"IF YOU ARE TRYING TO HELP STUDENTS, YOU SHOULD PROBABLY ASK THEM HOW YOU CAN HELP": TESTIMONIOS OF LATINA/O/ HISPANIC COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO PERSISTED TO GRADUATION

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“IF YOU ARE TRYING TO HELP STUDENTS, YOU SHOULD PROBABLY ASK THEM HOW YOU CAN HELP”: TESTIMONIOS OF LATINA/O/ HISPANIC COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO PERSISTED TO GRADUATION

BY

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UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND

AND

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Latinx student enrollment in higher education institutions has been increasing and will continue to rise (McFarland et al., 2018), yet Latinx students have lower degree completion rates than their peers from other racial and ethnic backgrounds (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Higher education institutions need to learn directly from the lived experiences of this diverse population of students to better support their college completion efforts (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2018; Flink, 2018). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of Latinx students who persisted to graduation at a four-year Hispanic Serving Institution by examining two research questions: How did the Latinx alumni successfully navigate the collegiate experience? How do the Latinx alumni describe the institutional policies and practices that fostered or served as barriers to their persistence in, and graduation from, college? Latina/o Critical Theory (LatCrit) served as the theoretical framework that guided this study. Testimonios research design and methodology was used in this study to conduct individual interviews with participants and two focus groups. The individual interviews explored each participant’s experiences related to the two research questions. The focus groups served as opportunities for member checking related to the themes that emerged from the individual interviews. The interviews and the focus groups were video and audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. In vivo coding, the pattern coding technique (Saldaña, 2021), and Fraser’s (2004) approach to analyzing personal stories were used to analyze the data and develop themes. The themes that emerged from the data related to question one were personal strengths, family influence, support from friends, and positive interactions with faculty and staff.
The themes related to question two were difficulties navigating college, lack of diversity on campus, institutional *desorden* (chaos), lack of information related to the academic roadmaps and academics in general, discrimination and unjust treatment, and institutional policies and practices that fostered persistence. These themes were used to develop recommendations for the higher education institution that served as the research site and future research.
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Thank you to the participants of this study. Your testimonios were powerful. I left every interview feeling inspired and motivated to keep doing my part to make things better for current and future Latina/o/x/ Hispanic students. Thank you for taking your time to participate in this study and I hope your voices help drive change at Anchor State College.

I would also like to thank my dissertation committee starting with my Major Professor, Dr. Annemarie Vaccaro. Your dedication to students is admirable. I don’t know how you manage to advise so many of us and make us feel like we are the only ones you are advising. I would not have been able to get through all the program milestones and paperwork without you. You instilled confidence in me and helped me keep my peace in what would typically be high stress environments. I’m so grateful for your support. I also want to thank Dr. Adrienne Goss for being my original Major Professor and who guided me early on in the program. Thank you for creating a space for students of color where we could just be, I really needed that. Dr. Julie Keller and Dr. Kalina Brabeck, thank you both for your support and feedback throughout this process and for helping me see my topic from different angles. I also owe a huge thank
you to Dr. Jennifer Meade for serving as an outside committee member. You have supported me in so many ways and helped me stay focused on what is important.

Lastly, I dedicate this dissertation to my daughter who was born at the end of this educational journey. I hope you can continue to build on what your great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents have accomplished so that you can complete your purpose in this world and help your future generations do the same.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The Latino population is the “fastest growing ethnic-minority population in the United States” (Flink 2018, p. 403), which is estimated to “double in size by 2050 and will then make up approximately 30% of the population in the United States” (Flink 2018, p. 403). In 2016, 61% of Latinos in the United States were age 35 or younger with a median age of 28 (Lopez et al., 2018). Given the fast Hispanic population growth trends in this country and the high number of young Hispanics within that population, it is no surprise that higher education institutions have also seen an increase and will continue to see an increase in their Hispanic student enrollment. Latinx student enrollment in higher education institutions (HEIs) grew from 1.4 million in 2000 (McFarland et al., 2018) to 3.6 million in 2020 (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities [HACU], n.d.). These enrollment trends have also raised the number of institutions that have reached the Hispanic Serving Institution designation (HACU, 2022). The enrollment rate of Latinx college students is expected to continue to increase and surpass 4.4 million by 2025 (HACU, n.d.). However, Latinx college students have low degree completion rates. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the six-year graduation rate in 2016 for Latinx students at four-year degree-granting institutions was 54% compared to 64% for white students (2019). Latinx college students also graduate at lower rates compared to their peers from other racial and ethnic backgrounds (Excelencia in Education, 2019).

The term Latinx will be used to promote gender inclusivity (Torres, 2018), but the terms Hispanic, and Latina/os will be used to honor the language used by scholars in the literature and the language used by research participants.
Although the barriers that prevent many Latinx college students from graduating college have been identified (Babineau, 2018; Flink, 2018; Millea et al., 2018; Murphy & Murphy, 2018; Ortiz, 2004), almost half of Latinx students at four-year institutions are still not making it to graduation (NCES, 2019). Assuming that increased enrollment rates automatically lead to increased graduation rates can cause higher education intuitions to interpret low completion rates through a deficit perspective of Latinx students. They might find themselves asking why Latinx students are failing school (Farrington, 2018) instead of how their institution can better support Latinx students. Viewing students from a deficit perspective can also lead to the continuation of “so-called race-neutral institutional policies and practices [that] perpetuate racial or ethnic subordination” (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 108). Assessing institutional barriers to degree completion through the experiences of Latinx students takes the onus off the students and holds institutions responsible for their success. This study adds to the small but growing number of qualitative studies that explore the lived experiences of Latinx college students (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2018; Gonzalez & Morrison, 2016; Storlie et al., 2013) and allows more students’ voices to be heard. This study was conducted at a newly designated Hispanic Serving Institution that is exploring how to support its changing student population.

**My Personal Connection to the Study**

My interest in the research questions that were explored in this study came from my personal and professional experiences. My view of college persistence has been shaped by my experiences as a first-generation Latina student and my role as a staff and faculty member at a public higher education institution. I pursued higher
education as a first-generation Latina student who had little support navigating the campus system. My experience in college was difficult since I did not feel much of a connection to the college community due to having to work while in school and being a commuter student. Although I found great support from my friends and family, they did not have the social capital or college experience to help me avoid some of the setbacks I experienced due to not understanding the college system.

My interest in the research questions also comes from my role as a staff and faculty member at a public higher education institution. Through this experience, I have seen how resilient students from historically marginalized backgrounds are. I have also witnessed that some students do not have the privilege of being students first due to other priorities that are competing with school, such as family and work obligations. When students decide to take some time off from school or completely drop out, I often see how they internalize this decision instead of recognizing that they are operating in a system that was not built with them in mind. I hoped that the experiences I brought to this work would allow me to create a safe and accepting space for the participants in this study to share their experiences. I also acknowledge that there are pieces of my identity that carry privileges, such as being able-bodied, cisgender, a citizen of the United States, and being fluent in Spanish and English. These privileges shaped my college experience and can contribute to power imbalances during the research process. I used reflective journaling and peer debriefing during data collection and analysis to help me identify and address any power imbalances that arose, documented my experiences related to the research
questions, and focused on highlighting participants’ stories above anything else in this study.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Latinx students that successfully navigated the collegiate experience at a four-year Hispanic Serving Institution and persisted to degree completion. Focusing on students who persisted to graduation allowed this study not only to explore changes the institution can make but also to learn about the things the institution did to support students on their journey to graduation.

**Significance of the Study**

As Latinx college enrollment increases, higher education institutions will have the opportunity to respond to their institution’s changing landscape (Flink, 2018; Page, 2012) by learning directly from Latinx college students’ experiential knowledge. This information can help institutions improve supports to their students and help them adapt to the higher education projected enrollment trends that might leave some institutions fighting to keep their doors open (Grawe, 2018). In addition, the voices of the students in this study can lead to changes, improvements, and the development of policies, practices, and programming that enhance the educational experiences of Latinx students instead of serving as barriers to their college persistence. Most importantly, the results of this study can contribute to improving the quality of life for Latinx people in the United States, beginning with the completion of a college degree. Increasing college completion rates for Latinx students can “result in economic and social benefits for Latinos, their families, and society” (Murphy & Murphy, 2018, p. 10).
3). Those with college degrees on average can earn one million dollars more over their lifetime compared to high school graduates that have not completed college (Murphy & Murphy, 2018; Schak & Nichols, 2017). Completion of a higher education degree can also contribute to Latinos’ sense of purpose, social capital, increased involvement in community volunteer efforts and voting, and better health (Murphy & Murphy, 2018; Powers 2007; Trostel & Smith, 2015).

**Research Questions**

Therefore, my research questions were, How did the Latinx alumni successfully navigate the collegiate experience? How do the Latinx alumni describe the institutional policies and practices that fostered or served as barriers to their persistence in, and graduation from, college?

**Definitions of Key Terms**

**Latinx College Student**

Latinx/ Hispanic college students are described as any student who identifies as being a person of “Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race” (Llagas, 2003, p. 1). This definition can include students who identify Spain as their country of origin. This is the definition that the U.S. Department of Education uses to describe Hispanic students, and the one that I adhered to throughout this study. I chose to use the word Latinx in this dissertation since it “disrupts traditional binary notions of gender” (Salinas, 2020, p. 153) which can promote gender inclusivity. I asked the participants in this study how they identify and I honored the terms they used to describe their identity.
Persistence

This study focuses on the experiences of students who persisted to graduation. Persistence in higher education is generally defined as “the act of staying enrolled in an institution of higher education from enrollment to degree attainment” (Babineau, 2018, p. 2). There are supports and barriers students can face while working to achieve their educational goals that can impact persistence.

Hispanic Serving Institution

The Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI) Program falls under Title V of the Higher Education Act, and it is an initiative that is designed to help support Hispanic college students (U.S. Department of Education, n.d). The application process for the HSI designation includes demonstrating that at least 25% of an institution’s total population are full-time equivalent Hispanic students, at least 50% of the students they serve receive need-based assistance and are receiving the Federal Pell Grant, and that they are a post-secondary accredited degree-granting institution (U.S. Department of Education, n.d).

Overview of Research Design

This study used a qualitative methodology and the methodological approach of testimonios to explore the research questions. It is important to acknowledge that qualitative and quantitative research originated from racist ideologies that supported desires to document the lives of non-white people or, in other words, those labeled as “others” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Perez Huber, 2008). Quantitative and qualitative research was used to support colonization efforts, especially of Indigenous people in the United States (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This creates a conflict for the researcher
who is working to create “knowledge from People of Color within a research process” (Pérez Huber, 2009, p. 644) that has historically contributed to their oppression. 

Testimonios allowed me, as a Latinx researcher, to disrupt “dynamics of the researcher-subject relationship present in traditional paradigms” (Perez Huber, 2008, p.162) by engaging in a methodology that promoted the empowerment of participants sharing their experiences, that validated, honored, and shared their experiences, and that created a space for them to engage in practice that promotes hope and liberation (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012).
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Latinx students that successfully navigated the collegiate experience at a four-year Hispanic Serving Institution and persisted to degree completion. This chapter will first clarify who Latinos are and some statistics that demonstrate their influence in the United States. It will then provide a summary of the Latino journey to accessing higher education. This chapter will also explore the relevant literature on Latinx college students, including persistence theories that played a role in the support they have historically received, and identify gaps in the literature related to this population. Finally, this chapter discusses Latina/o Critical Theory which was used as the theoretical framework that guided this study.

Latinx Population in the United States

Although Latinos trace their heritage to Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America and/or to Spain (Noe-Bustamante, 2019), the Latina/o population is diverse and is made up of people from different backgrounds, ethnicities, nationalities, cultural histories, races, immigration journeys and status, political ideologies, and socioeconomic status (Flink, 2018; Maldonado & Farmer, 2007; Ortiz, 2004). There is much history behind the terms Hispanic and Latina/o/x. Part of this history includes the creation of the term Hispanic by white politicians to be able to collect Census data on people in the United States from Spanish-speaking countries (Pertuz, 2018). The creation of this label led to lumping together people from diverse national backgrounds into one ethnic group (Oboler, 1998). The term Hispanic has ties to
Spanish colonialism (Oboler, 1998; Pertuz, 2018). The term Latino also has some problematic connotations that can promote gender binaries and exclusion (Pertuz, 2018). The literature encourages higher education professionals working with Latina/o/x students to be culturally sensitive to the complexity and intersectionality of the Latinx/a/o identity (Pertuz, 2018).

In 2020, there were 62.1 million Hispanics in the United States, which accounted for 18.7% of the total United States population (Jones et al., 2021). That same year, Latinos made up 18% of the U.S. labor force (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021), and “as of 2017, Latinos became the largest entrants into the workforce” (Blancero et al., 2018, p. 5). Latinos are projected to make up 30% of the United States workforce by 2050 (Flink, 2018), and the quality of the workforce “will depend, to a great extent, on this group’s education and job skills” (Maldonado & Farmer, 2007, p.1). Despite increased participation in the U.S. workforce, Latinos tend to work low-wage jobs that do not provide a path for increased economic mobility but instead contribute to increased poverty levels (Garcia, 2019; Maldonado & Farmer, 2007; Mora, 2015). Unemployment rates are typically lower for people with higher educational attainment (Schak & Nichols, 2017). Given Latinos growing representation in the U.S. workforce, increasing college completion rates for this population will play a crucial role in the U.S. economy (Blancero et al., 2018; Linares, 2008; Maldonado & Farmer, 2007). More important than their representation and contribution to the workforce is the quality of life that Latinx people have in this country. Many Latinos express that there are better opportunities related to work, raising children, treatment of those living in poverty, and healthcare in the United
States than their place of birth or family’s country of origin (including Puerto Rico) (Lopez & Moslimani, 2022). However, historically in the United States “Latino migrant flows were directly connected to the growth of the U.S. empire and responded closely to its needs” (Gonzalez, 2011, p. xviii). United States imperialism has played a role in the living conditions and lack of opportunities available to Latinos in Puerto Rico and Latin America (Planas, 2015) that cause them to leave Puerto Rico or their country of origin and come to the United States (Gonzalez, 2011). Increasing college completion rates for Latino students can “result in economic and social benefits for Latinos, their families, and society” (Murphy & Murphy, 2018, p.3). Those with college degrees on average can earn one million dollars more over their lifetime compared to high school graduates that have not completed college (Murphy & Murphy, 2018; Schak & Nichols, 2017). Completion of a higher education degree can also contribute to Latinos’ sense of purpose, social capital, increased involvement in community volunteer efforts and voting, and better health (Murphy & Murphy, 2018; Powers 2007; Trostel & Smith, 2015). To help change the deficit perspective narrative related to low completion rates for Latinx college students and to support their college completion, we need to understand their efforts accessing higher education.

**Latinx Journey Accessing Higher Education**

Higher education was originally accessible only to white men who could afford the cost of tuition and had the privilege to dedicate their time to furthering their education (ProCon.org, 2021). The history of higher education includes using financial gains from slavery to create and sustain early higher education institutions (Wilder, 2013), stealing land from Native Americans to build higher education institutions, and
advancing and justifying Eurocentric ways of knowing and being which serve to benefit white people and oppress people of color (Patton, 2016). Latinos had to fiercely advocate for their access to higher education. The fight to access higher education is connected to Latinos’ long and continuous struggle in the United States to legally receive equal treatment despite skin color, language, and country of origin (Donato, 1997; MacDonald, n.d.). There were many court cases brought forth by Latinos to challenge the segregation of Latino students in schools, such as Alvarez v. the Board of Trustees of the Lemon Grove School District (1931), Mendez et al v. Westminster School District (1946), Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School District (1948) (MacDonald, n.d; Madrid, 2008.). The Lemon Grove case was called the “the first recognized court-ordered school desegregation case” (Madrid, 2008, p. 15). In this case, parents fought for the rights of Mexican students in a San Diego County school (Madrid, 2008). The judge presiding over the case ruled that the Lemon Grove School District were segregating Mexican children and the Mexican students “were entitled to attend Lemon Grove Grammar School on the basis of being equal to the white children” (Madrid, 2008, p. 18). Although this case was not appealed and was not properly documented, it played a major role in preventing the Bliss Bill from being passed which could have increased the number of segregated schools in California and could have negatively impacted the decision in the Mendez V. Westminster case (Madrid, 2008). The Mendez et al. v. Westminster School District (1946) and Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School District (1948) cases led to legally ending segregation of Latino children based on skin color and language in California and Texas schools (MacDonald, n.d; Madrid, 2008). They also played a major role in the Brown v. Board
of Education (1954) United States Supreme Court decision which ruled that children could not be segregated in U.S. public schools based on race (MacDonald, n.d.; Verdugo, 2006).

The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 provided land and financial support to build higher education institutions which ended up supporting the creation of state-funded colleges for people of color, particularly Black people (MacDonald & García, 2007; Patton, 2016). Latinos could attend these institutions but “their presence was discouraged” (MacDonald, n.d., Americanization and Resistance, 1848-1930s section). At that time, two major barriers to Latinos accessing college were low secondary school completion rates due to systemic racism in the education system and the need for inexpensive laborers in agriculture (MacDonald, n.d.). The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (G.I. Bill) supported Latino veterans to attend college (MacDonald & García, 2007), but advocacy was needed to ensure that they could fully utilize their benefits and combat discriminatory practices against this population of veterans (MacDonald et al., 2007). The fight continued through tireless efforts during and after the civil rights movement (Donato, 1997; Verdugo, 2006). These efforts included Latino student-led protests, boycotts, grassroots efforts, and militant organizations who were fighting for visibility, equal access to higher education, and increased Latino college enrollment (MacDonald et al., 2007). Philanthropic organizations helped to support programs for Latino students, create legal defense funds for Latino students, promote Latino research, support Latino faculty in higher education, and increase access for Latino students to higher education through government programs such as the TRIO programs (MacDonald et al., 2007). The
TRIO programs are federally funded programs that focus on providing support to students from historically marginalized backgrounds, such as low-income and first-generation students (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). The addition of the category “Hispanics” to the U.S. Census in 1970 led to higher education institutions documenting enrollment, retention, and degree attainment for the Latino population which could serve to hold these institutions accountable (MacDonald et al., 2007). Latinos took matters into their own hands in the 1980s and 1990s by creating organizations such as the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU), who focused on advocating for Hispanic college access and support at the congressional level (MacDonald et al., 2007). HACU’s advocacy helped to expand support to Hispanic students through the reauthorizations of the 1965 Higher Education Act, which eventually led to the creation of the Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions Program (MacDonald et al., 2007). This program provides funding in the form of grants to Hispanic Serving Institutions to help them “expand educational opportunities for, and improve the attainment of, Hispanic students. These grants also enable Hispanic Serving Institutions to expand and enhance their academic offerings, program quality, and institutional stability” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d).

Although access to higher education for Latinx students has significantly increased, there are still many challenges Latinx students face while trying to obtain their college degree.

**Latinx Population in U.S. Higher Education Institutions**

Increased enrollment trends of Latinx students in higher education institutions have made them one of the most represented (at the undergraduate level) ethnic groups in higher education (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021). Due to the rise in
Latinx college enrollment, some two- and four-year higher education institutions have become Hispanic Serving Institutions. HSIs are characterized by at least 25% Hispanic undergraduate student enrollment (Excelencia in Education, n.d.). In the 2020-2021 academic year, there were 559 HSIs in the United States and an additional 393 institutions that were identified as emerging HSIs (HACU, 2022). HSIs play a vital role in helping to increase access to college and degree completion rates for Latino/Hispanic students in the United States (Flink, 2017; Santiago, 2012) especially given that 65% of all undergraduate Hispanic students attend HSIs (HACU, 2022). HSIs need to understand the needs and strengths of their Hispanic student population and to adapt their instructional practices, academic programs, and support services to their population (Santiago, 2012). To support Latinx students in their college completion efforts, it is important to consider the factors that play a role in Latinx student persistence, including persistence theories that have impacted the support they receive.

**College Persistence Theories**

Two of the most well-known and widely used college persistence theories are Tinto’s theory of student departure (1993, 1975, 1987) and Bean’s model of student attrition (1981). Since these theories have been used as the theoretical foundations for numerous studies on college retention and persistence, they have impacted the support that Latinx college students have historically received while in college. Tinto’s theory of student departure posits that a student’s motivation to stay enrolled in college is impacted by their ability to integrate into a higher education institution’s academic (formal) and social system (informal) in a balanced way (Tinto, 1975). Integration into the college systems is impacted by the interactions students have with people in the college system and those interactions are influenced by the student’s individual
characteristics, their prior experiences, and the goals the student has for themselves throughout their higher education experience (Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1987). A major contribution of Tinto’s theory is their argument that higher education institutions play a role in students’ ability to stay enrolled and that the responsibility does not rest solely on the student (Tinto, 1987; Tinto, 2012). In addition, Tinto has argued that higher education institutions need to increase communication with students, promote connections between personnel and students, develop support programs, and be mindful of policies and practices that impact students, among other things (Tinto, 1987; Tinto, 2012).

Bean’s (1981) model has some overlap with Tinto’s theory of student departure in that it also argues that a student’s ability to persist is impacted by the interactions a student has while in college in which they assess “whether or not a successful match between them and the institution exists” (Burrus et al., 2013, p. 8). Bean and Tinto’s theories differ in their views on what variables have the biggest effect on college persistence (Cabrera et al., 1990). Bean’s model states that students’ ability to persist is influenced by “external, attitudinal, and interaction factors” (Burrus et al., 2013, p. 8). Bean explained that students’ intentions to leave or stay at an institution are shaped by their beliefs and attitudes (Bean, 1981). Their beliefs and attitudes are affected by their experiences within the institution and external factors such as family responsibilities, finances, and their perceptions about their opportunity to transfer to another institution (Bean, 1981).

Some researchers have argued that Tinto’s concept of integration serves to further marginalize students from underrepresented groups by suggesting that their persistence depends on their ability to acculturate to the dominant college values,
customs, and norms (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) which can in turn promote the rejection of their culture (Rendón et al., 2000). Bean’s model has been validated with nontraditional students such as adult learners, commuter students, and students that attend two-year higher education institutions (Burrus et al., 2013), but it does not expand on the cultural factors that impact persistence. Gonzalez and Morrison (2016) conducted a review of the persistence literature from 2000 to 2014 and argued that Tinto’s model “serves as the template for many researchers” (p.104) who explore why students do not make it to graduation. Any findings and implications for practice based on studies that use Tinto or Bean’s theories should be carefully examined before being applied to the Latinx college student population. Gonzalez and Morrison (2016) found that the studies that focus on the persistence of specifically Latino students are sparse and even the majority of those with that focus do not incorporate the complexities and differences that exist within the heterogenous Latino culture. The following are some examples of studies that have explored Latino/ Hispanic college persistence.

