Nuestras Experiencias: A Phenomenological Study of Latina First Generation Higher Education Graduates

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NUESTRAS EXPERIENCIAS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF LATINA FIRST GENERATION HIGHER EDUCATION GRADUATES

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Doctor of Educational Leadership

Department of Educational Leadership
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The Graduate College

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THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

We recommend the dissertation prepared under our supervision by

**Diana E. Cruz**

entitled

**Nuestras Experiencias: A Phenomenological Study of Latina First Generation Higher Education Graduates**

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Doctor of Educational Leadership**  
Department of Educational Leadership

Edith Rusch, Committee Chair  
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May 2012
A review of the literature indicates that Latinos lag behind White and African American students in higher education degree attainment. This educational gap is of concern because Latinos are the largest minority group in the United States, and the Latino population is expected to increase in the future. Higher education degree attainment for Latinos is vital because statistics show an undeniable relationship between degree attainment and income level. In order to ensure the economic well being of Latinos, it is important that Latinos persist through university degree programs. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of “at risk” Latina first generation college graduates. The study explored the personal, institutional and environmental factors that contributed to their success. Phenomenology was utilized to capture the essence of their experiences. Data for this study came from the in-depth interviews of Latina participants who attended K-12 public schools prior to entering a university setting. The narrative data from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed to gain an understanding of the factors that influenced
the success of a group of Latina students who pursued higher education degrees and earned at minimum a bachelor’s degree.

Through the exploration of the participants’ lived experiences during their pursuit of higher education, the themes which emerge are directly related to the various types of capital and social assets that are embodied within the Community Cultural Wealth framework: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant. The findings suggest that the women’s own desire for educational attainment, family expectations, and emotional support were key factors in their educational success.

Through the exploration of the participants’ lived experiences during their pursuit of higher education, the themes which emerge are directly related to the various types of capital and social assets that are embodied within the Community Cultural Wealth framework, such as aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant. The findings suggest that the women’s own desire for educational attainment, family expectations, and emotional support were key factors in their educational success.
Acknowledgements

Faculty, friends, and family members have helped me to complete this dissertation. I would like to express my gratitude to these individuals for their support, assistance and inspiration.

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I would never have been able to finish my dissertation without the guidance of my dissertation committee, Dr. Ackerman, Dr. Sonya Horsford, and Dr. Anita Revilla. Each one has generously given their time and expertise to better my work. I thank them for their contribution and their good-natured support.

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Nobody has been more important to me in the pursuit of this project than the members of my family. My mother for always expecting the best of me, Titi Fela, Uncle Michael, Uncle Junior and Titi Marisol who have always provided me with never ending inspiration and support. I also credit my daughter Jaiden, for inspiring and amazing me every day. My paper is finished now and we will have a lot more mommy and daughter time.

And last but not least, I am most grateful to the seven women in this study who have shared their innermost personal experiences with me – ¡Si se puede!
Dedication

I wish to dedicate this dissertation to my mother Gloria, Titi Fela, Titi Marisol, Uncle Junior and Uncle Michael, and friends who have modeled resiliency and success in life. Finally, I dedicate this to my daughter Jaiden for always making me feel like I can do anything.
When I hear educators discuss the “limitations” of their low-income students, I cannot help but think of my own educational experiences. Many of these educators are unaware of the fact that I myself was by their definition an “at risk” student. During the late 1970’s up to the late 1980’s, I was considered “at risk” because of my low socio-economic status, average grades (“Cs”) from 6th to 8th grade, and was parented by a single mother with a 9th grade education. Despite those life circumstances, my education began in 1975 at a Chicago Public School pre-school and today I am pursuing a doctorate in Educational Leadership at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Many of the educators in my past would probably find this shocking.

Elementary school was a time of many struggles for me. I received satisfactory or unsatisfactory grades during most of those years. My teachers often spoke to my mother about my lack of interest, lack of ability, lack of skills, and/or negative behavior. A look at my academic abilities during my elementary school days would reveal to all my teachers that I was approximately 2 years below grade level and possessed only adequate math skills.

During my early school years, my family did not move often. I attended the same Chicago Public School (CPS) from kindergarten until the middle of my seventh grade year. My experiences at the second elementary school (middle of 7th grade to 8th grade) were quite different than those at my first school. I can recall my first day at this particular school quite well; it was February 14, 1984. It
felt strange being in a new building; it felt dark and it was not decorated with the beautiful plants and paintings to which I was accustomed to at my previous school. There was an unwelcoming feeling and the paint on the wall appeared dull and dirty. Yet, despite the aesthetics, I had many more positive experiences at this school than at my previous school. It was here that my grades began to improve and I became more interested in school despite my “limited” reading skills. In fact, my problems in reading persisted until I entered high school.

One of my fondest memories is from 7th grade. I recall Ms. String having a conversation with my mother about my academic progress. She stated, “Diana is a very capable student; she just needs to apply herself.” Prior to that moment, I don’t remember any other teacher saying anything like that about me. Ms. String told my mother to buy books that were of interest to me and that it would help me improve my reading skills. Soon after that parent-teacher conference, my mother took me to a neighborhood thrift store and had me peruse the bookshelves. The books were about 10 cents each and my mother told me I could buy as many books as I wanted as long as I read them. This is when my love for reading began; I started to read about two books a week. Soon I was performing better at school and becoming more involved. My mother continued to buy books for me and was pleased to see me reading. As I think about it now, I’m not sure why I hadn’t picked up the hobby earlier because my mother and aunt were avid readers. My mother and Aunt Fela often discussed books and exchanged books with one another. I secretly aspired to reach their level of reading as I observed
them engage in conversations about the stories they were reading. I noticed their excitement and eagerness to read each other’s book selections.

It wasn’t until eighth grade, 7 months after Ms. String spoke to my mother that I began to flourish at an accelerated rate. In eighth grade, Ms. Red, continued to encourage my newfound love for reading by providing me with discarded library books. I recall walking to the elementary school on a “professional development day” to meet Ms. Red to select books from the trunk of her car. She was pleased to see me, yet disappointed to see I was the only student to show up. It was also Ms. Red who selected me to compete in our school science fair. I remember feeling excited and scared at the same time. In Ms. Red’s class I began to find math interesting as well. Ms. Red taught basic algebra and I was pleased to discover that I actually understood it and found it simple. Not only did I enjoy reading and math at this point, but was also able to retain much of the information we were learning about the United States Constitution. I was surprised at my progress but at times I still doubted my own capabilities. Once I graduated from the eighth grade I attended the high school in our area.

There are certain events that I clearly recall from my educational experiences, such as getting hit with a ruler on the palm of my hand in kindergarten for talking during nap time, refusing to write smaller for my second grade teacher, not wanting to read aloud because I wasn’t able to recognize all the words on the page, feeling pressed for time and completing the ITBS assessment randomly, standing in a dark closet or sitting under the teacher’s
desk for talking. Some of these incidences inhibited my academic growth and others helped me to flourish. One vivid event was my placement in a bilingual classroom. My mother became an English language learner at the age of five when she moved from Puerto Rico to Chicago. She attended Catholic school until the 8th grade, became fluent in English, and always spoke to my siblings and I in English. We spoke Spanish only with our grandparents and my grandmother’s brother and sisters; thus, my sister and I were not fluent in Spanish. However, I remember walking in the hallway of my school around the age of 7 with my mother one day. She was angry and walking quickly, I was nervous and walked besides her, wondering what was about to happen. My mother was about to demand that I be moved from my current classroom into a different classroom. My teacher at the time told my mother that I was struggling in class. It was then that my mother learned that I was in a bilingual classroom! This upset her because she never requested that I be placed in a bilingual classroom and in her view, the placement was confusing me and unnecessary. My mother’s demand was fulfilled and I was placed in a monolingual English classroom the following day.

In high school, my mother reacted the same way when she learned I had been placed in remedial reading and math courses that I found extremely easy. My mother and I were talking to our neighbor’s daughter Lucy who was a sophomore at the same high school I was attending. We were discussing my courses, and Lucy explained to my mother that I was in two remedial courses. My mother also learned that because of the remedial courses I would have to
attend summer school to take English I and Algebra I class, or I would not graduate on time. It was not mandatory that I take the courses. Once again my mother went to the school and demanded that I be placed in the appropriate setting. I was moved from the courses and placed in a regular English I and Algebra I course. Although, I had missed part of the semester in my new courses I was able to pass both classes with high marks. That was the last time my mother had to demand anything from any of my teachers or the schools I attended.

Other than the incident regarding the remedial courses I described earlier, high school is more of a blur. My memories are not as detailed as those I remember from my elementary school days, but I know I received excellent grades in all my courses. I listened attentively in class and remembered everything I heard, I figured out various methods I could use to memorize new information with little effort, and everything seemed much easier for me. As a high school student I had many more positive educational experiences, participated in JROTC courses, photography club (president), student council, the Hispanic Honor Roll Society and the National Honor Roll Society. It was quite a change from my elementary school experiences and I somehow managed to be one of the top 25 graduates of my class. Throughout my high school experiences, my mother and extended family members began to discuss college. Two of my aunts had attended a few semesters of college immediately after high school, but never returned to attain their degrees. My Aunt Estelle had studied photography at Columbia College and my aunt Janine had attended the
University of Chicago. Each of them began to share some college experiences with me. They had my uncle’s girlfriend share some of her experiences as well. Soon the family expectations included that I would become the first college graduate. This made me nervous and feel loaded with pressure. I always felt a need to please my family and live up to their expectations.

My experiences in college were mixed with new challenges and experiences. During that first year of college, as I sat in my classes, I felt lost, naïve, and at a disadvantage. Something as simple as a syllabus was new to me and for some reason I didn’t tackle the things that were new to me. Fortunately, that first semester two of my high school friends, Beth and Cyndi, were attending the same university. Beth’s older sister Mary was also attending and we thought of her as our guide. Mary walked us through our syllabus and helped us map out our assignments. She also gave us a tour of the school and pointed out what computer labs we could use. Neither one of us had ever used a word processing program or any other computer software. In high school, we had a computer programming class but never used computers for anything else. In fact, I remember typing many of my papers on a typewriter given to me by my parents while I was a senior in high school. Mary talked to us about college expectations and told us what we need to know to survive our first semester. Unfortunately, Mary was gone the next semester and I no longer had her as a resource.

The following semester, I met a group of individuals who would become influential in a variety of ways. Outside of my classes I became involved in the student activities club, which sponsored many of the major activities on the
campus. These activities range from films, comedy acts, game shows, dances, lectures, etc. Before long, I was chairing the film committee and later the lecture committee and attending out of state conferences for the university. While participating in this club many of my friends graduated and moved on into teaching, social work, accounting, or other careers. But, there were others who dropped out as well. I remember asking myself, “Will I make it and how can I make it out of here with a degree?” Academically, there were several difficult times within my college experiences. I was working 30 hours a week while attending college and I had a hard time managing my time to put together big projects and earned a few “D’s” in some of my earlier education courses.

To combat this problem, I quit my outside job and took a lower paying job at the university library. I had to adjust to earning less money but it was a sacrifice I was more than willing to make. As a Student Assistant in the library I learned about the resources available to students and how to use them accordingly. There came a point when all my friends had moved on because they graduated or dropped out and I felt as if I was alone. I started doing more things outside of school and did not enroll for a semester. I did not tell my mother, but she found out after a month or so and my entire family was afraid I would not go back. The truth is I too doubted that I would return promptly.

However, after an unfortunate personal experience I found myself thinking about my future and I sat down and mapped out the courses I needed and determined a graduation date. I moved into my uncle’s house and signed up for classes the following semester. My uncle’s wife was also attending the same
university and I traveled to school with her every day. My aunt and uncle always asked me about my assignments and encouraged me in a different manner my mother could provide. During this time, my mother was expecting a child and I did not speak or spend much time with her. My mother was upset that I had moved out of the house. I never told her I moved out because my home life was negatively affecting my academic progress. Her encouragement and high expectations could not be met with the issues surrounding my younger sister. Therefore, with one year of courses left to graduate, I had to make a dramatic change.

During this period in my life another uncle also encouraged me to complete my courses successfully. He inquired about my grades each semester and rewarded me. I can recall working as a cashier and my uncle stopping by to check up on me. I told him my grades for the current semester and he was quite pleased with me. He left the store and visited me at home the following day carrying a shopping bag; the bag contained an outfit from a popular store. My uncle told me he was extremely proud and promised me things in my life would change dramatically if I continued performing well in school. All these experiences with my uncles placed me in a position in which I could not imagine disappointing either of them or my mother (although we were practically estranged during that time). Finally in 1995, I graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Education. Despite the limit of four tickets per a student, I managed to have my mother, two aunts, two uncles and a close personal friend
present for my graduation ceremony. At the time, I thought I had reached the end of my educational goals.

However, in 1996, I decided to take a few courses focused on teaching mathematics and curriculum and instruction before deciding on a masters program. I did well in these courses, but they weren’t of interest to me. At the start of the 1997-1998 school year, I was assigned to teach a first grade class. I was extremely anxious because my focus had always been middle school aged children. The idea of teaching children how to read made me nervous. I am certain that my fears of teaching small children beginning reading skills stemmed from my own childhood reading experiences. This is when I decided to get a master’s degree in teaching reading. I found myself enjoying the program and easily adapted what I was learning into my own teaching. My professors at Chicago State were inspiring and my experiences at this university were extremely positive. I earned straight “A’s” in the program and was nominated to the Honor Society, and made the National Dean’s List. Unlike my initial college experience, this program went smoothly for me and I enjoyed attending every class. Upon graduation in 2000, I met with my advisor and another professor; they complimented me on my work. I had taken several courses with each of them throughout the program. I recall going out to dinner with my advisor after graduation and during our dinner she asked, “Diana, what are you going to do next?” “Have you thought about going into a doctorate program?” The thought had never crossed my mind and I told her so, but she just looked at me and said, “I think you would be a great candidate and you should consider it. Let’s keep in
touch; I want to know what you decide to do.” A year later my advisor had become the department chair and one night in 2001, I received a message from her on my answering machine. As I heard the message, I could not believe what I was hearing she was asking me to teach a graduate course in diagnosing reading problems and remediation. I felt honored and apprehensive all at once, but I accepted and worked at Chicago State University until I moved to Las Vegas two years later. To this day, I am in contact with her and she continues to encourage me and plant little seeds in regard to setting new goals for the future.

When I moved to Las Vegas I began teaching at an elementary school and immediately became involved within the school. After being at the school for about four months my supervising administrator gave me a flyer for an educational leadership master’s program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV). She informed me that she and the principal were graduates of the program and that she believed I would be a good candidate and I should seriously consider it. I informed her that I was considering looking into a doctorate program at UNLV, but I was not certain whether I wanted to be an administrator. I few weeks later, I decided to go through the extensive process. Unlike most masters programs, we had to interview with the Clark County School District and take several exams. I remember feeling excited once I was accepted in 2004 and worked enthusiastically throughout the program. Once again I made the National Honor Society list and in 2006 successfully finished another masters degree program; despite the personal challenges I faced at home and a newborn
baby. However, I still had thoughts about enrolling in a doctoral program at some point in time. It seemed like it would have to wait as I embarked motherhood.

In 2007, I received an email regarding an educational leadership doctorate program at UNLV and due to several personal life changes I thought it was a perfect time to pursue a doctorate. I began the program with some reservations, wondering if I would be able to finish successfully. “Could someone like me be able to successfully navigate through the program and acquire a doctorate degree?” Despite my doubts I decided to apply for admission and began this journey of uncertainty with excitement. Throughout the program I have remained positive and I never doubted my ability to successfully finish the program. My focus has always been on a completion date for this educational goal that had never occurred to me as a child or young adult.

As I sat down to write this portion of my dissertation I thought about everything I have accomplished with hard work, the support of my mother, stepfather and extended family members. I now realize they did more for me than I ever realized, and I thank each of them for all their hard work, understanding, dedication and encouragement.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Data from the 2010 Census indicated that the vast majority of the growth in the total population came from those who reported their race as something other than White or those who reported their ethnicity as Hispanic or Latino (United States Census, 2010). The reported numbers suggest that it is in the interest of all Americans that Latinos achieve educational excellence (Fry 2002; Hernandez & Linares, 2000; Yzaguirre, 2000). For example, the United States Census (2010) revealed there were 50.5 million Latinos in the United States, composing 16 percent of the total population. Furthermore, between 2000 and 2010, the Latino population grew by 43 percent a rise from 35.3 million in 2000. In 2003, “Among the Hispanic population; two-thirds (66.9 percent) were of Mexican origin, 14.3 percent were Central and South American, 8.6 percent were Puerto Rican, 3.7 percent were Cuban, and the remaining 6.5 percent were of other Hispanic origins” (Ramirez & De la Cruz, 2003, p.2). Despite this growth, Latinos lag behind other ethnic groups in attaining a secondary education (Santiago & Brown, 2004). The U.S. Census 2000 revealed that compared to other U.S. racial and ethnic groups, Latinas/os have the lowest high school graduation rates. In addition, the number of Latina/os enrolling in four-year universities and attaining college degrees remains proportionally low in comparison with White, non-Hispanics (Brown, 1999; Chapa & Schink, 2006; Garcia, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2000; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003).
More than one-quarter of Latina/o 25 years old and over had a high school degree compared to over 77 percent for non-Hispanics” (Saenz, 2000, p. 269). This is problematic for a community that is already concentrated in the lower socio-economic bracket.

In fact, the growing educational disparity of Latina/o students has prompted many researchers to examine the factors that hinder educational attainment (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Solorzano & Orlelas, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999; Yosso, 2006). However few studies have focused on the factors that promote academic success among Latina/o students (Conchas, 2006; Gándara, 1995). This gap in the literature can be addressed through studies focused on successful Latino college students. The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of successful Latina first-generation college graduates. This qualitative study, based on a phenomenological inquiry process, explored those factors of Community Cultural Wealth that assisted “at-risk” first-generation college students to successfully navigate the education pipeline and acquire, at minimum, a bachelor’s degree. By highlighting the voices, I hoped to gain a better understanding of the resources low-income, first-generation students utilized to achieve academic success.

**Research on Latina/os**

Since the turn of the century, Latina/os have accounted for just over half of the United States population growth (Fry, 2008). According to Bernstein (2008) yearly growth rates in the Hispanic population were outdistancing all other minority groups. From April 1, 2000, to July 1, 2007, the Hispanic population
grew from 10.2 million to 45.5 million an increase of 29% (Fry, 2008) and by 2008, nearly 1 in 6 U.S. residents was Hispanic (Bernstein, 2009).

Despite the growth in population, Hispanics lag behind other ethnic groups in attaining a secondary education (Santiago & Brown, 2004). In fact, the 2000 U.S. Census revealed that, compared to other U.S. racial and ethnic groups, Latina/o students have the lowest high school graduation rates. According to the U. S. Department of Education, 73% of Latina/os age 18 through 24 attained a high school diploma in 2007 compared to African Americans (89%) and Whites (94%) (Cataldi, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2009). When the dropout rate was considered, the authors indicated that Latina/o students were more likely than White students to leave high school; with a dropout rate of 6% compared to 2.2% for Whites. Despite the discouraging data on K-12 Latina/o students, the rapid growth in population has led to increased post-secondary enrollment for Latina/o students.

Although Latina/o enrollment in colleges and universities has more than doubled since 1990, going from 782,400 in 1990 to 1,809,600 in 2004 (National Center of Education Statistics [NCES], 2005), there are disparities among enrollment and matriculation rates. The nature of the increased access, when reviewed, finds Latina/os are more likely to attend community college than individuals from other racial/ethnic groups (Adelman, 2005) in fact, 58.3 percent of all Latina/o enrolled in postsecondary education attend a community college (NCES, 2005), and they tend to enroll in programs that are correlated with lower earnings and less social mobility (Dougherty, 1994 & Ramirez & De a Cruz,
Those Latina/o students who are enrolled in four-year institutions are concentrated in Hispanic-Serving Institutions, which tend to be less selective, non-research colleges and universities (NCES, 2006). Although only about 8 percent of postsecondary institutions are Hispanic-Serving Institutions, nearly half (48 percent) of Latina/o students enrolled in institutions of higher education attend these schools (NCES, 2002; Brown & Santiago, 2004). While these institutions provide access to Latina/os, they are considered to be of lower status than more selective research universities. In this sense, community colleges and Hispanic-Serving Institutions could be considered to be disadvantaging contexts, and may be contributing to the accumulation of disadvantage by Latina/o students. Disparities in the degree attainment rates of Latina/os and whites also reflect the ongoing accumulation of disadvantages by this demographic group. These lower degree attainment rates reduce the pool of Latina/os eligible to go on to graduate study, making the underrepresentation of Latina/os even more severe among masters, doctoral and professional degree holders.

In 1995, the U.S. Department of Education examined minority participation in post-secondary education and discovered how serious the problem is among Black and Hispanic students (1995). The report concluded:

- Among Black, non-Hispanic undergraduates, nearly two-thirds of students enrolled were women, compared with 53 percent of Hispanics and 55 percent of white, non-Hispanic students.
- Black, non-Hispanic and Hispanic students were more likely to be enrolled in private, for-profit institutions (20 percent and 15 percent,
respectively), and less likely to be enrolled in 4-year colleges or universities than were white, non-Hispanic students. American Indians/Alaskan Natives were also less likely than white, non-Hispanic students to be enrolled in 4-year institutions.

• On the other hand, American Indians/Alaskan Natives; black, non-Hispanics; and Hispanic undergraduates were no less likely than white, non-Hispanic students to aspire to a bachelor’s or advanced degree. In 1989–90, undergraduates of all racial–ethnic minority groups were less well off financially than their white, non-Hispanic peers: one-third or more of minority students, including 41 percent of black, non-Hispanic students, were in the lowest family income quartile, compared with about 20 percent of white, non-Hispanic students.

• Among Hispanic ethnic groups, however, Cuban Americans were much more affluent than Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans: 37 percent of Cuban Americans were in the highest income quartile, compared with about 16 percent of either Mexican Americans or Puerto Ricans.

Dr. Sylvia Hurtado, director of the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles, found a larger percentage of Hispanic freshmen are first-generation, compared to freshmen of other backgrounds. Students that are economically disadvantaged or first-generation college students are significantly less likely to be prepared to enter a four-year
university than students from higher economic status students (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Although, there has been an increase of minority students attending colleges and universities; a higher percentage need tutoring or remedial work in subjects such as English, reading and math.

Latina/o families face various challenges due to ethnicity, race, and social economic status (Alejanddrosso, 2002). These issues are not directly tied to Latino cultural assets because Latina/o cultural capital has not been easily translated into social capital in U.S. society (Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002). Social capital has been conceptualized in many different forms to include family and community resources and social networks of civic engagement (Bourdieu, 1985; Putnam, 1993, 1995; Portes, 2000). Through social capital, Latina/o families can translate and transmit their cultural assets inter-generationally. Either teachers or principals can mediate families’ benefits and resources as a means toward upper mobility (Portes, 2000). Schools have an effect on the development of human capital, combined with social and political environments that enable norms to develop and shape social structure (Bourdieu, 1985). For instance, according to Gándara (1995), family stories were examples of cultural capital that helped students achieve academically. Therefore, support of the use of a family’s story as Latina/o cultural representations can contribute to promoting an educational structure that is more receptive and valuing of Latina/o culture.

