EXPLORING FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO ACADEMIC PERSISTENCE FOR

UNDERGRADUATE HISPANIC NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS AT HISPANIC

SERVING INSTITUTIONS IN THE SOUTHEAST

by

Floralba Arbelo Marrero

Liberty University

A Dissertation Proposal Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education in Leadership

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the academic persistence of 10 undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students enrolled at a public and a private not for profit Hispanic Serving Institution in the southeastern region of the United States, each in their last year of a bachelor degree program. Using a phenomenological research design and an ecological and sociocultural framework the findings indicated that family context, personal aspirations, campus environment within Hispanic Serving Institutions, life challenges, and English language learning each play a vital role in the persistence behaviors of this population. These factors interact at the student and institutional levels to provide students with internal and external resources and motivators that influence their academic persistence at Hispanic Serving Institutions.

Keywords: Nontraditional Students, Persistence, Hispanic Undergraduate Students, Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI), Hispanic Students, Qualitative

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Dedication

This research is dedicated to my husband Michael Marrero from whom I've learned the meaning of relentless pursuits and whose support has been unwavering. Thank you.

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National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Hispanic Serving Instittuions (HSI)

Hispanic Assoication of Colleges and Universities (HACU)

English Language Learning (ELL)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background

Over the past two decades Hispanic undergraduate college enrollment has tripled, yet bachelor degree completion rates for this group is at about half that of African Americans and a bit less than a third to that of Caucasian undergraduate students (NCES, 2011). The National Center for Education Statistics reports that degree completion at the undergraduate level for students between the ages of 25 and 29 are at 9.6% for Hispanic students, 19% for African American students, and 26.8% for Caucasian students (Arana et al., 2011, p. 238; Aud et al., 2011, p. 34). Despite the increase of Hispanics in postsecondary education, universities are still challenged by high attrition of this population and therefore persistence has become a subject of interest (Bordes-Edgar, Arredondo, Robinson-Kurpius, & Rund, 2011; Crisp & Nora, 2010; Otero, Rivas, & Rivera, 2007; Rivera, 2008). Overall, Hispanic students are a heterogeneous group comprised of Hispanic Americans and immigrants from diverse South and Central American nations, as well as the Caribbean (NCES, 2011) .

Within the scope of this undergraduate student population are Hispanic nontraditional students, which are increasingly enrolling in undergraduate programs for diverse reasons. Characterized as students that are 25 years and older, being financially independent, having delayed entry into college, and caring for dependents, among other factors, some nontraditional students enroll to complete studies begun at prior periods of their lives, for second career purposes, or desire to improve their earning potential (Jinkens, 2009, p. 980; NCES, 2011). A changing United States economy has also contributed to increased enrollment as many adults enroll to retool and learn skills and trades that may aid them to secure employment in a very

competitive marketplace (Pusser, et al., 2007). It is also important to note within this phenomenon that the workforce has shifted significantly over the past three decades with an increase of about 30% (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2010, p. 1) in jobs that require a postsecondary education; this trend is expected to continue over the next decade. This highlights the importance of a college degree as a vital component to economic viability in a changing global environment.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2011) nontraditional learners, those 25 and older comprise 38% percent of undergraduate enrollment; this agency projects that these numbers will either remain static or increase over the next 10 years (Hussar & Bailey, 2009, p. 9). This group is characterized by the NCES as possessing some of the following characteristics: delayed entry to college, single parent status, financially independent, part time enrollment, being employed full time, having dependents, and not possessing a high school diploma (Ross-Gordon, 2011; & Zafft, 2006). Others in the literature identify them as 25 and older, employed full or part-time, financially independent, and handling multiple responsibilities (Harkins, 2009; Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Spitzer, 2000). Nontraditional students who choose to enroll in postsecondary education will confront challenges in seeking degrees based upon their very nature of being nontraditional students and the characteristics associated with the competing demands that are associated with combining adult responsibilities of work, family, and their extended community; all of these require their time and attention.

Chao, Flynn, and DeRocco (2007) reported that nontraditional students will be challenged by their work and financial obligations, family, and by educational systems that are not tailored to meet their needs but that have been created to address issues related to the more

traditional university student. Given that Hispanic population numbers are increasing in the United States, and that Hispanics have "surpassed African Americans as the largest minority group" (Oseguera et al., 2009, p. 23) it is imperative to continue to understand the experiences of this group at the postsecondary level and explore the factors that contribute to their persistence, thereby contributing to their success.

Research provides insight on the experiences, factors, and themes that have emerged for the general undergraduate Hispanic population and how these contribute to persistence from diverse approaches (Arana et al., 2009). Many of these studies focus on ethnic identity (Castillo et al., 2006), family contexts, campus environments (Arana et al., 2009; Bordes-Edgar et al., 2011), first year of college retention tracking and strategies (Bordes-Edgar et al., 2011; Otero, Rivas, & Rivera (2007), academic readiness (Barnes, 2010; Blankenship, 2010), and first generation status (Arana et al., 2009), among other indicators that effect persistence. Yet there still exist gaps in the literature which need to be addressed; these include research on the academic persistence behaviors of Hispanics in diverse geographic areas of the United States, comparisons between Hispanic graduate and undergraduate persistence, and comparative analyses of Hispanic undergraduates at HSIs, among others (Arana et al., 2009; Otero et al., 2007).

This study addressed the gap as related to geography, Hispanic heterogeneity, and a subpopulation of Hispanic undergraduate students that are characterized as nontraditional students; all within the context of Hispanic Serving Institutions by exploring the factors promote persistence for the Hispanic nontraditional student at Hispanic Serving Institutions in the southeast United States, specifically south Florida. The findings of this study have the potential

to assist institutions of higher education that serve the dense Hispanic population that exists in this and other regions, in cultivating learning environments and strategies that engage these students and sustain academic persistence for this population.

Situation to Self

The study bears relevance and interest to me as my career trajectory includes public policy research on New York City immigrant youth and on education programs that have shown promise in their work with Hispanic youth in the United States, as well as my work with at risk populations, and teaching Hispanic college students in different geographic locations. Having witnessed firsthand how the effect of education, quality of programming, and access to opportunities influence career choices, economic viability, and impact community, I continue to consider it a substantive topic and desire to contribute to the literature in this specific area. As a Hispanic doctoral candidate working among Hispanic college populations, this study has helped me to obtain a deeper understanding of factors and experiences, of which I am certain, will assist postsecondary institutions to develop and provide targeted services to their student populations which aid in increasing the possibility of college degree completion; persistence is an imperative factor for success.

The research sites which participated in this study were two Hispanic Serving Institutions in the south Florida area from which participants were recruited. I am employed by one of the institutions as a curriculum developer and project director, and at the time of the study did not work directly with the proposed participant population. My role at the university has been to work collaboratively with university executive administrators, directors, chairpersons, faculty, and personnel in facilitating curriculum redesign, integrating technology in the development of a

co-curricular remediation methodology, and to supervise the completion of an 18,000 square foot instructional facilities expansion for science and technology initiatives.

Research suggests that in order to appropriately meet the needs of populations at risk, there are specific steps that universities and their personnel need to take into account in shaping policies and services (Chao et al., 2007). Among the theoretical frameworks in the persistence research is the ontological philosophical assumption which seeks to understand the nature of the reality for Hispanic college student populations and the factors of persistence. The perspectives that the participants provided were an important component to understanding the common themes in their individual and collective experiences based upon participant reality and the phenomenon itself (Creswell, 2007). The interpretive worldview also shaped the study as the major element that impacts society through attainment and persistence gaps for Hispanic populations in college. Specifically the conditions that provoke desertion and factors that influence persistence among this group; how sociocultural values, campus environment, experiences with faculty, personal issues, and conflicting roles all intersect to effect academic persistence.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed by this study is the low academic attainment of Hispanic nontraditional undergraduate students, specifically their low retention and undergraduate completion rates. Hispanic college students have a significantly lower graduation rate than their Caucasian and African American counterparts, with a 9.6%, 26.8% and 19% attainment of bachelor degrees respectively (Arana et al., 2011, p. 238; Aud et al., 2011, p. 34; Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009). With a low bachelor degree attainment and Hispanic population numbers

on the rise, it is imperative to continue to understand what specific factors contribute to college degree persistence and thereby completion so that this group may improve their economic viability in a shifting global marketplace.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand factors that contribute to college persistence for undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students at Hispanic Serving Institutions in the southeast United States.

Significance of the Study

The decrease of retention over the past decade has not equally affected all students; minorities seem to be most affected by these phenomena, with Hispanic undergraduates demonstrating the lowest educational attainment (Castillo et al., 2006; Garcia, 2010). Many of the Hispanic student persistence studies conducted focus on the general undergraduate population, first year student experiences, first generation status as related to persistence, community college student behaviors, racism and ethnic identity, academic readiness, and many take place in the southwest region of the United States where there are dense Hispanic populations (Arana et al., 2011; Escobedo, 2007; Oseguera et al., 2009; Otero et al., 2007). Other studies have focused on predictor variables of success, transfer decisions, cultural predictors, sense of belonging, motivation, self-determination as the context to study persistence, and take place in non-Hispanic Serving Institutions (Crisp & Nora, 2010; Maestas, Vaquera, Muñoz-Zehr, 2007; Young, Johnson, Hawthorne, & Pugh, 2011). It is important to draw from this body of research and contribute to the gaps in the literature in order to inform the education sector.

While the literature provides a diverse scope of research on persistence for this general group, undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students, which are increasing in numbers on college campuses, have not been thoroughly explored as a population in relation to persistence in the context of Hispanic Serving Institutions (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2010). Understanding the factors of persistence for this subpopulation of undergraduate Hispanic students in the context of Hispanic Serving Institutions is an area of study that contributes to the research. The importance of comprehending the factors that promote persistence can be of great value to university communities across the United States struggling to help nontraditional students stay on course during their undergraduate studies; especially to Hispanic Serving Institutions that serve concentrated numbers of Hispanic students. Hispanic Serving Institutions, in almost all instances, did not necessarily aspire to become such, but serve Hispanic students due to their geographic location and the demographics related to a concentration of Hispanics (Benitez & DeAro, 2004). The findings of this study can assist the educational sector in providing targeted services and developing programs that meet specific needs for this group and that successfully assist them in persisting toward completion of their studies.

The National Council on La Raza's 2007 statistical brief states, "Hispanics age 25 and older are less likely than Blacks and Whites to receive a bachelor's degree" (Kohler & Lazarín, 2007, p. 11). It is imperative to understand what it is that influences Hispanic nontraditional learners to stay the course and persist in their college education. It is also important to note that the southeast region possesses an extremely heterogeneous Hispanic community that either arrived to the U.S. directly from or have ancestry linked to Central and South America, and the Caribbean. Furthermore, Miami Dade County, in which all of the participants of this study reside

in, is among the counties listed in the United States that is home to a majority of Hispanics (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

Research Questions

The following questions guided this study:

1. How do undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students attending Hispanic Serving Institutions describe persistence?

2. What type of experiences do undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students understand as having contributed to their persistence?

3. How do undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students describe their experiences at Hispanic Serving Institutions?

4. What specific factors do participants identify as having contributed to their persistence at Hispanic Serving Institutions?

Research Plan

A phenomenological research approach was utilized for this study. Drawn from education, philosophy, and psychology, this method communicates shared experiences of a particular phenomenon among several individuals or a group in order to understand the essence of those experiences (Creswell, 2007). Moustakas (1994) describes this approach as "a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essence of the experience" (p. 13). Gaining insight from individuals that are experiencing the phenomenon under investigation can elucidate it further and allow the phenomenon to be further analyzed, thereby drawing out information on the phenomenon. Using the descriptions of experiences provided by participants through "open

ended" questions and conversations provided content to extract structures of experiences that are reflective in nature that may be interpreted through analysis. Hernandez (2000) mentions the appropriateness of qualitative research methodologies to investigate issues associated to retention, of which persistence is, because of its adaptability and the rich descriptions that can be elucidated through the data, especially when working with "cultural concepts" among diverse students.

Within the phenomenological context a hermeneutical typology was used to interpret the analysis of the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007). Moustakas (1994) states, "hermeneutic science involves the art of reading a text so that the intention and meaning behind appearances are fully understood" (p. 9). Descriptions of experiences are only one component of a whole, experiences are dependent upon "historical groundings" as Moustakas (1994) describes them; these being the context of persistence and completion of Hispanic nontraditional students in the context of the whole experience and the data on persistence and completion for Hispanic undergraduate students, which is what this study will be grounded upon.

By focusing upon Hispanic nontraditional students I was able to focus on this subgroup within the general Hispanic undergraduate student population and understand their particular academic persistence experiences as they relate to their undergraduate studies. This provided clearer picture of the type of persistence experiences which was derived through the data analysis and interpretation. It should also be noted that it is imperative for the researcher to set aside any opinion or prejudice on the subject and understand the text through a constant synthesizing of interconnected meanings and interpretations to be clarified through the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology was a good fit for my study and interest in understanding the nature of

persistence for this population, specifically the themes that surfaced among participants and how those are meaningful in the context of persistence for undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students. Framing the meanings, descriptions, and experiences that emerged as a result of common experiences, interaction, support, and cultural norms all support this type of methodology.

Delimitations

The National Center for Education Statistics labels nontraditional students as those 25 and older characterized by delayed entry into college, single parent status, financially independent, full time employment, having dependents, or a combination of these (Hussar & Bailey, 2009). Kenner and Weinerman (2011) in their study on the use of adult learning theory on nontraditional undergraduate students defined them as 25 and over, with a high school diploma, and financially independent (p. 87). Spitzer (2000) categorizes nontraditional students as those 25 years of age and older, Bean and Metzner (1985) defined nontraditional students as 24 years and older with part time attendance, and Harkins (2009) describes them as having many responsibilities that set them apart from the more traditional student. This study aligned the criteria for nontraditional students closely to that of the NCES as described above.

As the focus of this study focuses on Hispanic undergraduate students, this ethnic category was defined as, "Hispanic origin can be viewed as the heritage, nationality group, lineage, or country of birth of the person or the person's parents or ancestors before their arrival in the United States" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011, p. 2). It is important to note that Hispanics are a heterogeneous group and some studies focus on particular subgroups such as Cubans, Mexican Americans, and or Puerto Ricans among others; this study focused on a general Hispanic group,

not a particular Hispanic group. Participants were all Hispanic nontraditional students, 25 years and older, enrolled in an undergraduate program as a nontraditional student, and met two of the following criteria; have dependents, were employed full or part time, had delayed entry to college, or were financially independent; participants had to meet a combination of a minimum of two of these characteristics in addition to the age characteristic. All were currently enrolled in a four-year degree program at an HSI.

The rationale for these criteria was to homogenize the characteristics that identify the population so that emerging themes could be derived from a common population with similar characteristics, thereby validating findings. These criteria also parallel the NCES (2011) definition found in the literature; this provides a context within which a common understanding of these experiences can be developed. Findings will have increased applicability if adherence to an already established definition is utilized. The literature sometimes uses the term Latinos, Chicanos, and or Hispanic to describe Hispanic groups; this study will use the term Hispanic unless directly quoting research which uses a different term than Hispanic. Hispanic Serving Institutions will be defined as those postsecondary institutions that have a Hispanic population of 25% or more within a given academic year as the definition utilized by the NCES (Ross-Gordon, 2011; Torres & Zerquera, 2012, p. 260). The institutions from which participants of this study will be recruited and the context in which persistence is being investigated are Hispanic Serving Institutions.

Persistence, for this study, refers to enrolled student that has remained enrolled through to their senior year of study in a degree program, including periods that they may have had to skip a semester due to unforeseen circumstances. Tripodi (2010) states that persistence is the "study of

individual students and their staying at an institution of higher education until they attain a degree, satisfy their personal goals, or leave higher education entirely" (p. 28). Historically persistence has been linked to retention and attrition (Seidman 2005; Tinto, 1993), has been used as an interchangeable concept with retention despite ideas that link retention as a university responsibility and persistence as a student characteristic (Hernandez, 1999), and defined to suit the context of a study on the subject (Hernandez, 1999). Abeyta (2009) defined persistence as the behavior demonstrated by the student in their pursuit of program completion. Throughout the literature there seems to be no universal consensus as to how persistence is defined but that it is generally associated with student motivation toward goal attainment (Tripodi, 2010).

Limitations

The study took place in the southeastern region of the United States, and all ten participants were enrolled in one of the two Hispanic Serving Institutions; one was public and one was a private not for profit, the findings may be limited to the unique ethnographic landscape of this region. Another limitation is that Cubans, which are the predominant ethnic group in south Florida, are granted political asylum and treated differently from other immigrant groups. The Cuban experience may differ from that of another group, specifically from Central and South America. This will be addressed in the study by documenting country of origin and ethnicity.

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Chapter Summary

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This study focused on understanding the factors associated with undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional student persistence in the context of Hispanic Serving Institutions. This was accomplished through the use of a phenomenological methodology that explored the experiences

of ten participants in order to provide further insight to the educational community that work with this population. Through interviews, journaling, and focus groups, common themes, words, and experiences were coded and meanings interpreted to provide an understanding of this phenomenon. Comprehending what it is that motivates undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional undergraduates to persist in their degree programs is a key that will help institutions work more efficiently to serve this population, and bring knowledge to the forefront of the persistence research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Universities are increasingly being challenged to provide education to students of diverse backgrounds, including Hispanic undergraduate students. With a 300% increase in enrollment of Hispanic students over two decades (NCES, 2011, p. 34), this group is enrolling at a historic rate, yet attrition and low degree completion rates point toward low academic persistence for this population (Arana et al., 2011). More and more, college campuses are comprised of minorities and nontraditional students, Hispanics are among those which comprise each category (Garcia, 2011). With a population increase that points toward Hispanics forming up to 29% of the United States population by the year 2050 compared with only 14% in 2005 (Passel & Cohn, 2008, p. i), high birth rates, greater consumer impact, and participation in the labor force (Humphreys, 2010), educators are attempting to comprehend what it is that motivates Hispanic students to persist.

The literature provides insight to the disparities in educational attainment between Hispanic students and different ethnic groups in the United States, specifically in higher education. Hispanic student baccalaureate graduation rates are at 9.6% as compared to African Americans that are at 19% and Caucasians that are at 26.8% (Aud et al., 2011, p. 34; Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009, pp. 23-24). While data demonstrates a significant increase in the number of Hispanic students enrolled at the postsecondary level, with the greatest gains in enrollment from 4% in 1979 to 13% in 2009 in degree granting institutions compared to other ethnic groups, graduation rates point toward incomplete degrees (NCES, 2011, pp. 34-35). Hispanics make up on average about 8% of the total undergraduate 4-year college population across public, private,

and not for profit institutions, yet they are still lagging significantly behind the Caucasian and African American student populations (NCES, 2011, pp.112-113).

Persistence studies indicate that traditionally, minorities possess low graduation rates and describe variables that are related to this as being linked to academic, personal, demographic characteristics, first generation status, academic deficiencies, and university context (Aguilar, 2011; Arana, Castañeda-Sound, Blanchard, 2011; Otero, Rivas, & Rivera, 2007). A 2007 report by the United States Labor Bureau asserts that nontraditional students have lower postsecondary persistence and completion rates than traditional students, possess unique needs due to the competing demands and responsibilities, and indicates that universities, by and large, are still operating under a framework created for the more traditional student, thereby not meeting the needs of this population (Chao et al., 2007). These are serious factors to consider with an ever-changing demographic and economic landscape that provokes shifts in enrollment trends and patterns that need to be addressed through university policies and programs that meet current student current needs.

Early studies which pioneered the research on retention provided a model of persistence which was framed around assimilation of minorities to an Anglo college environment with Tinto (1982) leading the way providing a dropout model that considered the differences "within academic institutions, between dropouts as academic failure and as voluntary withdrawal" (p. 688). Tinto's (1982) dropout model did open new ground for the education research yet was admittedly limited as it focused upon freshmen qualities and the interaction of these with institutional characteristics and social systems within; external and financial determinants were not factored into that model. Nevertheless scholars and practitioners continue to study the

problem of attrition; it is suggested that only a multitheoretical approach can work to combat attrition and significantly influence persistence; one that is multidisciplinary and addresses retention from diverse perspectives (Seidman, 2005). Universities are spending considerable resources in trying to create effective practices that combat attrition and to understand how to help students persist, as failed postsecondary student experiences threaten to effect society at many levels (Robbins, Le, Oh, , & Button, 2009).

Through the lens of persistence, the Hispanic attrition and college graduation rates is quite alarming among educators, policy makers, and at the community level. Different studies attribute the issue to diverse factors of the Hispanic population, and suggest consideration of sociocultural factors, institutional characteristics, academic readiness, and the different hurdles that Hispanic students must overcome to succeed at the undergraduate level (Hernandez, 2000; Lopez-Mulnix & Mulnix, 2006; Oseguera et al., 2009). This study sought to delve into the experiences of the Hispanic nontraditional student to understand what it is that promotes their persistence at the undergraduate level.

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems theory provides a framework for this study and asserts that there are microsystems and mesosystems that the learner interacts with which impact their development. In education this is demonstrated by links and interactions that include culture, educators, institution, and community that impact a student's success (Ortiz & Ordonez-Jasis, 2005). The type of support on and off campus, advising, cultural norms, campus experiences, student-faculty interactions, employment obligations, family responsibilities; how these impact and interconnect to effect achievement and persistence is what framed this research.

