming learning environment. These sources of dissonance and stress have been associated with increased

academic non-persistence decisions among Latina/o students (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez et al., 2005; Nuñez, 2008).

To increase first-year retention rates, many institutions have reorganized and transformed the way in which they deliver services to first-year students. The momentum with which this has taken place in higher education has resulted in a first-year experience movement. While these efforts have increased the intentionality with which initiatives have been designed and delivered, the full effects of these changes, as indicated earlier, have not increased retention rates over the last ten years as campuses have become increasingly more diverse. The first-year movement, however, has demonstrated that institutions can take the first important steps toward being reflective and transformative in their efforts to better address their students' needs.

### **The First Year Movement**

The first-year movement began at the University of South Carolina as a means of promoting first-year retention, as well as a mechanism for creating a more harmonious racial climate on a newly integrated campus. This organizational shift produced positive outcomes for student learning and satisfaction and has served as the impetus for the creation of first-year programs across the country (Gaston-Gayles, Wolf-Wendel, Tuttle, Twombly, & Ward, 2005).

The first-year seminar was introduced in 1972 on the campus of the University of South Carolina by its president at the time, Thomas Jones. Confronted with campus riots and student uprisings in response to its recent racial integration, Jones sought a way to facilitate the adjustment of first-year students to the campus. The course, as he envisioned it, would be taught by a cadre of specially trained instructors that included faculty and student affairs professionals. The course grew and developed to eventually become University 101 with John N. Gardner as its

first director. By the mid 1980's other campuses had created their own versions of the course and assessing the impact of the course on their first-year students (Hunter & Murray, 2007). In 1982, approximately 175 educators met at the University of South Carolina to discuss the first-year seminar course at their respective campuses. Based on that success, a second meeting was organized and its focus was much broader to address the multitude of issues associated with the first year in college marking the start of subsequent annual conferences on The First-Year Experience (Hunter & Murray, 2007).

Momentum increased across the country as the benefits of first-year initiatives were studied and researched. Numerous colleges and universities expanded the breadth and scope of their first-year programs to address the needs of first-year students through curricular and co-curricular initiatives. In 1985, the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education approved the establishment of the National Resource Center for The Freshmen Year Experience. Its mission was to “encourage, research, publish, and disseminate research and best practices and continue to organize continuing education events for higher education desiring to enhance the first-year experience” (Hunter & Murray, 2007, p. 29).

The 1990's saw an even greater increase in the number of first-year programs across the country and their focus expanded beyond that of the first-year seminar. During this era, many institutions developed campus-wide initiatives to promote the academic, personal, and social development that were based on curricular and co-curricular collaborations. Examples of such efforts include orientation programs, learning communities, common readings, first-year advising centers, first-year residence halls, and first-year programs and workshops. The degree to which these programs were integrated into the fabric of these campuses varied. In many cases

these initiatives were add-ons to the existing organizational structures while on other campuses these programs were formed as a result of institutional restructuring.

As colleges and universities paid closer attention to the transition of their first-year cohorts, the transition of other student groups became more apparent. Through longitudinal research of their first-year efforts, many institutions discovered that an unintended consequence of their efforts was that these very students experienced different transitional issues as they progressed into their second, third, and even fourth years. Administrators also discovered that those students who did not successfully negotiate their way through these challenges were often not retained. These dynamics have spurred on sophomore, junior, and senior year initiatives on many college campuses. The Center has also responded to this expansion in retention efforts by renaming itself as the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition and by revising its mission to reflect the broader scope of its work, “to support and advance efforts to improve student learning and transitions into and through higher education” (University of South Carolina Board of Trustees, 2002).

The renewed mission of the Center recognized that the organizational changes were beneficial not only because they supported first-year students through their transition to the university setting but because they helped to change the institutional culture. These cultural changes would be beneficial not only to first-year students, but to all students as they progressed through their undergraduate experience. These adjustments were significant given the increasing diversity of today’s student body.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter presented the compelling need for higher education institutions to address the sociocultural and institutional factors that impact first-generation Latina/o student outcomes. The history of Latina/os in higher education illustrates hundreds of years of exclusion, inclusion, struggles, and achievements, yet access and equity still have not been achieved. Departing from individualistic student departure theories that have been based on notions of deficiency and assimilation, I introduce a sociocultural perspective to interpret the experiences of first-generation Latina/o enrolled at a PWI. Inherent in this perspective is the notion that institutions can change their environments to operate differently as evidenced by the first-year movement, which inspired institutions to transform themselves to become more responsive to student needs.

In the next chapter I explore more deeply the sociocultural factors associated with first-generation Latina/o students' experiences at PWIs. In the process of this exploration, I analyze the interplay of social capital and institutional support based on Stanton-Salazar's framework as they relate to first-generation Latina/o student persistence.

## CHAPTER TWO

This chapter reviews existing research related to the study of first-generation Latina/o students and the institutional culture of higher education. Beginning with a discussion of higher education institutions as cultural entities, the notion of socialization as an interactive process between institutions and their students is presented using a framework developed by Stanton-Salazar (2001). A cultural lens is used to explore the impact of *social capital* on first-generation Latina/o students' outcomes and the potential that *habitus* can have in shaping these students' experiences. Such concepts provide a foundation for the contrasting perspectives in the current retention literature regarding the causes of and solutions to first-generation Latina/o student attrition.

This chapter highlights the fluidity of culture and its role in the interplay between Latina/o students and their institutions. The review illustrates how recent research in higher education has demonstrated that gender, race, social class, language, ethnicity, culture, and capital are mitigating factors to first-generation Latina/o student persistence. That is, while these factors are often sources of support for first-generation Latina/o students, they can also be the root of their disenfranchisement by their institutions. In order to persist, first-generation Latina/o students must often find ways to make meaning of their experiences and negotiate their way through the institutions in which they are enrolled.

## **Higher Education Institutions as a Cultural Entities**

Colleges and universities are cultural entities and demonstrate elements similar to other organizations, including structured interactions and symbolic meanings. Higher education institutions find meaning and significance through the organizational structures and the processes which serve to sustain them. These processes include their own unique set of values, norms, rituals, symbols, and shared histories. This notion is closely aligned with that of Clifford Geertz (1973) who defines culture as an interpretive process:

Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretivist one in search of meaning. (p. 5)

From this perspective, culture influences higher education institutions on multiple levels. These influences can be studied from an interpretivist perspective to better understand the role culture plays at these institutions.

The value of studying higher education from a cultural perspective was introduced in the 1960s and developed further in the subsequent decades. The approach was first recognized by Reisman and Jencks (1963) who viewed the subcultures of higher education as being similar to those found in societies. They asserted that more ethnographic data were needed in the field for these institutions to be better understood. Tierney's early contributions in the 1980s helped to fill in these gaps and broadened the perspectives from which researchers studied higher education.

Echoing Geertz, Tierney (1988) expanded the cultural study of higher education to serve as a means by which organizational structures could be examined within colleges and

universities. He defines organizational culture as “the study of particular webs of significance within an organizational setting. That is, we look at an organization as a traditional anthropologist would study a particular village or clan” (p. 4). Introducing a framework for studying institutional culture, Tierney specified the essential concepts for study which include: environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership (p. 8). He suggested that culture influences decisions throughout all levels of higher education institutions. By focusing on the impact of culture on their functioning, researchers and administrators are able to have a heightened awareness of the dynamics at play in higher education institutions and how they impact its members as they enter and interact with the various cultural elements within the organization.

The impact of culture in higher education institutions is quite pervasive. Culture influences the process by which institutions’ services are developed and the form in which they are distributed. That is, institutional culture shapes how colleges and universities operationalize the design and delivery of services that are intended to support students. At the same time, culture also maintains the values upon which institutions were founded. This process-product dynamic reflects and reinforces the institutional culture. Stanton-Salazar (2001) framed this concept of *institutional support*, which is central to this study, as an artifact of the urban schools he studied. He asserted that the culture of these schools was reflected and reinforced in the process by which this support was made available to students as well as in the tangible resources that resulted from these modes of institutional support (p. 270).

A significant finding of Stanton-Salazar’s (2001) research is that institutional support can actually have a detrimental effect on those students whose culture and educational backgrounds are not reflected in or valued by their educational institution. Stanton-Salazar described that the

only option these students had were to conform to the subtle and obvious cultural expectations and values of their schools, including individualism, meritocracy, and the usage of English only. These students were marginalized as a result and did not have the opportunity to benefit from their schooling they were supposed to receive. Valenzuela's (1999) research on Mexican students in urban high schools presented similar results. She noted that the policies and practices of the schools in her study were assimilationist in nature, "designed to divest Mexican students of their culture and language" (p.20). Consequently, these educational environments contribute to the self-perpetuating cycle of Latina/o youth who are unable to succeed in educational institutions that attempt to negate and dismiss their cultural values. Although Stanton-Salazar's and Valenzuela's research is based in K-12 systems, their findings are applicable to higher education when considering the disparity between the student outcomes of Latina/os and those of their White counterparts.

It is important to note that higher education operates in an organizational form that is characterized as an institution. Kezar (2001) pointed out that institutions serve to fulfill long established missions using set norms and socialization processes that are based on these missions, societal needs, and connections to individuals' identities. Like other cultural entities, higher education institutions are value driven (e.g., academic freedom, shared governance, specialization); universities strive to uphold their values using policies, traditions, and institutional roles that serve in a self-regulating and self-replicating manner, making the organization less susceptible to change from external and internal influences. Higher education institutions were founded on the value systems of the dominant culture and have changed little despite their longevity and the changing profile of its student body. The resulting interaction between the cultures of higher education institutions and those of this increasingly diverse

enrollment produces mixed results for students. While these interactions can produce enriching diverse environments, they can also result in alienation among students whose race, age, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, linguistic background, and sexual identity are not valued by the dominant cultures of the higher education institutions.

### **Socialization as a Cultural Process in Higher Education**

While there are many overt symbols and rituals that socialize new members to a college campus, the most subtle messages are often the most influential to their socialization. Events such as orientation, convocation, and homecoming all reinforce and acknowledge a university's history, values, heroes, and traditions; however, they are isolated occasions that do not give the full picture of the day-to-day operations of the organization. Higher education institutions, each with their own cultures, have unspoken and unwritten values, norms, and traditions which are communicated and reinforced through interactions between members of the organization (Cox, 1994; Tierney, 1997). When considering that cultural organizations are made up of unique individuals, each with their own characteristics and histories, socialization can be interpreted as the interplay between individuals and the organization through which both derive meaning. Socialization, therefore, is an interpretive process by which individuals shape their cultural organization just as much as the organization shapes its members.

The post-modernist perspective on the socialization process differs from a modernist perspective which focuses on the deficits of new members whose characteristics do not fit the mold of their organizational culture (Tierney, 1997). The latter suggests that culture is static and that new members must acquire requisite knowledge about their organization in order to learn how to become full members. Within this modernist framework, those who do not assimilate are

then marginalized for not “fitting in” or fully participating in the institution. These members’ differences are labeled as deficiencies and the organizations are scrutinized for their inability to provide a successful assimilation experience. Tierney’s post-modern definition of socialization, on the other hand, implies that higher education institutions are dynamic cultural organizations. This characteristic, Tierney posited, can empower institutions to expand their notions of acceptability for the diversity of their members and the nature of their socialization tasks.

When considering the breadth and scope of ethnic and socioeconomic diversity represented in the student population, Tierney’s post-modern view of socialization can be useful in providing further insights that these factors play in their experiences. Viewing socialization as an interactionist process allows for the conceptualization of a nexus between students and their higher education institution. It is at this nexus that the values, behaviors, resources, and networks of these respective entities interact resulting in institutional barriers to success for first-generation Latina/o students (e.g., discrimination, marginalization, low expectations), or to new opportunities that lead to the creation of more equitable outcomes (e.g., persistence, graduation, and retention rates).

Tierney’s view illustrates the socio-cultural interactive process by which socialization occurs on college campuses, and serves as the starting point for this dissertation. The concepts of *social capital*, and *habitus* also provide insight into the socialization process and shed light on the issues of persistence among first-generation Latina/os at PWIs.

### **The Impact of Capital**

The interplay between individual capital and institutional culture impacts first-generation Latina/o students’ educational experiences from K-12 to higher education. As presented in

chapter one, the national enrollment and persistence data demonstrates that many first-generation Latina/o student have negative experiences that disaffirm them as students, thereby self-perpetuating the educational and social inequities that challenge their persistence and success. The resulting implications for continued class and cultural stratification in the United States are compelling and warrant decisive attention by educators and policy makers.

Researchers have utilized sociological and economic perspectives to explain social class reproduction as it occurs in educational institutions (Berger, 2000; Dika & Singh, 2002; Gándara, 2002; McDonough, 1997; Nora, 2004; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Valenzuela & Dornsbuch, 1994; Walpole, 2007). Many scholars have used Bourdieu's (1986) notions of *social capital* and *habitus*, which provide a conceptual link between structural factors and individual choices and outcomes. Educational researchers have also drawn from the work of Coleman (1988) who explored social capital in terms of its intergenerational nature. These two frameworks have been utilized by educational scholars to emphasize the individual and social applications of the term *social capital*. The research on social capital cited in this chapter draws from both Bourdieu and Coleman as they refer to the issues related to first-generation Latina/o students.

Utilizing Bourdieu and Coleman, Stanton-Salazar (2001) defined social capital as a “set of properties existing within socially patterned associations among people that, when activated, enable them to accomplish their goals or to empower themselves in some meaningful way” (p. 265). These associations, according to Stanton-Salazar, can occur as networks between two individuals, between individuals in a group, and between groups in a community creating “social support systems” that allow or prevent opportunities and resources to flow back and forth through conduits formed by these networks (p. 6).

Stanton-Salazar (2001) described three properties of social capital. First, social capital is reciprocal where the groups involved make investments and commitments, not always in the same proportion, with power differences between these parties playing a significant role. Secondly, the help-seeking and help providing exchange that occurs during a social capital association are guided by cultural rules, obligations, and expectations that are contextualized according to the power relations inherent in these associations. Lastly, Stanton-Salazar asserted that social capital has a resource generating capacity, with resources flowing reciprocally between the individuals involved in the associations that are founded on trust and mutual expectations formed according to hierarchical power based relationships. The associations and investments described have a cultural base, in which the exchange involves shared meaning making, the establishment of common interests, and collaboration (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p. 266).

Social class, gender, ethnicity, sexual identity, age, linguistic background, and race all serve as mitigating factors in determining the social networks to which individuals have access. These networks connect or exclude individuals to opportunities, privileges, and institutional resources, and power depending on their levels of “social embeddedness” to the various groups to which they ascribe. Stanton-Salazar suggested that individuals are pulled by and gravitate toward various social, cultural, and ideological forces that are often contradictory in nature (pp.18 - 19). In order to maintain access to opportunities and resources, individuals must negotiate their way through the institution using social networks. This negotiation process serves as a way for individuals with social capital dissimilar to their institution’s to maintain access to opportunities and resources from which they are being excluded.

Stanton-Salazar (2001) takes the notions of social capital introduced by Bourdieu and Coleman and through his reinterpretation places them squarely in a cultural context. He views social capital as inclusive, acknowledging that culturally specific practices and interactions amongst individual and family networks are resource and opportunity producing for Latina/o youth. Within this framework, the means by which this reciprocal exchange of social capital occurs supports Latina/o youth as they negotiate their way through the institutional culture of their schools which is unlike the culture of their families or the communities in which they live. Similar to Tierney (2000), Stanton-Salazar (2001) affirms that culture is always in the backdrop of the experiences of underrepresented students at educational institutions with cultural systems based on the values of the dominant culture. His sociocultural interpretation of persistence among the Latina/o youth in his study translates well to the experiences of first-generation Latina/o students attending PWIs.

Educational institutions, as cultural organizations, often seek to sustain the values of the dominant culture upon which they were founded in a self-replicating manner. Value is placed on student characteristics that align with the values and behaviors that are reflective of the dominant culture. Consequently, students at PWIs possessing such characteristics carry social capital at their campuses. This capital is communicated subtly by students of higher socioeconomic statuses through behaviors, knowledge, and beliefs which they inherited from their parents and communities (Berger, 2000; McDonough, 1997; Tierney, 1999; Walpole, 2007). While in college, these students also further develop their capital, through relationships with individuals that serve as resources from which opportunities and resources are gained. PWIs reward students with social capital through admission, grades, internships, graduate schools, and other such opportunities, thereby reinforcing these students' status in society and the values of these

institutions (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). It is important to note that students entering higher education institutions from middle and upper-class backgrounds are socialized at a very early age to participate in higher education. For these students, according to Tierney (1999):

admission to college is not a choice but a preordained conclusion. The question for them is not whether they *should* go to college or if they can afford it, but *which* college they will attend. In this light, the culture in which individuals reside determines whether or not they have the cultural capital to attend college. [italics in original] (p. 83)

In turn, the PWI welcomes students possessing the social capital that reflect that of the institution reinforcing the appropriateness of their membership.

In contrast, students possessing social capital that does not reflect that of the institution often experience alienation at PWIs. Characteristics that mark differences in capital include, but are not limited to, socioeconomic status, race, language, ethnicity, disability, and sexual identity. From this perspective, social capital serve as reinforcing agents for structuring mechanisms producing inequitable educational outcomes (Walpole, 2007) and for the perpetuation of a stratified society (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

### **The Role of Habitus**

Within his theory of social reproduction, Bourdieu (1986) proposed the concept of *habitus* to explain how individuals achieve their desired social and economic goals by making structuring mechanisms to work toward their advantage. Habitus serves as an agent of choice at the subconscious level, defining a set of perceptions that individuals have of their environment and the people with whom they classify themselves. Individuals that share a similar culture and worldview are likely to have common experiences that occur on class-specific bases resulting in

a common habitus for that group. This habitus comes into play as students determine which colleges would be the “right fit” for them and their educational ambitions. The question of “fit” is of tremendous significance to first-generation Latina/o students as they evaluate their cultural and social identities, their college options, and the cultural landscapes of the colleges they attend.

The concept of *organizational habitus*, as introduced by McDonough (1997), is highly relevant to the notion of “fit.” McDonough contended that while habitus exists in families and communities, it also operates in organizations, including high schools and universities. She defined organizational habitus as “the impact of a social class culture on individual behavior through an intermediate organization” (p. 156). Through her research, McDonough illustrated that the high schools in her study were social class communities that determined the types of college choice options with which students were presented. These options, or the complete absence of options, were then supported or unsupported by the habitus of family and friends. These influences shape the individual decisions students reach regarding college attendance. Organizational habitus, according to McDonough, made such individual decisions possible by bounding the search parameters to the different views of college opportunity offered by the studied schools. In sum, while organizational habitus contributes to certain perceptions of appropriate college “fit” by students, the habitus of students’ families and friends act in a mediating capacity, allowing individuals to make decisions about college choice that can depart from the habitus presumed by their high schools.

Bourdieu’s idea of habitus offers a powerful tool for the opening or closing of doors for students; however, it focuses mostly on the impact of economic capital on the individual. Theories put forth by later researchers (Nora, 2004; Perna, 2007; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Tierney, 1999; Walpole, 2007) place more emphasis on the social and cultural influences, within the

context of capital, on students' decision to apply to and to attend higher education. In light of the predominance of the existing student retention theories, this sociocultural perspective is significant when considering the experiences of first-generation and Latina/o students at PWIs.

Perna (2007) introduced an integrated human investment model suggesting that even when the expected benefits and costs are the same, two individuals may make different college choices because of variances in their preferences, tolerance for risk, and uncertainty. Her conceptual model recognizes that multiple layers of context influence an individual's decision making by providing access to different resources and opportunities. Perna's four layers include the individual's habitus, the school and community context, the higher education context, and the social, economic, and policy context (p. 58). The study also found that the measures of social capital are particularly important to the decision of Latina/os to enroll in a four-year college.

### **Capital and First-Generation Latina/o Students**

It is not surprising that students possessing social capital that is not valued by PWIs negotiate their way through their institutions with challenge. This challenge is particularly true among first-generation Latina/o students who often come from families of lower socioeconomic backgrounds that have little to no experience with higher education institutions. These students have less knowledge of how college and universities work and were not raised in families or communities in which this tacit knowledge circulated (Kuh & Love, 2000). Furthermore, bilingualism, familism, and other similar cultural characteristics have been negatively associated with adjustment and academic achievement within the institutional structures of PWIs (Tinto, 1993), yet they have been identified as sources of strength in research focusing on social capital and Latina/o students' achievement (Gándara, 2002; Nora, 2004; Perna, 2007; Stanton-Salazar,

1997; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000; Tierney & Venegas, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999; Valenzuela & Dornsbuch, 1994).

Students can use their social capital for self-empowerment by resisting the pressure to conform to structures imposed upon them by the dominant culture at their higher education institution. The support Latina/o students receive from friends and members of their families and communities has been demonstrated as important resources that assist in their transition to college (González, Jovel et al., 2004; Hurtado & Carter, 1997) and help to promote their academic persistence and achievement (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez et al., 2005; Valenzuela & Dornsbuch, 1994). Despite these familial and peer resources, first-generation Latina/o students from working class families enter academe with a set of values and experiences that are not represented at the institution presenting significant layers of cultural and social challenges through which these students must negotiate in order to persist.

Stanton-Salazar (1997) produced a seminal work linking Bourdieu's theory of capital to educational experiences of Latina/o youth. He asserted that while educational systems work to replicate the race and social class inequalities, institutional agents within these educational systems can serve as resources and create opportunities for low-income minority youth who possess social capital that is not valued by these institutions. Institutional agents provide connections to resources and opportunities that serve as conduits to social capital and mobility by helping youth learn how to decode their educational system which is bound in the cultural values and beliefs of the dominant culture. According to Stanton-Salazar (1997), decoding the system begins with "making sense" of this cultural logic, and entails knowing how to role-play using the institution's "identity kit" (p. 13). This important perspective serves as a foundation for several future studies and highlights the economic, social, and cultural factors at work that produce

inequity and those that produce social mobility among low-income underrepresented students in higher education.

Several studies find familial involvement to be a very significant source of social capital for Latina/o students. Perna and Titus (2005) found that family involvement in college preparation programs, particularly those that are able to effectively involve parents, offer great potential in addressing Latina/o student underrepresentation in higher education. The support and capital first-generation Latina/os derive from their family members, who often are low-income and not college educated, has been reported to be deeply significant to these students' persistence. In Gándara's (1995) qualitative study of Chicano students' college attendance, family stories of strength and persistence based on Chicano culture provided these students with valuable sources of cultural capital. These stories, according to Gándara, are told almost always by women and serve as a means by which mothers passed on cultural values and characteristics. From this perspective, the passing down of these family stories is a powerful mediating factor between schooling and social class.

Friends that serve in a familial capacity have also been linked to the development of social capital which, in turn, enables students to use habitus to their advantage. Using an anthropological concept, Tierney and Venegas (2006) illustrated that *fictive kin* who provide college-going information help their peers to increase their accessibility to social capital. With greater social capital, their peers are able to use their habitus to negotiate their way through a university's organizational culture. Tierney and Venegas contended that this dynamic could be operationalized in the form of peer mentors to capitalize on their influence in this information sharing relationship and support the transition and persistence of low-income, first-generation, students of color. Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2000) suggested similar benefits through their

*network-analytic* model. Their model details how, with the assistance of family, friends, and mentors in their network, minority youth can develop networking skills, code-switching ability, and the coping strategies to negotiate their way through organizational culture of PWIs.

As suggested, social networks have the potential to play powerful roles in the provision of culturally and racially relevant capital. They can inform first-generation Latina/o students of the subtleties related to the culture and structure of higher education while providing them with the clarity and opportunity to negotiate the institution more effectively. Most importantly, these networks can serve as important tools for first-generation Latina/os in attaining educational and societal equity.

As described in the previous chapter, Latina/o college students still contend with a history of disenfranchisement from educational institutions. Valenzuela (1999) pointed out that this history coupled with school policies and practices actually results in their “social de-capitalization” creating a subtractive effect on Latina/o students’ educational and social outcomes (p. 29). As evidenced in several studies (Gándara, 1995; Gloria & Castellanos, 2003; Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez et al., 2005; González et al., 2003; Nora, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999), many first-generation Latina/o college students reported little collegiate preparation, despite their academic abilities, since they were not expected by their high schools to attend postsecondary institutions simply because of their race, ethnicity, social class, and linguistic background. This lack of guidance and mentorship is clearly manifested in their lower levels of educational attainment and their underrepresentation on the campuses of four-year colleges and universities.

Valenzuela’s (1999) findings are consistent with those of McDonough’s (1997) study which have demonstrated the ways that high school students from different socioeconomic and cultural groups navigate through the process of selecting a college. Students from higher

socioeconomic backgrounds typically attended high schools that made concerted efforts early in their students' education to gain their admission to selective universities. Students from lower socioeconomic and minority/immigrant backgrounds, on the other hand, attended high schools that placed much less emphasis on the process and were more often directed toward community colleges by high school guidance counselors if they were encouraged to attend college at all. Enhancing concepts outlined by Bourdieu, McDonough introduced the concept of *entitlement*, the idea that students believe that they are entitled to a particular kind of collegiate education based on their family's and/or high school's habitus. This process, McDonough suggested, is preceded by a class socialization process that influences students' college going goals consistent with those of their families and communities.