Kozol (2003) addressed the cultural issues affecting Latina/o students’ educational attainment, asserting that much research in the area of minority success and failure in school has been devoted to discussions of culture.
Specifically, these conversations have been the focus of a clash of cultures with regard to the student’s home and the White middle class represented in American schools (Ogbu, 1994). Policy and use of rules, regulations, and procedures are viewed as the foundation of this cultural clash (Noguera, 2006). As Kozol pointed out, the dominant culture is constantly reflected by these goals and ideals, which minority students face on a regular basis. Therefore, these rules and policies require careful, individual examination regarding minority students to determine success or failure in school. There are additional factors that contribute to Latina/o college enrollment and attainment rates. Whereas, middle-class and affluent parents embrace college enrollment and attainment tasks with economic and educational resources supplemented by an early start in college planning, minority students and parents alike are not knowledgeable, empowered, and informed by school officials about college access. (Noguera, 2006; McDonough, 1997). Middle class parents draw on educational experience from the field of higher education through professional connection and productive social networks, enabling them to use the system to benefit their children’s academic advancement; and they have proven to be successful (Yonezawa, 1997; Noguera, 2006).

Jackson (1968) coined the phrase “hidden curriculum” to describe the covert practices taught in schools that are not part of the formal curriculum. For instance, schools teach students which interactions and values of society are viewed as important. The hidden curriculum is defined as the rules, norms, routines, and rituals that schools use to reward students. Researchers suggest
that students who master the hidden curriculum do better than students who do not (Wren, 1995). Researchers also argue that low-income and minority students who succeed in the decoding the hidden curriculum develop social ties to institutional agents that assist them in learning the appropriate decoding skills so they can obtain institutional support (Stanton Salazar, 1997). Possessing these networks gives students an educational advantage in schools.

According to a Pew Hispanic Center analysis of data compiled by the U.S. Department of Education, first-time, full-time Latino freshman enrollment increased in seven of the most highly Latino populated states ranging from 6 % in New York to 53 % in Florida during1996-2001 (Fry, 2005). As of 2007, Latino students comprise 12% of full-time college students, up from 10% in 2006 (Bernstein, 2009). Although Latinos continue to increase their numbers as college attendees, a review of Department of Education (2010) statistics from 1990-2009, shows that Latino higher education students continue to lag behind both White and African American students in college degree attainment. This gap appears consistently across all degrees and widens. Table 1 compares degrees conferred among Whites, African Americans, and Latinos for the years 1990-2009.
Table 1. Percentage of Degrees Conferred by Race/Ethnicity and Degree: 1990-2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree Level</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Associates Degree</td>
<td>66.4%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>71.5%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>64.6%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral Degree</td>
<td>58.6%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


This gap in academic achievement for Latinos is of concern because income levels typically increase with educational attainment. The U.S. Census Bureau reported on educational trends and income levels, citing workers with a bachelor’s degree earned about $26,000 more than those with only a high school education (Edwards, 2009). Because the Latino population is expected to continue to increase, it is important to ensure that Latinos persist through academic programs and obtain higher leadership roles. The societal benefits of a post secondary education go well beyond the personal economic gains noted above. Post secondary graduates are more likely to be in the labor force, more likely to be employed, more likely to vote, and in short, more engaged members of our society (Mortenson, 2003; Pascarella & Terezini, 2005). Finally, regardless of age group or income level, a higher percentage of college graduates report being in excellent or very good health compared to the number of high school graduates who report the same (Baum & Payea, 2004; Baum & Ma, 2007).
Despite the growth in post-secondary education by Latina/o students, attrition continues to be a problem. In recent years, a number of researchers have examined the attrition of minority students in postsecondary education and identified academic background and high school preparation, students’ grade point average, study habits, and high school curricula, as factors that have the most impact on students’ progress in postsecondary education (Penrose, 2002; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001). That attrition rate, however, has revealed a new gap in college completion rates between Hispanic men and women. According to Bluer and Waltz (2002), Latinas are surpassing their male counterparts in attending post secondary institutions and successfully attaining baccalaureate degrees. Across the country, women are entering higher education at a rate that is outpacing the rate for men (Fry, 2005; Morales, 2000). A more significant number of Latinas not only attend post secondary institution, but stay in college, graduate, and go on to attend graduate school. This phenomenon escalated in the 1990s, with the level of academic success for Latinas increasing at a higher rate than Latinos (Gonzalez, Jovel, & Stoner, 2004). Consistently over the past few decades, Latinas have achieved more gains in higher education compared to their male counterparts.

Problem Statement

Whether researchers focus on the individual or environmental aspects of academic success, few studies include the voices and perspectives of college graduates who were previously considered “at risk”. More often studies on
Latinas focus on issues of deficits and lack of preparation (Rodriguez, Guido-DiBrito, Torres, & Talbot, 2000). Studies on Latina student success focus on academic resilience (Mandera, 2009). In fact, little attention has focused on the factors that may contribute specifically to the academic success of Latinas (Valverde & Associates, 2008).

Statistics show that 73 percent of Latinas 18-24 years of age have graduated from high school compared to just 63 percent of Latinos, and 4.2 percent of all bachelor's degrees go to females versus 2.6 percent for males (Gandara, 2009). At the level of the doctoral degree, 1.7 percent of all doctorates go to women versus 1.4 percent to males. Looking at the numbers, it is evident that Latino males have not lost ground academically, but instead females have gained ground. While it is certainly cause for celebration that Latinas are making progress, it is worrisome that Latino males have made so little progress and the group as a whole continues to be so seriously underrepresented. Because Latinas acquire higher education degrees at a higher rate, it is important to gain insight on the factors of their success. This study focused on the educational experiences of this subgroup, looking specifically at college persistence and completion factors related to Latinas. In order to understand Maimer’s (2003) notion of the conquering systems phenomena, the inquiry was designed to gain insight into educational factors that support the success of Latina students.
Research Questions

This study investigated the lives of seven Latina first-generation college graduates who successfully navigated the educational system in the United States. Their stories offer perspectives and deep insights on the factors that influenced that successful transition. Yosso (2005), whose theory of Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) guided this study, proposed that understanding the sources of knowledge that students bring to school might yield a better understanding of the relationship of school achievement and culture. Yosso, working from a critical race standpoint, theorized that deficit thinking “takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because: a) students enter school without the requisite normative cultural knowledge and skills; and b) parents neither value nor support their child’s education (p. 75). Thus, Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) provides a lens for examining the lives of these seven Latina women. The counter story of these women offered insights into the factors that led to their current level of educational attainment.

This study was guided by the following questions:

- If a Latina student is identified as an “at risk” student in K-12 settings, what factors influence a decision to attend College?
- What factors support college completion for Latina students?
- In what ways do the stories of Latina college graduates inform K-12 policies that define “at risk” students?
Significance of the Study

Examining the perspectives and experiences of Latina first-generation college graduates provides an additional lens for the study of community cultural wealth as a means of navigating through the educational system. Studying the phenomena enhances our capacity to promote academic success within this population and value community cultural wealth. I sought to gather information from Latina first-generation college graduates from low-income urban backgrounds who managed to persevere and stay in school. Rather than focus on deficit models and lack of degree attainment, this study was driven by the need to identify community cultural wealth factors that are associated with college success for Latinas and degree attainment.

The main objective of this study was to give students a voice absent in existing literature and reform efforts that could potentially enhance or foster our understanding of educational resilience. By investigating the commonalities and variations in the life stories of Latina students and examining their understandings of the relationships between individual experiences, family supports, the role of culture, and their lives, this qualitative study gave voice to the stories, experiences and perceptions of Latina college graduates and reveal their perspective on the significant factors in the development of their academic success. From these reported experiences, I drew conclusions and offered recommendations about what educators can do to improve education for Latina students. This study, identified variables, that educators may use to develop methods, to improve the academic achievement potential of Latina college
graduates; by identifying factors that may be modified to enhance the educational outcomes of students considered “at risk” of failure. Finally, this study adds to the knowledge base of Latina literature studies in the area of higher education across the United States.

**Delimitations**

This research study aimed at investigating the phenomenon of successful post secondary education completion of “at risk” students, particularly first-generation higher education students. Therefore, the study population was limited to Latina students who attended public schools throughout the 8th and 12th grade. This study was also limited to Latina college graduates in the United States who have been awarded a bachelor’s, masters, and/or doctoral degrees from a 4-year university.

**Limitations and Assumptions**

Limitations are limiting factors inherent in a study that should be clarified and made explicit (Creswell, 2003). In terms of participant selection, the phenomenological research approach requires a participant have had the experience the researcher wishes to fully understand. It further requires the participant be able to reflect on the experience thoughtfully and convey it in detail and depth through conversation or through other means, such as artistic work, poetry or other writings. In addition, the phenomenological approach requires the researcher to be able to engage in thoughtful communication with the participant. In the case of the researcher, the expectation is that s/he possesses a well-developed understanding of the topic gained through careful review of and
attention to the literature. The researcher may also carefully explain his or her personal experiences and beliefs about the participants, as phenomenological research does not aim to eliminate personal or professional bias. Phenomenological research expects the researcher to bring their biases into careful awareness and public view so the biases do not negatively impact the data or analysis.

A limitation of this study was the relatively small sample size. The use of a self-report may be also seen as a limitation, but it is a necessity within the phenomenological method, which is appropriate for this investigation. Phenomenological studies rely on self-report, on retrospective recall that can be inaccurate, and provide distortions associated with response bias. The phenomenological method requires the researcher to state any assumption regarding the phenomena and set aside preconceptions or judgments in order to avoid the imposition of a prior hypothesis (Creswell, 1998). The Epoche that appears as the preface was essential for bracketing the researcher’s preconceptions and judgments as the data was analyzed. Furthermore, results may be limited by the researcher’s noted observations of the interview responses of the students. An assumption exists that by serving in an intimate investigative role, the researcher may gain a deeper understanding, which may enrich the data and analysis, creating a more comprehensive study. Qualitative studies do not lead to generalizations, but the findings from this study may be transferrable to other populations.
Definition of Terms

*At risk:* The working definition for “at risk” is, a student who was considered to be in danger of failure due to the one or more of the following factors, low socio-economic status; single parent family; older sibling dropped out of school; the student changed schools two or more times; average grades of "C" or lower from sixth to eighth grade; repeated a grade and/or had limited English proficiency skills (Slaving, 1991).

*Attrition:* The voluntary or involuntary discontinuance of a student’s participation in the degree program prior to completion.

*Cultural Community Wealth:* An array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression, which include 6 forms of capital such as aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital (see Delgado Bernal, 1997, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Yosso, 2005).

*Counterstories/counternarratives:* Address the structures, practices, and discourse that facilitate academic challenges. Counterstories draws directly from Critical Race Theory to examine and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly shape social structures, practices, and discourses (Yosso, 2006).

*Cultural deficit theories:* Cultural deficit theories suggest that families are at fault for the poor academic performance of minority children, reinforce teacher practices that negatively affect student-teacher relations and produce low
expectations for Students of Color (Huber, Huidor, Malagon, Sanchez, Solorzano, 2006).

*Degree attainment:* Refers to a diploma received by an individual indication that the college course requirements have been met.

*First generation students:* First-generation students are defined as those whose parents’ highest level of education is a high school diploma but no college or university experience. They are the first generation in their family to continue education beyond high school (Choy, Horn, & Chen, 2000; Duggan, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Mc Connell, 2000; Nunez & Caccaro-Alamin, 1998; Benmayor, 2002).

*Funds of Knowledge:* Is defined by researchers Luis Moll, Cathy Amanti, Deborah Neff, and Norma Gonzalez (2001) “to refer to the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133).

*Latina/o and Hispanic:* Latina/o and Hispanic both refer to a group of people who share a common culture and language. A person who traces their origin or descent to Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Central America, South American and other Latina/o cultures as recognized by the U.S. Census Bureau (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The terms Latina/o and Hispanic are used interchangeably throughout this study.

### Summary

Considering how critical a college education is to future economic status and professional mobility, knowledge regarding how Latina first-generation
college students attain a postsecondary degree may assist in increasing matriculation rates. The purpose of this study was to go beyond the focus of existing research to identify and analyze themes that describe the phenomenon of college matriculation and the meaning graduates apply to the experience. The intent of the research was to add to current knowledge of matriculation and build awareness through the perceived and defined experience of “at risk” Latina college graduates through the words and views of the participants who have lived the experience. The findings from this study have multiple implications for practice and pedagogy, including re-thinking deficit theories and cultural deficit theories as we look at underprivileged communities as having assets. The chapters that follow provide a review of the extant literature, a detailed description of the methods employed throughout the study, a comprehensive presentation and analysis of the counterstories of the participants, and finally a summary of the findings for each research question.
Although the enrollment of Latina/o students in K–12 schools in the Western part of the United States surpasses other racial and ethnic groups, they continue to face serious hardships with regard to educational attainment. Part of the reason for is that Latina/o students, particularly low-income and first-generation students, face obstacles to college attendance (Hamrick & Stage, 2004). For one, many attend inner-city high schools with low levels of funding, crowded classrooms, or inadequate course offerings, and often have inexperienced teachers and whose climate is dangerous (Rendon & Hope, 1996).

The "achievement gap," as defined in research, is the difference between the academic achievement between students of color, or students in poverty and their white middle class counterparts (Noguera & Wing, 2006). It is an understatement that an academic achievement gap between these groups of students in the United States has persisted for many years. Figure 1 illustrates the U.S. educational pipeline by race/ethnicity and gender. Latina/o and Chicano students have a much lower high school graduation and college completion rates than their White and Asian counterparts.

During the last decade, research on first-generation college students has become more prevalent. Of the 1.3 million first-time freshmen who took the S.A.T. in 2002, over 28 percent (364,000) were first-generation students (Ishitani, 2003). The sheer increase in the number of first-generation students compels
researchers to investigate their success and patterns of failure in order to better understand how to serve them. These research studies typically focus on first-generation college student’s inability to persist, there is a smaller category of research that examines how and why first-generation college students succeed as well a research that helps determine their needs and at-risk behaviors (Ishitani, 2003).

Figure 1: U.S. Educational Pipeline for Latina/o students by gender, 2000

Latina/o Elementary School Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduate from High School</td>
<td>100/100</td>
<td>54/51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate from College</td>
<td>54/51</td>
<td>11/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate from Graduate School</td>
<td>11/10</td>
<td>4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate with Doctorate</td>
<td>4/4</td>
<td>0.3/0.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The first number in each box represents females; the second, males.

In education research, the pipeline is used to illustrate how students navigate through primary, secondary and postsecondary education. The following figures illustrate the educational attainment of five major racial/ethnic groups in the United States.

Figure 2: U.S. Educational Pipeline for White and Asian American students by gender, 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Whites Elementary School Students</th>
<th>Asian Americans Elementary School Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduate from High School</td>
<td>100/100</td>
<td>100/100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate from College</td>
<td>84/83</td>
<td>78/83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate from Graduate School</td>
<td>24/28</td>
<td>40/48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate with Doctorate</td>
<td>8/11</td>
<td>13/22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.6/1.4</td>
<td>1.4/4.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The first number in each box represents females; the second, males.

Figure 2: U.S. Educational Pipeline for Native American and African American students by gender, 2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Native American Elementary School Students</th>
<th>African American Elementary School Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduate from High School</td>
<td>Graduate from High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100/100</td>
<td>100/100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate from College</td>
<td>Graduate from College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72/70</td>
<td>73/71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate from Graduate School</td>
<td>Graduate from Graduate School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/11</td>
<td>15/13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate with Doctorate</td>
<td>Graduate with Doctorate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/4</td>
<td>5/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.4/0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.3/0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The first number in each box represents females; the second, males.


Recently, the U.S. Department of Education found that from 1998–99 to 2008–09, the number of degrees earned increased for students of all racial/ethnic groups for each level of degree, but at varying rates. For all levels of degrees, the change in percentage distribution of degree recipients was
characterized by increased numbers of African American and Latino graduates. During 1998-99 to 2008-09, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded to African American students increased by 53 percent, and the number awarded to Latino students increased by 85 percent. In 2008–09, African American students earned 10 percent and Hispanics earned 8 percent of all bachelor's degrees conferred, up from 9 and 6 percent, respectively, in 1998–99. Similarly, higher percentages of master's degrees were conferred to African American and Latino students in 2008–09 (11 and 6 percent, respectively) than in 1998–99 (7 and 4 percent, respectively). These increases are indicted on the following table.

Table 2: Percentage of Degrees Conferred by Race/Ethnicity, 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of degree and race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage Distribution</th>
<th>Percentage Conferred to Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bachelor's</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>75.6</td>
<td>71.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Master's</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>71.2</td>
<td>64.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Doctoral</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>58.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As noted within the above figures and table the number of Latino graduates among high school and post secondary education are lower across the board, except when compared to American Indian/Alaska Native students. Given that Latino/a students continue to be severely underrepresented in post secondary education, it is evident that the educational system is failing to support them (Fry 2002; Martinez and Fernandez 2004; Ornelas 2002; Yosso and Solozano 2006).

**Latina/os and Higher Education**

While the number of Latina/os entering a higher education setting has risen over the years, enrollment has not increased proportionate to the Latina/o population (Brown, 1999). A report presented to former President Clinton, the Secretary of Education, and the nation by the President’s Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanic Americans states, “Hispanics population growth and educational achievement gap require quantum leaps rather than small improvements” (Hernandez, 2000 p.3). The report calls for researchers to “analyze why Hispanic students drop out of college and develop institution-specific solutions to redress this problem” (p.38). On October 19, 2010, President Obama signed Executive Order 13555, renewing the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics. This historic event demonstrated the president’s strong support for the critical role Hispanics play in the overall prosperity of the nation and highlights the Administration’s commitment to expanding education opportunities and improving education.
outcomes for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). New elements of the executive order place a high priority on action, such as:

- Linking together key individuals and organizations from within and outside the education system to increase capacity and announce communitywide education initiatives
- Establishing a Presidential Advisory Commission and national network of community leaders that will provide real-time input and advice on the development, implementation and coordination of education policy and programs that impact the Hispanic community (U.S. of Education, 2010).

President Obama’s signing of Executive Order 13555 promises to strengthen the nation by expanding educational opportunities and improving educational outcomes for Hispanic and Latino students, help ensure that all Hispanics receive an education that properly prepares them for college and productive careers.

Haro, Rodriguez, and Gonzales (1994) conclude there are factors both internal and external to the college environment that persistently influence Latina/o students. The external factors are language, family, culture, and peer influence. Institutional factors, like mentors (Valdez, 2001) also contribute to success for Latina/o students. External factors, like family responsibilities are a major part of the Latina/o student’s college experience. Many underrepresented Latina/os come from low-income families and are working-class students with financial responsibilities in order to provide extra income for their families (Fry,
Thus, a high percentage of Latina/o freshman work an average of more than sixteen hours per week (Higher Education Research Institute, 2000). These students are also more likely to have more dependent children and are almost always the first in their family to attend college (Brown, Santiago & Lopez, 2003). According to Quintanar (1999), their parents often have low educational levels, with the majority having high school diplomas or less education. In addition, these students lack the role models or knowledge of academic expectations in a university setting. A large portion of Latina/o college students are underrepresented and need more support and understanding than traditional students (Carnevale, 1999; Quintanar, 1999).

Providing minority first-generation students with support while on campus can improve student’s chances to succeed (Engle, Bermeo, O’Brien, 2006; Vargas 2004; Diaz-Mohs, 2007). Diaz-Mohs (2007) interviewed 18 participants who had completed their higher education degrees to gain a better understanding of “why Latinos seek a degree in higher education?” Each interview explored the factors that contributed to the participants’ persistence in completing the higher education degree, the role polled in their higher education experience, and how the perceptions of race, culture, financial status, and other factors impacted their success. Diaz-Mohs’ findings in this study established critical factors associated with learning and how the lack of understanding of the mechanisms of the system could become barriers to success. The study confirmed that although academic achievement is frequently perceived as a major factor of success among Latina/o students, seeking higher education
degrees requires Latina/os to extend their learning to include knowledge on how to overcome and conquer the educational system. Participants in the study indicated they received emotional and academic support from family, peers, and mentors who had a basic understanding of the potential barriers Latina/o students may face in American universities. Another important finding in the study included the achievement of self-pride in being Latino, the importance of family, serving as a role model, and the drive to succeed while resisting the negative stereotypes associated with Latino academic competencies.

Gándara (1995) conducted a multiple qualitative case study with 50 Chicana/o individuals from low-income and undereducated family backgrounds who completed doctorate-level education. The childhoods of all these individuals met most of the criteria that are predictive of school failure: poverty, low levels of parental education, large families, and limited exposure to English at home. The parents, especially the mothers fostered a culture of possibility by: relating stories of past family successes, supporting educational goals, setting high performance standards, modeling literacy, and helping with schoolwork. Individuals’ own motivation and persistence allowed them to overcome barriers. The researcher argues for policies and practices that integrate ethnic experiences as a part of the school curriculum.

**Latinas and the Educational Pipeline**

Historically, the roles of Latinas were limited to the home environment. They were viewed as daughters, mothers, wives, and nothing more (Gonzalez & Stoner, 2004). However, over the past two decades that image has changed as
Latinas take their lives in their own hands and leave behind expectations of the past. Today’s Latina has defined a new set of convictions and walks toward destinies of her own choosing (Gonzalez & Stoner, 2004). In 2008 there were 14.4 million Latinas in the United States, and this number is expected to steadily increase since Latino/as are the fastest growing “minority’ group in the United States (Center for American Progress Action Fund, 2008). When looking at educational attainment, Latinas have made progress over the last two decades, but are not well served by educational institutions (Gándara, 2009 and Valencia, 2011). Latinas have the lowest levels of attainment at every stage of the educational pipeline when compared with women from the five major racial/ethnic groups in the United States (Valencia, 2011). In 2006-2007, eight percent of Latinas received a bachelor’s degree compared to 70.8% White women; six percent received a master’s degree compared to 67.7% of White women; and three received a doctoral degree compared to 61.9% White women (Maes, 2010). Although their attainment does not match women from other racial and ethnic groups, they far exceed the attainment of Latinos.

Today, Latinas consistently out-perform Latinos at every level of schooling. Most recent statistics (2006) show that 73 percent of Latinas 18-24 years of age have graduated from high school compared to just 63 percent of Latinos, and 4.2 percent of all bachelor's degrees go to females versus 2.6 percent for males (Gándara, 2009). At the level of the doctoral degree, 1.7 percent of all Ph.D.s go to women versus 1.4 percent to males. Even though
many Latina students have high intellectual abilities, school systems often
devalue their cultural knowledge (Maes, 2010).

**First Generation Post Secondary Students**

First-generation students are defined as those whose parents' highest level of education was a high school diploma, but without college or university experience. (Benmayor, 2002; Choy, Horn, & Chen, 2000; Duggan, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Mc Connell, 2000; Nunez & Caccaro-Alamin, 1998; Rodríguez, 2003). For many First-generation college students, entering college means entering an alien physical and social environment that neither their family nor their peers has ever experienced (Thayer, 2000). Research has shown that first-generation students already begin the process of higher education with unique challenges that may hinder their success. These characteristics that are associated with attrition include conflicting obligations between family, school, and work; false expectations, lack of academic preparation or support; and lack of participation in campus activities (Brown & Burkhardt, 1999, Penrose, 2002; Warburton, Bugarian, & Nunez, 2001). These students are more likely to come from low social economic status homes, tend to be less academically prepared, and have lower degree aspirations (Nunez & Caccaro-Alamin, 1998). First-generation students from lower income levels also tend to have much lower rates of persistence than those with higher income levels (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Furthermore, a study by the National Study of Education Statistics (2005) concluded “academic preparation played a positive role in bachelor's degree completion” (p. 48). The researchers found students who completed calculus,
pre-calculus, and trigonometry in high school or achieved high scores on college entrance examinations were more likely to attain a bachelor’s degree than those who completed only Algebra I or achieved low scores on exams. Their college attendance is a deliberate attempt to improve their social, economic and educational status within society (London, 1992; Nunez & Caccaro-Alamin, 1998).