**Latinx College Persistence**

Arbelo-Marrero and Milacci (2018) used a qualitative, phenomenological research design to explore how ten nontraditional-aged Hispanic students from two HSIs in the southeastern United States described persistence. The researchers found the following revised description of persistence by participants:

Persistence is to persevere despite obstacles and setbacks; it is using resilience, which has been developed through challenging life experiences and personal determination, to overcome difficulties that arise while one tries to fulfill a goal; it is a compelling desire to achieve something that will transform our lives. (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2018, p.227)
The researchers demonstrated that persisting in college can be affected by internal and external factors, but the study did not focus on the institutional barriers that students face (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2018).

Storlie et al. (2013) conducted a content analysis of qualitative research studies that focused on addressing the lived experiences of Hispanic college students and that were published in the Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences. A total of 1,060 findings were generated within the 32 searches that used this inclusion criteria. Six qualitative research articles met the inclusion criteria. Four of the six articles explored the experiences of Mexican American students, and their sample sizes ranged from two to 31 participants. The following themes related to college persistence and degree attainment emerged from Storlie et al.’s (2013) data analysis, past barriers, negative college experiences, self-efficacy, positive feelings, succeeding, additional support, cultural awakening, and hope. The negative college experience theme emerged from data in which Hispanic college students expressed feeling overwhelmed with the challenges they faced in the college environment. “Feelings of alienation were common when confronted with racism, sexism, and additional microaggressions” (Storlie et al., 2013, p. 71). The theme of hope emerged from data related to Hispanic students expressing “belief and hope in a positive future” (Storlie et al., 2013, p. 73) and enhanced opportunities after college. This allowed students to work through the challenges they faced and “feelings of discouragement and inferiority” (Storlie et al., 2013, p. 73) in order to continue working towards achieving their goals. The researchers called for more qualitative research that explores Hispanic student experiences (Storlie et al., 2013). This study also does not highlight institutional
barriers that contributed to the stressors and emotions students experienced while in college. Most of the literature on Latinx college students has focused on barriers they face while in college.

**Barriers Faced by Latinx College Students**

Latinx college students face similar persistence barriers as students from other underrepresented backgrounds including social, cultural, financial, academic, and situational barriers (Babineau, 2018; Millea et al., 2018). Some of the barriers that are specific to Latinx students are related to transferring from community colleges to four-year institutions (Crisp & Nora, 2010; Ortiz, 2004), the challenges that come along with acculturation pressures (Flink, 2018; Murphy & Murphy, 2018), the pressures associated with *familismo* (Babineau, 2018; Murphy & Murphy, 2018), and the difficulties experienced by first-generation students and students that are undocumented while in college (Contreras, 2009; Pérez & Ochoa, 2018; Zarate & Burciaga, 2010).

**Transferring from Community Colleges to Four-year Institutions**

Approximately half of Latino students begin at community colleges (Ortiz, 2004; Postsecondary National Policy Institute [PNPI], 2021). As a result, one of the biggest barriers Latino students face is transferring from community colleges to four-year institutions (Flink, 2018; Murphy & Murphy, 2018; Ortiz, 2004). Some of the reasons Latino students choose to attend community colleges first are to improve their English language proficiency (Flink, 2018), to take advantage of curricular options that have a more direct pipeline to employment (Murphy & Murphy, 2018), and because they are a lower-cost option, offer more flexibility, and are more accessible to
Latino students (Liu, 2011). Although half of Latino students enrolled at a community college intended to transfer out to earn a bachelor’s degree, only about 14% either earned a bachelor’s degree or were still enrolled in a four-year institution within six years (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014; Radford et al., 2010). Transferring to another institution requires knowledge about how to navigate the college admission and financial aid process (Murphy & Murphy, 2018) as well as knowledge and understanding of the transfer and articulation policies that impact students (Núñez et al., 2012). Núñez, Crisp, and Elizondo (2012) examined the “transfer patterns of a national sample of Hispanic community college students” (p. 2) and found that informal contact with faculty outside of class, and faculty validation and encouragement played a “positive role in the academic engagement, sense of belonging, persistence, and transfer of Hispanic community college students” (p. 20). Martinez and Hernández (2018) argue that “Latinx/a/o students’ college aspirations are challenged by a lack of information about college costs” and student affairs professionals can support students with this barrier.

**Acculturation Pressures**

Another barrier that Latino students face is the psychological effects of the acculturation process (Flink, 2018; Murphy & Murphy, 2018). Latinx students tend to have cultural values, norms, beliefs, and language that differ from the majority population at higher education institutions (Flink, 2018), and this can be a “source of distress and dissatisfaction” for students (Murphy & Murphy, 2018, p. 10). According to Flink (2018), “the difficulties associated with the acculturation process can be
manifested into academic and social challenges both on campus and within the classroom” (p. 407).

Familismo

*Familismo* is a Latino cultural value that influences Latino college students’ decisions and experiences (Babineau, 2018; Murphy & Murphy, 2018; Torres & Zerquera, 2012). *Familismo* is “a cultural value, emphasizing loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity, requiring prioritization of family over individual interests” (Torres & Zerquera, 2012, p. 261). Family “can provide strong social connections and potentially a source of social capital” (Martinez & Hernández, 2018, p. 145) that can aid student success in college. However, the family responsibilities that go along with this value can create some added pressures for Latinx college students (Babineau, 2018). These responsibilities can include being the primary caretaker for family members and financial obligations that may lead to students working while attending school (Babineau, 2018; Murphy & Murphy, 2018).

First-generation and Undocumented Status Among the Latinx College Student Population

First-generation students are students whose parents did not attend college (Cataldi et al., 2018). Approximately 48% of Hispanic students enrolled in higher education are first-generation students compared to 42% of Black students and 28% of white students (PNPI, 2021). Latinx students make up the “highest representation of first-generation college students” (Martinez & Hernández, 2018, p. 144) in higher education. Although first-generation students have many strengths, they are not able to “benefit from their parent’s college going experience- a valuable source of cultural
capital that helps students navigate college (e.g., understanding the significance of the syllabus, what ‘office hours’ mean, or how to cite sources in written assignments)” (Cataldi et al., 2018, p. 2). First-generation students also need support navigating the “tangled web of college policies, procedures, jargon, and expectations” (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017). PNPI reports that “The median family income for first-generation freshmen at two- and four-year institutions was $37,565 compared to $99,635 for continuing-generation freshmen” (2021). This contributes to financial barriers Latinx students face.

Approximately 46% of all undocumented students in higher education are Hispanic/Latinx students, and the majority of them are also first-generation students (Redden, 2020). Students who are undocumented usually struggle with paying for college, especially if they have to pay out-of-state tuition rates due to local policies (Contreras, 2009) and if they do not qualify for support under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. In addition, students who are undocumented might live in fear of deportation, struggle to trust faculty, staff, and peers and might hesitate to seek on-campus services (Contreras, 2009). This fear can be exacerbated by the political instability the DACA program has undergone in the last three presidential administrations. The DACA program was created in 2012 giving qualifying undocumented individuals the ability to temporarily remain in the United States without the threat of deportation, to receive work authorization (American Immigration Council, 2021), and the ability to receive state or college based financial support in higher education (Federal Student Aid, 2022). In 2017, an attempt to end the DACA program was made by stopping the renewal of applications (American
Immigration Council, 2021). This attempt was challenged by several states and was eventually ruled by the U.S. Supreme Court to be unlawful (American Immigration Council, 2021). The battle over whether or not the program is lawful has continued in the courts, but President Biden has stated that he is in support of the DACA program and those affected by it (U.S. White House, 2022). College students impacted by this program are often at the mercy of their institutions who decide their level of commitment to protect their identity and to continue to provide services throughout this uncertainty (Venegas et al., 2017).

Understanding the barriers that Latinx students face during their higher education journey helps to explain why about half of Latinx college students do not make it to graduation. These barriers could play a major role in their experiences as they work to persist in college to degree completion. These barriers also shed light on the opportunities to better support Latinx college students. Critical theorists encourage higher education institutions to challenge the “illusion that Latinos have an opportunity to succeed that is equal to that of majority white students” (Villalpando, 2004, p. 45).

**Areas for Further Research**

Despite the existing literature on student persistence and the barriers Latinx college students face, higher education institutions are struggling to help Latinx students persist to graduation. The research on Latino/ Hispanic college students highlights a need for more qualitative studies that explore the lived experiences of Latino/ Hispanic college students (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2018; Flink, 2018; Nora & Crisp, 2012; Storlie et al., 2013; Villalpando, 2004). Nora and Crisp (2012)
encouraged researchers to “allow Hispanic students to tell about their own college experiences, as rigorous qualitative work is needed that provides a rich description of students’ experiences and perceptions specific to the college environment” (p. 5). Storlie et al. (2014) argued, “Hispanic college student experiences can be fully appreciated through qualitative research methods in which expression of these life accounts are conducted through students using their own voices” (p.75). This study adds more voices to the literature on Latinx college student experiences.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that served as a base for this study is Latina and Latino Critical Legal Theory (LatCrit) (Valdes & Bender, 2021). LatCrit proposes an important lens through which higher education institutions can view Latinx students’ college persistence in that it can bring to light some of the institutional changes that can be made to better support Latinx students. Before sharing more about LatCrit, I will share some information about what structural racism looks like in the United States, which contributes to the need for LatCrit. I will then dive into LatCrit’s history, key concepts, and the current higher education scholarship related to LatCrit. Lastly, I will end by sharing why and how I used LatCrit as the theoretical framework to inform my dissertation.

**Structural Racism in the United States**

The United States of America was established by white, wealthy, men through colonization of Indigenous land including that of Mexicans who occupied about “one-third of the continental United States” (Morín, 2011, p. 127). Based on the laws the Founding Fathers created for this country, it appears as though they used themselves
as the “standard of measure against which all other identities are judged and positioned” (Zine, 2006, p. 246). As a result, they created laws that made some people property, justified slavery and colonization, and left it up to the states to decide who could vote. Women, Indigenous people, people of color, and anyone else who could not own property were not allowed to vote, leaving them without a way to change the laws that oppressed and served to subjugate them. As amendments were made to the Constitution giving non-white men more rights, white men continued their fight to maintain power. De facto segregation practices such as white flight, blockbusting, and discrimination against African American veteran’s mortgage benefits made it so that African Americans and other minoritized people, such as Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans, were restricted on where they could live and where they owned property (Rothstein, 2017). These practices were reinforced by “racially explicit government policies” (Rothstein, 2017, p. XVII) such as the Federal Housing Administration’s policies that denied mortgages to African Americans (Rothstein, 2017). These policies left African Americans who wanted to own property with little choice but to enter into contract sales agreements that set them up for late monthly payments, which could eventually result in them being evicted from their home (Rothstein, 2017, p. 96). The pressure these policies put on African American homeowners contributed to overcrowded neighborhoods and schools, children who supervised themselves after school, and neighborhood crime (Rothstein, 2017, p.97). These “systematic patterns of discrimination” transformed non-wealthy white people into a “virtually hereditary underclass of impoverished people” (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1999, p.211). This trickles down to the schools that are mostly funded by
their city or town’s property taxes which “ensures that poor communities will have inferior schools” (DiAngelo, 2012, p. 172). Schools with fewer resources create equity gaps in education (Payne, 2013). This unequal distribution of resources in schools is perpetuated by laws such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that gave way to standardized testing, which has historically justified giving more resources to high-performing schools that also tend to be higher-income schools (Stein, 2004). These are just some examples of the discriminatory history, laws, and practices that play a part in and perpetuate structural racism in the United States.

In the 2017 Brown University commencement forum titled How racism works, Dr. Rose defined structural racism as “the normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics (historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal) that routinely advantage whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color” (Brown University, 2017, 28:50). Dr. Rose argued that tackling structural racism is not just about changing policies, but also about tackling ideology. Some ideologies that maintain structural racism are meritocracy, individualism, and universalism (DiAngelo, 2012). Meritocracy is the belief that “success is solely the result of ability and hard work” (DiAngelo, 2012, p. 174). Individualism is “The ideology that we are all unique, therefore categories such as race have no meaning and provide no more or less opportunities. Thus success or failure is not a consequence of social structures but of individual character” (DiAngelo, 2012, p. 175). DiAngelo defines universalism as “The ideology that because we all are human, categories such as race have no meaning and provide no more or less opportunities” (2012, p. 176). Meritocracy, individualism, and universalism are ideologies that prohibit some white
people from acknowledging that being from a racial group that is not white automatically puts someone at a disadvantage in the United States. These ideologies contribute to the continuation of racism in this country to this day. Lorde (1992) describes racism as “the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance” (p. 496). Racism and systemic racism are core issues of LatCrit.

Although Latinos identify with some of the discrimination that African Americans have faced in this country, they have life experiences that called for a theory that would highlight the oppression they face related to their “multilayered identities” (Gonzalez & Morrison, 2016, p. 89). There was (and still is) a need to analyze and change laws, policies, and practices that serve to oppress Latinx people and their multiple intersecting identities and as a result, Latina and Latino Critical Legal Theory was developed (Valdes & Bender, 2021).

**History of Latina and Latino Critical Legal Theory**

LatCrit emerged after a 1995 colloquium held in Puerto Rico that focused on “Representing Latina/o Communities: Critical Race Theory and Practice” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p.1). The founding members of LatCrit were legal academics of which most are people of color (Valdes & Bender, 2021). During LatCrit’s inception, part of the political climate was “dedicated to rolling back legislation and doctrine from the New Deal, the Civil Rights Era, and the Great Society” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 2). At the same time, in higher education there was an “opposition to affirmative action values as well as hostility to critical studies and scholars within the legal academy” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 149). LatCrit’s creation was prompted by a “socio-legal
invisibility of Latinas/os/x” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 79) that existed at that time and the persistent marginalization of Latinx people in the United States (Valdes & Bender, 2021). Using Critical Race Theory tenets, experiences, and lessons as a jumping-off point, LatCrit aimed to create a “collectivized base” to counter the “collectivized warfare directed at us” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 2). LatCrit’s fundamental goals have been,

(1) to develop a critical, activist, and interdisciplinary discourse on law and policy towards Latinas/os/x; and (2) to foster both the development of coalitional theory and practice as well as the accessibility of this knowledge to agents of social and legal transformative change. Through a variety of scholarly and activist interventions, LatCrit theorists aim to deploy Latinas/os/x’ multiple internal diversities and to situate Latinas/os/x in larger intergroup frameworks, both domestically and globally, to promote social justice awareness and activism. (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 1)

LatCrit later became incorporated as a tax-exempt nonprofit organization which allowed the organization component to generate financial resources to support its community (Valdes & Bender, 2021). According to Cho and Harris (2021), LatCrit’s most prominent accomplishments since its creation have been helping to increase the number of underrepresented faculty in United States law schools and helping to expand “the acceptable topics, approaches, and methods for legal scholarship, paving the way for new entrants to further redefine their fields” (p. 119). In addition, LatCrit has helped to combat the epistemological racism that oppresses people of color in higher education (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002). This kind
of racism can keep people from historically marginalized backgrounds from obtaining faculty positions and from producing scholarship that is typically not accepted by mainstream journals (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002). Valdez and Bender believe that the biggest theoretical contribution of LatCrit scholarship “has been the centering and elaboration of Latina/o/x identity in U.S. law and society in explicitly non- or de-essentialized terms” (2021, p. 27).

LatCrit falls under the genre of outsider jurisprudence (OutCrit) which “refers (at least initially) to those scholars who identify and align themselves with outgroups in this country, as well as globally, including most notably those who in recent times have launched lines of critical inquiry within legal culture, including critical legal studies” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 152). Delgado (1989) connects the term outgroup to outsiders which is described as “those who are not white males and who are historically underrepresented in law schools” (p. 2412). OutCrits aim to address “the mutually reinforcing systems of subordination and domination that construct both outgroups and ingroups” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 152).

The key tenants of LatCrit include the antisubordination principle, antiessentialism, and intersectionality. Wrapped in these tenants are key concepts of LatCrit, which include the intra/intergroup framework to intersectionality, the rotating centers and shifting bottoms practice, and the big tent approach (Valdes & Bender, 2021). These major tenets and concepts focus on highlighting systemic inequalities that give power and privilege to the ingroups and discriminate and reinforce inequality for the outgroups, while also highlighting “identity differences as assets, both intellectually and politically” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 18).
LatCrit Tenants and Key Concepts

According to Valdes and Bender (2021), the antisubordination principle is the response to antidiscrimination laws and practices in this country. Antidiscrimination laws in the U.S. “as interpreted judicially in the form of formal equality, looks only to whether a plaintiff can produce ‘smoking gun’ evidence showing that the defendant individually, consciously, and overtly ‘intended’ to discriminate against the plaintiff as an individual” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 19). LatCrit argues that this is problematic because it can be used to “disguise intentional discrimination” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p.19), it assumes that all identity groups are equal and ignores the “systemic power and privilege” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 20) that white men have in this country, and it protects the “illusion of individualism” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p.21) which “pervades and distorts the entire system to justify collectivized injustice” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 21). These ignored issues make it so that solutions aimed at addressing discrimination do not match the problem, therefore reinforcing caste systems and perpetuating systemic injustice (Valdes & Bender, 2021). LatCrit argues that “although subordination (like privilege) is experienced by individuals, it is systemically imposed based on actual or perceived membership in some identity-based social group” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 23) and that “collectivized subordination, not discrimination as such, is the problem facing individual members of historically and currently disempowered groups” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 22). Therefore, LatCrit’s antisubordination principle focuses “on the pervasive, collective, and cumulative effects of caste systems” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 21) and on “the
identity groups actually subordinated by them in social, economic, and legal terms” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 21).

Working in an interlocking manner with the antisuubordination principle are the principles of antiessentialism and intersectionality. “Latinas/os—again like other groups—are diverse along many axes of identity, including gender, sexual orientation, religion, and socioeconomic class” (Iglesias & Valdez, 2000, p. 207). Antiessentialism challenges the belief that Latinx people have the same race and ethnicity (Iglesias & Valdez, 2000) and “seeks to reveal intragroup differences to resist relations of subordination and domination that may exist within and among the members of any particular group” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 24). Intersectionality was a term originally introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the context of violence against women (1991). The term was used to explain the complexities of the marginalization faced by women who also identify as being of color (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw (1991) argued that these identities intersect and cannot be looked at as separate experiences of racism and sexism. This term was adapted to other contexts, including higher education, and has been viewed not just a way to define experiences but also to work toward social justice change that spotlights systemic and institutional inequities (Harris & Patton, 2019). LatCrit incorporates intersectionality by emphasizing that every person “simultaneously embodies multiple identities—race, sex, orientation, class, religion, nationality and more—and that different combinations of those identities call for different analyses or policies” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p.24). LatCrit works to dispel stereotypes that try to put all Latinas/os/xs in the same box and that are used to make problematic laws and policies regarding Latinas/os/x (Valdes & Bender, 2021).
LatCrit has “showcased the complexities and diversities of Latina/o/x communities in terms of race, and ethnicity, religion, culture imperialism, and colonialism, language and its suppression, class, and immigration status” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 29). To do this LatCrit has utilized some of their key concepts which are the intra/intergroup framework to intersectionality, the rotating centers and shifting bottoms practice, and the big tent approach. Intersectionality in LatCrit is analyzed through the intra/intergroup framework. This framework looks at the Latina/o/x condition from diverse outside (e.g., gender, class) and inside viewpoints (e.g., culture, language, ethnicity) instead of just focusing on one identity such as race or gender (Valdes & Bender, 2021). This framework allows LatCrit scholars to get a better look at the “systems of subordination that jointly and severally keep existing hierarchies of injustice and inequality in place both within and across social groups” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 30). This framework requires the practice of “rotating centers and shifting bottoms” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 36). This practice involves the decentering of certain identities and centering other marginalized identities to better investigate “power hierarchies and their mutually reinforcing interplay” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 35). Latinx people can engage in this practice of rotating centers and shifting bottoms internally depending on the environment or situation they are in (Valdes & Bender, 2021).

Another key concept of LatCrit is the “big tent approach” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 42) which promotes cross-disciplinary knowledge production. LatCrit conferences from the beginning were open to anyone who wanted to attend (Valdes & Bender, 2021). This allowed for “Substantive areas of particular concern to Latinx
populations- such as globalization, immigration, settler colonialism, neocolonialism, and language rights” (Cho & Harris, 2021, p. 119) to find their voice at LatCrit conferences (Cho & Harris, 2021). The big tent approach encourages collaboration and scholars to “develop their scholarly agendas and work, individually yet collectively, in the service of equal justice” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 42). This approach also makes LatCrit a multigenerational project where veteran, junior, and emerging scholars are included and supported in their production of knowledge and where “universalized ‘standards’ for scholarly production” (Valdes & Bender, 2021, p. 42) and meritocracy are not reinforced (Valdes & Bender, 2021).

**LatCrit and Education Scholarship**

LatCrit has been used in higher education scholarship to bring attention to “the ways in which so-called race-neutral institutional policies and practices perpetuate racial or ethnic subordination” (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 108) with the goal of helping to dismantle and get rid of the policies and practices that create barriers for Latino students in higher education (Villalpando, 2004). One example of ethnic subordination is related to what knowledge is and whose knowledge counts.

Higher education in the United States is founded on a Eurocentric epistemological perspective based on white privilege and “American democratic” ideals of meritocracy, objectivity, and individuality. This epistemological perspective presumes that there is only one way of knowing and understanding the world, and it is the natural way of interpreting truth, knowledge, and reality. (Delgado and Villalpando, 2002, p. 171)
Delgado Bernal (2002) used CRT and LatCrit to challenge “the traditional notion of what counts as knowledge” (p. 109). They argued that students of color are “holders and creators of knowledge” (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 107) and that the focus should be on how their “cultural knowledge contributes to their educational success” (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 117) instead of looking at students of color from a deficit perspective.

Perez Huber (2008) explained how LatCrit could be used in higher education research to validate students’ experiential knowledge and to support culturally appropriate methodologies such as testimonios which serve to “more accurately portray the experiences of the Latina/o community” (p. 173). LatCrit as a framework for educational studies also analyzes the “disconnect of students of color from their race, ethnicity, and culture in post-secondary settings” (Gonzalez & Morrision, 2016, p. 91).