Continuing with the study of the impact of social capital on educational experiences, González, Stoner, and Jovel (2003) used Stanton-Salazar's theoretical framework to examine the role of social capital on the educational access for Latinas. Their results also support the notion that the type of college-going support offered to these students while in high school was consistent with their levels of social capital. Those Latinas who enrolled at four-year colleges and universities, however, had attended elementary and high schools that allowed them to acquire institutional capital throughout their youth. Conversely, those Latinas who had been neglected in terms of their college planning and preparation attended schools with inadequate curriculum, were tracked in ESL or special education programs, had negative experiences with teachers, and had negative or no contact with counselors. Consequently, these Latinas began their college experiences at community colleges, but later transferred to four-year institutions.

González, Stoner, and Jovel argued that the students' academic ability was not an obstacle for these students, but rather the institutional neglect they endured during their K-12

years as a result of their lower levels of inherited social capital. They also concluded that while parental and sibling support was pivotal to these students' college enrollment, the social capital students gained from their parents did not meet the criteria to gain entrance directly into a four-year university. This study demonstrated that while educational institutions can be vehicles for expanding social capital, they can also serve to reinforce the existing socio-cultural stratification.

### **The Interplay between Capital and Institutional Support**

Stanton-Salazar's (2001) framework for examining Latina/o youth socialization in an educational system is based on concepts of social capital and institutional support. This concept provides a compelling lens through which the transition and persistence of first-generation Latina/os can be interpreted. The premise from which Stanton-Salazar conducted his research is consistent with other research done on the experiences of students of color in higher education—that educational institutions replicate and promote the values of the dominant culture through their socialization practices. This "*hidden curriculum*," implemented either tacitly or explicitly, is based on the assumption that the values and norms of the educational institution should be celebrated and promoted universally to apply to all its members regardless of their cultural background (p. 246). The results of this socialization process, according to Stanton-Salazar (2001), are that members to whom these values and norms apply are able to retain their privileged access to power and resources whereas those to whom these values and norms do not apply are marginalized and disenfranchised. Although the context of Stanton-Salazar's research has been urban K-12 public schools, such practices that promote institutionalized alienation have been proven to prevail in higher education as well (González et al., 2003; Tierney, 1999; Walpole, 2007).

### *Institutional Support*

Institutional support as defined by Stanton-Salazar (2001) is an act of bridging that is both a process and a tangible resource. He characterizes institutional support using six specific forms as featured in Figure 1. These include 1) funds of knowledge, 2) bridging, 3) advocacy, 4) role modeling, 5) emotional and moral support, and 6) personalized and soundly-based evaluative feedback advice and guidance (p. 268).

Stanton-Salazar (2001) pointed out that his conceptualization of resources as “social support” or “institutional support” account for both the process-related and the tangible properties of social capital. Covered in this model, therefore, are the relational interactions that foster support as well as the concrete items that are passed along during these interactions, such as funds, opportunities, resources, and relationships. Social capital, according to Stanton-Salazar, “is the value inhering in an individual’s relationships when those relations are capable of, as well as socially organized for the purpose of, transmitting to the individual forms of institutional support – particularly in times of greatest need” (p. 270). Examined from this perspective, organizations practice the transmission of social capital as institutional dynamics facilitate its acquisition as well as the resources that are exchanged and shared between individuals.

Table 1: Stanton-Salazar's Six Forms of Institutional Support

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1. Funds of knowledge	Those funds most associated with ascension within the educational system; such funds also underlie the process of implicit and explicit socialization into institutional discourses – those which regulate communication, interaction, and exchange within mainstream institutional spheres.
2. Bridging	The process of acting as a human bridge to gate-keepers, to social networks, and to opportunities for exploring various mainstream institutions – e.g., university campuses.
3. Advocacy	The process of intervening on behalf of another for the purpose of protecting or promoting their interests.
4. Role modeling	Modeling behaviors associated with (1) effective participation in mainstream domains, and (2) effective coping with stratification forces via help-seeking behaviors, rational problem solving strategies.
5. Emotional and moral support	Provided in the context of other forms of support geared toward promoting effective participation in mainstream domains and effective coping with stratification forces.
6. Personalized and soundly-based evaluative feedback advice and guidance	Incorporates the provision of institutional knowledge as well as genuine emotional and moral support.

An important finding in Stanton-Salazar's research is the degree to which the institutional culture influences the help-seeking behaviors of students and their interaction with institutional agents. Social support and institutional support are accessed via "*social networks*" which Stanton-Salazar (2001) likened to social support systems that connect individuals to personal, social, and economic resources. He found that familial and peer networks can serve as sources of institutional support in their own culturally appropriate and often transformative ways through *familismo*. At the same time, however, networks can also be exclusionary to those who do not have access to the same types of social capital generated and possessed by these resource networks. Stanton-Salazar asserted that within educational institutions Latina/o youth access institutional support from agents who transmit knowledge and resources characteristic of the social networks and opportunities available to the middle and upper class. These institutional agents, therefore, serve as conduits to social capital for these students.

Stanton-Salazar found, however, that students with positive orientations toward their schools and their agents did not always have help-seeking behaviors. He attributed this inconsistency to the low status level of these students and the associated perception they have of themselves as not being privy to the benefits to be reaped from the social capital that could grant them access to institutional support and resources. This "internalized oppression" (p. 246) occurs in response to the alienating socialization process and perpetuates a cycle of exclusion and marginality among Latina/o youth.

A major determinant of whether students sought institutional support was the degree to which these students had a sense of *confianza* in a particular interpersonal relationship. Stanton-Salazar (2001) explained that *confianza* refers to a level of trust in a relationship that allows one to feel comfortable enough with another individual to be vulnerable and intimate without the fear

of being deceived or manipulated (p.27). *Confianza* operates as a social construct and is referred to as *confianza en confianza*. This construct is based on an expectation of reciprocity that Latina/o youth learn at a young age through their relationships with family members and close friends. In this sense, *confianza en confianza*, according to Stanton-Salazar (2001), is a cultural norm that operates on an intuitive level as a coping strategy; it also serves as a form of social capital, functioning as a resource that flows reciprocally among the members of the communities studied by Stanton-Salazar. Students who do not have a *confianza en confianza* with their institution or its institutional agents develop negative help-seeking behaviors as they are socialized into these educational environments. He noted that when students seek help from social networks, they do so in Spanish with other Latina/os as it is their “language of trust.” English, on the other hand, was perceived by these students as the language of assimilation despite the fact that the public schools in Stanton-Salazar’s study tout English as the “language of opportunity” (p. 210). It is important to note that although students expected Latina/o teachers to be more caring, this expectation did not predetermine with which teachers and institutional agents students connected since the presence of *confianza* were found to be more important than race and ethnicity.

### ***Funds of Knowledge & Socialization***

Stanton-Salazar (2001) described *funds of knowledge* as the resources exchanged to provide access and privilege in an educational institution. These funds “underlie the process of implicit and explicit socialization into institutional discourses” by “regulat[ing] communication, interaction, and exchange within mainstream institutional spheres” (p. 268). Within the form of institutional support described by Stanton-Salazar (2001), he delineated seven forms of

institutionally based funds of knowledge that support students to successfully negotiate their way through the educational system (p. 269).

1. *Institutionally sanctioned discourse*: Socially acceptable ways of using language and of communicating
2. *Academic task-specific knowledge*: Subject area knowledge such as math, science, etc.
3. *Organizational/bureaucratic funds of knowledge*: Knowledge of how bureaucracies operate – chains of command, resource competition among various branches of bureaucracy.
4. *Network development*: Networking skills: knowledge of how to negotiate with various gatekeepers and agents, build supportive/cooperative ties with peers well integrated at the school, and seek out instrumental ties with informal mentors outside the school.
5. *Technical funds of knowledge*: Computer literacy; study skills, test-taking skills, time-management skills; decision-making skills.
6. *Knowledge of labor and educational markets*: Job and educational opportunities; knowledge of how to fulfill requisites and how to overcome barriers.
7. *Problem-solving knowledge*: How to integrate the first six knowledge forms above in order to solve school-related problems, make sound decisions, and reach personal or collective goals.

The seven forms of institutionally based funds of knowledge reflect technical skills that students need to acquire to make use of institutional support yet, at a more fundamental level, they represent opportunities for students to learn how to “*decode the system*” (Stanton-Salazar,

1997, p. 13). This knowledge is typically inherited by students in the form of social capital and provides them with an understanding of the educational system that enables them to maneuver through the institution successfully. Definite patterns emerge from Stanton-Salazar's (2001) findings on the process by which resources are tacitly organized and then distributed to students in his study. These findings helped to inform his conclusions regarding the outcomes of this resource transfer and how these transfers are legitimized by the schools' organizational cultures into an operating ideology that privileges a certain set of students over others. Resources are typically reserved for those students who arrive to the educational institutions knowing how to "*decode its system*" by either mirroring or conforming to that system. The group most privileged by this operating ideology have pre-established networks, competitive orientations, and possess skilled orientations toward help-seeking and self-advocacy.

A second group of students who have significantly less access to these resources are typically individuals who distinguish themselves from alienated students by demonstrating signs of conformity and approval of the educational institution. According to Stanton-Salazar (2001), these exhibited signs are not rooted, however, in genuineness of these sentiments, but more so as a coping strategy that allows them not only to "*decode the system*" but to also gain and maintain the favor of institutional agents who act as gatekeepers at the school. Therefore, the socialization processes at the schools studied by Stanton-Salazar produce different results for the different groups of students enrolled – reinforcement and reward for those students entering with approved capital, conformity for immigrant students who do not possess the approved forms of capital yet want to still have access to resources, and alienation for those students who do not possess the approved forms of capital and do not conform to the school's organizational culture.

Stanton-Salazar (2001) postulated why there are such varied processes and outcomes resulting from the interaction of social capital and institutional support at urban schools. He argued that these schools are “both noncommittal and ill-equipped to provide the varied types of social supports geared toward meeting students’ emotional and psychological needs, nor are they geared, in any authentic way, toward maximizing students’ intellectual and multilinguistic strengths” (p. 215). Stanton-Salazar found this most distressing since students must negotiate and navigate their ways through layers of barriers (race, class, language, ethnicity, segregation, family, etc.), making the development of social networks and their associated conduits to social capital and institutional support so critical to their resiliency and learning. Despite this compelling need, many urban schools and by extension higher education institutions continue to direct their efforts and resources to students who arrive to these institutions with privilege since the propagated individualistic and meritocratic ideology defines these students as “most deserving” (p. 215). The residue of such practices for Latina/os are seen in their higher education attainment rates as discussed in chapter one, and ultimately in the employment rates in the United States.

### **Applicability of Stanton-Salazar’s Framework to Higher Education**

Utilizing Stanton-Salazar’s concept of institutional support, Bensimon (2007) used the *funds of knowledge* concept to question the operating ideological assumptions in higher education that are similar to those found by Stanton-Salazar in urban schools. She defined *funds of knowledge* as “a concept found in sociocultural studies of teaching and learning to signify the intellectual and social knowledge of an individual or community” which incorporates both behavior and cognitive and affective components (p. 451). Bensimon explained that funds of

knowledge are reflected in how educators define problems, situations, and explain phenomena. The actions and thoughts associated with this process are generally drawn from an unconscious ideology among educators which Bensimon challenged by asking:

When practitioners have been socialized to view student success from the perspective of the predominant paradigm, what do they notice? What might they fail to notice? What do they expect to see and what happens when their expectations are not met? Might the know-how derived from the dominant paradigm be inimical to the needs of minority students? Might it lead to misconceptions? (p. 451).

Bensimon pointed out that many of the accepted theoretical concepts and standards used to promote and measure student success are heavily based on the values, social class, race, language, and gender associated with the dominant group. This assumption is evident, according to Bensimon (2007), in the manner in which universities provide support services believing that students will take advantage of them.

Stanton-Salazar's work has also been used to interpret the participation of first-year underrepresented racial minorities in health science research (Hurtado et al., 2008). Framed in the context of social capital, Hurtdao et al. asserted from their research findings that there is a significant relationship between the likelihood of these students engaging in research opportunities and to having connections with institutional agents and upper-division peers (p. 130). Hurtado et. al. (2008) found that such individuals were critical to assisting underrepresented racial minorities in learning how to negotiate their higher education institution. This assistance allowed these first-year students to access the information and resources associated with research opportunities, social capital they did not possess on their own prior to enrolling in higher education.

On PWI campuses many first-generation students and students of color do not know how to make use of these services or do not feel confident enough to even seek help for fear of

rejection (Steele, 1997). The challenge herein is that these student sentiments and fears run contradictory to the value higher education institutions place on student behaviors such as engagement, active classroom participation, and utilizing faculty office hours. Given their economic, cultural, and familial obligations, first-generation Latina/o students may not have the ability to become involved in the same types of activities and endeavors as their privileged White peers. Using Stanton-Salazar's framework, Bensimon (2007) argued that in higher education "racialized practices and the unconscious dynamics of White privilege play an important role in who has access to forms of engagement that have greater exchange value" (p. 452).

Furthermore, she encouraged the higher education community to think beyond the established constructs upon which educators fall by default and to consider student patterns and behaviors contextually. When doing so, these differences do not suggest that academically successful first-generation Latina/o students fulfilling these obligations are less committed or determined students than their academically successful privileged White counterparts. Rather, these students are investing in activities and endeavors that provide them with culturally relevant capital that supports them thorough their university experiences.

The forms of institutional support described by Stanton-Salazar (2001) as being instrumental to urban Latina/o youth's success in public school systems have also been identified as impacting the transition and persistence of Latina/os in higher education. For example, *bridging* has been explored with respect to mentorship programs by Bordes and Arrendondo (2005) and Zalaquett and Lopez (2006) who considered the impact these relationships had on students' perceptions of their institutions. Additionally, Hurtado and Carter's study (1997) demonstrated that involvement in student organizations was shown to positively impact campus climate. Gándara (1995) and McDonough (1997) addressed the positive and negative impact

that *advocacy* has on the achievement of Latina/o students. *Role modeling* was found to be a significant form of institutional support in a study done by Kenneth Gonzalez (2000) on minority student participation in PWIs. Gloria, Castellanos, and Orozco (2005) explored the *emotional and moral support* form by examining the various types of support utilized by Latinas as they attempt cope with cultural conflict and educational barriers in higher education institutions. Lastly, *personalized and soundly-based evaluative feedback advice and guidance*, which involves the interplay of *funds of knowledge* and the emotional and moral support elements of the forms have been explored by Rendón (1994), Castellanos and Gloria (2007), and Padilla (1997). Although the context may be different, these works highlight that the institutional obstacles and issues confronted by Latina/o students often recur in higher education.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter reviewed the literature on first-generation Latina/o students in higher education and the culture of the institutions that they attend. Using a cultural lens the impact of social capital on first-generation Latina/o students' outcomes and the potential that *habitus* can have in shaping these students' experiences were also explored to provide a foundation for the contrasting perspectives in the current retention literature. The literature review also presented the interplay that race, ethnicity, social class, gender, language, culture, and capital can play in determining how students are supported by their institutions and how they make meaning of their experiences in order to persist. The chapter also introduced Stanton-Salazar's conceptual framework for interpreting how first-generation Latina/o students experience their PWIs. This framework informs the methodology for this study that I review in the next chapter as well as the interview protocols used with the study's participants.

### CHAPTER THREE

This qualitative study explored the experiences of first-generation Latina/o students at a four-year public university that is a PWI. The aim of this research was to capture students' thoughts, reflections, and perceptions as they, bringing with them their own culture and ways of making meaning, negotiate their way through the institutional culture of Metro State University. I conducted this study in an interpretivist spirit and utilized a narrative approach to tell these students' stories. This methodology brought forth these students' voices which allowed them to tell their own stories and depict their social realities (Tierney, 1997). My primary goal for this study, therefore, was to capture the meanings that these first-generation Latina/os ascribe to their experiences as students at the PWI.

The manner in which I approached this study and described my findings expressed my relationship to the topic, the written text, and the students I interviewed. This relationship was intimate, personal, and integral to the interpretivist process. Furthermore, the relationship I had with this study also makes a statement about the active role I took in the research process as I collaborated with the interviewees to make meaning and translate the experience of first-generation Latina/os attending PWIs.

The interpretivist constructivist approach is rooted in the belief that "to understand this world of meaning one must interpret it" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118). This is contrary to a positivist form of research in which reality is "stable, observable, and measurable" (Merriam,

1998, p. 4). Drawing from Geertz's interpretive theory of culture, the methodology seeks to understand the world through the point of view of those who live those lives. Geertz (1973) asserted that a qualitative researcher studies a culture by interpreting the meaning its members ascribe to their experiences much in the same way that a complicated text is read. To tell the story of human experiences, the qualitative researcher puts forth *thick descriptions* in demonstrating the depth of the subject being studied. This interpretivist philosophy is coupled by the constructivist notion that "knowledge and truth are created, not discovered by mind...that what we take to be self-evident kinds (e.g., man, woman, truth, self) are actually the product of complicated discursive practices" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 125).

Guba and Lincoln (1989) formed a significant social research paradigm by intertwining these two perspectives. According to their constructivist framework, reality and truth are constructed in the minds of individuals. They also believe that, at the same, individuals simultaneously present several constructions, some of which might even be conflicting. Despite these divergent and even dichotomous perspectives, Guba and Lincoln assert that "truth" exists therein. It is the task of the researcher to take in these realities, interpret them, and then describe them in the narrative.

### **Research Design**

The framework used in this study is based upon a constructivist approach which asserts that individuals utilize different lenses through which they see their worlds and ascribe their own meanings to the phenomena that takes place in their worlds. Constructivist researchers, therefore, attempt to uncover and interpret the meanings that interviewees assign, or construct, to various elements in their worlds (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Unlike positivist research, which produces "objective" results, constructivist research yields data that are descriptive and

subjective from which the researcher uncovers the meanings that subjects designate to the phenomena of their lived experiences.

As culture primarily influences the lenses through which individuals see their worlds a constructivist approach was most appropriate for this research. The PWI attended by the Latina/o students has several dominant and normative cultures through which the University assigns meaning and determines the norms of the organization. This study focused on the nexus at which the students' culture and that of the PWI meet to explore the processes by which these students negotiate through the institution in their attempts to persist and succeed. Three questions addressed by the study are:

- 1) What role do peer networks play in the persistence of first-generation Latina/o students attending the PWI?
- 2) What role does family play in the persistence of first-generation Latina/o students attending the PWI?
- 3) What role does institutional support play in the persistence of first-generation Latina/o students attending the PWI?

These three questions, identified in chapter one, guided the research process and influenced the course of the study.

### **Gaining Access**

This study was based on interviews with twenty first-generation Latina/o students enrolled at Metro State University, a four-year public university in the New York metropolitan area. In addition, five faculty and staff members were interviewed to gain their institutional

perspective on the students' experiences. Using a snowballing technique, these faculty and staff members were identified by the student participants during the course of their interviews.

A pool of potential student interviewees was identified for the study utilizing a tracking database maintained on the University's Learning Communities program. As approximately 80 percent of Metro State University's first-year students participate in this program, its database offered a large potential pool of students from which to draw. The database included information on the Learning Community students' gender, ethnicity, major, earned credits, class standing, and grade point averages. I used this data to identify a pool of Latina/o students in good academic standing (minimum of 2.0 grade point average) who were sophomores and could serve as potential interviewees.

To recruit students to participate in the study, I sent an email to the sophomore Latina/o students I identified from the database and extended to them an invitation to participate in the study. As the institution that served as the research site did not code student records with this information, I relied on students' self-identify as first-generation students to form the needed pool of interviewees. To assist students with their self-identification, I included in this email the definition of first-generation students used by Pascarella and Terenzini (2004) that was used in this study, college students from families where neither parent has more than a high school education. The email informed students of the study's research questions and the contributions I sought to make to the advancement of Latina/o students in higher education.

When the study was first proposed the targeted interview pool consisted of twenty-six sophomores. This group was to be comprised of thirteen males and thirteen females evenly split between residents and commuters. As an insufficient number of students were identified through this approach, I extended the potential interview pool to juniors and seniors and sent these groups

the same invitational email that I sent to the original group of sophomores. I also used a snowballing technique by which I asked participants to refer possible interviewees who would provide valuable perspective for the study (Merriam, 1998). Additionally, I visited a Latin American Student Organization meeting and a Greek Council meeting to explain the purpose of my study and to recruit from their membership. This approach resulted in the eventual participant pool which was more diverse than intended yet still provided a rich set of data on the experiences of first-generation Latina/o students at this PWI.

The eventual make-up of the study's participants included twenty students, three males and seventeen females, who were sophomores, juniors, and seniors. Of this group, six were residents and fourteen were commuters. The study's participant pool had a range of grade point averages (2.008 to 3.762) and a variety of majors including Psychology, Biology, Family and Child Studies, Business, Photography, Mathematics, Chemistry, History, Italian, and Broadcasting (see appendix).

Recruiting male students to participate in the study was more difficult than expected. None responded to my invitational emails and although several male students indicated their support for my study during my visits to the Greek Council and Latin American Student Organization meetings, only a few followed through resulting in the disparity in representation of male and female students in this study.

## **Methodologies**

Using constructivist interpretive methodologies, I developed an understanding of the students' lived phenomena as revealed through their own perspectives. During this qualitative research process, "the researcher builds a complex holistic picture, analyzes words, reports

detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). The approach began with research questions that guided this journey and findings were made along the way through an interpretative process that occurred throughout the stages of data collection and analysis.

Interviews are basic components of qualitative research and will serve as the primary data source for this study. I conducted the interviews for this study using a constructivist interpretive paradigm in that the process was based on the notion that “to understand the world of meaning one must interpret it” (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118). Schwandt explains that the constructivist or interpretivist:

must elucidate the process of meaning construction and clarify what and how meanings are embodied in the language and actions of social actors. To prepare an interpretation is itself to construct a reading of these meanings; it is to offer the inquirer’s construction of the constructions of the actors one studies. (p.118)

Through these “constructions” I presented the interviewees’ emergent interpretations and understandings based on their socially constructed realities. This methodology brought forth the meanings of the students’ constructions as they related to their experiences at the PWI. This approach was consistent with the proposal’s methodological goal of delving into the experiences of first-generation Latina/o students at the PWI. The participants’ first-hand interpretations were central to capturing the sought data to answer the research questions.

Polkinghorne (2005) offers perspective on the purpose served by interviews in studying lived experiences:

Experience has a vertical depth, and methods of data gathering, such as short-answer questionnaires with Likert scales that only gather surface information, are inadequate to capture the richness and fullness of an experience. People have access to much of their own experiences, but their experiences are not directly available to public view. Thus, the

data gathered for study of experience need to consist of first-person or self-reports of participants' own experiences. (p. 138)

Through an interpretivist constructivist approach, the findings of this study were determined by the students themselves. Interviews, therefore, “are not pipelines for transmitting knowledge but reality-constructing, meaning-making occasions” (Jarvinen, 2000, p. 371).

Focusing on their cognitive interpretations, the study explored through interviews the meanings Latina/o students ascribe to their lived experiences attending Metro State University, a PWI. Qualitative research that is based on interviews allows for *thick descriptions*, as described by Geertz (1973), to be produced by using questions, probes, and follow-up questions to fully explore into the subject matter being researched. Furthermore, the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee in the data gathering process allows thick descriptions to emerge as the interviewee supplies information and the researcher interprets and analyzes it during the interview process.

Document analysis served as a secondary data source in the proposed study. This process involved a systematic examination of documents using the research questions as the basis for their examination. I examined documents such as the University mission statement, curricula, and the Strategic Plan. Through this process I noted emerging themes that are consistent with those that came forward during the interviews.

### **Timeline**

The Table 1 details the methodologies used for the study and the target group or resource from which data was collected. Additionally, the table below supplies the frequency at which this data was collected and the date that each research methodology was completed.

Table 2: Research Methodology and Timeline

Method	Targeted Group	Frequency	Timeline
Individual Interviews	20 Latina/o first-generation students, 3 males, 17 females	Single interviews, 1 hour	February – April 2010
Individual Interviews	5 faculty and staff members with close connections to first-generation Latina/o students	Single interviews, 1 hour	February – April 2010
Document analyses	Website, application materials, course descriptions	Upon source availability	December 2009 – April 2010

### Validity

Validity, from an interpretivist constructivist perspective, is demonstrated quite differently than it would be from a positivist perspective. To establish internal validity the data must be collected and represented in a way that is trustworthy and reliable so the findings of the study reflect the reality the study attempts to capture. Reality, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) is a “multiple set of mental constructions . . .made by humans; their constructions are on their minds, and they are, in the main, accessible to the humans who make them” (p. 295). I, as the researcher, was the study’s primary instrument for data collection and analysis. To do so I used the interviews, observations, and document data yet I also relied on complementary methodologies, transcript verifications by interviewees, and the literature to ensure that internal validity is achieved.

The use of multiple methodologies provides not only for a more robust description of the studied phenomena, but also serves to ensure the validity of the presented results. Through triangulation, as described in the methodologies section, I compared and contrasted the emergent

themes and interpret the data collected using the different sources to substantiate the research findings (Creswell, 1998). By corroborating the evidence gathered from these individual sources a detailed and accurate picture was painted of the experiences of the first-generation Latina/o students attending the PWI.