Although first-generation students may gain access to higher education, attrition is a major problem. Students from family incomes ranging between $20,000 and $34,999 were 72 percent more likely to drop out than were students with family incomes of $50,000 or higher (Ishitani, 2006). First-generation students showed higher risks of leaving the higher education system than did students of college-educated parents in years one through four.

First-generation students also faced the highest risk period of departure during the second year of college. Compare to students whose parents graduated from college, they were 8.5 times more likely to drop out. However, the risk of departure for first-generation students decreased over time after the second year. Studies have concluded first-generation students were more likely to have lower college retention rates than their counterparts (Horn, 1998; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Riehl, 1994). Furthermore, Ishitani (2003) found first-generation students were less likely to complete their 4-year programs in a timely manner, and were at a higher risk of departure in their first year of college.
Academic Preparation

It appears that the high school environment has a significant influence on whether a student considers college (McDonough, 1997). Students with long-standing goals of attending college are more likely to go to college if their intention is developed before the tenth grade (McDonough, 1997). The decision is often determined by whether or not the student develops and integrates specific college-focused academic standards and practices in high school. Although these rationales contribute to their decisions to attend college, many first-generation students lack adequate academic preparation to sustain their matriculation, and the following section will look into the factors that contribute to this section of the education of first-generation students (McDonough, 1997).

Although first-generation students have diverse academic ability, they are at a disadvantage in regard to academic preparedness, post-secondary education, family support, and in their perceptions of their academic literacy skills (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004; Penrose, 2002). Since first-generation students have not been raised in a college going family and may not have been exposed to the college academic life, they often have less of an understanding of the values, norms, and customs associated with higher education (Penrose, 2002). However, researchers report exposure to significant college knowledge can assist first-generation students gain academic success, particularly at any age. Students also begin to understand the importance of college and its value in being able to pursue career aspirations (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004). In a study of
first-generation students, Trotter (2001) determined 55 percent of students who enrolled in regular course loads in high school remained in college after three years; however, 81 percent of first-generation students who enrolled in more rigorous course loads in high school remained after 3 years. Horn and Nunez (2000) found that a lower percentage of first-generation students took eighth grade algebra than continuing-generation students did. This trend continued during high school, as lower percentages of first generation students completed at least one advanced mathematics course compared to the percentages of continuing-generation students. It did appear, however, first-generation and continuing-generation students who took eighth grade math were both more likely to complete advanced-level mathematics courses in high school; taking advanced math more than doubled the chances of enrolling in a four-year college (Horn & Nunez, 2000). Although strong academic preparation is important, nearly one-quarter of first-generation students who were highly qualified for college admission had not enrolled in college 2 years after high school graduation (Horn and Nunez, 2000).

Furthermore, researchers found a significant number of first-generation college students participated in less rigorous curricula than their continuing generation peers (Education Resource Institute, 1997; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Warburton, Bugarin and Nunez, 2001). They were less likely to take college entrance exams and when they did, they scored lower than continuing-generation students (Warburton, Bugarin and Nunez, 2001). First-generation students were more likely to score in the lowest quartile and less likely to score in
the highest quartile than continuing-generation students as well. In some cases, first-generation students’ performances differed minimally from students whose parents had some college, but more so from students whose parents had completed college (Warburton, Bugarin and Nunez, 2001).

In fact, several federal programs have been created to assist disadvantaged students pursue their career aspirations. The Federal TRIO Programs are educational opportunity outreach programs designed to motivate and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The history of TRIO has been progressive. It began with Upward Bound, which emerged out of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 in response to the administration's War on Poverty. TRIO includes six outreach and support programs targeted to serve and assist low-income, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to post baccalaureate programs. TRIO also includes a training program for directors and staff of TRIO projects and a dissemination partnership program to encourage the replication or adaptation of successful practices of TRIO projects at institutions and agencies that do not have TRIO grants (U.S Department of Education, 2000).

The academic preparation of first-generation students is central to their educational aspirations, access to higher education, persistence, and success. The likelihood of college enrollment increases with higher academic achievement and students who are prepared academically have a greater chance of persisting through college (Cabrera, Deil-Amen, Radhika, Prabhu, Terenzini, Lee &
Franklin, 2006). Often times, first-generation college students begin their undergraduate work at a 2-year college. Some of the reasons they start with 2-year schools is that their academic preparation is lacking, and they are not qualified for admission to 4-year institutions; the financial obligation at four-year schools is too expensive or they need flexible class schedules to accommodate their work schedule, or other family responsibilities (Bui, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Yet, first-generation students are more successful at attaining a bachelor’s degree when they begin at 4-year institutions (Harvey, 2002; Bui, 2000; & U.S Department of Education, 2000).

First-generation students’ academic preparedness is a strong indicator of their educational aspirations and ability to persist in college (Ishitani, 2006; Warburton, Bugarin and Nunez, 2001). Although a combination of variables contributes to their educational aspirations, if they enter college without the requisite academic preparation to complete college-level work, they significantly increase their chances of failure.

**Post-Secondary Experiences**

Moving from one environment to another can be difficult to manage for most students, and first-generation students are especially challenged once they enter postsecondary education (Hsiao, 1997). The attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions they encounter in college can differ from those from first-generation students’ homes and communities. Although, college is viewed as a rite of passage for first-generation students, it also demonstrates a significant separation of the student’s past to his/her future, particularly for traditional aged
students who live at home. The cultural challenges faced by first-generation students can inhibit their academic progress (Hsiao, 1992). To some degree, all students experience a change in college. Many students’ ideals, behaviors and values transition throughout their college matriculation as a result of college curriculum, and exposure to other cultures and attitudes. They are encouraged to think abstractly by college faculty and as a result have changes in their psychological and ethical development. These changes are often in direct conflict with their home environment and culture (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004).

In addition, first-generation students are less proactive in pursuing academically challenging curricula than continuing generation students. First-generation students reported studying fewer hours, were less likely to be in honors programs, completed fewer credit hours during their first year, and took fewer courses in the humanities and fine arts (Terenzini, 1996). Just as the background characteristics of first-generation students are less likely to promote and support higher education aspirations and success; their transition is not as smooth and involves a greater learning curve than that of their continuing-generation peers (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004). Due to their cultural, economic, and social backgrounds, first-generation students often experience anxiety. Their expectations about college life, academic, and social integration differ from their continuing generation peers. First-generation students often feel socially isolated from peers who have been exposed to the culture of higher education (Penrose, 2002).
Critical factors that influence first-generation students learning outcomes are demographic and cognitive in nature (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996). These variables also influence a student’s curricular choices, classroom experiences, and out of classroom experiences. As a result, first-generation students' background and academic preparation are not the only factors that influence these students' college experiences and choices. College aspirations and expectations as well as orientations toward learning play a major role in the development and college persistence of these students (Penrose, 2002). Certain choices made by first-generation students may enhance their chances of success. For instance, first-generation students are less involved in student clubs and other social activities. This lack of involvement had a negative correlation to GPAs. First-generation students also spent less time on campus and at cultural events, and this lack of involvement had a positive correlation to GPA (Ishitani, 2006; Penrose, 2002).

A study by Pratt and Scaggs (1999) found first-generation students felt significantly different from continuing-generation students about being adequately prepared for college. Consequently, first-generation and continuing-generation students have little difference in their initial expectations for success or academic performance. The primary difference is in their college experiences, comfort levels, and quality of life. The primary distinction between first and continuing-generation students is the cost (alienation from their families and from their college peers, etc.) of their success, not whether they can succeed (Ishitani, 2006; Penrose, 2002).
**Family Influence**

First-generation students are at a disadvantage compared to continuing-generation students with regard to their academics, financial characteristics, and family support of college (Benmayor, 2002; Hsiao, 1992). It appears that parental support of a college education and understanding of the culture and practices of higher education are quite different, and evoke different responses from first-generation students’ parents, families, and friends (Penrose, 2002). Several researchers report first-generation students receive significantly less emotional support from family and friends; a dynamic which may appear counter-intuitive, considering the sacrifices first-generation parents make to send their children to college (Orozco, 2008; Penrose, 2002). First-generation parents are often unprepared for the transition their children undergo while attending college. Because the values they adopt may differ from those in the home, there is often less congruence between the students’ beliefs and those of their parents. There is a sharper contrast between the old and new environments (Penrose, 2002).

Hurtado, Carter, and Spuler (1996) focused on Latina/o students and concluded family involvement helps first-year Latina/o students adjust to college. Hernandez (2000) used quantitative methods to confirm that family involvement significantly impacts the decision of Latina/o students to persist in graduating from college. Family members set certain expectations that for some students act as positive pressures encouraging them to meet family demands. Upward mobility can create a sense of loss or can be perceived by family members as disloyalty and discontinuity. In contrast, upward mobility can also produce feelings of discovery,
reconciliation, and joy (London, 1992). Howard London (1992) contends that first-generation students must leave behind certain cultural beliefs and practices (social identity), and take on the new cultural beliefs and practices of the higher education institution they attend. He further contends that the loss of a familiar past is what evokes periods of confusion, conflict and isolation for some first-generation students (London, 2002). This analysis describes the experiences of some, not all, first-generation students, and reflects a deficit approach to understanding their experiences (Benmayor, 2002).

For instance, London (1989) describes the process which first-generation students undertake when moving from their home environment to school environment as cultural mobility. The reason many students have problems completing this transition is that they have no true support system at home due to the conflict between the culture of their families and the culture of college (Hsiao, 1992; London, 1998; Nunez & Caccaro-Alamin, 1998). Going to college is often considered a “rite of passage” for many students; however, it is often a great challenge for first-generation students because of the conflict a college education has with past cultural practices in first-generation homes. Parents, siblings, and other family members who have no experience with college, or its rewards may be non-supportive or even become a barrier because they lack the understanding of the advantages a college education can provide (Hsiao, 1992). However, the social mobility involved not only provides a sense of gain among first-generation students, but it also creates a sense of loss of cultural attitudes and perceptions they learned prior to attending college. This change contributes
to the confusion, conflict and often anguish that many first-generation students manifest when entering the “college life” (London, 1989). Many first-generation students give greater importance to gaining respect or status and bringing honor to their family, and financially contributing to their families as reasons for going to college as well (Bui, 2002). The research on first generation students identifies more challenges than opportunities for success in higher education. The next section explores theories that offer some insights into the challenges and opportunities.

**Cultural Capital and Social Capital Research**

Much of the research on access and success in post-secondary environments is informed by cultural theory. Cultural capital theory is derived from social reproduction and social mobility theory. Social capital is focused on the future and the social advantages one can pass on to others (Ball, 2003; Prandy, 1998). Social reproduction and cultural capital are linked in critical ways. Cultural capital cannot stand alone and is obtained and increased as a direct result of the pursuit of social capital and upward mobility. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has been a leader in the development of cultural capital theory. In Bourdieu’s view, those in power pass on their material wealth or economic capital to their children and try to assure that their children acquire cultural capital and social capital (Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Zweigenhaft, 1993). According to Bourdieu, cultural capital consists of various forms of knowledge, dispositions and skills. Social capital refers to the benefits of knowing people who can be of
help to one, also referred to as making “connections” or “networking” (Zweigenhaft, 1993).

Cultural capital is based on class rather than race. Individuals from lower socioeconomic status do not have the same attainment as those in the higher socioeconomic status. Those from higher socioeconomic acquire knowledge through the upbringing of their family which provides them the means for success. Simply said, the higher the social class of the family, the greater the rewards. Since the inception of Bourdieu’s theory, many educational and sociological researchers have used Bourdieu’s theory to better understand the family dynamics of low-income students and the educational attainment of these students.

Lamont and Lareau (1988) defined cultural capital as “signals,” that include attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behavior. These signals determine one’s status and degree of inclusion in the social system. They are institutionalized, deeply rooted, and often programmed in the ways people interact with each other, or how they are treated by education institutions. DiMaggio (1985) defined cultural capital based on three aspects: status of cultural participation, cultural resources, and cultural mobility. These capitals are inculcated in students’ early childhood and impact the education of students. Dumais (2002) also explained cultural capital based on three forms: objectified cultural capital, institutionalized cultural capital, and embodied cultural capital. His idea of cultural capital is as follows: objective cultural capital, which refers to objects that require special cultural abilities to appreciate, such as works of art; institutionalized cultural
capital, which refers to educational credentials and the credentialing system; and embodied cultural capital, which is the disposition to appreciate and understand cultural goods” (2002, p.46). Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell (1999) described cultural capital similar to DiMaggio (1985) and Dumais (2002) but more briefly: cultural capital is simply resources obtained by students from their family. Therefore, cultural capital is a set of cultural, economic, and sociological means that shapes knowledge, attitude, behavior, experience, and the overall development.

Walpole (2003) explains that each social class possesses capital, economic, social and cultural. Parents pass on cultural and social capital in the form of attitudes, preferences and behaviors that are used for social profits or desirable social outcomes. Cultural capital is knowledge, skills and dispositions that are specific to different social classes and used as a means to gain social mobility or social acceptance to a degree. The perceptions in which social class members share consist of goals and strategies necessary for aspiring to the desirable social level or attaining a certain social status. This concept is identified as *habitus*. Habitus is defined as the attitudes, perceptions and knowledge sets that influence a person’s actions subconsciously. Habitus determines how an individual operates and the parameters they have identified internally (Throop and Murphy, 2002; Perna and Titus, 2003). Cognitive and motivating structures within a particular social environment are the modes through which habitus and, subsequently, cultural capital are formed and maintained. According to Bourdieu (1977), habitus is something that is not intentionally transmitted. It is learned
attitudes and behaviors that are passed on to others in that particular social environment without conscious intention. Therefore, the attitudes of students who are first-generation begin in part in the home. Research indicates that the habitus of low socio-economic status students predisposes them to lower academic or professional aspirations than those of their high socio-economic status peers, and this attitude perpetuates itself by engaging low socio-economic status students in less effective educational strategies that in turn prove to further relegate them to lower social profits and continued lower social position (Laureau 1987; Walpole, 2003).

Paul DiMaggio and John Mohr (1985) have offered hypotheses related to cultural capital and educational attainment and college attendance. They contend: “cultural capital has a positive net effect on educational attainment and college attendance for men and women” (p. 1239). The expectation of cultural capital is for it to affect students’ educational attainments and their likelihood of attending college. Cultural capital can increase opportunities for special help from teachers and other gatekeepers, it can nurture the development of generalized reputations as “cultured persons,” and it can navigate exposure to social environments where education is valued and exposure to additional educational milieus is prominent. The researchers defer to Bourdieu, who treats cultural capital as cumulative, noting that the greater earlier endowment, the easier the further acquisition (DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985). Cultural capital is viewed as extending far beyond college and across generations.
Family, Socioeconomic Status and Cultural Capital

The differences between low socioeconomic status and high socioeconomic status students begin early in a child’s life. They are cumulative and are shaped by differences ranging from parental involvement to college costs. Student aspirations are influenced by both parental involvement and college costs; both of these variables vary with social status (Cabrera, Burkum & LaNasa, 2005; Walpole, 2003). As noted earlier, those students of low socioeconomic status that gain access to higher education typically attend two year or vocational institutions. Those who enroll in 4-year institutions are less likely to persist to graduation and do not pursue post-graduate degrees. Low socioeconomic status students also manifest different behaviors than their high socioeconomic status counterparts, and these unique behaviors transition into different outcomes once they attain their degrees (Walpole, 2003). Walpole (2003) also found, educational aspirations and degree attainment are influenced by family background, social and cultural capital. In an earlier study, she (1997) noted that social status often defines parental expectations and definitions of success, which in turn, mediates student aspirations. Walpole observed that low socio-economic status parents do not typically envision post-secondary education for their children, as opposed to high socioeconomic status parents who consider a bachelor’s or advanced degree to be the norm.

It has been long understood that low socioeconomic students have a set of obstacles on their way to and through college, which results in negative consequences for their educational aspirations and goal attainment (Walpole,
Lower socioeconomic students lack correct information to equip them for college. For example, while parents of lower socioeconomic students hope that their children can also attain an advanced degree, they tend to have limited and sometimes false information about college (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). In comparison with the higher socioeconomic parents, lower socioeconomic parents tend to overestimate tuition cost and are more likely to know the cost for attending either a community college or a state university but not a research university. Furthermore, they have less knowledge of the admissions criteria, ways to help their children meet the criteria, and the level of rigorousness of college courses (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). Their lack of knowledge implicitly influences the educational choices of their children. Lower socioeconomic parents have limited understanding about the education system, minimal access to important information, and fewer numbers of resourceful networks that can adequately represent their children’s interest (Gándara & Bial, 2001). Their cultural capital is transmitted to their children yet hinders the children to achieve academically, because socially and systematically, their capital is not highly valued and accepted.

Coleman (1991) conveyed that social capital in marginalized communities needed to be rebuilt. Based on a lifetime of work, he concluded that by enhancing the disposition and further influencing cultural capital, individual families can further influence the community and build greater social capital. Facilitating change with the individual homes is essential. “Social capital among parents, once created, does not always reinforce school goals; however, a strong
constituency of parents is a force within the community that will often act in accordance with the school, but also as an agent for the children of the community and as a gauge on the actions of the school’s” (Coleman, 1991. p.3). A critical relationship that plays a role in the achievement and aspirations of students is that between parents and schools. Parental involvement affects the interactions between the school and the family by nurturing it.

**Teacher Support, Aspiration, and Cultural Capital**

Teachers play crucial roles in supporting students move on to a postsecondary educational institution. Unfortunately, the teacher quality is not the same between lower and higher socioeconomic schools. The Bridge Project, a research study conducted by a team of researchers from Stanford University, found teachers in the higher socioeconomic schools provided opportunities where students could freely ask them questions that relate to college preparation (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). Higher socioeconomic teachers provided general tips such as courses to take to prepare for college and become competitive. Teachers in the higher socioeconomic schools were also more encouraging. Their voice and word choice showed enthusiasm that transmitted hope to their students. Unlike the teachers in the higher socioeconomic, teachers in the lower socioeconomic schools were less likely to provide any information regarding college entrance to their students (Kirst & Venezia, 2004). Lower socioeconomic teachers were not current in the college preparation information, and therefore, did not know how to guide their students. Moreover, they were more likely to presume that their students are not capable to be admitted to or afford a four-
year institution (2004). If their students chose to attend an institution, they tended to recommend community colleges or vocational schools. Their tone of voice and word choice also implied censure and imposed restrictions as to how far students could go educationally.

Unfortunately, much of the social theory research legitimizes the marginalization of many students (Gonzalez, 2005). This idea that low-economic students share a “culture of poverty” which is considered detrimental to school achievement has led to the development of cultural deficit thinking models in education (Gonzalez, 2005). Students from low-economic backgrounds are viewed with a lens of deficiencies that limit educational achievement (Valencia, 1997).

**Cultural Deficit Theories**

Ladson-Billings (2007) suggested that school achievement and most importantly, minority achievement in the United States remains a social and political dilemma today in all facets of life. Ladson-Billings believed the structures of this “achievement gap,” i.e. the difference between those students whose school performance meets the identified target goal of achievement and those who do not, should be examined. Before articulating the concept of Community Cultural Wealth, it is important first to explain the concept of cultural capital and its impact into what we know today, as the deficit practices in educating students whose backgrounds are not those of the dominant group. Cultural deficit theories have been used throughout history to explain the educational attainment levels of marginalized communities (Barrera, 1997; Valencia, 1997; Solorzano &
Yosso, 2000). Cultural deficit theories conceptualize culturally bound characteristics, including interdependency, and language, as deficiencies that manifest as academic failure for Latinos (Barrera, 1997). According to this deficit perspective, students from marginalized communities enter school with a lack of “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1997), the cultural assets possessed by middle and upper class students and are acknowledged by schools and considered valuable. Therefore, upper and middle class students according to this theory are more likely to do well in school because they possess more cultural capital (Solorzano and Yosso, 2000).

Cultural deficit theories suggest that families are at fault for the poor academic performance of minority children, reinforce teacher practices that negatively affect student-teacher relations and produce low expectations for students of color (Huber, Huidor, Malagon, Sanchez, & Solorzano, 2006). Valenzuela (1999) stated that schools that work from this understanding of cultural capital do not value the knowledge and skills that Latino students bring to school. Yosso (2005), employing a critical race perspective, rejected the notion that Latino students come to the classroom with cultural deficiencies. Instead, Yosso theorized that the Community Cultural Wealth framework served as an alternative concept for understanding the cultural capital that Latinos bring with them to school. Anzaldúa (2002) inferred that if other “conocimientos” (knowledges) are recognized, such as the skills and behaviors of Latinos, as being valuable in the school world, then instead of marginalizing students who have a different language and culture, they could be empowered by recognizing
other "conocimiento" or the ways of others, not just the "conocimeinto" of the dominant group. Therefore, research on the skills, knowledge, and abilities possessed and utilized by socially marginalized communities, identified as cultural wealth has articulated theoretically informed strategies that challenge cultural deficit perspectives on students of color (Yosso, 2005).

**Counterstories to Cultural Deficit Theories**

Critical race theorists use counterstories to balance the representations of underrepresented and marginalized populations found in mainstream research. While the researchers cited below may not identify as critical race theorists, their studies offer a compelling counter story to cultural deficit theories. For example, one study concluded that parents, who may not be educated, do guide their children by culturally nurturing them and connecting them to family history and values (Benmayor, 2002). Other studies found that parent’s expectations are a strong indicator of Hispanic students’ predisposition (Hamrick & Stage, 2004; Orozco, 2008) and these expectations are constantly advocated by parents and family members (Acker-Ball, 2007; Orozco, 2008). Acker-Ball (2007) found, families overwhelmingly provided support and assisted Hispanic college students as best as possible, even if it was simply reinforcing the need to attend college. Parents came to know and appreciated the value of a college education and consistently promoted the need to have one (Acker-Ball, 2007). Furthermore, parents embedded the significance of attaining a greater social status than their current level (Perna & Titus, 2003; Acker-Ball, 2007).
Rodriguez (2003) examined the ability of first-generation college students to rise above their circumstances, obtain a baccalaureate degree or higher and go on to become activists, and a vehicle for those who come from comparable backgrounds. The participants indicated that adequate financial-aid, parental support, academic preparedness, and college counseling were factors, which promoted their success. However, there were several additional positive influences that promoted their success as well. A phenomenon identified as a special status was determined to be common in the homes of many poor, uneducated families and homes. This practice involved special treatment of the participants by family member who provided positive reinforcement and boosted self-confidence. Often, special gifts and treatment by a family member or friend provided advantageous effects on the student’s attitudes and perceptions of self-worth. These affirmations offered encouragement and instilled a greater hope for themselves, both academically and professionally (Gonzalez & Stoner, 2004; Rodriguez, 2003).