The specific relationships that the learner has with individuals across systems such as their home, campus, church, neighborhood, social settings, and in the context of the university; these all have the potential to provide a pathway to individual development (Arana et al., 2011; Woolley, 2009). This study analyzed how it is these individuals and groups interact with one another to provide a support system for the learner, how these are linked and interact to potentially have impact their academic persistence (Kazdin, 2000; Woolley, 2009).

Sociocultural theory also frames the research as this theory proposes that individual learning is associated with social relationships and interactions that effect educational outcomes. Based upon the Vygotskian sociocultural idea that humans are embedded in highly complex set of relationships which are linked to learning and therefore human behavior cannot exist in a vacuum of this matrix (Vygotsky, 1978). In education this is demonstrated by links and interactions that include culture, educators, and community (Ortiz & Ordonez-Jasis, 2005). The specific type of support, advising, cultural norms, on campus experiences all impact and interconnect to effect achievement and persistence. The relationships and interactions within sociocultural context impact how individuals think and learn.

Review of the Literature

Success factors among Hispanic students are of interest in this study as they potentially increase persistence and college graduation rates and therefore are worthy of mention; they also provide a comparative context for discussion on the data gathered from this study. Arana, Castañeda-Sound, Blanchard, and Sound (2011) assert that Hispanic students that found support across various social systems had an increased chance of college completion. In their study on success indicators it was found that family context, student generational status, and the

connection to the campus, all play a role in the success of the student (Arana, Castañeda-Sound, Blanchard, & Sound, 2011). Research suggests that persistence may be influenced by environmental, individual, and social factors. The relationships that students develop, how they contextualize their role in a campus setting, how they perceive themselves as students, and the importance of education in the schema of their life influences the decisions they make to persist in or to abandon their studies (Lopez-Mulnix et al, 2006; Olivares, 2011; Oseguera et al., 2009).

Hernandez and Lopez (2004) discuss the heterogeneity among the Hispanic population of undergraduate students, yet how there are common factors that do contribute to their educational attainment, such as family ties, economic viability, mentoring relationships, campus engagement, and "academic self-context", (p. 40) among others. This ethnic population is extremely diverse, some born in the United States, others emigrate from Latin America or the Caribbean, and demonstrate a variance of colloquial language, mannerisms, customs, and traditions. Regionally they can represent dense populations from a specific country, such as the large amount of Mexicans in the southwest and Puerto Ricans in the northeast (United States Census Bureau, 2011). Though there are common elements of the Hispanic culture, there are also differences; these dissimilarities may have an impact on education. The variability of issues, both academic and nonacademic, cultural norms, and experiences all have the potential to contribute to Hispanic student success or failure to complete a college education and presents a challenge to university faculty and administration that work with these populations.

Bordes-Edgar, Arredondo, Robinson-Kurpius and Rund (2011) emphasize that there are significant social, campus, and family ties that are linked to Hispanic student success in higher education. Their research asserts, among other things, that there are ties between high school and

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college to be built in preparing this particular group for the academic lifestyle of the university, friendships that counteract isolation, and mentoring relationships which all played a role in the academic success for Hispanic students. It will be important to note how this particular experience relates to adult nontraditional students.

Hispanics in the United States

The United States Census Bureau reports that the American nation is experiencing an ongoing ethnic shift due to rapidly increasing numbers of Hispanics in the United States; in fact it is estimated that Hispanics have made up more than 50% of the nation's population increase between the years of 2000 and 2010 (Passel, Cohn, Lopez, 2011, p.1; U.S. Census Bureau, 2011, p.2) and that trend is expected to continue. The Pew Research Center reports that Hispanics, currently the "nation's largest minority group, will triple in size and will account for most of the nation's population growth from 2005 through 2050. Hispanics will make up 29% of the U.S. population in 2050, compared with 14% in 2005" (Passel & Cohn, 2008, p. i). These figures point toward a heightened economic impact by Hispanics on the United States economy. Humphreys (2010) asserts in an economic impact study that the Hispanic aggregate consumer market power in 2010 was larger than "all but fourteen countries in the world" (p. 6) and purports that this group will continue to strengthen consumerism in the United States.

Since the year 2000 Hispanic purchasing power has grown by 50% and represents a larger increase in purchasing power than that of all United States consumers and is expected to continue to expand in comparison to other U.S. groups (Humphreys, 2010, p. 11). It is also reported that the Hispanic median household income was at $38, 039 (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2010, p. 8) as compared with the overall American household median income of $49,777

(p. 7). This population has high birth rates as compared to the total population, and between the years of 2000 and 2010 experienced an increase of 39.8% compared with a 9.8% increase for the total U.S. population (DeNavas-Walt et al., p. 11).

Hispanics are a relatively young group with 34.2% of their population under the age of 18 in 2008 as compared with 22.5% of the non-Hispanic population (DeNavas-Walt, 2010, p. 11), and had a business ownership growth rate of 44% from 2002 and 2007 compared to 18% for overall U.S. business ownership increase (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The data demonstrates that Hispanics are young, represent a robust aggregate consumer market, trends point toward an increase of Hispanic owned businesses and that the group is contributing to the U.S. economy, but this group still lags behind in educational attainment in comparison to other groups and could potentially have a greater economic impact with an increase in post-secondary education attainment. Furthermore the Pew Research Center estimates that the number of working age Hispanics, that is, between the ages of 16 and 64 will double as compared to a decline in the non-Hispanic White share of the working age population (Passel & Cohn, 2008, p. 10), it behooves the education sector to investigate issues of persistence in order to best serve the expanding Hispanic population in the United States.

This unprecedented cultural shift in the United States effects educators at all levels of the United States educational spectrum. At the high school level Hispanic student graduation rates are low in comparison to national graduation rates of 53% and 75% respectively (Woolley, 2009, p. 9). Also important to note is the fact that 21.4% of this population lives below the poverty line when compared to 7.8% non-Hispanics (Niemeyer, Wong, & Westerhaus, 2009, p. 613) and that Hispanics comprise up to 41% of students in the 'top ten largest public school districts'

(Marshall, 2010, p. 1054); understanding factors of educational success for this group is

imperative to inform policy makers, educators, families, administrators, researchers, and

Hispanics overall.

At the post-secondary education level Hispanic enrollment increased about 40% between

1999 and 2009 (NCES, 2011a, p. 34), and fivefold since 1976 (Aud et al., 2011, p. 34) but the

9.6% (Arana et al., 2011, p. 238) completion rates demonstrates that they enroll but do not

persist. Among the general undergraduate population, between the years of 2000 and 2009 there

was a 27% increase of students 24 years of age and younger while the enrollment of students 25

years of age and older increased by 43% (NCES, 2011b).

Minority Persistence

The problem of minority achievement has been a topic of study for some time in a nation

that is increasingly diverse, where the differences in educational attainment translate into

increased earning potential and advancement, and where race relations have been a historical

issue (Weiher & Tedin, 2006). Carter (2006) explains that the postsecondary degree gap at the

higher education level between minorities and nonminority students is vastly disproportionate

when comparing individuals in their late twenties, "more than one-third of Whites have at least a

bachelor's degree, but only 18% of African Americans and 10% of Hispanics have attained

bachelor degrees" (p. 33); furthermore studies demonstrate that minority students have higher

attrition rates.

Among private and public institutions in the state of Indiana, minority and nonminority,

an academic persistence study showed that background variables influenced the persistence of all

students regardless of their ethnicity or race, but there were differences in the degree and pattern

of the impact (Carter 2006). In this study the Caucasian students whose parents did not possess postsecondary credentials had less of a chance of persisting to completion at the undergraduate level, yet those that came from families with significant incomes had a better chance of persisting. For the Hispanics and African American students in this study, parental postsecondary credentials did not yield significant results but high income did affect persistence; high levels of income are linked to college persistence across race and ethnicity. This same study found that advanced placement and honors curriculum at the high school level significantly influenced persistence at the college level for all three groups but that college choice impacted persistence for Caucasian and African American students, and grades had no impact at all. For all three groups, college experiences with support services through remediation courses were associated to persistence (Carter, 2006).

Academic preparation and cultural capital has also been linked to college success for minority students. In a mixed methods study conducted on high school preparation, college choice, and factors influencing enrollment for minority groups, researchers concluded that the attainment of an education is comprised of sociocultural factors that take place within institutions. Students in this study discussed the experiences at the high school level that took place around them that either deemed them "smart" and on a college track, were then provided with mentors, and encouraged to attend college, or, virtually ignored them with little assistance with their postsecondary plans if not on the "smart" track (Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, & Suh, 2004). Among the different ethnicities and races, persistence also represents the willingness to contend with difficulties to obtain a goal.

In a study conducted on how minority undergraduate students (African American, Asian American, Hispanic, and Native American) persist in an engineering program at a predominantly Caucasian institution researchers found that among the top struggles minority students mentioned to persist were keeping grades up, lack of academic preparation prior to college coursework, feelings of isolation, heavy course load, internal program pressures, faculty issues, large class sizes, gender discrimination, and English as a second language; most of these struggles are not always visible and many go unnoticed (Shehab et al., 2007).

In this same study 18 of 40 students mentioned the single most reported factor associated with the experiences they had in keeping academic progress was the quality of the teaching faculty member in the classroom. These students mentioned that there was a lack of the explanation of concepts and assisting students in grasping material, felt disconnected from their professors which added a level of inapproachability to the source that they believed could be of assistance, lack of hands on applications, and that it seemed as if they were purposely attempting to weed out students in the program; this from all four minority students with a majority of Asian and Hispanic students voices in this category (Shehab, et al., 2007). Of those that reported positive experiences with faculty, these were related to the willingness to assist students, provide advice, and moral support during difficult times.

Hispanic students were among the highest proportion that mentioned difficulty with course content and noted that there was not enough practical application and "hands on" work, while theory and homework seemed to be main structure of the courses. The major differences that emerged from this study were that the Hispanic and African American participants stated they were not adequately prepared for the rigors of college courses and felt that they were at an

academic and cultural disadvantage in the college environment from a lack of cultural and social capital (Shehab et al., 2007). Strong feelings of isolation were mentioned predominantly by the African American group, but also by the Hispanic and Asian American group with isolation referring to a lack of camaraderie with others similar to themselves. The Hispanic females in the group reported gender discrimination that was linked to cultural gender stereotypes of Hispanic women which may not have goals that surpass marriage and children; these students attributed this to how male students disregarded their abilities and potential contributions.

Important to note among the strategies that were most reported to work toward persistence among these minorities were personal strategies such as finding internal motivation to persist on overcoming academic struggles, seeking out academic assistance, tutoring, a commitment to complete their goal, time management, learn how to exist a challenging environment, work harder, retake the class, as well an understanding of how to navigate the academic system. Among the persistence factors most mentioned in the study was finding a support system through a person or persons, a type of cultural capital that helped the student navigate the system and remain in college. Also important to note here is that most of the strategies mentioned by the students were not initiated by the institution but by the student themselves, understanding that their persistence was at risk (Shehab, et al., 2007). This sheds some light into what some groups consider important tools and strategies that aid their goal of degree attainment and how these factors, experiences, and perceptions impact their persistence; these are an important part of the discussion section of this study.

Campus Environment

It is evidenced in the literature that students' perceptions of campus environment and engagement influence academic outcomes and is linked to how a student perceives that they form a part of an institution and their role in that community (Edman & Brazil, 2009). Studies show that how students perceive that they belong to a campus community, the attitudes they develop within the community are correlated to their academic performance (Mckinney, McKinney, Franiuk, & Schweiter 2006; Thompson,Thompson, Orr, & Grover, 2007). The research related to campus environment includes issues associated to race, cultural norms, culturally competent personnel, and student support practices; these should be considered when attempting to comprehend the patterns of success for Hispanic undergraduate students.

In a study conducted by Brown (2008) a sampling of 52 students both of Caucasian and Hispanic descent were surveyed to assess how culture and language patterns influenced each group's belief on the appropriateness of classroom behavior. Culture did influence student perceptions on the participation, attitudes, and behavior of students in the classroom, especially in the area of group expectations (p. 98). Hispanics demonstrated different expectations than their Caucasian counterparts in the area of classroom participation due to cultural perceptions of this type of behavior. An example of this was the perceived outcome by the Hispanics versus the Caucasians in a classroom; the Hispanics in the study considered classroom engagement behaviors as unbecoming due to cultural norms that considered this type of behavior as showing off. The study indicated the importance of administrators and faculty in being culturally competent when working with diverse populations and comprehending cultural cues and mindset patterns linked to specific behaviors (Brown, 2008).

Crisp and Taggart (2011) found that some campus discriminatory experiences may impact the academic tracks of Hispanic students and whether they choose to move on and complete their four-year degrees. Crisp and Taggart " "suggest[ed] that the discriminatory experiences of students during high school serve to decrease the odds of attending a four-year institution even after controlling for academic preparation and the other variables in the model" (p. 33). Experiences at the high school level also do impact college choice, as do at the college level, experiences with peers, faculty, administration, and school personnel which were all were found to relate to the college behaviors of Hispanic students and influenced their decisions to persist (Crisp & Taggart, 2011).

Colleges have slowly become increasingly culturally competent, and in the inclusive manner in which they work with Hispanics and other ethnic groups. Curricular reforms have also been subject to change over the past decade to reflect the groups represented among university populations. Lopez-Mulnix and Mulnix (2006) conducted case studies across four universities and found that the hiring of competent personnel to work toward establishing frameworks for minority groups, community support, and moving beyond the "power elite" all had an influence upon the campus culture that worked to promote Hispanic student retention (p. 19). Their research argues that the single most important factor working toward Hispanic persistence is the unyielding commitment of the university to work toward embracing diversity in all contexts (Lopez-Mulnix & Mulnix, 2006). Robbins, Le, Oh, and Button (2009) in a meta-analytic study on intervention effects of retention found that teaching students how to self manage increases their effectiveness as students and helps them persist. While the research may provide such

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conclusions, it is important to keep in mind that persistence can be influenced by many different factors as Seidman (2005) presents retention as a holistic or systemic effort.

Sociocultural Factors of Persistence

Within the framework of achievement, sociocultural theory proposes that individual learning is associated with social relationships and interactions that effect educational outcomes. In education this is demonstrated by experiences, links and interactions that include parents, family, teachers and community (Ortiz & Ordonez-Jasis, 2005). How institutions interact with students through support and policies that do not undermine their persistence because these practices demonstrate an understanding of the diverse attitudes, cultural cues, and motivations that students bring with them to the academic realm. How institutions collaborate with community organizations, cultural groups, and in the case of the nontraditional student, are sensitive to the needs of those with family, and create bridges that cultivate relationships can have an impact on persistence.

From a student perspective, how they manage their cultural values and general social schemas in order to navigate and succeed in a higher education setting is important to understand. Smith (2007) states that "minority students may not always represent the generally characterized cultural norms, beliefs, or behaviors of their society due to individual differences defined by their personal experiences" (p. 19). Lascher (2008) asserts that there are delicate characteristics within a culture that potentially effect educational outcomes, such as the strong bonds and family responsibilities that may supersede the educational commitments of Hispanic students. Perhaps these links to family may diverge at times from educational goal attainment for

having an obligation to the family that conflicts with their own educational aspirations which in turn affects persistence.

Liem, Martin, Porter, and Colmar (2012) assert that the motivation to achieve academically is socioculturally rooted and dependent upon the culture, and linked to the context in which a student develops throughout their lives. Their study tested the mediating role of value orientations in achievement motives using a one-path analytic model and found that Indonesian students' achievement motivation was linked to family, educators, and other influences. Students' in this study felt compelled to attain educational goals based upon the expectations that others had upon them, they had an "ought approach" to do well because they should, and an "ought avoidance" to avoid failure because of the expectations placed upon them by their community (Liem, Martin, Porter, & Colmar, 2012, p. 8). Zell (2010) reviews the personal experiences of Hispanic college students and how those relationships, interactions, and the influence of them impact persistence through perceptions of self-efficacy. The study demonstrates that a willingness of students to overcome challenges, understand themselves, move toward purposefulness, understand the perception of others, mentoring opportunities, and family generating a culture of success as factors that helped propel them toward college success (Zell, 2010).

Tamara (2008) discusses the positive experiences of Hispanic undergraduate student persistence as a result of personal drive to improve socioeconomic status, the desire to ameliorate the needs of others, aspirations to depart from the cultural norm of limited educational experiences, and determination to break with traditions, that compel first generation Hispanic college students to stay the course. Research also shows that there are positive relationships

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between ethnic identity and academic beliefs, especially the value placed upon an education as influenced by the culture of the student (Dotterer, McHale, & Crouter, 2009). Sociocultural factors do play a role in persistence as demonstrated in the literature, yet how these play out within the context of Hispanic adult nontraditional students in the context of Hispanic Serving Institutions has yet to be established.

Hispanic Serving Institutions

Over the past few years, Hispanic Serving Institutions have been increasing in number across the United States due to diverse factors. Having emerged from a convergence of sociopolitical and economic factors, including demographic shifts in the United States, the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, and increased access to minority populations to higher education, these continue to grow in different regions of the United States. (Gasman, Baez, & Sotello Viernes Turner, 2008). These institutions are characterized as being either public or private not for profit, offering degree granting two or four year programs, having a Hispanic enrollment minimum of 25% full time or equivalent, and it is reported that these institutions are graduating more Hispanics than other postsecondary institutions (Torres & Zerquera, 2012, p. 260; Vigil-Laden, 2004). It may very well be that they graduate more Hispanics by default because they have a higher concentration of Hispanics or because they are intentionally fostering the success of Hispanic students or neither; these uncertainties have caused interest in HSIs and in recent years these institutions have been identified as a key area of research for higher education in order to shed light on their particular characteristics (Nuñez, Sparks & Hernandez, 2011; Pascarella, 2006). Hispanic Serving Institutions must meet specific criteria of having at minimum 50% of their student population categorized at or below the poverty level as defined by

the Bureau of the Census if they desire to qualify for Title V grant initiatives that are available to

Minority Serving Institutions that tend to enroll a significant amount of at risk students (Johnson,

Conrad, & Perna, 2006; Torres & Zerquera, 2012, p. 260; Vigil-Laden, 2004).

The educational community has been slow to recognize this grouping of postsecondary

institutions but is taking note of them due to advocacy efforts by the Hispanic Association of

Colleges and Universities (HACU), and the President's Advisory Commission on Educational

Excellence for Hispanic Americans, established in 1994 by President Bill Clinton. These

organizations, HACU and the President's Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for

Hispanic Americans, exist to increase awareness of the needs of and improve the access of

educational opportunities for Hispanic students, expand HSI participation in federal programs, as

well as provide technical support to institutional organisms that work with Hispanics.

Hispanic Serving Institutions are also clearly recognized due to the amount of Hispanics

that are enrolled among their ranks, approximately 46% of Hispanic college students are enrolled

at HSIs according to a national study (Nuñez, Sparks & Hérnandez, 2011). Gasman, Baez, and

Sotello Viernes Turner (2008) mention that with the exception of Hostos Community College,

National Hispanic University, and Boricua College, all established in the 1960s and 1970s with

the specific mission to educate Hispanic students, most HSIs have been labeled as such due to

the specific demographic shift that has taken place in their regions and did not start out with the

specific intention to serve Hispanic populations. Yet more and more postsecondary institutions

are being categorized as HSIs among geographic regions that are home to dense Hispanic

populations and are working with Hispanic populations; these institutions have the potential to

offer insight as to what works to influence the undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional learner's persistence.

Nontraditional Students

Nontraditional students are a growing presence across universities in America as enrollment trends show that in the last decade there was a 47% increased enrollment on campuses compared to 27% enrollment of younger more traditional students (NCES, 2011). The National Center for Education Statistics anticipate that in this current decade there will be a projected pattern of growth equal to 23% for nontraditional students, the same group projects a 9% growth rate for traditional student enrollment (2011). Nontraditional students are a formidable presence on college campuses across America and understanding their needs will be vital to academic persistence which will lead to the completion of college degrees as their enrollment numbers continue to rise (NCES, 2011).

In the past, undergraduate institutions have focused their energy toward meeting the needs of more traditional students; these are described as students that study full time, arrive on campus after completing high school, and have no dependents (NCES, 2011). More and more, nontraditional adult learners are changing that paradigm and forcing universities to reconsider policies that were created for the more traditional students. Colleges have had to create different programs, hours, and learning platforms to meet the needs of this nontraditional group that are "employees who study rather than students who work" (Bosworth et al., 2007, p. 1). Kimmel and McNeese (2006) described the need for this group to retool due to global competitive markets and that the access to student funding has facilitated their entrance or return to the university as adult learners. There are powerful market trends that have reshaped the career and job landscape

for individuals, a high school diploma is no longer enough to secure employment as there is a decline in work opportunities for those with only a high school diploma. As nontraditional students retool to meet market demands for knowledge and skilled labor positions, to pursue their desire to earn a living and secure positions in the work place, universities must rethink outdated policies which do not frame a model of success for this group (Chao et al., 2007).

The United States Department of Labor asserts that more than half of "postsecondary students are financially independent; more than half attend school part time" (Chao et al., 2007, p. 3). Chao, Flynn, and Stover-DeRocco (2007) assert that nontraditional students have lower postsecondary persistence rates than traditional students; possess unique needs due to the competing demands and responsibilities, and indicate that universities, by and large, are still operating under a framework created for the more traditional students. They present that the needs of the nontraditional student are not being met by educational institutions (Chao et al., 2007). Nontraditional students generally have a gap between their acquisition of a high school diploma or equivalent and their university studies creating a vacuum of academic knowledge and skills necessary for college level coursework; this can be a deterrent for them once they arrive on a college campus (Kasworm, 2008; Kenner & Weinerman, 2008). While they do obtain practical knowledge and skills in the workplace, and these skills promote task orientation which is important, research recommends that colleges frame learning to the direct benefits associated with connecting content to their multiple adult roles, as it minimizes possible frustration; nontraditional students are interested in knowledge acquisition and application that transfer to their immediate reality (Jinkens, 2009; Kenner & Weinerman, 2008).