Interpretation occurs throughout the research process, thus the role of the researcher is critical to the data collection and analysis processes (Merriam, 1998). Unlike the role of the researcher in positivist research who aims to be objective and detached, the qualitative researcher seeks to develop a relationship with the topic and with the research participants. This relationship is integral to the researcher's understanding of the subjects' lived experiences and to addressing the issues at the heart of the research questions. As Marshall and Rossman (1999) point out, the researcher enters the lives of the participants and is the instrument in qualitative research.

This relationship between the researcher and the research is central to the constructivist perspective. According to Lincoln (1998), a constructivist approach seeks understanding which is "holistic, emic, and intimate" and a belief that "conventional scientific method has not and cannot solve the enduring and persistent problems of schooling, and that new forms of inquiry and action should be undertaken" (p. 17). This approach differs from positivist research in which this relationship to the topic is commonly referred to as bias. From the formation of the research question to development of the conclusion, the researcher develops a relationship with the project and its participants interpreting all data collected throughout the process to provide a rich description of the studied phenomena.

Bias was important to address in this study given my personal proximity to the issues addressed in this study. By relying on the stated methods for achieving validity and by utilizing

both my professional and personal lenses to interpret the collected data, the interpretations I offered were true to those provided by the first-generation Latina/o students who were the focus of this study.

My relationship to the research topic was very personal as I am a first-generation Latina who attended a PWI so I approached the methodology for this study as an insider. This is the lens through which I interpret the world and higher education institutions in particular. During my undergraduate years, I experienced many of the challenges cited in the literature that are likely to be experienced by students who participated in the study. I view my background as an asset and strength in conducting this study as I had the ability to relate to their stories and provide first-hand interpretations of their accounts. Having attained advanced degrees and dedicating my professional career to supporting student success my interest in the research topic was conveyed as being authentically supportive of the achievement of first-generation Latina/o students.

As an administrator at the university that served as the research site, my day-to-day responsibilities involve making decisions that reflect and uphold the institution's mission and values. This role also influenced the manner in which I developed this study and interpreted the collected data thereby offering balance to the perspective I brought as a first-generation Latina. I conducted the study with the intention of sharing its results to improve the postsecondary experiences of first-generation Latina/os at PWIs.

During the initial meeting with the research participants I presented them with my interest in accurately reflecting their stories through the proposed study. I shared with them my personal background and my research interests. My goal was to foster a sense of trust and to build a rapport with the participants, with the intention of making them feel at ease to share their

experiences with me (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Assuring the student participants that their thoughts and perceptions were accurately captured and represented in the study was critical to their full participation and to capturing quality data for the study. Their sharing the details of their experiences at the PWI required a certain level of vulnerability on their part. Recognizing this, I informed the study's participants that I came to them not only with my research interest, but also with their individual interests in mind. Relaying my interests was critical to building a sense of confidence in my intentions and to demonstrating my goal of reciprocity (Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Parker, 2001).

While I collected the data at one particular PWI, these findings are likely to bring forth new insights into the experiences of Latina/os in higher education. The yielded results were naturally reflective of the PWI at which the interviewed students are enrolled and will have external validity insofar that “[t]he idea that the general resides in the particular, that we can extract a universal from a particular, is also what renders great literature and other art forms enduring” (Merriam, 1998, p. 210); that is, the outcomes of this study serve to inform other researchers as they attempt to develop a better understanding the experiences of first-generation Latina/os enrolled at PWIs. In sum, I conducted this study in a constructivist interpretive paradigm in that I used “quality criteria that translate internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity into trustworthiness and authenticity” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 480).

### **Data Collection**

The data gathering process involves obtaining the needed evidence to better understand and describe the experiences to be investigated. In qualitative research, therefore, the data serve as the basis from which analyses are conducted and conclusions are subsequently drawn.

In this study, individual interviews were the primary data sources with document analyses serving as secondary sources.

Interviews began with an emphasis on building a rapport and sense of trust with each participant. Establishing this relationship was integral to maximizing the potential of my positionality with the student participants and the research subject. Merriam (1998) asserts that the value of an interview depends on the interviewer's level of familiarity with the topic to ask the interviewees significant questions and in understandable language. Such rapport set the tone for introducing to participants consent forms to sign that confirmed their permission to utilize their responses in the study (see appendix).

To conduct this study I sought approval from the Institutional Review Boards of the University of Alabama and the institution at which the study was conducted. All of the student participants reviewed and signed forms from both universities. Faculty and staff who participated in the study also signed a consent form as required by the University of Alabama. The forms explicitly stated that the participants' anonymity were preserved, that they were able to discontinue their participation at any point, and that they were given the opportunity to review the interview transcripts and modify them as well. This statement of consent was a critical step in the interview process to ensuring that the study was ethically conducted (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Interviews were conducted using an established protocol designed to elicit responses that produced data useful in answering the aforementioned research questions. The protocol consists of open-ended questions with probes to follow up on the responses offered. Initial questions were general in nature to attain descriptive feedback and then gradually worked toward more specific issues related to the first-generation Latina/o students' experiences attending a PWI. In

developing the protocol, I was informed by the literature on first-generation students, Latina/o students, student retention, multiculturalism, and organizational culture. As Stanton-Salazar's capital-institutional support framework served as the conceptual lens for this study, I included the influence of his work (see appendix).

I audio tape recorded each of the twenty student interviews to maintain a record of each the interviews that I conducted for the study. My reflections of the interviews were noted immediately following each session so that ideas, questions, and comments can be followed up on and considered during the data analysis stage. I transcribed these individual interviews verbatim and headed each transcript with the interviewees' names, the dates of the interviews, and other significant information pertaining each particular interview session. This approach produced data samples that were efficiently catalogued and well-maintained for coding and analysis.

A protocol was utilized to create an intentional manner in which data were collected during the student interviews. These questions addressed the salient socioeconomic, cultural, and educational issues found in the literature on the experiences of first-generation Latina/os attending PWIs. Although the interviews were conducted using a set of established questions, they were not regimented. Instead, they were more conversational in nature and consisted of open questions, follow ups, and probes. This approach reflected a fundamental principle in qualitative research, that "[t]he participant's perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 108). As interpretation occurs throughout the research process, I adjusted the protocol accordingly to maximize the production of relevant data on the first-generation Latina/o students' experiences at the PWI. I conducted member checks with each interviewee so they can

give their full and true informed consent to include of their insights into the data sample for the study.

A similar methodology was utilized to conduct the interviews with faculty and staff members at the University. A protocol was developed for these interviews to draw out their perceptions of the Latina/o students' experiences at the University (see appendix). This protocol was adjusted somewhat according to the areas of the University that each of these individuals represented. A total of five faculty and staff members whose names were mentioned by the interviewed students with the greatest frequency were invited to participate in the study. I explained to them the purpose of the study and presented with a consent form prior to the start of the interviews. After completing these interviews, I compared and contrasted the responses from these institutional agents to the data collected during the student interviews to draw a more detailed picture of how the study's participants persist at the University.

### **Data Analysis**

In qualitative research data analysis is accompanied by data collection and theorization. From a constructivist perspective, these processes have an interpretivist interdependence to the research process (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). These elements are important to consider as culture is a critical and elusive factor in the study to be conducted. There is interplay, therefore, between the perceptions, interpretations, and meanings expressed. As a researcher I utilized data analysis techniques to identify the emergent themes to develop a deeper understanding of these students' experiences.

Data were collected for the study using a protocol of questions comprised one hour-long individual interview with each participant. I audio tape recorded the interviews with the

students' consent and then transcribed them verbatim. If the interview protocol does not produce a rich set of data I modified the questions to address the concepts related to the study. Once a hard copy of the transcript was created, I asked each interviewee to review the documents to offer comment and feedback.

Data collected in the study were managed primarily through coding and then organized by constructing categories following Merriam's (1998) constant comparative method. Merriam defines this approach as one that:

involves comparing one segment of the data with another to determine similarities and differences....Data are grouped together on a similar dimension. This dimension is tentatively given a name; it then becomes a category. The overall object of this analysis is to seek patterns in the data. These patterns are arranged in relationship to each other in the building of a grounded theory (p. 18).

Throughout data analysis, I repeatedly reviewed, compared, and contrasted data collected from the interviews and document analyses to hand identify common themes. Informed by Stanton-Salazar's (2001) conceptual framework and by the literature relevant to this study, the collected data were reviewed to identify themes. As these themes were identified, I assigned shorthand designations which were useful in allowing the themes and factors within to be identified and retrieved. Through this approach, Stanton-Salazar's framework informed the data analysis process while and allowed for other themes indigenous to this study to emerge.

From these coded data categories and subcategories units of data meeting the criteria set by Guba and Lincoln (1985) were formed to be considered for inclusion. That is, the data had to be heuristic and interpretable in their own contexts. The steps I followed as I constructed categories were those recommended by Merriam (1998) as they were aligned with the principles behind the constant comparative method. The categories reflected the purpose of the research, exhaustive, mutually exclusive, sensitizing to the specific content of the data, and conceptually

congruent (pp. 183-184). The results all directed toward the answering of the three aforementioned research questions.

By considering the contexts from which the data were drawn and their connection to the research questions, I theorized on their overall meaning and how they describe the phenomena of the students' experiences. Connections were made to the literature to find associations or disparities to existing evidence related to the topic of the study. The intent of this final step of data analysis was to contribute to the body of knowledge that exists on focusing on the experiences of first-generation Latina/o students attending PWIs.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I described the steps I followed to conduct this study. In developing the methodology I carefully considered how best to align my personal background as the researcher, my philosophy regarding qualitative research, and my ideas as to how best to approach gathering the data needed to answer the research questions of this particular study. As culture and socialization play significant roles in the experiences of the students that were interviewed, a methodology that allowed for expression of their interpretations and reflections was identified. As a first-generation Latina, my personal relationship to their experiences enabled me to have closeness to their stories and served as an asset in interpreting them. Furthermore, as a professional in the field working to support student persistence, my goal at the close of this study was to interpret these findings for the institution so that the increasing number of enrolled Latina/os may graduate and fulfill their dreams and those of their communities.

## CHAPTER 4

### FROM ASPIRATION TO ACHIEVEMENT

As a Latina I have learned that a lot of the stuff that people say about Latina/os, that they can't come to college, that the language is a problem, that you're not going to be successful, that that is just a bunch of lies. You just have to work a little extra, a little harder to achieve something so you can put aside those stereotypical beliefs that people have about Latina/os that come from another country that they can't be successful. You can be successful. (Celia, junior)

For first-generation Latina/o students the path to graduation is one that has been described as difficult to traverse, leaving many travelers behind with few making it to their final destination. Much of the literature on this group has detailed the deficits and shortcomings they must overcome to achieve success (Trueba, 2002). In their own words, the first-generation Latina/o student participants in this study tell stories of significant challenge and sacrifice, but not defeat. Their accounts describe how they have garnered strength and resilience from the very elements of their sociocultural and immigrant backgrounds often thought to be hindrances and limitations. Collectively, their stories describe how they access social capital through their families, peers, and institutions to persist on the path toward graduation.

In this chapter I explore how study participants persist by harnessing the social capital associated with the three sources identified by Stanton-Salazar (2001): family members, institutions, and peers. As I present the students' stories of support offered to them by their

families, I bring forth the role of culturally relevant values in the socialization process of Latina/o youth and the interplay of these values as students enter Metro State University. In my discussion of the social capital generated by institutional support, I refer to two of Stanton-Salazar's six forms of institutional support, specifically funds of knowledge and emotional and moral support. With regards to peer support, I illustrate how the participants use their networks to mobilize capital through exchanges of emotional and moral support and knowledge.

Additionally, the concepts of "sense of belonging" and "intercultural capital" are considered through students' stories of persistence. Informed by Bourdieu and Stanton-Salazar, Nuñez (2009) suggests that "[s]ocial capital in the university setting might suggest the degree to which students perceive social cohesion in the university and feel that their connection with social networks are supportive" (p. 24). In applying the concept of social capital to examine Latina/o student transition to college, Nuñez identifies the concepts of funds of knowledge and emotional support as the means by which peers and institutions provide students with intercultural capital which fuels their capacity to negotiate diverse racial/ethnic environments. Data collected through document analysis contribute to the interviews to illustrate aspects of Metro State University that promote the provision of intercultural capital on its campus.

The principle used to analyze the collected data is Stanton-Salazar's (2002) notion of network orientation. He explained, "[A]n individual's network orientation constitutes an important dimension of human consciousness, and can be understood as a rather complex constellation of dispositions and skills related to network-building and adaptation to environmental demands, stressors, and opportunities" (p. 24). Students used their network orientations to navigate their way from preparing for college, negotiate their current experiences

at Metro State University, and develop their plans for the future. The students' stories serve to answer the research questions first proposed in chapter one:

- 1) What role do peer networks play in the persistence of first-generation Latina/o students attending the PWI?
- 2) What role does family play in the persistence of first-generation Latina/o students attending the PWI?
- 3) What role does institutional support play in the persistence of first-generation Latina/o students attending the PWI?

The stories told by the student participants reflected several cultural constructs in Latina/o culture as they relate to these three sources of support. Rooted in Latina/o familial and interpersonal values these constructs contribute to and manifest the exchange and acquisition of social capital and are, therefore, both process and outcome oriented. Table 3 contextualizes how these constructs, which are discussed at length in this chapter, shape the experiences of the student participants and manifest social capital.

Table 3: Latina/o Cultural Constructs as they Manifest Social Capital

<b>Latina/o Cultural Construct</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Manifestation of Social Capital</b>
<i>Familismo</i>	Involves maintaining strong bonds with one's nuclear and extended family members, fulfilling one's family obligations, and having strong beliefs in the importance of family support (Valenzuela & Dornsbuch, 1994).	Resources and support that ensure financial, emotional, and social stability, which are often the outcomes of having attained a college education. Social capital is often invested in family members with the expectation that it will be returned in exchange.
<i>Consejos</i>	Nurturing advice (Auerbach, 2006)	Parental encouragement imparted with the intent that the students would become well-educated and have fewer hardships than did their parents. Advice and family stories provide guidance and support for students to persevere.
<i>Educación</i>	The foundation for all other learning and begins in the home. Children are instilled with a strong sense of moral, social, and personal responsibility (Auerbach, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999).	An upbringing that focuses on developing a child to grow into a well-functioning and educated adult. Lessons taught at home center on the well-being of the individual, family, and community.
<i>Confianza</i>	A level of trust in a relationship that allows one to feel comfortable enough with another to be vulnerable and intimate without the fear of being deceived or manipulated (Stanton-Salazar, 2001)	Facilitates the development and maintenance of relationships in which social capital can be exchanged. The level of trust assures individuals and network members that fair reciprocation of social capital will occur.
<i>Confianza en Confianza</i>	The expectation of reciprocity. A cultural norm that operates on an intuitive level as a coping strategy. (Stanton-Salazar, 2001).	Serves as a form of social capital, functioning as a resource that flows reciprocally among individuals and network members.

It is important to note that in addition to sharing the common characteristics of being first-generation students and Latina/os, other commonalities naturally emerged from within the group. All 20 students grew up, and many still reside, in predominantly Latina/o communities in urban areas. Some of the cities from which these students hail are among those known for their lower performing school districts and high poverty rates. Additionally, all 20 students are the children of immigrants or are immigrants themselves from other countries or from Puerto Rico. Another important commonality is that Spanish is the primary language of communication in their homes.

As I stated in chapter three, I recruited students to participate in my study using an invitational email, visiting a Greek Council meeting, and visiting a meeting of the Latin American Student Organization. I soon discovered that Latina/o students on campus were finding out about my study through word-of-mouth and began approaching me asking to participate. When I asked them why they were interested in doing so, many responded similarly as did Sandra, a sophomore majoring in Family and Child Studies, “It is important that people know that we’re here.”

### **Early Aspirations**

The dream of attending college was had by most of student participants even at very young ages. Two students, coincidentally, even had hopes at very young ages of attending Metro State. Alma, a junior majoring in Accounting, recalls visiting the campus at the age of eight:

My mom likes the [name] Mall and we always used to take the bus to go there so we always used to go through this college... ever since I was little...and I was like [Metro State] is so beautiful and my mom was like “Probably you’ll go there one day”...and I

was like “Yeah, I hope.” I don’t know when I took the bus and saw the school I always thought it was hard to get in...like, I don’t know if I could get in type of thing...and I knew it because of that because we always used to take the bus. One day we stopped actually...we stopped at the stop and we just walked just to see it and I didn’t even know anything. Now I know what the buildings are but when we walked through I was like what is this? This is so big. This is like another town. (Alma, junior)

Alma’s statement indicates that even at a young age she recognized that a university was a place unlike any other that she had experienced thus far. Celia, a junior majoring in Family and Child Studies, recounts a similar memory of her first visit to the campus at the age of eleven:

I came once with my mom when I was a little bit smaller and then...my mom had a friend who had a daughter that came here and we came once and I just loved it because it was more like a community. It wasn’t like other colleges where everything was so separate so I always wanted to come here but I never thought I could come. I never pictured myself actually coming here but I’m here now. I always thought that it was so expensive and that I wasn’t going to have the grades to make it here and then I thought “Oh my God, college” that it’s this impossible idea...that I could never come here, but then...I don’t know...I’m here. (Celia, junior)

In both cases, the early contacts they made with the University were chance occurrences that left lasting impressions on these two women. Even at those young ages, they questioned whether they had the academic and financial capacity to attend. Despite their perceived inability to gain entry and pay for their education, these two students and the others all attributed their attendance and persistence in college to the support they have received from their families.

### **Family Support**

I have always known that I wanted to go to college since I was little. A lot of teachers always mentioned college like “Oh, when you go to college...” and “College is important” so I decided that I wanted to go to college, especially knowing that my parents couldn’t make it to college so I wanted to make a difference for them like in my family. And so I always knew I wanted to go to college. My parents also influenced me to go to college. They always said “It’s going to be better for you. You see how we have

struggled through life. We don't want you to go through that so it would be best for you to go to college.” (Daniela, sophomore)

### ***Family Encouragement to Attend***

While the notion of attending college was suggested to these students directly and indirectly by peers, teachers, and guidance counselors, the most influential sources were their parents and family members. The power of this influence is tremendous when considering the educational attainment levels of the participants' families. Most of students were raised by parents who had minimal levels of education in their own countries and none had direct experience with the system of higher education in this country. Despite their lack of familiarity with educational systems, the students' parents regularly provided them with *consejos* (nurturing advice), encouraging them to become well-educated so that as adults they would have lives with fewer hardships than did their parents (Auerbach, 2006; Niemeyer, Wong, & Westerhaus, 2009; Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

The Latina/o value of *familismo* is a strong undercurrent through all of the students' experiences described in this chapter. *Familismo* involves maintaining strong bonds with one's nuclear and extended family members, fulfilling one's family obligations, and having strong beliefs in the importance of family support (Valenzuela & Dornsbuch, 1994). Valenzuela and Dornbush (1994) asserted that *familismo* “is not only a cultural norm; is also becomes a social capital variable” (p. 32). From this perspective, *familismo* serves as a vehicle by which parents provide their children with culturally relevant forms of social capital to preserve through the demands of higher education. As social capital is an exchangeable resource, this dynamic explains why all of the students in the study stated that it was their responsibility to “give back”

to their families by earning their college education, becoming employed and ultimately achieving the American Dream (Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

### *Los Consejos*

Gabriela, a sophomore majoring in Family and Child Studies, is the daughter of an immigrant father from Argentina and an immigrant mother from Colombia. As Gabriela and I spoke about the factors that influenced her desire to go to college, she explained that her parents did not complete their high school education until they earned their GEDs in the United States. Despite their lack of education, they encouraged Gabriela to pursue a college education. She recalled her father stressing through *consejos*, “Finish high school, go to college. Don’t work in a factory like we did’ so it always motivated me.” Her parents viewed a college degree as means by which their daughter, a child of immigrants, could have a better quality of life with fewer hardships. This guidance was instrumental in her adopting the idea to attend college.

Milena’s parents instilled the idea of attending college when she was in middle school. They are immigrants from Ecuador who spoke with her regularly about their hopes for her future. They relayed to her that the family needed to work hard so that she could not only go college, but also get into the college she most wanted to attend. Milena, a junior, recalled that her parents had instilled in her the idea of going to college and possible careers when she was in middle school. She explained that her parents articulated their support for her education, “We’re working for you to go to college, for you to go to college.” These *consejos*, explained Milena, are how she learned from her parents the importance of hard work so that she could not only go to college, but also the college of dreams.

Gloria, a junior majoring in Psychology, immigrated to the United States from Ecuador with her mother and younger siblings when she was eight years-old. Having grown up in poverty, Gloria shared how her mother instilled in her aspirations to succeed through *consejos*, “She always talked about how it is important for me to be somebody and how it’s important for me to be the first one in my family to go to college since I was little.” These *consejos* came back to Gloria as she approached the end of high school and at which point she needed to consider her next steps, “So I was like, alright, I never thought of it much. So when I graduated high school I was like okay I want to be somebody so I decided to come to college.” The idea of “becoming someone” by means of earning a college education suggests that the degree is viewed as “a ticket to significance,” that is, a way to rise above the socioeconomic conditions of their community and their family’s circumstances (Ceballo, 2004).

### ***The Immigrant Experience***

The students were keenly aware of the fact that the impetus for their resilient approach to attaining their college education was linked to their experiences and their families’ experiences as immigrants. They expressed acceptance of the fact that to achieve what they and their families desired, significant sacrifices needed to be made on both parts.

Juan, a senior majoring in Business, was born in Colombia and believes that his parents chose to come to this country with him and his younger brother so that they could have an opportunity to have an education. He reflected on his parents’ choice to come to the United States: “It was for us that we came here. Like there was a time they even thought about going back early on but they wanted us to be here to have like a better opportunity I guess so I think that is definitely a big reason why they pushed.” Juan believes his parents encourage him as

much as they do because they see in him the hope they have for the next generation of his family. “You know we made this move and like it’s like paying off like in a sense. I don’t think they look at me like an investment but at the same time that’s what they did like by coming here and leaving home behind,” he said. “So I definitely think the fact that we immigrated here like makes them push me a little more... I know it pushes me.” Juan uses the term “investment” in language of capital much as Stanton-Salazar conceptualizes the idea. His parents have encouraged, sacrificed, and guided him with the hope that their son will graduate from college, which will be the “pay off” or return on their investment.

Several students also noted the difference in experiences and backgrounds between themselves and that of their classmates who do not have immigrant or first-generation experiences. Some of the students juxtaposed their experiences to that of their peers in a “haves” versus “have nots” manner. Elena, a sophomore, stated in a resentful tone, “I mean I feel like sometimes I’m like too young to, not too young, but I feel I have more...I mean I don’t pay rent or anything but I feel like I have more responsibilities...” Elena, who must work about 25 hours a week to help pay for her tuition, has noticed the difference in the life that she must lead compared to her classmates. “I mean I know people who don’t work and they just go to school and their parents give them some and it’s not that easy for me,” she explained.

A few students expressed assumptions about the background and socioeconomic statuses of White students at the University. Kim is a sophomore majoring in Physical Education who holds three jobs to help her parents pay her tuition. She is also spends a good deal of time caring for her ailing grandmother. Kim must juggle all of these large responsibilities and feels she has endured more challenges than her non-Latina/o peers who she perceives as leading easier lives. Because she manages these various duties, Kim asserted, “I would say that I am a lot stronger

than a lot of the races here. There are some students I know who have it very easy.” Kim also argued that she is also more mature than some of her non-Latino peers on campus. She noted, “You know, their parents pay or they take out loans to live on campus and they make stupid decisions because they live on campus and then that leads to not go anywhere in life.” Kim’s experiences have lead her to the realization that “because of my background and because my parents have taught me to work hard for everything that you want and to not depend on other people. That’s gotten me a lot further...I feel like I am a lot more stronger, a lot more tougher.”

Sandra is a sophomore from the Dominican Republic majoring in Family and Child Studies. She and I spoke about the representation of undergraduate Latina/os on campus (22%) and about her feeling that her White classmates do not know enough about students of her background and therefore make sweeping generalizations. Sandra expressed frustration that “[m]ost people don’t know how, since they’re just 22%, so then everybody else, they’re Caucasian...they’re White...so their parents went to school...went to college... they know about everything.” She continued, “They know how it is to go to college, what it’s like. But our parents since they’re from another country and they came here they don’t know what their parents know. So, I guess we do have a disadvantage in that sort of point so we have to try harder.” Sandra’s statement, however, is also a generalized assumption of the background of her non-Latina/o classmates. Her statement suggests that all White students have college educated parents, that their families are financially well off, and that they are not from immigrant backgrounds.

Sandra explained the perceptions she has of her classmates by suggesting that, “I guess they don’t understand.” She contextualized their inability to relate by stating “[m]y mom, I don’t think she finished 5<sup>th</sup> grade because she had to go to work right away.” She continued, “So

it harder for us to, I mean for them to understand and to make it known that we're different and don't always assume that we're always there and that we'd always understand because our life experience will be different than theirs." Attending classes with students who do not share a similar background is somewhat alienating for Sandra because "[s]ometimes they say that their parents...like if somebody says in class, 'Oh yeah, my parents went to college and they went to this university, and this and this and this' and I'm like 'Um, no. I can't say that.'" The assumed differences in student backgrounds leave Sandra with a feeling of "otherness" within the classroom.