Padilla (1998) and Keller (1990) call for more Latina/o specific research and while there are a growing number of Latina/o first-generation college students the focus needs to shift away from a deficit theory approach toward a solution-based approach (Maimer, 2003). There needs to be an emphasis on reforming schools and building programs from the ground up that encourage all students, to develop their interests and skills in all academic areas. Therefore, it is important to learn from interpretive studies how they complicate the cultural
capital theories introduced by Bourdieu (1982) and the social capital theories described by Coleman & Hoffer (1987).

**Funds of Knowledge**

Funds of Knowledge, is defined by researchers Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (2001) “to refer to the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133). These scholars have found that Latino families create and draw from communal funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al. 1995; Gonzalez and Moll 2002). In a study conducted by Benmayor (2002), she concluded that ethnic students have brought about new modes of thinking as researchers analyze first-generation students and their integration into higher education. As opposed to succeeding because of first-generation students’ abilities to conform to dominant culture norms, some first-generation students or ethnic minorities have developed “critical resistant navigational skills” to help in their successful matriculation. These skills develop as a result of students’ resistance to the oppression of their cultural experiences and non-acceptance of the dominant cultures’ values and expectations. These students use their cultural resources to reject a deficit paradigm (Benmayor, 2002).

**Conceptual Framework: Community Cultural Wealth**

While a wide body of literature exists explaining the experiences of first generation college students, perceptions, achievement trends, disparity of educational access and barriers for Latina/o/Hispanic college students, little research has been done to examine the experiences of successful college
graduates (Maimer, 2003). Understanding how the family and community positively influence academic success will assist today’s educators in reforming our educational system. According to Maimer (2003), more studies should focus on how Latina/o students actually conquer a system of higher education. In Maimer’s study, participants became catalysts by forming relationships with other Latina/os consciously and intentionally with similar attributes, interest, and education. Some would say those Latina/o students who successfully conquered an academic system and earned a higher education degree were lucky or they were able to conquer by chance. However, in reality, by taking the appropriate steps to conquer the system one reduces apprehension and gear about how to conquer any system (Diaz-Mohs, 2007). If Maimer’s (2003) approach created an opportunity to break tradition, researchers might investigate other alternative rituals and structures for communicating how a system can be conquered.

Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth framework offers a different lens by which to view cultural capital as communities of strength, rather than as disadvantages brought about by poverty. Community Cultural Wealth acknowledges and values other forms of capital through counterstories that address the structures, practices, and discourse that facilitate academic challenges. Counterstories draw directly from Critical Race Theory to examine and challenge the ways race, racism, and hegemonic views implicitly and explicitly shape social structures, practices, and discourses (Yosso, 2006). According to Solorzano and Yosso (2000), “We need to challenge the ideology that underlies educational inequality, and look toward a student’s culture as
strength and possibility rather than deficiency and obstacles” (p. 57). This includes expanding the current narrow definitions of parental involvement by starting with the premise that parents are our strengths. In an effort to counter deficit perspectives recent research examines how schools that serve “culturally deprived” students are as successful as high-achieving schools in more affluent communities. In fact, a growing body of research urges schools and leaders to acknowledge the social and cultural capital present in marginalized communities (Gonzalez, 2005; Yosso 2005).

Marginalized community members possess forms of cultural capital that are not often recognized or valued by middle class society (Yosso, 2005; Leibowitz, 2009). According to Yosso (2005), “community cultural wealth is an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression” (p. 77). These resources come in six forms in Communities of Color; aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital (Yosso, 2005).

- Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain dreams and hopes for the future, despite of barriers.
- Linguistic capital refers to the intellectual and social skills attained through a student's communication experiences through the use of more than one language and/or style. This also comes in the form of oral histories, story-telling traditions, cuentos and dichos.
• Familial capital refers to the cultural knowledge that is nurtured among the family that carry a sense of community and cultural intuition.

• Social capital refers to the networks of people and community resources. This involves peer and social contacts that provide significant emotional support to assist the navigation process among society’s institutions. This may come in the form of scholarships, employment, health care, etc.

• Navigational capital refers to the skills used to maneuver through social institutions. For example, navigating through a hostile school campus, ability to sustain high academic achievement despite presence of stress.

• Resistant capital refers to the knowledge and skills students gain through challenges of inequality.

Thus, these elements of Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth conceptual framework offer a different lens, illustrating how various types of capital intersect and promote a variety of skills, while providing resiliency, and support. This framework contradicts the deficit theories often found in schools. When school function under this premise of deficit theories, the results are devastating for students of marginalized communities. Thus, Community Cultural Wealth offers a variety of forms of capital for understanding the success of Latino/a students.
Summary

At present, research on access and success for first-generation college-goers tends to draw more from deficit models than an assets model. Hence, efforts to assist students and families begin with an assumption of a deficiency of cultural capital. If our inquiries begin with a focus of community cultural wealth, perhaps we can begin to look at marginalized communities as places with multiple strengths in various forms of capital (Yosso, 2005). “The main goals of identifying and documenting cultural wealth are to transform education and empower People of Color to utilize assets already abundant in their communities (Yosso, 2005 p. 82). This study outlined in the next chapter is intentionally designed to identify how Community Cultural Wealth assisted Latina/o first-generation higher education graduates attain a post-secondary degree.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides an overview of the qualitative research design that was utilized to conduct this study. It includes the general characteristics of qualitative research and a rationale for why I chose to employ this paradigm and how it was best suited to answer the research questions. Furthermore, it also describes the phenomenological approach that framed the research design. This methodology was used to solicit the counterstories of the educational journey of “at risk” Latina first-generation post secondary graduates. Bogdan & Biklen (2007) note that researchers who use the phenomenological approach attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions of ordinary people in particular situations. In addition, phenomenology helps us bring to light a kind of thinking which guides us from theoretical abstractions to the reality of lived experiences (van Manen, 1982). This was achieved by describing the individual’s journey in a narrative format and examining the data to construct themes common among the participants.

The chapter also includes a discussion of the key constructs of Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) and how they were utilized and integrated into the overarching theoretical framework, as well as sampling procedures and the criteria for the selection of participants. As the researcher and the author of this chapter, I briefly review my position and the benefits and limitations of my past experiences in the phenomena of study.
The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of previously labeled “at risk” Latina first-generation post secondary graduates in order to understand if Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) was a factor in their success. As discussed in chapter one, statistics from the U.S. Department of Education (2010), show that Latino college students continue to lag behind both White and African American students in degree attainment. Due to the expected population increase of Latinos, it is important to ensure that Latinos persist through academic programs and obtain post-secondary degrees. As discussed in chapter one, Latinas graduate with higher education degrees at a greater percentage than Latino males (U.S Census, 2010; Gándara, 2002). Because Latinas acquire higher education degrees at a higher rate, it is important to gain insight on the factors of their success (Gándara, 2009). The intent of the study was to locate findings that help us to understand the educational experiences of at-risk Latina first-generation college students, as it is a phenomenon that is prevalent among the Latina community.

By using a qualitative research design, I was able to verify students’ perspectives of how they were able to develop their academic skills and what factors influenced their current realities, including their shared college experiences. In using a phenomenological approach, I used in-depth interview methods to answer the following research questions:

- If a Latina student is identified as an “at risk” student in K-12 settings, what factors influences a decision to attend College?
- What factors support college completion for Latina students?
In what ways do the stories of Latina college graduates inform K-12 policies that define “at risk” students?

**Qualitative Research Design**

Sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and educational researchers alike commonly use qualitative research designs to explain phenomenon within their fields. There are some approaches to inquiry that are traditionally linked to specific disciplines. For instance, sociologists have traditionally used narrative and phenomenological approaches while anthropologists have often used ethnographic approaches. In educational research, scholars have had the opportunity to utilize methods from any and all of the other social science disciplines. As a novice educational-researcher, I struggled with this opportunity. I realized that my ability to defend my methodological decisions was linked to my future reputation and credibility in the research world. Therefore, I have included this section on general characteristics of qualitative research and a justification of my chosen approach.

This study was framed within a qualitative paradigm that used in-depth interviews in order to learn what characterizes the educational experiences of the participants and what they mark as the factors and critical events in their academic successes. The intent of this study was to make sense of the lived experiences that led to success in acquiring a higher education degree. A qualitative paradigm helped me understand what occurred in the lives of these women that propelled and allowed them to successfully navigate through higher education. According to Creswell (2007), qualitative research designs are most
appropriate when the following characteristics are present:

Table 2: **Qualitative Research Design Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Creswell</th>
<th>Current Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The researcher is the key instrument for analysis</td>
<td>I was the key instrument of analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are multiple sources of data.</td>
<td>There were multiple sources of data in my study, including individual interviews, semi-structured questions, and extant literature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The researcher focuses on participants’ meanings.</td>
<td>Using a phenomenological approach I looked for participants’ meanings in the lived experience of their transition to college.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The design is emergent</td>
<td>As I progressed through the study, the research questions and methodology evolved. During the data analysis phase, I allowed themes to emerge from the data. Therefore, the design was emergent based on how the study unfolded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A particular theoretical lens is used.</td>
<td>I used Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth as a lens to analyze the counterstories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researchers make interpretations.</td>
<td>As part of my data analysis, I interpreted participants’ interviews to understand the meanings they applied to their lived experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A holistic account of an issue is created.</td>
<td>During data analysis, I used themes to search the data while at the same time, allowing other themes to emerge. I analyzed the data across all participants, as well as looked at each participant individually. After interpreting all the data from these multiple points of view, I provided a holistic description of the educational experiences for this sample population.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This study used a qualitative methodology, informed by phenomenology, because the nuances of gender, race, class and unique personalities are difficult to examine within statistical studies (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). These are precisely
the nuances that comprise Community Cultural Wealth, which may account for the success of the study participants. Thus, a qualitative approach fits the purpose of this study better.

**Phenomenology**

Edward Husserl, a German mathematician developed the philosophy of phenomenology in 1913 (Creswell, 1998, Moustaches, 1994, Sokolowski, 2000, van Manen, 1990, Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). According to a phenomenological perspective, “to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings. The act of researching-questioning-theorizing is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it, or better, to become the world. Phenomenology calls this inseparable connection to the world the principle of “intentionality” (van Manen, 1990, p.5). Intentionality refers to a person intentionally judging and valuing a particular situation, object, or entity (Sokolowski, 1994, Moustakas, 2000). A person’s knowledge of intentionality “requires that we be present to ourselves and to things in the world, that we recognize that self and world are inseparable components of meaning” (Moustakas, 2000, p.28). Phenomenology “attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we interpret features of consciousness and arriving at an understanding of the essence of the experience” (Moustakas, 2000, p.28).

In this study, I applied a phenomenological inquiry approach to understand the lived experiences of these individuals as they navigated through the educational pipeline. The intent of this type of research was to describe the
experience from the participants’ point of view in order to understand the
essence of this experience (van Manen, 1990). Therefore, I collected data from
the individual participant in the form of in-depth interviews. I used the
descriptions of the students’ experiences to understand their educational
preparation as more than a series of steps. Unlike much of the existing literature
on this topic, I looked beyond understanding students’: 1) academic and family
assets, 2) initial college experiences, and 3) the limited view of student success
or lack of success in college.

The similarities and differences in students’ experience revealed new and
forgotten meaning of the unseen structures and influences on these individuals
as they negotiate the complex daily realities of their university culture and
academic lives. I was able to capture the essence of the experience through
analysis of student voices, therefore, extending our current limited understanding
of this process. Van Manen (1990) describes six research activities related to the
phenomenological approach:

• Turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits
  us to the world

• Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we
  conceptualize it

• Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the
  phenomenon

• Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting
Manipulating a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon

Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole (pp. 30-31)

I was able to engage in all six of these activities to answer my research questions. For instance, as a Latina first-generation college graduate I have first-hand experience with this phenomenon and the development of the Epoche allowed application of the six activities to my own story prior to beginning the research study.

Data Collection Methods

This section outlines how I collected data for the study. I begin by outlining the unit of analysis, describing the target population, discussing the appropriateness of purposeful sampling within the study and my mode for recruiting participants for the study.

Unit of Analysis

Phenomenological research aims to reveal and unravel the structures, logic and interrelationships of the phenomenon being analyzed surmising that experience manifests at the intersection of person and world. In addition, phenomenological research seeks processes of consciousness which provides meaning, clarity and discrimination and further reduces a lived human experience to its essence.

Patton (2002) stated that the key issue in selecting and making decisions about the appropriate unit of analysis is to decide what it is you want to be able to
say something about at the end of the study (p. 229). Identifying the unit of analysis in a phenomenological study is not without challenge. Although I was interested in the experiences of “at risk” Latina first-generation college graduates, the study sought to describe the phenomenon of overcoming the “at risk” label. Therefore, while the unit of observation was the individual participant, the unit of analysis was the collective experiences that represented the phenomenon, as expressed by the study participants.

**Purposeful Sampling**

Sampling is a key to solid qualitative inquiry and to understanding the phenomenon under investigation. Phenomenology necessitates a purposeful approach to sampling, to insure that participants have, indeed, experienced the phenomenon in question. Therefore, a purposeful criterion based sampling technique was utilized to select participants. Both Polkinghorne (1989) and Creswell (2007) reported wide variation in the number of participants selected for phenomenological studies. According to Polkinghorne a phenomenological researcher needs to choose an array of individuals who provide a variety of specific experiences of the topic being explored (p. 48). Creswell (1998, pp. 65 & 113) recommends “long interviews with up to 10 people” for a phenomenological study (p.65). I initially solicited 10 participants.

For this study, I established the criteria for my participants and identified individual cases that met the criteria (Mertens, 2005). The criteria for selecting participants listed below were utilized during a pilot study conducted during the summer of 2009, with the exception of utilizing a male participant during the pilot
study. The original criteria for participants was as follows: Latina decent (ex. Mexican, Bi-racial Mexican decent), between the ages of 30 and 45, previously identified as "at risk", attended and graduated from K-12 public schools, and first-generation college graduates.

**Target Population**

The target population for this study was changed after a discussion with my dissertation committee it became apparent that the focus needed to be narrowed down, particularly the Latina/o background groups. This was necessary due to differences among the Latina/o culture. Therefore, the criteria for participants was modified as follows: Latina decent (Mexican and/or Bi-racial Mexican decent), between the ages of 35 and 45, previously identified officially or unofficially defined as "at risk", attended and graduated from public K-12 schools between 1983-1993, and first-generation college graduates who obtained a bachelor’s degree, who were currently working full-time or pursuing a post-graduate degree. A more detailed description follows.

**Latina first–generation college students**

For the purposes of this study, Latina students refers to students of Mexican descent or Mexican bi-racial decent. First-generation college student refers to an individual whose parents have not attained bachelor's degrees.

**At Risk**

As described in chapter two, I was primarily interested in the experiences of students labeled (officially or unofficially) “at risk” after the 1983 article “A Nation At Risk” published by the National Commission on Excellence in
Education. Therefore, the study was limited to female students who attended public K-12 schools from 1983-1993 to understand how “one who is in danger of failing to complete his or her education with an adequate level of skills” (Slavin, 1989) was able to successfully navigate through the educational pipeline.

**Time since graduation**

According to phenomenology research experts, phenomenological reflections are retrospective and reflexive; the lived experience is an experience in the past (van Manen, 1997). Furthermore, a person cannot reflect on lived experience while living through the experience. Reflection on lived experience is re-collective; it is reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through (p. 10). The person who has experienced the phenomena must have sufficient distance from the experience to subject it to phenomenological inquiry. For this study, participants had to have lived through the experience and graduated with a higher education degree a minimum of 12 years ago.

**Participants**

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for a pilot study, I recruited within my personal and professional network. Through casual conversations about my study I learned of potential participants. I thought of other methods for locating participants and while searching the University of Nevada Las Vegas website, I found the UNLV Diversity & Inclusion Multicultural Center/Centro Multicultural. I contacted the director and met with him to discuss and explain the purpose and scope of my research project. I then asked how the center could assist in recommending potential participants. The director
informed me their database could be utilized to recruit participants. This is discussed in further detail below.

The initial pool of participants was from a small group of acquaintances willing to be a part of the study. During the pilot study, I identified the participants through discussions with acquaintances, peers and/or co-workers. Those interested in participating were selected if he/she fit the first set of criteria. During the current study, I employed the same method and interviewed those interested or recommended by peers, co-workers and/or acquaintances. Selected participants came from various career paths, law, education, medical, business and or social services. Once potential participants were identified, the consent form was discussed with each. After these participants were interviewed, a snowball sampling (Creswell, 2008) technique was used. Those interviewed were asked whether they knew of other individuals that would fit the criteria for the study. The required number of participants was not reached immediately, therefore a recruitment flyer was distributed to University of Nevada, Las Vegas graduates and current UNLV graduate students. The recruitment flyer was circulated among graduate and alumni students through the UNLV Diversity & Inclusion Multicultural Center/Centro. The Diversity & Inclusion Multicultural Center/Centro Multicultural has an updated graduate student database and the students received an email regarding the study as they have consented to receiving messages from the UNLV Diversity & Inclusion Multicultural Center/Centro Multicultural. The members who expressed an interest in the study filled out a demographic data form that determined whether the potential
participant fit the criteria. As participants were identified interviews were scheduled.

The participants of this study were from Chicago, Illinois, Tucson, Arizona, Las Vegas, Nevada and Phoenix, Arizona. Of the participants interviewed, six claimed Mexican heritage and one participant identified herself as Mexican and Puerto Rican. All of the participants identified themselves as first-generation college graduates. Each individual who communicated a desire to be involved and was selected for the study was given an individual interview appointment at a convenient location. For purposes of confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for each participant during the transcription and analysis process (Table 2).

Table 2: Profiles of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>English as a Second Language</th>
<th>Degree(s)</th>
<th>Profile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marisa</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Bachelor of Arts in Sociology</td>
<td>Born in Chicago, Illinois; 37 years old; music scholarship in high school; commuted to college; first generation college graduate; social work major; worked part-time while in college; married, two daughters; father immigrated from Mexico; mother migrated from Puerto Rico; spoke both English and Spanish at home; commuted to university; desires to earn a master's degree in counseling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alicia</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Bachelor of Science in Psychology</td>
<td>Born in Chicago, Illinois; 30 years old; lived on campus for undergraduate studies program; intends to earn a master's; family immigrated from Mexico when she was in fifth grade; Spanish spoken at home; single; works full-time;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alba</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Bachelor of Science in Psychology</td>
<td>Born in Chicago, Illinois; 30 years old; lived on campus for undergraduate studies program;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elena</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Bachelor’s in Elementary Education &amp; Master’s in Curriculum and Instruction</td>
<td>Born in Tucson, Arizona; 32 years old; attended predominated White schools; took honors courses in middle/high school: honors courses were recommended based on test scores; AP classes in high school; commuted to college; bachelor in education and masters in? did not work during college; not married, no children; born in the United States; mother and father’s family immigrated from Mexico; English and Spanish spoken at home; first-generation college graduate; wants to possibly go on for doctorate Difficulties in college, high school didn’t study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marisela</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Bachelor’s in Education &amp; Master’s in Bilingual Bicultural Education</td>
<td>Born in Cicero, Illinois; 34 years old; commuted to college; married at 18 years old; worked full-time while in college; mother of two children; mother and father spoke Spanish predominantly; Spanish first language; faced bullying in predominately White elementary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lola</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Bachelor’s in Education; Master’s in Curriculum and Instruction</td>
<td>Born in Phoenix, Arizona; 36 years old; functional knowledge of Spanish; brother committed suicide while she attended college; parents migrated from Mexico; parents are bilingual; wasn’t accepted to master’s program petitioned the department for admittance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Bachelor’s in Education &amp; Master’s in Educational Leadership</td>
<td>Born in Las Vegas, Nevada; 35 years old; commuted to college; teenage mom; earned bachelor’s degree in education and master’s in educational leadership; works full-time; single mother with two children; mother and father immigrated from Mexico; Spanish first language;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Sources

This research project involved a process of collecting data from a pilot group that provided feedback on the semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix C). No changes were made to the semi-structured interview protocol and it then guided the interviews with seven Latina first-generation college graduates. Transcripts of the recorded interviews were presented to each participant for member checking purposes.

Pilot Group

Based on Hernandez's (1999) model, a preliminary pilot group was conducted to obtain feedback on the quality and appropriateness of the questions in the semi-structured interview protocol. Prior to interviewing the purposefully selected participants, a pilot group of three Latinos/as were interviewed with the initial phase of the qualitative project to evaluate the semi-structured interview questions. The pilot group allowed the collection of data and provided the opportunity for expressing of complex ideas and opinions and allowed for assessment of trends and opinions of respondents to refine the protocol (Creswell, 2005).

In-Depth Interviews

The first individual interview consisted of participants describing their educational experiences (Appendix B). Prior to the interview process, all participants signed a consent form (Appendix A) that affirmed their willingness to
participate with confidentiality. As the researcher, I initially asked participants to describe their educational experiences. Once the initial interviews are completed, they were transcribed by the researcher and or independent transcriber and sent to the participants to review and make any needed changes. The edited transcribed interviews were then analyzed for emerging themes.

The second interview was an individual, in-depth interview that was also conducted face-to-face. During the second interview each participant answered semi-structured interview questions (Appendix C) regarding their use of Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) as a resource during their navigation of the education pipeline. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix C) was followed with the seven first-generation Latina college graduates. The initial ideas for the questions were developed using Community Cultural Wealth as a guideline.

The transcriptions of the first and second interview were presented to the participants for feedback. Participants were free to elaborate on their responses or reword for added meaning. During the second interview, the participants answered a series of open-ended semi-structured questions using the six forms of cultural capital discussed by Tara Yosso (2005) in "Whose culture as capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth" as a framework. During the interviews the open-ended questions allowed for each participant to elaborate on her experiences. Initially, I planned to conduct a final focus group interview, however time constraints and limited access to participants did not support this stage of data collection. My decision to forego the focus group was
also influenced by the lack of changes participants made in their interviews during the process of member checking.

Throughout the process I focused on the meaning of the lived experience for these individuals. As van Manen (1990) describes, this is only possible by “borrowing” the experience of others. He reminds us that as we investigate the experiences of others, we may have had similar experiences ourselves. In order to capture the essence of the phenomenon without being indirectly influenced by our own conceptualizations of the phenomenon, we can engage in a reflective practice called bracketing, which was described in the analysis section of this chapter.

**Data Analysis**

Experts state that a rigorous and ordered analytical process must be utilized when using phenomenology. Van Manen (1990) declares that the key to phenomenological analysis consists of methodical reading, reflection and writing which in turn allows researchers to transform lived experiences into textural expressions of their essence. Through analyzing words and phrases as well as obtain experiential descriptions from participants, greater observation, reflection and insight may come together. It was hoped that by attributing lived structures of meaning, or essences, to the experience of degree attainment, a shared experiential world would appear. The individual interviews in this study will serve the purpose of collecting narratives in order to develop an understanding of the meaning of this human phenomenon.
Researchers state the first step in data analysis is epoche or bracketing. Bracketing is an attempt to identify one’s own biases and conceptualization of the phenomenon prior to conducting data analysis (Rehorick & Bentz, 2008, Sokolowski, 2000, Moustakas, 1993, Creswell 2007). Bracketing is done when a researcher writes down her own experiences first and then analyzes the experiences of the participants only after becoming aware of her own biases. For instance, prior to beginning my data analysis, I wrote the story of my own educational experiences, which is included as the preface in this document.