Kasworm (2008) discusses how coursework and classroom should be connected to the nontraditional students' other roles, creating a bridge that validates them as "knowledgeable and competent adult actors" (p. 30). This connectedness also creates a space for them to consider theories and knowledge that challenge their paradigms in a supportive context. Other studies indicate the importance of integrating the nontraditional student to the collegiate environment, which is a challenge for universities, as the competing and demanding roles of this type of student limits their ability to interact in this setting (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

Other issues to consider for this population of student is the consideration of the learning styles of nontraditional students as they tend to dislike authoritarianism, prefer self-directed learning, need flexible scheduling, favor scholarship that is linked to real life, appreciate active approaches to learning, and collaborative learning (Jinkens, 2008; Wyatt, 2011). Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007) in their quantitative study on affective and motivational factors in the academic life of undergraduate students, found a closer correlation between intrinsic motivation and positive effect for nontraditional students than for traditional students and on average, interest and age were found to significantly predict the intrinsic motivation to learn for both groups which can increase persistence.

Quantitative studies have linked age as a predictor for cognitive maturity and for the use of time effective learning strategies among nontraditional students which are linked to persistence; this has led researchers to believe that older more nontraditional students may approach learning in different ways than do younger and more traditional students; an important factor to note for those educating nontraditional students (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007). Research also demonstrates that this segment of the undergraduate population in comparison to

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traditional undergraduate students, arrive to class prepared, spend more time on refining their assignments, ask more questions and contribute more to course discussions; they also desire for universities to understand that they bring a wealth of experience to their educational career (Wyatt, 2011).

Other research points out that the multiple roles of the nontraditional student can induce stress which may have an impact on their persistence; the competing roles of this type of student creates a type of tension while attempting to fulfill all their roles in a manner that family, friends, and the workplace are accustomed to having them realize (Guastella, 2009). The conflict ensues when obligations are demanding time, energy, and resources that are limited and so the nontraditional student will depend upon the assistance of family to provide relief while trying to meet their academic responsibilities, and they have to decide which role precedes other roles (Guastella, 2009).

In a study conducted on the conflicting roles of nontraditional student in degree completion, nontraditional students bonded with other students around their commonalities in having multiple roles and this helped to ameliorate this problem, increasing their ability to persist in their studies. The same study found that nontraditional students developed specific strategies that allowed them to manage their conflicting roles of parent, spouse, and employee among others, which were time management, stress coping, effective course scheduling, and understanding what study techniques functioned best for them (Gaustella, 2009). Competing roles are a source of conflict for nontraditional students; their time and attention is limited by their many responsibilities, working toward creating an understanding among the staff and faculty of universities on what type of supportive behaviors and policies meet the needs of this

type of student is imperative for their successful engagement in the university education process (Wyatt, 2011).

Within an academic context, nontraditional student engagement is considered by some as an act of hope that spans across actions, from navigating the initial steps of admissions, registration, and participation in coursework as a part of their many responsibilities, to the engagement of new knowledge, to the act of confronting challenges for position and a willingness to find their place in the higher education setting; a purposeful act in attempt toward an improvement (Kasworm, 2008). Nontraditional students are taking a chance in an effort to gain something of value for themselves and in many instances for those they care for. Generally universities should look to understand the specific policies and practices of what works and the experiences that promote persistence for this group, in order to help develop staff, faculty, programming and support systems that support persistence.

Academic Readiness

The phenomenon titled "academic readiness" is a subject of great debate as high schools and universities struggle to understand how to best have students prepared for the rigors of college level learning. Academic readiness has no official agreed upon definition but Conley (2007) defines it as "the level of preparation a student needs to enroll and succeed, without remediation, in a credit-bearing general education course at a postsecondary institution that offers a baccalaureate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program" (p. 4). It is reported that among bachelor degree granting institutions 30% of students take one or more remedial course and 60% do at community colleges and in 2009 ACT reports that only 28% of high school graduates were ready for biology, 67% for English composition, and 42% for college algebra

(Porter & Polikoff, 2011, p. 3).

Assessing readiness skills is currently an ongoing discussion among groups and there have been recommendations for "preparedness studies" that have been discussed among national groups, researchers, and educators that seek to understand what the criterion should be when assessing readiness and the appropriate criteria to judge this (Conley, 2007). Generally reading skills, avoidance of remedial work, grade point average, high school graduation, and courses completed at the high school level, were used to assess "readiness", yet recently there have been diverse initiatives to arrive at some consensus on appropriate measures of readiness that encompass the entire college experience, including factors that reach beyond high school and first year of college metric indicators (Conley 2007; Estevez, 2008; Porter & Polikoff, 2011). Educators and groups from other sectors are interested in defining a more comprehensive understanding of what entails academic readiness.

Over the past decades there has been an evident increasing academic gap between students who graduate from high school or those who enroll in universities and that are actually prepared to meet the demands of college level coursework (Blankenship, 2010). With more high school graduates enrolling to continue postsecondary education, approximately a 20% increase over 30 years, and more than two thirds of them not meeting "readiness" criteria for college level work, academic readiness is of concern to educators (Porter & Polikoff, 2011, p. 3). Among Hispanic students it is reported that only one in ten are actually demonstrating college readiness in all four of the ACT college readiness examination subject areas based upon national scores, and that this group scores below the national average in comparison to other test takers (Blankenship, 2010). The ACT college readiness examination links low test scores to difficulty

in achieving success in college; academic readiness is another area that should be considered when studying persistence among Hispanic students (Blankenship, 2010).

Davies-Vollum and Greengrove (2010) assert that a lack of academic readiness among nontraditional undergraduate students functions as a detractor to persistence and have implemented a gateway course that helps nontraditional students to attain success at the upper level science courses at the baccalaureate degree level. They have discovered specific skill sets that assist students in their academic work which are "finding and filtering information" through the use of databases, "reading and interpreting scientific material", data collection and analysis, the ability to synthesize information, writing and presenting skills in relation to scientific content, and career planning (p. 29). By creating activities that helped nontraditional students develop these skills, they have helped to increase their academic preparedness for the rigors of upper level science courses at the undergraduate level and had those skills transfer over to help them succeed in non-science courses (Davies-Vollum & Greengrove, 2010). These types of transition courses are offered at some universities to provide the support necessary for nontraditional students entering or resuming university studies and are designed to meet the specific academic needs of this population in order to enhance persistence (Harkins, 2009).

Enrollment Trends

Enrollment trends have differed at the undergraduate and post baccalaureate levels (which include graduate and first-professional programs). Undergraduate enrollment generally increased during the 1970s, but decreased from 10.8 million to 10.6 million between 1983 and 1985 (NCES, 2011). Between the years of 1985 to 1992, undergraduate enrollment increased each year, rising 18 % before stabilizing between 1992 and 1998. During the first decade of the

21st century, undergraduate enrollment rose 39% between 1999 and 2009. Post baccalaureate enrollment had been steady at about 1.6 million in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but rose about 73 percent between 1985 and 2009 (NCES, 2011, pp. 34-35).

Hispanic postsecondary enrollment has increased over 300% over the past 30 years, and as the fastest growing minority group in the United States, increased enrollment is expected to continue (Aud et al., 2011, p. 35; Zell, 2010). These enrollment trends point to necessary university system wide policies that appropriately address and serve the sociocultural and academic needs of these complex populations, these policies if appropriately formulated and applied will impact persistence and eventually lead to gains in completed college degrees.

Skilled Labor Trends

Labor research projects that the United States will fall short of three million postsecondary degrees to fill a need of 22 million skilled labor positions by 2018. The same study states that "we will need at least 4.7 million new workers with postsecondary certificates" (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010, p. 1). Data shows that between the early 1970s and late in the first decade of the 2000s, there was a 30% increase of jobs which required postsecondary education (Carnevale et al., p. 1).

Increasingly labor trends demonstrate the necessity for postsecondary education for employment; it seems as if those individuals that do not possess a postsecondary degree be marginalized in the labor force. Factory jobs in the United States are limited and they have steadily been replaced by jobs that require strategic thinking, non-repetitive tasks, executive and managerial functions, all which require postsecondary training (Carnevale et al., 2010). As nontraditional students return to postsecondary educational institutions to retool for employment

purposes, factors of persistence are vital for institutions to understand in order to successfully work with these students toward completing degrees that are meaningful in a changing labor environment.

Labor Force Demographics

The Department of Labor forecasts dramatic demographic shifts that will impact the labor market. Estimates by this agency predict that the United States Caucasian workforce population will decrease by 19% for the ages of 25–64 from 1980 figures, and Hispanics in the workforce, ages 25–64 will nearly triple, and African Americans will increase by approximately a third. All of this is occurring and yet educational attainment rates for Hispanics do not match these trends; causing great alarm (Bosworth et al., 2007, p. 5). While this working-age population shift occurs, the educational attainment rates indicate that Caucasian students graduate from college at a rate twice of that of African Americans and three times as much as Hispanics; there will clearly be a deficiency of a qualified labor force if these developments continue.

The technology age has transformed labor markets in America and across the globe, moving many employment opportunities to diverse geographic regions that are out of the reach of American labor. Yet there has been a significant increase in knowledge and skilled labor which requires postsecondary education credentials. The 2007 report on Adults in Higher Education confirms that market forces are creating jobs that make academic and technical knowledge that are the result of a postsecondary degree, a prerequisite for work within the scope of an "information and service economy characterized by frequent job and career change" (Bosworth et al., 2007, p. 2). It is common knowledge that earning potential is linked to educational attainment, the same report states, "adults with postsecondary credentials earn

significantly more than those with just a high school education" (Bosworth et al., 2007, p. 2), and employment opportunities with the most significant increased growth are expected to take place among those opportunities that require postsecondary education.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor the United States economy may stagger due to a population that cannot meet market demands for knowledge and skilled workers with 60% of adults between the ages of 25 and 64 years of age that possess no postsecondary credential (Bosworth et al., 2007, p. 2). Furthermore data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics data indicates that the three employment categories by 2014 expected to be among the 10 with most increase rate of growth and a median annual salary that is more than the federal lower living standard category for a family of four ($29,000), all require a postsecondary degree (Bosworth et al., 2007, p. 4). It is important that universities have information at their disposal to help them provide services, programs, and use strategies to increase persistence among Hispanic nontraditional students who make up a significant part of the labor force.

Expected Demographic Trends

The ongoing racial divide between those that obtain a postsecondary education and those who do not, is a growing concern across the labor market, between the decades of 1980's and 1990's Hispanics that obtained bachelor degrees rose only 3% three percentage points and African Americans 6%, Caucasians had a 10% increase of bachelor degree attainment (Chao et al., 2007). These trends are indicative of a workforce that will not be prepared to meet labor demands and an overall rise in the percentage of uneducated working-age population. There is an expected rise in the workforce that has less than a high school diploma of 15% over the next twenty years (Kelly, 2005).

Chapter Summary

The demographic, labor, and enrollment trends demonstrate that the Hispanic population is experiencing unprecedented growth across sectors; how universities meet this challenge is an ongoing debate among academics, administrators, communities, and policymakers. Understanding how it is that diverse relationships, experiences, policies, services, support systems, cultural values, and links intersect to impact persistence is an important determinant in securing degrees for undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students which are increasingly enrolling in postsecondary education. Whether they enroll for work related purposes or for sheer academic purposes, all will confront challenges on their journey to persist in their university studies. How these experiences play out, how students engage challenges, what those experiences are, how they influence their persistence is an important component for a holistic view of undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students.

CHAPER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This qualitative phenomenological study investigated the factors that contributed to persistence for Hispanic nontraditional students enrolled in undergraduate four-year degree programs at two Hispanic Serving Institutions located in southeast Florida in the United States. Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems theory and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory served as the theoretical framework to guide the research which focused on understanding and capturing the essence of shared persistence experiences within the context of a private not for profit university and a public institution of higher education, each which serve a large Hispanic population.

Research Design

Due to the nature of exploring and understanding how the lived experiences of the participants have influenced their persistence, and to comprehend the underlying meaning of those experiences, a hermeneutical phenomenological approach was determined as the appropriate method to conduct this research (Creswell, 2007). Phenomenology is the science of a specific phenomenon, while hermeneutical theory is the exercise of the interpretation; combined, hermeneutic phenomenology interprets the description of lived experiences (van Manen, 1990). This type of methodology uses descriptions of experiences to uncover findings about the phenomenon being examined by focusing on the perceptions of individuals and their lived experiences, which take place in their natural environment (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Moustakas (1994) stated, "the focus on consciousness and experience" (p. 8) is a main emphasis in hermeneutics; it provides insight to the underlying concepts that are revealed through lived experiences. Moustakas described an interrelationship between "the direct conscious description

of experience and the underlying dynamics or structures that account for the experience" (p. 9) which provide an understanding as to the "essence of the experience" (p. 9).

This research study sought to identify factors linked to academic persistence for ten undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students within the context of Hispanic Serving Institutions. This study sought to illustrate the academic persistence of these students in relation to the factors that have impacted their ability to remain constant in their degree programs. The analysis is a personal interpretation that is founded upon the hermeneutical research process and centralizes on the meaning the individual ascribes to those experiences (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). Taking those experiences and thematically analyzing them for collective themes of persistence among the group in a dynamic, ongoing, and reflective exploration of the phenomenon was the goal of the study and therefore, the hermeneutic phenomenological approach was a logical choice.

The qualitative research method of hermeneutic phenomenology is grounded upon the philosophical ideas of Martin Heidegger (1972) who theorized that "human activity" could be subject to interpretation beyond what was visibly apparent; it encompasses time, language, culture, and history moving the interpretation to the "possibilities of being" (Steward & Mickunas, 1990, p. 162). In the hermeneutical framework, observations and data collected do not exist in a vacuum but as a part of a whole experience, including past and present in the ongoing interpretation of these lived experiences. Within the hermeneutical framework there is an acceptance that individual participants have experience with and are aware of these interactions with the phenomenon in question (van Manen, 1990). The data was interpreted utilizing this method and interpreted to determine how each participant described different facets

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of his or her conscious experiences with academic persistence within the complexity of his or her everyday life, and sought out commonalities within the data of the collective group to grasp the essence of those meanings.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students attending Hispanic Serving Institutions describe persistence?

2. What type of experiences do undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students understand as having contributed to their persistence?

3. How do undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students describe their experiences at Hispanic Serving Institutions?

4. What specific factors do participants identify as having contributed to their persistence at Hispanic Serving Institutions?

Participants

The participants were ten undergraduate Hispanic students that met a predetermined set of criteria which evidenced their experience with academic persistence and nontraditional status in their undergraduate studies within Hispanic Serving Institutions in the southeast United States. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) stated that between three and six participants is a judicious amount for a phenomenological study (p. 51), and Creswell (2007) recommended three to ten subjects (p. 126). Purposeful sampling techniques were used to secure participants that fit a specific set of criteria which categorized them as nontraditional students as defined by the literature (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; NCES, 2011).

Each participant was chosen for his or her ability to provide information on academic persistence due to specific experience with the phenomenon being studied; in depth knowledge could be drawn from the data collected from this group (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Participants were enrolled in their last year of a bachelor degree program at one of two Hispanic Serving Institutions that were chosen as sites for the study. Seven of the participants were female and three of the participants were male, ranging in ages from 25 to 54 years old. Participants equal in number were recruited from each institution. Snowball sampling techniques were also used by asking participants to recommend peers that fit the criteria for the study. Institutional program departments assisted with the recruitment of participants by posting flyers (Appendix A), stacking invitation letters in their department waiting areas (Appendix B), and sending flyers to groups they thought would fit the criteria.

Students interested in participating in the study contacted me by phone or email and if they met the criteria to participate in the study; a meeting was arranged to provide an overview of the study and to secure their participation. Participants had to be Hispanic, over the age of 25, and in their last year of a bachelor degree program at one of two Hispanic Serving Institutions in South Florida. They also had to meet two of the following criteria: work full or part-time, be financially independent, have dependents, or have delayed entry to college after high school. The criteria established a measure of categorical validity for the nontraditional student status, as measured by the United States Department of Education (NCES, 2011) and enough homogeneity in the sample so that the research questions were contextually significant and findings of the study useful (Smith et al., 2009).

Once the participant agreed to participate in the study and I determined that the criteria was met, the participant read and filled out a consent form (Appendix C), any questions participants had concerning the study were answered, and an appointment for the in-depth one-on-one interview (Appendix G) was made. Each participant received a copy of his or her signed consent form. Participants were also informed that they would be contacted if any clarification was needed after data collection began.

Sites

Participants were recruited from two Hispanic Serving Institutions in South Florida, Miami University (pseudonym) is a private nonprofit university with a 78% Hispanic, 6% African American, and 7% Caucasian student population. The population is approximately 80% female, with 65% of the university's students achieving full-time status. Of the overall population, 82% described themselves as employed, and 70% over the age of 40 years. Seventy percent of the students are English language learners, and 72% receive student loans (Internal Documents). At the time of the study, there were 307 undergraduate students enrolled, 208 of which identified themselves as Hispanic. The staff and faculty population is predominantly Hispanic (92%) while the remainder of the population is represented by African American, Asian, and Caucasian individuals. The university, accredited by the Middle States Accrediting Agency, offers studies at the bachelor degree level in the disciplines of business administration, education, and psychology. This institution operates on the premise of commitment to social responsibility, which frames its programs and services, and offers degree programs from the associates to doctoral levels.

Dade College (pseudonym) is a large public institution of higher learning in the United States with several campuses in South Florida offering degree programs at the associates and bachelor levels in multiple disciplines of study. The college's bachelor degrees are offered in the disciplines of nursing, supervision, education, electronics, and engineering technology. This institution has over 70% Hispanic enrollment and is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and has approximately 40% male to 60% female enrollment . Both institutions operate in a multicultural and socioeconomic complex region of Florida that has seen significant increases in a shifting population of students that are at risk and unprepared for the rigors of university study. They were each chosen because they represent a Hispanic Serving Institution of the United States with high diversity among its Hispanic student body and have nontraditional students enrolled at the undergraduate level.

Data Collection Procedures

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was secured from Liberty University (Appendix D) after the appropriate authorization from each site was obtained to conduct research in order to proceed with the recruitment of participants and the data collection process. One of the institutions required that I complete the National Institutes of Health Office of Extramural Research "Protecting Human Subjects" online course and follow up examination in order to qualify for application to conduct research at the institution (Appendix E).

Demographic Survey

Data was collected using a demographic survey, an in-depth interview, journaling, and focus group. In qualitative research, utilizing several sources in order to bring about a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation is important (Bogdan &

Biklan, 2007). The interview questions were piloted with a representative sample population at one of the Hispanic Serving Institutions participating in the study. This was conducted to assure clarity and effectiveness of the interview questions (Hernandez, 2000). Once the participants were recruited and the consent forms were signed, each participant was provided with a demographic survey (Appendix F) to complete and return before the one-on-one in-depth interview was to take place. This survey helped to establish participant ethnicity and background information, qualify nontraditional status, and confirm that the participant was in his or her last year of study. Overall, these questions helped to establish a purposeful sampling base and provided general information on the participant and how each one fit into the criteria of the study (Creswell, 2007). An appointment was set up for an in-depth interview which was audio recorded and transcribed within 48 hours of the interview having taken place. As is the practice in qualitative research, pseudonyms were used for participants and institutions to insure confidentiality (Moustakas, 1990). A contact summary sheet for each participant was established to track interactions and submissions of items and to make notes of any characteristics that stood out about the participants and or questions that needed clarification.

In Depth Interview

Phenomenology helps to construct meaning by focusing on "meaning, sense-making and communicative action" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 45). It seeks to understand how individuals "make sense" (p. 45) of their experiences and the significance of those experiences, and how they perceive their circumstances within the context of their own lives through their own terminology. For this study, questions were constructed to elicit information on the participant experience with academic persistence, and while guided questions were utilized, there

were also open ended questions to encourage participants to speak freely on the subject under investigation. Questions one to three were open ended and directive, designed to elicit raw, descriptive data and information on the experiences that have aided the participant in completing his or her undergraduate educational journey (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2007; Olive, 2008). These questions also allowed for a type of definition of persistence to be drawn from the participants.

The fourth question was meant to be reflective in nature and to delve into the process of persistence through the experiences of the participant. Smith et al. (2007) suggested that phenomenological questions should focus on the participants' "understanding of their experiences" (p. 47) and should be exploratory and reflective in nature. Moustakas (1994) described the need to elicit wide-ranging descriptions that frame a basis for "reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experiences" (p. 13). Question five represented this same concept and a move toward a more specific set of components to be elicited based upon the experiences of the participants. van Manen (1990) explained that it is important for researchers to create questions that prompt participant information that describe the experience with the phenomenon "from the inside" (p. 64). Questions six, seven, and eight explored the nature of persistence in other areas of the participants' lives and in their identities as nontraditional students. It is important to differentiate nontraditional student status in light of persistence and to understand the experiences and factors that these students link to this phenomenon. Questions six, seven, and eight were drawn from a doctoral thesis that studied mature student retention (MacFagden, 2009) and a study on first generation African American male student persistence (Apslund, 2009).