One of the core practices of LatCrit is counter-storytelling which Solórzano and Yosso (2002) describe as a “method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society)” (p. 32). Counter-storytelling can be used to create awareness of the racism, oppression, and discrimination that Latino students face and help to change the narrative about their “culture being to blame for their lack of success” (Villalpando, 2004, p. 46). This study incorporated this counter-storytelling practice along with LatCrit to spotlight some of the institutional practices and policies that work to support and oppress Latinx students and to reject the deficit narrative that has been told about Latinx students. In this study, participants’ strengths and how they have used those strengths to help them
persist to graduation were highlighted. Using LatCrit allowed me to showcase the intersecting identities that the Latina/o/ Hispanic participants hold and how those cultural differences played a role in persistence (Gonzalez & Morrison, 2016). LatCrit was also used to inform which data sources were used for this study, helped shape interview questions, and provided a lens through which the data was analyzed.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Higher education institutions need to learn directly from the lived experiences of Latinx students to support them in their college completion efforts. The goal of this study was to explore the experiences of Latinx students who persisted to graduation at a four-year Hispanic Serving Institution. This research study used testimonios methodology and research design to help answer the two following research questions: How did the Latinx alumni successfully navigate the collegiate experience? How do the Latinx alumni describe the institutional policies and practices that fostered or served as barriers to their persistence in, and graduation from, college? Chapter Three will cover an overview of the research setting, the methodology and research design, sampling procedures, data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness.

Research Setting

The research site for this study is a medium-sized, newly designated HSI in the northeastern United States, herein known by its pseudonym, Anchor State College. Anchor State College is a public state institution that served 5,252 undergraduate students during the 2021-2022 academic year. Anchor State College has a diverse undergraduate student population consisting of 41% of students identifying as students of color, 47% meeting Pell Grant eligibility, and 46% identifying as first-generation students. About 69% of undergraduate students identify as female, 31% as male, and less than one percent identify outside of these binary genders. Eighty-six percent of the undergraduate students Anchor State College serves are in-state students and 85% of students commute to campus. The six-year graduation rate for the 2014 cohort of first
time, full-time, undergraduate students is 48.5%. When disaggregated based on race, there are some disparities between the graduation rate for white students in this cohort which is 50.2 % and Hispanic students whose graduation rate is 40.3%. Approximately 74% of full-time, first-time, undergraduate students that started in Fall 2020 were enrolled in Fall 2021. This college is known for its affordability and the opportunities for social mobility it provides to its graduates.

Anchor State College achieved the Hispanic Serving Institution designation in 2021, making it the first higher education institution in the state to reach that status. It created a working group that same year made up of staff, faculty, and members of the President’s Executive Cabinet. The group was tasked with developing strategies to help this institution promote the designation, identify HSI-related funding, and look at college policies and practices through the lens of the population of students now being served at this institution. Reaching this designation means that the way students are served, specifically Latinx students, needs to be explored and possibly changed. The results of this study provided Anchor State College with the experiences of some Latinx students, which can serve as a launch point to strengthening student success not only of Latinx students but all students at this institution.

**Methodology & Research Design**

In alignment with the theoretical framework of Latina and Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit), this research study used a *testimonios* research design and *testimonios* as the chosen methods approach (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Pérez Huber, 2012). The inception of *testimonios* is not clear but its creation as a literary mode in Latin America is traced back to the 1970s where it was used to resist “imperialism in Third World nations” (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012, p. 526) and to
share the experiences of those being oppressed “often within the context of war” (Perez Huber, 2008, p. 168). Testimonios were also practiced later by Chicana and Latina scholars who used testimonios based in a feminist framework to bring attention to the oppression Chicana/os and Latina/os face in the United States (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Chicana and Latina scholars have helped increase the use of testimonios in the field of education as a methodology and pedagogy (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012) that focuses on sharing “the struggle of people of color for educational rights and for the recovery of our knowledge production” (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012, p. 526).

Testimonios have also been used to build solidarity and resist dominant laws, policies, and practices that serve to oppress Latinas/os (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012).

Testimonios have been described as verbal expressions of “one’s life experiences with attention to injustices one has suffered and the effect these injustices have had on one’s life” (Brabeck, 2001, p. 3). The sharing of these experiences is an act of resistance (Brabeck, 2003) which is motivated by “a social and/or political urgency to voice injustice and raise awareness of oppression” (Pérez Huber, 2012, p. 379). Testimonios are not meant to be kept private but are shared to bring attention to something that needs to change, elicit solidarity from the reader, and bring forth a call to action (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012). Testimonios are also meant to be liberating and empowering to those telling their story (Pérez Huber, 2012).

According to Perez Huber (2008), “There is no single definition of testimonio or requirements for how this technique should be used in the research process” (p. 169), and they do not suggest that there should be one. However, testimonios as a
critical research methodology assumes that research is subjective and political (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012). It centers around “giving voice to silences, representing the other, reclaiming authority to narrate, and disentangling questions surrounding legitimate truth” (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012, p. 365).

In this study, testimonios allowed the participants to share their first-hand accounts of their experience persisting in college until degree completion. Latina/o/Hispanic alumni were encouraged to critically reflect on their college experiences (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012) and identify and make meaning of the oppression and marginalization they might have experienced as a student due to institutional policies and practices (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012). This critical reflection promoted the liberatory aspect of testimonios (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012) by creating the space for participants to engage in the practice of counter-storytelling (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) related to their experiences persisting in college despite any barriers that were faced. The opportunity for liberation also came from being able to take the burden off themselves for setbacks they experienced in college and instead identify what the institution could have done to support them better. Testimonios gave alumni the opportunity to relive their experiences from a place of power that allowed them to be in control of their narrative, share it with others, build solidarity (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012; Latina Feminist Group, 2001) with current and future Latina/o/x/ Hispanic students, and recommend ways that Anchor State College can improve support for Latina/o/x/ Hispanic students (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012).
Testimonios as a methodology calls for the researcher to bear witness to accounts shared by participants, listen to the ways they identify the forms of oppression they might have experienced, validate their unique lived experiences, recognize differences, and identify commonalities among their lived experiences (Beverley, 2008; Pérez Huber, 2012; Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012). The researcher’s role is to document these experiences with the goal of sharing them to challenge deficit perspectives and advocate for institutional policies and practices (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012) that, in this case, can serve to better support Latinx students. Testimonios also calls for the researcher to be subjective and to work with participants to construct knowledge together (Perez Huber, 2008).

The researcher uses the research problem they hope to address and the research paradigm they will follow in the study to guide their decision on which research method and design best align with their study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Keeping in mind the research questions, the underlying transformative research paradigm, and LatCrit framework that was used to guide this study, the five commonly used qualitative designs were reviewed to determine if they were appropriate to be used in this study. I concluded that the best design was not within the five. This study does not seek to just “collect stories” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 68) about individual experiences as narrative research does, “generate or discover a theory” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 82) as is the case in grounded theory, examine the shared patterns of an entire “culture-sharing group” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 90) as ethnographic research aims to, “develop an in-depth description and analysis” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 104) of a case or several cases “within a real-life, contemporary context or setting”
(Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 96) as is the goal of a case study, and it does not align with phenomenological research which aims to “reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). Testimonios was the most appropriate qualitative approach to use because testimonios is intentionally political and social justice driven (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Testimonios bring to light “accounts of oppression” (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012, p. 526) with the goal of bringing about social justice change while also being a liberating and empowering experience to those sharing their story (Pérez Huber, 2012). Testimonios was also appropriate because it disrupts the apartheid of knowledge (Perez Huber, 2008) that exists in research by highlighting and valuing the experiential knowledge of people who identify as Latinx but also carry other intersecting identities.

**Sampling Procedures**

This testimonios study used purposeful sampling to select “information-rich cases for study in depth” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). This was appropriate because I was looking for Latinx alumni who had experiences related to the two research questions. Snowball sampling was used to select the participants for this study. This technique is used to identify “cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 159). The inclusion criteria were alumni of any age and any identified race and gender, who identify as Latina/o/x/ Hispanic, graduated within the last five years of the start of the study (2018- May 2022), and who were enrolled at Anchor State College their total time in college. The reason for these criteria was to yield information-rich cases related to the research
question and to allow the study to focus on changes Anchor State College can make or to highlight things the institution did to support students. Including alumni helped me yield more data about the research questions since they were able to navigate college to degree completion. Alumni are not in the student role anymore, which could also serve to minimize power dynamics when discussing institutional barriers.

Approval from the Institutional Review Board was received in April 2022. I began the recruitment process in June 2022. I started by emailing faculty and staff to share details about the study and ask for their help with identifying research participants who might have information-rich cases regarding their journey persisting in college and institutional barriers they might have faced (see Appendix A). I reached out to 24 faculty and staff. The list of personnel was generated using the knowledge I gained working five years in the Student Success Division at Anchor State College. These were individuals that I knew had a lot of direct contact with students in different programs of study and people that I often witnessed advocating with and on behalf of students in meetings. In August 2022, I reached out to the Office of Alumni Relations at Anchor State College to request a list of all their alumni who identify as Latina/o/x/Hispanic and that graduated within the last five years (2018- May 2022). I requested that the list include contact information, graduation date, and major. I received the list at the end of August 2022 while I was still reaching out to alumni suggested by faculty.

The first outreach effort to faculty and staff resulted in the names of 44 potential participants. Eleven of the 44 potential participants were suggested by more than one faculty/staff member. According to Patton (1990), “The chain of recommended informants will typically diverge initially as many possible sources are
recommended, then converge as a few key names get mentioned over and over” (p. 176). I cross-referenced the names of all potential participants with the list I received from the Office of Alumni Relations and that left me with 42 potential participants for the study. I kept track of my recruitment efforts using an Excel spreadsheet. I emailed the 42 potential participants an invitation to participate in the study (see Appendix B). I received a response from 11 students, 10 who said they were interested in participating in the study and one who said they were not available. The 10 interested alumni were asked to complete a screening and background questionnaire (see Appendix C) that was created in Microsoft Forms. The information provided in the questionnaire was intended to help select a maximum variation sample of participants. The purpose of variation sampling is to select participants that represent diverse characteristics but that all meet the predetermined inclusion criteria for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I had a limited volunteer pool to select participants from which did not allow me to fully engage in the maximum variation sampling process. However, I was fortunate enough that the potential participants represented different graduation years, number of years enrolled at Anchor State College, and academic majors. All 10 potential participants completed the background questionnaire, but only seven participated in individual interviews. Two of the interested participants did not set up a time to participate in the interviews and eventually stopped responding to emails. Another potential participant attended their individual interview, but before starting the interview questions, they shared that they did not attend the institution included in the study during their entire undergraduate journey. They added that they had transferred in from another institution at the end of their sophomore year which meant that they did not meet the inclusion criteria. Before logging off they shared two
other potential participant names (one was already on the potential participant list and the other was not on the list shared by the Office of Alumni Relations). Individual interviews started in October 2022 while I continued to engage in the recruitment process. In October 2022, I reached back out to faculty and staff I had not heard from, and that outreach effort yielded the names of five more potential participants, four of which were on the list from the Office of Alumni Relations. In an attempt to identify more research participants, I decided to also identify potential participant names. I felt this was appropriate since I had a lot of direct contact with students at this institution through my staff and faculty roles. That experience served to help me identify alumni that had information rich experiences to share. I reviewed the list from the Office of Alumni Relations and identified the names of eight potential participants who had different characteristics than the already identified participants in the study, such as graduation year, major, and gender. My second outreach effort to potential participants was to 12 alumni. Two of the 12 alumni responded to my emails. One did not meet the inclusion criteria (attended another institution for their undergraduate degree) and the other one became a participant in the study. Testimonios could have been gathered from many more participants, but it was difficult to identify interested participants for the study. Although this was the case, consistent patterns emerged in the testimonios of the eight participants related to the research questions. I was also aware of my positions of power as current faculty and previous staff member during the recruiting phase of the study. I was mindful of the number of times I followed up with the pool of potential participants so that I did not make anyone feel obligated to respond and used their contact information in a respectful manner. The final individual interview was conducted in December 2022. Before sharing the data collection and analysis
process, it is important to provide a summary of the background of the participants of this study.

**Participants**

Eight participants agreed to participate in this study which allowed for an in-depth exploration of the participants’ experiences instead of aiming for generalizability to the larger population. The eight participants identify as Latina/o/Hispanic and as first-generation college students. They are all bilingual speakers (Spanish/English), they attended Anchor State College during their entire undergraduate journey, and all graduated from this institution. The participants varied by gender, age, place of birth, family’s country of origin, graduation year, and academic major. I decided not to collect information about immigration status to not discourage participants who were undocumented from participating in the study and instead just asked about place of birth. Six of the participants identified as female, one as male, and one as woman. The participants ranged in age from 21 to 56 years old with seven participants in their twenties and one in their fifties. When asked, “How do you identify related to your race?” one participant shared that they identify as Black, another one as Black and Hispanic/Latino, two as Hispanic/Latina, one as white, one as Hispanic, one left this question blank, and one shared “Other-racial classifications used in the U.S. does not identify Hispanic/Latino population.” When asked, “How do you identify related to your ethnic background?” two participants stated Hispanic, one identified as Mexican, another one as Mexican American, one as Hispanic or Latina, another one as Hispanic/Latino, another participant as Nicaraguan and Dominican, and one as Latina. One of the participants was born in Mexico, one in Puerto Rico, two
shared they were born in the United States, three listed New York as their place of
birth, and one noted that they were born in Rhode Island. When asked where their
parents were born, three said Mexico, four said their parents or at least one parent was
from the Dominican Republic, two had at least one parent who was born in New York,
and one shared that their father was born in Nicaragua. Four of the eight participants
attended the same institution for graduate school (three were still enrolled in graduate
school when their interviews took place). One of the participants also shared that they
are a United States Army Veteran.

In this study, participants had the option to use their real names instead of a
pseudonym to be consistent with testimonio methodology. Six of the eight participants
selected to use their real names and two selected pseudonyms for themselves. Out of
the eight participants, I had briefly interacted with two of them in my previous staff
role in the Student Success Division, and I had only worked closely with one of them.
Five participants had been suggested for the study by staff from the Student Success
Division. One of those five was also suggested for the study by a faculty member. Two
others were suggested by faculty members and one other participant was suggested by
someone from the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. The characteristics of the
participants can be observed in Figure 3.1.
**Figure 3.1**

*Overview of Participant Characteristics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of years enrolled at higher education institution</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Place of Birth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angel</td>
<td>6 (undergrad and graduate)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic/ Latina</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy</td>
<td>6 (undergrad and graduate)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>“Other - racial classifications used in the U.S. does not identify Hispanic/Latino population.”</td>
<td>Hispanic or Latina</td>
<td>New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destiny</td>
<td>3 ½ (undergrad and still enrolled as a graduate student)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>Nicaraguan and Dominican</td>
<td>Rhode Island</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estevez</td>
<td>7 (undergrad and graduate)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Puerto Rico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic/ Latina</td>
<td>Mexican American</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marishell</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black/ Hispanic/ Latino</td>
<td>Hispanic/ Latino</td>
<td>New York</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Overview of Participant Characteristics Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Length of time living in United States</th>
<th>Parent’s country of origin</th>
<th>Primary language</th>
<th>Languages participant speaks, reads, and/or writes</th>
<th>First Generation</th>
<th>Academic Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angel</td>
<td>All my life</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Spanish, English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Health Care Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy</td>
<td>27 years</td>
<td>Dominican Republic (maternal) and New York (paternal)</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Spanish, English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>54 years</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Spanish, English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Art Studio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destiny</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>New York (maternal) and Nicaragua (paternal)</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Spanish, English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Youth Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estevez</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Spanish, English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>26 years</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>Did not answer</td>
<td>Spanish, English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Justice Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>All my life</td>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Spanish, English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Environmental Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marishell</td>
<td>23 years</td>
<td>Santiago, Dominican Republic</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>Spanish, English</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Youth Development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection Procedures

Since this study focuses on participants sharing their experiences in college and since they should have the opportunity to reflect in ways that can lead to liberation from any experiences of oppression, data sources for this study were semi-structured individual interviews and a follow-up/member-checking focus group. Interviews allow the researcher to explore what was on the participant’s mind and to “gather their stories” (Patton, 2015, p. 427). Semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions allow the researcher to guide the conversation using specific predetermined topics and to ask participants the same basic questions (Patton, 2015). The wording of the questions can change since the interview style is conversational (Patton, 2015). This is the format that the individual interviews and focus groups for this study followed. It was important that the interviews had this format since testimonios calls for the researcher to prompt the participant for information related to their experiences and to clarify what they share, but it is up to the participant to decide what information they want to share and how they would like to share it (Brabeck, 2004; Perez Huber, 2008).

Selected participants were provided a summary of the origins and use of testimonios which was optional for them to read (see Appendix D). They were also provided with the consent document (see Appendix E) to review before their scheduled interview, and they had the opportunity to ask any follow-up questions before deciding whether to participate in the study. The participants were able to choose which setting they wanted their interview to be in. Seven of the participants chose to conduct their interviews via Zoom and one chose to conduct their interview in person at Anchor State College at a location on campus they felt comfortable in. During the individual interviews, I thanked each participant for their interest in the
study and for making the time to participate in the interview. After introducing myself, the consent document was verbally reviewed again with each participant prior to recording the interviews to give them a chance to ask questions and to ensure that this document was signed before starting data collection. The purpose of the study was shared with participants in a clear, honest, and transparent manner. Appropriate efforts were made to protect the identities of the alumni and keep data collected safe. Although some participants chose to use their real first names, I still concealed their last names and all data that was collected was kept in a safe and protected location and used only for the purposes of this study. Since the data collection method used in this study had the potential to evoke feelings, thoughts, and memories that could pose minimal risk for participants or could cause healing and liberation from injustices (Aron, 1992), participants were provided with a list of resources that could offer them support and help them process things that might come up during and after their interviews. Participants were made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time. How the findings would be used for this study was shared and participants also had the chance to ask questions about testimonios methodology. I checked if the background questionnaire was completed and thanked the participants for completing that document. I gave the participants the opportunity to ask any questions before I started recording the interview.

The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Participants were welcomed to speak either English, Spanish, or a mix of both since I’m fluent in both languages. The virtual interviews were all recorded through Zoom’s recording feature that provides an audio and visual recording as well as a transcription of the interview. The video recordings allowed me to capture the non-verbal communication the participants
engaged in which is also part of their testimonio. The in-person interview was recorded using the Otter.ai cell phone application which provides an audio recording and a transcription of the interview. In addition to the recordings, I took notes during the interviews to help formulate questions in real-time, keep track of information that stood out in the moment, and to have as a backup in case the recording device malfunctioned (Patton, 2015). I used the semi-structured interview protocol I created to guide the questions I asked during the study (see Appendix F). I also engaged in reflective journaling during the research process to help me document my experiences related to the research questions and help me become aware of and address the biases and assumptions I experienced in the research process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). I used the transcriptions from Zoom and Otter.ai as a starting off point to complete all the transcriptions myself. This gave me the opportunity to become very familiar with the data and to start to identify codes and themes.

After the one-on-one interviews were complete, participants were invited to participate in a 60 to 90-minute semi-structured focus group (see Appendix G) to explore themes that emerged from the interviews and allow for reflection of those themes. One focus group was held on December 19, 2022, via Zoom which was the setting most participants preferred. Although five participants had originally confirmed their attendance, only three ended up participating in the first focus group interview. The first focus group lasted two hours since the participants were engaged in robust conversation. The other focus group was held via Zoom on January 2, 2023. It took place with two participants and lasted 90 minutes. Three participants had originally confirmed but one emailed to share that they would not be able to make it.
The focus groups were recorded through Zoom (audio and visual) and were transcribed and coded as well.

The focus groups helped me increase confidence in the patterns that had emerged from the interviews by serving as an opportunity for member checking (Patton, 2015). Member checks are “The discussion of the researcher’s interpretations and conclusions with the study participants and other members of the participant community for verification, insight, and deeper understanding” (Johnson & Christensen, 2017, p. 299). During the focus groups, I shared the themes that came up for each question and shared direct quotes to further explain some of the themes. I then asked participants if there was anything that surprised them, something they would like to share more about, their overall thoughts on the themes, or something that I might have gotten wrong or misunderstood. Participants then had the opportunity to either confirm, challenge, expand on, or question the themes I shared. The focus groups also allowed participants to share their perspectives on the research questions with each other, which served to build solidarity (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012) among the participants and contributed to them having a liberating experience (Pérez Huber, 2012). During the focus groups the participants ended up sharing parts of the testimonio they had shared with me, with each other. Solidarity seemed to be built as they connected on similar experiences during their higher education journey. For example, when I shared the “failure is not an option” theme during the first focus group the following discussion took place:

Estevez: I really like the quote you said that “failure is not an option.” I feel like that resonates a lot with me just because it really wasn't an option. I had to
finish no matter what. My family wouldn't have accepted it and I wouldn't have accepted it. You know what I mean?

David: Yeah, dropping out probably would not have been a good thing for me. I mean, I was already invested in 3 years when I really hit the wall with being challenged by certain classes, more of the academic classes than the art classes. That put a lot of doubt into me, but I was not going to give up in that sense. Yeah, I think it's a very common thing that comes up with everyone when something's going on in their lives, or it's just getting more and more difficult as the semesters roll by. But failure, just quitting, was not going to be my choice. I had a muscle through it.

Angel: Yeah, for me that's exactly the words I said to myself when it came to graduating college. Failure was not an option if I started it. I already went through the trouble of applying. I already went through the trouble of accepting the fact that I wasn't good academically. So, I wanted to persevere and prove to myself “you can do this.” Also, I had no other options. I had no other thing going for me… I knew that my mom would never let me hear the end of it if I quit.

In this example the participants were able to connect over their experience of persevering through to graduation no matter what they faced. Angel and Estevez both shared the expectations they had for themselves and their family’s expectations about finishing their undergraduate degree.

At the end of each focus group, I reminded participants that part of testimonios methodology is to provide the opportunity for participants to have a liberatory
experience. I asked if they felt they had that at any point in the study. I decided to reserve this question for the focus groups because in that setting they were able to hear about each other’s experiences and had possibly already taken the time to reflect on what they shared during their individual interviews. All the participants spoke to how this study was liberating in one way or another to them. Estevez shared that participating in this study was helpful for her because “it just connected the dots on a lot of things that I already knew.” Angel shared that after hearing the other participant’s experiences, she came to the following “realization”:

> It’s nice to hear that other students that also look like me have also nothing but good things to say about the institution… I’m glad to know that it’s not just me that has had positive experiences, but other people are also able to thrive here.”