The purpose of bracketing is to help the researcher identify any biases present as a result of their own experiences and then to suspend one’s own beliefs about the world in order to study the essential structures of the world. This notion of suspending one’s beliefs works only in theory. In practice, it proves to be a challenging yet worthwhile task. For me, engaging in a ‘bracketing’ process prior to data analysis enabled me to think about my own experiences as an “at risk” elementary school student, high school honor roll student, college graduate, graduate student, and doctoral student. This experience allowed me to reflect on the events or individuals who helped me to successful navigate through the educational system. It helped me to understand how my research participants’ experiences were similar and different from my own.

Polkinghorne (1989) six-level outline of the phenomenological method guided my work. He describes:
Verbatim Transcriptions: Researcher must collect verbal data via an audiotaped interview and transcribe data in verbatim and then critically read the raw data to get a general sense of the interview.

Reviewing Data: Researcher reads the data and breaks the data into parts that express a meaning unit of the experience phenomenon (Polkinghorne, 1987, p. 53). The researcher restates the meaning units in the third person, retaining the participant’s original language.

Locating Emergent Themes: Next the researcher conducts the initial transformation of data of the participant’s words into the researcher’s words, this is organized according to topics and presented in narrative form to reveal each participant’s experience of degree attainment. Statements are carefully judged for inclusion and, after careful consideration, those not containing essential or experiential descriptions are excluded.

Writing Participants Experiencias: In a second transformation of the data, the researcher re-describes the concrete data into psychological language expressing psychological meanings emphasizing the experience being investigated.

Structuring the Experiencias: The experiences were combined and data was synthesized to form descriptive narratives reflecting and summarizing the data into a discrete entity of meanings. Perspectives representative of only one or two participants are excluded.
General Descriptions: In the final level of abstraction, the experience was viewed and described in general, to allow articulation of essential structural features of the experience.

Essential Description: This level of analysis represents key findings of the study Polkinghorne (1989) suggests that the above levels be tied together to produce “a description of general structure of experience” (p. 53).

**Process for Ensuring Trustworthiness**

Providing multiple methods of data conformability ensured trustworthiness. First, from the outset of the project I declared my biases and assumptions to help the reader understand my position. My researcher's bias was made clear early in the process by bracketing my own experiences (Rehorick & Bentz, 2008, Sokolowski, 2000, Moustakas, 1993). Second, throughout the process, I maintained bracketing notes. Additional trustworthiness was provided by this process of member checking that Lincoln and Guba (1985) view as essential for the credibility of qualitative data analysis. Finally, participants had the option of elaborating once they were given the transcriptions.

**Validity and Reliability**

In order to ensure that I was capturing the actual words and interpretations of the data of what was shared, I collaborated with the participants themselves. After individual interviews, participants reviewed the transcriptions for accuracy. This communication also provided an opportunity for participants to share any additional information or stories that came to mind after having spent time
revisiting their responses. Notations were made where some participants, but not all, felt the essence of the messages being shared was not captured.

**Researcher Bias**

The researcher is also an instrument by which to conduct and collect data. Researchers must understand that their observations and interpretations are processed through their own experiences and lenses (Schensul et al., 1999). With this in mind, I come to this research with my own biases because of my own lived experiences, beliefs and views.

One bias that is known to me is my belief that Latina/o parents provide assets to the education of their children. An assumption that I hold that is that Latina/os, as a marginalized population in the United States, are rendered invisible regarding the assets that we do bring to educational settings. I am influenced by social justice education and what I have learned through this field regarding master narratives and counter stories.

As a researcher facing these biases and assumptions, I felt that I had two choices in addressing them. First, I could ignore them and let my biases cloud my judgment and taint the findings, giving reason to discredit the Latina narratives. The second option would be to name, notice, and train myself on how to identify my biases so that I could confront them and ensure that they were not interfering with the data collection and analysis process. I did this by bracketing my own experiences, jotting down my thoughts after each interview and transcribing and after reading the interview transcriptions. Therefore, each participant’s responses were recorded and transcribed in their own voices.
Role of the Researcher

According to Morse and Richards (2002), phenomenological researchers attempt to understand the essence of how people attend to the world, cognizant of the fact that people’s descriptions are perceptions and forms of interpretation of experience. The role of the researcher conducting a phenomenological study is to descriptively investigate the phenomenon and transform the experience into a textural expression of its essence. This study presupposed the researcher’s sensitivity to the phenomenon being investigated and faithfulness to the participants’ experience. Additionally, phenomenological research mandates that researchers set aside prejudgments or bracket any preconceived ideas about the phenomenon in order to understand it through voices of the informants. The epoche provided in the preface served as a portion of the bracketing that was utilized throughout the study. The researcher’s role in this phenomenological study was to awaken essential possibilities within the experience of degree attainment among “at risk” students and to give the experience an articulated consciousness. In addition, the researcher, through reduction of research, will seek to uncover and offer a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of degree attainment through the development of “meaning units”, the discriminated articulations of the description of the experience. The researcher will maintain professional spontaneity and sensitivity, as well as an attitude open enough to allow unexpected meanings to emerge.

Limitations

Marshall and Crossman (2006) noted that, “all research projects have
limitations; none is perfectly designed” (p.42-43). Neither is this investigation. While the “insider” positionality of the researcher is considered strength in qualitative research, it also creates a certain tension between the interviewees and the researcher. Ganga and Scott (2006) defined “insider” research as “social interviews between researchers and participants who share a similar cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national and religious heritage” (p. 2). Prior to the interviews I was concerned that the participants might not want to share all the details of their lives with me. However, I discovered that perhaps it was me who wasn’t necessarily willing to share my experiences with someone that wasn’t a friend.

My fears were not justified. The participants were honored that I chose them to share their life stories. They stated at different times that if their life story was of help to anyone, they were happy to share it. The participants have had the opportunity to confirm, disconfirm, or add perspective to the analysis of the interview data through member checking, which I feel added validity to this study. Furthermore, Schwandt (2007) considers member checking to be a “participative and dialogical” interaction between researcher and participant, honoring the participants’ right to know what the researcher has written about them. Thus, I shared with my participants the results of the interview data. I conducted two one-on-one interviews with each participant for a total of fourteen interviews. After each interview I provided the participants with a copy of the transcript of the last interview to make sure they approved what they had shared with me.
Summary

According to Bogdan & Biklen (2007), phenomenological researchers attempt to understand the essence of how people attend to the world, cognizant of the fact that people’s descriptions are perceptions and forms of interpretation of experience. As the researcher I attempted to bring forth the essence of degree attainment through “las voces” of previously identified “at risk” Latina first generation college graduates. My role in this phenomenological study is to awaken essential possibilities within the experiences of “at risk” college graduates and to give the experience an articulated consciousness through descriptive narratives. In addition, I seek to uncover and offer a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of being an “at risk” Latina student through the development of “meaning units”, the discriminated articulations of the description of the experience.

This chapter presented the methodology and research design that was employed in the study. A thorough description of the steps of the process ensured a quality study and bias was also discussed. The sample consisted of seven Latina women of Mexican descent who have enjoyed educational success despite having obstacles and little academic support to navigate through the educational system in the United States. Their stories are told using a narrative approach. This study focused on this subset, participants who identify themselves as first generation Latina college graduates, who defied the odds.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY: EDUCACION ES IMPORTANTE

The goal of this research was to explore the lived experiences of previous labeled at risk Latina first-generation college graduates and understand the factors that helped the participants navigate the school world successfully. Therefore, the study explores the perceptions and lived experiences of Latina first-generation college graduates. In this chapter readers will gain insight to how various forms of capital aided participants in attaining a post-secondary degree.

The research questions that guided this study were based were as follows:

- If a Latina student is identified as an at risk student in K-12 settings, what factors influences a decision to attend College?
- What factors support college completion for Latina students?
- In what ways do the stories of Latina college graduates inform K-12 policies that define at risk students?

In the previous chapter, I provided a brief portrait of each participant (Table 2) to give the reader an understanding of each person’s background (Table 2). In this chapter, I first provide a detailed portrait of each participant, an analysis of the participant stories using the lens of Community Cultural Wealth framework and an explanation of the various types of cultural capital are explained as it is revealed in each story. Secondly, I expand upon the Community Cultural Wealth framework by contextualizing the critical events in the seven women’s life stories that aided them in successfully navigating through the P-20 educational pipeline. And lastly, I provide the reader with an analysis of the commonalities and
variations in their life stories in order to make suggestions for future practices in educating first-generation Latina college students.

The data collected through one-on-one interviews served to form an educational portrait of each participant. The main goal throughout the interviewing process was to gain a better understanding of the experiences of at risk first-generation Latina college graduates.

**Latina Profiles**

This section introduces the seven women who participated in this study. For the purpose of confidentiality, I have changed the names of participants, the colleges they attended, and names of their places of employment (past and current). I have also changed other details where necessary to protect and shield their identity.

The seven participants in this study were either from the Chicago, Illinois, Tucson, Arizona, or Las Vegas, Nevada. All of the participants attended a four-year university and earned their bachelor’s degree within four years. All of the participants were of Mexican descent; however, two stated she was half Puerto Rican. There were also interesting variations among this group: two of the participants are married, three of the participants have at least two children, one became a mother while in high school, four have a master’s degree, and four were non-English speakers upon entering elementary school.

**Alicia.** Alicia grew up in a single parent home with two sisters and a brother in the south side of Chicago, Illinois. She has a large extended family, approximately 30 cousins that she considers brothers and sisters. She views her
aunts as extra moms because they always gave her advice y la regañaban. She always lived within a block away from her extended family members. Alicia has always had a strong bond with her immediate and extended family, with the exception for her father. She has no knowledge of him. Although, Alicia’s first language was Spanish and she recalls always being in the lowest reading group. She always knew she would attend college because even as a young child her family told her she would become either a doctor or lawyer. In fact, once she mastered English she began to excel and eventually ended up in a college preparation program while in high school.

**Angelica.** Angelica grew up with both parents and she is the youngest of five children. All of her siblings are married with children; therefore she has 11 nieces and nephews. Alicia is not married nor does she have children. Her parents moved to the United States from Mexico about 34 years ago. Alicia mother worked at a factory most of her life and her dad is a bus boy. Her first language is Spanish and when she started kindergarten she was in a bilingual classroom. However, she quickly transitioned into an English classroom by the first grade. Alicia does not remember much about her elementary school years but she does recall her first f in first grade and that education was always and expected in her family. She attended a high school in Chicago that was geared to prepare minority students for college. Her parents and siblings always wanted a college education for her.

**Elena.** Elena grew up with both of her parents, a brother and three sisters. Both of her parents are high school graduates, but her mother did not
attend college because she became pregnant right after high school. Elena remembers that before she moved to Vegas, she had a hard time with reading. During the second grade Elena had to see a reading specialist. Despite that she was a good student in fact she was an A and B student although she was shy. Although she doesn’t speak Spanish fluently she understands it because her grandparents always spoke to her in Spanish. While in high school Elena attended honors courses and advance placement classes this helped her excel in college. Her mother always had college aspirations for her despite personal issues (alcohol and drug abuse) among other family members. Elena is the only college graduate among her siblings.

**Lola.** Lola grew up with her parents, two brothers and one sister. She is the eldest of the children. Both of her parents are high school graduates and migrated to the United States from Mexico. Lola is the first college graduate from both sides of the family, but her siblings are also college graduates. She does not recall being told by her parents that she needed to go to college but education was really important in her family. Lola was always an A and B average student throughout elementary and high school, however she experienced difficulties during college due to lack of academic preparedness and her brother’s suicide.

**Marisa.** Marisa grew up with her parents, two older brothers and one younger sister in Chicago, Illinois. Her mother has a GED and her father earned an associate’s degree. Marisa attended three different public elementary schools and one public high school. She excelled in elementary school but found her
high school experiences poor. Due to negative influences and low academic expectations at the high school, she was not given the opportunity to acquire the grades nor the academic skills necessary for college. However, she was accepted into college with the assistance of a Latino organization that helped students with access to higher education.

Marisela. Marisela attended a Catholic elementary school but due to financial constraints attended a public high school in Cicero, Illinois. When she entered elementary school Marisela did not speak English and she had a difficult time for many years. She remembers not being able to write her own name when she entered kindergarten. She did not excel academically until she entered the 6th grade. Marisela experienced constant teasing from her classmates because she was the only Latina in a predominantly White Catholic school. In her view, attending private school was a horrible experience. However, once Marisela entered public school her grades started slipping because female gang members picked her on. Because of this Marisela stopped caring about school and I just did whatever I could, she became a C average student. She believes she graduated from high school by a pure miracle. She had a hard time getting into college because her grades were extremely low. Marisela married at the age of 18 and her story is unique in the sense that she was encouraged to attend college by her cousins and her husband.

Rosa. Rosa’s parents were both from Mexico, her mother attended school to the sixth grade and her dad until the 5th grade. Rosa is the youngest of
two siblings, a brother and a sister. Both of her parents expressed their desires for a college education for Rosa and supported her in all of your school activities. Her mother chose to clean homes in order to have a flexible schedule. This allowed her to take Rosa to and from school and take her to school events. Rosa’s case is unique in the sense she became pregnant during high school. Therefore, she had parental responsibilities throughout college.

**Emergent Themes**

Various recurring themes emerged from the life stories of the participants, which help explain their ability to navigate through the educational pipeline and to eventually become college graduates. These include, but are not limited to, the strength of the family unit where the participants were supported by their immediate and/or extended family to reach higher education attainment. A part of this experience was the constant reminder and expectation that they needed to do better than their parents in order to have a better life.

The participants had mentors and other adults who guided them at different stages in their lives. These mentors saw potential in the participants. This mentorship is something the women describe as an important motivator in helping them pursue and attain a college degree. A few of the participants stated having an individual or individuals set high expectations, support structures, and rigorous curriculum is essential for Latina/o academic success.

These themes are woven throughout and across the life stories of the Latina women interviewed and their stories exemplify various types of capital, as described in detail in the following section. Here I draw from Yosso’s (2005)
Community Cultural Wealth framework to discuss various types of capital as described by the participants in order to understand the role these assets played in helping them navigate through the educational pipeline.

**Materialization of Community Cultural Wealth**

These Latina women all shared a wealth of information in how aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational and resistant capital assisted them in navigating through school despite barriers. All seven participants had access to all six types of capital outlined in the Community Cultural Wealth framework, though different times in their trajectories and careers.

**Aspirational Capital.** Parents transmit aspirational capital by encouraging their children to hold on to their hopes and dreams despite barriers. Parents transmit their desires for academic advancement to their children by stressing the importance of an education. This helped the participants in this study push themselves beyond other members in their families. All but one of the participants had aspirations to attend college at an early age. They recall their mothers or extended family members constantly reminding them as to why getting an education was critical. Only one participant, Marisela, expressed a lack of desire to attend an institution of higher education.

Throughout her early educational experiences and high school, Marisela had negative views about school due to constant bullying and racism. Marisela shared:

> My cousins did [college aspirations for me]. They were always pushing me because they went to college. In my mother's side of the family almost everyone goes to college and it's expected. But...when I was in high school I didn't want to go...and they [cousins] were like, no you have to go,
what else are you going to be doing? Yeah so, it was my cousins pretty much pushing me…They’d even think of careers for me and that’s where the news reporting came from, cause they’re like, you’re so verbal, you should be a news reporter and I was like, okay I’ll do it. But it was not my own decision, you know?

When asked if anyone else influenced her decision to attend college she added:

Pretty much my husband…[then boyfriend] was college oriented, he was expected to go to college and I felt threatened by it…I thought, if I didn’t, he might be turned away, you know? Well he flat out, I remember, he won’t admit to it now, but I remember him saying when we were dating, I won’t marry a girl who won’t go to college. And I was like, WOW!

Contrary to the deficit-based assumptions that Latina/o parents do not care about their children’s education, the participants often expressed that their parents had high educational aspirations and expectations for them. In fact, extended family members also expressed their desires for a better quality of life and educational opportunities for the participants. Alba’s immediate family and extended family all had college aspirations for her. She stated:

At home, my mom always told me, I had to go to school. Like I knew I had to go to school, I knew I had to get straight A’s, and the only thing I knew was that I was going to be a doctor or a lawyer. That was it. Because, you know, that’s what she said, like, ‘oh, mi hija, va hacer una abogada o una doctora’…so, I was like, yeah, you know, I didn’t know there was other stuff you could pick from, so it was like, yeah, that’s what I’m going to be. My family always told me that I was going to be a doctor or a lawyer. I always knew I was going to college and that I wasn’t going to let them down. Yes, after hearing it [doctor or lawyer] so much you start believing it. I leaned more to doctor and played doctor as a kid. I always told everyone I was going to be a doctor.

Alba shared that her extended family had college aspirations for her as well:

It was a freaking reunion. It was like twenty people that went to drop me off. My aunts, my uncles, my grandma went, my cousins, my brother, my sister, my mom. They brought a dog. Everybody. Like on the front [of the university]. In one of the dorms, in front, my whole family was in the damn
front yard. They were just there chilling, they didn’t want to leave for like an hour, you know, and I was like, OK, guys, it’s getting dark.

When asked how she felt when she realized her entire family was dropping her off at the university she replied:

I cried, because I mean, I think when you’re going through it you don’t realize what a big deal it is. And I don’t know if it’s humility or what, but I didn’t realize it, until I saw them there and everybody started crying...And then they had to leave and I was just like, damn, I'm really doing this, you know, I’m really here, and I’m really expected to finish. Like that was one thing like I knew for sure. Like I told you, my mom always expected me to finish. She never said, 'oh, a ver si terminas’. My aunts, everybody that knew me, they knew I was going to finish. It was like a fact. It was done. I just had to go through the motions, right, like I was already there; I just had to actually reenact the thing. So, to me that was like a really big impetus, I guess, because, I don’t know, it had a big impact when I saw everybody there and they were crying...

Marisa reflected on whether her parents had aspirations for a post secondary education for her and responded with the following:

I want to say yes, they stressed and made it known to us that when we went [to college], I had aspirations for college for myself because of the people we associated with through church. Some of them were in school or already had a college education. That was big, I always knew because we had positive role models...My parents always said if you want to be somebody or do something we your life you need to go to school. I translated that to - those that don’t have a college education aren’t anybody.

Alicia’s stated there was never a question in her mind that she would go to college:

My parents wanted me to go to college and more than anything my mom always said she wanted me to work with my mind not my hands like her. My mom worked at a factory for 20 years and my dad as a bus boy, airport and now delivery car parts. That’s what they did while I was in school.

This also refutes deficit thinking that perpetuates the myth that all Mexican American parents do not care about their children or their education (Flores,
Cousin and Díaz, 1991). In Lola’s case, she did not recall ever being told that a college education was necessary but she did remember her parents always emphasized that education was important. Lola’s experience combined with other participants in this study confirms that minority parents do care about their children’s academic success and want to be involved in their children’s schooling (Trumbellet al., 2001). She shared:

Growing up education was really important in our family so my parents use to have study hour (laughing), even if we didn’t have homework, which we didn’t like. But it was important and getting good grades was important. During study hour we had to read, so something important. I remember, growing up, my parents bought the Encyclopedia Britannica, you know, and things like that. They always encouraged us to learn.

Elena shared that both her parents were college graduates with aspirations for a college education, however her mother became pregnant right after high school. She remembers that despite of her brother’s drug abuse problem and father’s alcohol abuse her mother encouraged her to persist academically.

My mom did [aspirations for a college education]...she asked us to go to school, do well, and go to college. It was like an expected thing for me. I knew I wanted to go to college, but I didn’t know how I was going to pay for it, but the year I graduated was the first year of the Millennium Scholarship. After that, I knew I was definitely going because it would be free.

Elena also stated:

Once I was in college I knew I would return for a master’s. She [mother] would always praise me; brag about me towards other family members…when I earned my master’s degree my mother asked me what’s next? Are you going to get your doctorate? [Laughter]

Rosa recalls that both of her parents had aspirations for her to attend college, her parents communicated this to her verbally.
Yes, both my mom and dad did [aspirations for a college education]. Like they would support me in everything I did with school. If I had any school events, sports, anything related to school, they always made sure to take the time to go and take me to the event. They always encouraged me, told me I could do it...my mother chose to clean houses so that her schedule would be flexible so she’d be able to take me to school, pick me up, take me to events and stuff like that.

As the various statements above demonstrate, parents and extended shared their aspirations for their children to attain a higher education and their children used it as a source of motivation in their pursuit to educational attainment. According to Tara J. Yosso (2005), “aspirational capital is the ability to hold onto hope in the face of structured inequality and often without the means to make such dreams a reality.” (p. 77). Thus, in spite of the challenges and barriers parents encountered in their own educational experiences, they remained optimistic about their children’s future educational and career opportunities. When Rosa’s dad found out she was pregnant in high school, he was devastated and his hopes for a college education were crushed she recalls:

My dad was really hurt when he found out I was pregnant. He said really mean things to me, like, ‘this is the end of your life. You’re, not going to do anything more, you’re going to end up like your cousins, having babies and not doing anything with your life.’ I knew I wanted to go to college before I got pregnant. That was my main goal. But hearing him say that, I was like, yeah right, I’m going to prove you wrong.

Despite claims that first-generation students are at a disadvantage due to their parents’ lack of knowledge about formal educational systems and higher education; these participant stories illustrate the importance of parental and familial encouragement for a college education. They also illustrated how this played an important role as to why they went to college.

**Linguistic capital.** Linguistic capital is related to the tradition of
storytelling. This kind of storytelling can include *consejos* (advice) or *refranes* (proverb-style messages) and demonstrates linguistic strengths in the ability to tell a story while employing comedic timing, intonation, memorization, facial expressions, and dramatic pauses. I was able to witness this capital in action while I interviewed the when I participants recalled specific example of their experiences. During in-depth interviews, a memorable experience shared was when a participant shared the story about her first day in college. Alba shared how all her aunts, cousins, siblings and mother caravanned on campus, she laughed while she described her family on the campus lawn. Linguistic capital also includes the ability to communicate in various languages.

In this study the participants provided examples of how the Spanish language builds linguistic capital (Barciaga & Erbstein, 2010). Out of the seven participants, two stated they were not fluent in Spanish. Elena and Lola indicated they understood Spanish, but aren’t able to speak it fluently. However, both stated that they possess a functional knowledge level that has been beneficial when working with English Language Learners.

Alba noticed that being bilingual was an advantage when learning new vocabulary words. Having this skill made learning easier for her and she stated:

> I always felt like it’s kind of like cheating especially in vocabulary, I always excelled and in writing I felt as if I was cheating. When the teacher asked for definitions I knew what it was in Spanish when most kids didn’t know at all. Knowing Spanish has always been an asset I don’t know what I would have done without that knowledge.

While growing up Alba also served as her mother’s translator and her mother pushed her to ask questions. According to researcher Marjorie Faulstich
Orellana (2003), children who translate acquire skills including, metalinguistic awareness, civic and familial responsibility, social maturity and cross-cultural awareness. Alba used these acquired skill later to navigate through college. Alicia discussed how knowing two languages as helped her help parents and students:

I just grew up speaking it [Spanish]. But, the fact that Spanish was my first language and that I know both has many advantages whether it’s formal or informal...At work for sure, my job is to work with and assist first generation minorities to persist through college and graduate. And I run into a lot of parents not knowing how to navigate through [the application process] but have an interest in helping their kids. So I serve as a person able to explain for example subsidized and unsubsidized loans.

Marisa’s linguistic capital goes beyond language; she enjoys arts and crafts, dramatic play and spent her four years in high school studying music.