Questions nine, ten, and eleven sought to prompt the participants to describe their experience with persistence within the context of HSIs. van Manen (1990) suggested the use of questions that help the participants to remain focused in the case that they move off track of topic or over-generalize the experience; these questions represent this concept and serve to help participants hone in on the experiences in context. Question twelve inquired about the nature of the relationships on campus that may influence student persistence (Arana et al., 2011). Question thirteen was drawn from a study of first generation African American male student persistence and a study on Hispanic undergraduate achievement and explores cultural and social factors related to participant persistence (Arana et al., 2011; Asplund, 2009). The final question provided the students with an opportunity to share anything that may not have been addressed in the previous questions or a thought that comes to mind in the process of the interview, or anything else the participants may desire to add in relation to their persistence experiences.

The questions were as follows:

1. How would you describe your experiences as a college student?

2. Describe your experiences related to your remaining in college.

3. How have your experiences helped you to continue in your undergraduate studies?

4. How do you believe these experiences have affected your ability to continue on your educational journey?

5. What specific factors do you believe have contributed to your motivation to persist?

6. Are there aspects of being a nontraditional student that present barriers in your efforts to persist?

7. What are some of the issues you face in managing your multiple roles as a nontraditional student?

8. Are there specific things that a university could do to improve the nontraditional student educational experience?

9. How would you describe your academic experiences as related to studying within a Hispanic Serving Institution?

10. Can you provide a specific example of how your experiences studying at a Hispanic Serving Institution has influenced your persistence?

11. In what manner has the experience of studying at an HSI helped or hindered your persistence?

12. Do you have any mentoring relationships with faculty or staff members at the university which have influenced your persistence? If so, can you provide some examples?

13. How does your culture and life off campus influence your ability to persist, if these have any influence at all on your persistence?

14. Do you have anything else to add?

Prior to each interview, I spent time with each of the participants to establish rapport and a level of comfort that would encourage them to share their experiences (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007). Each participant signed a consent form and was assured that all of the information they provided would be treated in a confidential manner. The one-on-one in-depth interview was an active process between researcher and participant which utilized structured and open ended questions to gather data about the lived experiences of each of the participants with the

phenomenon and enabled me to immerse myself into their experiences (van Manen, 1997).

These questions also allowed me to explore and reflect on the descriptions and words used in an

intense and focused manner (Moustakas, 1990), which in turn aided in the discovery of meanings

and interpretation that were embedded in the transcribed narrative. This also allowed for a

reflective process of connecting overarching thematic relationships among and between

participant experiences (van Manen, 1990). Dr. Max van Manen (1990) asserted that in

hermeneutic phenomenology, interviews serve the purpose of "exploring and gathering

experiential narrative material" (p. 66) which provide a rich source to gaining understanding of a

phenomenon, and a means to obtain insight on the significance of the experiences with the

phenomenon.

    I transcribed the one-on-one in-depth interviews which provided a review of the

interviews as the transcribing took place. If doubts arose on the specific language used in the

narrative as transcribed from the interview, I was able to go back and listen to any of the

recordings to clarify the issue. If additional explanations were needed about a specific aspect of

any interview, I contacted the participant to discuss the subject matter and asked for further

clarification in order to minimize researcher bias. During the interview process, I tried to keep to

the interview focused as close to the phenomenon as experienced by the participant by asking

guided questions that also inquired on concrete examples of the experiences (van Manen, 1990).

There were also open ended questions that allowed the participants to speak liberally on their

lived experiences with academic persistence and the factors which they associated to the

phenomenon. Once the interview took place and transcribed, it was submitted to the participant

to provide him or her with the opportunity to verify and ensure the accuracy of the transcription and data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Electronic Journaling

Participants were instructed to journal their reflections and thoughts on their academic persistence experiences over the course of one month through a private online journal (www.penzu.com). Each participant was given a unique username and password to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Regular emails went out to prompt and coach the journaling process. Coaching the participants through their journaling task is a recommended strategy to help move participants through moments of uncertainty. It provides clear expectations on the content and guidance throughout the process, and has been used to help engage participants in the journaling process (Wilkes & Jackson, 2012). In qualitative research, seeking out diverse sources and collecting field text and experiences is important, including the use of journals, letters, and stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Reflective writing is a type of interviewing technique that provides participants with the means to express themselves on paper, helping them to feel more comfortable sharing some experiences that may be personal in nature; it also provokes a reflective attitude (van Manen, 1990). Journaling for educational purposes is used to help a participant reflect on meaningful aspects and experiences lived as related to a particular phenomenon and may fall under the purview of personal documents in qualitative research (van Manen, 1990; Wilkes & Jackson, 2012). Billings and Kowalski (2006) asserted that journaling increases personal awareness of beliefs and values of self, as well as of the interactions that take place around an individual. Keeping a diary and reflectively writing has been found to allow for connections to be made

between relationships that may be otherwise overlooked; insights, patterns, and themes can emerge through reflective journaling that appropriate and clarify the meaning of lived experiences (van Manen, 1990). Journals were collected, read through, and submitted to member checks for thematic groupings and experiences that emerge from these textural resources.

Focus Group

All of the participants were invited to attend a structured focus group meeting that was held at each of the main campuses in order to involve participants in a group discussion on academic persistence. The rationale for this type of data collection was to negotiate the themes that emerged from the in-depth interview transcripts and journal narratives through a group discussion to gain additional insight on the phenomenon that may not have been attained through the individual interviews (Umaña-Taylor & Bámaca, 1994). In qualitative research, this method of data collection has been used to elicit insights and confirm data and interpretations, as well as further the exploration of the data (Umaña & Bámaca 1994). Additionally, focus group methods have been found to be notably useful for research involving Hispanic populations because they help to diffuse possible intimidation created by power structures that ethnic minorities may perceive due to experiences of having limited influence (Morgan & Krueger, 1993).

Participants were provided with a copy of the emerging themes (Appendix H) that were discovered through initial analysis of the data collected and they were led through a series of questions that served to elicit validation and further development the themes (Appendix I). Questions used to guide the focus group discussion were drawn from Hernandez's (2000) study on understanding Latino college student retention; the discussion was audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. The questions were:

1. Are these categories and themes representative of your persistence experiences?

2. How do these categories come together to explain your persistence?

3. In what ways, if any, do these categories influence each other?

4. Do some categories come before others (are they hierarchical) or are they equal?

5. Are some categories more important than others?

6. Is anything missing?

The questions served to add to the trustworthiness of the data collected, further investigate experiences shared, and determine how the experiences potentially influence and overlap.

Researcher's Role

I was born in New York City and am a currently a project director and curriculum specialist at a Hispanic Serving Institution in Miami. I have had the privilege of working extensively with Hispanic populations in the United States, Puerto Rico, and in the Dominican Republic across educational settings. I hold a BA from Brooklyn College, an MS from Milano School of International Affairs, Management, and Urban Policy, and an Ed.S from Liberty University in Curriculum and Instruction. Currently, I am a doctoral candidate in Educational Leadership at Liberty University.

One issue of relevance for perspective on this study is my own personal experience as a Hispanic in higher education at the bachelor degree level. I worked full- time during most of my undergraduate studies and experienced a host of challenges that could have hindered my persistence in obtaining my undergraduate degree. The pressure to work came from financial issues associated with my father's untimely death during my first year of college. My personal persistence throughout the years of study was related to the value placed on an education by my

own father and mother and constant reminders throughout the years that my ultimate goal was to obtain at minimum a baccalaureate degree. "Without and education you will not succeed in life" was the mantra in my home.

My family, though of Puerto Rican descent, encouraged me to use the English language in our home and so the English language was not a barrier for me. I was the first in my immediate family to obtain a bachelor and graduate degree and have worked in higher education for over ten years now, passing on the same message to my own children, family, and friends. In this study, I have been the principal and only investigator, facilitating and leading interviews and focus groups, reflecting upon the transcribed data, inquiring into the literature, comprehending and interpreting emerging themes, contextualizing those themes in light of past studies and student experiences, and articulating them in narrative form. My main goal for this study was to interpret the experiences of nontraditional Hispanic students in a manner that will be useful to the higher education community across the United States in light of the challenges that students are confronted with today. This is why I have disclosed my own experiences as a nontraditional student. I was also aware throughout the data collection process and analysis, that it was participant experience that had to be interpreted throughout the research process, and not my own.

Data Analysis

Generally, hermeneutic phenomenology examines texts and documents to uncover the significance and the "structure of meaning" of the participant experience through a participants' own language and accounts (van Manen, 1997, p. 78). Moustakas (1994) described this as "the art of reading a text so that the intention and meaning behind appearances are fully understood"

(p. 9). Moustakas' (1994) research implies a type of discovery attained through reading and review. Giorgi (1985) described a four-step method of analysis: a) reading the entire description in order to formulate a sense of the experience described in a whole sense b) once the whole experience is understood, the researcher returns to the beginning of the text to further understand the essence and structure of the meaning units within the context of the phenomenon c) the meaning units or themes are reviewed thoroughly for insight d) a synthesis of the meaning units and structured statements that are formed through a series of levels (p. 10).

In this analysis, I sought to uncover the interrelationship between the described experiences and the hidden dynamics that could elucidate the principal meanings that reveal the essence of academic persistence for undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students (Moustakas, 1994). Through the multiple sources of data collection, ideas and themes were developed through various layers of review and analysis. The analysis took place throughout the data collection process as a natural interactive process of actively paying attention to the words and descriptions that each participant voiced throughout the interviews and the images and portrayals as noted in the journals (Creswell, 2007). I interviewed each participant and transcribed the data within 48 hours of each interview; I read and reread the transcriptions in order to understand the content as a whole and immersed myself in the data while contemplating the ideas, words, and imagery, reflecting upon the meanings behind them (van Manen, 1997). When this was complete I coded the transcriptions and documents in order to begin identifying topical categories while continuing to reflect upon the ideas that were forming.

Initial and Descriptive Coding

Initial coding was the first level of coding used to review and analyze the salient

attributes in the transcriptions (Saldaña, 2009). The raw data was translated through this initial

open coding analytical process throughout the interview transcriptions and the journal

submissions using a line-by-line approach; these were read and reread (van Manen, 1997).

Phrases such as "challenges with language," "role model for family," and "family hardships" are

examples of the initial codes that were identified and written out on the margin of the page. As

recommended in the literature, another round of coding was employed using descriptive coding

methods to summarize the topics in the transcriptions and narratives, such as "further ambitions"

and "peer intimidation." This process allowed me to search for ideas and descriptions in the

texts, while continuing to form an understanding of the meanings of these texts through words

and documenting codes and ideas that occurred with frequency (van Manen, 1990). Examples of

topical phrases that were developed in this round were "family sacrifices encouraged

persistence" and "a deep questioning about the value of education"; this method of analysis

helped to reflectively organize the codes into descriptions of topics and short, specific phrases

that described topical groupings (Saldaño, 2009).

Pattern Coding

A second cycle of coding took place using the pattern coding technique, in which the

narratives and transcriptions were reviewed for patterns of emerging themes. This exercise

helped to formulate some explanations, connections between phrases, and general thematic

patterns that appeared in the data (Saldaña, 2009). Participant responses were organized under

the corresponding question so that I could look at all responses to the same question in one data

file. These were labeled and drawn out, reviewed again to establish common patterns throughout

the corpus data, and colored highlighters were employed to identify clusters of data; "similarly coded passages" (Saldaña, 2009, p.154) that occurred with frequency were labeled across interviews and journal documents. The data was then grouped by tentative emerging themes and the larger portions of data were synthesized for re-examination and clustering; it was then transferred to a separate file for each thematic grouping. An example of clustering a pattern in the data would look like this: "faculty mentor, peer networks, peer resources, tutoring, accurate degree advisement, and access to information." This cluster could formulate a code such as "campus experiences," and could then be reviewed again for further development. This analytic and organizational process assisted in an ongoing data-reduction process, which provided a space for the phenomenon to be accurately uncovered and depicted (van Manen, 1997).

Constant Comparative Analysis

The data themes that were categorized were read through again for a comparison among the themes in a type of analysis inventory. Files were reviewed, and interview and survey data that had been categorized was reviewed again and reread for comparison of themes that formed thematic units. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended the constant comparison method to categorize and code experiences to "unitize" and "categorize". Unitizing allows statements to be broken down for interpretation and categorizing allows the unitized data to be organized into broader categories that describe the settings from which the units originated. This is important for validating the themes that have emerged, ensuring they are in common units and categorized in a systematic method. Experiences were further organized into common groups, categories were refined, and key words that were linked to meanings were clustered in an attempt to create a richer contextual thematic grouping. A composite description was developed using both

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"textural and structural descriptions" in order to effectively communicate the "essence" of the participant experiences (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). Once achieved, the data formed themes that inform persistence experiences for undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students at Hispanic Serving Institutions. Finally, tentative thematic units were organized and presented to the participants for discussion during the focus group meetings.

Focus Group

Two focus groups were held during which participants negotiated the themes presented to them through discussion; this clarified how the experiences of the group influenced and overlapped with one another, whether there were relationships between themes, and how these relationships contributed to persistence. The focus groups were audio recorded and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Lunch and refreshments were provided for the participants. Ultimately, I wanted to further understand how the participants believed the data interacted to impact their academic persistence. The transcribed data was used to understand how the themes were inter-related and how they overlapped, to identify hierarchical structures, and to determine whether the themes that emerged represented the participants' experiences or if any themes were missing. The transcription content was linked to the thematic units and used for validation of interpretation and meaning of the data.

Contact Summary Sheet

Each participant's data was organized in a contact summary form that organized the data collection and communication with each of the participants and helped to track the experiences, phrases and field notes that were identified in the interviews and journals (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The contact summary form was also helpful when a particular participant needed to be

consulted for further clarification, and allowed for data on the participant to be available for recall when making references or revisiting the participant data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a validating aspect of a study; it determines whether the findings of a study are reliable, which ultimately depends on the data collection and analysis. In conducting this research, I used multiple methods to collect the data, including in-depth interviews, journal documents, focus group meetings, and a demographic survey. The data collected was rigorously analyzed using various levels and phases of coding. The transcribed narratives from the in-depth interviews, journal submissions, and the feedback from focus group meetings were subject to member checks of transcriptions and interpretations to ensure accuracy of the themes that were discovered and the interpretation of such themes.

Peer Review

My dissertation committee has reviewed the research thoroughly to ensure the quality and validity of the interpretations that I have presented in the narratives, themes, and overall body of this research.

Member Checks

Participant members were provided with a draft narrative of the transcriptions from their interviews to confirm, negate, or suggest changes. The focus groups also served to validate the thematic units that were derived from the interviews and journals and the interpretations reached as a result of the data collected from them. Member checks increase the validity of the text, narrative, and the interpretation in the study (Moustakas, 1994).

Bracketing

Early on in the research proposal stage I documented my role as a researcher in order to attempt to set aside preconceived biases and increase reliability and validity for the research being conducted. My documentation is included at the end of this section. Moustakas (1994) described this as "a preparation for deriving new knowledge but also as an experience in itself, a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness…as if for the first time" (p. 85). Notwithstanding, to completely set preconceived ideas aside is challenging, but interview questions and frameworks built into the data collection and analysis structure provide a type of validity in the process that can offset these issues.

Audit Trail

All of the data that was collected was then organized in a table (Appendix J) that describes the data collection process that has transpired throughout the research process. The data collection method was documented consistently throughout the period dedicated to interviewing, meetings, survey collection, and focus groups. This allows for the study to be replicated, clarifies any questions that readers or other researchers might have, and provides a map of the process, all of which has the potential to increase validity (Creswell, 2007).

Ethical Considerations

Ethics should be considered when the research being conducted involves the personal lives and experiences of the participants and other individuals. Participants should be notified that their involvement in the research can influence their relationships. Therefore, pseudonyms were used for the participants in this study. The educational institution names were also changed

in order to protect them from any negative images that may arise as a result of the research findings. Participant content collected through interviews was coded by pseudonyms and password protected files that were kept in different databases and locations. All files related to interviews and content were electronically filed with password protection and remain confidential. Furthermore, as a researcher I am committed to inform the literature in an honest and truthful manner.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This phenomenological study was designed to understand the factors that influenced the academic persistence of undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students enrolled in their last year of bachelor degree programs within Hispanic Serving Institutions. By understanding what motivates and influences students to persist in their pursuit of an academic degree, the practices and policies that administrators, faculty, and policy makers utilize to benefit the students and enhance their outcomes may be improved. A hermeneutical phenomenological design was utilized to explore this phenomenon in order to capture the lived experiences of the ten participants in the study. Hermeneutical phenomenology is characterized by the interpretation of experiences that lead toward discovery of the meaning behind a phenomena (Stewart & Mickunas, 1990). This methodology allows academic persistence to be examined through the conscious experiences of participants and leads to insights that are revealed through the analysis of interview transcriptions and reflective narratives (van Manen, 1997). Participant impressions, experiences, words, phrases and ideas in relation to the motivations and influencers in each student's academic persistence were analyzed and are presented here.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions which were designed to understand the factors that contribute to the academic persistence of undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students at Hispanic Serving Institutions:

1. How do undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students attending Hispanic Serving Institutions describe persistence?

2. What type of experiences do undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students understand as having contributed to their persistence?

3. How do undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students describe their experiences at Hispanic Serving Institutions?

4. What specific factors do participants identify as having contributed to their persistence at Hispanic Serving Institutions?

In this chapter, the findings of the research are presented within the context of research questions and the themes that emerged as discovered through participant experiences and in the meaning assigned to those lived experiences in light of the phenomenon in question (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). Reading, rereading, coding, analyzing, and thematically organizing these experiences to relate the participant story to the research topic helps individuals to understand the phenomenon being studied.

Participant Description Summary

Ten undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students were recruited for the study through purposeful and snowball sampling methods, five from each HSI participating in the study. Each participant qualified based on the criteria that had been established for the study which identified them as undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students in their last year of study within a degree program at the baccalaureate level within one of two Hispanic Serving Institutions in Miami, Florida; seven students were in their last semester and three students were in their second to last semester (See Table 1). The participants were each given a pseudonym and were identified as Linda, Nancy, Joanna, Milca, Anthony, Solimar Rafael, Pablo, Deborah, and Reina. Their ages ranged between 25 and 5. The countries represented among them were Columbia, Cuba,

Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela. Only two of the students were born in the United States, both of which were of Hispanic ancestry. There were three males and seven females. Those students who immigrated to the United States have lived in the U.S. between nine and 31 years. All ten students agreed to have their one-on-one in-depth interview audio recorded and understood the research protocol involved in this study.

Linda is 43 years old, a mother of a 21 year old and a 15 year old. She has been in the United States for 22 years. Linda works in healthcare as she did in her country of origin and decided to seek her bachelor degree in order to further her career. English is her second language. Linda is in her last semester of study. Her husband and children have supported her throughout her studies by working within the constraints of her schedule and providing her with study time. Linda graduated with her bachelor's degree during the writing of this manuscript.

Nancy is a 43-year-old married woman studying psychology. She is in the last semester of her degree program and is financially and physically responsible for her disabled mother. Nancy works part-time, and studies full-time; she is convinced that the only way to overcome the great obstacles related to life is by arming oneself with an education. Nancy graduated during the writing of this manuscript and is preparing her applications to graduate school.

Joy is a single woman, 26 years of age who watched her mother's dreams of practicing her profession become thwarted by lack of finances to validate her credentials. Joy refuses to give up on herself or her family despite ongoing instability in their relationships. The college experience has helped Joy to realize her own potential and she is committed to completing her bachelor's degree, understanding that it is her first step toward fulfilling her career goals. Joy is in her last semester during the writing of this manuscript.

Profile of Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	ELL	Ethnicity	Country of Birth	Family Country of Origin	Nontraditional Criteria
Linda	43	Female	Yes	Hispanic	Columbia		Dependents Financially Independent Employed Full Time
Nancy	43	Female	Yes	Hispanic	Cuba		Dependents Financially Independent Delayed Entry to College
Joanna	26	Female	No	Hispanic	United States	Venezuela	Financially Independent Delayed Entry to College Employed Full Time
Milca	25	Female	No	Hispanic	United States	Dominican Republic	Dependents Financially Independent
Anthony	33	Male	Yes	Hispanic	Cuba		Dependents Financially Independent Employed Full Time Delayed Entry to College
Solimar	43	Female	Yes	Hispanic	Columbia		Dependents Financially Independent Delayed Entry to College
Rafael	54	Male	Yes	Hispanic	Cuba		Dependents Financially Independent
Pablo	32	Male	Yes	Hispanic	Ecuador		Dependents Financially Independent Delayed Entry to College Employed Full Time
Deborah	46	Female	No	Hispanic	Puerto Rico		Dependents Financially Independent Employed Full Time
Magda	44	Female	Yes	Hispanic	Cuba		Dependents Financially Independent Delayed Entry to College Employed Full Time

Table 1: *Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (N=10)*

Joy is a single woman, 26 years of age who watched her mother's dreams of practicing her profession become thwarted by lack of finances to validate her credentials. Joy refuses to give up on herself or her family despite ongoing instability in their relationships. The college experience has helped Joy to realize her own potential and she is committed to completing her bachelor's degree, understanding that it is her first step toward fulfilling her career goals. Joy is in her last semester during the writing of this manuscript.

Milca is a single mother who is 25 years old, in her last year of studies, and shares responsibility for her parents and grandmother with an older sister. Becoming a single mother at the age of 22 created a sense of urgency in Milca to financially provide for her daughter and prompted her to realize that she was a role model for her daughter. Motherhood has caused Milca to concretize her professional plans and as she completes her bachelor's degree, she has graduate school in sight.