Other students spoke thankfully for the strength their sacrifices and upbringings have given them. While recognizing the difficulty they have endured, these students see the opportunities that lie ahead of them as immigrants in this country and focus on their goals despite the hard work the tasks may entail. Celia, a junior, offered insight on what she has learned thus far as a first-generation immigrant pursuing a college education. She reflected, "I think what I have experienced and what my parents have experienced have helped me come to understand the only way that I could get out of you know...by having an education."

Education, to Celia and her family, is the key that unlocks the door to having access not only to social capital, but also to an improved quality of life. She gave examples such as "not having to work a lot of hours like my parents do and not having the opportunities and luxuries to do other stuff like go on vacation every year and buy a big house and live in a good neighborhood and stuff like that." Celia's examples are telling as they are markers of a middle-class American lifestyle that she and her family have not yet been able to include into their worlds.

Celia's stamina and determination is rooted in her upbringing as it relates to her immigrant experience. Her undocumented status precludes her from receiving financial aid so she must work about 40 hours a week to earn enough money to help her parents pay for her tuition. She described how her aspirations and those of her family are her driving force: "That's what it's pushing me to actually do something for my life and to be professional and have a career. It's that experience that's also pushing me to want to do it and not get stuck in that same life that they had. I didn't have it easy either." Through these challenges, Celia has developed incredible fortitude and focus. She offered the following perspective on how she approaches her life as an immigrant Latina and a first-generation student: "I just think that if you really want something you have to work at it. If you don't work hard you're not going to get what you want and if you're willing to work hard then you're going to do it and you're going to achieve whatever you want, so yeah."

Attending college is of tremendous importance to first-generation Latina/o students who come from immigrant backgrounds. Many of the study's participants describe the pride they feel to be the first in their family to have this opportunity and recognize the sacrifices made by their parents so they could reach this point in their lives. While the students express gratitude for their parents' efforts, they are also anxious about their academic performance and possibly disappointing their parents and ruining their chances for a successful future. Milena, a junior, explained how as the child of immigrant parents, pursuing a college degree is a source of honor for her: "[Earning a degree is]...something that will make my parents really proud of me...very happy that all of their hard work got put into something that will help me in the future and make me successful." She continued, "Nobody in my family has had that privilege to go to college or that determination to keep going in school so that's a big reason why to continue as well as for

myself.” At the same time, Milena feels the pressure of her family’s expectations that she succeeds and graduate. She acknowledged the sacrifices they have made for her to have such an opportunity and sees how their efforts will help to improve her life and the life of the family she will have one day.

Milena’s sentiments illustrate how *familismo* is an incredible source of strength for these students, but also the source of stress. She explained, “Like what my parents have given me is a lot of sacrifices so I don’t want to just throw it away and just keep going as...like I could have done more or I could have had a better life for my kids or my future kids and things like that.” Although Milena’s academic performance has been commendable thus far, she still worries about failing and having regrets. She shared, “I just don’t want to throw away all the hard work my parents as well as myself have put into coming all the way up here and then just leaving and looking back thinking ‘I should have done that. I was so close’ and for my future as well.” The feelings Milena expresses in her statements reflect the importance of reciprocity and obligation she has to her family because of the care and social capital they have given her to attend college.

Like Milena, many of the other students also fear that they will not do well and let down their families. These students are very aware of the wishes of their parents and their extended family for their success and very much want to achieve this for themselves as well. The potential of disappointing themselves or their families is for these students a significant source of stress. In fact, five of the students who participated in this study shared that they have in the past or are currently utilizing the University’s counseling services to better manage this aspect of their lives.

Marta views her upbringing as having taught her the value of hard work. As the daughter of immigrants, this lesson has not always been an easy one to learn. At same time she sees what she has gained from family experience despite the obstacles she has faced. Marta explained, “I

mean it doesn't suck because I feel like I learned from my parents and like how hard they had to work for it." She continued, "I feel like it makes me a better person...from how they came here and how they're living their lives and how they made their lives to what it is now, like giving us a house and providing us with food and everything." Marta attributes her upbringing to the motivation and drive she now has to push forward to her plans to attend medical school

Marta also explained that she has learned a great deal about life just by watching her immigrant parents work hard and sacrifice so that her family can live comfortably. According to Marta, "To me it made me learn more about life and like how not everyone can have it as easy as like...oh get a BMW when you're 16 because your parents are fortunate and went to school because they know English and like you know my parents would have to work their butts off to do that." Consequently, Marta believes she has developed a better understanding of the world in which she lives. She concluded, "It's like it opened my world up and my view of things."

Marta's comments indicate that she has put her immigrant family's accomplishments into perspective, recognizing the value of what she has gained by watching them struggle to achieve what other families might have come to rather easily. These lessons are forms of capital for these students and are what Stanton-Salazar (2001) refers to as "an immigrant family's treasury" (p. 98).

### ***Family Familiarity with Higher Education***

Latina/o immigrant parents, particularly those who have been marginalized, generally believe that their role in the educational process is conducted at home. Involvement in this cultural and socioeconomic context consists primarily of *consejos* and other nonverbal gestures that provide the students with support and inculcate them with the knowledge and values

enabling them to negotiate their way through challenges (Auerbach, 2006; Ceballo, 2004; López, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001).

When asked to describe how their parents were involved in their college application and selection process, the students' responses did not include activities such as arranging for campus visits, paying for SAT preparation courses, and managing deadlines. The students described at length about how their parents would speak with them about the hopes their parents had for their children's futures in this country and encouraged them to do well and school so that they could earn college degrees. As their parents did not have experience with educational systems in the United States and, in many cases, did not have a firm grasp on the English language, they left most of the tasks associated with the college application process to their children.

Much like many other four-year universities in its vicinity, Metro State University does not offer information to parents in Spanish; therefore the parents of these students were not presented with resources to understand or learn about the institution and the college-going process. Celia describes an occasion when she and her mother visited the University to gather information about applying. She explained, "Like I remember coming here with my mom and trying to ask for information about college and she didn't understand because everyone speaks English. There's no one here in college...well before coming here...that would talk to my mom or try to make her... like bilingual staff." Circumstances such as these disenfranchise immigrant Latina/o parents from becoming involved in the college-going process and limit the amount of support they can offer their children.

The inability of the University staff to communicate with Celia's mother put Celia into the roles of translator and intermediary, a role in which she was uncomfortable as she was just learning about the University and did not always understand the processes herself. Celia noted

that it is “very important you know to include parents because maybe I would understand it but maybe it’s harder for me to try to explain it to my mom...just having that staff to get them involved a little bit more.” She added, “They might try to be a little more involved knowing that they could come here and not have to rely on me to go ask the questions and then translate it for them. They could actually just come here and go to [building name] Hall and ask about financial aid if they wanted to.” While many students stated that this level of responsibility helped them to become more independent and responsible, their parents are unable to interact with the university and play a more active role in their children’s education. As noted by Stanton-Salazar (2001), “Macro-forces engender economic conditions, neighborhood ecologies, and relational dynamics that systematically make it difficult if not impossible for immigrant parents to act as authentic and reliable sources of social and institutional support for their children” (p.156).

The students in the study described how they, as first-generation students, were primarily responsible for the college application and selection process. Many of the students never even visited the campuses to which they applied despite that most were only a short drive from their homes. The students also completed their financial aid forms on their own although some were able to get assistance from their siblings, guidance counselors, and extended family members yet these individuals were sometimes unreliable.

Several students described the FAFSA as being a hurdle they had to conquer on their own although they did not understand many of the financial terms on the form. Marta, a sophomore majoring in Biology, shared how her parents were unable to assist her with college applications because of their minimal English skills and their unfamiliarity with higher education. She recalled, “No, I basically did everything on my own because they don’t speak good English and stuff and they weren’t really oriented because I’m the first one to go to college.” Marta’s parents

did attempt to assist by relying on their own network of other parents who had some familiarity with sending a child to college. She stated, “So, they would hear things from other parents who have children in college and then just get back to me on what they’d say but I just did everything on my own and then just go to my guidance counselors and whatever my high school provided for me.” In Marta’s case, her parents sought ways to assist her with the FAFSA process by accessing support from their own network of parents who had familiarity with sending a high school student to college.

Alicia, a junior majoring in Photography, is the youngest in her family. She and her entire family lived in the Dominican Republic before immigrating to the United States. Her older siblings started college, but never finished so she relies on their familiarity with the various processes for assistance since her parents still do not have a firm enough grasp of the English language. Sibling support was instrumental to these students in many ways. Alicia shared, “My parents never assisted me with like FAFSA at all. I would ask them for their information like their social, but that was about it. My sister on the other hand would help me every now and then but ever since like the second time that I had to do a FAFSA I’ve pretty much done it by myself.” Alicia’s sister has stepped into a parental role for her in terms of providing her with the support she needs to arrange for financial aid. In terms of her sister, Alicia recounted, “She handles pretty much everything being that she’s like 10 years older than me. She’s the oldest. She handles all the financial things within the family unit. Like my parents not so much because the whole language barrier.” Although the assistance from their parents could have made these tasks simpler, these first-generation students were able to draw upon their self-reliant and independent characters to ensure that their packages were complete.

Parents' unfamiliarity with college has been problematic for some students yet not for others. In effort to share their college experience with their parents a few have, on a very basic level, explained to them what they have been learning at the University, what their major is about, and the demands that are upon them. Some of the students were disappointed that their inability to share this aspect of their lives with their parents has created a gap.

Carlos emigrated with his family from Colombia. He lives at home with his parents and does manual labor with his father working close to 48 hours a week. As he and his father spend a great deal of time together, Carlos has developed a very close relationship with his father. Given his father's unfamiliarity with higher education, Carlos realizes that his father does not have the reference points to speak with him about his educational experiences. This gap has been a source of frustration for Carlos:

Carlos: I work with my father so I spend the most time with him and he always asks me "How are you doing? How was that test? I know you were studying for that test. How did it go? Are you stressed?" He's always asking me but like sometimes I get into too much detail and he has no idea of what I'm talking about. Like he doesn't understand the registration process, how like there's certain windows, like when you're almost done with school like there's only a few classes because it's a senior seminar course... "Dad, I have to choose this class because it's the only class offered." Like they don't understand that type of stuff so I talk with them about what I can talk with them about, what they'll comprehend, but they always do ask. My mom too...she'll always ask me "Oh, so what are you reading about? What are you doing? How's school?" Always.

Michele: Do you think it's created a gap at all in terms of what you can share with them?

Carlos: Yeah, definitely because sometimes you want to de-stress and I'm not one to like just sit down with a random friend...trust for me is a big thing so I can't just de-stress with nobody because I don't want to be a burden on them and there's only certain people that I can really really talk to, of course my parents being the two major people in my life. It's like "Damn, I really want to talk to you guys but you're probably not going to understand me and I'm probably not going to get nowhere with this." So it's like that's when you bite your lip and you're like ugh, what can you do?

Carlos expresses the sense of loss that he feels at not being able to share his stress and frustration with two important people in his life. Although they do initiate conversations with him about his progress, he believes he is unable to fully engage in conversations with his parents because their limited capacity to understand the world to which he is referring.

In Elena's case, her pursuit of joint degree in Chemistry and Pharmacy means a longer path to a college degree than is taken on by other undergraduates. She is a sophomore from Puerto Rico who spends many hours working, studying, and completing projects in the Chemistry lab. She recounts a conversation she had with her aunt at a family gathering. "I was with my family and my aunt asked me "Oh, what are you going to do? What are you doing?" and I'm like "I don't know. I'm still in college." "And when are you going to finish?" And I'm like "Oh, well I have a long way to go." You know I didn't even... and they're like "Really? Well, good luck with that," she recalled. Her family and extended family members find the amount of time that she is spending on this degree program to be odd when a few of her cousins completed short training programs through proprietary schools and are now employed. According to Elena, "because they see it as like "Why you taking all those classes, like history and math? Didn't you take that already?" That's just part of it. They don't really understand. But I'm just like, I don't talk about it with them too much because I can't. I can't really relate to them in that about school and stuff, but they'll see hopefully." Elena's goals are to persevere through the program and show them that her time and effort were well spent in the end.

Elena's joint Pharmacy program is extremely rigorous and requires that its students maintain a competitive grade point average in order to continue their participation. This standard is on the forefront of her mind constantly and necessitates her to find various ways to study and focus on her academics. She lives at home in a small apartment with her parents and two older

brothers making it virtually impossible to find a quiet place to study. Elena explained, “I work in real estate and I close and open the office so I have my own key. My manager, she says I can go whenever I want so sometimes during the week I go there and I sit in the conference room to study because in my house, I don’t live in a whole house. It’s an apartment so it’s like I’ll sit in the dining room and my parents are in the living room watching TV or like my brother is walking back and forth so...and in my room, I’ll just fall asleep.” Elena relies on the support of her supervisor at the real estate agency who allows her to stay at the office after business hours so she can study. She explained, “Sometimes I actually I stay at work...sometimes I’ll stay until 11 in the office to study because it’s very quiet and I have my desk, so.... thank God I have that job.” Elena’s job is a valuable resource to her, not only for the salary and study space the position provides her but also for the emotional and moral support she receives from her supervisor for academic pursuits.

Managing the multiple demands of college, work, and home responsibilities is the cause of significant distress for some of the students in this study. While they feel a sense of honor to be the first in their family to pursue a college education, they are also under a great deal of stress because of the expectation to succeed. Given the multiple demands these students manage, they are stretched thin while also fearing they will disappoint their families if they fail or do not do as well as they had hoped to. Selena’s story is an example of the double-sidedness of *familismo*. On the one hand the value is an inspiring force for these students yet at the same time the expectations that come with this force can be burdensome.

Selena, a sophomore majoring in Psychology, is the daughter of Dominican parents and lives at home. Selena still has many of the same responsibilities to the family that she had when

she was in high school, including caring for her niece who also lives with Selena's parents. My exchange with her illustrates Selena's concerns about managing all of her responsibilities,

Selena: It's support on different levels. I mean it's support also pressure because like I said before I am the only one in my immediate family that is going to college so some of the things that they'd like to call is support is pressure on me but then there are little thing that they do like the other day I was studying and my mother she made me coffee. Things like that. I thought that was so cute. It was like midnight and I was pulling an all-nighter. She made me coffee. That was so sweet, but then there were other times that she comes home, I mean I come home like really tired, like mentally drained and she like "What do you have to be tired about?" She's like "You're not stuck in a factory like I am working" and I'm like "Mom, if you're telling me I can't be tired and I have no right to be tired there's something wrong here." I was like "Do you think college is easy?" So it was like that...like I don't know I feel... like that pressure. I have to be home and have a straight face and not be tired because the only thing I do is study, you know.

Michele: So what about the family responsibilities? I mean, so you're living at home so you still have a role...

Selena: I have a niece so as far as like expectations go they're very high for me to be like Selena part of the family, Selena the student. Come crunch time I don't want to be home. I can't be home. I can't pick up my niece from school. I can't take her to Girl Scouts. I can't ...my mom wants me to pick up something from the store for her...things like that and I don't know how I can like juggle between that. I know that they're expecting a lot from me which is why I have to move out. I am trying to dorm next semester because I can't handle it...at least not for now.

Selena's multiple duties, coupled with the pressure she receives from her parents, have placed a tremendous burden on her. She is expected to succeed in school while also be contributing member of her family. Selena believes, however that her ability to do everything has its limits, especially when the support offered to her does not always have a positive impact on her ability to persist.

Milena had lived on campus her first two years at the university but her parents offered to take the money that had been spent on her housing and use it purchase a car for her so that she would move back home. While she likes the independence that comes with having her own vehicle, moving back home has compounded her stress since living at home has only added more

responsibilities and expectations to her plate. Milena expressed the impact of these expectations on her, “Stress kills me a lot because it’s very hard to manage a lot of things at the same time. Like I spend my whole day here and then I go to work and then when I come home I’m like dead...like I can’t anymore and I think I’m involved in a lot of things so it’s very hard to balance it all out and then go back home and have time for family because on the weekend it’s family.” Moving back home has brought her closer to her family, which is important to Milena. At the same time, she still has the same responsibilities she needs to fulfill for her academics.

As her family is unfamiliar with the time and commitment college students need to devote to their coursework, they see their weekends together as family time, whereas Milena often needs those days to study and complete projects. She feels caught between the expectations she needs to fulfill as a college student and those that she is expected to fulfill as a member of her family. Milena describes how she struggles to find a balance: “We’re usually doing family things so I don’t have the weekend. Like they would give it to me...they would say ‘Okay, okay’ but they want to come with me and they want to spend it with me so it’s very hard. I think it disappoints them. It makes them sad but I have to do my homework.” The stories offered by Selena and Milena describe the stress that they and other first-generation Latina/o students experience as they try to be academically successful while still honoring the value of *familismo*.

Another layer to Milena’s story is the relationship between independence and responsibility as they relate to *familismo*. She recognizes that there has been a change in the way in which her parents view her since she lived on her own on campus and has now returned home. Milena shared the following realization: “It feels like...they treat me more like an adult now since it was a break away from them so now I have more privileges and more responsibilities so

they come hand in hand.” Milena believes she has become more independent and self-reliant since she has started college; however, the responsibility to support her family and give back has, in some ways, compounded consequently (Sy & Romero, 2008).

Alicia and her family emigrated from the Dominican Republic when she was in elementary school. She says she knew ever since she was a small child that she wanted to do something in the field of studio arts. She is a junior who describes herself as an “art kid” and in many ways identifies herself more as an American than she does as a Dominican. For example, Alicia presents herself as an “art kid” through her wardrobe, hairstyle, and the alternative rock that pumped through her headphones when she arrived to my office. She is the youngest sibling in her family and the only one to come this close to graduating. She is pursuing a Bachelor in Fine Arts, a degree path to which her family has had a mixed response. She explained, “They’re happy I’m going to school and they’re very supportive of the fact that I am going to school but I guess with my major it’s not something I talk to them about because they don’t understand it so I don’t really talk to them about it and that kind of does bug me because I wish I could talk them all the time about it and they don’t [understand].” The gap that has resulted between Alicia and her parents is representative of their varying levels of acculturation and their varying world views. For example, Alicia approaches art as a discipline to study and practice whereas her parents view art as a skill that can be appreciated. According to Alicia, “My mom doesn’t even understand it all. I mean she likes the fact that I paint but if it were up to her I’d be painting fruit bowls all day and that’s not something that I’d want to do.” The divergent world views between Alicia and her parents make conversations about art, higher education, and employability harder to have.

Alicia had been majoring in Studio Arts – Painting and recently switched to Photography, which she discovered as her passion. While she describes her family as being supportive of her pursuit of a college education, the major that she has chosen is one that her parents have difficulty understanding since it does not appear to have a clear path to a career. Alicia surmises that her parents are very much in favor of her pursuit of a college degree, but wonder how the degree will serve her: “ I would say that they’re still very supportive but I don’t know if in a year after I graduate if they will be worrying about me like, ‘How is she going to survive? What is she going to do now?’” Alicia’s dilemma illustrates the conflict that exists for her and other Latina/o students whose individual interests come up against the collective interests of the family. The reciprocal expectations embedded in *familismo* suggest that Alicia’s family has supported her to earn a college degree and in return her pursuit would ideally lead to opportunities that would also be in the family’s best interest, such as Alicia’s and her family’s financial stability. This conflict between individual and familial values is reflective of a cultural clash between Alicia’s individualistic “American” motivations for pursuing her intellectual passion versus her immigrant parents’ collective preferences (Sy & Romero 2008).

### ***Educación: The Foundation of Latina/o Learning***

The students described how as children, and still today as young adults, they learned Latina/o sociocultural values from their parents’ *consejos*, to become *bien educado/a* (well-educated, well-mannered). *Educación*, a cognate that goes beyond that of the term “educated” in the English language, is the foundation for all other learning and begins in the home by instilling children with a strong sense of moral, social, and personal responsibility (Auerbach, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999, p. 23). Celia is a junior who also majoring in Family and Child Studies. She

came to the United States as child with her family from El Salvador and has lived in this country for several years undocumented. Celia had always been a high achiever and was fortunate enough to be selected to attend a charter school for gifted and talented high school students. At the time that she began college she was still undocumented and therefore ineligible to receive financial aid. Both of Celia's parents work in factories earning salaries that barely cover her family's expenses. As Celia's family has very little financial capital she has taken it upon herself to pay for her education. To attend college, Celia works 35 to 40 hours a week in a flower shop commuting approximately four hours a day on public transportation to get from home to the University and then to home. She does all while still maintaining an impressive grade point average, sleeping only a few hours most nights.

Celia spoke openly about the sense of responsibility that she bears in fulfilling the goal of earning her degree, a goal that appears to belong not only to her but also to her family. I asked her hypothetically whether she would ever consider skipping a class. Her responses demonstrate how preposterous she finds the idea of not attending a class for which she has paid. Although Celia laughs during our exchange, she sternly states her opinion that the opportunity to attend college should not be taken for granted. Our dialogue illustrates how she has internalized her parents' *consejos* to become *bien educada*, managing her intensely demanding life as a college student,

Celia: No! I have to go to class!! [laughter]. No because it's hard because you're actually...maybe if my ....

Michele: How would your parents react if they found out...

Celia: That I just didn't feel like going to classes? I don't know. I would feel so guilty because that's money I'm working for. That's money that my parents are working for. It's not easy for me to come to college. To not to come to a class, if I can come to class then I'm coming to that class and I'm learning something from that class! OK, now if I'm sick, that's a different story because then I couldn't come but just not coming?

That's why you schedule your time. If you knew that you could come at that time and you had nothing else to do there's no excuse for you to not to come to class. You have to come. No option. That's it.

Michele: That's how you were raised?

Celia: Yeah. Because if you know when you do your schedule if you know you're not going to be able to make it to class let's say on Wednesday, because there are a lot of people who just don't come on certain days...you know on Thursdays they have parties that nights...then you shouldn't pick the class. You should pick something else that fits your schedule because if it fits your schedule then that means you can come so you should come and it's over. You have to. It's your responsibility especially if you're paying for it. Even if it was given to you for free you should still come.

Michele: Do you hear your parents' voices in your head as you're saying that?

Celia: Yeah. [laughter]

Michele: Because you sound like a parent right now. [laughter]

Celia: That's their teachings. That you're paying for it. You know that it's your responsibility to come. You're the one that has to learn something. Your professor is not going...they're still going to get paid for it. They already know the material and it's only for your own good then why wouldn't you come?

Celia's words relay how she has internalized her parents' *consejos* to become a college student who is *bien educada* well beyond the classroom. Her strong-willed nature demonstrates her resiliency to put the amount of time and effort into work and school in order to persist toward graduation. For these students, fulfilling the dream of attaining a college degree is closely intertwined with their own aspirations and with those of their families. This goal for which they are striving is one they seek not only for personal advancement, but also for the betterment of their families.

### ***The Power of Family Support***

The power of family support to the 20 students who participated in this study cannot be underestimated. Despite the challenges that several students encountered as they negotiated their

relationships with their parents and managed the demands placed upon them, all the student participants believed that their family's support strengthened them and made them stronger students and individuals. The students' words demonstrate that family support is a tremendously motivating source of social capital for these first-generation Latina/o students from immigrant families.

I asked Rita, a junior majoring in Psychology, to name her greatest source of support. She quickly responded, "My mom." I then asked her to share specifically the kind of support she receives from her mother, to which she concisely expressed as "Love!" Rita informed me that her father did not graduate from elementary school and that he died when she was three. Her mother has a similar educational background as her father "since there were too many siblings she had to take care of and it wasn't even a luxury aside from the fact that she didn't even like school." Despite her mother's level of education, Rita firmly believes her to be the foundation of her motivation. Rita asserted that "[t]he support that she gives me is just love. I mean that's all I can ask for because at the end of the day like maybe if she pushed me more or she said you have to do your work and stuff maybe I would a little bit more or less motivated. I don't know, but it worked out well. Like, she always supported me." Similar to other students, Rita indicated that her mother's unfamiliarity with higher education precludes them from sharing many aspects of her college experience. Nonetheless, Rita feels confident in her ability to rely on her mother's love and her support for her academic endeavors.

Gloria lives in an impoverished city and graduated from one of its toughest high schools. She immigrated to the United States when she was eight-years-old and still struggles to keep up with the academic English she hears her professors speak in the classroom. Gloria works part-time job at a hospital, lives with her mother, and assists with the raising of her two younger

brothers. She manages multiple responsibilities, is involved on campus, and still maintains her grade point average. Gloria shared with me a powerful moment that she had with her mother. As she recalled this experience, she became quite emotional, “Actually my mom just told me like last year...her first time ever...that she was proud of me. It felt so good, but I’m like that strong person compared to her... like, I can’t shed a tear in front of her.” She continued, “Oh, I can’t believe I’m crying [sobbing]...oh stop...yeah...so I can’t [laughing]...yeah....So I’m that tough person with my mother. She’s like, ‘Oh you’re so strong minded’ ... like, she’s always like that.” Gloria’s tears came at a time in our discussion when she spoke about the resiliency she had to develop in order to persist through high school and now at the university and the important role her mother’s support played in this process. Hearing from her mother the validating statement “I am proud of you” is significant in a culture that often utilizes nonverbal messages, such as *consejos* to relay advice and support. The impact of that experience was so powerful that it brought Gloria to tears.