David spoke about realizing his “white privilege” and other privileges he had as an adult learner who could “finesse my way through certain situations” while in college that maybe his younger peers of color did not have. Karen and Cindy shared their responses to this question.

> Cindy: For sure, I mean our voices are being heard. I don't know for Karen, but just being able to talk with her and hear about her experiences, that's really important. You know, when it comes to your study, I think that's a big point of this. We wouldn't know if we don't share. Anchor State College doesn't know how Latinx individuals, the struggle that they go through, if we don't talk about it, if we don't point it out to them. So, I think the idea of how you set this up is really great to get to that point. I think the way that this happened, having our personal interviews first, and then being able to talk in a group, I think that was
a really great way to just be able to talk about experiences. They're all really important and I think that this highlights it.

Karen: Yeah, I agree with Cindy as well. I would say the same. Talking with someone else and hearing each other out was very awesome. I think for me more than liberating it's very satisfying to know that like at least someone hears us. Or at least someone cares enough to do a whole project on this and present it and talk about it. So that is kind of satisfying to be like “wow, there's somebody that cares and wants to do something about it.” And actually, is going to do something about it, so that the next students that go in don't have such a rough time. I think that for me, you know, I'm not there anymore but I want anybody else that goes there to have a good experience that’s Hispanic.

Karen and Cindy’s exchange related to this question not only demonstrated feelings of empowerment through sharing and listening to each other’s stories, but it also connects to LatCrit in that they appreciated that their experiential knowledge (Perez Huber, 2008) was being tapped into through this study in order to make a change.

**Data Analysis**

For data analysis, I used Fraser’s (2004) approach to analyzing personal stories. Fraser’s approach to data analysis aligns with the *testimonio* method I used because it allows for analyzing each individual story, the collective story, and identification of themes related to systemic issues students might face. This is also connected to one of the core practices in LatCrit which is counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In the data analysis process my goal was to highlight any racism, oppression, or discrimination that the participants faced and to analyze their
The first step in data analysis was to hear the participants’ stories and to take notes on any emotions or body language that play a role in the story (Fraser, 2004). The second step was to transcribe the interview material (Fraser, 2004; Latina Feminist Group, 2001). Part of this process included engaging in member checking by sending the transcript from each interview to the corresponding participant to review for accuracy (Turner, 2010). Step three was to look for themes in the participants’ interview transcripts (Fraser, 2004). The process of identifying themes began as I was transcribing the interviews which included me playing back the audio recordings multiple times to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts. Once the transcripts were completed and approved by participants (all but one responded to me), I read and re-read the data to identify significant statements about the experiences of participants using In vivo coding. In vivo codes are created using participants’ exact words (Saldaña, 2021). This first step allowed me to “develop a list of significant statements” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 201) for the participants’ stories. After this, I used the pattern coding technique (Saldaña, 2021). This allowed me to group together the initial codes into themes and identify patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2018) within the testimonios. The fourth step was to “scan stories for different domains of experience” (Fraser, 2004, p. 191) which included intrapersonal (person), interpersonal (social), cultural (perhaps related to Latinx identity), and structural aspects (policies or the higher education system) of participants’ experiences. This allowed me to identify
commonalities and differences in participants’ stories as they related to the research questions. Themes related to differences and commonalities within the testimonios were shared with research participants during the focus group for their member-checking and feedback. Once the focus groups were completed, I finalized my coding frame (see Appendix H). I created an Excel spreadsheet to help me organize and retrieve my data with tabs representing each code. I went through each of the participant’s transcripts again and copied and pasted the appropriate transcript lines under the code it aligned with. The Excel spreadsheet included which participant the quote belonged to and what page number of their transcript the quote could be found on. I then used the same coding frame and process to code the focus group transcripts. I sent each participant a draft of their testimonio for their review and feedback so that the final testimonio could be co-constructed. Five of the eight participants responded with their approval to use the testimonio I had sent them. Another participant shared some minor edits she wanted me to make, and two did not respond.

I went back to Fraser’s (2004) data analysis process I had followed as I worked to figure out how to present my findings. I decided to first share the summary testimonios for each participant because this is where the themes and findings came from. It also allowed me to showcase the differences between each participants’ experience which is what I first observed when I started analyzing the data. I then decided to focus on the two research questions that guided this study and the commonalities and differences that were found in participants testimonios related to the two questions. I was mindful to provide examples of intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural, and structural aspects (Fraser, 2004) of the testimonios to provide depth to the findings.
Trustworthiness

Positionality

I approached this study with my own testimonio of my efforts persisting in college until degree completion at Anchor State College. As a college student, I was saddened to see so many of my friends from high school dropout of college within their first two years. They all had their reasons for not continuing their education, but I always felt that there was more that could be done on behalf of the institution to retain them. I also faced my share of barriers, including not having proper information about what I could major in, experiencing negative interactions with faculty, being misguided about how many credits I needed to take to graduate in four years, and not having clear information about my financial aid options. These experiences stuck with me, and they drove why I wanted to return to the institution as a staff member. Becoming a staff member was like having someone pull back the curtain to reveal what really goes on in higher education. I started to see so many policy and practice issues that were not always in the best interest of the students or sometimes had good intentions but still served to disadvantage certain students. In this role I worked with many staff and faculty that had a strong desire to help students, but we also hit roadblocks in our efforts to support students. Throughout this time, I always noticed that students were, for the most part, not sitting at the decision-making tables. Their voices were not being heard. When I started this Ph.D. journey my goal was to hear students’ voices and have those voices be heard by others.

I believe that these experiences provided me with opportunities instead of limitations while conducting this study. During the interviews and focus groups, participants jumped right into sharing very personal things about their experiences as
college students. I think our shared identity as Latinx people, Spanish speakers, and graduates of the same college promoted a sense of trust and feeling of comfort during the interviews. Building trust in qualitative research is imperative, especially since it can serve to minimize the power imbalance that exists between the researcher and the participants (Jones, et al., 2013). I found myself during the interviews having many of my experiences validated (although the participants were not aware of this) and I found myself validating their experiences. I used reflective journaling to help me process the experiences, emotions, and thoughts I had during and after the interviews. After every interview, I felt a deep gratitude to the participants for sharing their stories and a responsibility to share their experiences with others. I know there are Latinx college students whose experiences could also be validated through reading these testimonios.

Limitations & Credibility

The generalization of the findings of this study to the larger population of Latinx college students is not possible given the qualitative methodology used in this study. In addition, the sample was selected from one Hispanic Serving Institution in the northeastern part of the United States using purposeful sampling. The sample ended up being only 8 participants given the limited number of responses during the outreach efforts. These factors can be seen as limitations of this study since they make it difficult for the findings of this study to be confirmed by others in the field. Instead, before reporting the findings of this study, I provided details about the research setting, the participants, and the methods so that other researchers can relate to the findings and allow for the transferability of this study to other contexts or groups (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Another factor that could be seen as a limitation is the overrepresentation
of participants that identify as women and first-generation students. However, this high representation reflects the high percentage of students that identify as women and first-generation at Anchor State College. One of the limitations related to the validity of data collection could be the way questions were worded for the individual interviews. There were times when participants asked me to clarify a question for them. For example, when I asked Angel how she successfully navigated the college experience, she asked me if I was asking about her academic experience or social experience in college. I responded by saying, “all of the above.” I was mindful not to lead participants on or to bias their responses.

Researcher bias might be viewed as another limitation to this qualitative study. As previously mentioned, the use of testimonio methodology requires the researcher to be subjective and to engage in collaborative knowledge construction with participants during the research process (Perez Huber, 2008). I engaged in member checks at several points in the data analysis process. The use of two data collection sources (one-on-one interviews and focus groups) allowed for triangulation of the data. Triangulation is the cross-validation of data that allows for the exploration of the consistency of the qualitative findings (Patton, 1999). The focus groups allowed for participants to provide additional insight, certification, and a deeper understanding (Johnson & Christensen, 2017) of their testimonios to promote the validity of the results. For example, during one of the individual interviews the Spanish word desorden was used when discussing an experience that the participant had at Anchor State College. While reviewing themes and creating the coding frame, I felt a fitting translation of this word to English was “disorganization” and I felt that should be a major theme in the findings. During one of the focus groups, I shared the translation I
planned on providing for *desorden* and asked participants how they would translate the word to English. Karen, who was the participant that originally used the word, felt that translation did not capture what she meant. She then said,

> When I think of the word in Spanish *un desorden* I think of chaos. When I go to the dictionary, and I just looked up the word “chaos” on my phone, it says “a state of utter confusion or disorder, a total lack of organization and order.” That's what I would say it represents, institutional chaos… disorganization makes it sound prettier than chaos. But I feel like chaos embodies the show that goes down.

I asked the other participant (Cindy) for her thoughts on this, and she said,

> Chaos. Yeah, I mean, I think it makes it sound more severe if anything. But I think it's still a good way to describe it because that kind of is how hard it is for a lot of people to navigate college. You know, that is the reason why it's so hard for them.

Based on this feedback, I changed the translation of the word *desorden* to capture the participants’ experiences. Most of the feedback received in the focus groups validated the codes that were created and the themes that emerged which allowed me to feel confident as I moved forward with identifying the major themes of the study. A limitation related to member checking was that not all the participants participated in the focus groups and provided feedback on their final testimonios.

Engaging in reflexivity throughout the study through reflective journals and peer debriefing also helped me address any assumptions, predispositions, and actions that threatened to impact the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2017). I conducted all the
interviews and focus groups which contributed to the dependability of the study. These different strategies can help support the confirmability of the study.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

The participants in this study engaged in counter-storytelling through the practice of sharing their testimonios, which centered on their experiences persisting at Anchor State College until degree completion. Their testimonios demonstrate their strengths, provide some insight into how family, friends, and faculty/staff played a crucial role in their persistence efforts, and demonstrate their ability to critically reflect on their experiences in a way that will hopefully lead to improved student supports at Anchor State College. Their testimonios can also serve to motivate and inspire current and future Latina/o/x/ Hispanic college students. This chapter begins with a summary of each participant’s testimonio so that their voices and lived experiences are at the forefront of the findings. More details are then shared through excerpts from their full testimonios to support the major themes that emerged for the two research questions that led this study. A snapshot of the research questions, major themes, sub-theme, and example of a participant quote for each theme can be observed in Figure 4.1.
**Figure 4.1**

*Snapshot of Findings Related to Each Research Question*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question One</th>
<th>Major Theme</th>
<th>Sub-Theme</th>
<th>Participant Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Strengths</strong></td>
<td>“Failure is not an option”/Determination/Perseverance</td>
<td>“failure is not an option, I have to graduate undergrad at the very least.” (Angel)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family Influence</strong></td>
<td>Motivation from Family</td>
<td>“I felt like I had to do it because they sacrificed so much for me to get to where I’m at and it wasn’t only one person, it was a community that raised me. When I was walking the stage, I was like, ‘oh, I’m bringing so many people with me. This degree isn’t for me, it’s for my family’” (Destiny)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support from Friends</strong></td>
<td>Continuing High School Friendships into College</td>
<td>“I would say she was more academic than I was, in a way, so she was kind of like that thing holding me accountable when it came to like, ‘you have to go to class, let’s go to the library, let’s study, let’s do this.’ For me, she was a huge influence, a huge support.” (Estevez)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Positive Interactions with Faculty and/or Staff</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>“felt like a family rather than just being your instructors.” (Marishell)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How do the Latinx alumni describe the institutional policies and practices that fostered or served as barriers to their persistence in, and graduation from, college?

**Major Theme**: Institutional Policies and Practices that Served as Barriers to Persistence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Theme</th>
<th>Participant Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties Navigating College</td>
<td>“that should be the number one priority, should be student help. You know, how to navigate classes, how to navigate signing up, how to navigate your credits, how to navigate switching majors, how to navigate dormitory stuff, FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid], tutoring. Some people didn't even know where to go for tutoring.” (Karen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Diversity on Campus/ in Classrooms</td>
<td>“Anchor State college tends to be more diverse than the other universities…but I still felt out of place in a lot of my classes because you would see people of color on campus, you would see Latinos, you would see Asians on campus, but then when it came to being in the classroom, you really didn't see them. A lot of the times I was the only person of color in my classes.” (Marishell)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional “Desorden” (Chaos)</td>
<td>“It always felt like it was un desorden. I would always say, ‘I don't know who’s running this school, but they need help.’ It just felt like it was all over the place. I don't know, everything just for me felt a little bit chaotic. Some adults that I would ask for help or something, they didn't know about certain things. And I’m like, “well, if you don't know and I don't know, then who does know?” (Karen)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Research Question Two

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Theme</th>
<th>Sub-Theme</th>
<th>Participant Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do the Latinx alumni describe the institutional policies and practices that served as barriers to their persistence in, and graduation from, college?</td>
<td>Institutional Policies and Practices that Served as Barriers to Persistence</td>
<td>“He [advisor] made me feel so dumb. I was like, ‘this is literally my first time coming to you.’ I still remember that day. I was struggling to get there...and then this meeting was supposed to be thirty minutes and it was cut down to five minutes because he was like, ‘you were supposed to have that figured out.’ I was like, ‘I might be considering other majors. Um, but I’m not completely sure yet. How can you support me in this?’ He was like, ‘you kind of just have to figure it out.’ I was like, ‘oh, okay.’ It just seemed like he didn't want to talk, and I wasted my time.” (Destiny)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of Information Related to the Academic Maps and Academics in General</td>
<td>“well, this is my culture, this is my roots. We're not speaking badly about anybody. We're not having full on conversations in Spanish. We're greeting each other in Spanish.” (Karen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discrimination or Unjust Treatment</td>
<td>“I definitely thank Anchor State College for the opportunity for changing my future” (Angel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunity to Obtain a College Degree</td>
<td>“coming to Anchor State College, it was just eye-opening for me because it was just so diverse.” (Cindy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Diversity on Campus/ in Classrooms</td>
<td>“I have never experienced discrimination, but it's because of the way I look. I, I have been told I look racially ambiguous. So, I really haven't experienced any of that.” (Angel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institutional Policies and Practices that Fostered Persistence</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
In the direct participant quotations, the real name of the research institution was replaced by the pseudonym it was given. Some participants chose to speak in Spanish and English while sharing their *testimonio*. I grappled with whether to provide a translation for what they shared in Spanish. I ultimately decided not to provide translations, except for the word *desorden*, which is used in one of the major themes of the study. This decision was inspired by my encounter with Anzaldúa’s (1987) *Borderlands=La frontera: The new Mestiza*. In this book, Anzaldúa communicates in both Spanish and English. Anzaldúa does not always provide a translation for the reader of Spanish words, leaving them with a challenge to dig deeper to understand what is being shared (Jordan, 2018). When I first encountered Anzaldúa’s writing, it was like I was staring at a mirror. It was one of the few times where I saw pieces of my identity reflected in a scholar’s work in an empowering way. It reminded me of my strengths as a bilingual individual and provided me with an example of how one can honor their culture in their scholarly work. In the spirit of Gloria Anzaldúa, I decided that not providing translations allowed me to engage in some resistance during this research process. This decision aligns with LatCrit in that it pushes back on the Eurocentric epistemological perspective (Delgado & Villalpando, 2002). It also honors the skill of code-switching that participants practiced and allowed me to remain authentic to what participants communicated during their interviews.

*Testimonios*

**Angel**

Angel’s *testimonio* about her undergraduate experience at Anchor State College was overall positive. A major part of Angel’s *testimonio* is the support she
received from her mother. Angel shared her mother’s migration story to the United States from Mexico. Angel said things did not go as planned during her mother’s first trip and so she remained in the United States. Angel was born in the United States and was raised by her mother, which she identified as being “rare” in the Hispanic community because she did not have the “whole Hispanic family stuff.” It was just her and her mother. She mentioned a few times that her mother raised her with a lot of freedom, and she expressed that is not the typical way to be raised in the Hispanic community. Angel was motivated by her mother’s sacrifices. She was also motivated by her determination to prove people wrong about the way she was raised and to show people her mother “didn’t mess up, look where I ended up.”

Angel shared that she was not an academically strong student in high school and that Anchor State College gave her “a chance.” She credits her success to several people on campus, including an advisor she had, staff from the TRIO programs on campus, a Latina mentor she had on campus, and a friend that motivated her just as much as she motivated them. Angel shared that the staff she connected to on campus created “safe spaces” for her and saw “potential” in her. They also supported her with her academics, helped her navigate college, and exposed her to different opportunities, including attending graduate school.

Angel mentioned several times that she was aware of the privileges she had while in undergraduate school. Some of these privileges included receiving financial support from her mother, being able to prioritize school over everything else in her life, and qualifying for financial resources through her citizenship status in the United States. Angel elaborated on the privilege of being a U.S. citizen:
I know people on DACA who are struggling right now because of the current political climate. Who have to pay thousands of dollars in lawyer fees, retainer fees, and they're way smarter than me. And so, I feel like I would feel not the best if I were not to do something people are willing to kill for.

Angel added that due to appearing “racially ambiguous” she did not have to experience any discrimination on campus. In fact, she shared that she felt very safe on campus and if she would have experienced any discrimination, she would have had support managing that. Angel’s awareness of her privileges has contributed to her desire to open doors for other Latinx people. She is aware that representation is important. She commented:

if you succeed you can definitely be a role model for other people who may think “I can't do this, because of this, I can't do this because of that.” But once they see someone who may look like you, they think “I could do that because that person did it.” Because as you know we don't have that many current role models here in the United States, in higher education. And my motivation was to like, I want to up that number. And if one person thinks that, then another person can think that, and another person can think that. So, then the number ups itself before you know it.

Angel was working to finish up her thesis for her graduate degree at Anchor State College when the interview took place. She hopes to create opportunities for Latinx individuals in the human resources field as well. She added, “if I could have the opportunity, I would like to look like other people look who you're talking
to…someone who also knows what *horchata* is, someone who also knows what *tacos de lengua* is, like we have some common ground.”

Angel wants those reading her *testimonio* to know,

I'm Mexican, but not from California. That makes a big difference. So, a lot of my experiences are different because I feel like a lot of studies that I read are really Mexican Americans from California, and I feel it's a whole different experience from being on the east coast.

She elaborated that her experience as a Mexican American in the eastern United States differs because Mexicans are not the majority on the east coast and there is much more diversity within the Hispanic community in the eastern part of the United States.

Angel also wants those reading her *testimonio* to know how grateful she is for the opportunity she was given to obtain a higher education degree:

I was not the model student when I first entered. I was given a chance to reinvent myself for the better, and I was given the chance to improve my life circumstances. Even though I did go through some unfortunate events at the time, I was lucky, and I was lucky that it worked out for me because that doesn't work out for all. But I was given a chance, and I definitely hope to help other folks when it's my turn to help, when I'm able to help.

Angel took advantage of the opportunity she was given to obtain a higher education degree and hopes to help others do the same.

**Cindy**

Cindy’s *testimonio* started off on an emotional note which led to her shedding some tears as she reflected on her college experience. She said she was “really proud”
of herself for being a first-generation student and being able to graduate from college. She attended a high school where she, as a Latina, was in the minority. English is her second language, and she did not feel like she could be her authentic self and be connected to her culture. Anchor State College, specifically her experiences in the social work program, allowed her to find her voice and to embrace her culture.

Reflecting on this Cindy shared:

> growing up I feel like I was just closed off from my identity, my culture, and it wasn’t until college where I realized that I don’t have to hide that. I should be proud of that other language that I can speak. And the food I eat, and you know, I met people I can share that with.

Cindy had a professor in the social work program that made her voice “seem really valuable.” She was also encouraged by the diversity on campus.

Cindy’s educational journey includes finding her true passion for social work while taking classes for her education major. Once she connected with faculty in the social work program, she knew she was in the right place, which led her to change her major to social work. She found people she connected with in her social work classes and work that was meaningful to her. As an undergraduate, she worked with students and faculty from different departments to organize a trip to Puerto Rico where the students could give back to communities impacted by a hurricane. Cindy explained the impact this trip had on her:

> I came back even more grateful with everything that we have. All the resources we have. Yeah, that made me want to keep doing what I'm doing and just help out more and be involved in the communities and really just do a big part. That
was, that was a lot. I didn't realize until after the impact it had on me, but it was positive.

Overall, Cindy felt safe on campus. She had good experiences living on campus, which allowed her to engage in some on campus activities, meet new people, and contributed to her personal growth. Cindy participated in projects led by the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Office. These projects exposed her to opportunities that helped increase awareness about diversity on campus. Although navigating college was somewhat tricky for her since she did not have support from her family with that, she was able to find supportive people on campus, such as the staff in the advising office. Her family was also a motivating factor for her persisting to graduation in college since they provided her with emotional and financial support.

Cindy wanted it to be noted that she appreciates how Anchor State College honors and promotes terms like Latinx. Cindy elaborated: “I know they include that now in assessments and intakes where they want to know what the student identifies as. I think that's really, really, important to do that and allow us to identify who we want to be.”

Cindy would like those reading her testimonio to know that the differences within the Latinx identity should be considered a strength. Cindy added: we come from different backgrounds, we can offer so much, we can do so much. And I feel like just honoring that. Knowing that we can do the same thing as a person in a white neighborhood and just the white privilege type of things, we can do it too.
Cindy added that Latinx students should work to identify what motivates them and use that to achieve success.

**David**

David began his undergraduate education at Anchor State College when he was 49 years old. Being an adult learner played a major role in his undergraduate experience. David was excited to be back in school and determined to get his degree so that he could have access to better employment opportunities. David elaborated:

I was very excited to be back in school and a little intimidated because I had been out of school for such a long time. It took me a while to get used to the technology, typing, submitting essays, being in lecture, taking notes. I felt very excited like if I was nineteen or twenty all over again. I was really excited to be with young people and their ideas and learn so much from them about the way young people are. I also had a lot of advice for them, you know, to stick around, to try to do it now instead of coming back later. It was a great experience.