Anthony is 33, single, works full-time and studies full-time. Anthony is the sole financial provider for his parents, sister, and nephew. Having had negative work experiences throughout the years with low-paying, dead-end labor positions right after high school, Anthony understands the value of an education in accomplishing his goals of earning and excelling in his profession. Throughout his time in college, Anthony has worked full-time and was enrolled either full or part-time during some semesters in order to accomplish his goal of obtaining a bachelor's degree. Anthony completed this goal during the writing of this manuscript.

Solimar is 43 years of age, married, and has one teenage son. From military high school in her own country to over a decade of experience working in the restaurant business and cleaning offices at 3am with her baby in tow, Solimar is committed to obtaining her bachelor's

degree in order to succeed in life and has persisted through threats of possible foreclosure, loss of employment for both her and her spouse, and severe financial constraints. Her confidence level with the English language and within the American cultural system has improved during her time as a student. She has graduated with her bachelor's degree during the writing of this manuscript.

Rafael is 54 years old and has found that immersing himself in the English language has helped him to assimilate to the culture and understand the American way of life. Moving away from the expectations of the natural immigrant experience toward vocational or labor-oriented careers in construction or restaurants, he refused to accept the normal route of his fellow countrymen and entered in an academic course of study that was interrupted for almost two decades by family and life situations that required his full attention. Realizing that critical life experiences would always exist, Rafael committed himself to completing his degree and moving on to graduate school, and has graduated during the writing of this manuscript.

Pablo is 33 years old, married, has two children, and worked full-time while studying. He graduated during the data collection process. Pablo has worked two jobs at one time to support his young family and had to drop out of college for a semester to meet financial obligations. He has found the college experience as an adult with full-time obligations tough, but rewarding, as he experienced career promotions that were directly linked to his educational attainment. Pablo credits his family for their commitment and support throughout his academic program of study and is applying to graduate school.

Deborah is 46 years old, married, and has three adult daughters. Committed to education, she works full-time while studying to complete her bachelor's degree, leading by example for her daughters who are currently enrolled in degree programs at the same college. Deborah credits

her elementary teachers for embedding the idea that schooling ends at the bachelor degree level and not at high school; something she has never forgotten. Though life situations have deterred the pursuit of her goal, Deborah has paced and balanced herself over the last few years and is currently in her last semester of study.

Reina is 44 years old, married, and has an adult son. From Castro's child labor camps, confronting rough life situations as a single mother, having a special needs child, and eventually remarrying, Reina attributes her persistence to having survived many critical life situations. Reina is in her last program year to obtain her bachelor degree and understands the importance of maintaining a balance between life, health, work, family and her studies.

Summary of Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process included a demographic survey, an in-depth one-on-one interview, focus group interviews, and journaling. Each participant signed a consent form, provided basic contact information, filled out a demographic survey (Appendix F), and set up an appointment for a one-on-one interview (Appendix G). The interviews were audio recorded, ranged from 30 to 60 minutes, and were fully transcribed. The questions posed to the participants asked them to reflect upon their experiences of remaining in college as nontraditional students within the context of Hispanic Serving Institutions. Participants were also asked how institutions could better serve them and how their lives off campus and their culture have impacted their academic persistence. Once the interviews took place, the data was transcribed and read through, reviewed, and submitted for member checks. Journals were collected and read throughout the data collection process.

The analysis included several coding processes: first initial coding, second descriptive coding, and then a second phase of coding using the pattern coding method. Data was reduced to reflect ideas that were categorically evolving to help organize the data analysis. The data was also analyzed using the constant comparison method to categorize experiences into units that helped to elucidate meanings which led to emerging themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The categories were revised when necessary as the constant comparison process continued and the themes further compressed. This method allowed further examination of statements for interpretation and informed the development of the expansion of these into themes that reflect the lived experiences of the participants. As the themes emerged, they were grouped into composite descriptions that used rich text to define those themes and were then presented to the participants in the focus group interviews to negotiate the themes, their inter-relationships, and a hierarchy which served to further validate the data analysis. The themes which emerged from the data collection and analysis are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.
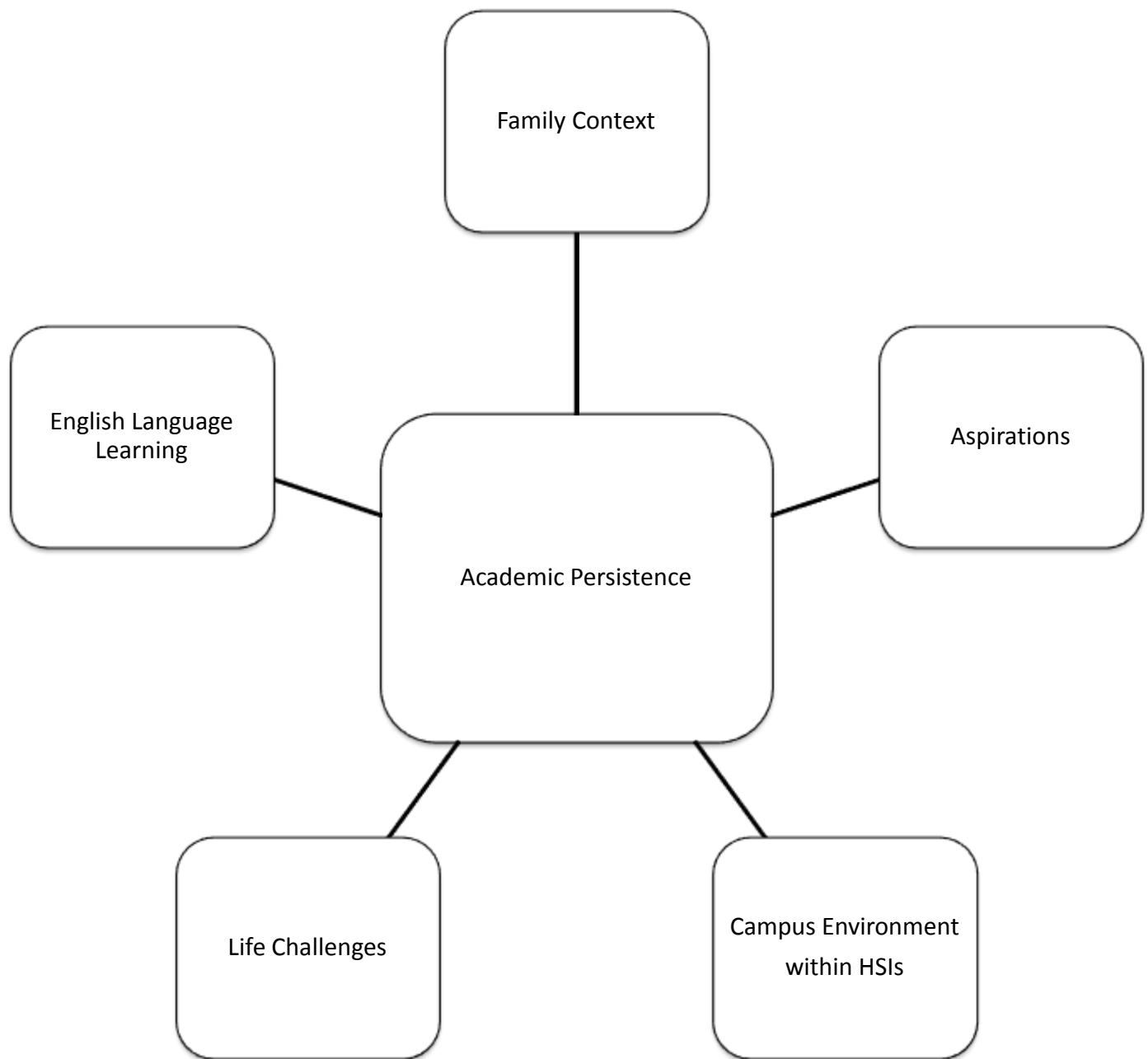
Figure 1: *Themes that emerged from the data*
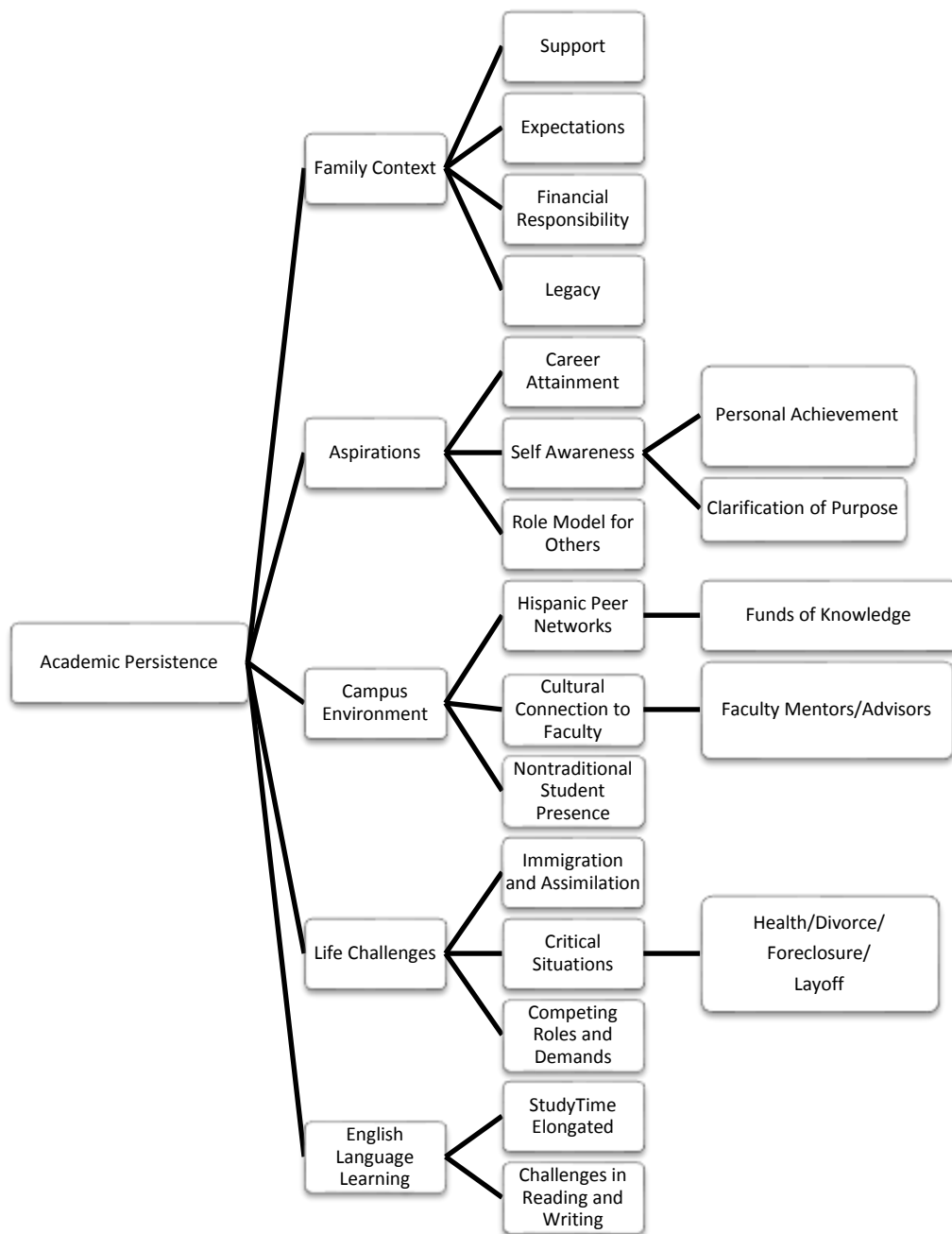
Figure 2: *Meaning Units to Themes*

Themes

In the analysis of the data there were five themes that became apparent throughout the participant voices in the narratives and transcriptions. These themes were interwoven throughout the participant experiences and became plain through the coding and constant comparison process. Phrases, ideas, and reflective thoughts on the topic of academic persistence pointed to the themes that are stated below (van Manen, 1997).

1. Family Context

2. Aspirations

3. Campus Environment within HSIs

4. Life Challenges

5. English Language Learning

Figure 3 depicts the themes within the hierarchical and relational positions as discussed during the focus groups that the majority of participants agreed were of greater importance, beginning with family context and ending with English Language Learning. All participants asserted that they are each interlinked with one another and most participants thought there were some themes that the emerged as more impactful than others. Each of the themes encompassed the influences that impact the undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional student's academic persistence within the Hispanic Serving Institutions that formed a part of the research sites.
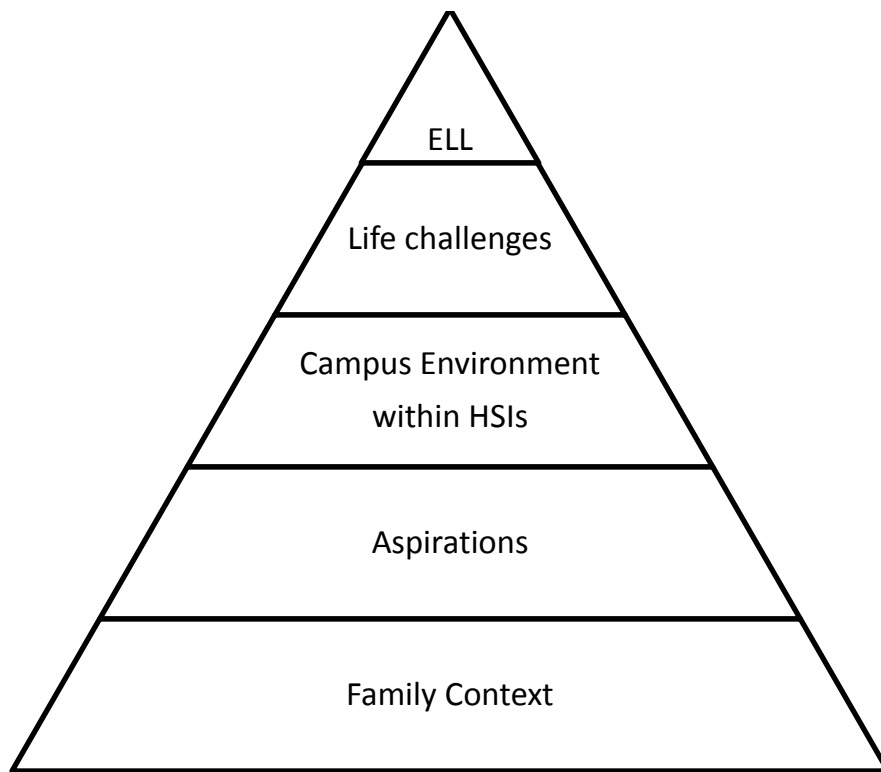
Figure 3: *Themes in Hierarchical Order from Family Context to ELL*

Research Question 1

How do undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students attending Hispanic Serving Institutions

describe persistence?

The topic of persistence was described by participants throughout the data collected; the

ideas and experiences of each participant provided insight to this concept. Extracted from

participant journals and interview data, rich text was used to qualify the participant descriptions

of the concept of persistence as they wrote about their experiences or reflections on the

phenomenon and discussed the topic during the interview process. The overarching idea of

persistence as expressed by participants through words and ideas was of perseverance despite

obstacles and setbacks, using a reserve of resilience to traverse difficulties that had developed

through life situations or a compelling desire to attain a goal that the participant understood would transform his or her life. Through a myriad of circumstances, participant voices referred to an all-encompassing attitude of persistence in relation to grades, school work, time constraints, scheduling, adaptation, attitude, resources, competing roles, critical life situations, and possession of tenacity. Below are some quotes that have been extracted from the journals and interviews with participants that depict their ideas of academic persistence:

Reina: My study goal is my mission; nothing will distract me from it, if something comes my way against it or conflicting with it, I will defend it against all odds. I am a Castro survivor, I am an overcomer, if I have developed this resilience of surviving and as a child was forced to work hard under the sun in the fields, for meager food from the government, then I say I have learned to swim against the current.

Pablo: It is focusing on getting the best possible result, knowing that it won't be easy to get and several things will come up that may divert you from fulfilling your goal. Persistence is nothing else but to keep doing what are doing without hesitation and tackling any obstacles that you may face along the road.

Solimar: My desire is to improve and challenge myself, no matter if I fall once or twice but at the end learning and not giving up. Because in the end you know this is the only way you are going to get something you have promised yourself and in the end there is a reward for you. By not giving up if you have a bad grade, getting up at 3am and 4am to study, doing a couple of hours of homework, come to the earliest classes possible and then go to work. Sometimes you come back after work and take night classes, or weekend classes. My experiences have helped me persist in my undergraduate studies in

every way; it is like a piggy bank you put a coin in every day. The piggy bank grows and has more value.

Rafael: Persistence was the key word in order to do all requirements and procedures to apply for my student visa. (I will) Never give up on my dream. (I want) to show my family that it doesn't matter how old you are, it is how much you have to persist in order to get to your main goal.

Deborah: Sometimes you just want to give up, you just want to say *"I'm tired",* but it is a matter of telling yourself that this is what you really want. Given my age and responsibilities, it is made it easy for me to have the discipline to study even when I have been very tired.

Linda: If I stop working on my career I will not have enough knowledge in my field; the more I study the more I can demonstrate my experience in the work that I do.

Nancy: I am happy to have continued my studies but it has not been easy, there are barriers along your path, obstacles that you were not counting on yet with the support of my family I have not given up. My mother taught me to not give up, and to persist in life so that I could accomplish my goals, both professionally and personally.

Joy: Persistence is the motivation in yourself to want to do the best that you can every day. In my case I always try to be that overachiever in general but especially when it comes to my studies. Being Hispanic I am already set with boundaries and I make it my goal to keep pushing forward.

Milca: People at times make you feel that because you have children your life is over, and that you have to devote your entire life to your children and sacrifice everything you

have every dreamed of doing. I don't want my daughter to represent (to me) all of the things that I gave up, on the contrary, I want her to be the reason I decided to continue my education because I want to change the world. I want her to know that anything she wants do she can do, no matter what.

Anthony: Having the support from my family including my parents has been a very good and necessary help; it has made it a lot easier to stay in school and not quit. When you put into perspective and understand that every day you struggle to keep your job because of the difficulty of the schedules; that sometimes you miss class, you can't finish your work, not because you're irresponsible but because of the school and work conflicts.

In these quotes and throughout the narratives and interviews there exists a common thread of wanting something very much, a willingness to exert a concerted effort to obtain a goal and invoke a personal transformation by attitude and action. The students knew this could be accomplished with the help of others, the support of family, and sheer personal focus. There is an overarching aspirational characteristic woven through the statements that describes the participants' conscious experience with the phenomenon of persistence; they possess a personal desire to accomplish and achieve. Participants challenged the expectations they had of themselves to do more and negative expectations from any source were used as fuel to work harder and challenge any assertions made against them. Across all of the comments that are quoted there is an element of a deep desire to complete a long-anticipated and hoped for outcome, which could only be achieved through strenuous commitment on the part of the individual who was influenced by other factors. For example, Deborah states that her own adult

children provide her with a motivation to persist in her studies; she desires to illustrate to them through her own commitment to complete her bachelor's degree exactly what it is that she expects from them. In this quote **Deborah** states,

> When I have my doubts about continuing towards my goal my own children keep me on track. I am very aware that I can't demand excellence of them if I am not willing to go the extra mile for my own studies; they are the fire that keeps me going when I feel discouraged or too tired to go on.

Linda describes it as a commitment to a profession and the obligation of an individual to continue developing his or her knowledge and skills in order to effectively serve the community in one's respective profession. **Linda** states,

> Everyone has a self commitment to the profession they choose; it is to serve the community and the world; it is the reason why people choose to continue to study and develop in their profession.

Though each is very unique, the stories of the participants, their journal entries, and all of the interviews frame persistence as a personal willingness to accomplish something that is internally motivated and externally supported.

Research Question 2

What type of experiences do undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students understand as having contributed to their persistence?

There were various types of experiences that participants described as having contributed to their persistence, many of which fell into the categories of the themes which were found throughout the data. Each of these experiences related a type of support and determination to

remain in degree programs to completion and how the different themes contributed to their decision and ability to persist. In this section, the question is addressed within the themes that were found to contribute to academic persistence for this group. Across themes there were potent motivators that created a healthy environment for participants to strive for and meet their personal aspiration of obtaining a college degree.

Family context. Experiences within the family context were powerful influencers that provided an impetus to persist in participant efforts toward bachelor degree completion, yet they also demonstrated that a lack of family support can create barriers in student efforts to persist. Support from family is imperative when one takes on the role of a student while managing other responsibilities; this support takes on an invaluable trait in the academic persistence of the participant. Participants were motivated to persist across diverse family experiences and utilized words such as help, motivation, role model, supportive, and sacrifice among others to describe the feelings and mindsets that occurred as a result of family context in relation to their academic persistence. Family was a source of strength for the participants. For five of the participants there was sense of transcending limitations and past accomplishments in being the first generation to persist toward a significant academic goal and set a standard for the next generation; two of the participants were enrolled in degree programs at the same time that their children were. For all of the participants there was a pushing against their previous thresholds of personal achievement in order to improve their situations in life and utilizing the medium of education to accomplish this.

 Milca: Having my daughter is the main reason I am in school; I want to set an example

  for her. My family has helped me a lot, they keep me going. I come from a family where

  not everyone went to college.