The power of family support to the persistence of the first-generation Latina/o student in this study was resoundingly significant. The *educación* the students received from their parents placed them on a path to look past the hardships in their lives to find meaning in their experiences. As a result, these students learned from their parents through their *consejos* to not take lightly the opportunities presented to them as immigrants and the children of immigrants since they will open doors for them to achieve the “better life” that they seek in this country.

According to the study’s participants, their parental support has created what Gándara (1995) referred to as a “culture of possibility” (p.112). These students learn from their parents about the countries and cultures from which they came and draw strength from these stories and knowledge to attain social capital for mobility. Viewing their past and futures through such a

lens empowers these students to interpret their current worlds as places where they can make things happen for themselves and for their families.

While family support generates social capital that positively contributes to these students' "culture of possibilities" other sources of support are not as consistent with this provision. In the next section I explore the role that institutional support plays in the persistence of the first-generation Latina/o students who participated in this study.

### **Institutional Support**

I don't think this is a college that's racist at all. I feel that everyone is nice here. I've never had an encounter with someone that is rude here. So that's good because I've been to other colleges, like my friend's college and like slept over there and people were like, they separate each other. Like, OK, all the Black people are here, and the Hispanics here, and the White people here, but here you'll see a group studying and there's all different kinds and that's good and that sends out a good message that this is a diverse community and everyone respects each other. For Hispanics, I feel equal here. (Alma, sophomore)

The educational institutions through which the first-generation Latina/o students in the study have negotiated were designed with the intent of supporting their academic, social, and personal development. The stories shared by the study's participants have had experiences that have been positive while several described experiences that have been marginalizing and alienating. In this section I present students' stories that illustrate their attempts at negotiating their way through their educational institutions.

### ***High School Preparation for College***

The high schools attended by the study's participants feature predominantly Latina/o enrollment, many of whom are from lower socioeconomic and immigrant backgrounds. In some

cases these school districts are known in the state for their low performance outcomes. Consequently, few of their graduates are accepted to four year institutions and often those that do attend leave after their first year. Many of these high schools track their students separating their “college bound” students who are enrolled in honors and advanced placement courses from their ESL students and those who are disruptive to the school. Sandwiched in between these groups are those students who are regular-track students who are moving through the high school curricula unnoticed.

As *educación* serves as the foundation for all other learning, the values inherent in this construct shape how immigrant Latina/o students view their educational experience in the broadest sense. Valenzuela (1999) asserts that *educación*:

represents both a means and end, such that the end-state of being *bien educada/o* is accomplished through a process of respectful relations. Conversely, a person who is *mal educada/o* is deemed disrespectful and inadequately oriented toward others (p. 23).

Like any other form of capital, *educación* is developed as a result of reciprocal relationships. *Educación*, however, is nurtured through caring and respectful relationships. When immigrant Latina/o students encounter school systems that do not practice the values embedded in *educación*, such as respect, social responsibility, and caring they find themselves in an exclusionary environment (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 23). In such schools, students are stratified and social capital is distributed in a hierarchical manner replicating societal stratifications. Groups with the least amount of social capital are marginalized and those with the greatest amount of social capital have access to opportunities. The group that is wedged between the two must find ways to negotiate their ways through their educational systems in order to achieve advancement (Stanton-Salazar, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999).

The students' stories also echo the impact of not having *confianza* in an educational institution and its agents. As defined in chapter 2, *confianza* refers to a level of trust in a relationship that allows one to feel comfortable enough with another individual to be vulnerable and intimate without the fear of being deceived or manipulated (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p.27). Stanton-Salazar uses the social construct of *confianza en confianza* to explain the expectation of reciprocity that Latina/o youth learn at a young age through their relationships with family members. He asserts that youth extend *confianza en confianza* to their interactions with institutional agents and that this construct also serves as a form of social capital. According to Stanton-Salazar, students who do not have *confianza en confianza* with their institutional agents develop negative help-seeking behaviors. As illustrated in this chapter, several of the study's participants express that they did not have *confianza en confianza* with various institutional agents at their high schools and at Metro State University.

The study's participants were placed in either the college-bound tracks or regular-tracks in their high schools and afforded very different experiences from their teachers and their guidance counselors with respect to their college preparation. As the students talked about their high school preparation there was great disparity in the academic rigor and attention received by the college-bound students and the regular-track students. Because of this difference, a few students in the study whose schools did not offer a college track actually left to enroll in other school districts or schools earmarked as gifted and talented to increase their access to academic capital and gain a more caring educational experience.

## *Curriculum and Instruction*

Several of the regular track students described their high school experiences with disappointment and resentment. Their stories relay sentiments of missed opportunities and loss. Students that were placed in college-bound tracks completed coursework that engaged them intellectually while also awarding them with college credit. These two groups shared very different stories of persistence through high school.

According to Sandra, a sophomore, “[High school] didn’t really prepare me at all. Cause usually high school was like hanging out. The professors weren’t on you as much. I mean they cared but they didn’t really care at the same time.” Sandra describes a learning environment in which teachers and students were both academically disengaged. Now as a student at Metro State University, she feels that her high school experience did not prepare her for college. She recalled, “I would just do the minimum amount of work to just pass with a C. They would kind of just pass you anyway. It wasn’t really that important to me at that time. Like the kids, they didn’t really care so you follow your peers. It was just the environment.” She continued, “I guess the teachers tried, but it was just who you were around. Maybe if I was in another school I would have been more wanting to learn.” Sandra relays through her story a sense of being cheated out of a rigorous learning experience as she does not believe that her high school invested in her education.

Carlos, a junior, feels as though he has been denied opportunities because of the level of preparation he received. He looks back on his high school education and evaluates it as “not good. I can say that, not good.” According to Carlos, “[The teachers] never stressed to us the importance of doing good in high school actually which was my main flaw.” He shared with me that his SAT scores were “pretty good” but because his grades were not as high, he could not be

considered for more selective colleges. “Like I know I could have been in a way better school if I did better in high school, you know. I always wanted to be at Columbia or a good Ivy League school,” he concluded. Carlos suspects that he was passed along since he was an athlete, which he stresses, did more harm than help in the long run.

The instruction Carlos received during high school is also characteristic of a disengaged learning environment. He contended, “[I]ike the teachers, except for a few, they were all there for a paycheck, you know. You could just tell and can pinpoint three professors that will always have my respect and I dearly love them, care about them, and respect them but the rest, they were just there for a paycheck.” He concluded, “They just wanted to go home. There were just very few of them that had that passion to help better a student.” Carlos believes that if his teachers had cared more about teaching that he would have been inspired to try harder and engage in the course material. The sentiment he expresses reveals that Carlos aspired to do more with his education yet the very institution that should have helped him achieve his goals failed to do so.

Sandra and Carlos describe interactions with teachers and their high school that did not instill in them *confianza en confianza*. Being denied an academically rich and challenging experience had a decapitalizing affect on them in that they did not receive the level of preparation they felt they needed to be accepted at more selective institutions and confidently meet the academic challenges presented to them at Metro State. While both these students are performing well at the University, their stories suggest that they entered the institution with less social capital simply because of where they went to high school.

Several students noticed the disparity in the academic preparation received by students on the regular-track versus those who were on the college-bound track. Pilar, a sophomore

majoring in Psychology, took classes in both the regular-track and the college-bound track in her high school and noticed that the discrepancy in the learning opportunities between the two. According to Pilar, “[regular-track classes] didn’t prepare us too much but it was helpful if we needed the help and we looked for the help... But as the material we learned in school, not too much.” She notes that the rigor of the regular-track classes was lacking and that students who needed assistance had to seek it out on their own. Pilar contrasts the instruction she received in the regular-track classes to the instruction she received in the college-bound track courses. She asserted that “if you were in the advanced classes that would be different because I was in the advanced sciences and all that and that helped me out a little bit.” Pilar recognizes that she did not learn as much in her regular-track classes as she did in her college-bound track courses. Her observations are consistent with the arguments made by Valenzuela (1999) and Stanton-Salazar (2001), that students in regular-track courses are not afforded as much quality instruction and attention as those in the college-bound track.

Juan, a senior at Metro State, illustrates how the track in which students in at his high school were placed has a relationship with their college persistence. Juan was placed in a college-bound track in high school and took honors and advanced placement (AP) courses. He has several friends who were on the regular-track; he believes that his friends in the regular-track graduated from high school much less prepared for college than he and his peers in the college-bound track. He explained that “because I took a lot of the honors courses and some AP courses and because I talked to a lot of the kids in the regular classes and I don’t feel they were prepared and a lot of those kids that even came to this school aren’t here anymore.” Juan’s observations suggest that his high school friends who took classes on the regular-track did not receive the

social capital they needed to continue in college compared to those who were on the college-track.

The college-bound track at Juan's high school was part of a larger college preparation program that invested a good deal of the school's resources into its students. He points out that his classmates from this program who are enrolled at Metro State University are still enrolled whereas those who were in the regular-track classes are not. He explained, "We were in classes together in high school and we're still here today. So, it did a good job if you were in those advanced classes but I don't think it prepared everyone the same." Juan concluded, "The levels were completely different between an honors course and a regular course, but I definitely felt prepared and they had a good [college-bound] program to help me out with it." This contrast in preparation brings forth the importance of these students' ability and success in accessing social capital to persist in high school and at Metro State.

Selena explains how she transferred from the high school in her hometown to a high school in another town that had higher performance outcomes. She describes the schools in her hometown as "a majority of like Hispanic students so the future of those students were like a little... because they're also like probably first-generation Latina/o students where their parents don't enforce them very much to go to college. It's like for you to just graduate high school and get a job." In contrast, Selena describes her second high school as a school "where the students there were very encouraged to go to college and very pushed by their teachers and their parents." As she and her family had aspirations for an educational experience that would prepare her for college, Selena had to make certain sacrifices to access capital that would increase her chances of getting accepted at a four-year institution.

One of Selena's most challenging sacrifices involved leaving a predominantly Latina/o school to attend another where she would be a minority. Her adjustment to this new setting required her to confront and overcome adversity in order to have the opportunities that she and her family longed for. Selena explained, "I don't feel like targeted [at Metro State] whereas in [second] high school I did because it was a predominantly white school. It was like culture shock for me because there would be all these gringos or all these white people, you know [laughter] but then I went to high school and I was the target." Selena's adjustment was a means to an end: "I feel like my transition from [first high school] to [second high school] was like no college to college, if that makes any sense." The choice of "college or no college" forced Selena and her family to choose between remaining in school whose ethnic make-up was familiar and confirming or to leave that environment to enter one that had a record of good academic performance, but could potentially be alienating. For a family to feel that they must make such a choice for their child is a decapitalizing experience.

Milena also noticed the gap in opportunity between the regular-track high school at which she began and the gifted and talented high school to which she transferred. The description she provides of her first high school is one that illustrates a lack of *confianza en confianza* in its teacher and administrators who she believes ran the school as though they were "babysitting." She elaborated, "If you're quiet and you're nice and you follow directions they would pretty much give you at least a B." Milena had been in gifted and talented courses throughout elementary and middle school, but her district did not offer this kind of academic rigor during high school. Having been accustomed to a more academically enriching environment, Milena began to disengage in high school taking regular-track classes: "I didn't find myself as motivated as I did when I was younger so I don't know. It's like you're there and

you're quiet so they give you good grades so I was like why do I have to try hard? So that's when I started slipping." Given the academically disengaged learning environment of the high school, much of the school's efforts were directed at maintaining order. According to Milena: "[t]he teachers cared but they were more worried about keeping control of the class so there was a lot of like fights and overcrowding and so my high school experience was not good."

A significant change occurred for Milena when her district launched a gifted and talented magnet school during her last year of high school. She attributes her readiness to meet the academic demands of Metro State to her participation in this program. "That was a big experience because it was AP classes...like you were required to take AP classes. In high school you had to have like amazing grades in order to go into AP...like a little bit of kids went [to the magnet school]," she explained. Unlike her previous high school, the magnet school focused on creating a learning environment that promoted academic success.

In addition to offering rigorous curricula, Milena indicated that the school hired the most credentialed teachers and extended the school day to by three hours. Looking back, Milena believes "that senior year actually prepped me up to come over here into college. They like formed me because if I had graduated from the regular school that I was in before it may have been more difficult for me to adapt to this school environment and motivate myself. It would have been a lot harder if I hadn't gone to the gifted and talented program that prepped me into coming to college." Clearly, Milena attributes her ability to meet the demands of college to the academic preparation she received through the gifted and talented program. Had she remained in her first high school she would have endured further decapitalization during her senior year and have been less prepared for Metro State University.

Students who were tracked in college-bound classes described how they participated in educational programs that focused specifically on preparing them to be accepted into a college or university. These students interacted with a network of teachers who imparted capital through various funds of knowledge (Stanton-Salazar, 2002). Not only were they offered a more challenging curriculum, they were also introduced to bridge programs with nearby universities and their teachers spoke with them about careers in the field of the courses in which they were enrolled. By imparting these students with this knowledge and expectations, college became the next natural step for them and further confirmed the encouragement and *consejos* they had been receiving from their parents to become educated and seize the opportunities available to them in this country.

Donna, a sophomore, recalls the guidance she received as a high school sophomore that helped her prepare for college. Her teachers devoted time and attention to her students to inform them of college preparation opportunities such as summer programs and credit-bearing science courses. Her teachers also stressed the differences between high school and college. According to Donna, “the teachers would be like ‘You know, in college things don’t work this way and we have to get prepared for college’ and they would just be like ‘It’s for your success. It’s very difficult nowadays to just get a job with a high school diploma’ so just to get a better education and be someone in life.” Donna’s story reveals that she received a message from her teachers early in high school that she was “college material” and had been given the tools and resources to get accepted to a university.

### *Support from Teachers and Guidance Counselors*

Another important component of college preparation for these students was the support and assistance they received from their guidance counselors. These connections were important to students to obtain knowledge on when and how to investigate their options, how to determine good fit in their college choices, how to proceed through the application and FAFSA processes, and how to decode the lingo of higher education. As many students were confused and nervous about applying to college, they needed moral and emotional support as they negotiated their way through this foreign terrain. The stories shared by the study's participants were both positive and negative.

Many of the circumstances inherent in urban high schools impede the delivery and receipt of counseling services for immigrant and first-generation Latina/o students. Guidance counselors have very large caseloads, a wide portfolio of responsibilities, and are either encouraged by school administrators or forced because of school priorities to direct most of their time and effort on the highest achieving and most disruptive students (Kimura-Walsh, Yamamura, Griffin, & Allen, 2009, p. 300). By default, the regular-track students are also made invisible and forced to find other means, either through their peer and family networks, to attain the capital they need to successfully complete high school and get accepted to college.

Alma and Celia, the two students who coincidentally expressed childhood hopes of attending Metro State, also had very similar experiences dealing with their guidance counselors. Both women, at separate high schools, were discouraged by their guidance counselor from applying to the university that they had dreamed of attending. Although neither student was ever

told why they were discouraged, both believe it was because of their undocumented status at that time.

Celia, who emigrated to the U.S. from El Salvador, attended a college-prep high school in one of the state's most impoverished and urban cities. She lauded her teachers for their support and effective instruction, yet Celia described her guidance counselor as unsupportive and someone from whom she rarely sought help. When Celia began to explore her college options her guidance counselor repeatedly tried to discourage her from applying to any four-year institutions because of her undocumented status and her associated ineligibility to receive financial aid. Her guidance counselor tried to convince her that the local community college would be a better fit as its tuition would be more affordable. However, her academic abilities demonstrated her potential to do well at a four-year university. Celia insisted that she and her family were prepared to pay the full cost of tuition at a public university no matter what the price since obtaining a bachelor's degree was of primary importance to her family. Her guidance counselor continued her discouragement, which only pushed Celia even harder to pursue her educational dreams.

As Celia reflected on this experience, the hurt and anger she felt at the time returned. She remarked, "It kind of pulled me a little bit back, but I always had friends and teachers who always pushed me to get the best education that I can." Rather than folding under the disaffirming comments of her guidance counselor, she asserted this negativity "kind of made me want to do it even more when she told me not to go. I was like, 'OK you're telling me not to go. OK, then I'm doing it just to prove you wrong.'" In fact, Celia mentioned that when she received her acceptance letter from Metro State she enthusiastically showed this guidance counselor out of spite. She later visited her high school when she was sophomore at the

University and made a point to stop in to see this guidance counselor to tell her that she was still at Metro State and a very successful student as well.

Similar to Celia, Alma's interaction with her guidance counselor left her feeling marginalized and hopeless. Alma emigrated from Ecuador with her parents when she was six years-old with her visa, but it expired while she was in high school. Despite her motivation, her strong grades, and her positive recommendations from her teachers, Alma's guidance counselor did not present her with options other than attending a community college. She explained, "My advisors from high school would tell me 'Oh, you can't go. You can't go at all. Metro State, you can't go to [university name]. If you want you can only go to [community college name] and that's it, or just get a job.' So, I really felt not very motivated and I went through a phase."

Alma described the discouragement she received from her guidance counselor as being a very disempowering and demoralizing experience. During this time she made several harsh realizations about her status as an undocumented immigrant in the United States. Alma expressed, "I never knew what it was to be an immigrant. Like I didn't know what that was like until I was going to college and I felt all the pressure around me. Like I have arms and legs but they are invisible because I can't do anything. I wanted to get a car, I couldn't. I wanted to apply for financial aid, I couldn't. I couldn't do a lot of things and it just frustrated me and I decided to go to Ecuador or get a job because college is really expensive." Although Alma came close to leaving the United States, she decided stay and seize the opportunities that she and her family sought when first coming to this country.

During her senior year, Alma garnered the strength to apply to the institutions in which she was interested despite the discouragement of her guidance counselor. She explained, "I guess the moment when I decided to go to college was when I heard people saying to me that I can't do

something. That was when I got to the point that ‘Yes I can and I’m going to prove it to you.’ I applied to college, to Metro State to [university name] and to [university name] really late.”

Alma continued, “Like it was really late because I was deciding on whether to go back to Ecuador and leaving my parents because I really didn’t think I had a shot here. That’s when I realized I had to go to college and go for it. It was either all or nothing.” Like Celia, Alma and her family worked to earn enough money to pay for her tuition costs. Her immigration status recently changed and Alma has applied for financial aid and will hopefully receive some assistance in the near future.

Alma was able to persevere despite the adversities she encountered. Her father was a tremendous support to her. Alma shared that her father would encourage her by saying “Don’t give up. We’ll find a way through this.” Her father’s salary has been able to cover her tuition costs. Although Alma was a student in the college-bound track of her high school, she did not receive the capital from the very individual at her school designated to be her supplier. Not able to access social capital in the way designated for her, she relied on her parents for encouragement and her friends for information on the college application process.

Gloria, a junior, contends that her high school did not prepare her for college at all. She added, “I didn’t even know what a GPA was until I was a senior.” Gloria never connected with her guidance counselor until a supportive teacher facilitated their meeting. The teacher believed in her ability to be successful in college, yet in her senior year Gloria had not taken any steps in the college going process since she had no idea of where to start. She recalled, “I didn’t even know how to fill out an application. I didn’t know anything.” Working with her guidance counselor and her teacher, she applied to several colleges and was accepted to a few. Gloria credits her college career to her teacher who invested in her and with whom she had *confianza en*

*confianza*. She explained, “I ended up coming here and it was because of him really. He helped me a lot getting my papers and stuff done and I was really surprised because I was always the one who wasn’t like failing but in the C’s and B-‘s and I was always had trouble learning and trouble getting through stuff and I ended up coming here.” Had it not been for her teacher’s support Gloria believes she would have attended a community college or not have attended college at all.

### **University Support for First-Generation Latina/o Persistence**

Attendance at a four-year university is a tremendous and valued opportunity for the study’s participants. The students expressed a great deal of gratitude to be students at Metro State University. They spoke about their perceptions of their faculty members, their classmates, the university services they have utilized, and the resources they have relied upon for support. This section includes insights offered by the faculty and staff related to the experiences of first-generation Latina/o students at the University.

#### ***Support from Faculty***

The study’s participants expressed that they found most of faculty at the university to be knowledgeable, respectful, caring, and accessible. Although some said they found the size of their classes to be somewhat intimidating, the approachability of their faculty often made up for the lost feeling they had in those courses.

Sandra transferred to Metro State from a local community college. Some of the courses in which she has been enrolled at the university are much larger than those she experienced at

her previous institution. Sandra shared, “Some teachers want you to excel. Like, they actually want to help. They’re like ‘Call me. Here’s my number. If you want a letter of recommendation here it is.’ My teachers, [they] have been pretty good so maybe they have sent a message that says that you can do better.” Given her adjustment from a smaller community college, Sandra expressed gratitude for her faculty members’ accessibility and their willingness of her faculty to be contacted outside of class time.

Carlos, a junior, has also had validating and encouraging interactions with faculty he has come to respect greatly. He expressed how a few have had a positive impact on his experience at Metro State University: “You know like professors like Dr. [name] when you go to get advisement from them and then it turns in a 45 minute long conversation, people like that. Like I said, I’ve had my share of great professors where they genuinely say ‘Carlos, I see a lot in you. You should look into this. You should do this.’ Stuff like that.” When considering his high school, these interactions have been very empowering for him. “It’s happened a lot to me and I really appreciate that,” he concluded.

Alma, a sophomore, has found her faculty to be interested in her academic and career development. From her experiences she has found that “[t]hey’re available and they keep their office hours. You can go to them and they don’t act like they don’t know you. They’re more involved with you and they care, not like in high school where the teachers would just pass you so you could just graduate.” Alma has found the faculty as a source from which she has been able to mobilize social capital to attain opportunities that have opened doors for her and have contributed to her academic enhancement. She offered the following perspective about her faculty: “Here they know that this is your future so they help you with internships and letters of recommendation. If you don’t get a subject they’re there for you. You just make an appointment

or visit them in their office hours and talk to them. I use their office hours a lot and I paid for it so I make the time to talk to them.” Alma is an assertive and proactive student. She has no qualms about approaching her faculty, articulating her concerns or questions, and following up with them to get answer as needed. Not all students have Alma’s temperament or have had the encouragement to be as persistent.

Gloria offered a very different perspective on the helpfulness of her faculty members. According to Gloria, “Professors just come in, teach, and leave” and do not have an interest in their students as individuals. She described the faculty to be much less accommodating than her high school teachers. “You got to hand in your homework. If you don’t then you get the F.” Gloria finds the faculty to be uncompassionate in their dealings with students. She noted, “[I]t doesn’t matter. They’re not trying to ask you why you couldn’t do it. If you’d be trying to tell them why, it’s like it’s always an excuse so you’d rather just not say anything on why you couldn’t do it. You probably could have had like the worst night but it still doesn’t matter to them.” Gloria wishes her professors were more personable and compassionate to their students’ personal challenges. “Like some are understanding, but some... I feel like you just don’t need that extra excuse to tell them ‘Oh, I couldn’t do my homework’ or ‘I couldn’t do my paper’ or ‘I couldn’t come to class.’ I just feel like it’s so different from high school.” She concluded, “Like you can’t get away with anything pretty much. You come, you don’t come, you withdraw the class, and it’s the same thing. They don’t really care. Like, I haven’t clicked with a teacher.” This lack of connection with a faculty member is something that she feels is lacking in her college career.

Kim, a sophomore, shared Gloria’s perspective on the impersonal and disengaged nature of some of the faculty that have taught her courses. “I’ve noticed that there are some professors,

who are very into what they do, who teach because they love to do it. Then there are other professors who are here just to get a paycheck, which really affects the students,” she explained. Kim is frustrated by faculty members who have an uncaring attitude toward students and the quality of their instruction. She explained that “because when I sign up for a class I expect to get something out of it which is what everyone should do when you go into a class.” Kim’s sentiments are reflective of her unfulfilled expectations of *confianza en confianza* from her professors. That is, she has found that despite the credentials and expertise of her faculty, some have lacked the interest in teaching and mentoring their students. According to Kim, “There are teachers that you can’t, you know, you just don’t get that vibe from them like they really want to be there which makes the class completely miserable. You just feel like you’re going there, you’re writing down a couple of notes, and then you go home, then you fail the test.” Such perceptions of faculty can be discouraging and echo the experiences some of these students had taking regular-track classes while in high school.

Sandra and Daniela, both of whom are pursuing the same major, each expressed individually their frustration at the advising services available to them. Their help seeking behaviors reveal how they have interpreted the availability of advising services through the construct of *confianza en confianza*. Sandra and Daniela have never met with their faculty advisors although they know their advisors’ names as they are featured on their student accounts. Instead, Sandra and Daniela have utilized the services of an administrator in the department in which their major is housed. When asked why they had not sought out their advisors, they both stated that they did not believe it was up to them to initiate their advising relationship with their faculty advisors. Sandra expressed, “I mean my advisor hasn’t even sent me an email ‘Ok, are you guys going to come over?’ Nothing at all. At least they should send out an email even if it’s

like a universal email to all his students and he hasn't even done that." Both students perceived the lack of outreach from their advisors as lack of interest in their academic progress leaving them to be suspicious of their faculty advisors' interest in helping them.