David has fond memories of being on the college campus including interacting with peers and “just wonderful times in the library, studying, running to get coffee at the cafeteria, and then getting back to studio and painting all night until nine or ten. Good nights.” David remembers having “warm” and “culturally enriching” encounters with some cafeteria workers who were from Guatemala, Dominican Republic, and Argentina. They would communicate in Spanish, and he remembers them being impressed by the fact that he was back in school as an adult learner. David received much support from his wife, who works at Anchor State College, and motivation to
complete college from his family, some of whom are still in Mexico. David sometimes felt “awkward” because of his age, but he had friends on campus that were also adult learners. David said these friends made a difference for him. David explained: “We supported each other in the sense that we were older students. We shared our feelings, our challenges, and encouraged one another to continue.”

David had an overall positive experience at Anchor State College. He received support for learning accommodations that he needed and was also able to receive a tuition waiver to help him cover the cost of college. David had positive experiences with faculty and sometimes could relate to them better than his peers because of his age. He does not recall facing any institutional barriers besides having a difficult time with a math class he was required to take. He would have liked to see more “Latin American art incorporated into the curriculum.” He remembers having conversations where he expressed, “why aren't they talking about tribal art, or Indian art, or African art, or certain artists from the nineteen twenties or thirties? Why are we talking about all these European white men mostly?” This was shared with his professor who “agreed that they needed more diversity in the representation of different Latino and Latino artists” and who “showed more LGBTQ art, Latino art, and a Cuban American artist.”

David’s message to those reading his testimonio is one of inspiration:

I graduated when I was 54 from my four-year college, and I graduated with honors. It was one of the most challenging things I've ever done. But it was also one of the most exciting and rewarding things that I have done. And
because I got a four-year college degree, that opened up so many doors to me, as far as employment availability.

David hopes this encourages those thinking about or entering college.

**Destiny**

Destiny started her undergraduate journey with 30 college credits that were transferred from her time in high school. Despite entering Anchor State College with two years of college credit, she still had to figure out how to navigate college. She remembers feeling,

> I’m not really gonna have that much support. I’m gonna try to figure this out by myself, and my mindset was, I’m just gonna do it. It's gonna be very hard for me to do because I don't understand all these college things.

She stated that the TRIO programs were influential in her making it to graduation since they offered her support throughout her undergraduate college journey and into graduate school. Destiny described that the staff in the TRIO programs “pour a lot into you.” She provided a few examples of times where she was struggling academically or with a life barrier, and the staff in these programs took their time to validate her experiences and help her problem-solve. Destiny said that the staff in the TRIO programs and the faculty in the youth development program created a sense of community for her.

Destiny shared that she was raised by her grandmother, mother, aunt, and uncle. She added that she was motivated to succeed in college because she had learned from family members’ mistakes and wanted to do better. She felt that she had to earn her undergraduate degree for them. She also shared that being a first-generation, low-
income, Latina shaped her college experiences because she had learned not to take no for an answer and to persevere through obstacles. She added:

a lot of what I do is because I have to break these generational curses and stuff like that, so I felt a responsibility on me. And I feel that part of me also shaped me, being low-income and first-generation because I have a lot to prove.

Some of Destiny’s views on her undergraduate experiences have changed because she is now a staff member in one of the TRIO programs at Anchor State College. In her role, she provides advising and other student success support to first-generation students. This experience has allowed her to pull back the curtain on the work that staff, faculty, and administrators do and do not do at Anchor State College. She explained that she now sees that staff are stressed because their offices are “understaffed”, and they are dealing with a “hierarchy” at Anchor State College that is causing a lot of staff turnover. She also feels that there is not a “community-based philosophy” that leads the work staff do. As an undergraduate student, Destiny remembers many times where she was advocating for the support she needed, but she faced several barriers in accessing that support. Sometimes the barriers were staff who she felt did not want to help her. Destiny elaborated on this changed perspective:

now, as a staff member it's making me make sense of my undergrad, because I’m giving people the benefit of the doubt a little more. I’m like maybe these people are just under stress and stuff like that. But then I’m also like don't work at a college if you don't want to help college students.

She uses her undergraduate experiences to help current students overcome the barriers they face.
Destiny feels that the college experience is very different for Latinx students than for white students because white students can experience the fun side of college more and Latinx students do not have that privilege. She shared, “I felt like for them, it was just more play and for Latinx students, it was a necessity. I don't have anybody to fall back on.” She wants Latinx students reading her testimonio to know, there's going to be a lot of pressure for Latinx students to complete college, and to do it at a certain amount of time. But with the world we live in now, it's also okay if you don't do it in a certain amount of time. If you find alternatives that speak to you, college is not for everyone.

She added that if Latinx people decide that college is for them, they should know that there might not be Latinx representation in certain areas of study. She said it is important to realize the “beauty of you being that representation for someone else, and you building the road for other people too. In this road I feel like it has a lot to do with connections and so once you're in everybody's in.” Destiny’s message to future and current Latinx students is that lack of representation should not stop them from pursuing their goals; it should motivate them to be that representation for others.

Estevez

Estevez received support from the TRIO programs that guided her transition from high school to college, helped her navigate undergraduate school, and supported her transition to graduate school. She felt that the TRIO programs provided tailored support and a place where she felt safe, accepted, and where she could interact with other people of color. During her undergraduate journey she worked part-time and went to school full-time. She lived on campus during part of her undergraduate time.
but would frequently visit home on the weekends. She remembers her undergraduate journey being difficult due to adjusting to the college workload and writing standards. Despite any hardships she faced at school, and the number of times she thought about quitting, graduating was her only option.

Estevez faced significant loss in her family at a young age, which resulted in her migrating to and from the Dominican Republic a few times. She was raised by her grandmother and other family who she feels sacrificed so much for her to be able to pursue a college degree. She also felt the responsibility of being a role model for her family members. Estevez wanted to gain college knowledge so that she could “be a resource for my siblings and my cousins, not all, but those who do decide to go through the college process.”

During her undergraduate journey, Estevez received support from a faculty member whom she considered to be her mentor. Although Estevez was grateful for this faculty member’s efforts to be supportive and create a comfortable space for her, she was aware of the power dynamics that existed in the relationship. Estevez expanded on this by sharing,

I was raised in this household where I was raised to respect your elders and you have to keep that line of professionalism as well. So, definitely looking back at it, she tried to make it as comfortable as possible. But I always had it in the back of my mind that she's a professor. She's a mentor. Do not let it get too comfortable.
When speaking about the same faculty member later she added, “I don't know teachers are teachers for me. They're an adult with power. That even now I'm trying to unlearn.”

Estevez had the opportunity to study in Australia for a semester through a study abroad program that a faculty member suggested to her. Although being away from her family during that time was difficult, she learned so much during her trip and had great experiences. Other things that stick out about her undergraduate journey are negative encounters with some staff that she feels were based on being treated differently because of her accent. Estevez shared a bit about her experience as a bilingual student:

I was coming in as an insecure, first-generation, bilingual student who could barely understand herself in English or Spanish, and there was a lot of times where I felt more intimidated than welcome in a way and was like just walking around on eggshells trying not to disrespect anyone, so that doesn't help at all.

As she reflected on her undergraduate journey, she felt that she wants to leave those reading her testimonio with the message that higher education is not the only path for Latinx students to take post high school. She expanded on this by sharing, college doesn’t have to be the only track that they go through. It's okay, to take some time off. It's okay to try other options. I feel like they should really consider the decision before going into it, because they are the ones going through their classes, doing the schoolwork, having to participate in the classes and everything. It's not going to be their parents. It's not going to be their friends or anyone else. It's going to be them.
Estevez added that students should also consider the financial piece of pursuing a college degree. They should review their financial aid package carefully but not be stressed if their degree is not going to make them “mega rich.”

**Julia**

Julia’s college experience started a bit rocky for her. She did not see people who looked like her at her orientation and being a “shy person” caused her to struggle to connect with people. She noticed that student workers were primarily running orientation, and they did not provide her with information about her options for potential majors or what “classes to sign up for.” Although she lived on campus her first year hoping to be involved in the campus community, she had a hard time making friends. She felt “lonely” and was not able to establish relationships with people in her classes because of the lack of diversity among her peers. Julia recalls having a difficult time relating to people. Julia added, “I was in my freshman and sophomore year, and I feel like in those general classes, there wasn't students that looked like me. There was more like Caucasian students. It wasn't as diverse, I would say.” Julia navigated college to the best of her abilities as a first-generation student until her junior year when she connected with a professor (who later turned into her advisor) that made a difference for her. She said the professor, “saw something in me that inspired me to believe in myself.” The professor provided academic support and helped her overcome obstacles she was facing. She feels that without this professor’s support she would “probably still be lost” and not know what major to pursue. Julia recalls that once she started taking classes for her major, she found there was more diversity among her peers in her classes.
Julia was motivated to complete college by her parents, who did not get the opportunity to attend college. Her boyfriend in college (now husband) also motivated her by saying, “if something happens you have your college degree that you can lean back on and you're always gonna have that, no matter what”. Looking back, Julia would advise her first-year self not to be afraid, “ask for help” and to get out of her “comfort zone” and connect more. She also feels like Anchor State College could have done more to help students connect with the campus community. Julia’s message to those reading her testimonio is that “college is not for everyone.” Those that attend college should know that there are people who can help and “there's gonna be obstacles, but you can do it.” She added that those that face obstacles should “keep moving forward” towards their goals.

Karen

Karen lived on campus during her entire time in undergraduate school at Anchor State College because her mother moved to the Dominican Republic after Karen graduated high school. Despite having her mother physically far away, she was her main support person in college. Her mother was always just a phone call away anytime she needed emotional support. Karen’s faith and belief in God also helped her get through college. She leaned on prayer often and even created a Bible study group on campus. Karen also worked on campus and was a student-athlete. She remembers many late-night study sessions with her roommates and smiled as she shared, They were geeks like me. We would stay up to like four in the morning and study together and I love those little study sessions. You know it makes it less stressful when you know you’re stressed in a group. The stress is shared.
Karen’s undergraduate journey had its share of difficult times, including encountering staff that were not always sensitive to life barriers or academic struggles she faced. There were also structural aspects of the dormitories on campus that were unacceptable to her such as not having a water fountain available in the building she lived in. She elaborated:

the freshmen dorms sucked, it sucked so bad. I remember I would sweat like a dog every night. There was no AC or nothing and I was like, “what is this? It’s not like a third world country college, why would we not have central AC?” Or like my heater would break and then they couldn't turn it off and that thing would be just burning hot.

What made this more difficult for her was that some of her friends with more resources could afford to live in the more expensive dormitories on campus. She shared that they lived right across the street but had better living conditions. Despite these negative experiences, Karen had a team of advisors from her two minors and major that were very supportive. She also received support from the case management office and the College Visions program on campus.

While in college, Karen remembers many conversations with roommates about how Anchor State College could improve. She experienced several inequities but always persevered and found solutions. Karen started college with a plan that included what classes she had to take to graduate in four years. She stuck to that plan and met with her advisors as needed to register for classes. Karen graduated during the height of the COVID pandemic and did not have a graduation ceremony. A few months later, she received a call from someone at Anchor State College who informed her that she
needed one more credit to complete her graduation requirements. Karen was so confused because as she shared,

   I was done. I didn't have anything left. I finished my major and both of my minors were completed. I was like how do I do a double minor and a major and finish them, and still I’m missing a credit?

Karen had to scramble with her advisors to find a one-credit class she could take online to meet her graduation requirements. She still does not understand how this happened but feels it is just part of the “chaos” that takes place at Anchor State College.

Karen would like those reading her testimonio to know that Hispanic student’s work ethic should be acknowledged. She added that people should not jump to judgments about Hispanic students:

   don't be quick to judge because if a student is sleeping in your class, you just never know if they’ve been up all-night working. Or up all-night studying, taking care of a mom or of a little brother. And try to put yourself in their shoes. You were a student once. Remember how that felt. Have sympathy for students who could be doing anything and decide that they choose education.

Karen shared that faculty and staff should be aware of the life barriers Latino students face and be supportive of them as they juggle school and other responsibilities.

**Marishell**

Marishell’s journey at Anchor State College was influenced by her adjustment to college from high school, her support system, and her struggle to identify a major she felt passionate about. Marishell stated that it took her some time to adjust from the
structure of high school to the independence she gained once she entered college. She shared, “when you're in high school you have to ask permission to go to the bathroom. If you miss a class, like get written up, you get detention. You get a call home if you're absent too much. That doesn't happen in college, and I was not prepared for that.” Her family motivated her to persist in college since they supported her as much as they could financially, provided emotional support, and expected her to graduate college. Marishell took some time off college due to not being able to identify a major that she was passionate about. She attempted to major in communications, nursing, and psychology, but she did not feel a connection to these majors:

I didn't feel any motivation because I didn't like the majors that I was studying. And at that point I was in the psych [psychology] major and there were many times where I just was like, “I don't want to be here. I don't know if I want to be a teacher. I don't know if I want to be a psychologist. Maybe college isn't cut out for me, but I have to finish. I have to have some type of degree.”

Marishell had the motivation to graduate from college but did not have the academic guidance she needed to find her major. Thankfully, one of her friends (who she had known since ninth grade) was able to guide her in the right direction. This friend also attended Anchor State College and was a social work major. Her friend suggested and connected her to the youth development major. She suggested what classes to take, which professors to take, and she would introduce her to some of her professors before starting classes. When Marishell connected with a youth development faculty member for the first time she said, “I just felt that click. And after that, that whole YDEV [youth development] department just completely helped me finish off my college
experience and finish my journey, and I was able to graduate.” Marishell had some positive experiences with faculty who offered her a lot of support and who she felt were more like family or a friend. She shared a negative encounter with a faculty member who assumed her symptoms of iron deficiency were reflective of her not caring about her education. Marishell remembers this faculty member saying, “I don't understand why you're here if you're not gonna be doing the work. You're just gonna be falling asleep in class and you're not gonna get anywhere.” Marishell added that she ran into her sometime later at a college open house event where Marishell was representing the youth development major. When the faculty member saw Marishell at the event she said, “Oh, wow! I can't believe you're still here.” Marishell responded to the faculty member by saying, “Yeah, I’m still here, and I'm almost graduating.” Marishell remembers getting so much satisfaction from proving this faculty member wrong and making it to graduation. Looking back at her undergraduate journey, Marishell shared that she felt the pressure to graduate college in four years, which she now realizes comes from society and should not exist. She elaborated:

There's just so much pressure that you need to finish college in four years. No, you need to take your time. Everyone learns differently. Everyone has different schedules. Everyone has different lifestyles, and that's the good thing about college that you kinda can work around that. You can work around your work schedule, you can work around your learning style. You don't have to finish in four years because a person that finished in four years and a person that finished in six, we both have the same value and degree. We both have a bachelor’s. We just finished at different times, and that's okay.
Marishell wanted those reading her *testimonio* to know that there is a lot of support in college and that Latinx students should be reminded “To not feel like they don't belong because they do belong.”

**Research Question One**

The following question is addressed in this section: How did the Latinx alumni successfully navigate the collegiate experience? The major themes that emerged were personal strengths, family influence, support from friends, and positive interactions with faculty and/or staff.

**Personal Strengths**

All the participants spoke about personal strengths they possess that helped them persevere in college. Four participants spoke about their passion for learning all topics or topics related to their specific field of study. Karen gave more details about this when she shared, “I generally loved what I was learning, and I think that was the strength that helped me get through it. I was passionate about everything that I was learning.” David said he was “very eager to learn, very excited to learn.” Four participants explained that their organization skills made a difference for them in college because it helped them not “miss assignments” (Marishell), stick to their schedule, “keep my future vision clear” (Cindy), and keep track of what classes they “needed to take” (Karen). These statements demonstrate the participant’s desire to pursue a higher education degree, their investment in learning, and the action steps they took to be successful academically. This serves to challenge the deficit perspective that can exist of Latinx college students and instead sheds light on their strengths (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Cindy, Destiny, and Karen touched on tapping into
the intersecting identities they hold to find power or strength during undergraduate school. Cindy spoke about being a bilingual Latina and her ability to find her voice and embrace her culture during her undergraduate journey. Part of this took place while she was in the social work program. She stated: “There was a lot of females in the social work program. I noticed that and I think just the comfort of being able to express myself a little bit more being bilingual.” Destiny shared, “I identify as biracial, because I’m half Indigenous and my Dominican side is like a whole bunch of other stuff.” These identities, combined with identifying as a Latina shaped who she is and played a role in how she navigated situations on campus because they lead to her “not taking no for an answer.” Karen identifies as a Latina and Christian, which played a major role in her ability to persist in college as she relied on her faith to help her overcome the difficult times she faced. Although Cindy, Destiny, and Karen all identify as Latinas, they shared how other pieces of their identity intersected to help them persist in college. This is an example of the antiessentialism and intersectionality tenants of LatCrit (Valdes & Bender, 2021) in that it challenges the notion that all Latinas/os/xs/ Hispanics are the same and highlights how different identities they hold intersect and create unique experiences for them.

The strength that seven participants had in common was that they all felt that persisting to graduation was their only option. They shared a determined mindset that helped them persevere and obtain their college degree. Angel stated, “failure is not an option, I have to graduate undergrad at the very least.” Cindy said, “I knew what I wanted, and I wasn't going to stop until I got it.” Estevez expressed her certainty that she would graduate: “I knew I was gonna make it. No matter what I had to do I was
gonna make it a hundred percent.” David shared, “I was determined to finish and that was my drive. I wanted to pass every class and get those credits under my belt and walk on the stage.” Even Julia, who struggled with thoughts of dropping out, was determined to graduate:

I feel like maybe jokingly I said, *me voy a salir*. But I don't think I actually like meant it…yes, there were times that it was stressful and all. But if you put your mind into it anything is possible, you could do it. It's hard, but well, you know, we'll get it done.

Destiny also felt that her only option was to graduate, but she expressed that pushing through has its pros and cons. Destiny explained:

Well, I for sure think it's like my mindset. When I start something, I do not like to give up or even allow myself to give up. It's good, but it also can be toxic because I don't listen to myself if I’m going through something, I’m just like, “no, I just have to finish it.” So that's definitely a strength but also like a deficit. I feel like that's the main strength that's pushed me through because there were times that I was having self-doubt and stuff like that but, I was like, “no, you have to do it, you just have to suck it up and do it.” Obviously, I’m not like that with other people, but with myself that’s how I am. That's just how my mindset is with most things.

A couple of the participants mentioned that their ability to ask for help and prioritize school aided their success in college. This is another challenge to the deficit mindset (Delgado Bernal, 2002) of Latinx college students since it demonstrates that
the participants had every intention to graduate college, and they utilized their skills, passions, and identities to help them navigate college to degree completion.

**Family Influence**

All participants mentioned their family’s influence on them while they were in college. All participants spoke about the different ways that their family served as motivation for them to graduate college. Some participants spoke about the difference that receiving financial support from family made for them while in undergraduate school. Two other subthemes that emerged related to family were the pressure to work towards specific careers and family not understanding college expectations.

The participants spoke about being motivated to complete college by the sacrifices their families made that allowed them to have a chance to attend and complete college. They did not want their sacrifices to be in vain and wanted to make them proud. This responsibility was heightened by the fact that none of the participants’ parents or caretakers had obtained a college degree in the United States, meaning they identified as first-generation college students. Estevez shared, “I started off for the family in a way like this is what my grandparents have worked for. This is what they brought us to this country for, the American dream.” Destiny shared this feeling in common with Estevez:

I felt like I had to do it because they sacrificed so much for me to get to where I’m at and it wasn't only one person, it was a community that raised me. When I was walking the stage, I was like, “oh, I’m bringing so many people with me. This degree isn't for me, it's for my family.”
David’s family influence ties in with Estevez and Destiny’s experiences as well, even though he went back to school as an adult learner. David mentioned:

You know because none of my other siblings had finished college…I wanted to just prove to myself and to share my diploma with my family, to make them proud, to show them that I could have done it even if I went back at forty something to finish school. I wanted to show my mom and my older siblings that I could have done it even then. But some of my family in Mexico, a lot of them, were able to afford to go to a college and university. So, I think I’ve been the only one that finished in the United States of all my cousins and my siblings.

Being aware of and driven by the sacrifices family has made and having a strong desire to make their family proud is aligned with the Latino cultural value of familismo (Babineau, 2018; Murphy & Murphy, 2018; Torres & Zerquera, 2012).

Some participants expressed that successfully navigating college was made possible by the financial support that their family offered them. Marishell and Angel said that their family would help them cover their tuition so they “could manage to pay without taking out loans” (Marishell) or so they could minimize how much they had to take out in loans. Cindy said that her family helped her financially so that she could live on campus, which made a big difference in her experience. Cindy recalls her family telling her, “it's okay, you can live on campus another year if that's what you want. If you need money, let us know.” This shows that their family was invested in their education and although they could not support them with the college know-how, they were willing to support them in other ways to help lessen their load. This is
supported by the literature which argues that Latinx families “can provide strong social connections” (Martinez & Hernández, 2018, p. 145) for students to help them succeed.

Another subtheme that several participants brought up was their family not understanding college expectations. The participants expressed that their parents, caretakers, and other family members did not understand what was expected of them in college. Julia explained this further:

I lived with my parents, and it would have been nice for them to be aware of how time-consuming college was going to be. For example, like how much time or reading was gonna take on homework, and how we weren't gonna be able to attend this family function just because we have this reading or whatever assignment we might have in.

Estevez had the same experience with family members who did not understand the time and effort that would go into completing schoolwork, except she did not see it as a negative thing:

my family… they don't understand this the college process at all. They don’t understand that it’s not just show up to class and do your homework. It takes more time and dedication and effort than just the words itself. So, I feel like unfortunately that lack of support from them was a positive influence in a way. They didn’t understand it. I could explain it, but they wouldn’t understand it. Because to them it was just like, you just go and learn, you just have to learn.

She went on to explain that her family not understanding the effort that goes into assignments motivated her to get them done so she could “shut them up in a way.”
Both Estevez and Julia were speaking about how their family’s lack of college experience and understanding played a role in their college journey. They did not speak about this in a negative way but rather as one area where they could have used more support in. This is a shared experience among first-generation college students (Cataldi et al., 2018).

Lastly, three participants spoke about the pressure they received from family members to be in specific career fields that would allow them to make more money. Although this was not an obstacle for any of them, they were aware of the career fields that were more lucrative to their family. They ended up choosing career fields that their family felt would not allow them to earn a good income. Estevez recalled a conversation her family had where this came up:

So, to them it’s like, para tú poder salir de la probreza, para tú poder salir adelante, tú necesitas sacar tu degree in like I said, lawyer, or doctor, or accountant, and those are like the top three ones. And “tú tienes que salir de esto porque tú sabes que nosotros no tememos na, o no vinimos de na and we came to this country to give you guys a better life and that entails going to school.”