Solimar: My husband is supportive; he has a full time job at one place and a part time job at Denny's. I am living my dream of studying and getting a career and becoming a professional for my son who understands how hard it has been around the house and the stress that I live day by day to keep up with the assignments and his extra-curricular activities. I don't want him to go through the hardship that his father and I have lived. I always tell him how important education is for his future and explain the type of work we have done and the reasons for it. I am proud of our heritage and I want him to understand the difference of the culture, our traditions, and values that can bring lots of positive things when you compare and see what you are and where you can be.

Reina: I have to devote a lot of extra time and effort, I am not doing almost anything at home, my husband cooks, my husband cleans, I basically have to try to keep my health and get my sleeping time, disconnect to the negativity of my son, and set aside time for my goal.

Rafael: I am a father of three and grandfather to five, and I would say that I have to show them that college is the most important thing. My father went to college, I am the fourth of his children and he went to college and finished in Columbia, South America. There we have the model in order to succeed; this is what I have wanted.

Nancy: A main factor for me is to look out for my mother (disabled) and be able to provide a secure future for my family.

Joy: My parents were not given the privilege to go to college and choose what they wanted to do; they studied in order to make money to provide for the family. I have

learned from that and need to do what I want to do; it will be beneficial to me and for my family.

Anthony: My mom, she never went to college; only has a seventh grade education because she was forced to work with the family business and that is what they did, they took you out of school and you had to work. So seeing my mom so happy with her son in college trying to become a better person gives me a lot of motivation. I am the breadwinner in my home, I take care of my parents who are 60 and 67 years old, it gives me great pleasure to see them and not only understand what I am doing but it gives me that support in a moral way.

Family members provide support for the student through various means, from accommodating an allowance of time to study, taking on a second job to assist with finances, and helping with household-related duties and child care, to sacrificial acts to assist the nontraditional student through academic pressures. Family support sustained the participant through hardships and stressful situations and allowed the participant to focus on his or her academic studies. In many cases, family was also the motivating factor to persist in degree-seeking objectives. The desire to set an example and take care of family and provide them with a better future by means of increased job opportunities and job security was evident throughout the data.

Pablo: At some point in the four years with the birth of the kids and stuff like that, you might give up because of too many responsibilities; I even took a second job (to support his family). My wife helped me a lot; she took care of the kids so that I could concentrate on my classes. Seeing my wife helping me right after she finished the Caesarean Section and gave birth to my son was a very strong experience. The next day I had to present a

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final project for my class and because of the hospital and everything I could not finish

that project, when she woke up at 5 am the next morning (after the Caesarean Section)

she helped me to type up the work. That was amazing. Those are the kinds of things that

help you to be persistent.

Milca: I think I have been lucky; I have had a lot of help from my parents with my

daughter, especially when she was a baby so that I have been able to do this.

Maria I have support from family, they understand the time I have to spend at college; I

talk to them and we make all of the arrangements.

Without the support of family persistence to work toward the accomplishment of obtaining a

bachelor degree for most in this group would have been extremely difficult. The understanding

that family provides through encouragement and helping participants to remain focused on

completing their degree was present throughout the interview narratives.

Deborah: Wanting the kids to go to college, my husband even pushes me by reminding

me how few classes I have left.

Nancy: Now here I am about to graduate and it is another gift for her (referring to her

mother), all of these things they motivate and make you stronger.

Likewise, caring for parents, children, and other relatives was a great responsibility that some of

the participants assumed and this creates a context that can either strengthen or create a tension

that can negatively influences academic persistence.

Aspirations. Among each of the participants there was a sense of ambition that extended

beyond a goal. The expressions used by participants alluded to something greater and all-

encompassing for their lives; a desire to succeed and improve life for themselves and their

families. There was a sense of increased possibilities and accomplishments beyond a high school diploma or an associate's degree that held promise for a better future that brought an enhanced self-awareness and discovery of each student's own capacities. The use of the word aspiration instead of ambition was important since in the Hispanic language, the literal interpretation for ambition has a negative and almost greedy connotation. During the focus group, this interpretation was described and the participants agreed that the word aspiration was more appropriate than the word ambition to describe the studied phenomenon.

> **Anthony:** My second reason for persisting in college is that I have a nephew that lives with me and I am the male figure in his eyes; I want to be that role model for him. When I tell him that he has to go to college and he asks, "did you?" I will be able to say "yes" and show him what I did with my life because I want him to do something with his too.
>
> **Reina:** Those of us who lived under a communist regime, we convince ourselves that we cannot allow giants to overcome us; you grow up and see challenges all around you but you learn to overcome, you learn to endure or you starve.
>
> **Maria:** My goal is to work in the field of my career (career in home country).
>
> **Nancy:** As a professional you want to advance, you don't want to give up and stay at a lower level; you want to feel fulfilled in an area.
>
> **Joy:** It is really important that I do the best that I can do because I have noticed that it really motivates people.
>
> **Milca:** Continuing my education was difficult but I truly feel I had no other option; it's been something that I knew I had to do. Having my daughter is the number one reason that I'm in school; I want to set an example.

Anthony: My life experiences have tested me, they have made me think, should I do this, should I go to school, or try to find another job, or keep the job to just make money?

Joy: I can relate to when I was growing up, I was told not to speak up and now I make that my motivation to do better, earn that extra credit, this really motivates me to do a lot. I really want to be out there, hands on, helping people and knowing that I did something for them (the community).

Solimar: It is that you know there is only one way you are going to get something, something that you have promised yourself, in my case, for a very long time. And you know that in the end there is a reward for you.

Rafael: I have done my own research and exploration on how to do things and to persist so that I can get what I really want. You have to be disciplined, disciplined means that I look ahead of me and focus on my path, the one I am going to take and I will not allow anybody to divert my route. This is my main goal, this is what I have to finish. It is like a modeling, I would like to continue the modeling that will serve my children and grandchildren.

Anthony: I did not attend college right after high school and worked in different places that made my life miserable; I decided that was not a life for me and I came to college; the more you achieve the better off you are in the real world. **Pablo:** I think that getting the bachelor's degree this late (in life) gives you a lot of experience in other aspects of life that combined with your studies are strong skills for you in life. My focus is my degree because I need it for my kids, my wife, for my job and obviously for me.

Life challenges. Throughout many of the participants' lives there existed challenges that could be considered significant in nature, such as immigration, divorce, caring for elderly parents, and giving birth to a child, among others. These challenges were of considerable impact to the life of the participant, enough so to compel him or her to persist in obtaining a bachelor's degree in order to ameliorate some of the difficulty. The participants worked on their academic pursuits with a better future in sight and the desire to provide for a family. Life challenges added a critical characteristic to the overall desire to continue persisting. Life struggles almost took on a new meaning and value for the participants, adding to their resilience.

Solimar: My motivation comes from my mother, my son, and my background, I went to military high school in my country, worked in restaurants and cleaning offices in this country during the night hours with my 3 month old with me. As an immigrant you face challenges knowing that you have to fit into the environment with the culture, you have language deficiencies, you are older, you have obligations, and if you don't produce nothing else is going to follow. We haven't let the house go into foreclosure yet; it is very stressful. Making space for education is difficult, especially when you don't have the financial help; but when you know those barriers can be overcome, you give that push that will unleash that freedom eventually, and you keep going. At home right now I have a room that is full of laundry and I told my husband I won't be there until Sunday and that is how it has been. Aside from chores, I lose sleep, you have to make time to study. I have four classes right now, I think I made 2 As and 2 Bs. I am going to two schools and I'm making a sacrifice so I cannot ask too much from myself. Even if it sounds balanced, it doesn't look balanced. I was working in a restaurant for almost 8 years and because of the renovations of this restaurant I was laid off.

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Linda: I have to share time with all of my responsibilities, my job, my home, my kids, my husband, my family, but I try to do my best. I went through a divorce five years ago but that did not stop my career, I kept moving forward.

Milca: When I had my daughter two years ago, that experience pushed me to figure out what I'm going to do with my life. Being a college student now is difficult with so many responsibilities, when you are younger education can easily be your number one priority, but as a nontraditional student it isn't. I have to take care of my parents, take my mother and grandmother to doctor's appointments. I had to learn to put myself completely aside and take care of the people around me; something I really did not have to worry about at the age of 18, no one expected me to. My experiences have helped me keep going, I come from a family where not everyone went to college; it's a big deal to me for my daughter to have that. My parents only have high school diplomas. It's so important for me to have my education, to provide. I think that that it will make everything I've struggled with mean so much more.

Anthony: This may sound funny but you see it on television in a different format, it looks a lot easier but once you become a student at a college you realize that being a student is tougher than it looks and my particular situation is because I have to work full time because I have a family (parents, sister, nephew) and I have to take care of them. So I cannot take free time for school, it is literally tough.

Deborah: I have to be very aware of my different hats, I really do. I have to very aware because otherwise I will neglect something. I take it easy on myself because otherwise it would be impossible; be aware that sometimes I just have to write things down. October was a very difficult month because I had to go to Puerto Rico three times and even though that

part is over, I still have my mom over that I have to think of so it is hard. My kids are big now, one is 19 and the other is 22 but they are still at home, both studying and I still have to take care of them in many ways, they are girls; it never ends. One day at a time….no other way. I need more than 24 hours in a day; my family, full time job, church, school all demand time from me.

Nancy: I have my mother she is disabled and I take care of her; she got here with the dream to advance professionally and she only got to a certain point because she became disabled and her dream was cut off. There are many times that I could not go to work because my mom had appointments, was admitted to the hospital and I had to stay with her. I have to try to do something for myself and not just be a laborer but work at the professional level so that I can look after her. I promised myself I would not give up for all the obstacles that come my way and I have grown strong and independent. I could say that these (experiences) have helped me to become stronger.

Joy: As for my relationship with my parents, still today it is not the best, constant fighting, crying, heartache, things we don't need to go through. I've lost a lot of concentration in school to the point where I have wanted to give up and not continue with school because I could not handle the stress that was going on in my life. My friends have really motivated me through words and support; we try to keep each other motivated. Why give up when I'm so far along?

Anthony: I have lost a few jobs because the employer would not be lenient with me regarding my course schedule. When I was hired, the employers were aware of my schedule and assured me it was not a problem. After a few months it became a problem so I realized

that I must finish college and do something with my life so that I am not subject to these situations. I have seen life, how it really affects you when you don't have a college education and that opens my eyes to continue. I have to work full time because I support my parents, sister, and nephew.

Rafael: I am facing some critical life situations, I have a son he is 21 years old and has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder while I've been in college over the last few years. I said to myself even though my son has been diagnosed I cannot stop studying, I must finish. This has been a great suffering for me because we are trying to discover ways of helping him. My daughter was divorced just last year and I have been trying to help her and my granddaughters; my children depend upon me for so much. These are the kind of things that would stop you from what you are doing.

Reina: I started my associate's degree but became pregnant and things got complicated because he was a special needs child. I was alone for many years with him, it was just me and my parents and I was coming to work and trying to take care of the kid, pushing him to do homework and taking him to therapy and this and that. I put school on hold and the years passed; every night spending three hours with my son doing homework, it was very frustrating. Finally when he was 16 years old he dropped out of high school and got in touch with a bad crowd, I had by then remarried but my husband was laid off and he is disabled; I decided it was time to come back to school not only for myself but for us (she and husband).

Research Question 3

How do undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students describe their experiences at Hispanic Serving Institutions?

Campus environment within Hispanic Serving Institutions. Hispanic undergraduate nontraditional students describe their experiences at Hispanic Serving Institutions as being able to engage in an environment that cultivates their academic endeavors and where they are comfortable as Hispanics. They describe situations that allow them to culturally connect with peers and mentors that are free of discrimination. Participants of this study describe situations that refer to a collaborative atmosphere that permeates the campuses and where resource sharing and a type of community mentoring takes place, proving a supportive environment for academic endeavors to occur. A strong collective sense of belonging, acceptance, and peer support that enables students to overcome insecurities was present in the data and helped participants to overcome fears and anxieties related to their academic journey and the stressors they confront as nontraditional undergraduate students. Some of the students expressed positive experiences as related to faculty and advisors who demonstrated an interest in their academic pursuits, which made them feel accepted and valued. Others specified that having Hispanic faculty and administrators created an opportunity to relate to others while on campus and provided them with role models to emulate or draw inspiration from.

> **Nancy:** Studying here (HSI) has been a good experience; the Hispanics within (the HSI) demonstrate warmth and kindness toward others, a willingness to help, understanding, and these aspects make you want to be here; you feel as if you are at home. You don't feel discriminated against by the faculty in any way; students are friendly and work together as teams, are willing to share information, notes, and books, lend assistance. It is a supportive system amongst the students and faculty; everyone is willing to help you.

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Joy: It makes me feel comfortable to have Hispanic faculty and administrators on the campus. I feel that they are very much like the personalities that I have at home and in my family. You are able to be yourself because they understand where you are coming from; they have probably lived it. I think it pushes me to do better.

Milca: I think it makes it easier as a nontraditional student because I see more people that have the same problems that I do. They have the same conflicts of schedules, and the kids and have more kids than I do, they are older than I am and still managing to get here and I think that pushes me more. Though we are all different we go through many similar experiences; there is an understanding because of the Hispanic culture, and that helps.

Anthony: I like it (studying within an HSI) because of my background; it makes me feel more comfortable. Someone in my class used the word melting pot and that is a pretty good idea of how it is. I can make friends easier, if I have a problem explaining something in English to someone I can switch over to Spanish and they understand what I am saying.

Solimar: Being among Hispanics helps me to persist because there are those that inspire me and awake a fire within me to do more, accomplish more.

Rafael: I would say one of the most important things that has influenced me to keep doing what I am doing to succeed has been the role model of our college president. He was an immigrant (from a Latin American Country) and did not know one word of English, went through hardships, discrimination, but today we know who he is and he is a role model for many.

Deborah: You never feel out of place here, it is easier to make friends, meet people, and you relate to them. There is the younger crowd but there are students that are my age, a lot of adults are coming back to study. You feel at home, it helps you not feel out of place, and it is not a challenge to worry about. Like me, I'm shy and the fact that everyone around me, their background is similar to mine, that makes it easier to study here.

Pablo: I'm Hispanic and I know that sometimes you have to do work groups (class projects in groups) but there wasn't enough commitment from other students and I think that when working with 18, 19, and 20 year olds there is more of a chance for irresponsibility.

Reina: The professors connect because they are Hispanic and some are immigrants as well. They can connect to the student, especially if the student is coming back to school, the faculty respect (that). It is a different level of empathy, they can understand you better, and they themselves have had to go through a process to be able to get their credentials validated if they studied in a foreign country just to be an adjunct faculty. Some participants felt that the immigrant experience that the faculty and or administrators had undergone when arriving to the United States, the paper work involved, the transcriptions of their university credentials, their having to subject themselves to the governmental and established systems in order to live and work in the United States helped them to respect the Hispanic undergraduate nontraditional student.

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Research Question 4

What specific factors do participants identify as having contributed to their persistence at Hispanic Serving Institutions?

Campus environment within Hispanic Serving Institutions. There were several factors that participants identified as having contributed to their persistence within Hispanic Serving Institutions which helped identify the theme of campus environment during the analysis process. These factors were informal networks of information and resources which functioned as funds of knowledge, easy access to advisors, faculty, and services, a sense of being valued by college community, cultural identification with peers and faculty, and nontraditional student presence. There was a sense of commonality with others on campus and in classrooms that created favorable conditions for the student to navigate through academic and social situations. During the focus groups, the participants described these different factors as having operated as support systems which propelled participant motivation and ability to persist in their academic endeavors as operating in an integrated manner and not as a single factor by itself.

Participants described experiencing a discrimination-free environment which cultivates peer and faculty assistance and a sense of being valued that seemed to help develop peer relationships and engender resource sharing. Having an institution, faculty and staff that demonstrate by their policies and actions that they care about the student and are concerned about his or her academic attainment was mentioned by participants as something that motivated them and caused them to feel valued. Building relationships with others of a similar background, positive communication in one's native language which helped to navigate situations in an

academic setting, and an environment to develop and sustain friendship all supported academic persistence.

Cultural connection. Within the context of the Hispanic Serving Institutions, participants described having a cultural connection that engendered a favorable campus environment for students to meet and develop relationships with peers who reflected their ethnic roots and identities. The Hispanic culture was noted by participants as generating a healthy environment that cultivated resource sharing, formal and informal information gathering, and in which students felt comfortable developing relationships with peers and other individuals who acted as a source of encouragement and motivation on one's academic journey.

> **Nancy**: All Hispanics within (the HSI), they have this kind of warm treatment
>
> toward others, willing to help, comprehension (an understanding), many things
>
> involved that make you want to be here and make you feel like home. You don't
>
> feel discriminated against in any way. This is amongst the faculty but the students are
>
> very friendly and they get together to work as a team and are willing to share information
>
> like if you are doing an assignment and you need some information on diseases and they
>
> will say, 'oh I have something to help you' and they will
>
> lend you their materials, give you copies, or provide information.
>
> **Joy:** It has been impactful (to be at an HSI); we are not only surrounded by
>
> Hispanics but many other cultures. We have to learn how to be able to study next
>
> to them, be friends with them, and learn from them. We have to be able to
>
> understand where they are coming from and not just automatically judge them. It
>
> makes me feel comfortable to have Hispanic faculty and administrators on

campus; I feel like they are a lot like the personalities that I have at home and in my family. You are able to be open and be yourself because they understand where you are coming from (your background). I feel that is has helped it a lot (her persistence). Being in an institution where a lot of us are Hispanics, I feel comfortable enough to be myself. I am not afraid now to ask questions, to be myself the way I grew up, Hispanic. What can be better than that?

Milca: That there are Hispanic faculty and administration makes it easier, they understand me. If my advisor were male, Caucasian and he did not understand that I am a single mother; maybe he would not understand how to help me, or whether he should help me. I think that because we are all different, but we all go through many similar experiences; there is an understanding because of the Hispanic culture.

Anthony: It makes me feel comfortable (studying at an HSI) and I can make friends easier.

Solimar: If I have a friend in class and she speaks Spanish I speak to her in Spanish right away; it makes me feel more comfortable but also it is good and bad. It may make you more complacent; it has its attributes both positive and negative. Being around Hispanics has helped me to persist, there are those that make a big difference, those that inspire you and here there are those people that inspire and awaken a fire in you to do more. I have found many people on campus, immigrants like me who want to improve their education and want to have a certain academic level. These people are struggling, just like me, trying as well because of the many factors that influence the time that they could dedicate to school. I have had the opportunity to meet wonderful people from

many countries; I have built great relationships with them, learned about their culture and their dreams. I hear their stories and I thought I was the only one experiencing fears, questions about courses, professors, and the college.

Deborah: Well you know, background, ethnicity, it defines you; those things define you. It is important to me to have the support of others, and because you are similar you do get the support, you get encouragement. There is communication, it is easier to say, here is my phone number; we trust, there is more trust and because of that we encourage each other.

Nontraditional student presence. The presence of nontraditional students on campus provided a sense of belonging to some of the participants. Seeing other students who struggled with many of the same situations as they struggled with, helped to create a common identity with other nontraditional students on the campus that helped to justify many of the nontraditional students' aspirations.

Deborah: You never feel out of place, it is easier to make friends, to meet people, you relate to them. Especially here that you have the young crowd but you also have my age (46 years), a lot of adults are coming back to study. You feel right at home, you don't feel out of place. That is not a challenge so you don't have to worry about that. Like me, I'm shy. And the fact that everyone around me, their background is similar to mine, that makes it easier.

Reina: The good thing is that I've seen in my classes a few young people but I see a lot of people coming back; people in my young forties coming for one reason or other. One friend she has economic problems and divorced after 20

something years; she is completing her bachelor degree with passion. There are about 6 ladies about my age; they are coming back deciding to do it for themselves. I don't feel alienated because there are others in the same boat (as I am). There is another guy who is 43 and he says that there are better opportunities at his job and his bosses support him and want him to be promoted. That other nontraditional students are studying makes me feel good; we work together and support each other, we link to exchange resources and support network; especially with the Latinos we have a connection and support one another.

Nancy: You identify with many people on the campus that are struggling like you, trying to get somewhere and it gives you strength to continue.

Milca: Staying in school I experienced many moments of confusion, as far to questioning whether I should even be in school while raising my daughter but being at this university I meet so many women whose situations are so much more complicated than mine and they find a way to manage. Being around so many other people with multiple roles and they manage everything, it keeps me pushing.

Hispanic faculty. Having Hispanic faculty as professors and administrators who represented the same ethnic group as the participants contributed to the ability to persist by allowing students to feel understood by those that taught them and were facilitating their educational experience.

Joy: It makes me feel comfortable to have Hispanic faculty and administrators on campus; I feel that they are a lot like the personalities that I have at home and in my family. You are able to be open and be yourself because they understand

where you are coming from. They have probably lived through it (similar

experiences); it's funny to even think about it. They can automatically

understand and they can even read your facial expressions and say, "I know, I

know".

Milca: That there are Hispanic faculty and administration it makes it easier, they

understand me. If my advisor was male, Caucasian and he did not understand that

I am a single mother, maybe he would not understand how to help me or (know)

whether he should help me. I think that because we are all different but we all go

through many similar experiences there is an understanding among us because of

the Hispanic culture; having the same culture helps.

Joy: I feel that I have created a bond with quite a few faculty members and staff. Their

demeanor is what I desire to be in the future. How professional they are, how motivated

they are, how much knowledge they have, they are so knowledgeable I want to pick their

brains every day. I want to ask them "why did you make that decision, why are you doing

what you are doing now? All of these are Hispanic, I feel that since they are just like me

they feel the same way I did, surrounded by the same Hispanic views and they have made

it so far. It is an honor to just speak with them and for them to give me some guidelines

on what is best for my future.