Daniela surmised that perhaps the lack of outreach from her advisor means students need to initiate contact, yet she did not appear to be comfortable doing so. She explained, "I guess you have to go out and look for them. They won't just come. Like I never received like an email or anything from my advisor so I don't know if she really cares." Having not received an invitation to visit left Daniela distrusting of her advisor. She doubted that her advisor has a genuine interest in her academic success: "If I were an advisor I would want to know how all my students are doing. If they are doing good in school, if they have any questions, if they need help in anything. I would want to know what's going on with them, not just wait until they come to me." Daniela and Sandra's perceptions of their faculty advisors is consistent with the notion that *educación* is based on caring reciprocal relationships. These students have interpreted the absence of an invitation for an appointment from their advisors as disinterest in their well-being and academic progress leaving them to not have *confianza en confianza* with these institutional agents.

A few students mentioned that certain faculty members took special interest in them as Latina/os students and frequently offered them support and connected them to resources. Most of faculty members, but not all, were also Latina/os, who had personal and professional interests in making special outreach to Latina/o students on campus. Several participants shared that they receive emails from these particular faculty members on internship and scholarship opportunities for Latina/o students. A few of the students indicated they had never even had these faculty

members as professors in their classes, which made them appreciate their effort and thoughtfulness.

The type of support these faculty have offered include advising Latina/o student organizations, coordinating minority academic support programs, mentoring students to apply to graduate schools and internships, and providing academic advisement to students in their departments who have difficulty finding or connecting with their assigned faculty advisors. All of faculty interviewed for this study recognized that these activities are beyond their role as faculty members at the University, yet they argued that they felt a moral and ethical obligation to assist Latina/o students as they are at the greatest risk of not being retained at the University. At the same time, however, they also recognized that there are no rewards for efforts. All of the faculty indicated that in order to support Latina/o students in the way they do has meant having to adjust their workload and performance. For one faculty member this has meant making a conscious decision to not seek a promotion since this individual's level of support to Latina/o students has resulted in a reduction in publications, a trade off this individual believes is the "right thing to do." Another faculty member stated that while there is support on the college level for his efforts, this support is not built into the institutional rewards system. He argued that because of this structure, the University actually discourages faculty from offering such support to students. This professor continues to do so because he feels a responsibility to provide underrepresented students with "the helping hand that was offered to him as an undergraduate."

The institutional support offered by these faculty members are examples of those presented by Stanton-Salazar (2001). The advisement and mentorship are funds of knowledge that assist students with negotiating their way through the institution and connecting them to future opportunities. Additionally, their efforts are also reflective of another form of institutional

support Stanton-Salazar finds to be critical, including emotional and moral support. The affirmation and care Latina/o students receive from these faculty members provide students with access to social capital that can be mobilized to become profitable to them in their academic and professional careers.

### *Support Services*

By and large, the students did not indicate that they were frequent users of campus resources even if they expressed a particular need that could have been addressed by utilizing a service offered by the University. Students who began at the Metro State as first-year students often stated that they did not have the time or that they “had not gotten around to” visiting those offices. Such statements were expressed mostly by commuters. Transfer students, in particular, did not have knowledge of these university services, especially those who were commuters. These students explained that they had not been introduced to campus resources when they first started at Metro State, yet they also had not inquired or investigated them on their own since their enrollment.

The services used most by the study’s participants were those that contained resources they needed to access and did not involve interfacing with university personnel. These services included the library, the computer lab, the Recreation Center, and the campus shuttles. A few students mentioned getting assistance from the Tutoring Center and the Writing Center, but these contacts were few. The exception to these usage patterns were, as mentioned earlier, the students who connected with Counseling and Psychological Services to get help managing their stress.

These help-seeking behaviors are consistent with those described by Stanton-Salazar (2001) for students who do not have *confianza en confianza* with institutional agents. While almost every student who participated in the study stated that they find Metro State to be a welcoming campus, their help seeking behaviors do raise questions as to why some students did not make better use of the services available to them at the university. The question that remains is whether these behaviors are remnants from their high school experiences or if these students are reacting to invalidating interactions with institutional agents at Metro State.

Much like the faculty whom I interviewed, the staff members who participated in this study also provided support to Latina/o students that stretched beyond the scope of their positions. Their activities included advising Latina/o student organizations, assisting with arranging referrals to resources both on and off campus, guiding students through the application process for scholarships, internships, and graduate schools, and serving as a navigator for students as they work through institutional obstacles with various campus offices. In many ways, these individuals translated the institutional culture to Latina/o students who were still unclear of the University policies, procedures, and mores. The study's participants met many of these staff members at events hosted by Latina/o student organizations or in classes that they these staff members have taught. The staff members indicated that once students developed *confianza* in their relationship, these students brought with them friends who also needed assistance thereby creating a network of students who would come to them with questions and concerns.

### ***Intercultural Interactions through Institutional Support***

The study's participants have been afforded many opportunities through funds of knowledge to increase their intercultural interactions. These opportunities have occurred through conduits such as university's curricula and class discussions. Through their exposure and participation in these intercultural interactions, the students reported that they have a better understanding of the value of diversity and how they can more effectively navigate their way through the university to facilitate their academic enhancement (Nuñez, 2009).

Selena, a sophomore, made most of friends through her major, Psychology; however, her love of language inspired her to pursue a double major in Italian. A friendship she developed with a student on campus came as a result of their shared academic interests and ethnic identity. Selena finds the development of this friendship to have a positive impact on her academically, but also validating because of the adversity she encountered at the predominantly White high school she attended. She explained, "[Developing that friendship] was so empowering because people are always like 'Why are you an Italian major if you're Latina?'" Selena is able to connect with her friend because of their common backgrounds and pursuits. "Knowing that she is Latina too, we just understood each other and we could just do like 'Oh, that's funny. Italians do that because Latinas do that too,' things like that. We'd speak to each other trilingually, like Spanish, English, and Italian. So she became a close friend of mine," she concluded. Selena's friendship encourages her to share her academic and intellectual interests with another student at the university. The fact that this friend is also Latina allows Selena to confirm the validity of her interest in other languages while still identifying with her own ethnicity. As Selena points out, her trilingual abilities empower her to educate her peers that Latina/os can and do have an interest in learning other languages and cultures.

An analysis of the institution's documents reveals that Metro State University has made a definite commitment to infusing diversity into the fabric of its curricula and to imparting its students with intercultural capital. The university's mission statement and strategic plan declare the University will support a learning community that is supportive and reflective of the state's diversity. The institution's academic programs encourage the study and investigation of numerous cultural groups as well as an exploration of women's and LGBTQ studies through its majors and minors.

Additionally, the University's General Education program designates courses that promote multicultural and transnational awareness as well as awareness of diversity issues. Students are also required to fulfill foreign language and multicultural awareness requirements as part of their degree requirements. These elements of Metro State's academic programs reflect an intentional effort made by the University to expose its students to a curriculum that highlights inclusion and fosters cultural competence.

### ***Perceived Validation from the Institution***

As Nuñez (2009) posited, positive intercultural interactions promote a sense of belonging at higher education institutions and a positive campus climate. Through an analysis of the information available on its website, Metro State has several programs and initiatives in place that promote equity and diversity. In addition, the institution has a task force in place that addresses bias incidents as soon as they happen, which include a response from public relations. In addition, the task force promotes campuswide conversations. A question I posed to all the study's participants was whether they perceived Metro State University to be an institution that welcomes and values their membership in the campus community. Such perceptions are directly

linked to their sense of belonging at the university. Resoundingly, the students feel that the institution is welcoming to them; they identified different examples and sources of that message.

Gabriela, a sophomore, noted she saw on the University's website that Metro State was recently recognized for increasing its minority graduation rates which impressed her. She also indicated the institution's support of the various student cultural organizations and that the University has a President's Commission on Affirmative Action that hosts an annual Affirmative Action Day. Gabriela actually attended the event at which a keynote speaker addressed the audience on the educational outcomes of students of color. Gabriela felt that the event "gives me a good message. [The speaker] was very interesting that we had that and how they were specifying like GPAs and how it should be improved and people should be improved so that was good that the University was able to bring the speaker and have people listen to him." She concluded, "So, I think they do a pretty good job." Gabriela's statement indicates that she has picked up on a "vibe" on her campus that the institution is committed to fostering an inclusive environment.

Marta responded to the question by highlighting that beyond the diversity of the campus of Metro State, more importantly, students from various ethnic and racial groups do interact giving them opportunities to learn about each other. From Marta's perspective "that's what makes Metro State...its diversity. Like if it was only White people or Black people Metro State wouldn't be what it is today like. Like everybody makes a school like whether you're Latino, Asian, African, White, whatever. I feel we're all a melting pot so like everybody contributes in some way." This type of sharing between ethnic and racial groups opens the doors for conversations between students both within and outside of the classroom fostering the

transmission and mobilization of social and intercultural capital (Locks et al., 2008; Nagda & Gurin, 2007; Nuñez, 2009).

Several of the study's participants commented on the positive nature of the Metro State's campus climate. Milena, a junior, shared how she feels about being a student at Metro State: "I really enjoy it and I think it's had an impact on other students as well because I've seen people wanting to get along. Everyone's happy and willing to help each other and very open to people of color or like being friends with each other." Milena's comments relay not only a strong sense of belonging at the University, but also a sense of security. She added, "I feel safe. I feel welcomed. I feel like I can talk to people without being like another color than they are. I feel good on this campus. Like I haven't seen racism anywhere so it's been good." Alicia, a junior, shared a similar perspective. She said, "For the most part Metro State prides itself on being very, very diverse. I don't feel like the school has ever faltered me in any way as a Latina ever. I feel like Metro State has done a good job about that pretty much. Metro State is very open minded and I feel like I am too so I feel like it's a good match for me." The sense of belonging that the first-generation Latina/o students feel at Metro State allows for them to function in a campus environment that supports their persistence.

For most of the study's participants, the feeling of inclusion on the campus is a departure from the exclusionary environments that existed in their high schools. Metro State has made a concerted effort to be reflective of the members of its campus community in its curriculum, majors and minors, and student organizations. Additionally, the university also has in place programs and offices with missions that focus specifically on issues of diversity and bias and the demographics of its faculty and staff strongly reflects that of the student body. All of these

elements contribute to fostering a campus climate that supports intercultural interactions that allow for social capital to be shared with ease throughout various student networks.

### **Peer Support**

Since they all have the same interest that I do...we're all in school...we're focused on the same things. Like if I have a problem I will go to one of my sorority sisters. Like, I trust them now. I just pledged last semester, so we created that bond. Like if I'm down or if I'm having a problem at home I can come to their apartment and stay over they can help me financially or whatever it is, so it's good. But before then like I wouldn't say that nobody is my support...like my friends back home because I am the only one of the group that is going to school and they're all like "Oh, I look up to you." (Gloria, junior)

A third valuable source of social capital for students who participated in the study came from their peer networks. These networks were comprised of friends from their hometowns, friends from the university, and their classmates. These networks provided the students with various types of emotional, social, and academic support as well as a sense of belonging. These types of support connect students to social capital that allow them to negotiate through a range of structures and systems so that they may persist at the university. Through these networks, students "become active participants in their own socialization process – wrestling with multiple and conflicting manifestations of social structure and culture, tolerating contradiction, and actively negotiating both constraint and opportunity" (Stanton-Salazar, 2002, p. 24).

#### ***Peer Support from Hometown Friends***

The influence of hometown peer networks on the college experience was very evident throughout the study. A few reasons for this connection emerged. Of the 20 students who participated in the study, 14 live with their families in their hometowns, a percentage that is

fairly representative of the institution's off-campus population. For some of the students, their ties to their friends from their hometowns were still very close. For others, these ties become progressively loose resulting in feelings of ambivalence about the relationships they have or once had with these friends.

### ***Being One of the Few Who's Made It***

The mutual profitability of these friendships is an important criterion in the inclusion of hometown friends in peer support networks (Valenzuela, 1999). The degree to which the students' hometown friends were included in their peer network depended on how supportive they were of their pursuit of a college degree. As stated earlier, all 20 students grew up in and many still reside in predominantly Latina/o communities in urban areas. Some of the cities from which these students hail are among several in the state known for their lower performing school districts and high poverty rates. In many cases, very few of the students with whom they graduated high school went on to attend four-year institutions. Perhaps even fewer go on to graduate with baccalaureate degrees.

The following examples illustrate the feelings of incongruence expressed by some of the study's participants as college students with roots in predominantly Latina/o communities with high poverty rates. While they felt fortunate for the success they have had thus far at the university, they also shared feelings of frustration, guilt, anger, and disappointment that more of their peers were not also in college.

Juan, a senior, participated in a college-bound program at his high school which he believes prepared him well academically. He thinks back on the students with whom he graduated to estimate how many have persisted to college: "That I know of? Only a few of my

best friends...two of them are graduating with me. One of them was going to graduate, he's going to be like a semester or a year late but he's going to graduate...besides that, not a lot," he summarized. Juan is delighted that he is graduating, but is also disappointed that several of his friends from high school did not persist as he did. He said, "So, not a lot of my friends from high school I'd say are in the position that I am. Yeah, it kind of stinks and you know when you think of the group as a whole but at least the way I look at least me and friends are doing it and that's a step I guess. So to answer the question not a lot of people are in my shoes right now unfortunately." Juan graduates this year with mixed emotions wishing that more of his hometown friends could be with him at Commencement.

Milena, a junior, attended the public school in her town and then enrolled in a gifted and talented school in her senior year. She too stated that the academic preparation she was afforded in the academy was beneficial, but believes very few students chose to participate in the program since it was so rigorous. Milena provided a similar account of the attrition rates among her classmates from her first high school: "Like, I've had a lot of friends that have dropped out [of college] and have found it overwhelming...not enough support...not this college but as a whole." Milena points out that her classmates' lives went in a very different direction once they dropped out. She explained, "[They] started a family, got pregnant and got married and a lot of my friends aren't in college and I don't know if it was the high school...they usually went to public, they didn't go to [gifted and talented school]. Not a lot of my friends from [town name] have such a bright future so I guess I'm happy that I got all the support I needed to be here today." Milena recognizes that the support she received throughout her educational career has been instrumental to her persistence.

Gloria spoke about the social differences that exist between her hometown and the university's campus community. The city in which Gloria lives is known in the state for its high poverty and crime levels. She expressed the difficulty she faces negotiating her way between these two social environments pointing out that "it's really hard especially coming from [town name]. Like 90% of my friends are pregnant so I'm like it's nothing bad. It's a blessing, but not when you want to finish school." Gloria focuses on the hopes that her family has for her success in order to rise above the pressures of her hometown. She said, "Like my mother she would probably be very disappointed because she really wants me to finish school." Gloria is very aware, however, of these differences as she tries to persevere.

Carlos, a junior, thought back to his circle of friends with whom he graduated.

None. I had a close network of six of us. RaRa is in jail for life, Wiley is in jail for life, Booger is in Iraq and he only did it because he couldn't get into college, Ezra works in Red Lobster...no he works in Houlihan's now I'm sorry, Mark has a daughter and that's it, and then you have Ach and Ach is just that guy on the block. You know and it's like "Go to school man. You don't have to be here." Yeah, it's so stupid. So it's like none of them, none of them. And they're very supportive too. They're like "Yo, I wish I could do that" and I'm like "You don't have to wish you can do it. You're just choosing not to." (Carlos, junior)

Despite the connection the students had with their high school friends in their hometowns, the profitability of these relationships are relatively low for these students in the college setting.

Although they can draw little social capital from these relationships that are usable at the university, they do need this social capital to negotiate their way through the communities in which they still live.

### *Negotiating Between Two Worlds*

Moving to and from the culture of the University and their hometown requires the study's participants to negotiate between two very different sets of values and norms. According to Trueba (2002), immigrant students "manage multiple identities" in order to define themselves in each of these cultural settings (p. 8). He asserts that having such a capacity:

...requires a unique skills and flexibility on the part of immigrant youths from all ethnic groups. The new and rapidly evolving postmodern society is more than ever lead by a new youth that does not accept ethnic boundaries as a red light in the development of their potentialities. (p. 8)

Some of study's participants described how their relationships with their high school friends have changed because they lost the ability to relate to one another. For others, these relationships remain as strong as ever while they have developed new relationships with students from a variety of ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds. This fluidity of "ethnic boundaries" emerged as a very relevant factor in the students' sense of belonging in their hometowns and on campus allowing social capital to be exchanged with ease.

Alma is a sophomore and a commuter who graduated from high school with a set of peers, many of whom enrolled at community colleges if they attended college at all. Alma shared what the adjustment she makes as she moves back and forth between her hometown and the campus of Metro State: "Two different worlds...it feels like that...so different...it's very different. It's like I'm going from one country to another country." Alma's comparison of Metro State and her hometown suggests that she notices the cultural differences. She points out that despite the differences, she values both communities, "[b]ecause here I have different friends, I go through different scenarios than I go through in my house. Over there it's the

people that I have known since forever and there's nothing else to learn from them, but I like it. I don't mind it. It's a different environment, different people, different cultures, different scenarios." Alma's fondness for both her hometown and Metro State University illustrates her ability to manage both her worlds, as asserted by Trueba (2002). She is able to navigate between both settings and have a sense of belonging in both.

Milena, a junior, expresses sentiments that are similar to those of Alma. She shared, "With my friends at home, some of them don't go to college so it's like a whole different world. They'll be like 'What are you talking about?' or I'll have to minimize my language sometimes." Many of her friends are pregnant, married, and have families of their own. Milena believes that since they have different plans for their lives, their priorities have changed as well which has impacted their ability to relate with one another. According to Milena, "They don't have big aspirations. They're like 'Why do you need to study? You'll do fine.'" Milena finds she has to adjust when interacting with her friends at Metro State who are focused on studying and being academically successful. At the same time she feels that she can interact with these students easily since they share commonalities to which she can relate.

Milena still feels a sense of connection to the peers who have chosen a very different path for their lives and draws social capital from this relationship as she continues to reside in the community in which she was raised. The importance of the emotional support she receives from her peer network in her community cannot be underestimated. Given that they "manage multiple identities" (Trueba, 2002, p. 8), first-generation Latina/o students who come from immigrant backgrounds strive for persistence in all the worlds through which they negotiate.

Although Gloria has developed a strong peer network on campus, this network cannot provide her with the type of support she still needs and receives from her peer network in her

hometown. Despite the fact that Gloria is now in college and none of her hometown friends are attending, their friendship remains intact. She pointed out, “I’m actually closer to my friends back home because I’ve known them since grammar school and they know all about me than here because here it’s on a different level.” Gloria makes a distinction between the roles that her campus peer network plays in contrast to her hometown peer network. “I feel like here is on a school-friendship level and there it is just friendship because they’ve been there for me through all the problems I’ve gone through so I feel like I just trust them a little bit more than my school friends like with my personal issues,” she concluded.

While none of her friends in her hometown peer network are attending college, they provide her with a valuable source of emotional and moral support which has great profitability for her. The challenges through which Gloria must negotiate as an immigrant living in a predominantly Latina/o urban community necessitates her access to a peer network that provides her with the type of support that allows Gloria to manage her identity in this social context. Doing so, while receiving the endorsement of her hometown peer network, provides Gloria with an important sense of encouragement and motivation to take on the multiple demands that she confronts as a college student.

Donna is a sophomore majoring in Mathematics and the daughter of a father from Colombia and a mother from Cuba. She is a commuter who works 25 hours a week to help pay for her tuition and other education expenses. Donna participated in a college preparatory program in her high school and a few of the friends with whom she graduated also attend Metro State University and live on campus. Donna has been able to extend the peer support to which she had access in high school into Metro State University. The convenience of this network has been beneficial to Donna, “So, it’s pretty cool. Like, we’re always there for each other. Like

when they're like 'Oh I want to drop out' we're like, 'No you can't. Come on. We have to keep on. It doesn't matter when we graduate. We just have to graduate.' So, we're supportive," she shared.

Donna's network operates through reciprocity as it exchanges social capital. Donna relied on public transportation during her first two years to get to and from home, work, and the university which was very trying to her. She was able to tap into this peer network for assistance in managing her schedule. She now carools with some of friends and frequently pays for gas in exchange. During exams she stays overnight in the residence hall room with a couple who live on campus and they study together while helping one another in the subjects they are most versed. Donna believes entering Metro State with this peer support network facilitated her transition to college and has been instrumental to her persistence. From this peer network she has been able to branch out and become connected to other students she has met on campus to form an on-campus peer network that has provided her with social capital that has been profitable in that context.

### ***On-Campus Peer Networks***

The on-campus peer networks formed by the study's participants provide a range of support to these students as they attempt to persist at the university. Nuñez (2009) suggests that "within the higher education context, social capital can be defined as the capacity for social networks to facilitate educational advancement" (p. 25). Given the profile of the study's participants, their ability to utilize peer networks to access various forms of social capital is of the utmost importance to promoting their academic achievement. As demonstrated by the

students' stories, the exchange of social capital within their on-campus networks is done mostly through their funds of knowledge.

### *Classroom-based Peer Networks*

Connecting with classmates, the study's participants increased their academic engagement. They spoke with these students in their classroom-based networks about their common academic interests, their aspirations for success, and shared information about opportunities in the field such as internships and research projects. While these network interactions helped to enhance the students' sense of academic effectiveness, some participants also stated that they increased their cross-cultural and cross-racial interactions since their classroom communities were more diverse than the hometowns or their high schools. Furthermore, the students also noted that they were also able to draw moral and emotional support from the classroom-based peer networks making these networks profitable to the study participants on multiple levels.

Many students connected with their classmates based on their mutual interest in successfully completing the courses in which they were enrolled. Pilar provided her perspective on the value in forming friendships with her classmates, "They're very helpful at times. The email service we have on campus, like if we miss something we can go on Blackboard and email the whole class works pretty good. If we miss a class we can just email the whole class and they can help us out. That's good." Pilar's recognition of the importance of classroom networks allows her tap into her classmates as a resource as needed. "You can help them out and they can help you out," she added. Her statements also reinforce the notion of social capital being a relational and reciprocal resource to students.

Most students found their classmates to be willing to be of assistance and open to providing support. Marta describes how found that most of her classmates to be approachable. She said, “I don’t feel like there are too many people who are like ‘Oh my God, don’t talk to me’ or ‘I don’t know you so I can’t help you out’ or something like that.” Marta also finds her classmates to be helpful to each other when needed. “They’re definitely open so I am definitely open if like someone needs notes or like their lost. I feel like even if I don’t talk to the girl next to me I’ll be like ‘What are doing?’ or ‘What page are we on?’ or ‘Do you know how to do this?’ They’re more than willing to help me out,” she said. This level of approachability has enabled the study’s participants to exchange resources and social capital with their classmates and has also facilitated the formation of classroom-based peer networks.

Several of the study’s participants described how they have formed classroom-based peer networks comprised of students in their majors which have supported their academic success. Elena, a chemistry-pharmacy major pointed out, “All of my friends here, we’re all Chem majors because we all see the same people in every class. There’s so many students here and I can actually count the ones I’m friends with, I don’t know. I like my friends. We help each other with our work.” Elena’s description demonstrates the collaborative spirit with which students in the Chemistry lab work on projects. Providing each other with assistance and encouragement, they are able to exchange knowledge and moral support.

Celia’s busy schedule prevents her from spending as much time on campus as she would like to so whatever opportunities she has to connect with the friends she has made through her major courses are very valuable to her. “I don’t have a lot of time to spend here, but most of the friends I do have is from my Family & Child Studies classes and we share a lot of interests, you know, education,” she said. “We go out sometimes, we have coffee, we do homework together,

they have been very supportive to what I'm doing maybe because I am trying to do the same but you know it's not a lot of friends." Celia shared that she feels as though she has had to sacrifice the social aspect of her college experience so that she can work to pay for her tuition. The friendships that she has made on campus have allowed her to have a peer network to develop a sense of belonging on campus while also share information about opportunities in her major. "[W]e talk on the phone about what's going on in school, about scholarships they might find. They always try to encourage me to fill stuff up knowing that I don't get financial aid. So they have been a big help for me and for making the transition of 'you can't go to college' to 'hey you're here'", she concluded. Although minimal, whatever social and emotional support Celia can garner from her peer network is important to her feeling as though she is not missing out on having the full college experience that other students have the privilege of having.

Some students expressed that forming networks with the individuals in their classes was not as easy as they hoped. An obstacle that several of them mentioned is that most students at Metro State University are commuters and have a "come-pack-and-go" nature. Gabriela describes the challenge she has experienced in connecting with her classmates because of this pattern: "It's hard because I guess it's up to you what you kind of do in the classroom, but sometimes I feel like you're in the classroom, class is done...you're out...pack up and leave." Gabriela is a confident, but reserved student who is not always comfortable starting a conversation with classmates she does not really know. "So it's been a little harder for me to kind of communicate unless I am working in groups with people. Like to just sit next to someone and just start talking to them, like that doesn't happen a lot," she confided. According to Gabriela, unless students make a concerted effort to introduce themselves and start a conversation, students do not generally form classroom-based peer networks. She added,

“You’ll see people say ‘Yeah, you were in my other class,’ ‘Were you really?’ They don’t notice it.” Gabriela’s observations illustrate the pace at which students’ lives move. Many students run from class to class or to their sources of public transportation making classroom-based peer networks difficult to form.