Cindy also recalled the time she let her family know that she was considering going into the field of social work. The message she received was similar to what Estevez heard. Cindy stated:

when I had that thought of switching my major, when I mentioned social work, my family was like, “oh no, you're not going to make it, what is that? What are
you gonna be doing? You’re not going to be making money. Why go to college for that?” They didn’t really understand what it was like.

Cindy said that she ultimately pursued what she was passionate about, and everything worked out. These statements are also aligned with the value of familismo in that they demonstrate the financial pressures that Latinx students can feel (Babineau, 2018; Murphy & Murphy, 2018). Cindy and Estevez found programs of study that they were passionate about but were encouraged by family to consider how potential careers in those fields would support or negatively impact their financial success.

**Support from Friends**

All the participants spoke about their friends providing them with support to navigate college. There was a split between those who continued friendships from high school and even elementary school into college and those who made new friends in college. Either way, the participants shared that their friends encouraged them to stay focused on their academics, helped them study, connected them to resources on campus, and served as emotional support. Estevez provided an example of this support:

I remember my roommate up to like junior year was my high school friend. She came from Colombia when we were in eighth grade, and then we went to Anchor State College, and we became roommates. She was very studious. I would say she was more academic than I was, in a way, so she was kind of like that thing holding me accountable when it came to like, “you have to go to class, let's go to the library, let's study, let's do this.” For me, she was a huge influence, a huge support.
Marishell also gave kudos to a friend she had from high school that helped her build relationships on campus. She said this friend,

introduced me to a lot of people. Um, she was a social work major. So, because of YDEV [youth development] I had to take social work classes, and she would always recommend which professors to take. She would tell the professors about me before I would even start the class and that also helped start things off on the right foot and build the relationship with those social work instructors. So yeah, she was just great.

Julia spoke about one friend she had on campus who would accompany her to “go study at the library or the cafeteria, or we would also hang out at events.” As shared in his testimonio, David made friends on campus with other adult learners who were supportive and encouraging. These participants were able to build their social capital while in college by leaning on their peers for support navigating college and staying motivated.

**Positive Interactions with Faculty and/or Staff**

Lastly, every participant provided examples of faculty and/or staff members at Anchor State College that helped them successfully navigate college. Karen seemed to capture the experiences of the other participants with faculty and staff nicely when she said that during their college journey, students “find these little lights, and you're like, okay, in the middle of everything at least I have all these little great people that I can say they're gonna make this a good experience for me.” Karen was speaking to the positive influence that some staff and faculty had on her college experience. Staff from the TRIO programs on campus were mentioned by several participants as captured in
the individual testimonios. Estevez explained the support she received from the TRIO programs:

they had an advisor for me. They had an office where we could go if we need any assistance. It was for me, it's like a safe environment. So, I had that and then they always had resources for us if we needed. So, I feel like that's what helped me graduate. I knew that I had a place to go if I need any help in general.

The TRIO staff along with the staff from the case management office, the advising office, the College Visions program were essential in helping participants tap into resources. These staff members also helped them overcome barriers they faced, navigate the college system, offered guidance related to what classes they should take, and provided social emotional support. Cindy spoke about the support the advising office on campus offered her: “just me as a student getting their support, and just having the person that would just reassure me that I'm on the right track. I think that was really helpful.” Karen said the College Visions program “helped me a lot with FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid]. So, every single time I had to renew everything for FAFSA it was always with somebody from College Visions that would help me out.” The participants that felt supported by staff expressed being cared about in a holistic manner, meaning that they cared about their academics and what they had going on in their life. Destiny provided an example of this holistic caring when talking about the support she received from one of the TRIO staff:

they just cared about me more than my academics, and I feel like that's really hard to find. Especially on the college campus because some people will not
want to listen to your stories or if they do listen to your stories, they're just like, “okay, whatever.” But here they just really care about the students, and they build relationships. I feel like they do a lot to make sure you’re okay.

When talking about the faculty that helped them navigate college, most of the participants shared that it took them some time to find a faculty member they connected with, but once they did, they established connections that were familial in nature. Angel said that her advisor was “basically a second mother” to her. Marishell said that the faculty in her major “felt like a family rather than just being your instructors.” These familial relationships were also established with staff. Angel shared that she had a staff member who cared about her like a mother. Karen expressed that the case management office “helped me like a big brother, big sister, to navigate some things.” Although the faculty and staff are not family members, their level of caring and support seemed to be aligned with the value of familismo (Torres & Zerquera, 2012).

During their testimonios, all participants expressed that their ability to navigate the collegiate experience successfully was not just a solo effort. They utilized their skills and tapped into the motivation, support, guidance, and resources they had access to in order to make it to graduation. This serves as an example of counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) that will hopefully contribute to changing the deficit narrative about Latinx college student’s persistence efforts.

**Research Question Two**

The following question is addressed in this section: How do the Latinx alumni describe the institutional policies and practices that fostered or served as barriers to
their persistence in, and graduation from, college? This section will cover the themes that emerged related to this research question and the participants’ suggestions for how Anchor State College could improve support for Latina/o/x/ Hispanic college students.

**Institutional Policies and Practices that Served as Barriers to Persistence**

The participants were all asked research question two directly during their individual interviews. Some said they could not think of any policies and practices that fostered or served as barriers to their persistence efforts. However, all the participants provided examples of policies and practices that supported their persistence efforts, could be improved, or negatively impacted their college experiences. The difference was that some participants did not make the connection initially between their experiences and the policies or practices involved in those experiences. The major themes mentioned by at least five participants each, were difficulties navigating college, lack of diversity on campus, institutional desorden (chaos), and lack of information related to the academic maps and academics in general.

**Difficulties Navigating College**

Since all the participants identified as first-generation college students, it did not come as a surprise that this theme emerged. As mentioned in Chapter Two, first-generation students cannot rely on their parent’s social capital or college know-how to navigate higher education (Cataldi et al., 2018). The majority of the participants felt that they were on their own at one point during their undergraduate journey trying to figure out many of the nuances of college. Karen described some examples of these nuances that Anchor State College should be helping students with:
Isn't that the whole point of college, to get students to succeed in their education? If you're not doing that then I really don't know what's the point of the college itself. Then just to get money from kids like, honestly, that should be the number one priority, should be student help. You know, how to navigate classes, how to navigate signing up, how to navigate your credits, how to navigate switching majors, how to navigate dormitory stuff, FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid], tutoring. Some people didn't even know where to go for tutoring.

Karen explained her frustrations with the lack of support that is offered to students as they work to figure out different aspects of college, but she also broke down the different areas that students can use support in. To some, these things might be easy to figure out but for a student with no college experience and no one to help them, there is a lot of information that is needed to make informed decisions in all these areas. Lack of information related to the things she mentioned can have a negative impact on a student’s college journey. Julia shared that she knew there were resources available to her because some were mentioned at orientation. However, during orientation she “felt lonely” and that is what occupied her mind. Angel said difficulties navigating college were not just related to academics but also the social aspects of college:

during undergrad you have to learn how to navigate. It's a new environment from high school…a new environment not just academically, but also when you're a young adult it’s about learning how to navigate the fun times with the time we need to settle down and read this paragraph, or read this book, or write this essay, or do this research.
In this excerpt, Angel adds to the list of nuances that students have to navigate in college. Karen adds another layer to this when she shared how her experience navigating college differed from her white peers’ experiences:

I feel like a lot of Hispanic students… they're literally doing everything by themselves…and they feel like they have to because nobody else is going to help them. …I remember being in college and my roommates that weren't Hispanic or Latina, I was the only Hispanic one, they had their parents help tutor them through the phone, or like, “all right, this is what we're gonna do for this and this.” I didn't have any of that. I just had to figure it out.

Karen did not have the privilege to navigate college with her mother’s help. She had to utilize her resourcefulness, ask questions, and learn from her peers’ experiences. These examples of difficulties navigating college provided by Karen, Julia, and Angel are connected to LatCrit’s principle of antisubordination (Valdes & Bender, 2021). Not only are participants sharing gaps in support for Latinx and first-generation students, but they are also illuminating how the expectation of independence that is pushed in higher education institutions and supported by an individualistic ideology can work to disadvantage Latinx students and other students of color.

Lack of Diversity on Campus/ in Classrooms

The student demographic composition of Anchor State College, and its recent HSI designation, demonstrate its racially and ethnically diverse population. However, this diversity was not always seen by the participants in their classes or on campus. Some participants shared that they would see diversity in one setting on campus but not in others. Marishell described this experience:
Anchor State College tends to be more diverse than the other universities…but I still felt out of place in a lot of my classes because you would see people of color on campus, you would see Latinos, you would see Asians on campus, but then when it came to being in the classroom, you really didn't see them. A lot of the times I was the only person of color in my classes. I mean I didn't really feel a sense of belonging when I was in the classroom, but then I would come out and I would walk on campus and see more people like me. That reminded me that I guess I might identify as Hispanic and Latina. I may not see it that much in the classroom or in the professors, because a lot of my professors were white, but being on campus and seeing the diversity on the campus, that reminded me that I was where I was supposed to.

Like Marishell, David also expressed a need for Anchor State College to have more “Latino professors” who students can “relate to.” Julia and Angel shared the same experience as Marishell when it came to being one of the few students of color in their classes. Julia observed a lack of diversity in her general education classes but noticed a difference in her major specific classes: “once I got into more specific towards my major, I noticed that there were more students that looked like me, and I was able to relate.” During her second year at Anchor State College Destiny noticed a decline in the number of people of color on campus that she knew from the neighboring communities:

I feel like it was very discouraging when I thought there were barely any of those people in my classes, or barely any of those people on campus and stuff like that. It was a lot of white people, and I was just like, “what's going on?”
Those that did not experience much diversity on campus felt alone or like they could not connect and relate to their peers. In these examples, the participants were speaking to their desire to connect with, have access to, and visibly see Latinx people in their classrooms and on the campus. Representation is important when it comes to sense of belonging like Marishell alluded to. Lack of representation can contribute to students feeling disconnected from their Latinx identity in the higher education setting (Gonzalez & Morrision, 2016).

**Institutional Desorden (Chaos)**

This theme also did not surprise me since Anchor State College is known to have issues with creating a “run around” experience for students. The participants spoke about this issue and how it created frustrations or barriers to college persistence. They describe this experience as being provided with wrong or misleading information about policies and practices, not having their problems solved in an organized manner or at all, confusion about who can offer support, “lack of collaboration on the campus” (Destiny), and a feeling of “chaos” (Karen) when trying to figure out “who’s in charge” (Karen). Estevez provided an example of this “run around” experience:

> these staff at Records, Financial Aid, and stuff, they like to send you *buscandole la cola al pollito* because they are so bitchy. I’m sorry but their attitude is so, ugh. You go in there asking for help, asking for guidance, and they'll be like, “I don't know, like you have to go to Financial Aid, or you have to go here and there.” Then they just send you on this wild goose chase that you're trying to find a solution for your issue, but they are not really looking to help you. They just wanted to get rid of you.
Estevez mentioned this again during the focus group and had this experience validated by David who shared that some offices do not “do a huddle to know what the other group is requiring or needing.” He expressed walking documents over to offices because “I wouldn’t want them to send it through an interoffice envelope. I would just say, ‘give me the copies and I will go there myself, so I don’t have to wait for you to not get the records.’” Karen also talked about this “run around” and this conversation started when she was reflecting on her experiences living on campus. She felt like the Residential Assistants were breaking the rules that they were tasked with implementing. She asked herself “who is in charge?” She then shared,

It always felt like it was un desorden. I would always say, “I don't know who’s running this school, but they need help.” It just felt like it was all over the place. I don't know, everything just for me felt a little bit chaotic. Some adults that I would ask for help or something, they didn't know about certain things. And I’m like, “well, if you don't know and I don't know, then who does know?” Or when I would try to get information, let's say I had to go to Bursars or something, I had to get a paper, they would be like, “oh no, go to Building One.” Then when I would get to Building One, they'd be like, “oh no, go to Building Two.” Then when I would get to Building Two, they would be like, “that's not here.” I’m like, “can you guys come together in agreement? Who's in charge of this area?” “Oh no, it's like this person, but she's on vacation, so when she's not here, this other department handles it, but that person is not here. So, you're gonna have to wait like three weeks.” That would get me because I don't like when I feel like I don't know what I’m doing, but even
worse, when the people that's supposed to know what they're doing, don't know what they are doing. And that's kind of was the thing, like a run around.

When speaking about this experience Cindy added, “It can be confusing sometimes when you have to wait for certain things to happen. Or maybe find a certain person.”

Navigating college is difficult enough for anyone who is new to that environment. These examples demonstrate an added layer of confusion that the participants had to deal with at this institution. Institutional desorden (chaos) is an example of a practice that can create or perpetuate subordination (Delgado Bernal, 2002) for Latinx students. The “run around” can lead to students not getting the support they need and potentially even dropping out due to missing critical information pertaining to their education or having negative experiences on campus.

**Lack of Information Related to the Academic Maps and Academics in General**

Anchor State College uses academic maps for undergraduate students in all majors to help guide what classes they need to take, facilitating the completion of their graduation requirements in a timely manner. The real name of the maps has been changed to conceal the identity of the institution. Some participants said that these maps were shared with them, but they did not understand the information provided in them or how to follow them. Other participants spoke about not being provided with information about what classes to take, what their options were for academic majors, what academic requirements had changed, and how class credits were assigned or what they meant. In some cases, lack of academic information elongated their time in undergraduate school. Angel and Estevez missed out on obtaining minors due to lack of information. Angel said, “No one told me how to declare a minor…I didn’t even
know minor was an option.” She did not learn about minors until she was almost done with her major requirements and at that point, she “didn't want to pay more to stay in school more. But I really wish I could have had a minor in communications.” Estevez was misled about the classes she had to complete to earn a minor. Estevez took a chemistry class she thought she needed for her minor and after taking it the second time to improve her grade, her advisor shared that she took the wrong class. She expressed her frustration with this situation because she had been meeting with her advisor about her classes and felt that oversight should not have happened:

I was so pissed. I was so annoyed. I was so freaking annoyed. And then I was like, “I'm graduating in freaking four years. I'm not trying to stay another semester. No this is it.” So, I had to drop it [minor] and I only had one class, apart from that chemistry class, to get that minor. To this day that pisses me off so badly because I had taken all these other minor classes like what the hell, seriously? How did you fumble that bad, you know?

Karen followed her academic map carefully and still ended up being one credit short of completing her graduation requirements, as shared in her testimonio. Destiny shared her first experience seeing an academic map in an advising session. Getting to her advising session was half of the battle because she took the bus, but the bus was in an accident which led to her having to find another form of transportation to get to her advising appointment. Once she got there, she had the following exchange with her advisor:

I was like, “what classes do I take?” He was like, “you were supposed to come in with the classes picked.” I was like, “how was I supposed to know that?” He
was like, “On the academic map.” I was like, “I don't even know what the academic map is.” He made me feel so dumb. I was like, “this is literally my first time coming to you.” I still remember that day. I was struggling to get there...and then this meeting was supposed to be thirty minutes and it was cut down to five minutes because he was like, “you were supposed to have that figured out.” I was like, “I might be considering other majors. Um, but I’m not completely sure yet. How can you support me in this?” He was like, “you kind of just have to figure it out.” I was like, “oh, okay.” It just seemed like he didn't want to talk, and I wasted my time.

Destiny made every effort to make it to her advising appointment so that she could get the academic guidance that she needed to be successful. Instead, she had an encounter with an advisor that expected her to know information that advisors are tasked with sharing. This advisor did not use the advising time properly and left Destiny feeling worse and more confused than before the advising appointment. More academic-related information would have made a difference for participants in all these cases. In all these examples, the participants spoke to the advising practices that served as barriers for them while in college.

**Discrimination or Unjust Treatment**

Four participants gave examples of unjust treatment they witnessed or experienced on campus. Karen shared that resources were not distributed evenly amongst the sports teams on campus and that unequal distribution was based on which sports were the “favorites.” Cindy spoke about witnessing limitations for females on which sports they could join. She said there was “that gender expectation, like oh, ‘it’s
the boys’ team or girls’ team.’ I know girls definitely are much more limited on sports or activities that they can join.” Karen shared the housing disparities that existed in the residential dormitories. She stated that she could not “live better on campus” because she “couldn’t afford it.” Karen also experienced language discrimination at one of her on-campus jobs. Karen and her coworker were told by staff to stop speaking Spanish because it was “unprofessional in the workplace.” Karen shared, “I had never have had an experience where I felt discriminated towards. It was just so shocking because I was like, ‘is English considered the professional language?’” She said that she responded to the staff who told her to stop speaking Spanish by saying, “well, this is my culture, this is my roots. We're not speaking badly about anybody. We're not having full on conversations in Spanish. We're greeting each other in Spanish.” Karen was initially left feeling like she did something wrong for speaking Spanish and was left to grapple with feelings associated with being discriminated against. Karen stood up for her language and culture but unfortunately, this interaction at work resulted in Karen quitting her on-campus job. Estevez also provided examples of being treated differently by staff on campus because of her accent or because she did not know what certain things meant in English. She said she would “encounter people who were like, ‘speak louder’ or they were just like full of themselves, when like I would approach them, and I have my accent.” She provided another example:

there were like things that I didn't know or words in English that I didn't know. So, when I would have to ask, they were like, “how do you not know that? It's common sense.” So just things like that it’s like, “for you, yeah, but for me, I just don't know.”
These interactions made her feel dehumanized and insecure about her accent. These examples of discrimination provided by Karen and Destiny speak to the disconnect that students of color can feel in the higher education setting when parts of their culture, such as their language, are not valued (Gonzalez & Morrisson, 2016).

**Other Subthemes that Emerged**

Participants also named other institutional policies and practices that negatively influenced their persistence journey. Marishell spoke about the stigma connected to grade point averages:

let's talk about the fact that you fail one class and your GPA drops so many points, but you get As for like two semesters straight and it's barely a change. …there's so much pressure around GPAs, but there's so much more to a GPA.

It's not just the number.

Angel spoke about the lack of positive support available when a student fails a class:

“I don't think people go out of their way to fail a class. I think they're generally struggling. I think if a person is shown to fail a class multiple times, there should be more personalized attention towards that.” Other participants mentioned the lack of communication on campus related to resources that were available to students.

Marishell explained this point: “I think there was a lot more resources on campus that people really don't know about.” Cindy said she was “attentive to email” but mostly heard about most things through “word of mouth.” A few participants spoke about experiencing limits on resources. Angel shared, “I ended up leaving the class towards the end of my undergrad career, and that was a big mistake, but it was just the lack of support because they capped how many times I could visit the tutoring center.” Angel
felt she had no other way to receive support for this class. Destiny expressed her frustrations with having one of her scholarships reduced because of a “random endowment” she received. Some participants spoke about specific classes that felt like roadblocks for them. Some participants had to take a class more than once to progress in their program of study. Angel had this experience with one class: “It just made me sad that I had to take the class again and again and again.” Cindy also spoke about this struggle: “it was more like the certain classes that were hard for me which was like math, for example. And that one actually almost held me back.” Other’s struggled in certain classes, which made them question their abilities or triggered mental health issues for them. David spoke to the mental health challenges triggered by some classes:

I felt a lot of anxiety when I would be in those classrooms because I couldn't remember everything or keep up. … I remember those moments being really kind of, I would become depressed because I didn’t know if I could do it or not, and little by little I, I pulled myself out of that really negative thinking. David was able to make it through his difficult classes and ended up enjoying the challenge but did this without support. Three participants spoke about faculty not being understanding and sensitive to life barriers they were facing. As shared in her testimonio, Marishell struggled with low iron and the symptoms related to that were misinterpreted by a professor who expressed that she was just not engaged in her class. Karen struggled with a professor who she said did not show empathy towards her when she expressed not being able to purchase a textbook needed for their class:
I already had so much other stuff going on, trying to figure out financially how
I was going to do all this stuff. And I had like personal stuff going on. I
remember, like, after he just spoke to me, he was like so intense and like so
rude to me. I was like holding back tears and no teachers ever made me cry
except that one teacher.

Karen felt that this professor was not understanding to her life circumstances which
prevented her from being able to afford the class textbook. Thankfully, she connected
with the case management office, and they provided her with funds to purchase the
book.

**Institutional Policies and Practices that Fostered Persistence**

Three themes emerged related to policies and practices that fostered persistence
for the participants at Anchor State College. The most prevalent theme was the
“opportunity” given to them by Anchor State College to obtain an undergraduate
degree, and for some, even a graduate degree. Angel expressed that Anchor State
College gave her the “opportunity to change my future.” Cindy said she is proud to
have graduated from Anchor State College and grateful for the opportunities it
afforded her. Karen said, “I’m thankful for the school itself and everything that it gave
me, and I want to be able to give back.” The theme of diversity on campus and in
classrooms came up again but now as a strength of the college. Cindy shared, “coming
to Anchor State College, it was just eye-opening for me because it was just so
diverse.” Cindy had transitioned from a high school that did not have a lot of diversity
among its student population. Estevez also noted the diversity of her peers in her
classes and “the people that I was meeting.” Some participants gave examples of
events they attended on campus that highlighted the Latinx/Hispanic culture such as a “Day of the Dead event” (Angel) and a “Latinx conference” (Cindy). Lastly, Angel and Destiny felt that because they were “white passing” (Destiny) or “racially ambiguous” (Angel), they did not have negative experiences on campus based on how they looked. Angel expanded on this by saying, “I have never experienced discrimination, but it's because of the way I look. I, I have been told I look racially ambiguous. So, I really haven't experienced any of that.” Destiny added that if she was not “white passing” she would have “definitely dealt with more people being just rude to me during my undergrad experience, and just discriminated me and stuff like.” She based this off the interactions she heard other students had on campus.