I was fortunate to have the music experience high school because my parents would not have been able to afford that or instruments. In music, I was able to learn how to compose and write music. That was the main purpose why I was at that school. If you were in band they were going to make sure you learned music...because it was a music academy. In its earlier years, it was the best music academy in the city. It was located in an affluent community. Once the Lanthrop projects were built within its district, the school had to admit kids from the projects. So, then it also catered to low-income families from the project homes. However, if you lived in the district it was not mandatory to take music or join the ROTC program.

Rosa views about knowing to languages and how she’s ensuring her children become proficient in Spanish:

I’m grateful I speak two languages, you know, for my job, opportunities, being able to help others. My children are not allowed to speak English at home, its only Spanish, because I don’t want them to lose it. Their first language is Spanish, even though I could have taught them English first.

Five participants spoke Spanish in their homes. Rather than only considering these families as deficient and linguistically isolated among mostly
monolingual English speaking communities, the concept of linguistic capital pushes us to think critically about the work these participants engaged in as linguistic and cultural brokers (Barciaga & Erbstein, 2010). That is, they serve as mediators between people who might otherwise not be able to communicate as effectively because of language and/or culture. These bilingual and bicultural adults were able to contribute to their families’ well being by acquiring skills through interpreting that are often overlooked.

Four women in this study whose first language was Spanish found that knowledge of their native language helped them gain a better understanding of how the English language works and helped them accelerate their English language learning, which is consistent with the research on second language acquisition. Linguistic competence in two or more languages, as has been documented by researchers (Cummins, 2009; Calderón, 2007; & García, 2005) is a complex process, and honoring one’s native language is critical in being able to acquire higher levels of second language proficiency or what Cummins refers to as the Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) level.

**Familial capital.** According to Delgado Bernal (1998 & 2002), familial capital cultural knowledge-nurtured by the family carries a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition. Familial capital engages a commitment to the community’s well being and expands the concept of family to include a more extensive understanding of kinship. Therefore, family may include immediate family as well as aunts, uncles, grandparents and friends who we might consider part of our *familia*. Our family also model lessons of caring, coping and providing
educación, which inform our emotional, moral, educational and occupational consciousness (Yosso, 2005). All the participants credit their parent(s) and/or extended family members for setting high expectations in regards to education. Whether they were there to watch or not they were told that homework was important. Alba remembers how inspiring her aunts were:

My aunts were as essential as my mom. My aunts always went above and beyond for me. They knew my mother couldn’t get certain things for me and they were always there to help. They would often tell people ‘déjala en paz, ella es una niña buena ella va a ser una profesional’ they always had positive things to say about me. Besides their encouragement I was always a conscientious child, I was aware of their struggles, I knew my aunts woke up at 4am to work at a factory and then work as a waitress later that same evening… I knew their struggle and admired them for the way they deal with things.

Alba looked up to aunts because they are extremely strong women and whether they had an education or not they were always very resourceful. She mentioned she aspired to be like her aunts. She said:

They were a loyal and emotional support. They weren’t able to provide examples of what they did in college but they provided emotional support.

Alicia recalls getting support from her mother, father, brothers and sisters, these moments gave her strength and motivation to move forward.

For some reason when I felt overwhelmed, I would tell my mom. I would call her and tell her why I felt overwhelmed…how many papers I had to write, I would vent…She would listen while I talked and cried. I remember she would tell me not to give up and that I could do it. And eventually everything was better, even my brothers, sisters and father would tell me ‘you are there now and doing this for a reason, you can do it.’ They always gave me words of encouragement, it was always positive…after talking to them how did I feel? [Laugher] Great! Like I had no worries. I still had a 10-page paper to write, but I had a team behind me, encouraging me and believing in me. I also had people at my high school. So this is how I looked at it the more people supporting me the more people I had to disappoint. If I messed up I would disappoint, my principal, teachers,
advisors, parents, brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews. I could not disappoint them.

Elena expressed that her mother spent most of her time dealing with the alcohol and drug issues of her husband and son. Elena found the support she needed among her college going friends. She shared:

If I didn’t understand it [school work], I had friends that would help me. I had a group of friends that were there to help me and support me in high school. I had my friends, and since my friends were all talking about going to college, they’re the ones who like took me on the path to college. I just happened to hang out with a great group of friends that took me on the path...I had a group of friends that were applying, and we all went through the application process together, so it was them that helped me.

Lola recalls her mother encouraging her, but she also shared that a friend helped her through a difficult time (brother’s suicide) while in college:

Just, I mean I remember, you know, when my brother committed suicide, my friend—one of my friends was in class with me, so she went to the teacher right away and told them about my situation, and so, you know, he was—I didn’t even have to go to him right away [to talk to my professor] because she had already done that for me. Then, she kind of tried to help me, you know, catch up on some of my assignments and things like that, and just being there for me when I was, you know, going through a hard time. And, when my parents, I mean they were just, you know, encouraging.

She also commented:

I mean I have never seen my parents give up on [laughing] on anything really, you know? And then I think too it’s your—like the individual person too. I’m a very stubborn person. [Laughter] When someone tells me that I can’t do something, I will do it. [Laughing] So, I mean even today I mean, I guess, because I run marathons and things like that so I guess, maybe I got that, probably from my parents. Although, I did drive my parents crazy. I know I did [Laughter] because I was very stubborn.

Marisela’s mother did not push her to go to college and once Marisela decided to marry at the age of eighteen her mother was not involved in her life.
However, Marisela remembers that her cousins and husband who encouraged her to earn a college degree. She stated:

They did [cousins]. They did support, Lisa was always there pushing me. And then my cousin, I don’t know if you remember my cousin, Jose, financially. He’d feel bad and he’d be like, here [money], just go buy this or that, things I needed. And those are the two that stand out really. Well. They [cousins] influenced my lifetime career decision cause they were all teachers. And I ended up becoming a teacher. Not because they told me to, but because I saw what they were doing. And all the stories they would tell every time they get together, they would talk about their classroom experiences and how much they liked it.

Rosa stated that her parents weren’t able to provide academic support while she was in high school and college. However, she spoke about the family support her parents provided while she was in high school and during college:

My family offered a lot of support in the sense that it I ever needed anybody to take care of my son, they were there. My sister watched him, my mother watched him and my dad watched him, a thing he was used to doing, not even with us, but for him he would watch him, if I needed it. If it was school related. I had a horrible car that I bought myself, it smoked everywhere and everything, when I was going to UNLV and she saw I was continuing to go, she actually gave me a car.

Parental involvement has been documented (Gonzalez et al., 2005) extensively to be a determining factor in helping students be successful in schools. However, parental involvement, as in the case of these participants, was not the traditional incorporation of parents in school events or going to the school to advocate for their children. Nonetheless, the importance of setting up structures for these students to take responsibility for their schooling was evident. Thus, it would appear that understanding the student’s circumstances and their background would help educators create bridges of support for the students (Nieto, 2000).
**Social Capital.** In this study, social capital emerged similarly to Yosso’s (2005) description of social capital as human and community resource networks. The participants interviewed spoke highly of the few adults that assisted them. Most of these adults were employed by social services, some worked at schools, and others were family or community members who dedicated time to provide individualized support to the students they served. These adults, programs, or community centers provided assistance. For Marisa, the church played a big role in building a sense of place in the community. The church activities provided opportunities for developing leadership skills. Yosso’s (2005) framework of social capital supports the notion of a church as a community resource that can provide members with opportunities to develop leadership skills, as was the case with Ana and Rosario. The church also provided Marisa with various layers of emotional and academic support.

Marisa explains how the church activities helped her with her character development. She developed a sense of self by being involved in helping others. Through the church is met an inspiring individual and it was he who inspired her interest in sociology. She recalls:

Outside of school my mother and father were very social people. My mother was always involved within the community so we were exposed to people from different walks of life. This sparked my desire to seek a higher education because I knew that some of these individuals had one [college degree]. Two people stand out, a piano player at church who was a psychologist and we had another guy who spoke at our church who was a sociologist. And he is why I went into sociology. He was a Harvard grad, a Latino and an African looking Latino at that. And it made me feel like…Wow he’s a Harvard grad that’s a big deal. I wanted to go into the same thing because of him and the work he was doing. He was big on cultural diversity and breaking social barriers affecting the economic and educational status of Latinos and other minorities.
She also discussed how a Latino community resource center assisted her during the college admission process.

That’s how I got in [Poyecto Palante], not because of my grades. The only time I made honor [roll] in high school was the last semester. I don’t even know how I even made honor roll because half the time I wasn’t in class. But, I made it.’

On the other hand, Marisela, Alba and Angelica received similar support from school personnel, which provided them with opportunities to navigate through the educational system, a finding echoed in the work of Yosso, (2005). Marisela recalls taking advantage of professor’s office hours and some of these professors took an interest in her success. Shared:

They [professors] did provide us [support], I remember, we could go talk to a counselor if we had a problem or we needed some kind of assistance. And the teachers were always very nice about everything. Well, I think I remember the teachers the most, because since we didn’t have our parents around we were newlyweds. We saw them as our parents. So, if we had a problem or a question we went to them and talked to them about it and they would give us advice. They were always thought it was cute; we were the married couple in the classroom all the time and they were always there for us. They themselves, the professors would actually tell you about it [resources].

When asked what type of help she received from her college professors and advisors Marisela recalled:

When we couldn’t afford books, the waivers were there. They helped us establish credit cards. We would use credit cards to pay for school things or for daily living things, cause we were just starting out. Whenever we had questions about personal issues, they kind of helped us get through it. If it wasn’t for those resources I don’t think we would have made it. And those things we actually did pay attention to, because we really were, I think we were too involved in trying to get by as a married couple that we needed those resources. It was hard.
Alba gives credit to her high school college preparation program for helping her acquire valuable college skills. But, once in college she knew she needed to make connections with social and academic groups in order to succeed. When asked how she became involved at the university’s cultural house and her sorority she responded with:

I just put myself out there. I’m a loud mouth, I asked questions, and I’m curious. I did experience a culture shock. But, I started asking questions and seeking people out that spoke my language, my color, I was asking questions left and right, etc. This is how I found out about socials and I would go. I would take any flyer offered and I was there for whatever was going on.

When asked how beneficial these programs were to her attaining her degree she replied:

They were extremely essential. If they hadn’t been there it would have been an extraordinary struggle…College shouldn’t be as difficult as it is for Latinos or Latina students like me. I feel like there are more resources readily available for mainstream population, which are the White students. I realized they have a lot more, many more programs options and resources to back them up. For example, White sororities, compared to Latina sororities we aren’t even allowed to have houses and have that support system but Latinas can’t have that-so that helps out a lot every little bit counts. And growing up the way I did you learn to appreciate every little thing and you work with that, when people under estimate you, it pushes you even more. You tell yourself, I’m going to make it work.

Alba used the resources available to her to the best of her knowledge and capabilities such as tutoring services and computer labs. Similarly, Alicia recalls her high school teachers and principal’s efforts in creating success in their college bound program. She remembers:

The classes were small about 20 students, the teachers were amazing and as a student you knew the teachers believed in you and really cared. We had a longer school year and day compare to other schools. We went the regular 4 years and an additional 10 months. We knew our teachers worked until 5:30 p.m. each day and they were there to help us. I just
thought because they were so willing to help and they set the bar so high. There wasn’t a question if you go to college, everyone talked to you like you are going to college and you don’t hear that anywhere else. You don’t hear it in your neighborhood. As far as my parents they sent the same message but they didn’t know the difference between a two-year and a four-year [college/university], the differences between colleges, anything about financial aid. But they made it very clear that it was expected. During high school I felt I was a B student a little higher than an average student. I took AP and college placement courses because I like to challenge myself, nothing too crazy. They [courses] were recommended by the dean of students and my teachers, they talked you through it and you had to accept it.

Alicia also discussed her high school principal and he was a source of inspiration and described how he has assisted other minority students attain a college education. In college, Alicia remembers how inspirational and helpful the Latino/a professors were to her as well. When she faced lack of motivation she turned to her Latino professors:

Sometimes, I talked to Latino professors and that was motivating to me. There wasn’t a tutor that could help you with motivation. Overall, it was something I had to work on myself, it was something that was instilled in me through aspirations that my family had for me as well and those I had for myself.

Alicia described how she used the Latino professors as a source of motivation:

Just seeing that they were able to do it made me feel like I could do it and to this day, meeting you, someone who is from the same background makes me feel like we can do anything. It feels really nice to sit down, have a conversation with someone who has been to school and came from the same background and has done it. It is motivating. To hear their story of how they did it, that they are continuing on and where they are going next- it’s great to hear their stories. Learning about my professor’s background, seeing them in front of a classroom at a university was inspirational. Just watching them was inspirational.

Social capital establishes that it is exactly this type of human support system described by Alba, Alicia, Marisela, and Marisa which has been found to help Latinos jump over the hurdles of poverty and the many other factors
associated with being an (Yosso, 2005).

**Navigational Capital.** All of the participants demonstrated navigational capital, the various strategies used in navigating social institutions. In this section are descriptions of how the participants navigated through school. Alba and Alicia attended high schools with a college preparation program, which set high expectations and offered a support system for the students to be able to gain access to educational institutions after high school. They each shared that being in that environment going to college was almost a given. Alba also utilized the skills she learned while growing up to tap into university resources and build a network system. She stated:

> I mean I was my mother’s right wing man; I called in about bills, paid the bills ever since I was 9 years old at the currency exchange. My mother would say, ‘ustedes que saben el idioma deben de preguntar.’

Alba’s mother felt that she had the English skills to maneuver through everyday challenges and always pushed her to ask questions and acquire information as a child. Due to these interactions Alba quickly learned about the importance and effectiveness of speaking up and seeking for assistance when needed.

Alicia learned about the university resources when she realized she was at risk for failure. She recalls:

> There were programs that targeted minorities; the La Casa Cultura Latina offered tutoring services. I didn’t use them until later. I probably should have used them sooner because I knew they were there. There were so many resources. I learned [about the programs] when I learned I was on probation; I didn’t even know I was on probation. Also, through my advisors in college and still being connected to my high school. They [high school personnel] were still checking up on us to ensure we were persisting each year. It was like reality, I had to do it. The university and high school told me about the resources and then I had to seek out the help I needed.
Elena felt well prepared for college life and this was accredited to the advance placement course she took during high school. These courses gave her the tools needed to work out any issue she faced while in college.

I took advantage of the office hours for the professors, if I needed extra help I didn’t use the Writing Center because I was a good writer but I did use the computer labs. I also used the Curriculum Library once I discovered it.

Rosa stated that her only obstacle was ensuring she had someone to care for her son while she was in class. She was able to get assistance at the university, which had an on-site daycare. Yosso’s (2005) framework supports the notion that students who have access to navigational structures and support are able to navigate higher learning institutions even though their parents were unable to help them find their way to universities or other institutions of learning after high school.

**Resistant capital.** All of the participants had to resist negative stereotypes and display a high degree of motivation in order to successfully navigate through school. For example, when asked whether attending college presented academic or other challenges, all participants resisted barriers in regards to intelligences, lack of motivation, time management, personal challenges, and or financial constraints. Among the findings in this study, these Latina college graduates resisted the notion that they were incapable of persisting in a university setting. They met academic, institutional, and personal challenges head on.

Rosa had aspirations for going away to college; however she became
pregnant while in high school. She recalls her father’s reaction to the news:

My dad was really hurt when he found out I was pregnant. He said really mean things to me like, this is the end of your life. You’re not going to do anything more, you’re going to end up like your cousins, having babies and not doing anything with your life. I knew I wanted to go to college before I got pregnant. That was my main goal. Hearing him say that, I was like, yeah right! I’m going to prove you wrong.

Later Rosa added that her father’s statement fueled her motivation because there were times she doubted that she had the skills and knowledge to go to college. She stated:

So in a way, even though he [father] was really mean and harsh to me during that time… it kind of gave me the motivation to still keep going. Because not only did I want to prove myself wrong, that I could still do it because sometimes I doubted it, I wanted to prove him wrong more than anything. My mom was more supportive.

Alicia felt navigating through college was a difficult task for herself and other Latina/o students of urban communities. She had a great sense of accomplishment to have successfully navigated through college within 4 years from the number one public university in Illinois. She shared her thoughts about her acceptance to college:

My parents were not [excited] because they didn’t want me to go away for school. They asked why can’t you go to a university in Chicago? They didn’t understand but I knew they wanted me to go to college I had no doubts about that, they just did not want me to leave I was the youngest, a female and the first to go to college. They were nervous and didn’t know how I would take care of myself…this is how I pitched it to them. You left Mexico for a better life and I’m going about 150 miles away for a better life and I’m coming back with a degree. And I did, I did it in four years [smile]. I had personal milestones… All the research tells you that you aren’t going to make it. And that was a motivator for me, and my family supporting me to stay [in college]. That’s how I got through college; I persisted through sophomore year. And once I did that…obviously there were so many challenges. I struggled academically to the point where I would be at the library and read a paragraph over and over again and I could not retain the information. I would get up and walk around and I’d have tears all over
my face. I would wipe the tears and turn around and go back into the
library to finish my work. I would think about my brothers and sisters, they
have jobs, cars, homes, kids and they were successful, they didn’t go to
college. So I’m over here away from my family because I can’t read and
struggling mentally and I don’t know what it was that also was challenging.
Just going through that, but my next goal was finishing college in 4 years
again something that isn’t common among Latinos. But we keep changing
that, finishing college in four years. I guess considering my background,
even my ACT score was a 21, which is at the low end for students who
attend that university. Being able to finish within 4 years was an
accomplishment [smile].

When asked about the challenges Alicia faced she shared the following:

…As far as the challenges, when I was in class I remember feeling really
intimidated. Sometimes being the only Latina in the entire classroom
sometimes I felt scared to speak. I thought I might say something
incorrectly; afraid of sounding different and thinking they already expect
me that I am this or that. I remember raising my hand and my heart would
start beating so fast. It happened so many times throughout the 4 years
and I always say that it’s one of things that made me stronger because I
kept raising my hand although my voice was shaking and my heart was
beating fast. That happened whether there were 10 people in my class or
500 in lecture hall but eventually I learned to speak up and it all ties
back…I just want to say that knowing the Latino statistics from my Latino
study courses helped and hearing about things that could be done. When
I saw a Latina professor in front of class teaching me I knew it could be
done. Those things motivated me and helped me get through the
challenges.

When Alba reflected on the challenges she faced while in college she said:

I feel like there are a lot of roadblocks, like the system is…I don’t want to
say that it’s set up for us [Latinos] to fail but they make it really easy for
urban minority students to fail. They brush you aside and you have to be
very persistent in getting what you want and what you need. You have to
ask questions otherwise you’re done. They weed you out, there are
classes designed to do this, there are class that are weed out class they
are extremely hard on purpose. And these are 100 level classes, so you
wouldn’t expect it. You don’t know this coming in, the advisors tell you to
take 100 level classes and if you take psych 100 and you’ll be done in the
first two weeks.

Although Alba participated in a college program in high school, she was not fully
prepared for the rigor found in higher education programs. This confirms
previous research finding indicating that first-generation students represent a diversity of academic ability and are at a disadvantage in regard to academic preparedness (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004; Penrose, 2002). She added:

In high school you don’t even read a chapter a night. So, the expectation level kinda messes with you and the lack of support. A lot of the professors don’t care. They don’t care that you weren’t taught; I guess they don’t have the empathy. That was a struggle in itself, finding teachers you could relate to, finding staff that could truly help you, and not mislead you was a mission, at least for me. At first working with professor was difficult…But eventually I learned to work around it. If one person doesn’t listen, try again and if it doesn’t work, more on. You have to learn how to work the system…I had to go to someone who did care, obviously the administrators need enrollment; they need a certain number [students] to earn grants…you need to learn how to work the system.

The skills Alba learned while assisting her mother and aunts navigate through everyday life experiences taught her to inquire and seek assistance. Alba shared that she would seek out student clubs or socials in order to build a network and acquire resources. Elena biggest challenge while in high school was not letting her father’s and brother’s problems distract her from studying.

I had personal challenges…my brother’s drug issues, rehab, bunch of chaos. My father was an alcoholic, and picked fights [arguments] with mother. My mother left the house one day. The way I coped with all the problems was by going into my room and I always focused on getting schoolwork done because that was important to me and it helped me forget about all the craziness that was going on all around me.

When asked how she learned to be resilient she credited her mother and father. She said her father was always a hard worker despite his problems with alcoholism. Furthermore, Elena believes her strength stems from her mother because she was always the backbone of the family and demonstrated strength during difficult times or situations.
Despite all the issues with my dad and brother, my mother never gave up on them. My brother did crazy stuff but my mother never gave up on him. She always tried to keep him in line. My mother and father are hard workers, so that kinda came up with us; we’re all hard workers.

This illustrates the value students find when parents modeled the importance of persevering and working hard. Lola also discussed her experiences with being resilient. Besides dealing with her brother’s suicide while earning her bachelor’s degree. Later, Lola faced a difficult time when she applied to a master’s degree program. The program she applied for was an accelerated program located two hours away from her home. She was not accepted initially.

And when I went for my master’s degree, I wasn’t accepted into my master’s program...because I didn’t have very good grades [as an undergraduate] during the whole time that I was struggling with everything, with my brother’s suicide. You could petition them, so then I petitioned them, and they accepted me. So, then I went through the program and [laughing] graduated. It was extremely hard, I think it was hard because I was teaching full-time, plus you’re taking 3 classes every evening, driving 2 hours back and forth, you know, and studying on the weekends, so for that year you didn’t have a life.

When asked about being resilient, she said:

Well, I think maybe my parents are probably resilient, too, in many ways. I mean they’ve—my dad is just, you know, he’s worked really hard and I had a big family. It wasn’t always easy, but you know, they worked really hard to make sure that we had what we needed, to live a good life, you know? And, I mean we weren’t rich by any means but, we always had food on the table and my mom always made dinner and we always sat down to eat together and, so we had like—we had good family—I think good family values, and we still do.

Marisa had a hard time getting into to college and went through a Latino program that helped Latino students gain access into high education. She stated had she known what she now knows about schools and education; she would have attended a high school with a stronger focus on academics. Marisa chose
to attend a high school with low academic student expectations; In fact, she thought music programs and JROTC were the main focus of school officials because she was not challenged academically. She recalls:

That’s how I got in [Proyecto Palante], not because of my grades. The only time I made honor roll in high school was the last semester. I don’t even know how I even made honor roll because half the time I wasn’t in class. But I made it. I was much unprepared for college. I had no direction. I just knew I wanted to go to college. I knew I had to get a college education. The ambition was there but the smarts, just wasn’t there. It was a struggle and it took me quite some time... I had to take a lot of pre classes that I paid for in order to get ready to take college courses. And I did really well in my college courses the only thing was that I was misguided in the sense that I ended up taking a lot of courses that I had no business taking. Such as, physics especially since I barely passed algebra. Not to mention, I had to take it [algebra] three times because I could not get it. It was not the basics skills; I would just lose interest in the subject. I passed it when I had no other choice and had to stick it out. It was a struggle for me because I ended up paying for a lot of my education out of my own pocket. Which is why it took me longer to finish than other people but I didn’t have to take any educational loans either. I paid for it myself. It took me longer but it paid off.

Marisa also added:

Other than feeling that I really belonged there [college], once I was there, I knew I belong there. I didn’t feel like I was out of my element. I knew I had the smarts and the predisposition to learn beyond my circumstances. It’s an innate desire; I continue to learn even to this day. I believe that despite economics, individuals can learn. Your economic situation and your predisposition to fail is not a barrier. Your desire to learn and the opportunity is important. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to go to college, which a lot of people don’t get that chance. Failure wasn’t an option for me.