Another challenge to forming on-campus peer networks has been the infrequency with which students take the same classes together. With a significant percentage of their courses in their degree programs consisting of general education requirements, students did not see the same individuals in their classes until they took mostly courses in their majors. Alicia explained how this dynamic has affected her experience building peer networks on campus: “I know that this semester I see a lot of the same people a lot in different courses. I feel like a lot of us have grown together throughout the years.” This contact with her classmates has allowed Alicia to build connections that extend beyond the classroom. “[O]ne of my closest friends, at least she’s becoming closer and closer because we’re studying the same thing....I don’t know, I feel like we’ve done through a lot of the same emotions you know in the past couple of years and it’s like another person to relate to,” she said. As Alicia points out, she is now able to draw emotional support from a peer network that was originally founded on common interests in an effort to garner academic capital.

### ***Cocurricular-based Peer Networks***

Several of the study’s participants indicated that they have become involved in co-curricular experiences that have allowed them to form peer networks from which they have drawn advantages. In addition to moral and emotional support, these networks have fostered a sense of belonging to a campus that once appeared to be large and unfamiliar.

Alma, a sophomore, made her first friends at Metro State University during her Orientation program and still includes them in her current peer network. This experience inspired her to become employed as a Peer Leader and become trained to work for the university's Orientation program. The experience involved intense training and spending extensive time with other Peer Leaders with whom she lived during the summer that she was employed in that position. Many of the students who served as Peer Leaders with Alma that summer are still good friends and important members of Alma's peer network. She described the beneficial nature of this network to her building a sense of trust with peers on campus: "The friends I made contributed a lot but Peer Leader friends they were the most though. We would stay up in the apartment and talk about everything and share stuff about ourselves and I shared about my dad's alcoholism and how he used to hit my mom and me." Alma explained that this was a milestone for her because she is normally very self-protective and cautious.

The friendships she formed through her Peer Leadership experience allowed Alma to build a sense of trust with the other students in the program, thereby establishing a network from which she can access emotional and moral support. According to Alma: "I shared this story with the other Peer Leaders and it's because of things like that we're all so close because we all know these things about each other. We're all still friends too." Sharing this aspect of her personal life with her fellow Peer Leaders allowed Alma to develop a sense of trust in the individuals with whom she served in this role. While she describes the training and experience she obtained in this position to be transformative, sharing this experience with her fellow Peer Leaders and the relationships that grew from that summer resulted in a peer network upon which Alma is able to rely for emotional and moral support as well as encouragement.

A few students joined Greek organizations which connected them with pre-existing peer networks. The types of Greek organization to which these students were drawn vary, but they all serve similar purposes in their experiences as students at the university.

Gustavo transferred to Metro State from a community college at which he was very involved in student organizations and had many friends. Upon arriving to the university Gustavo found it more difficult to connect with other students even though he lives on campus and spent a lot of time alone. Just when he was at a loss for finding a way to connect with students with whom he has similar interests he received a letter inviting him to pledge to a national honor fraternity because of his grade point average. This invitation allowed Gustavo to easily connect with an established cocurricular peer network that helped him develop a sense of belonging as well as draw support.

According to Gustavo, membership in the fraternity fills a social void that he felt as a student at the university. He feels that “not having someone there always for support but just having someone there to hang out with and to talk to because like I don’t feel it’s healthy to be alone all the time. So even if it’s like, ‘Hey you want to go to the library and study together?’ that’s something I look for when looking for new friendships.” Now that Gustavo has made this connection he has discovered how his network can connect to others that will give him access to additional resources and social capital. “I’ve met a lot of people because of the fraternity and I’m still finding other ways to like spread my name I guess so I can get involved in things and get more friends,” he said. Having spent time at a community college at which he was well-known and very connected to students he came to Metro State only to find himself without a network of students from which to draw a sense of belonging. An academically oriented fraternity that is committed to service was a perfect fit for Gustavo as a student. Furthermore his

participation allowed him to access friendship, support, and membership in the campus community.

Gloria entered the university through an opportunity program that provides academic, personal, and financial support to its students. She participated in a summer bridge program that connected her to a group of peers that has provided her with encouragement, friendship, and motivation. Gloria also joined a multicultural sorority that she feels will “have her back” through all the challenges and obstacles she will be face while in college. While she is still well connected to her friends in her hometown, she explained that she and her sorority sisters all have the same interests. “We’re all in school and we’re focused on the same things. Like if I have a problem I will go to one of my sorority sisters. We created that bond so like, I trust them now,” she said. “Like if I’m down or if I’m having a problem at home I can come to their apartment and stay over they can help me financially or whatever it is, so it’s good.” Although Gloria has her hometown peer network from which she draw emotional support for personal problems, she asserts that her sorority sisters are able to provide her with the support she needs as a college student, an experience to which her hometown friends are unable to relate.

Marta joined a sorority through which she was instantly connected to a group of sisters. From that organization she also met other students involved in Greek organizations on campus. Marta explained, “I think that’s one of the reasons why I wanted to join an organization and meeting new people is obviously great because there’s always networking and like people are there for you.” She quickly pointed out that the sorority is predominantly White, “and yeah, there’s not that much diversity within my sorority. I make the diversity... You always do get those comments like ‘Oh, you’re Hispanic? You have that Latino flavor’ this and that. I’m like, yeah, I don’t feel it’s like...I don’t know...I’m like ‘OK, yeah.’ I just go along with it.” Marta

explained that these comments were made playfully, however they focused on how she is different from the rest of the group rather than creating an inclusive spirit within the sorority.

Marta also mentioned that she has noticed that some of its members do not share her perspective and values with regard to her ethnicity, immigrant background, and her family's socioeconomic status. She said, "Some people...I don't want to say White people, whatever...some of them are fortunate to have what they want and they don't know it and they don't know like how my family ...like how hard my parents have to work to get what they want and others don't. They're just fortunate to have not to struggle as much...I mean their parents don't have to struggle as much as my parents." While Marta's membership in the sorority provides her with an established peer network with which to socialize, the disaffirming responses from her sisters to her ethnicity and its lack of academic focus has left her with feelings of ambivalence. Her acceptance into a predominantly White sorority has granted her access to social capital that she would perhaps not have access to otherwise such as scholarship or career opportunities that are available to its membership.

In speaking with the students about their sources of peer support, the multiple and overlapping layers of networks became very evident. As many students are from or currently live in hometowns that are within a one hour driving distance from campus, several of the study's participants have friends from high school that attend Metro State University and these students have entered networks that consist of students they met on campus. At the same time, students belong to multiple networks, each of which offers valuable and various types of capital.

### *Intercultural Peer Interactions*

The supportiveness of the campus community to a population of students that comes from a marginalized background is critical to their ability to access the necessary social capital to thrive in that setting. Intercultural interactions between peers both within and outside the classroom have positive impact on campus climate, students' satisfaction with the college experience, and student learning (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). The stories shared by the study's participants illustrate how their intercultural interactions with peers have involved the sharing of knowledge and the provision of emotional and moral support. These dynamics, in turn, enhance students' sense of belonging on campus and gave them access to social and intercultural capital which are critical to their ability to negotiate their way through the university.

Elena's major, Chemistry-Pharmacy, draws in students from a variety of ethnicities, which has resulted in her interactions with ethnic groups that she had not previously come into contact. She states that she was expecting her classes to be diverse and she is glad they are, but admits the transition from her homogenous high school was an adjustment. She said, "We're all from different parts of [the state] and it's pretty cool getting to know different cultures and stuff. I mean I like to learn from different people and talk to different...I mean everybody has their own backgrounds and stuff." Elena's intercultural interactions have required that she step out of her "comfort zone" to experience the cultures of her classmates which have been rewarding learning experience. She added, "It's different. I mean last week I went to one of my classmate's house and it was like way different, you know. In a way I kind of felt uncomfortable because I felt like I didn't belong there but it's good to learn to meet new people from different places." By making connections with students from various cultural backgrounds, Elena is learning not

only what cultural differences may exist between her and her classmates, but also that there are many similarities.

When Milena entered the university she was placed into a learning community designed for students of color pursuing a major in Psychology. The program was a grant-based project coordinated by a faculty member in the Psychology department who facilitated the students' formation of classroom-based peer networks. Since that first semester experience the students formed a student club for their organization on campus, thereby providing the group with funds for activities geared toward students of color interested in the field of Psychology. "That program really helped us. So like it's like a very good circle of friends to have because they have some of the same aspirations and goals that I have," she added. Milena attributes her positive experience at Metro State to her participation in this program

Students in the Psychology Scholars Learning Community have remained connected since they were first placed in the program three years ago providing each other with emotional and moral support as well as funds of knowledge. For example, Milena pointed out that when students in the program are "preparing to go to grad school so as soon as they find something they shoot me an email like 'I found great vocabulary cards to take the GREs. They're in Barnes and Noble.'" The peer network also shares information amongst its membership about internship and career opportunities, graduate school, and credentialing. Because of the support they have been able to mobilize for each other, the group decided to operationalize its efforts and become a student club that is now chartered by the Student Government Association. Milena explains that with funding the group is trying to create a self-replicating source of support for other students of color interested in Psychology.

Juan, a senior majoring in Business, knew that going to college would expand his range of interactions to different ethnic and racial groups. He was born in Colombia and immigrated to the United States when he was five and attended public schools that were enrolled almost fully by other Latina/o students. He was prepared for this since he had actually investigated the demographics of the institutions to which he applied.

Having missed his housing deposit deadline, Juan did not get a room assignment at the start of first semester at Metro State University. He commuted to campus with some of his high school friends who were also attending the institution and later received a room assignment at a nearby hotel used by the university to accommodate overflow requests. Juan describes how his networks and interactions with different racial and ethnic groups changed as his housing assignments also changed, including his increased involvement with LASO, the Latin American Student Organization. Juan's experiences took him from a peer network that included Latina/os from his high school also attending Metro State to other networks that included students of various racial backgrounds, to a current network that features students from these networks as well as his friends from LASO. The process described by Juan chronicles his increasing interaction with students of variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds while also growing closer to his Latina/o culture.

A co curricular peer network that 14 of the 20 participants mentioned is the Latin American Student Organization, LASO. Some of these students were active members or had been at one time but could not continue because of scheduling conflicts. LASO is a Student Government Association funded group that holds weekly meetings and facilitates cultural and educational programming about the Latina/o experience. While the organization's membership

is predominantly Latina/o, several non-Latina/os are also active members and even serve on the executive board.

LASO has a presence on the campus of Metro State that goes beyond social programming. In many ways it serves as the voice of Latina/o students on campus. LASO's president serves on the President's Commission on Affirmative Action, on the Latina/o Caucus, and the advisory board for the Latin American and Latina/ Studies program. The impact of LASO on the collegiate experiences of many of the study's participants is reflective of Tierney's (1988) notion that colleges and universities are cultural organizations that are shaped by new members just as much as the organization shapes its members.

Membership in LASO was repeatedly mentioned throughout data collection. As the students spoke about the role that group played in their lives the meaning it served went beyond that of a student club. LASO was described as a vehicle that students used to network with other Latina/o students, as well as collaborate with various university departments. LASO also provides a forum through which the students explore their Latina/o culture while sharing their culture with the campus community. The perspectives offered by the students with regards to the importance of LASO and Latina/o friends in their collegiate lives supports González's (2000) theory of "cultural nourishment." González's purports that Latina/o students at PWIs find ways of using their peer networks to generate culturally relevant social capital to transform the university's institutional culture to be more representative of the Latina/os at the PWI which they attend.

Gabriela, a sophomore, is very involved in LASO and its Latina/o dance troupe. LASO has great importance to her as a student at Metro State. According to Gabriela, "It represents me and I can dance with it. It's cultural basically. I am able to express things. There's a lot of

support there within the community, the Latina/o community. So it's helped me a lot and educated me a lot here. I feel like...because being part of an organization in college is really important and I feel like being in an organization plus being able to relate to the organization is a big thing." While connecting to her Latina/o culture through LASO is important to Gabriela, working collaboratively with other cultural groups and University departments is equally important to Gabriela since it allows for intercultural interaction. She explained, "I have been able to relate to LASO a lot not only because I'm Latina but not only because it works with Latina/os but because it works with other cultures, ethnicities and races." For Gabriela, sharing her culture with others is just as important as delving deeper into her Latina/o roots.

One issue discussed with all of the study's participants was related to the ethnic identity of their peer network members. While all of these students indicated that they greatly appreciated the diversity of their campus, many also expressed a strong affinity for friends who are also Latina/os.

Marta, a sophomore majoring in Biology, does not find it very important to have a network of Latina/o friends. She points out that she has several networks of friends that allow her to connect with different groups of students. While she is a member of a predominantly White sorority, she is also a member of LASO. She points out that she also reconnects with her Latina/o friends when she is at home. These various networks allow Marta to interact with different groups. She explained, "I like the diversity because I get to learn from other cultures and like their insights on life and stuff." These opportunities are more important to Marta than interacting primarily with fellow Latina/os.

Gloria, on the other hand, places a great deal more value on having friends who share her ethnicity. These networks are of tremendous importance to her. She explains the reasons for her

preference as being “because I am very stuck to my culture no matter what I will always know that I am Ecuadorian and Colombian. I just feel more comfortable because we share something in common. I don’t know we’re always talking in Spanish or going to each other’s houses.” Having a shared worldview with members of her peer network is essential to Gloria, “[b]ecause I can relate to them and a lot of them I know that their father or mother were immigrants like mom. She has struggled since we got here and we can kind of relate.” Ultimately, Gloria connects the source of preference for Latino/a friends to comfort and familiarity.

A few students expressed a preference for Latina/o friends but also strongly appreciated having other friends of various ethnic and racial backgrounds. Alma feels a natural inclination toward Latina/os for friendship. She said, “You’re more comfortable. That’s why it’s important to have Latina/o friends and you don’t lose or forget where you come from. It just reminds you and enforces it a lot.” At the same time, Alma also values having friends of other ethnicities as well as she enjoys learning about other cultures and sharing her own with people from different backgrounds. Donna expressed sentiments similar to those of Alma. She finds her friendships with other Latina/os to be comfortable, familiar, and affirming. Donna noted, “[these friendships] are important because I guess we can share similar cultures and experiences to that effect, but I am also interested in learning about other cultures.” Their openness to such diverse peer interactions presents Alma and Donna with many opportunities to gain intercultural capital. As a result, these experiences can enable them to effectively negotiate their way through diverse ethnic and racial experiences on and off campus.

A few students did report that they have peer networks on campus that they tap into for support. These students are commuters who travel to and from campus, home, and work and do not engage with the campus outside of the classroom. These students did not view the university

as their source of social relationships since their ties to their hometown friends were very strong. Sandra and Daniela, both sophomores with the same major, attended the same high school and are from the same hometown. They carpool together to campus and have the same on-campus jobs. They view the university as a place to become better educated, not as place to become involved in co curricular experiences or to make friends. According to Sandra, “I don’t care for meeting anybody because I’m only here to study and that’s what I came here for. It doesn’t matter if I make friends here or not to because I already have friends at home.” Daniela expressed similar sentiments: “I haven’t made friends-friends, but they’re like people you say hi to and ask questions. I have two friends that are Spanish that go to this school so we go out for lunch together on campus. I made my friends in high school.” Sandra and Daniela present themselves as disinterested in campus life; however, they also do not have full knowledge of all that the university has to offer. They both stated that if perhaps they lived on campus or found out more about its organizations, they might place more value on co curricular activities and meeting other students.

### **Habitus**

I learned that, you know, everybody has their own culture so like in high school I always felt that I had to like prove myself one way or another because I am Latina so it was a lot of feelings of inferiority and like I’d have to prove myself in other ways. Like “Listen, I’m Latina. I can do this.” [sobbing] I guess I no longer have to prove myself because of my ethnicity whereas I can just reach out and do what I have to do without thinking “Well, I’m Latina. I can do this” or “I’m Latina. I can’t do this.” I just do it if I am capable of doing it if I have the ability to do it. (Selena, sophomore)

The participants exhibited impressive levels of resiliency, stamina, determination, and drive. They possessed all of these characteristics while in many cases dealing with challenges

and adversity that could easily push them over the edge and to quit school. Nonetheless, they persist.

### ***Mobilization of Capital for Habitus***

Bourdieu's concept of habitus is illustrated in the students' stories as they talk about how and why they persist at Metro State University. Bourdieu (1986) proposed this concept to explain how individuals achieve and desire social and economic goals by structuring mechanisms to work toward their advantage. Trueba (2002) suggested that "habitus is the result of early socialization and inculcation of values and beliefs" (p. 17). He added that among marginalized groups, such as first-generation Latina/o students of immigrant backgrounds, this socialization process, capital is mobilized to generate resilience and persistence. The stories shared by the participants describe adversity at multiple levels, yet also indicate how they have harnessed social capital from their families, educational institutions, and peers to achieve success. Their aspirations do not end with Metro State, however. Each of the students with whom I spoke has plans to attend graduate school and several of them look to enter into fields in which Latina/os are highly underrepresented.

Several students vividly described how they maintain their stamina and persist. All of them draw from their Latina/o identity while also recognizing that the stereotype that Latina/os cannot be successful still exists. Many of them expressed the goal of "proving them wrong" with "them" representing various forces that have tried to hold them back throughout their lives. The students' stories illustrate how they have drawn upon the social capital they received from their families, peers, and educational institutions to persist and strive toward their goals.

The stories shared by the study's participants revolve around encountering difficulties and finding ways to negotiate around these obstacles in order to persevere. Alma shares her perspective on coming up against such adversity,

I learned that it's a problem only if you let it affect you like a problem because there are a lot of options. I guess that's what I realized, that there are a lot of options and shouldn't think that when things don't come out the way you want them to the first time that it's over. No, you have to have perseverance. Yeah, that's what my aunt taught me, *perseverancia*. She always says that word "*perseverancia, perseverancia*" and that's what I realized is the most important thing. Now we are proving that we have the capacity to succeed, to be determined. We just want to show it off I think and make our own history. And when Latina/os get opportunities we're like now or never. That's what I see with my aunts and stuff, "*Si tiene la oportunidad, hagalo*" [If you have the opportunity, take it]. Do it, don't just think about it because opportunities don't come all the time. (Alma, sophomore)

The sense of will that comes through Alma's statement is powerful. She conveys a strong motivation to succeed, but not just an individual. Instead she speaks more broadly on behalf of first-generation Latina/os of immigrant backgrounds. Drawing strength from her culture and her family, she asserts that Latina/os are destined to be successful. Given the struggles that she has gone through to attend a four-year university as an undocumented student in this country, Alma has a keen sense of how one perseveres in the face of adversity.

Gabriela's motivation to persist comes from the inspiration she has received from successful Latinas and from her desire to break the stereotype that Latina/os cannot achieve success. To do this, Gabriela believes she has had to learn more about herself as a Latina/o and as a woman. She finds that pushing against this negativity and focusing on what she strives to achieve is what propels her forward toward her degree. Her goal is "to be very successful and do something and then be like 'Look, I've worked this hard and look where I am now.' I've learned that, I've realized that every day and every year that like I go through college that I am one step closer and that I can actually do it. I can tell someone else to be quiet and not talk because I

actually made it,” she concluded. Gabriela understands that she is working against a societal stereotype, but asserts that by earning degree her she will be able to say “Look, I’ve worked this hard and look where I am now” to those who doubted her.

Elena and Pilar realize that they are pursuing paths that have not been followed by many Latinas. Elena, who is working toward a Chemistry-Pharmacy degree, shared, “Some people see me and they’re like “Oh, you’re Puerto Rican?” like very stereotypical and like “Oh, you’re a science major and you’re smart?” And I’m like “Yeah…” I mean what does that have to do with anything?” Rather than cowering under the doubt and criticism, Elena remarked, “That kind of pushes me forward because anyone can do it.” Pilar plans to get a graduate degree in Physical Therapy and keeps her focus on this goal realizing that “you don’t see many Latinos as professionals.” Pilar contended, “You want to be able to be like ‘Oh, I’m going to be a Physical Therapist and I’m Latina/o.’ So it’s good. It pushes you a little more to know that you’re able to do it.” For these two women, the underrepresentation of Latina/os in these fields encourages them to make their dreams become reality.

Donna asserts individual willpower is the key to overcoming the discouragement Latina/os often encounter as they strive to achieve their goals. She believes that “[a]long the road there are going to be plenty people that I think are going to bring you down but that’s when you have to prove them wrong.” According to Donna, higher education is a vehicle for Latina/os to overcome and to improve circumstances of their communities. She concluded, “I feel just taking that step and applying to college and actually getting accepted and being here so far two years I feel that’s just the beginning of that achievement because coming from [her hometown], everyone pushes you ‘Come on, you have to go to college.’”

## **Conclusion**

The stories told by the first-generation Latina/o student participants in this study illustrate the ways that they access social capital from their families, peers, and institutions to persist at Metro State University. This chapter described the achievements and challenges of these students as they negotiate their way through various settings accessing and exchanging social capital along the way. Through this process first-generation Latina/o students mobilize social capital from the very elements of their sociocultural and immigrant backgrounds often thought to be impediments to their success. In their own words, these students described how they utilized the social capital they accessed to gain strength and persist at Metro State University.

## CHAPTER 5

As the population of the United States becomes increasingly diverse, the changing demographics are reflected in the enrollment in higher education. US Census Bureau (2008) data suggest that within the next fifteen years children of color will comprise more than half of all children in country. Consequently, the composition of the nation's college campuses will increasingly reflect this shift in demographic. These changes will be expressed in the population of first-generation college students, among which the proportion Latina/os was the highest of all groups in 2005, 38.2 percent (Higher Education Research Institute, 2007, pp. 5-6). Coinciding with this change in demographics had been an increased disparity in outcomes for these students compared to their White counterparts. This gap demonstrates the need for institutions to respond by creating learning environments that support and encourage the success of its newest members to the academy (American Council on Education, 2007).

While diversity in higher education is often represented numerically, this diversity is also expressed through the various cultures and capital that students bring with them to their campuses. In particular, the increasing enrollment of students of color at institutions where they have been historically underrepresented has brought new challenges and opportunities for higher education. With the rapid increase of Latina/os in the general population, their enrollment has

increased dramatically at college and universities around the country (Hurtado et al., 1999). These circumstances present a compelling need for higher education to better understand the dynamics at the nexus where the cultures of first-generation Latina/os and PWIs meet. Such an investigation informs higher education institutions of the processes by which first-generation Latina/o students negotiate their way through the culture of a PWI to persist and succeed.

This qualitative study explored the experiences of first-generation Latina/o students as they strive to persist at a PWI. My interpretation of this group's persistence was contextualized within the social and cultural factors that shape their experiences at the institution. Informed by Stanton-Salazar's work, I conducted twenty individual interviews with students and these data collected served as the primary source for this research. I then interpreted these students' stories using a framework that explores the interplay between sociocultural factors and institutional support. In this dissertation, I presented the students' stories to explain the role that support from families, peers, and educational institutions play on their persistence at a PWI, Metro State University.

### **Telling their Stories**

Whereas many stories have prefaces that provide a history and background knowledge for their readers, the prefaces provided by the study's participants have no ending. Their stories of persistence began long before they first enrolled at Metro State University and their histories and backgrounds serve as central themes to the stories they tell today. Through their descriptions, the students explain how the three factors contributed to their childhood socialization and continued to play a significant role as college students who negotiate through various institutions and systems.

Commonly held conceptions of persistence are based on Tinto's theory of student departure (1993) in which he asserted that full academic and social integration are essential to student retention. To achieve this full integration, students need to separate from their homes and communities to fully immerse and assimilate into their campuses. The findings of this study reveal that while first-generation Latina/o students of immigrant backgrounds attend higher education institutions as individuals, they are still inextricably connected to their families, communities, and their culture. In this context "separation" is not feasible or applicable as the sociocultural factors of family, community, and culture are intertwined and interdependent in the experiences of the first-generation Latina/o students who participated in this study.

This study identifies sources of social capital that first-generation Latina/o students access from their families, peer networks, and educational institutions as they negotiate their way through their college experience and persist at a PWI. While the goal of their interactions with these sources of support is to garner social capital from which they can benefit, it is important to note that some of interactions with these sources of support are not always supportive and result in decapitalizing experiences.

The three research questions that guided this study are considered below based on the interpretation of the students' stories through the introduced conceptual framework.

***What role does family support play in the persistence of first-generation Latina/o students attending a PWI?***

The impact of family support on the persistence of study's participants cannot be underestimated. Every student attributed their family's involvement in their education as the

primary reason for their attendance and continued enrollment. This consensus held even for students whose parents had little to no familiarity with higher education.