Anthony I have to say that I like it because of my background, it makes me feel more

comfortable; I can make friends easier, if I have to explain myself (in discussions) with

faculty I can switch over to Spanish and they understand what I am saying. I think that is

positive. Also faculty recommend resources to read in Spanish; you can get the same

exact thing that this book is trying to explain but in Spanish, not all the faculty to do this

but some do. (I see how the) Adjunct faculty help and I would like to myself doing the

same thing, providing for someone else that is Hispanic.

Role models and mentors on campus. Participants found inspiration through role

models on their campuses that not only struggled through similar situations, but overcame those

challenges and attained their goals. This was a source of encouragement for the participants as

they worked through their degree programs and were guided by role models and mentors.

Rafael: I will say that one of the most important things that has influenced me to be

more disciplined in order to succeed has been the role model in our college president. He

came from (Latin American Country) without knowing one word of English, he went

through a lot of hardship, he went through what we might say is discrimination as a

student, he was denied by many universities in the United States of America but our

college opened their doors to him. We are talking about he is the type of model that

everyone is looking at. He comes from a country that it does not speak the English

language, his second language is English and he succeeded in the form that he has

succeeded. We have had the last three American presidents as commencement speakers,

he is one of the best leaders right now in college; he is my best model. With a model of

that kind there is nothing else a college can ask for.

Solimar: I know some professors that have had a great influence (in the courses) in just

one semester. I notice the changes on their faces, class aptitude and individual goals, and

as a good example I have Dr. Lopez (pseudonym) from our leadership course. I believe

he teaches because he really is a professional that enjoys what he does, but (who) wants

to make a difference in people. Each time we had a lecture each of us wanted more and that is why many times we stayed a little bit longer chatting and listening on how to become better speakers and professionals for tomorrow and how we could make that same impact in others. I felt the sadness when the semester was over, because these are people that you want to steal information from, (grab) advice and guidance every time you had a chance. There are more like him, Dr. Armstrong (pseudonym) (is) very professional came to class every day with a purpose on his mind to teach; it was a 7 am class and he would send us off with truly good lessons applicable for future jobs and some ethics issues that many times we don't realize how important they are and we are ignoring due to the culture issue.

Rafael: I do have professors that have been mentoring me in the sense that I have been asking them, "is there anything that I can ask you, can you help me out with" and they have said, "You don't worry about anything, anything that we can help you with Rafael, we will help you" and "What is it that you are looking for? You want to go to law school we can help you with anything that you need". So there is a kind of relationship that I have been building with them for mentoring and letting me know all those things that we need (to know) sometimes.

Pablo: I admire three professors in particular because of their experience and the way they taught, even though you know those people don't need the salary from the college; they did it because they loved teaching people and transmitting that knowledge. That was powerful for me in order to admire them; I really did not have time to build a mentoring relationship with them.

Milca: My faculty advisor helps me through everything, she answers my questions, I can ask her for anything. When I made the transition from education to psychology she helped me understand that I did not have to stop, that could go back to education if I wanted to pursue it. When I made the change I was afraid, what if something happens and I don't want to do it anymore? She talked me through it and kind of keeps me there.

Nancy: There is a support system among the students and among the faculty, everyone is willing to help you and this makes it a great experience. Sometimes you go places and you are invisible or you are not provided with help or support. At this institution it is easy to seek out assistance. The other day I had an assignment due in a file that I could not open as a PDF and had to turn it into the professor; I scanned it as an image and did not know how to convert it. I ran to the IT department and they are always willing to help; they helped and explained to me step by step and I learned how to do it myself. You feel important to people and they care about your academic advancement. The personalized attention, small class sizes, you can tell the professor wants you to learn, wants you to put into practice all the knowledge you have acquired, the skills you are learning; it is a community that is like a family, people get to know you and value you; this has helped me.

English language learning. Several of the participants expressed having issues at the inception of their studies in the United States due to learning English as a second language. Learning to adapt to higher education level English was a challenge that many had to overcome in order to persist in their academic degree programs. The general sense of the process was that the first years of study were more challenging due to the language barrier but that as time passed

and the students felt more in command of the English language, their experiences at the institutions improved. Some expressed having to spend two to three hours to every hour a native English speaker spent on their studies due to the English language learning situation.

Nancy: At the beginning it was not easy because I had to deal with the first barrier in the   United States which was the language. I did not get accustomed quickly to all the materials in English, all the classes in English, the assignments and tasks but as I got more familiar and started speaking more fluently in English everything was more resolved and became more comfortable.

Linda: My experiences as a college student…in the beginning I was afraid because I started in a new country, in a new school, and learning a new language. As time passed I felt more comfortable.

Solimar: For me reading one chapter; it may take three hours, for others one hour. I have to go back and every day I learn a new word. My issue when it comes to language and computer class and finance is a class where you have to know particular vocabulary and understand what it really means. I can read but since I was not familiar with the concept of finance it was very difficult to get into my head. The professor was pushing us to be quick and fast and it was my worst nightmare. At the end I knew I was going to fail but I stuck it through to get something. I took it again and go my A (grade) but it was a completely different style from the first professor.

Rafael: I have been getting in touch with the professors; I have been involved with programs at the university itself. All of these experiences have helped me

with my vocabulary, my practice in English. I was born in a Spanish family; we spoke in Spanish most of the time. So I have been having the opportunity to be practicing my English, explaining myself and speaking to everyone in English which has been a big help for me. Even though I had to learn the language on my own by reading the newspaper, watching (English language) television, and listening to the radio.

Anthony: I have been living in the United States for 22 years and my English is not perfect. I guess I have to develop a more controlling kind of technique. Right now I don't feel nervous when I talk, I can speak English the whole day, it's just that Spanish is my first language and I can elaborate more in Spanish than in English. When I am in class I understand more when someone speaks to me than when I'm reading. It is easier when I listen and look at the facts than when I'm reading. I may struggle sometimes because I may not know all the words and when somebody knows a sword that is utilized in a sentence, they can get the whole picture. When I don't (know the meaning of a word) I have to go back and get a dictionary and find out what it is and then I get what this professor meant when he said this. Yeah, that is one thing that has been really hard.

Pablo: The language was an important point because I remember the first and second semesters thinking, "I'm spending two or three more hours more of my time trying to study the same piece of information than everyone else". Everyone else spoke English and I didn't speak too much so understanding the professors and then reading the notes was kind of hard for me. It was tough at the beginning

and even that I am not a perfect English speaker now, later on I could get (absorb)

the information in a better way than at the beginning.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the persistence experiences of ten undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students at Hispanic Serving Institutions were organized and described through their own voices. The data collected through the one-on-one in-depth interview, the focus group interview, and participant journal reflections revealed how participants at the Hispanic Serving Institutions describe persistence and what they attribute to having influenced their persistence. Participants describe persistence as a strong conscious willingness to obtain their degree that is internally motivated and externally supported.

Five themes emerged that participants described fueled their persistence to remain in degree programs despite the many obstacles they confront daily. The first theme of family context describes the impact that family cooperation and support has on persistence. For the undergraduate nontraditional Hispanic student, family is a motivating factor; without the support of family many of the participants may not have been able to persist in the academic degree programs. The second theme of aspirations in the lives of the participants elucidates the importance of having goals and dreams that fuel a desire to succeed for oneself, but also for those around the individual participant. Participants mentioned the importance of setting standards and being a role model to those who they influence.

The third theme of life challenges presented significant issues which participants confronted, including immigration, divorce, caring for elderly and disabled parents, and giving birth to a child. This third theme described how these issues helped participants

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develop a persevering attitude that aided them in their persistence toward academic degree completion. Formidable challenges made them stronger, wiser, and more able to work toward their aspiration of degree attainment. The fourth theme of Campus Environment at the two Hispanic Serving Institutions that served as sites for this study, denoted how studying within the context of this type of institution cultivated students' academic pursuits by allowing them to culturally connect with peers and mentors who were similar to them. Some participants described a type of collective mentoring that took place and access to funds of knowledge through informal peer networks that provided support, resources, and information as being contributors to student success.

The fifth theme that emerged from the data analysis was the English language learning (ELL) theme, however not all of the participants discussed this as a major hurdle to overcome since two of them were born in the United States and grew up speaking both English and Spanish. Those who were English language learners depicted the experience as challenging, especially at the inception phase of their academic programs. Once they felt more in command of the English language, there was consequently an improvement in their communication and college-going experiences. Participants characterized their specific experiences that have contributed to persistence within Hispanic Serving Institutions as culturally connecting with students and faculty, the nontraditional student presence, having Hispanic faculty, and access to role models and mentors who motivated them to achieve and move beyond past thresholds to academic success.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This final chapter will focus on the interpretations and ideas associated with the findings of the research as related to the literature and theoretical framework. A summary of the study is presented as they relate to the research questions, a discussion of the findings and their relevance to the literature, the context of the theoretical framework, and the conclusions drawn from this study. Finally, limitations are presented as are recommendations for future research.

Summary and Findings

This study focused on the factors that influenced academic persistence for undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students enrolled in bachelor degree programs at Hispanic Serving Institutions. The hermeneutic phenomenological research design allowed participants to explain their persistence experiences by voice and written reflection which were then analyzed for categorical units; themes that emerged were negotiated among the participants. Ten students in their last year of study were recruited through purposeful and snowball sampling techniques to discuss their academic persistence experiences and inform the research on the factors that affect persistence for this particular population of students. Data collection included a demographic survey, reflective journaling, a one-on-one in-depth interview, and a focus group. Participants shared experiences which they attributed as having motivated them to persist in their academic degree programs through their last year of study. Eight of ten participants graduated during the data collection and manuscript writing phase of the research and the remaining two are currently in their last semester. Data analysis included layers of coding and the constant comparison technique that reduced the data to thematic units which were reviewed and interpreted to determine categories of factors related to academic persistence. Quotes from each participant

were used to contribute to the descriptions of each theme derived from the data which explained persistence factors for this group. Bronfenbrenner's (1994) Ecological System's Theory and Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory provided a framework for this research.

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students attending Hispanic Serving Institutions describe persistence?

2. What type of experiences do undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students understand as having contributed to their persistence?

3. How do undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students describe their experiences at Hispanic Serving Institutions?

4. What specific factors do participants identify as having contributed to their persistence at Hispanic Serving Institutions?

The factors identified in this study that influence persistence are family context, aspirations, campus environment, life challenges, and English language learners. Students in their last stage of undergraduate studies at Hispanic Serving Institutions indicated that the factors linked to their academic persistence exist within important social systems. These factors point toward an interaction which takes place at the basic microsystem level between themselves and family members, peers, the relationships they have developed with faculty and administrators at the institutional level, their English language competencies, and their ability to overcome the challenges within those very social systems that impact their academic persistence. Furthermore, during the focus group interviews the participants agreed that the hierarchical order of importance in which the themes impact their academic persistence was as follows (from greatest

to least important): family context, aspirations, campus environment, life challenges, and English

language learning (see Figure 3).
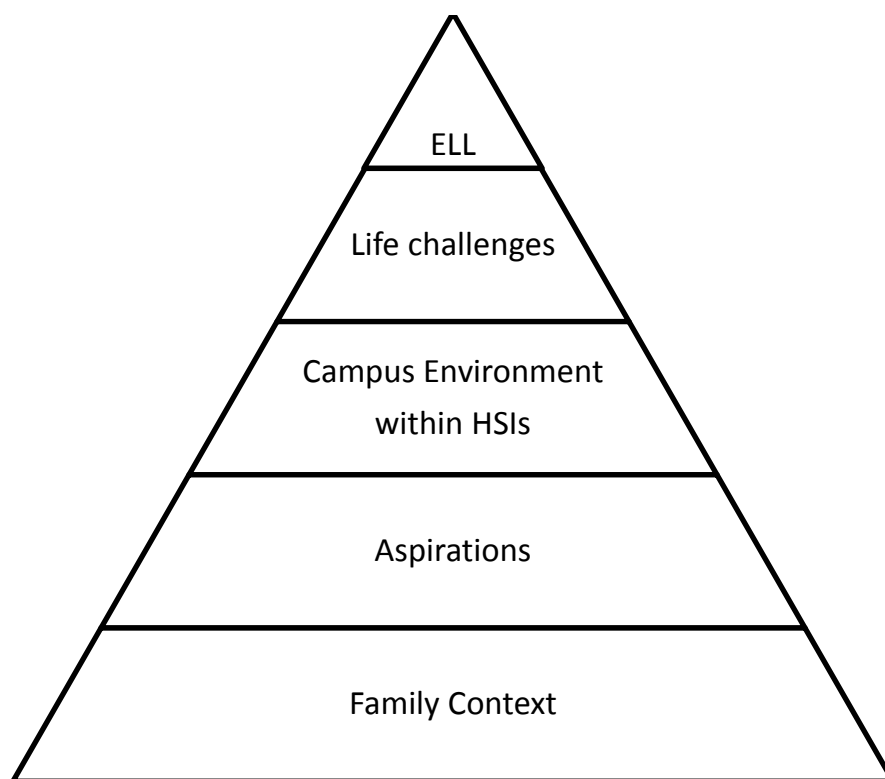
Figure 3: *Themes in Hierarchical Order from Family Context to ELL*

Each of the themes identified through the data analysis form a part of the microsystem

that the individual is engaged in on an ongoing basis. According to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological

System's Theory, the microsystem is the smallest level unit of relationships, including family,

peers, and community. Bronfenbrenner (1994) explained:

> A microsystem is a pattern of activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations
> experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with   particular
> physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in
> sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, activity in, the immediate
> environment. (p. 39)

In an earlier work, Bronfenbrenner (1977) defined a microsystem as:

> The complex relations between the developing person and their environment in an immediate setting containing that person (e.g. home, school, workplace, etc.). Setting is defined as a place with particular physical features in which the participants engage in particular activities in particular roles (e.g. daughter, parent, teacher, employee, etc.) for particular periods of time. (p. 514)

Bronfenbrenner (1977) established the microsystem as the most basic unit between the individual and one's immediate environment and relationships; in this research microsystems were found to have a significant impact on the persistence attitudes and the behaviors of the participants (See Figure 4). Family context, aspirations, campus environment, life challenges, and English language learning all were experienced at the most basic level of relationships, engagement, and environment. In the Ecological System's theoretical framework, the immediate settings that the participants engaged in and the relationships that took place within the immediate settings interconnected to provide a source of support and motivation to the individual student at the micro level in diverse ways (see Figure 4). Family provides support by accommodating the student while the student works toward a degree, but is also an impetus to continue toward completion of a degree programs in order to establish a legacy that the individual will leave for the family; the desire to accomplish in order to benefit the family.

Family context also includes the responsibilities that undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students are charged with—one surprising finding in this area was that half of the participants were financially responsible for their parents and two participants were financially responsible for extended family members, as well as caring for disabled or elderly parents. Giving support to and receiving support from family was evident throughout the data and this was a source of motivation for the undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional student. The literature has demonstrated that the Hispanic ethnic group has strong ties to its family and that there is a

source of strength drawn from family relationships, a concept called *familismo*, which is defined as a "centrality of strong family ties within the family, simultaneously positioning the family as the key source of strength and support" (Woolley, 2010, p. 10). In this study, *familismo* was demonstrated through the family context theme as a strong motivational source for participants to persist in their academic degree programs.

Aspirations, identified by participants as the second most important factor in their academic persistence, were comprehensive desires across the participants' lives to succeed. These were not discrete goals but were overarching desires to overcome life's challenges by attempting to self-improve, increase opportunities for self, and to help those around them. Each participant believed that aspirations were a key element in academic persistence. Without the hopes and ideas that fueled each of their commitment to educational attainment, academic persistence may not have occurred.

Four of the participants attributed their pursuit of education to an awakened self-awareness of potential that was a type of personal transformation. Personal aspirations challenged participants to think beyond their current and immediate situation and find ways to overcome their life challenges, stretching themselves beyond the limitations that had the potential to deflect their personal progress and influence their academic persistence.

Campus environment within the Hispanic Serving Institution allows the Hispanic student to culturally connect with others on campus. This, in turn, helps Hispanic students to establish connections, relationships, and to identify with others very much like themselves. These relationships and networks become funds of knowledge and social capital for the students to gain information and access to resources which all intersect to sustain academic persistence.

Family Context

-Support

-Diverse Roles

-Financial Obligations

- Legacy

Aspirations

-Educational/Career

-Attainment

-Role Model

-Self-Awareness

Campus Environment -

Cultural Connectiion -

Nontraditional Student Presenence

-Hispanic Peer Networks
-Hispanic Faculty
-Mentors

English Language Learning

-Early Years Challenging

-Additional Time to
Complete Reading and
Assignments

Life Challenges

-Divorce

-Health

-Immigration

-Loss of Employment

-Foreclosure

Figure 4: *Undergraduate Hispanic Nontraditional Factors of Persistence Microsystem Model*

Coleman (1988) defined the term social capital as "the resources obtainable within the

social structure of a person's community—norms, social networks, and interpersonal

relationships—that contribute to personal development and attainment" (as cited by Olivares,

2011, p. 71). In this study, the social capital and networks that participants accessed and utilized

on their campuses within the context of Hispanic Serving Institutions were of direct influence to

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their academic persistence. Prior research has indicated that Hispanic students at predominantly Caucasian educational institutions felt that they lacked the social capital necessary to be successful in their academic environments (Shehab, et al., 2007). There has also been research conducted that ties university context to student success, calling for increased connectedness between culture, context, and campus environment (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007). Hispanic Serving Institutions may have an advantage if they purposefully seek to recruit and cultivate minority faculty that culturally represent, interact with, and understand how best to serve their student populations in a manner that is "cultural[ly] congruent" (Castellanos & Gloria, 2007).

The campus environment at the two HSIs in this study provided students with easier access to Hispanic faculty and administrators, and such access provided the participants of this study with role models of the same ethnic background as themselves; this helped students to relate and seek out sources of social capital necessary to their success. The faculty and staff members of these institutions were considered sensitive to the needs of the undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional student and contributed to participant academic persistence by demonstrating interest in the students' academic endeavors. The faculty and staff of these institutions provided access to resources that the participants may not otherwise have had access to, the human capital necessary to navigate academic life; these campus experiences rendered value to the student.

Life challenges represent a single, multiple, or an ongoing situation that the student has confronted and overcome, or determined to overcome. This engagement in decision making, by the nontraditional student, to work through a stressor, helps to develop an attitude of persistence that aids in coping with the many roles and responsibilities that one will engage with while

pursuing an undergraduate degree. Participants were insistent to communicate that their challenging life situations helped them to develop the strength and endurance necessary to overcome the many obstacles that confronted them on their academic journey.

In this study, eight participants were English language learners, which was the fifth theme and the theme that participants identified in the hierarchy as the least impactful of the five. Yet participants cited having to learn how to use English for academic purposes as a challenging adaptation process and that time on reading and assignments in comparison to their native English speaking counterparts was two to three times as long. The first years of the academic program seem most intimidating to the English language learning student because of the language learning process, but as time passes and learning and adaptation take place, the students become more comfortable using the English language in their environments. The HSI campus experience played the important role of sustaining the English language learner by providing networks of bilingual speakers that could support them as they secured academic language skills and while participants adapted to the academic environment.

Most challenging to the participants were the first years in the degree program as they familiarized themselves with academic language and standards, which was an intimidating process. Having to spend hours reading textbook material that may take a native reader one hour was common for this group, yet as time passed and they became more familiar with the language, an enhanced sense of being comfortable speaking and writing in a second language developed and their experiences improved, adding to their ability to academically persist. The first years are critical for these students and support networks and relationships can act as key stabilizing agents in participant academic persistence through this critical time.

Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory comes to play within the themes of family context and campus environment in that these are two rich and multilayered elements of the social environment of the student which provide social interactions that influence behavior and ultimately impact academic persistence. Participants in this study engaged in relationships within the context of their culture, as was found with most of the participants, that increased their social capital and funds of knowledge, and formed peer and mentor networks with those that they identified with and engaged with to support academic persistence. Hispanic faculty and administrators formed a part of the sociocultural context in which students were learning; considering that participants referenced these relationships and experiences as instrumental in their motivation to remain consistent in their academic degree programs, ethnic identity and its connection to environment was a very important finding in this research.

Prior research found that the university environment has the potential to mediate persistence attitudes and ethnic identity among Hispanic students; a sense of belonging and the social and cultural climate can deter Hispanic students from deserting their academic programs (Castillo et al, 2006). The findings of this research support past theorists and studies that link persistence to institutional efforts in aiding student integration with university social and academic environments through funds of knowledge that are established through relationships and social systems (Lacy, 1978; Tinto, 1993). Funds of knowledge and informal social networks aid students in obtaining information and forming relationships that help to establish support systems that impact persistence, as well as engage students in their academic settings; these all provide a sense of belonging for the individual student. A sense of belonging further enhances a sense of accountability to the environment and the groups that the student will form a part of.

Participants of this study described interpersonal relationships and social systems within and outside of the HSI that helped to fuel and sustain their academic persistence. Furthermore, the Hispanic institutional setting was noted by participants to have created an environment that fostered their academic pursuits by helping students to connect with others of their own ethnic groups both at the peer and faculty levels. The campus environment helped students to flourish despite their nontraditional status and English language learning issues. This finding supports previous research that indicated Hispanic students' 'perception of their college environment' does impact their academic engagement, which affects their sense of belonging on a university campus (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1998).