The challenges Marisela faced while she was in college were more financial because she was a newlywed. She attended the same classes as her husband and they persisted through their education program together.

Pretty much getting financial assistance, cause once we got married, they told us that because we made $17,000 combined, we didn’t qualify for financial aid anymore. So, we had to take out student loans otherwise we
couldn’t go. Plus, working two jobs and trying to get the homework done on time and even getting there [school] cause it was so far.

When asked how she dealt with having two jobs, classes and marriage, Marisela recalled:

Just stayed up all night. Literally, we [husband] would just stay up or we would wake up at 3 in the morning and do our homework and then leave the house by 8. I mean that’s how it was. You just never slept cause we had to. I mean we decided to buy property at the time. We had property and we had to deal with that work, and we finally bought a car. Cause taking the train and not sleeping was no fun. Also, one of my cousins would help us out financially sometimes. We were completely on our own, that’s why I had two part-time jobs and he [husband] worked full time and then the student loans that we lived off student loans pretty much.

Rosa shared that her only obstacle during college was caring for her child and managing school.

Only obstacle was going to college with a kid. It was kind of a struggle doing it with him [laughter]. My family offered a lot of support in the sense that it I ever needed anybody to take care of my son, they were there. My sister watched him, my mother watched him and my dad watched him, a thing he was NOT used to doing, not even with us. But for him [grandson] he would watch him, if I needed it. If it was school related. So in a way, even though he [father] was really mean and harsh to me during that time, in what he said to me. It kind of gave me the motivation to still keep going, because not only did I want to prove myself wrong, that I could still do it because sometimes I doubted it, I wanted to prove him wrong more than anything. My mom was more supportive.

Resistant capital, for the participants in this study, was most often demonstrated through challenging inequity and subordination and articulating a vision for rethinking misconceptions. Such capital indicates the presence of critical thinking, demonstrating that despite their status as at risk Latinas they are not passive, but rather actively engaged in resisting negative stereotypes of themselves and their communities. In evaluating the elements that might foster the resilience of academically successful Latina students in this study, others in
la familia served as supports and role models. This was true even if participants’ mothers were not primary supporters of their educational pursuits. Although several participants had early bi-cultural educational experiences that included racism, their ganas fostered an in your face counter attitude. Having a strong attitude in combination with supportive people and programs on campus seemed to be most effective in rising above negative experiences.

**Consejos**

The findings suggested that the participants would know how to transmit the cultural capital they have attained through their educational journey to their children. This will assist in the transmission of community cultural wealth from one generation to the next. As a way to conclude this chapter, I present the advice that participants shared for future generations of Latina first-generation college graduates, however this set of advice is applicable to other marginalized groups as well. The consejos are based on participants’ lived experiences as they navigated through educational system and are told from each individual’s perspective. Each of the participants in this study began with a statement explaining what makes them successful and follows with a statement aimed to assist future Latina first-generation college students, these statements can be found below.

**Alba.** I don’t think I’m successful yet but I’m on the right path. I have high expectations for myself. I never sell myself short, to have high expectations for myself and always keep learning. My mother has always told me ‘si eres rica or no, la education no te la quita nadie porque todo que tu apredes se queda en tu cabeza. Si birdiz tu trabajo vaz a encontrar otro porque eres inteligente.’ So, to me learning everything you can is success. My advice to the next generation? To focus on what’s important and take advantage of everything you can. Speak up, be resilient and
when things don’t work out bounce back. You have to work it for you, use what makes you tick, that’s your drive. Realize what a struggle to be a woman and a minority because there aren’t to many programs that will help you along. I feel that we should be working now, as young professional with programs that help Latina women.

**Alicia.** As I mentioned before I work for a network of ten schools and it started with the one school I graduated from and part of my success is that I’m part of this mission that has become ten high schools. I’m helping students attend and persist through college as I did by following the same path. It seems really simple but it’s not because there are a lot of obstacles along the way. And there aren’t a lot of Latinas in that role [director] to get more Latinos in college and graduate. With that said my advice to future first-generation college graduates? I tell them there will be obstacles but that they can be successful and that there are more people out there like them that have been successful. My advice usually starts with the statistics surrounding Latino college graduates and I inform them that despite this we can be successful, to use this information as motivation, because we are the only ones that can change this. That’s really pushed me through college and is still a motivator. I always think in the back of my mind how as Latinos…this is how I explain it and it sucks, it’s an extra book in our book bag for first-generation Latinos an extra class. It’s almost like an extra ongoing class that we have to worry about, all these different issues that happen, in trying to maneuver through college and life, use the resources available to us. We have to accept what it is and use it as a motivator. These students have to want more. I’m glad that I can give back to my community with our program we’ve have 1,400 alumni who have graduated from college or are attending college and I believe that wouldn’t happen if we didn’t have this system in place. I have students that complain that their mom has asked them did you take your placement test for college, let me look at your essay, or let me fill out your financial aid application. And I tell them my mother doesn’t know how to turn on a computer, she doesn’t know what a loan is and I have a college degree and I did it in four years without that help. But they helped me in so many other ways and you should appreciate that you have that on top of the fact that they want you to go to college. You’re lucky that your mom can turn on a computer and fill out an application; I try to teach them to see that as a privilege.

**Elena.** What makes me successful? The fact that I’m dedicated, hardworking and I don’t like to disappoint myself. Like, a lot of the times I feel I disappoint myself, I have certain standards and I don’t always feel that I meet those standards. So, I reflect on what I did, and I always try to do better than what I did before. My advice? Oh my gosh. I would say... to always set goals, and make sure you accomplish them and don’t let
anything get in the way of that. Because I want to say, when I was—like I never had a boyfriend because I always felt that boyfriends would get in the way of where I was going to go. So you can't let any distractions get in the way of what you want to do. And you can't blame your parents for your life. Like because my dad was an alcoholic, I could've easily been an alcoholic and said, well, my life is sucky because my dad was an alcoholic. So you can’t blame. You have to take responsibility for your own actions. And as long as you stay on your track, you’ll do well.

**Lola.** What makes me successful? I think being stubborn makes me successful, to be honest with you. [Laughter] If I have a goal, I'm going to work towards that goal and not give up. Even if I stray away from it for a little while, I always have it in the back of my mind, like this is what I want to do and just working hard. Even when I'm teaching, I want my kids—I want my kids to learn as much as they can, you know? And, so like this summer I have students that were still struggling at the end [of the school year], so I tutor them over the summer, to try to help them. [Laughing] I'm hoping it'll help. I don't know. I just always want the best. I always want the best. I mean even just with teaching. I want the best for my students, and I want them to learn as much as they can and, you know, if I have a student, I don't want them just ending the year, reading at a first-grade level, because, many of them could be reading maybe at a fourth-grade level at the end of the year or they can be doing so much more, you know? So, I don't know. My advice? Just to [pause] just to always work hard and to never give up on their dreams, no matter what it is, you know? Whether it’s to become a teacher or an engineer. Do whatever is going to make you happy and work hard at it and not give up. I don’t know. [Laughter] I don’t know. It kind of reminds me, I was just talking to a—a little girl—well, she’s not little anymore, she’s fifteen, and she’s kind of going through a rough time. She loves dance, and her parents are not letting her do it. They don’t agree with it. And I told her, I said, you know, maybe you can’t do it now, but don’t let anyone tell you what you can or cannot do. You can do anything that you want to do. Like if this is really what you want to do, you do it, you know, and, if you can’t do it now, you do it in college because you’re an adult, and nobody can tell you what you—what you can or cannot do, you know? Now I know it’s hard but—so I guess just—just work hard and not give up and when things get tough, even if you fail, it's OK because, when you fail that just means that you can turn—you can still turn things around and still succeed. I failed. I failed quite a bit in college [laughing] and I still got a master’s degree, and I'm still teaching.

**Marisa.** What makes me successful is my ability to discern and navigate through whatever situation arises in my life. Being optimistic makes me successful. No matter what is happening in my life I deal with it head on. My advise for Latina students is to look beyond the additional stereotypes
of the Latina woman. Don’t let yourself defined by society.

**Marisela.** The drive to do something makes you successful, not caring what other people say. There are always people who will say you can’t do something. Success means that you are happy with yourself and what you are doing and not letting other people influence you in a negative manner. You can’t dwell on your past experience to explain why you can’t do something. It’s all in you, as long as you put your mind to it and not look back to blame your circumstances you will succeed.

**Rosa.** I think, having somebody there for you, the support, like family support, you know. I don’t have a lot of friends but the friends that I have are supportive. I think just being happy; I think is success for me. Not having a lot but having a lot of people around you that, those are the people that care for you, you know, and who are there for you no matter what. I think that’s success. I can have lots of money, which I think everybody can have lots of money, but I don’t think that’s success. I think, just being a happy individual, being happy with who you are and what you’ve done in life, and what you still plan on doing with your life, and having that motivation and drive to do that, I think that’s success. My advice to others? I would say just, believe in yourself. Believe that you can do it no matter what somebody else tells you.

These *consejos* are a powerful collection of insights that connect the experiences of these individuals who are often the only Latinas in their classrooms and graduate programs. The similarities in their empowering *consejos* can encourage future Latina first-generation college attendees along their journey.

**Summary**

Certainly, the women were smart, capable and full of potential. They resisted when told they could not achieve and resisted when obstacles manifested, instead they women set to achieve and succeed at attaining their academic goals. Participants in this study learned about values, discourse patterns, educational expectations, extended family members, community leaders, peers, and teachers. These themes are woven throughout and across
the life stories of the participants whose stories exemplify various types of capital, as described in detail in the previous section. I hope the findings in this study will serve to inspire other Latinas to continue through the educational pipeline. As I complete this dissertation, I know that I am one step closer to earning a doctorate degree. I feel good knowing that I will soon join the exclusive 1.5% general population that has attained a doctorate. I know I have defied the odds by showing that Latinas can attain degrees in higher education. And, if I can do it, others can too!
In chapter four, I presented an analysis of the findings of my investigation of the life journeys of seven Latina first-generation college graduates who have successfully navigated through the P-20 educational pipeline, despite the barriers. Through this research, I sought to understand what forms of cultural capital were utilized during each participant’s educational journey. There were both parallels and differences between the findings of this study and previous research. As demonstrated with the Latinas in this study, Rodriguez (2000), Gonzalez and Stoner (2004) and Gándara and Contreras (2009) stated that one of several factors that contributed to the success of Latinas completing higher education was the mother’s role in the home and the support of the educational goals of her daughter. This surfaced specifically in the cases in which the student’s mother supported her educational goals. In this study five out of seven of the participants reported that their mother’s support was important in them achieving their academic goals. Additionally, all of the participants reported that they were influenced positively by either their immediate and or extended family. Furthermore, participants expressed that college and higher education was always an expectation in their family.

Yosso’s (2005) framework of Community Cultural Wealth allowed for a specific comparison of the various forms of capital found among these participants and their families to those forms of capital recognized by mainstream
society in the United States. The culture of wealth framework by Yossi (2005) directly outlines the six forms of capital passed on from Latina/o parents to students, the basis for which those six forms were utilized by participants, and under what circumstances they were each displayed. With this in mind, I wanted to see if these themes emerged in my study through the interviews. Additionally, I was curious as to what other themes would emerge from the interviews. I was interested in discovering the ways in which Latina/o parents impact the educational goals and outcomes.

**Review and Critique of Methodology**

This study was framed within a qualitative paradigm which in-depth interviews were conducted in order to reveal what forms of cultural capital positively impacted the educational experiences of the participants. It was the intent of this study to make sense of the lived experiences that led to success in acquiring a higher education degree. A qualitative paradigm was chosen for this study because it helped me understand what occurred in the lives of these women that propelled them to navigate through higher education. In addition, this study used a qualitative methodology because the nuances of gender, race, class and unique personalities are difficult to examine within statistical studies (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). These distinctions are the nuances that comprise Community Cultural Wealth, which accounted for the academic successes of the study participants. Therefore, a qualitative approach was the best fit of the study.

A phenomenological inquiry approach was utilized to understand the lived experiences of the participants. This consisted of two interviews with seven
participants that were transcribed and then reviewed by the interviewee. Once
the participants reviewed their statements and provided feedback, I was able to
apply descriptions of the students’ experiences to understanding their
educational experiences more thoroughly. I was able to capture the essence of
the experience through analysis of student voices, therefore, extending our
current limited understanding of this process.

A critique of the methodology suggests that multiple methods of data
collection might have contributed to better triangulation and increase
trustworthiness of the data. A collection and review of relevant educational
documents from each of the participants such as, report cards, teacher notes,
assignments, school flyers and memos would have strengthened triangulation.

From the outset of this research project I declared my own biases and
assumptions to help the reader understand my position. My researcher’s bias
was made clear early in the process by bracketing my own experiences through
the epoche. For instance, one bias is my belief that Latina/o parents and
extended family members transfer cultural capital to their children and these
skills are beneficial to the education of their children. To keep my biases in
check, I maintained bracketing notes throughout the interview and transcription
process.

Member checking was essential for the credibility of qualitative data
analysis because participants had the option of elaborating once they were given
the transcriptions. As a novice phenomenological researcher, I attempted to
understand the descriptions of the phenomenon and transform the experience
into a textural expression of its essence. The format of the semi-structured and open-ended interview questions allowed respondents to engage and expand upon their views throughout the interview process, which is important to the study. Once I collected the data, it was coded and categorized appropriately. The data was coded by hand and the interpretive lens was Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth Framework coupled with cultural responsiveness pedagogy.

Initially, I planned to conduct a focus group interview however due to time constraints and limited access to participants I was not able to hold a focus group interview. If given the opportunity once again I would conduct the focus interview with all of the participants.

**Summary of Findings and Understandings**

This study highlighted some of the factors which assisted Latinas accomplish their academic goals. Several of the challenges Latinas face are high levels of poverty, lack of parental academic assistance, limited English proficiency, etc. From this study of seven Latina women, we can conclude that many forms of capital matter when bridging aspirations to reality. My journey into the lives of these women indicates that acknowledging the different types of capital Latinas bring with them to school and capitalizing on these assets matters greatly. Hanley and Noblit (2009), Ladson-Billings, (2007), Yosso, (2005), and Nieto, (2000) have stated that ignoring the capital Latinas bring with them to school is what promotes a deficit approach to educating Latinas.

Moll’s (2005) work, which is similar to cultural responsiveness pedagogy, indicates that understanding the “funds of knowledge” or experiences that these
students bring with them to school and learning how to infuse these cultural and language experiences into the curriculum honors the linguistic and cultural diversity of Latino students in schools. For the participants in this study it was evident that navigational, aspirational, familial, linguistic and resistance capital existed in their lives, but it is not clear whether the schools intentionally used these connections to enhance the students’ school experiences. It seems more likely that the participants used the capital to mediate their own learning, as opposed to the schools making a conscious effort to make these connections and leveraging what these students brought with them. It is important for students to be exposed to a wide variety of cultures and perspectives in the material they are learning at school (Gay, 2000, 2001; Kailin, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2007). Culturally relevant material should not be used as add-ons to supplement the core curricula; doing so trivializes this type of educational material (Gay, 2000, 2001; Kailin, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2007). In order to avoid trivializing culturally relevant material teachers should explicitly explain to students the importance of the culturally relevant material (Gay, 2000, 2001; Kailin, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2007).

Coupled with my review of relevant research and literature, there were three research questions that guided the research and the findings of this study. These questions are used here to guide the summary of my research findings.

Research Question #1: If a Latina student is identified as an “at risk” student in K-12 setting, what factors influence a decision to attend college?

The research study started by asking participants to share their
Participants shared experiences from elementary school, high school and higher education during the initial interview this was followed by a second interview with semi-structured questions. Many of Yosso’s (2005) forms of cultural capital became evident during each interview. Those forms that influenced Latina students to attend post secondary institutions were aspirational capital and familial capital. Each of the participants shared stories illustrating how their mother, father, and or extended family members shared their aspirations for higher education.

Alba vividly described how approximately 20 of her family members caravanned to her university on her first day, while Alicia recalled her mother’s wishes for her to work with her mind not her hands. In Marisa’s case, not only did she have the support from her parents but she also had positive role models through her church. This is where she met a Latino Harvard University graduate and commented on how conversations with him inspired her to seek a degree in sociology. These counter-narratives confirmed findings in previous research, in which mothers are essential in promoting aspirations of academic success among Latino/a students (Yosso, 2006; Gandara 1995 & 2009; Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Bernal 2006; Rodriguez 2000). The findings also indicate that Latino/a parents do value education (Valencia, 2010; Valencia & Black, 2002; Gandara 1995 & 2009; Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Flores, Cousin, Diaz, 1991).

Research Question # 2: What factors support college completion for Latina students?

When students were asked about factors that supported their academic
success, the participants emphasized family support, emphasis on the value of education, access and understanding of university resources, and role models of hard work. Many of the participants turned to the parents and other family members for emotional support in times of hardship. Alicia stated that when she found herself at a loss she would call her mother, father, and/or her siblings and share with them her struggles. She smiled while she recalled how their words of encouragement revived her motivation and provided strength because in her mind she had an entire team behind her. These conversations made her feel as if she could conquer anything in her obstructing her path to obtaining her academic goals. This is consistent with Yosso’s (2005 & 2006) work in regards to familial capital and resistant capital.

As Yosso’s (2005, 2006) indicates students’ navigational skills can be used to conquer challenges. Participants utilized their navigational capital in order to access university resources needed to tackle academic obstacles. Alba stated she constantly sought university resources as she explored her university’s campus. This appeared to be a skill she transitioned into her own life from all the years in which she assisted her mother with everyday living chores or tasks. Her mother often expressed that if you know the English language you should use those skills to inquire about resources and fulfill your needs. Descriptions from the participants also uncovered that parents are the role models for the benefits of hard work. The findings suggest that parents possess cultural, navigational and resistant capital, which they readily transfer to their children as they navigated through their higher education experiences.
Review of the findings also revealed that students who took honors and advancement placement courses in high school faced the least amount of obstacles. Alicia and Alba were in the first class of a special program created to increase access to higher education for minority students. These schools were located in communities of color. In contrast, Rosa and Elena attended high schools with a predominately White study body in a more affluent area. However, these four women were able to tap into skills they acquired through their honors and advance placement courses when they faced difficulties in their post secondary institutions such as studying skills. This is consistent with research findings indicating high school academic preparation was related to students' likelihood of remaining enrolled in postsecondary education. In general, the more rigorous their high school curriculum, the more likely students were to persist (or to attain a degree) at the initial postsecondary institution in which they enrolled (Warbuton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001).

Research Question # 3: In what ways do the stories of Latina college graduates inform K-12 policies that define “at risk” students?

It appears that most educators identify students as “at risk” by their circumstances rather than their cognitive abilities. The data suggests that educators identify students as “at risk,” because they are from a low social economic status, live in marginalized communities, their parents do not have a post secondary education or do not speak English, and or are English language learners themselves; then educators are operating from deficit thinking models.
The participants in this study were extremely capable of learning and demonstrated their abilities as they navigated through the P-20 educational pipeline with the skills they acquired through the various forms of cultural capital outlined in Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework. The descriptions offered by the participants in Chapter 4 serve to dispel deficit theories currently withheld with most schools, in which students are viewed as empty vessels (Valencia 2010 & Yosso, 2005 & 2006). Each of the participants activated their cultural knowledge to successful navigated through the P-20 educational pipeline.

An important conclusion and message to educators is to seek out areas of strength and capital that do not fit mainstream patterns. The seven Latina women life stories reveal that community cultural capital, which includes linguistic, aspirational, social, familial, navigational and resistant capital, definitely played a part in improving their outcomes and navigating through the educational pipeline. The purpose of the study was to uncover and highlight the lived experiences of seven Latina first-generation college graduate Mexican descendants who successfully journeyed along educational pathways to receive their higher education degree(s). As the largest subgroup within the Latino/a population, Mexican Americans have the lowest completion rates in high school and college (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006b). In terms of graduate degree attainment, out of every 100 Mexican American children, less than one will earn a bachelor’s (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The disparities in Mexican American educational attainment are often analyzed from a deficit perspective focused on
student failure rather than understanding how successful Mexican Americans
managed to navigate through educational systems and complete their degrees.
In order to understand Mexican American education attainment this study
described the forms of capital that helped Latina first generation college graduate
succeed as they journeyed through the P-20 pipeline. The study revealed the
lived experiences of previously identified “at risk” students. The analysis of these
lived experiences illustrated an image of struggle to access and the process to
complete a higher education academic program.

Participants shared stories about parents who demonstrated the value of
education by showing their children that education would lead to a better life
rather than labor-intensive work. The parents and or immediate family of the
participants demonstrated they valued education to their children, however many
school officials do not recognize or respect these forms of familial and
aspirational capital. Rather than determining parental involvement by one’s
attendance at school functions or conferences with teachers and administrators
during school hours, administrators and researchers should consider how
families shape educational aspirations and provided familial support by though
community cultural wealth (Yossi, 2005; 2006).

A few participants cited some struggles in accessing higher education, but
felt supported by parents. Participants impacted utilized community programs to
attain access to higher education. One participant shared her experiences with
racism while attending a predominately White elementary school. She
experienced over 7 years of taunting, unfair punishments and constant ridicule,
which led to a dislike of school and learning. In sharing stories about their educational journeys, participants focused on overcoming obstacles through persistence, family support and individual determination. Participants focused on individual processes and individual hard work in navigating educational systems. Participants incorporated survival strategies in college by seeking out assistance from professors, university resources, mentors, and family networks to navigate obstacles. Participants were encouraged to attend college early in their education. The *consejos* [advice] the women received focused on education as liberation from financial limitations and hard work.

At an early age, participants accumulated various forms of capital (aspirational, resistant, navigational, social, and familial) through their interactions with their parents’ labor-intensive work, hearing stories about hardships, and serving as linguistic brokers for their families. Participants activated their community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005; 2006) at various points along the journey to gain access into higher education and persevere despite obstacles. The findings provided a deeper understanding of oppression in U.S. society and the complexities within marginalized communities such as gender, social class, and parental education. This study challenged previous lived experiences in educational research that perpetuate a deficit perspective regarding Participants’ lived experiences did not seem to reflect traditional forms of resistance such as engaging in protests. Here resistance comes in the form of successfully navigating through a system that is inherently oppressive is understanding how to strategize, enact skill, and develop a small group of allies.
is resistance. Finding a way to work from within systems to change them is resistance. In this way, resistance may be occurring, but in forms that aren’t as obvious.

I argue that a dominant culture exists, that the realities in which all members of U.S. society live are constructed by the dominant culture as a means for maintaining power, and that educational institutions utilize sorting structures to keep certain communities in lower, labor-intensive occupations. In a capitalist society, these systems ensure that marginalized communities reproduce social structures that keep them at the lower levels social economic status, while supporting the dominant culture’s power and privilege. In this case, Latino/as are led to believe that cultural capital can be obtained through education, but it is a tool utilized by White middle and upper class communities to access higher education and decipher complexities within educational structures. Rather than attempting to access and utilize a tool that is not designed for Latina first-generation college students and those from working class backgrounds, I argue that a different approach should be enacted to uncover and accumulate the knowledge, skills, and abilities from within families and communities that can boost Latino/a educational attainment while retaining Latino/a communities’ cultural integrity and not surrendering to the pressures of assimilation and social reproduction. The successes participants experienced were, in large part, based on community cultural wealth, which are the assets or capital found within the Latino/a communities seldom recognized or valued by the dominant culture and within education institutions. This study demonstrated that the relationships
among individuals, families, and communities were essential to understanding how participants were able to advance along educational pathways, accumulate community cultural wealth from families, communities, and social networks, and expand traditional notions of cultural capital in which only White, middle and upper class values and experiences were considered valuable.