Suggestions for Improving Supports for Latinx Students at Anchor State College

The participants seemed to feel empowered to share their suggestions for how Anchor State College could improve the support they offer Latina/o/x Hispanic students. This feeling was especially sensed in the focus groups where they could build off what someone else had suggested. One of the suggestions that was made was to increase communication about the resources that are available to students on campus. It was suggested that the communication strategy should go beyond advertising in the cafeteria or with flyers that get posted on bulletin boards because that could be easily missed. Estevez said resources could be advertised better:

instead of you having to go look for it, or stumbling up on it if you go to the cafeteria, because what about if I didn't go to the cafeteria for two or three days straight? Then I miss that announcement. So, definitely I feel like that's something that even now, it's something they need to work on.
Marishell added that Anchor State College should let “people know that there are so many resources on campus and how they can help.” Cindy said that increased communication can happen through “more mandated meetings or communication between the advisor, maybe the professor. Just some type of connection to maybe increase a student’s support.” Participants also shared that Anchor State College should work to increase parent engagement. This could happen by holding meetings or events where Latino/Hispanic parents could “talk to other parents” (Angel) and they can be provided with information about college that can be used to support their son or daughter. In their focus group, Karen and Cindy spoke about creating a newsletter for parents in Spanish to update them on college happenings. Karen added,

I think it would just give them a lot of information. I think my mom would love to receive like a pamphlet in the mail kind of giving information about the school, and the activities, and probably make her feel like she's involved.

Karen said providing information to parents could “lighten the load on Hispanic students, and also give them some relief.” Other participants shared that Anchor State College could provide services to students and parents in Spanish. Estevez spoke about how this could be helpful: “Sometimes there are those students that come in with their parents and the parents don't speak English, and then the student has to translate. But there are times where the students themselves don't even know what they're translating.” David also shared that Anchor State College should offer “college credit classes in Spanish.”

Another suggestion was to provide trainings to faculty and staff about how to support Latina/o/x/ Hispanic students so they can be more aware of the barriers they
face and sensitive to their culture while interacting with them. Karen added that faculty should be aware that students who are “first-generation and Latinos, they are different than other students, so I think it's good to have a training to help them understand us little bit better.” Cindy said these trainings can serve to help faculty and staff “learn about different cultural factors” to keep in mind when supporting students. Lastly, Karen and Density both shared that if Anchor State College wants to improve supports to students, they should ask and “listen to what the students want” (Destiny) and need. Karen said, “I think if you're trying to help students, you should probably ask them how you can help them because they're the ones getting the help.” All of these suggestions provided by the participants demonstrate that they are “holders and creators of knowledge” (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 107). Their experiences can be tapped into to improve the experiences of other Latinx students.

**Summary**

This chapter began with a summary of each participant’s testimonio which highlighted their strengths, including their determination to complete their college degree. It also provided some details about how their family positively influenced their college experiences. In addition, the role that friends and positive interactions with faculty and staff played in participants’ persistence efforts was reviewed. Staying true to the roots of testimonio methodology, the testimonios of participants in this study also shined light on institutional policies and practices that could be improved at Anchor State College. Lastly, the findings provided examples of things Anchor State College did to foster persistence and how support for Latina/o/x/ Hispanic students can be improved. These suggestions for improvements, along with the other findings, are
discussed in the next chapter with the hope that the participants’ voices can spark the discussion at Anchor State College about action steps that can be taken to help increase graduation rates for Latinx students.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Summary of the Study

Increasing enrollment rates of Latinx students into higher education can be seen as a triumph in itself, given the advocacy that had to take place so that Latinos could have access to higher education in the first place (MacDonald & García, 2007). Sadly, the increased enrollment rates (HACU, n.d.) do not mean high degree completion rates for Latinx students (NCES, 2019). The low graduation numbers speak to the fact that there are roadblocks Latinx students face while navigating the higher education system. The literature explains some of these roadblocks but there is a lack of research that centers the voices and lived experiences of Latinx college students (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2018; Flink, 2018; Nora & Crisp, 2012; Storlie et al., 2013; Villalpando, 2004) and their persistence efforts (Gonzalez & Morrison, 2016). My personal experiences navigating college as a first-generation Latina and my professional experiences in higher education helping Latinx and other students navigate college, motivated me to conduct this study. My hope was to create the opportunity for the first-hand accounts of Latina/o/x Hispanic students’ persistence efforts to be told, heard, and to impact change. This study was led by two research questions: How did the Latinx alumni successfully navigate the collegiate experience? How do the Latinx alumni describe the institutional policies and practices that fostered or served as barriers to their persistence in, and graduation from, college? I used testimonios as my research methodology and LatCrit as the theoretical framework for this study. I interviewed eight participants who all attended and graduated from the same public, post-secondary, newly designated Hispanic Serving Institution in the
northeastern United States. Their interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to generate initial codes and themes, which were shared with participants during follow-up focus groups. The coding frame was then finalized before analyzing the data again and having the final themes emerge. The findings began with the testimonios of the research participants as an introduction to each of them and to showcase their individual experiences persisting to graduation. The major themes for research question one (personal strengths, family influence, support from friends, and positive interactions with faculty and staff) and question two (difficulties navigating college, lack of diversity on campus, institutional desorden (chaos), lack of information related to the academic roadmaps and academics in general, discrimination and unjust treatment, and institutional policies and practices that fostered persistence) were shared. The recommendations made by participants for how Anchor State College could improve supports for Latina/o/ Hispanic students were also conveyed. This chapter provides a discussion of the findings related to research questions one and two. Recommendations based on the findings are made along with implications for further study and concluding thoughts.

**Discussion of Findings**

The first research question that was explored through this study was, “How did the Latinx alumni successfully navigate the collegiate experience?” Using LatCrit as the theoretical framework led to the development of this question in the hopes that the participants’ responses could counter deficit perspectives about Latinx students’ persistence efforts in college (Delgado Bernal, 2002). The participants spoke about their determination and how their “failure is not an option” mindset helped them
navigate college to degree completion. They spoke about how they utilized skills such as organization and a passion for learning to help them achieve academic success. Some participants even mentioned how their intersecting identities (e.g., Latina and Christian or bilingual and Latina) helped them find their voice, advocate for themselves, and overcome difficult times. This is an example of the antiessentialism and intersectionality tenants of LatCrit (Valdes & Bender, 2021) in that it challenges the notion that all Latinas/os/xs/ Hispanics are the same and highlights how different identities they hold intersect and create unique experiences for them. The “failure is not an option” mindset was partly developed and sustained by the influence family had on the participants’ persistence efforts. As we know from the literature (Babineau, 2018; Murphy & Murphy, 2018; Torres & Zerquera, 2012), family and cultural values such as familismo play a major role in Latinx students’ college experiences. This was the case for participants in this study as well. It should be noted that participants saw all family influence as positive factors that contributed to their motivation to persist. This goes against Tinto’s (1975) integration argument since the participants did not leave their value of familismo behind to help them be successful in college. Since all the participants identified as first-generation students, it did not come as a surprise that their families did not have the cultural capital to help them navigate college (Cataldi et al., 2018). Some participants also spoke about their family’s lack of understanding related to college expectations and about career options beyond those they believed would allow them to make more money. The participants that shared this experience chose to complete programs that aligned with their passions, such as social work and psychology, instead of programs that aligned with the career fields their families had
in mind. This is unnecessary added pressure that some participants had to face, given that higher education institutions can intervene and provide college and career-related information to parents. The fact that Anchor State College does not communicate with Latinx families about these things might mean that they are engaging in a deficit perspective about Latinx families (Murphy & Murphy, 2018). Bean’s (1981) persistence theory accounts for the role that external factors such as family responsibilities and finances play in shaping beliefs and attitudes students hold while in college that impact persistence. Thankfully, the participants in this study had family members that were supportive of their passions. They did not force them to explore other career options which could have created conflict and might have impacted their ability to persist.

The participants also spoke about tapping into their friends’ social capital and the social-emotional support they offered to help them navigate college. Some participants expressed that their friends helped keep them accountable. Others shared that their friends helped them make crucial connections that positively impacted their ability to persist to graduation. Overall, participants’ connections with their friends contributed to their sense of belonging on campus. This is supported by Tinto (1975) and Bean’s (1981) persistence theories since they both argued that the social interactions students have on campus impact their ability to persist.

Lastly, the participants all spoke about faculty and/or staff members that successfully helped them navigate college. Another term for supportive faculty and staff is “institutional agents” (Garcia & Ramirez, 2018, p. 356) which are defined as campus personnel that have positions of power within the higher education system and
who help students navigate social and institutional aspects of college including the
bureaucracy that students come up against. Sadly, not all the participants had a team of
people supporting them in a holistically caring manner and it was interesting to find
that connecting with supportive faculty was not a quick and easy process for all the
participants. In fact, one participant took time off from college before being connected
to a faculty member that helped her identify a major and helped her persist to
graduation. Finding a supportive faculty should not be left up to chance. There should
be systems set up to facilitate these connections to happen early on in a student’s
academic journey. Another interesting finding was that the participants who had
supportive staff to aid their persistence efforts were primarily connected to the TRIO
programs on campus. Some of the programs that fall under the TRIO umbrella that
were mentioned by participants are Upward Bound, Student Support Services, and the
Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement program. Two factors that should
be considered are that these programs serve Latinx students by default, given the
student populations these programs target (Licón, 2019; Tierney & Hagedorn, 2002).
There might also be Latinx students who either are not first-generation or do not meet
the income requirements to receive support from these programs. However, at Anchor
State College, the participants who did not receive support from the TRIO programs
found support from either the case management office or the advising office.
Regardless of who and where students receive support from, they should all be
culturally sensitive to Latinx students’ needs and intentional about creating those
familial relationships that made a difference for the participants in this study and that
align with the value of *familismo* (Babineau, 2018; Murphy & Murphy, 2018; Torres & Zerquera, 2012).

The second research question that was explored through this study was, “How do the Latinx alumni describe the institutional policies and practices that fostered or served as barriers to their persistence in, and graduation from, college?” Although participants were asked about practices or policies that supported or hindered their success, there were few policies and practices mentioned that positively impacted participants’ persistence journey. The major theme that emerged related to that part of the question was the opportunity that Anchor State College gave participants to obtain their college degree. Although not mentioned specifically by participants, this could mean that Anchor State College’s recruiting and admissions policies and practices are successful in increasing college access to students from diverse backgrounds, specifically Latinx students. These policies and practices might provide an opportunity for Latinx students to start their higher education journey, but an opportunity is not enough. As the six-year graduation rate (40%) for Hispanic students at Anchor State College demonstrates, most students who are given that opportunity do not graduate. The participants spoke about several policies and practices that made pursuing this opportunity difficult for them, and it could provide some insight into the experiences of the students that did not make it to graduation as well. Participants spoke about a lack of information about available resources, limits on resources they did access, and poor advising.

It appears that overall communication with students needs to be improved at Anchor State College. The major practice that created barriers to persistence for
participants was the institutional *desorden* (chaos) they were exposed to and that they struggled to navigate during their time at Anchor State College. Institutional *desorden* (chaos) was also referred to by some participants as the “run around” experience. This experience was mentioned in Anchor State College’s last accreditation review report as something that students in all years of study and academic programs experience. From my experiences in the student, staff, and faculty roles at Anchor State College, I know this is something that has existed for many years but still has not been resolved.

With 46% of students at Anchor State College identifying as first-generation students, there is an urgent need to address the *desorden* (chaos). First-generation students typically need support navigating the “tangled web of college policies, procedures, jargon, and expectations” (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2017). This was the experience for the majority of participants as well. The fact that Anchor State College provides an extra barrier of “chaos” for students trying to navigate a new system is unacceptable. It is the responsibility of administrators, faculty, and staff at Anchor State College to create a positive experience for students that are seeking help, provide students with correct information, examine and potentially change policies and practices to ensure that student’s issues are resolved in a timely and organized manner, and identify what systemic issues are causing students to not graduate. Some of the institutional *desorden* that participants experienced might be explained by the bureaucratic nature of higher education institutions. Bureaucracy was originally created to increase “efficiency”, “progress and growth”, “accountability” and reduce “organizational issues” in organizations (Manning, 2017, p. 15). Higher education institutions follow a bureaucratic organization structure where every employee has a
specific job to complete, employees have different levels of authority and power to carry out a task, and there are specific communication practices and decision-making steps to follow. This operation style can sometimes create barriers and create “a sea of red tape that frustrates everyone associated with these organizations” (Manning, 2017, p. 16) including students as participants in this study shared. Garcia (2018) argued that HSIs should decolonize their governance structures. This “includes the rejection of centralized reporting structures, bureaucratic hierarchies, and single authority” (Garcia, 2018, p. 139). Garcia (2018) suggested that HSIs should have a shared leadership structure where people from historically marginalized backgrounds can be decision makers and are in positions of power. If one is looking at these issues through the LatCrit antisubordination principle, the sense of urgency to examine and address this issue should come from the possibility that this institutional desorden (chaos) could be generating systemic inequalities that primarily impact Latinx students and other students of color.

As previously mentioned, LatCrit has been used in higher education scholarship to bring attention to “the ways in which so-called race-neutral institutional policies and practices perpetuate racial or ethnic subordination” (Delgado Bernal, 2002, p. 108). As a result, the experiences of students who faced discrimination and outright racism at Anchor State College must be taken very seriously. This study included eight participants, and two of the eight provided examples of situations in which they experienced racism. They were either told not to speak Spanish or were treated with disrespect due to their accent or not knowing what certain words meant in English. These experiences speak to the disconnect that students of color can feel in
the higher education setting when parts of their culture, such as their language, are not valued (Gonzalez & Morrsion, 2016). During my time as a staff member at Anchor State College, I heard many similar experiences to those shared by the two participants. No student should have to face these issues while working towards their college degree. Nora and Cabrera (1996) argued that experiences with discrimination can affect “minority students’ decisions to persist in college” (p. 140). This issue, along with the lack of diversity experienced either on campus or in classrooms, should be looked at as Anchor State College adjusts to its new designation as a Hispanic Serving Institution. Based on the HSI eligibility criteria, institutions need to have a certain number of Latinx students enrolled in order to be eligible for additional funding (U.S. Department of Education, n.d), and they do not necessarily need to be providing specific services to Latinx students or have an “institutional mission to serve Hispanics” (Santiago, 2012, p. 163). Anchor State College should engage in intentional efforts to improve how they serve Latinx students (Santiago, 2012) and eliminate racism on campus. Garcia (2018) takes this a step further by arguing that HSI need to work towards the liberation of Raza (Latinx/a/o/ Hispanic) students by engaging in the decolonization of their governance, policies, practices, missions, and pedagogy to effectively serve Raza students. The “servingness” (Garcia et al., 2019) literature should guide the work that Anchor State College needs to improve supports to Latinx students. Garcia, Núñez, and Sansone (2019) conducted a systematic review of 148 articles related to how HSIs support Latinx students. Based on their findings, they developed the Multidimensional Conceptual Framework of Servingness at HSIs. The framework includes structures for serving (organizational supports), indicators for
serving (outcomes and experiences of students and nonstudents), external influences on serving (federal, state, local policies, governing boards, advocacy groups, etc.) and the influence white supremacy has on all these elements. This framework encourages those serving Latinx students to consider the different elements of servingness and how they interact with each other instead of reducing serving Latinx students to one or two factors (Garcia, Nuñez, & Sansone, 2019).

**Recommendations**

In this study, *Testimonios* methodology was used to create the opportunity for participants’ voices to help advocate for institutional policies and practices that improve the support Latinx students receive (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012) at Anchor State College. The following recommendations build on the suggestions participants made about Anchor State College’s areas for growth. One recommendation is that Anchor State College needs to provide Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) training to all administrators, faculty, and staff on a reoccurring basis to help them better serve Latinx students (Hernández et al., 2017) and “challenge them to rethink diversity, inclusion, and justice for all” (Garcia, 2019, p. 117). There is so much diversity within the Latinx community, and higher education professionals need to understand the cultural history, values, and experiences of the individual Latinx student that they are working with (Ortiz, 2004). This will allow them to honor and infuse students’ cultural backgrounds into the work they do together (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). Martinez and Hernandez (2018) argue that Latinx students “need role models and mentors to create the space for open, safe, consistent, and courageous conversations about threats and microaggressions” (p. 152). This training can also help
faculty and staff understand how to best engage in supportive relationships with Latinx students that build on students’ experiential knowledge (Villalpando, 2004) and help them combat any power dynamics that might interfere with rapport building. Along with the DEI trainings, Anchor State College needs to examine its processes for addressing discrimination, bias, racism, and any other treatment students consider to be unjust. Anchor State College personnel that oversee these processes should explore if students are aware of the process for reporting these behaviors, if people engaging in these behaviors are being held accountable, and if complaints lead to action steps that shift the culture and create safer spaces for students on campus.

Anchor State College should look at its advising practices to ensure that accurate information is being communicated to students in a timely manner (Garcia, 2019). Advising sessions should include an accountability system that requires information to be shared with students in a clear and helpful manner about their academic and career options. As Cindy suggested, perhaps there needs to be “more mandated meetings” between the students and the advisors instead of just one required meeting when registration for classes opens. This should especially be the case during students’ first and second years where there is a big dip in retention numbers for first-year, full-time students. Although Anchor State College has increased the number of professional advisors available to students who are still exploring what to major in, faculty advise a majority of the students at this institution. If an increase in advising sessions is implemented, perhaps faculty workloads can be adjusted based on the number of students they advise or different advising strategies can be encouraged such as peer advising, group advising, more advising professional development for faculty, and incorporating advising into certain classes (Thompson, 2016). I am aware that
Anchor State College is now utilizing Starfish, an online platform that encourages collaboration between support offices and advisors to streamline the support students receive as they work to achieve their academic goals. From my experience serving on the Starfish implementation team at Anchor State College, I know that part of the goal in implementing Starfish is to make advising more manageable for faculty and advisors. There should be an assessment completed that evaluates if this system is having a positive impact on students’ educational journey and if students are being served in a compassionate and holistically caring manner. Given the findings related to institutional desorden (chaos), something else that should be examined in advising practices is advisors’ ability to not only provide academic information but also to help students overcome the red tape that is often experienced in higher education.

Schmidtke’s study (2016) on retention of American Indian students found that to help retain students, advisors established personal relationships with students and helped them navigate administrative issues as well as “override campus rules if such an action benefited the student” (pp. 51-52).

Given the growing Latinx population at Anchor State College and the findings related to family influence on persistence, administrators and student success staff should establish family engagement initiatives. As Karen and Cindy suggested, this can start with a college newsletter that is shared in Spanish and English or with on-campus meetings for Latinx parents as Angel proposed. Perhaps there could be sessions at orientation directed at Latinx families where information is provided in both Spanish and English. These engagement opportunities can help students feel a connection between their family and the higher education experience (Martinez & Hernández, 2018).
Participants in this study had mixed experiences related to the diversity of their peers in their classes and the diversity they observed on campus. One way to begin to address this is to increase the representation of Latinx faculty on campus. Increasing representation of Latinx faculty in higher education has been shown to contribute to Latinx student success (Excelencia in Education, 2017; Hagedorn et al., 2007). The number of Latinx faculty has been growing but it does not even come close to matching the growing number of Latinx students in higher education institutions (Excelencia in Education, 2017). At Anchor State College, four percent of full-time faculty identify as Hispanic/Latino compared to 25% of the student body. Changing the demographics of the faculty is something that this institution should prioritize so that it reflects the institution’s diverse student population. It is also important to provide support to existing and new Latinx faculty. Given the low number of Latinx full-time faculty at Anchor State College, it is important to consider what experiences these faculty members are having which might include experiencing racial battle fatigue and emotional labor (Kelly, et al., 2019) and how their scholarship and service to students is being valued at the institution (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando 2002; Garcia, 2018).

This study provided examples of policies and practices that made persisting to degree completion difficult for the participants. The findings can serve as a starting point to help the institution examine systemic issues that need to change but more voices need to be heard. To start working towards increasing the number of Latinx students that make it to graduation, administrators, faculty, and staff should work together to ask students what is and is not working. Feedback can come from current students, students who did not persist to graduation, and alumni. Increasing student
involvement on campus committees can also ensure that students’ voices are heard and that they contribute to decisions that impact students. The institution is at a turning point having recently received the HSI designation. This new designation provides Anchor State College with an opportunity to change the status quo and shift the institution’s culture. This culture shift could work towards achieving cultural congruity which is described as “the fit between students’ personal and institutional values, which prompts their interpersonal connectedness and subsequent cultural validation within their university environment” (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007, p. 13). Working towards cultural congruency can support the degree completion of more Latinx students, which can enable their social mobility and opportunities for future generations. 

Anchor State College recently created an alumni mentorship program for Latinx students and has hosted some events where Latinx alumni were able to network and provide input to the institution regarding the Latinx student experience. These are great opportunities for Latinx alumni to get involved, support current students’ persistence and advocacy efforts, and help drive institutional changes. In an effort to support each other and to advocate in numbers, Latinx students can get involved in existing Latina/o/x/ Hispanic student organizations on campus or create new organizations that provide students an opportunity to connect with peers they can relate to, provide spaces for validation, and take on advocacy issues that impact the Latinx student population on campus. These actions can help them build on previous generations’ work to ensure equitable access to a college degree.
Implications for Further Study

This study contributes to the literature that explores the lived experiences of Latinx college students, but more is needed. Future studies could explore the lived experiences of Latinx college students that did not persist to graduation. Those studies could focus on exploring the institutional factors that contributed to their early departure from higher education and where higher education institutions can intervene to increase persistence. Future studies could also explore if and how institutional *desorden* (chaos) is experienced by Latinx college students enrolled at other institutions. The timing of this study was interesting in that it captured the experiences of Latina/o/ Hispanic students as Anchor State College transitioned into an HSI but most of the participants attended this institution while it had not reached the HSI designation. Since there are a growing number of emerging HSIs, future research could explore the efforts of newly designated HSIs to intentionally serve their Latinx population. Another area where further insight is needed is how the experiences of Latinx students attending established HSIs differ from those attending predominantly white institutions. Participants spoke about faculty and staff who developed relationships with them that allowed them to feel like family. It would be interesting to learn from the faculty that develop these types of relationships with students to explore how more college personnel can provide these supportive relationships on campus. Some participants spoke about their intersecting identities and how they played a role in persistence efforts. Future studies can dive into Latina/o/x/ Hispanic intersectionality and college persistence further to help shed light on the heterogeneity of this ethnic group.
Concluding Thoughts

Bearing witness to participants’ testimonios in this study in part left me feeling that they deserve better. No student should ever hear things like, “I can't believe you're still here.” In other words, the expectation was for that student to drop out. Higher education administrators, faculty, and student support professionals have the power to change the ideology and narrative that hard work alone is what allows students to achieve success in college (Patton, 2016). They have a role to play in students’ persistence efforts and should be held accountable when they fail students. Just like obtaining a college degree can help change the course of someone’s life in a positive manner, not making it to graduation and leaving school with debt and no degree can also negatively impact the course of someone’s life. The stakes are high and action on the part of higher education institutions is required. We should not be satisfied with the increasing enrollment numbers of Latinx students. We need to ensure that they are treated equitably while navigating higher education and that supports are tailored to help them persist to graduation.