The significance of family support to the study's participants is contextualized within the role of families in Latina/o culture. The students' described experiences in which support was imparted to them by their parents using culturally specific constructs. As all of the students' parents were immigrants, the prevalence of such practices appears to be reflective of Latina/o cultural values. The reported use of *consejos* (nurturing advice) by the students' parents is consistent with the practices described by Valenzuela (1999) and Stanton-Salazar (2001). According to Valenzuela (1999) parental use of *consejos* guide the upbringing of children by teaching them *educación* (moral, social, and personal responsibility) so that they become *bien educada/o* (well-mannered, respectful, well-educated). As the foundation for all learning, *educación*, a socialization process, happens at home and then continues when children attend school (Auerbach, 2006; Valenzuela, 1999). Many of the study's participants described the encouragement that they received from their parents to attend college came in this culturally relevant form. Although their parents were unacquainted with the college-going process or the demands of higher education, they knew that it was a means for their children to have a better quality of life as adults.

As the parents of all the students in the study are immigrants, their hopes and aspirations for their children are pronounced by their motivation for coming to this country. Whether the students were born in the United States or in Latin America, the message to them was clear, "*esta es tu oportunidad*" (this is your opportunity). All of the students described how their parents worked long hours performing strenuous manual labor, making sacrifices to manage the family's expenses. This image is one that the students recall respectfully but painfully as they

recognized the toll that this way of life has on their parents. Growing up in communities with high immigrant populations and classmates who did not graduate from high school or even attend college, their parents' aspirations for the study's participants are inspiring, but also weighty because of associated pressure to succeed and the lack of tacit knowledge these first-generation students have in regards to the culture of higher education.

The students' stories also need to be interpreted using the construct of *familismo* to fully understand the role of family support in the persistence of first-generation Latina/o students at Metro State University. As stated in chapter two, *familismo* is a Latina/o cultural norm that involves maintaining strong bonds with one's nuclear and extended family members, fulfilling one's family obligations, and having strong belief in the importance of family support.

*Familismo* is a vehicle of socialization by which parents provide their children with culturally relevant forms of social capital to persevere through the demands of higher education (Valenzuela & Dornsbuch, 1994).

Family encouragement to attend and persist at a university does come with the expectation that the study's participants assume and fulfill their responsibilities as family members. While several students described this exchange to be empowering and manageable, that was not the case for all. Some expressed stress and anxiety over the multiple demands they had to manage and dreaded the idea of ever disappointing their family with low or failing grades given the sacrifices their families have made to help them pay for college. In this respect family support is a double-edged sword for those students who become overwhelmed by the duties and demands of home, work, and college as the pressure can have adverse affects on their academic performance.

Among mainstream educational systems, family involvement in the student's educational experience is commonly thought to be an active process in which parents attend events hosted by the university or complete tasks that enable or facilitate the student's attendance.

Socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic factors can marginalize parents, often precluding them from such involvement. At the same time, however, involvement in this manner is not a culturally-preferred mode among Latina/o families. Instead, family involvement in their students' educational experience occurs at home through culturally relevant vehicles, such as *consejos* and *educación*, which are not often recognized by mainstream schools and educators.

The level of responsibility that the study's participants assume in order to persist has contributed to their independence and resourcefulness. As their parents were unfamiliar with higher education and the college-going process, students often took on the responsibility for completing various forms and seeking out answers to questions about financial aid. In doing so, they found ways to navigate through systems with which they were unfamiliar to access the social capital they needed to complete the college application and selection processes. Once the students began college, they continued to have such responsibilities, while working over 20 hours a week, maintaining their grade point averages, and in some cases fulfilling their obligations at home. Despite the challenges that come with managing these demands, the process of overcoming them has been capital producing for the study's participants as they have taken the strength and knowledge they have gained and have applied to the process by which they negotiate through their experiences at Metro State University.

***What role does institutional support play in the persistence of first-generation Latina/o students attending a PWI?***

According to Stanton-Salazar's (2001) framework, institutional support is a multifaceted construct that is an act of bridging and comprises both a process and a tangible resource (p. 268). Stanton-Salazar identifies six forms of institutional support in his study of kin and public school networks among Mexican-American youth. Two of these forms, funds of knowledge as well as emotional and moral support, were examined in this study. Funds of knowledge offer social capital to individuals in the form of institutional-specific information and networking skills that allow them to decode educational systems. Emotional and moral support promotes effective participation and coping skills within these educational systems. Examples of these two forms of support were identified in the stories the student participants shared about their high school and college experiences.

The high school experiences of the study's participants were varied in terms of the level of preparation the students received for college. Among the study's participants, a direct connection existed between the track students were placed in high school and their perceived sense of readiness for the academic and social demands they encountered at the University. Students who took classes on the regular-track reported several decapitalizing experiences. They described feeling invisible at their high schools and passed along. They were offered little attention by their teachers and guidance counselors who focused most of their attention on maintaining decorum. Furthermore, several students argued that teachers and guidance counselors simply did not convey any interest in their learning or development. Given the academic challenges they had to confront, these students question the level of rigor of their high school curricula and the effectiveness of their teachers. As most students in the high schools

were on the regular-track they were treated as though they were dispensable and many of these students slipped through the cracks unnoticed.

Students who were on the college-bound tracks at their high schools were socialized to attend higher education institutions. They were encouraged to participate in summer programs at local colleges, taken on campus tours, and offered advanced placement and honors courses. Their teachers and guidance counselors regularly mentioned the need to be prepared for college and directed them to apply to four-year institutions.

There were exceptions to the type of attention afforded to students who were on college tracks. Alma and Celia, both undocumented, were very strong academically during high school yet discouraged by their guidance counselors from applying to four-year institutions despite their families' ability to pay tuition. These two students perceived the reasons behind their decapitalizing experiences to be based on bias. As this study was conducted in the spring of 2010 while debates over immigration were actively taking place across the country, recalling these experiences was particularly painful for both these students.

The identified sources of institutional support at Metro State University most mentioned by the study's participants were the campus environment and individual faculty members. In many ways, these two aspects of the University have provided the study's participants with positive experiences. The climate of the Metro State University campus was repeatedly described by the study's participants as inclusive. Some stated that they simply felt a "vibe" that they as Latina/os, along with students of other races and ethnicities, were part of the campus community. Coming from homogenous communities to one that was diverse was a transition for many of them, yet they all stated that they felt welcomed.

Consistent with the framework introduced by Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, and Allen (1999) for considering institutional diversity, the document analysis revealed that Metro State has many characteristics of a diverse campus. In addition to its demographics, the University has a long history of exhibiting its academic and administrative commitment to honoring, promoting, and maintaining its institutional diversity. These elements have all contributed to fostering a campus climate that the study's participants believe has provided them with emotional support and a sense of belonging. These aspects of Metro State have also increased their intercultural capital, which Nuñez (2009) argues enables students to negotiate their way through culturally unfamiliar systems. The institutional diversity of the Metro State supports the students' learning experience while also validating their membership to at the University.

Students were frequently able to pinpoint faculty members with whom they had connected and had provided them with affirming experiences. This connection was profound for students who had taken regular-track classes in high school in which they and their teachers were disengaged. These participants found the instruction they received from their faculty to be challenging and intellectually stimulating. Furthermore, they found these faculty members to be accessible and interested in their academic and career development. Through these funds of knowledge, the students received social capital that was profitable to them for their academic enhancement. Although a few students stated that they were frustrated and annoyed that some of their faculty were almost as disengaged as their high school teachers, most students were satisfied and appreciative of their faculty. Students indicated that they found their classes to open and engaging environments where faculty treated them respectfully and with the expectation that they could perform above and beyond the level expected of college students.

While several students had questions related to their academic and career development and were in need of academic support, many of them did not seek out the support of campus resources that could assist them. When asked whether they sought out the help, participants generally responded by stating that they “had not gotten around to it.” They mentioned turning to their peer networks as sources of information and support, however the advice they received from their peers were not always effective or accurate.

These help-seeking behaviors are consistent with those described by Stanton-Salazar (2001) for students who do not have *confianza en confianza* with institutional agents. While almost every student who participated in the study stated that they found Metro State to be a welcoming campus, their help-seeking behaviors do raise questions as to why some students did not make better use of the university services. The question that remains is whether these behaviors are carry-overs from their high school experiences or if these students are reacting to invalidating interactions with institutional agents at Metro State.

***What role does peer support play in the persistence of first-generation Latina/o students attending a PWI?***

The role of peer support in the persistence of the study’s participants is mitigated somewhat by the geographic proximity of the University to their hometowns. As many of the study’s participants are commuters, their ties to their communities are still very strong. Even those who live on campus are from cities that are a short distance from the campus. For some students the connections they had with friends from their communities were still very important to them, in some cases more so than the friends they had made on campus. These different peer networks serve their own distinct purposes related to the persistence of study’s participants.

Maintaining peer support networks in their community and at the University requires students to have a foot in each of these worlds. Doing so, as stated by Trueba (2002), allows them to manage multiple identities and define themselves in each of these cultural settings.

The role of hometown peer networks in the persistence of the study's participants needs to be considered within the context of the communities in which these students live. Given the low high school graduation rates and the even lower college attendance rates, the educational pursuits of the study's participants are not the norm. The aspiration to attain a college degree requires the participants to acquire social capital to succeed in higher education. Once attaining the degree, they will have opportunities that are currently not available to most members of their community. In many ways, pursuing a college education is also a means by which these students can gain social capital to leave their communities. The students stated that this goal is often perceived admirably by friends in their community, but sometimes viewed with resentment and suspicion. Nonetheless, some students considered these friendships to be more valuable than those that they had made on campus since their hometown friends were able to understand them at a deeper level. Students who expressed that they were beginning to lose the ability to relate to their hometown friends did so with a sense of remorse and loss. These connections are important for students to maintain in order to have a sense of belonging in the towns in which they still live or return to on weekends.

Students also formed peer support networks to gain access to social capital toward academic enhancement and developing a sense of belonging at the University. Many of the students mentioned that these networks were formed primarily through the contacts they made through their major classes since they were able to see the same individuals over several semesters. Classroom-based peer networks were used mostly for managing the demands of their

classes and for obtaining information about their majors and career interests. These networks connected the study's participants to funds of knowledge as well as moral and emotional support.

Cocurricular-based peer networks served as means by which the study's participants were able to develop a sense of belonging on campus and access intercultural capital. Through fraternities, sororities, and other organizations, the participants connected with other students, many of whom are from a variety of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. These networks facilitated intercultural learning outside of the classroom and allow the study's participants to garner emotional and moral support. However, a number of students indicated a preference for Latina/o friends in their peer network since they find these relationships to be more comfortable. These students claimed that they were better able to relate to peers who come from a similar sociocultural background, although many of these students still enjoy being in a diverse environment and interacting with people from various cultural groups.

Gravitating toward Latina/o friends as a preference echoes González's (2000) concept of "cultural nourishment." He asserted that Latina/o students often attend PWIs where their culture is underrepresented encouraging them to find ways within to receive "cultural nourishment." and that these efforts can transform the institutional culture to be more representative of Latina/os at the PWI they attend. A prime example of González's concept of "cultural nourishment" on the campus of Metro State University is the Latin American Student Organization (LASO). A significant majority of the participants were members of the organization that facilitates social, cultural, and educational programming about the Latina/o experience. Many of the participants who are LASO members indicated that they joined the organization to stay connected to their culture and to meet more Latina/o students. Interestingly, despite coming from a Latina/o

community, a few students said they found LASO to be very valuable to them as the organization prompted them to explore their culture at a deeper level than they ever had before.

### **The Role of Habitus in the Persistence of First-Generation Latina/os**

The drive and determination exhibited by the study's participants was anchored in the three sources of support explored in this study. The students, who are from immigrant and marginalized backgrounds, have mobilized the social capital they have received to fuel their persistence and resilience. Included in this capital is their ethnic pride. As suggested by Trueba (2002), rather than giving up because of the adversity they have experienced, these students have risen up against their challenges using the support they have received to get to this point in their lives. A majority of students stated that their motivation to succeed is based on their desire to "prove them wrong," that is, that as Latina/os they can and will succeed. Among the groups that the students defined "them" included former teachers, former guidance counselors, society, racists, and others. As discussed in chapter four, all of these students plan to attend graduate school and several aspire to enter into careers in which Latina/os are sorely underrepresented.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Within all studies are limitations to their design and implementation. These potential limitations were considered and addressed in chapter three and addressed here at the close of the research project. These include the length of the study, the underrepresentation of males in the participant pool, and the limitations of the researcher.

### ***Length of the Study***

This study was conducted within a three month period during which time I conducted one-hour long interviews with the student participants and analyzed the collected data. The chosen research design was used to hear from the students themselves about the experiences that contributed to their decisions to go to college and those that have allowed them to persist. Rather than conducting an in-depth ethnographic study, the focus of this qualitative research was to gather from the students their perceptions of their experiences and the impact of the identified sources of support. Given the intent of the study, the methodology used was a good fit for yielding the needed data to answer the three research questions.

### ***Size of the Participant Pool***

I initially designed the participant pool to include twenty-six sophomores, thirteen men and thirteen women. After making several attempts to recruit enough students that matched the target group and not yielding those results, I decided to expand the pool to include junior and seniors in order to reach an acceptable number of student volunteers for the study. I deliberately avoided including first-year students in the study because of my role leading first-year retention initiatives at the research site. Although the final participant pool was slightly smaller and the class standings of this group were broader than originally intended, the collected data was robust and provided significant results.

### ***The Underrepresentation of Males in the Study***

As I attempted to recruit a participant pool of an acceptable size, I noticed the underrepresentation of male students who had responded to volunteer for the study. I decided to try other approaches to increase not just the overall number of students, but also to pull in a larger number of male participants. I visited LASO and Greek Council meetings, met students, and extended personal invitations to some of the men that I knew were first-generation students. While several of them responded positively to the purpose of my study, only a few (three) followed through with their actual participation. While the men who participated contributed a great deal to the study, the overall results are not as representative of the experiences of males as of females.

### ***Limitations of the Researcher***

As an administrator at the research site I have an intimate awareness of the University and its functioning. This knowledge allowed me to understand how to reach students to participate in the study as well as the institutional culture. Admittedly, there are perhaps certain biases with which I have interpreted the data; my use of faculty and staff interviews as well as the document analysis allowed for triangulation to increase the validity of the study.

As a first-generation Latina of immigrant parents, the stories told by the study's participants resonate with me personally. My background allowed me to develop a rapport and comfort with the students I interviewed. As many of the students in the study have been marginalized by educational institutions, it was important that they had a sense of trust in my intent. My ability to relate to the students' experiences has been an asset to interpreting and analyzing the collected data. I have a deep understanding of the sociocultural constructs that

have influenced the students' socialization into their communities and the educational systems with which they have interacted. To avoid inserting bias into my interpretation of the data I have taken proper steps through triangulation and used multiple sources.

### **Implications for Future Research**

While this research has contributed to the body of research that exists on first-generation Latina/o students at PWIs, the study has raised new and additional questions for future research. An important issue that this study could not adequately explore was the persistence of first-generation Latino males. The literature available on this subject is scant. This lack of research is problematic given the disparity in student outcomes for Latino males compared to males of other ethnic groups (Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009). Issues associated with access, persistence, and social capital for first-generation Latino males remain missing from the literature and need to be investigated so that higher education institutions can better support this group toward graduation.

Stanton-Salazar (2001) has researched the help-seeking behaviors of Mexican American youth and provided a strong theoretical foundation for studying these behaviors. Although students in the study indicated that they were in need of the services offered by various offices at Metro State University, they neglected to seek out the support of these departments. This behavior raises the question as to whether students with negative help-seeking behaviors in urban high schools carry over such patterns once enrolled at higher education institutions. This is another area for future research that would fill a gap in the study of Latina/os in higher education and offer insights into the help-seeking patterns of other subpopulations that do not readily access support from institutional agents.

## **Recommendations for Practice**

During the course of this research the student participants and the faculty staff all made recommendations for improvements at the University that would better support the persistence of first-generation Latina/o students and create a more inclusive campus environment. I present the most salient recommendations for practice that are based on the conceptual framework of this study.

### ***Increase Opportunities for Family Involvement***

One of the most pronounced results of this study is the power of family support in the persistence of the participants. Metro State University provides a great deal of information to prospective students and families about all that the campus has to offer, however all of its publications and electronic information are available only in English. Celia's story of the visit she and her mother made to the University stresses the importance of having staff who can communicate with the public in the second most commonly spoken language in the country. Often when staff members are able to communicate in another language it is by chance. Operationalizing the bilingual communicability of key offices, such as Financial Aid, Admissions, and the Bursar's Office would allow Spanish-speaking parents to assist their students with the college-going process. These offices could also offer parents presentations in Spanish at recruitment or accepted student events.

While *educación* occurs in the home, parents who have been marginalized have little choice but to contain their involvement to their homes since educational institutions do not always create opportunities to offer input or assistance. Simple adjustments to practice such as translating website information directed to parents into Spanish can open the door to their

involvement and understanding in their children's education. Given that the students' parents spoke with them when they were as young as ten years-old about attending college, making outreach to students and their families while they are in middle school would be affirming to these families. This contact would also give such Latina/o families insights into the college-going process that they do not have because of their levels of educational attainment.

### ***Institutional Support for the Effort of Faculty and Staff***

The support offered by faculty and staff to first-generation Latina/o students is critical to the persistence of these students. Students found out about these institutional agents and incorporated them into their support networks since they were able to provide these students with valuable sources of social capital. The faculty and staff identified by the students offered support in ways that was beyond the scope of the positions they hold at the University. The faculty and staff reported that they do what they do because they believed it was a moral obligation to support Latina/o students on campus.

The challenge for these institutional agents is that there are no rewards or recognition connected for their efforts. This deficiency is particularly challenging for faculty who in some ways devote time to mentor and advise Latina/o students at the expense of their research and without their efforts contributing to their promotion and tenure. Recognizing such efforts would reward those faculty and staff who work with students in need of such support and encourage other institutional agents to extend themselves more than they currently do.

### *Invest in Developing Cultural Translators*

The study's participants were first-generation students who entered the University without the tacit knowledge of how to negotiate their way through higher education institutions. Additional challenges these students brought with them was that either they or their parents were immigrants to this country and are from cities with low socioeconomic and educational levels. Very often, universities expect their students to proactively seek out help and expect that students will educate themselves about institutional policies, procedures, and resources. The study's participants, including those who were juniors, indicated that they still did not have an understanding of how to negotiate their way through the institution and its culture. The percentage of students with a profile resembling those in this study is increasing nationwide and the services offered by higher education institutions need to be improved with this population in mind.

It is important that faculty and administrators recognize that an increasing number of students need to be educated on the most basic aspects of higher education institutions. Building off of de Anda's notion of "cultural translators" (1984, pp. 103-104), such individuals would serve to assist first-generation Latina/o students in building their understanding of the university's institutional culture and how to negotiate their way through its systems. This knowledge includes providing students with the definitions of the terms that institutional agents use regularly and teaching them how universities are organized. Furthermore, higher education institutions need to evaluate the accessibility of their advisement and academic support services. This includes examining caseload sizes and the help-seeking behaviors of first-generation Latina/o students on their campuses in order for these students to better connect with institutional

agents on their campuses who can impart to them social capital that will enable to persist to graduation.

### **Conclusion**

The stories shared by the study's participants illustrate that the factors that contribute to the persistence of first-generation Latina/os in higher education do not necessarily fit within the mold created by the students who have historically attended higher education institutions. In fact, the very factors that had been thought to be impediments to student success are actually important sources of strength for these students. The results of this research demonstrate that support from family, educational institutions, and peers provide these students with valuable social capital that they mobilize for their persistence. Furthermore, Metro State has fostered an inclusive campus culture which has been an important element in the institution in providing the study's participants with a sense of belonging at the University. Based on the accounts provided by the students in the study, the institution has done well in supporting their persistence.

PWIs have much to gain from hearing the stories of first-generation Latina/os on their campuses. As more of these students become members of the academy, it is essential that these institutions respond proactively so that first-generation Latina/os may have greater opportunities to fulfill their dreams and those of their families.

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## **APPENDIX**

## Student Interview Protocol

1. Please tell me about your decision to go to college.
  - a. Who helped you make this decision?
  - b. When did you decide that you would be going to college?
2. How did your high school prepare you for college?
  - a. Who were the individuals that were most helpful?
3. What did you expect college to be like?
  - a. How is it living up to that expectation?
4. How do you spend your time when you're not in class?
  - a. Do you work? Number of hours?
5. What has been most challenging for you as a college student?
  - a. What helps you persevere through these challenges?
6. What kind of support does your family offer you?
  - a. What about extended family members?
  - b. Any difference in their involvement from high school to college?
7. Who are the individuals you can turn to as a college student for support?
  - a. How did you find out about them?
8. Can you tell me about the friends that you made since you've been at the university?
  - a. What kind of support do they offer you?
  - b. How important is it to you that they are also Latina/os?

- c. If a Spanish speaker – How important is it they can speak Spanish with you?
  
- 9. How involved are you in campus activities?
  - a. If involved – what organizations or activities?
  - b. If not involved – explain choice?
  
- 10. Please tell me about the university services you've used.
  - a. How did they help you?
  
- 11. What stands out to you most about your classes and your faculty?
  - a. How helpful have your faculty been?
  - b. What impression do you have of your classmates?
  
- 12. What messages does the University send you, as a first-generation Latina/o student that you are a valuable part of the University community?
  - a. How are these messages sent?
  
- 13. What have you learned about yourself since you started college?
  - a. What are your plans from here?

## **Faculty & Staff Interview Protocol**

1. You were identified by the first-generation Latina/o students participating in this study as a significant person who has provided them with support.
  - a. Do you see yourself in that role too?
  - b. Why do you think you were identified by the students as such?
2. Describe how did you developed this relationship with first-generation Latina/o students.
  - a. Have the students you first connected with referred other students to you as well?
  - b. How often do these students seek you out?
3. What kind of institutional support do you offer?
  - a. What about personal support?
  - b. Which do first-generation Latina/o students rely on most?
4. How, if at all, is the support you offer first-generation Latina/o students within the scope of your official position at the University?
  - a. Do you feel your efforts are supported by the institution?
5. What else do these students gain from their relationship with you?
  - a. Where else at the University can they access similar support?

6. What role does trust have in the interactions first-generation Latina/o students have with faculty and staff?
  - a. How have you relayed a sense of trust to them?
7. Based on your experiences, what do first-generation Latina/o students need most from the University?
  - a. What is most affirming to them?
  - b. What is most disaffirming?
8. Should the University operationalize what you offer these students?
  - a. If so, what would that look like at the University?
  - b. If not, why not?
9. What do you think would happen to these students if you did not support them the way you do?
  - a. What role do you think you play in helping them to persist at the University?
10. Is it important to you to be recognized as an advocate by these students?
  - a. Why or why not?
11. Anything else you would like to add that we haven't yet spoken about?

### List of Students Who Participated in the Study

I interviewed twenty first-generation Latina/o students for this study. The table below lists these students using the names by which they were identified in the dissertation. The students were assigned pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity.

<b>Student</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Residence</b>	<b>Other Information</b>
Selena	Junior	Psychology & Italian	Commuter	Psychology club; former Peer Leader; not working
Gabriela	Junior	Family & Child Studies	Resident	LASO; Works 20 hours a week as a student assistant position at the Children's Center on campus
Elena	Junior	Chemistry – Pharmacy	Commuter	LASO; works 38 hours a week at a real estate office and a restaurant
Rita	Junior	Psychology	Commuter	Former Peer Leader; LASO; sorority; works 10 hours a week as a student assistant on campus
Gustavo	Junior	Psychology	Resident	Honor Fraternity; works 10 hours a week in a work-study position
Alicia	Junior	Photography	Resident	Former Peer Leader; works 20 hours a week as a student assistant in the Photography Lab
Pilar	Sophomore	Psychology	Resident	LASO, EMT; works 25 hours in retail
Kim	Sophomore	Physical Education	Commuter	LASO; works 21 hours a week at a restaurant and 5 hours a week at the Rec Center; cares for ailing grandmother; mentor to children with disabilities

Sandra	Sophomore	Family & Child Studies	Commuter	No club activity; works 20 hours a week in a work study position
Daniela	Sophomore	Family & Child Studies	Commuter	No club activity; works 20 hours a week in a work study position
Gloria	Junior	Psychology	Commuter	Multicultural Sorority, LASO; works part-time at the emergency room at a local hospital
Celia	Junior	Family & Child Studies	Commuter	No club activity; works 40 hours a week; 2 hour commute one-way to campus on public transportation; undocumented
Donna	Sophomore	Mathematics	Commuter	LASO; works 20 hours a week in retail
Alma	Sophomore	Business	Commuter	International Business Club; learning Chinese; former Peer Leader, LASO; Intramural Soccer; works 24 hours a week at a restaurant
Carlos	Junior	History	Commuter	Latin Fraternity, LASO; works 48 hours a week with father doing manual labor
Marta	Sophomore	Biology	Commuter	Sorority, LASO; works 20 hours a week in retail
Milena	Sophomore	Psychology	Commuter	Minority Psychology Scholars; works 16 hours a week teaching dance to children

Samantha	Senior	Broadcasting	Resident	Community Assistant, former Peer Leader; works 20 hours a week in a work-study position
Laura	Senior	Psychology	Commuter	No club activity; works full-time; evening courses
Juan	Senior	Business	Resident	LASO President; works 20 hours a week as a student assistant on campus