**Mis Experiencias**

The examination of these women’s stories has helped me understand my own educational journey, which I detailed in my epoche. The idea for this study came to me during a class discussion about leading in diverse communities. During our class discussions, I found myself reflecting on several questions. At the time, I asked myself “How did I make it through college despite all the barriers listed in most research about minorities?” The notion that parents are not capable of providing students with the necessary support, lingered in my mind. I then started thinking about the ways my mother and family assisted me and supported my education. This sparked my interest in learning about how others like me were able to navigate through the P-20 educational pipeline. As I reflect on my journey to present day, I now know Community Cultural Wealth played a significant role during the process.

I recall how those I look up to and admire stressed the importance of education and instilled aspirations for a college education. These individuals were able to assist me along my educational journey by setting high expectations, providing support and motivating me. My mother always told me that A’s and B’s were the expectation, it was my job to bring good grades home.
She never rewarded but I did know she was proud of my academic success. However, she wasn’t the only one with high expectations, my aunts Flea and Marisol, and uncles Michael and Junior were also essential to my success.

One of my most vivid memories involves my Aunt Fela when she made it a point to express her expectations. My aunt told me “I have high expectations for you; you will go to college and graduate. You cannot waste your time dating and possibly get side tracked.” At that moment, I realized that I had to go to college and my family expected me to become a college graduate. Furthermore, once I was in college, my Uncle Michael always followed up on my grades. He would reward me with gifts for every A and or B I earned during college. He often told me he was proud of me and that he was sure I would be the first college graduate in our family. My Uncle Junior was also supportive. When he learned of the problems I was having with my younger sister, he voiced his concerns and added, “This is too much of a distraction for you, and you need to concentrate on school. You can come live with Mary and I, we will help you get through college.” Today as I look back at my past, I realized that my family was the most influential in my quest to attain a degree in higher education. In fact, without their motivation and support I would not be where I am today. Even though many Latina students have high intellectual abilities, school systems often devalue their cultural knowledge (Maes, 2010).

I have been fortunate that throughout my life I have come across many educators who have taken me under their wing to mentor and encourage me. I know for a fact that if I had not encountered mentors who took an interest in me
and exposed me to another world, I would have never made it through the educational pipeline of higher education. My 7th and 8th grade teachers, high school advisor, the female Cuban professors during my undergraduate program, my advisor for my first master’s program and my dissertation chair Dr. Rusch. However, as I sit and write my story, I know that I would not have even thought it possible enroll in a doctoral program, if Dr. Jones had not planted the seed in my mind 12 years ago. Today, I am able to recognize the value of various types of capital embodied by Community Cultural Wealth that have been present in my life. It seems obvious to me that education matters, the type of education we receive matters, mentors matter, and exposure to how others succeed matters profoundly.

**Implications and Recommendations for the Future**

The implications for practice that I formulated as a result of this study’s findings are the need for dismantling deficit theories, promoting culturally responsive practices, and breaking down system silos.

**Dismantling Deficit Theories**

The traditional mainstream view is that achievement for racial minorities is dependent on assimilation into the White society. However, for racial and ethnic minorities, assimilation has not worked in the way it did for earlier European immigrants such as the Irish (Rury, 2005). Assimilation for people of color implies a cultural superiority on the part of the assimilating culture that is used as the norm by which all others are measured, a relationship that often provokes subtle and overt alienation and resistance (Lauria and Miron, 2005). The literature
confirms that Latino/a students use their racial identity and socialization in response to racism and oppression and as a means of knowledge production and self-actualization (Hanley & Noblit, 2005). Current literature views this logic as subtractive. As educators we need to be proactive and help promote more equitable and democratic schooling by implementing anti-deficit thinking practices. When schools work with deficit thinking in mind they negate the students’ cultures, denying the students the key resource that they bring to education. Research now regards culture as a set of tools, perspectives and capabilities that students can deploy in the pursuit of learning (Hanley & Noblit, 2005). When these tools, perspectives and capabilities are suppressed or denied, students are educationally disempowered. They find it hard to use their culture to learn. Furthermore, as educational leaders we have been charged through No Child Left Behind to ensure the education for all students. A legislation has never demanded such an outcome. At the same time the parent and students are not being held accountable for their roles in the success of their individual achievement. Education systems have operated since their inception as a vehicle for motivated individuals, whom, if they choose to capitalize on the opportunities provided by the public education system; they could accomplish a middle-class lifestyle. We are not asking parents and students to change their norms, form, or levels of participation, but rather, our state and local governments are demanding that administrators and teachers change the culture of their schools and classrooms by utilizing their professional skills to ensure all students are successful. The paradigm shift would be a school's individual
response based on the needs of the students in the school, but the culture and practice of instruction, assessment, and interventions will need to change for the sole purpose of meeting the needs of students as opposed to adults.

I propose educators utilized the framework presented by Horsford, Grosland and Morgan Gunn (2011) for developing culturally relevant leadership to assist aspiring and practicing school leaders and those that prepare school leaders. Horsford, Grosland and Morgan Gunn emphasized four dimensions critical to the successful leadership of schools; political context, a personal journey, a pedagogical approach and professional duty. Horsford states that educational leaders must gain awareness of how culture operates in classrooms, value cultural and ethnic diversity to inform student achievement and assist teachers in establishing a school climate that will advance student learning and engagement through cultural affirmation and social support.

A practical way is to actively seek out counter-stories and increase engagement with all families authentically. As discussed by Valencia (2010), stereotypes must be replaced by recognizing cultural strengths and parents need to be encouraged to participate in the educational process. Educators must created opportunities for parents by expanding parental roles within the school that will promote personal growth and positively impact student achievement. Educators can offer parents training in computer skills, post-secondary informational sessions, U.S. citizenship classes, Graduate Equivalency Degree (GED) preparation classes, and English as a Second Language courses.

By seeking out counter-stories, educators can get away from current
prominent views that assume once Latino/a students assimilated into White society, academic success would follow. The belief was that what would serve students best means giving up their culture as part of being schooled (Hanley & Noblit, 2005).

However, the findings of this study reveal culture as a set of tools, perspectives and capabilities that today’s students utilize to learn. When these tools, perspectives and capabilities are suppressed or denied, students are educationally disempowered. They find it hard to use their culture to learn. A student receives from his or her culture a racial identity, and for Latino/a students, their racial identity can connect them to a wider project of racial uplift. We now know that Latino/a students learn best in culturally familiar settings and when they have strong positive racial identities. Hanley and Noblit 2005) claim that culturally responsive pedagogy and positive racial identity can play major roles in promoting academic achievement for Latino/a students.

By seeking out counter-stories and documenting life challenges and survival techniques of students and family members, educators become familiar with the struggles and successes. These counter-stories can inspire Latina/o youth to resist the societal expectations of failure by undertaking their own struggles for personal transformation. In addition, family lived experiences of resistance can serve as powerful motivational resources for helping young Latino/s endure the pressures within and beyond schools that hinder their academic success. Educators and policy makers can engage youth in social change by encouraging them to address oppressive forces beyond the school.
that limit their potential. For instance, learning how to challenge harassment, bullying, and racial stereotypes, allows Latina/o students to see them in a different light as well as confront those structures perpetuating the academic failure of students of color. As educators, scholars, and activists, our objective is to use the knowledge gained in studies to facilitate their understandings of how they can overcome barriers to academic achievement and facilitate social change.

**Culturally Responsiveness Practices for Academic Success**

Across all grade levels educators, administrators, support staff, and students share the responsibility of preparing all students for college and or the twenty-first century global market (Padilla, 2005). Most importantly in order for all students to be adequately prepared, all students must receive exposure to rigorous curricula (Padilla, 2005). In addition, educators must maintain high expectations and standards for all students (Padilla, 2005). It is also important for Latino/a first-generation students to receive extra support in order to have an educational experience.

There is a need for cultural responsiveness to include multicultural education and a rigorous academic experience. Nieto (2000) defined multicultural education as “comprehensive school reform…that challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination…and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender among others) that students and their communities, and teachers reflect” (p. 305). Most importantly, Nieto emphasized that a multicultural perspective to education is not an
additional programs or the perfect silver lining to education, but rather it is meaningful and authentic education where the curriculum challenges students to think critically and to take ownership of their learning.

In proposing authentic educational experiences that promote social justice, such as the cultural responsive approach outlined by Villegas and Lucas (2002). In their model, a culturally responsive curriculum promotes the following: a) an understanding of how language is learned and how to help students make connections to the target (new) language; b) an examination of students' lives in order to make instructional connections that make sense for them; c) an understanding of how learners make meaning or construct knowledge in order to build bridges to new knowledge; d) an understanding of culture and specifically an understanding of the impact on learning of a collectivist versus individualist view of learning; e) an understanding of how affirming views about diversity promote or convey confidence in the student's ability to learn; and f) an understanding of how to use appropriate strategies that engage all students in critical thinking. A culturally responsive environment as proposed by Villegas and Lucas (2002) supports and affirms learning in a setting that supports high expectations for all students and builds supporting frames for the students to learn.

It is necessary for educators across the P-20 pipeline to provide all students with a rigorous, high quality education through honors courses and advancement courses in high school. Especially since a solid K-12 academic preparation is the best predictor for student success in college (Barth &
Haycock, 2004). In addition to providing students with rigorous curricula, students should be taught critical thinking skills over the course of their K-12 education (Padilla, 2005). Rote memorization is not an effective teaching strategy because it does not help students retain the information they are taught (Barth & Haycock, 2004).

Cammarota and Romero (2006) illustrate social justice pedagogy in a study conducted in a Tucson high school with a cohort of 20 Latina/o junior and senior students. The pedagogy facilitated the students’ critical consciousness around racial inequalities affecting their educational and general life experiences by focusing on language and cultural oppression. Authentic action research projects ensured students worked on something that mattered to them. Cammarota and Romero (2006) found that students, who began the course unmotivated and silent, actively participated in the course work and engaged in social justice work by taking their concerns to policymakers. This is a prime example of how students should be actively involved in the co-construction of knowledge in the classroom; as such students are given the opportunity to express their thoughts, ideas, and opinions on the material they are learning (Gay, 2000, 2001; Kailin, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2007).

Breaking Down System Silos

Furthermore, K-12 educators play a critical role in developing and implementing practices which provides an opportunity for underrepresented students to gain access to higher education following recommendations should help first-generation students and other historically underrepresented students to
gain access to and persist to the attainment of bachelor’s degree at minimum. This study also suggests that educators can support students of marginalized communities by providing students and their family’s knowledge about navigating the higher education environment by becoming familiar with the current practices in higher education institutions.

**Future Studies**

The stories of these seven Latina women shed light on their individual educational trajectories as “as risk” students and provide a pathway to explore their journey to acquiring a degree in higher education. I would like to see this study adapted in several ways. One, it would add to our understanding to hear the lived experiences of “at risk” Latino men and those of different nationalities in order to discover the similarities and variations in their educational experiences and the types of community cultural wealth utilized to navigate through a post-secondary educational experience. Second, hearing the lived experiences of women of different nationalities in order to expand our understanding of various forms of capital. Additionally, few studies focus on the transmission of cultural capital from one generation to the next, much less how families incorporate their community cultural wealth with increased educational attainment. Especially, since the participants’ perceived “limited” cultural capital did not deter them from activating social networks and learning parts of the hidden curriculum. Research should focus more on understanding the accumulation of assets within communities of color using Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005; 2006), funds of knowledge, (Moll & González, 2004; Vélez Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992),
or new concepts that focus on families and communities and do not reproduce deficit models.

Lastly, another area of research that might illuminate the problem of differential school success is to find out how schools are implementing and sustaining a professional development approach that is linguistically and culturally responsive and how this approach to learning and teaching influences the outcomes of students who are English Language Learners. Ultimately, I would like to see this study extended to explore and examine mechanisms for leveraging the Community Cultural Wealth students either have access to or already possess.

**My Consejos y Reflejos**

Investing in your education is an investment in yourself, your family, your children, your communities, and future generations of Latina/o students who will, hopefully, no longer have to worry about being the only person of color in their college classrooms or graduate school. I was fortunate to have had my mother, aunts, aunts and uncles who set high expectations and encouraged me throughout my educational experiences. Not only did I have my family, but also during my journey I was fortunate to meet a few influential people, teachers, advisors, professors, friends and colleagues who have encouraged me along the way. Based on my experiences, I learned not to underestimate the power of parental and family influence even from those who have never attended college. Your family and friends will be proud of you, support and assist you along the way in any way they can. Build social networks with people you actually like and
enjoy spending time with by establishing a small group of those you trust and who will invest time in your success.

I set out to understand which forms of capital influenced seven first-generation Latina women to successfully navigate through the P-20 educational pipeline, despite adversity. I chose to use one-on-one interviews in order to capture the essence of their experiences and then analyze the factors that impacted their journey. As I reflect on what I have learned through the process of recreating their life stories and analyzing the interview recordings, I realized there were some common threads among all seven participants in my analysis. I originally set out to understand if Community Cultural Wealth was a viable and valuable tool to help me understand the types of capital that influenced their lives. I found out that not only were they in possession of capital that helped them overcome some of the barriers to learning and navigating through school. Their life stories resembled in some ways mine and in others less so. I was never aware of the learning processes I was utilizing to understand and apply new concepts. I now know that I’m an auditory learner and it’s why I was able to do well in high school. Because of this I was always about to successfully respond to comprehension questions based on the lecture given by the teacher. Like Marisela and Marisa, I was never given the courses or skills to be able to prepare to go to college. Which is why we struggled with college; we were not given the tools to navigate through an educational systems that values traditional views of social and cultural capital.

This study provides evidence to further dispel the myths that Latinas fail
academically due to the lack of parental involvement or that parents don’t care or value education. Additionally, a common “concern” voiced by educators is that children do not come to school prepared with experiences that will help them connect new information to prior learning. We can see from this study that students do come with experiences and background knowledge. This study is also important in demonstrating (once again) that despite poverty and a lack of English language skills, given the right supports and cultural wealth, at-risk students can be successful in educational contexts (Bernal, 2002; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Garcia, 2005; Ladson-Billings 2007; Nieto, 2000; Yosso, 2005).

Much of the research of the past several decades has focused on documenting the persistent underachievement of minority students. My focus in this study mirrors the trend nationally where schools and districts are constructing success among these students and the focus has become not on whether this can be done, but how best it can be done. Those responsible for educating all students must take this as the sacred trust it is and realize that the stakes are too high to allow continued failure of Latina/o students in large numbers. The stakes are too high for our students in marginalized communities. It is my hope that this study has personalized the statistics and given a snapshot of what a “sí se puede” approach to schooling might provide. This approach must include promoting strong skills in every type of student. Community cultural wealth theory supports antiracist and multicultural educators argument that it is also important for students of color to be exposed to culturally relevant curricula and pedagogy in order to persist through the education system (Banks, 2007;

This also illustrates the importance of having an education system that works to meet the needs of all students. Educators in all academic levels need to collaborate and move away from the current “middle class” mindset and mentality in which they believe they can work in isolation. Collaboration is necessary in order to successfully educate students for the twenty-first century. This requires that all teachers validate and value the lived experiences students bring with them to the classroom. Teachers need to view students through an assets lens and build upon their strengths rather than focusing on what they ought to know before stepping foot in the classroom. The task that lies before educators is overwhelming, but it is important that we give in to the challenge; through collaborative efforts it is possible to education programs so that more first-generation students can successfully complete these programs and obtain a bachelor degree.

**Summary**

As a result of this study, many recommendations were made to better support Latinas in higher education. It is important that Latinas utilize available resources and develop support groups and systems to succeed in school. Promoting awareness of Latino family dynamic, values, and strengths in order to better support Latinas in attaining higher education is important and key to support first-generation Latina college students. It was also suggested by many of the participants of this study, that their parents support was the number one reason they successfully completed their college degrees.
In essence, this dissertation is about the importance of knowing our students. A constantly shifting demographic map requires that we do more to consider our students’ educational pathways and gateways to higher education so that we can adapt the education system to match the rapidly changing needs of our communities. We must dispel the myth of meritocracy that exists in our education system, which suggests that students are agents insofar as it is up to them to simply choose the correct pathway to success. They will either choose wisely and succeed in school, or they will choose poorly and fail. The problem with this model is that it assumes equal footing and doesn’t account for institutional or ideological factors that obstruct pathways for some students more than for others. I will urge here that teachers the privilege to education and ability to set students on a pathway to success by becoming advocates take the time to learn about the students they service. Collectively across all grade levels educators, administrators, and student support staff share the responsibility of preparing all students for college and/or the twenty-first century global job market (Padilla, 2005). Most importantly in order for all students to be adequately prepared for the twenty-first century knowledge economy all students must be provided with rigorous curricula (Padilla, 2005). In addition, educators must maintain high expectations and standards for all students (Padilla, 2005). Finally, as a Latina first-generation college graduate, I believed it is possible for all students to earn a college degree, a master’s degree, and a doctorate degree. I attribute my own educational accomplishments to the individuals who believed in me and supported me along the way, family, mentors, and friends.
APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT

Department of Educational Leadership
TITLE OF STUDY: Nuestras Experiencias: A Phenomenological Study of Latina First Generation Higher Education Graduates
INVESTIGATOR(S): Diana E. Cruz and Dr. Edith Rusch (PI)
CONTACT PHONE NUMBER: Diana E. Cruz at (702) 481-3718

Purpose of the Study
You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to understand how “at risk” Hispanic/Latino first-generation college students utilized family and outside resources to successfully navigate the educational system to eventual attain a college degree. The working definition for “at risk” is, a student who was considered to be in danger of failure due to the one or more of the following factors, low socio-economic status; single parent family; older sibling dropped out of school; the student changed schools two or more times; average grades of "C" or lower from sixth to eighth grade; repeated a grade and/or had limited English proficiency skills. You will be interviewed to help document your educational journey and what those experiences mean to you. Your story will provide comprehensive descriptions of your college experience and surrounding factors. The researcher is interested in the different ways in which you utilized your resources, rather than the nature of the college experiences. The researcher’s questions are: (a) How does being an "at risk" student affect the decision to attend and persevere in a university? (b) How do Hispanic/Latino students overcome the challenges faced in a university setting? and (c) What factors promote Hispanic/Latino student success? Participants
You are being asked to participate in the study because you were an “at risk” first-generation college student
Procedures
If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following: (a.) two interviews lasting one to two hours each, conducted by a student researcher, Diana E. Cruz. These interviews will give you an opportunity to share your experiences/stories of your educational experiences in college. These interviews will take place at UNLV, however, they may take place in a setting in which you have agreed upon and will allow your experiences/stories to be recorded without distracting background noise. Diana E. Cruz will transcribe all the interviews and you will be able to review the transcriptions and make needed changes. You will be asked questions about the family and communities resources that were available to you and how you utilized them to become successful. For example, “What role did your immediate or extended family members play in your education? How did they inspire you or encourage you?” You will also answers questions about your perceptions about your initial college experiences and whether you believe you were properly prepared in high school. These experiences will include information about any obstacles you may have faced during college.
Benefits of Participation
There may not be direct benefits to you as a participant in this study. However, we hope that you learn how and what resources helped you navigate through the education system.

Risks of Participation
There are risks involved in all research studies. This study may include only minimal risks. The level of anticipated risk are minimal, as you may become uncomfortable answering some of the questions.

Cost /Compensation
There will not be financial cost to you to participate in this study. The study will take two to three hours of your time. You will not be compensated for your time.

Contact Information
If you have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact at and/or via email at cruzdi32@hotmail.com. You may also contact Dr. Edith Rusch (PI) at (702) 895-2891 and/or via email at edith.rusch@unlv.edu. For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints or comments regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted you may contact the UNLV Office for the Protection of Research Subjects at 702-895-2794.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study or in any part of this study. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice to your relations with the university. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study at the beginning or any time during the research study.

Confidentiality
All information gathered in this study will be kept completely confidential. No reference will be made in written or oral materials that could link you to this study. All records will be stored in a locked facility at UNLV for 3 years after completion of the study. After the storage time the information gathered will be shredded and destroyed.

Participant Consent:
I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study. I am at least 18 years of age. A copy of this form has been given to me.

_________________________  __________________________
Signature of Participant                  Date

_________________________
Participant Name (Please Print)

I have read the above information and agree to be audio taped for this study. I am at least 18 years of age. A copy of this form has been given to me.

_________________________  __________________________
Signature of Participant                  Date

_________________________
Participant Name (Please Print)

Participant Note: Please do not sign this document if the Approval Stamp is missing or is expired
APPENDIX B

Initial Demographic Data

Name:

 Alias:

 Parents Highest Level of Education:  Mother  Father

 Parents Primary Language:

 Race/Ethnicity:

 English Language Learner:  Yes  or  No

 Languages Spoken:

 Languages Written:

 Socio-Economic Background (during high school/college):

 First-generation college graduate:  Yes  or  No

 Degree(s) Attained:

 Phone:  Date:
APPENDIX C

Initial Interview

Tell me about your educational experiences (elementary, secondary and post secondary) that led to degree attainment.

• Share your thoughts and feelings, the negative, positive, and the neutral, in as much detail as you remember, about your decision and experience of degree attainment.
Appendix D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Could you give me a brief family history?
2. Did your parents and/or family members have aspirations of a college education for you? Did you? (aspirational capital)
3. How did your parents and/or family members communicate this to you? (aspirational capital)
4. How many languages do you speak? How was this to your benefit? (linguistic capital)
5. What role did your extended family members play in your education? How did they inspire you or encourage you? (familial capital)
6. Could you describe any groups (peers, informal, and formal) that helped you in deciding to prepare for, apply to, select, and then attend college? (familial and/or social capital)
7. Were there community/university resources available to you? (social capital)
   Such as, neighbors, extended family, employers, churches, university programs, etc.
8. If so, how did you learn about them and how did you get involved? (social capital)
9. How did these community or peer resources assist you in attaining your degree? (social capital)
10. Once you entered college did you feel you were adequately prepared? If yes, why do you believe you were prepared? If not, why do you believe you were not prepared?
11. What obstacles did your encounter? How did you handle these obstacles? (navigational capital)
12. How did you navigate through your academic college experiences? (navigational capital)
13. Describe how your family, extended family, community resources, peers, or university resources assisted you in overcoming these challenges? (familial and/or social capital)
14. In what ways did your parents or family foster/develop resiliency in you or teach you to challenge the status quo? (resistant capital)
15. How did this affect your interactions with your professors or other students? (resistant capital)
16. In my own experience, I have found that there are several different worlds in which I live and work, particularly my family, community, and academic worlds.
   • Do you feel you maneuver between these worlds easily? Why or Why not?
   • If so, has it always been the case?
   • What makes you successful?
   • How do you handle these various worlds?
17. Based on your experiences, what advice would you provide to the next generation of Latina first-generation college students?
REFERENCES


Bui, V. T., & Khanh. (2002). First-generation college students at a four year university: Background characteristics, reasons for pursuing higher education, and first year experiences. College Student Journal, 36(1), 3-12.


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