The testimonios of participants in this study have further demonstrated to me how resilient Latinx students are. Their experiences served to validate the experiences I had when I was an undergraduate student. The participants were also able to validate each other’s experiences in the focus groups. My hope is that the sharing of these testimonios can provide validation and liberation for future, current, and graduated Latina/o/x/ Hispanic students related to their experiences persisting in college. Another takeaway for me is how valuable the experiential knowledge of Latinx college students is. The participants offered so much insight into factors that supported and hindered their persistence efforts. This knowledge should lead the work that needs to
be done at Anchor State College especially because as Karen said, “if you're trying to help students, you should probably ask them how you can help them because they're the ones getting the help.”
APPENDICES

Appendix A: Participant Referral Email to Staff and Faculty

Dear ,

I am reaching out to you because I received IRB approval (reference # 2311) for my dissertation study titled “Estamos Aquí: Testimonios of Latinx College Students who Persisted to Graduation”. Through this study, I hope to explore how Latina/o/x Hispanic students that attended successfully navigated college to graduation and what institutional policies and practices fostered or served as barriers to completing college. I am looking for Latina/o/x Hispanic alumni who can help me answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How did the Latinx alumni successfully navigate the collegiate experience?

Research Question 2: How do the Latinx alumni describe the institutional policies and practices that fostered or served as barriers to their persistence in, and graduation from, college?

I am specifically looking for participants who:

- [ ] Identify as Latina/o/x Hispanic
- [ ] Graduated from within the last five years (2018-2022)
- [ ] Were enrolled only at for the duration of their college journey

Please email me the names and contact information (if you have it) of any alumni that you know or believe meets the criteria above and you believe may be interested in participating in this study. Please note, there is a $30 thank you gift card that will be provided to participants that engage in an individual interview and focus group. Upon receiving your referral, I will reach out to the potential participant and mention that they have been referred to me by you. If you don’t feel comfortable sharing the names with me, you can also send them the recruitment letter (attached). Please encourage those interested in participating in the study to reach out to me. I hope to identify at least eight alumni to participate in this study. Thank you in advance for your support and I look forward to hearing from you.

Joise Garzon
Doctoral Candidate
University of Rhode Island/ Rhode Island College PhD in Education Program
Phone: ( )
Email: 
Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Email

Dear ,

My name is Joise Garzon, and I am a Doctoral Candidate at Rhode Island College/ University of Rhode Island joint PhD in Education program. I am conducting my research under the guidance of my advisor, Dr. Annemarie Vaccaro. I am collecting data for my dissertation study currently titled “Estamos Aquí: Testimonios of Latinx College Students who Persisted to Graduation”. This research has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (reference # 2311).

Through this study, I hope to explore how Latina/o/x Hispanic students successfully navigated college to graduation and what institutional policies and practices fostered or served as barriers to completing college.

Would you be interested in participating in one virtual or in-person individual interview and one in-person or virtual focus group with the other participants that agree to be part of the study? The interview and focus group would take place sometime between September 2022 and November 2022. The individual interview and the focus group is expected to last approximately 60-90 minutes each, but participants can choose to stop at any point in time. I will also ask for your feedback on the themes in the data and on the summary of the story (testimonio) you share with me, but you can choose to not provide any feedback and still be part of the study.

I am specifically looking for participants who:
- Identify as Latina/o/x Hispanic
- Graduated from within the last five years (2018-2022)
- Were enrolled only at for the duration of their college journey

All participants that complete the individual interview and the focus group will be provided a thank you gift of $30 in the form of a gift card. My study offers no direct benefits to participants.

Interested individuals may contact me directly at for further details. If you are interested in being a part of the study, I will ask you to fill out a screening questionnaire that will be used to determine if you can be part of the study. If you are selected to participate in the study, I will send you a summary of the origins and use of testimonios that is optional for you to read. This summary will be provided in case you want to know more about how testimonios are used in research, but you can still participate without reading that summary. We will work together to find an interview time that best fits your schedule. Prior to participating in the interview, you will be asked to read and complete a consent document.

Thank you for your time and consideration,
Joise Garzon
Appendix C: Screening and Background Questionnaire

The information provided in this questionnaire will be used to select a maximum variation sample of participants. The purpose of maximum variation sampling is to select participants that represent diverse characteristics but that all meet the predetermined inclusion criteria for the study. If selected to participate in this study, the information provided in this questionnaire will also be used to construct the background that is shared for you (under the pseudonym) before sharing your testimonio. If not selected for the study, the information provided in this questionnaire will be deleted.

All the questions below will be optional to answer.

What is your full name?
What is your phone number?
What is your email address?
How many years were you enrolled at [ ]?
What was your [ ] email or student ID number (if you remember)?
Please provide three pseudonym options to be assigned to you for this study. The researcher is asking for more than one to avoid other participants having the same pseudonym.
What is your age?
How do you identify related to your gender?
How do you identify related to your race?
How do you identify related to your ethnic background?
Where were you born?
How long have you lived in the United States?
Where were your parents/guardians born?
What is your primary language?
What languages do you speak, read, and/or write?
When you attended [ ] [ ], were you considered a first-generation college student? (parents did not complete a four-year college or university degree)
Is there anything else you would like to share about your background?
Appendix D: Summary of Origins and Use of Testimonios

This research study will use a testimonios research design. The inception of testimonios is not clear but its creation as a literary mode in Latin America is traced back to the 1970s where it was used to resist “imperialism in Third World nations” (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012, p. 526) and to share the experiences of those being oppressed “often within the context of war” (Perez Huber, 2008, p. 168). Testimonios were also practiced later by Chicanas and Latina scholars who used testimonios based in a feminist framework to bring attention to the oppression Chicana/os and Latina/os face in the United States (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Testimonios have also been used to build solidarity and to resist dominant laws, policies, and practices that serve to oppress Latinx people (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012).

Testimonios has been described as verbal expressions of “one’s life experiences with attention to injustices one has suffered and the effect these injustices have had on one’s life” (Brabeck, 2001, p. 3). The sharing of these experiences is an act of resistance (Brabeck, 2003) which is motivated by “a social and/or political urgency to voice injustice and raise awareness of oppression” (Pérez Huber, 2012, p. 379). Testimonios are not meant to be kept private but are shared to bring attention to something that needs to change, elicit solidarity from the reader, and bring forth a call to action (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012). Testimonios are also meant to be liberating and empowering to those telling their story (Pérez Huber, 2012).

In this study, testimonios will allow for multiple participants to share their first-hand accounts of their experience persisting in college until degree completion. Latinx alumni will be encouraged to critically reflect on their college experiences (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012) and identify and make meaning of the oppression and marginalization they might have experienced as a student due to institutional policies and practices (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012). Testimonios will allow the alumni to relive some of their experiences but from a place of power that allows them to be in control of their narrative, share it with others, build solidarity (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012; Latina Feminist Group, 2001) with current and future Latinx students, and recommend ways that institutions can better support Latinx students (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012).
Appendix E: Consent Document

CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project title: Estamos aqui: Testimonios of Latinx college students who persisted to graduation

You are being asked to be in a research study about the college experiences of Latinx/a/o/ Hispanic students. Participation in this study is voluntary and it is anticipated that you would be involved for about 7 hours. You are being asked to participate in this study because you identify as Latinx/a/o/ Hispanic, graduated from [redacted] within the last five years (2018-2022), and you were enrolled only at [redacted] for your whole time in college. Please read this consent document and ask any questions that you have before choosing whether to be in the study.

Joise Garzon, a graduate student in the University of Rhode Island/ Rhode Island College PhD in Education program, is conducting this research in collaboration with the faculty advisor Annemarie Vaccaro, a professor at the University of Rhode Island and Rhode Island College.

Why this Study is Being Done (Purpose(s))

We are doing this study to learn about the experiences of Latinx/a/o/ Hispanic students who graduated from a 4-year higher education institution. This study will explore how participants successfully navigated the college experience and what things helped participants make it to graduation or what made their college experience difficult.

What You Will Have to Do (Procedures)

If you choose to be in the study, we will ask you to:

- First, you will talk with me (Joise Garzon) during an individual interview about your experiences as a college student. I will ask about things that helped you graduate and things that made your college journey difficult. You will be able to talk to me in either English, Spanish, or a mix of both. This will take about 60 to 90 minutes. This conversation can take place in person or virtually, depending on what you decide. This conversation will be audio recorded.
- Second, you will be sent a transcript of our conversation for you to review to check if it is correct. This will take about 60-120 minutes. You can choose to not read it and to not provide any feedback.
- Third, you will talk with me and other participants in a focus group about the themes that came up in the interviews, to connect with other participants about your experiences in college, and to share what can be done to help current college students make it to graduation. This will take about 60 to 90 minutes. This conversation can take place in person or virtually, depending on what you and other participants decide. This conversation will be audio and visually recorded. If you do not want to be visually recorded, you will be able to either shut your camera off (if discussion takes place virtually) or to sit outside of the camera recording zone but you will be asked to say your research name (pseudonym) before you talk.
- Fourth, I will email you or call you to ask you what you think about themes that come up in the study. I will also ask you for your feedback on the summary from your interview with me. This will take about a total of 120 minutes. You can choose to not to provide any feedback.

Covid-19 and In-Person Research

If any in-person interactions are scheduled to take place, we will be collecting your name and contact information for the purposes of contact tracing. Contact tracing is required by the Department of Health should someone whom you have been in contact with test positive for Covid-19. If someone whom you
have been in contact with from the study does test positive, then someone from Health Department (or local health department if in another location) may contact you at the number provided. This information will be kept separate from the data you provided as part of the study.

Participants should contact Joise Garzon at [masked] before showing up for any in-person interviews if they are experiencing any COVID-19 related symptoms as described by the Center for Disease Control. Participants will be screened by phone before any in-person interactions take place with the researchers and with other participants using up to date Center for Disease Control screening information.

**Risks or Discomforts**
There are minimal risks to participating in this study. This means that you may find that answering some questions can be upsetting or can be uplifting. We think that what you may experience would be similar to the kinds of things you might experience when you talk with family and friends. You can skip any questions you do not want to answer, and you can stop the interview at any time. If you want to talk to someone about your feelings or about problems that you are having, you can contact the following mental health resources, [Mental Health Services](tel:4016060606) at (401) 606-0606, [The Center- Outpatient Counseling and Psychiatry](tel:4012764020) at (401) 276-4020, [Counseling Center](tel:4014615234) at (401) 461-5234, or Zencare at [https://zencare.co/](http://https://zencare.co/). More mental health resources can be found in the Mental Health Association of [Emotional Wellness: E-book Resource Guide](mailto:Emotional Wellness: E-book Resource Guide). Most of these mental health providers will charge a fee for their services which is paid by you. We will not pay this fee.

**Benefits of Being in the Study**
Being in this study will not benefit you directly.

**You Will Be Paid (Compensation)**
As a way to thank you for your time, you will receive a $30 gift card to Amazon after participating in the focus group. If you change your mind and want to stop the study, you will be paid part of this. If you stop, we will pay you $15 for answering the background questionnaire and the individual interview questions.

**Deciding Whether to Be in the Study**
Being in the study is your choice to make. Nobody can force you to be in the study. You can choose not to be in the study, and nobody will hold it against you. You can change your mind and quit the study at any time, and you do not have to give a reason. If you decide to quit later, nobody will hold it against you.

**How Your Information will be Protected**
Because this is a research study, results will be summarized across all participants and shared in reports that we publish and presentations that we give. Your name will not be used in any reports unless you wish for your real name to be connected to your story about your college experiences and you give us permission to use your real name. We will take several steps to protect the information you give us so that you cannot be identified. Instead of using your name, your information will be given one of the three pseudonym options you provide us in your background questionnaire. The information and data for this study will be stored electronically on a password protected device and seen only by myself and other researchers who work with me. The only time I would have to share information from the study
is if it is subpoenaed by a court, or if you are suspected of harming yourself or others, then I would have to report it to the appropriate authorities. Also, if there are problems with the study, the records may be viewed by the [redacted] review board responsible for protecting the rights and safety of people who participate in research. The information will be kept for a minimum of three years after the study is over, after which it will be destroyed.

**Who to Contact**

If you have any further questions or would like to set up a time to connect about the study you can contact Joise Garzon via email at [redacted] and phone at [redacted] or you can contact Dr. Annemarie Vaccaro via email at [redacted] and phone at [redacted]

If you think you were treated badly in this study, have complaints, or would like to talk to someone other than the researcher about your rights or safety as a research participant, please contact the IRB Chair at [redacted]

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

**Statement of Consent**

I have read and understand the information above. I am choosing to be in the study “Estamos aquí: Testimonios of Latinx college students who persisted to graduation”. I can change my mind and quit at any time, and I don’t have to give a reason. I have been given answers to the questions I asked, or I will contact the researcher with any questions that come up later. I am at least 18 years of age.

I ___ agree ___ do not agree to be audio recorded for this study.

I ___ agree ___ do not agree to be video recorded for this study.

I would like my real name to be connected to the story I share about my experiences as a college student for this study and I give the researchers permission to use my real name in any reports they publish and presentations they give. I ___ agree ___ do not agree to have my real name used in this study.

Print Name of Participant: ___________________________________________________________

Signature of Participant: __________________________________ Date: ___________________

Name of Researcher Obtaining Consent: ______________________________________________
Appendix F: Semi Structured Interview Protocol

Date: ____________ Time & Place: __________________

Interviewer: Joise Garzon

Participant Pseudonym:

Confirm inclusion criteria” Were you enrolled at __________ only during your total time in college? The reason for these criteria is to yield information-rich cases related to the research question and to allow the study to focus on changes the institution included in the study can make or to highlight things the institution did to support students.

Introduction: Hello my name is Joise Garzon, and I am the person conducting this study. Today we will be engaging in a semi-structured interview meaning that I have some questions I will be asking all the participants but some questions I will develop in real time based on what you share with me. The interview is expected to last 60-90 minutes, but you can end it at any time. You are also welcomed to speak either Spanish or English since I am fluent in both.

Consent document: Let’s review the consent document. Do you have any questions about the consent document?

Use of findings: The voices of the students in this study can lead to changes, improvements, and the development of policies, practices, and programming that enhance the educational experiences of Latinx students at __________. A version of your testimonio that you approve of (if you would like to review it) will be included in my dissertation which will hopefully be published.

Background questions: I will check if background questionnaire was completed or give the participant time to complete the background questionnaire before beginning the interview.

Do you have any questions about the brief background that was sent to you about the origins and use of testimonios? Remember that was optional for you to read.

Other questions or concerns: I will address any questions the participant has before beginning the interview session.

Start recording: I will let the participant know that I will start recording the interview.

Questions for testimonio:

Please share as much depth as you feel is important for your testimonio

1. How did you successfully navigate the collegiate experience?

Probes (questions in bold are questions I prioritized if necessary):

- When did you first enroll at __________ and when did you graduate?
  - What motivated you to stay enrolled in college?
  - What helped you make it to graduation at __________?
  - What personal strengths helped you achieve graduation?
• What parts of your identity do you feel shaped or played a role in any of these experiences?
• Tell me about how your family, friends, and/or peers played a role in your college experience?
• Tell me how faculty and/or staff at [blank] played a role in your college experience?
• Tell me about the memories that stick out to you about your college experience?
• How has your view of your experiences in college changed since you graduated?
• What do you think caused your view on your experiences to change?
• What do you wish you would have done differently while you were a student at [blank]?
• Knowing what you know now, what advice would you give to yourself when you were first starting college?
• What else do you want to share about your college experience?

2. How would you describe the institutional policies and practices that fostered or served as barriers to persisting (staying enrolled until degree completion) in college?

Probes (questions in bold are questions I will prioritize):
• Did you ever take time off from college? If so, please share more about that experience.
  • Did you ever consider dropping out of college? If so, what led to you considering that as an option and what helped you stay enrolled?
  • Tell me about a time you faced a big hurdle at [blank]. Tell me about the hurdle and how you navigated that.
  • Tell me about people that supported or hindered your success at [blank].
  • Tell me about the practices or policies that supported or hindered your success at [blank].
  • Were there any times while you were a student that you felt you were treated unjustly or that you felt oppressed, discriminated against, marginalized? If so, please elaborate. How did these experiences affect you?
  • Were there [blank] policies or practices you were not aware of initially that impacted your college experience? If so, please share more about those.
  • What do you wish would have been different while you were a student at [blank].
  • How has your view of these experiences changed since you graduated?
  • What do you think caused your view on your experiences to change?
• What can do to better support Latinx/a/o/ Hispanic students at

• What advice would you share with current or future Latina/o/x Hispanic students?

• What parts of your identity do you feel shaped or played a role in any of these experiences?

• What would you want those reading your story to know about you, the college experience, and/or Latinx/a/o/ Hispanic students?

Closing: Thank participant for sharing their experiences.

Follow-up information: I will be sending you your interview transcript for you to review and will follow up for other member checking related inquiries. Providing feedback is optional.

Check preferred method of communication
Appendix G: Focus Group Protocol

Date:_______________  Time & Place:________________________

Moderator: Joise Garzon

Participant Pseudonyms: ________________________________

Introduction: I will introduce myself, share the interview process and format of the questions, and remind the participants that the focus group is expected to last 60-90 minutes, but they can individually choose to stop participating at any time.

Study purpose and application: I am conducting this study to learn about the experiences of Latinx/a/o/Hispanic students who graduated from a 4-year higher education institution. This study will explore how participants successfully navigated the college experience and what things helped participants make it to graduation or what made their college experience difficult.

Use of findings: The voices of the students in this study can lead to changes, improvements, and the development of policies, practices, and programming that enhance the educational experiences of Latinx students at [-----]

Focus group: Themes related to differences and commonalities within the testimonios will be shared with research participants during the focus group for their member-checking and feedback.

Confidentiality: I will remind participants that the focus group will be audio and visually recorded and I will keep participants identities confidential. I will ask participants to also maintain confidentiality of other participants.

Start Recording: I will let the participants know that I will start recording the focus group.

Ground Rules: I will ask participants to spend 5-10 minutes deciding on ground rules that focus on ensuring respect, consideration, and creating a supportive environment for the group discussion.

Ice Breaker: I will invite participants to spend about 10 minutes engaging in an icebreaker that can serve to create a comfortable space for participants.

Before jumping into the questions, I will ask participants if they have any questions or thoughts before we get started.

Questions: Specific questions were developed from themes that emerge from the individual interviews.

What do you think about the following personal strengths that were expressed during the interviews related to successfully navigating college_______?

During the interviews I heard the following themes related to your college experience_______. What would you want to add to this or does any of this spark any questions you would like to ask participants?

Is there anything that has been shared so far that has changed the way you view your college experiences?

During the interviews I heard the following themes related to supports you experienced while in college_______. What comes to mind when you hear these themes? Is there anything you would like to build on or ask each other about related to these themes?
What themes shared so far are sticking out to you the most?

What else do you want to share with each other about your college experience?

☐ During the interviews I heard the following themes related to institutional policies and practices that fostered persisting in college______. What would you want to add to this or does any of this spark any questions you would like to ask participants? Do any of these themes surprise you?

☐ During the interviews I heard the following themes related to institutional policies and practices that served as barriers to persisting in college______. What would you want to add to this or does any of this spark any questions you would like to ask participants? Do any of these themes surprise you?

☐ Is there anything that has been shared so far that has changed the way you view your college experiences?

☐ During the interviews I heard the following themes related to being treated unjustly, feeling oppressed, discriminated against, and/ or marginalized_________________________. What comes to mind when you hear these themes? Is there anything you would like to build on or ask each other about related to these themes?

☐ During the interviews I heard the following themes related to what can do to better support Latinx/a/o/ Hispanic students______. Is there anything missing or anything you would like to share more about?

☐ During the interviews, the following themes came up related to advice you would give to current Latinx/a/o/ Hispanic students__________. Is there anything you think should be added to that list?

☐ Was there anything that you feel was not highlighted from the interviews that you would like to share with the group?

☐ Is there anything that has been shared so far that has changed the way you view your college experiences?

☐ What message would you like those reading this study to take away with them?

Ask about liberating experience

Closing: Thank participants for sharing their experiences.
Appendix H: Final Coding Frame

Parent/Child Codes
Domains of experience: Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Cultural, and Structural aspects
(Fraser, 2004)

1. **Interaction with faculty and staff (Interpersonal)**
   a. Positive Interactions
   b. Negative Interactions

2. **Family influence (Cultural/ Interpersonal)**
   a. Motivation from family
   b. Financial support from family
   c. Pressure to be in certain careers
   d. Family not understanding college expectations

3. **Support from friends (Interpersonal)**
   a. New friends
   b. Continuing high school friendships into college

4. **Personal strengths (Intrapersonal)**
   a. Prioritizing school
   b. “Failure is not an option”/ Determination/ Perseverance
   c. Strong character
   d. Passionate about learning
   e. Organization
   f. Ability to ask for help
   g. Intersectionality

5. **Changed perspective (Intrapersonal)**
   a. Four-year college timeline
   b. Views on college

6. **What I could have done differently (Intrapersonal)**
   a. More engagement in on campus activities
   b. Connect with people/resources

7. **Institutional policies and practices that served as barriers to persistence (Structural aspects)**
   a. Difficulties navigating college
   b. Policies related to GPA and failing classes
   c. Lack of communication about resources
   d. Limits on resources
   e. Need for more pronounced sense of community
   f. Lack of information related to “academic roadmap” and academic in general
   g. Lack of support related to what to major in
h. Discrimination/unjust treatment
i. Institutional “desorden” (Chaos)
j. Classes as barriers
k. Lack of support/understanding of life barriers students face
l. Lack of diversity on campus/classrooms

8. Institutional policies and practices that fostered persistence (Structural aspects)
a. Different treatment as a white passing individual
b. Diversity on campus in classrooms
c. Opportunity to obtain a college degree

9. Suggested supports for Latinx college students (Structural aspects)
a. Increase communication about available resources
b. Increase parent engagement
c. Provide services in Spanish
d. Ask and listen to what students need
e. Advertise to Latina/o/x/Hispanic students
f. Increase financial supports
g. Provide faculty/staff trainings about how to support Latina/o/x/Hispanic students

10. Covid Impact (Structural aspects)

11. Liberation (Intrapersonal/Interpersonal)

12. Advice for current and future Latina/o/x/Hispanic Students (Intrapersonal/Social)

13. Other interesting data
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