Recommendations for Institutions of Higher Education

Envisioning the undergraduate landscape in the United States, nontraditional students make up about 38% of the undergraduate student populations at colleges and universities, and undergraduate Hispanic students possess the lowest overall bachelor degree attainment rate among Caucasians, African Americans, and Asians (NCES, 2011). With increasing numbers of Hispanics enrolled at American institutions of higher education, and a 47% increase in enrollment over the last decade for nontraditional students, findings such as these should be considered when developing institutional policies that impact this population and when designing undergraduate academic course delivery options, services, and programs (NCES, 2011).

Recent changes in the United States economy have indicated that in the current competitive jobs market there has occurred an increase of about 30% in employment opportunities that require post-secondary education; individuals are returning to college to learn

new skills that meet job market demands (Carnevale et al., 2010, p. 1). There are also emerging Hispanic Serving Institutions across the United States, which are those identified as serving between 15% and 24% of Hispanics at full time enrollment and are expected to become HSIs in the years to come as their Hispanic enrollment increases (Santiago & Andrade, 2010, p. 6). As Hispanics move away from urban centers and into less traditionally Hispanic populated areas of the United States, they will attend institutions that have not historically served Hispanic students. These institutions will be in need of information on how to best serve Hispanic populations that promote their retention and academic persistence. That HSIs and emerging HSIs understand that a part of the retention persistence formula is linked to student attitudes, relationships, and their backgrounds is imperative. All of these factors interlink with support systems within and outside of the educational institution and ultimately impact Hispanic persistence (Arana et al., 2011).

Improving the Nontraditional Student Experience

Serving nontraditional students requires an understanding beyond the traditional college student. Targeted services that are available to students that are pressed for time and attention are an integral part of an academic system that appropriately meets the needs of nontraditional students. This next section describes those ideas as depicted by the undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students that participated in this study and ideas that were derived from this research.

Interconnect the student and institutional context. Institutions that serve Hispanic populations should understand the nature of family, aspirations, and life challenges in relation to their nontraditional students. This study demonstrated that these factors do impact academic persistence and that a connection between the two must be factored into how retention

persistence formulas are considered. As family context was the main factor identified by the participants of this study as having impacted their persistence, institutions should try to link the family to the institution so that family can obtain an enhanced awareness of where and what the students are investing their limited time into. Institutions need to engage the families of their nontraditional students in order influence persistence through activities and services that will create a link between the family and the institution.

Institutions should understand that the family connection for the Hispanic nontraditional student is imperative when they take on the role of a student while managing many different obligations related to the family. Hosting events that include the family each semester is one strategy that can help bridge the gap between the family and the institution and helps to raise awareness for the family of the reality that the student is living which in turn can help families cooperate with their nontraditional student in a more understanding way. Knowing the pressures of the nontraditional student experience and how the competing obligations can play out in relation to academic persistence, services should be tailored to fit their hours, schedules, and demands. Ultimately educational institutions must understand that when they serve the nontraditional student they do not exist in a vacuum; there are a host of factors that affect academic persistence for this individual.

Mentors and role models. Participants in this study indicated the positive impact that faculty mentors and advisors had on their academic persistence; how having someone that they could identify with and that cared about their educational pursuits and ultimately their success factored into their desire for degree completion. Institutions should engender a system of support for students among their faculty and staff by building it into the context of their daily roles. They

should invest in professional development for faculty and staff on academic coaching and mentoring practices that help to establish relationships that sustain academic persistence for Hispanic nontraditional students and provide information on the mentoring practices that impact academic persistence and completion. Having academic success coaches can help students to hold on to their ambition to succeed and maintain the end in sight as the everyday pressures of life, work, and responsibilities can cloud their ability to remain focused on their goals. Alongside of this type of service should be student-mentoring programs that encourage peer mentoring among students. Peer mentoring can promote the development of formal and informal networks, much like those described by participants in this study, that form and influence academic persistence among Hispanic nontraditional students, it helps them to connect at various levels and access funds of knowledge. This type of intervention and programming can be applicable to both Hispanic Serving Institutions, Emerging HSIs, and non-Hispanic Serving Institutions that serve Hispanic students.

On-demand tutoring services. Student demand for tutoring services may fluctuate throughout a semester, creating a demand that is stronger during midterm and final sessions, yet students complained that the amount of tutors did not change. This created a shortage of human capital that was available to assist the student population. There should be an increase in tutors available during the periods of the semester when the tutoring services are most requested by students, periods when the volume of demand for tutoring increases. This will provide targeted assistance for students during very stressful periods of their academic degree program pursuit. Online writing centers can bridge the gap between brick and mortar services available to students

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and on demand types of services that are useful to this population. Nontraditional students tend to do school work during off hours, online services can go a long way to meet their needs.

Free language services. Hispanic Serving Institutions serve a significant percentage of Hispanic students. Depending on what area of the country the institution is located, many of those students may be immigrants who are first generation students in the United States. Consequently, there may be a language barrier for students to overcome in order to successfully complete their academic or vocational programs that exists beyond a traditional ESOL program. Students may have completed ESOL programs and are looking for tools to help them improve their academic and professional language abilities beyond ESOL and English Composition. One strategy is to offer students a series of free online language resources that are accessible on demand through the campus portal or information on free resources available through the web, at public libraries, and other community organizations which focuses on English for academic purposes. Another strategy is to pair up students that desire to practice their English professional skills with peer mentors on campus with whom they may practice their English language skills for a specific number of minutes per week. Providing students access to peers may be less intimidating for them as they build language skills, fosters relationships and networks that are very valuable to the Hispanic student, and can help to sustain persistence.

Flexible course delivery. Nontraditional students confront competing roles and obligations that limit the time they have to meet their responsibilities. A flexible schedule that allows the student to meet degree program requirements was mentioned by the participants as a strategy to help the nontraditional student persist academically. Flexible hours, early mornings, blended coursework, online courses, independent studies, and flexible degree programs are all

possible strategies to integrate to help this student population succeed. One participant

mentioned that many peers struggled to find child care and suggested that institutions of higher

education provide a type of child care service for their students at a reasonable rate. However,

flexible course scheduling may by-pass the need for this added service and all of the issues such

a service may entail, including space, insurance, and supervision of employees.

Another participant mentioned that having different campuses and satellite sites offering

courses as a possible strategy that would help nontraditional students meet both their academic

and work obligations. The participants who were recruited for this study from the public college

had access to several campuses in their city which offered different schedules of the same course.

Two of the five participants mentioned that they did take courses on different campuses to

accommodate their schedules and some were completing their degrees by enrolling in online

courses, which provided flexibility for those who otherwise would have drawn out their degree

completion time.

Institutional services and academic program information in Spanish. Hispanic

Serving Institutions that serve Hispanic immigrant groups that are English Language Learners

should provide basic information on the college, the services, and the degree programs offered

should be available in both the English and Spanish language. There was also a suggestion of

training students on following degree completion plans that are clearly outlined with pre and co

requisites for students to follow. Some students complained that they wasted time on courses that

did not count toward degree completion and insisted that had the information been provided in

both languages on their degree completion plans, they would have been able to stay on their

academic tracks much easier. Targeted academic advising that focuses on degree completion and

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degree completion plans available in the native language of the immigrant can assist in persistence.

Nontraditional student interest group. One participant suggested the development of a nontraditional student interest group that would provide information and resources to students who fall into that category and may have challenges understanding where to find specific information pertinent to their academic journey. This would create a type of space where nontraditional students could connect, access information and resources, and develop friendships and informal networks that would help them navigate the academic system. Students who are pressed for time and have other obligations that they are concerned about may not know where to turn, and many university offices operate during normal business hours which may not be convenient for the nontraditional student who is at work or meeting other obligations during the normal work day. A special interest group may be a support and informative source for this population of students, especially at institutions where the nontraditional population is increasing.

Emerging HSIs and mature HSIs best practices. Emerging HSIs could be best served by the more mature and experienced HSIs in understanding what their best practices have been in retaining Hispanic undergraduate students and working with them to degree completion. Hispanic Serving Institutions have a wealth of knowledge that can serve one another and help to inform the changing landscape in higher education with the boom in Hispanic college students. Mentoring relationships can be established between institutions and policy makers at all levels from local to federal should encourage some type of collaborative relationship between the emerging and more mature and established Hispanic Serving Institutions. These relationships

have the potential to be reciprocally informative and beneficial. This can be accomplished by the criteria set in the competition for Title V grant funding which is earmarked for Hispanic Serving Institutions.

Limitations

This research was exploratory and allowed participants to write about and discuss their experiences which contribute rich textural data to understand the nature of undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students' persistence experiences at Hispanic Serving Institutions. Despite the value of the study there were limitations that should be discussed, among those geographic location and gender representation.

The geographic region selected to investigate this phenomenon was the southeastern United States, specifically South Florida. While South Florida does possess a unique and heterogeneous population of immigrants from Latin America, researching other areas of the country where Hispanics are now shifting the demographic landscape of cities and regions, such as the Carolinas, Tennessee, the Dakotas and the northwest region of the United States, would be helpful (United States Census Bureau, 2011). These areas have seen concentrated shifts in the last decade and there will be emerging Hispanic Serving Institutions providing services to this population. Another limitation of this study was that there were only three male participants recruited and having an equal number of males and females in the study would have been valuable.

Recommendations for Future Research

Both Hispanic Serving Institutions in this study enrolled a higher percentage of females to males therefore the participant pool reflected that gender composition, yet a study with more

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male participation may provide further insight. Perhaps conducting a study that focused solely on male undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students would be beneficial in order to better understand the type of academic environment under which this group may flourish.

Another area of interest to be considered for research is academic persistence in online environments among Hispanic undergraduate students. As more coursework moves to hybrid and online programming it is important to understand how it is that the types of factors associated with academic persistence among Hispanic undergraduate students play out in the online environment. For students who consider peer networks, social capital, funds of knowledge, and interaction with role models and mentors on the campus, important for their academic persistence, understanding what works online is vital for their success.

The two institutions represented in this study were established Hispanic Serving Institutions that have been serving Hispanic populations for decades. Comparing persistence factors for students at Hispanic Serving Institutions and emerging Hispanic Serving Institutions may be helpful in understanding diverse environments of the two types of HSIs and what works for each distinct environment. These types of studies can provide information vital to the higher education community as the United States confronts economic challenges with a sluggish economy that has moved from industrial to technological over the past few decades. Knowledge workers are in demand in various industries that require college degrees and the more insight to the Hispanic population's academic challenges, what works for this group, and how institutions can realistically help Hispanic undergraduate nontraditional students complete the academic and technical programs that they enroll in, the more accountable these can be with the resources they are providing to students while contributing to the United States' economy. Finally, as the United

States' government has presented the mandate for the nation to produce the largest concentration of adults with postsecondary degrees in the world, individual and collective higher education institutional commitment to helping Hispanic college students persist and complete their college degrees is a key factor in contributing to this national objective (Kelly, Schneider, & Carey, 2010).

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

<u>Volunteers Wanted for a Research Study</u>

EXPLORING FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO ACADEMIC PERSISTENCE FOR UNDERGRADUATE HISPANIC NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS AT HISPANIC SERVING INSTITUTIONS IN THE SOUTHEAST

This study seeks to shed light on the motivating factors that influence educational attainment among undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students at Hispanic Serving Institutions in the southeast.

The research protocol will include one demographic survey, one in-depth interview, electronic journaling, and one focus group to collect information on what it is that influences participants to remain in college. All will be scheduled around the participant's schedule.

Prospective participants must be Hispanic undergraduate senior status students enrolled in a degree program at the institution listed in the header of this announcement, 25 or older, and either work full time, have dependents, delayed entry into college from high school, and or be financially independent.

Compensation will be provided for participation- a $30 gift card.

If interested in participating in this study please contact:

Floralba Arbelo Marrero, Doctoral Candidate, Principal Investigator
(954) 559 2275 or email: farbelomarrero@liberty.edu
Liberty University School of Education

APPENDIX B

Invitation to participate in a research study titled:

Exploring factors that contribute to academic persistence for undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students at Hispanic Serving Institutions in the southeast.

Floralba Arbelo
Liberty University
School of Education

Dear Student,

I would like to invite you to participate in a study about Hispanic undergraduate students' experiences with academic persistence in Hispanic Serving Institutions. I am a doctoral student at Liberty University and I am conducting this study in order to understand what it is that motivates Hispanic nontraditional undergraduate students to decide to stay in college. Overall Hispanic undergraduate students lag behind other groups in obtaining their college degrees and this study will be very beneficial to the general university community in the United States in understanding what factors influence the decision to remain in college.

The study will be comprised of one demographic survey, one in depth interview, electronic journaling, and one focus group. Interviews and focus groups will be scheduled to accommodate your schedule. I will ask you questions regarding your willingness to remain in college and decisions in regard to this. In order to participate you must be Hispanic, 25 years or older, in your senior year of study in a degree program, and meet two of the following criteria: be financially independent, work full time, have dependents, or delayed entry into college after high school.

When you complete the required interview, journaling, and focus group you will receive a $30 gift card to use as you wish. All information collected will be confidential and will not impact your grades or relationships with faculty. All names will be changed in the final report.

If you have any questions or if you would like more information about the study, please call me at 954 559 2275 or email me at farbelomarrero@liberty.edu. Thank you for taking the time to consider this study. I look forward to hearing about your experiences in college.

Sincerely,
Floralba Arbelo Marrero

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FOR STUDENTS

Research Project: Exploring factors that contribute to academic persistence for undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students at Hispanic Serving Institutions in the southeast.

Floralba Arbelo
Liberty University
School of Education

I agree to participate in the research project titled Exploring factors that contribute to academic persistence for undergraduate Hispanic nontraditional students at Hispanic Serving Institutions in the southeast conducted by Floralba Arbelo Marrero. I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to understand the experiences that influence Hispanic nontraditional students to persist in their studies so that universities can cultivate policies and programs that are conducive to this population of students.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to respond to questions regarding the experiences, influences, factors, and situations related to my academic persistence. I understand that I will participate in one interview, one focus group, will fill out one demographic survey, and will be asked to electronically journal my thoughts and experiences on persistence over the course of one month. I also understand that the interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim and that my privacy will be protected through the use of a pseudonym.

Benefits

The benefits to participation are your contribution to the literature that will assist the higher education community on obtaining information from actual Hispanic nontraditional undergraduate students on persistence factors which will allow them to serve these populations in a more beneficial manner. Another benefit of the study is the access to future research for those who decide to study this topic and could use this research as a framework for their own.

Compensation:

You will receive payment: of a $30 gift card when you complete all of the phases of the research mentioned above.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report that is published any information that will make it possible to identify a subject will not be included. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers will have access to the records.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with this institution. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships. I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Contacts and Questions:

The name of the researcher conducting this study is Floralba Arbelo Marrero. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at 954 559 2275.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Fernando Garzon, Chair, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1582, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at fgarzon@liberty.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: _____   Date: _____

Signature of parent or guardian: _____   Date: _____
(If minors are involved)

Signature of Investigator: _____   Date: _____

APPENDIX D

LIBERTY
UNIVERSITY.

The Graduate School at Liberty University

December 6, 2012

Floralba Arbelo Marrero
IRB Approval 1409.120612: Exploring Factors that Contribute to Academic Persistence for

Undergraduate Hispanic Nontraditional Students at Hispanic Serving Institutions in the

Southeast

Dear Floralba,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.
Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB and we wish you well with your

research project.

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
Professor, IRB Chair
Counseling

(434) 592-4054

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APPENDIX E

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that **floralba arbelo** successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 10/17/2012

Certification Number: 1030961

APPENDIX F

Demographic Survey Questions

What is your name? _____

What is your age? _____   What is your gender?   Male ____   Female ____

Do you currently live in the south Florida region? Yes ____   No ____

Are you Hispanic?   Yes ____   No ____

What is your country of birth? _____

How long have you lived in the United States? _____

Are you in your senior year of studies at the college/university in which you are enrolled?   Yes

____ No ____

What is your major? _____

What is your first language? _____

You are a nontraditional student based upon which of the following factors? (Please circle those

that apply to you)

   a) You have dependents

   b) You are financially independent

   c) You did not attend college immediately after high school

   d) You are employed full time

If you are employed full time, what do you do for a living?

_____

Would you be available to take part in an interview, a focus group, and an online journaling

exercise as part of this study over the next two months? Yes ____   No _____

APPENDIX G

In-Depth Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your experiences as a college student?

2. Describe your experiences related to your remaining in college?

3. How have your experiences helped you continue in your undergraduate studies?

4. How do you believe these experiences have affected your ability to continue in your undergraduate studies?

5. What specific factors do you believe have contributed to your motivation to persist in your studies?

6. Are there aspects of being a nontraditional student that presents barriers in your efforts to persist?

7. What are some of the issues you face in managing your multiple roles as a nontraditional student?

8. Are there specific things that a university could do to improve the nontraditional student educational experience?

9. How would you describe your academic experiences as related to studying within a Hispanic Serving Institution?

10. Can you provide a specific example of how your experiences studying at an HSI has influenced your persistence?

11. In what manner has the experience of studying at an HSI helped or hindered your persistence?

12. Do you have any mentoring relationships with faculty or staff members at the university

which have influenced your persistence? If so, can you provide some examples?

13. How does your culture and life off campus influence your ability to persist, if these have any

influence at all on your persistence?

14. Do you have anything else to add?

APPENDIX H

Themes that emerged from data gathered:

English Language Learning

Challenging to study while not completely adept at the language, reading documents and completing assignments takes a longer time due to the language issue.
Studying in a language that is not native is a challenge in and of itself.

Life Challenges

Immigration and assimilation is a process that teaches you to endure and persist, those of you that have had that experience suggest that it prepares you for the type of resilience and resolve that it takes to persist in college.
Trepidation (similar to fear but not as strong) of the unknown.
Critical Life situations that many of you have overcome taught you to value opportunities and act on them. These situations also have helped you to clarify your goals and the direction that your life will take.
Attempting to ameliorate life's challenges with an education as a valid resource.

Family Context

Support from family is imperative when one takes on the role of a student while managing other responsibilities.
Family support is support is invaluable.
When family does not understand the time constraints involved in studying while managing other obligations, it makes it more challenging.
At times in life when the many responsibilities of family responsibilities, being employed to care for family, and dealing with critical life issues related to family caused or could have caused goals to be overshadowed.
Scheduling to handle many family responsibilities.
Sacrifices made by family members has been an impetus to keep working toward degree.

Personal Aspirations
- Ambition to succeed for self, for family, for career.
- Focus on goals in order to move forward in life, in career, to be a family role model to others.
- A commitment to advance professionally.
- Increased possible accomplishments beyond a high school diploma or an associate's degree.
- Self awareness/Self Discovery – understanding that education makes you more equipped for life.

Campus Environment at Hispanic Serving Institutions

- Studying with other Hispanics helped make a cultural connection that brought comfort and created a collaborative environment where peer networks were made that helped you persist.
- Sharing of resources.
- Hispanic faculty brought motivation in that some existed as role models, some mentored, some advised, and they generally understood the Hispanic experience.
- Helped participants feel valued as individuals.
- Similarities with peers provided a motivation.
- Being around other Hispanics with similar roots and values positively enhanced the college experience.
- Added a level of camaraderie to relationships and groups.
- Learning to navigate the system is imperative for a successful college experience.
- Targeted and accurate degree and career advisement is a key factor for a successful college experience.
- Understanding all of the resources that are available to students is important for success and access to these resources that may make a difference in persistence
- Peer networks are instrumental in aiding academic persistence.
- Presence of other nontraditional students on campus struggling with issues and juggling other responsibilities is encouraging.
- Faculty and staff that are mentors provide support and encouragement that are necessary for the journey.

APPENDIX I

Focus Group Questions

1. Are these categories and themes representative of your persistence experiences?

2. How do these categories come together to explain your persistence?

3. In what ways, if any, do these categories influence each other?

4. Do some categories come before others (are they hierarchical) or are they equal?

5. Are some categories more important than others?

6. Is anything missing?

APPENDIX J

Part of Audit Trail

Participant	Date	Activity	Duration	Reflection/Feedback
Particpant1 HSI1	10-Dec-12	One on One Interview	50 minutes	Backed up interview from digital recorder onto flash drive and transcribed the interview straightaway.
	5-Dec-12	Consent Form	10 minutes	Collected
	5-Dec-12	Demographic Survey	10 minutes	Collected
	6-Dec-12	Journaling	4 Weeks	Collected Online
	9-Feb-13	Member Check	8 day return	Returned
	18-Mar-13	Focus Group	1 Hour	Negotiated Themes
Participant 2 HSI1	7-Jan-13	Contact Made		Participant approached me about participating
	9-Jan-13	Consent Form Collected	Electronic	Backed up Electronic Version
	9-Jan-13	Demographic Survey Collected	Electronic	Backed up Electronic Version
	14-Jan-13	One on One Interview	45 Minutes	Backed up interview from digital recorder onto flashdrive
	9-Feb-13	Member Check	4 day return	Returned
	1-Feb-13	Journaling	4 weeks	Returned
	18-Mar-13	Focus Group	1 Hour	Negotiated Themes
Participant 3 HSI1	18-Jan-13	One on One Interview	40 Minutes	Participant approached me about participating in the study. Transcribed interview immediately.
	18-Jan-13	Consent Form	10 Minutes	Backed up Electronic Version
	18-Jan-13	Demographic Survey Collected	7 Minutes	Backed up Electronic

				Version
	9-Feb-13	Member Check	8 day return	Returned
	Feb-13	Journalling	4 Weeks	Returned
	18-Mar-13	Focus Group	1 Hour	Negotiated Themes
Participant 4 HSI1	12-Jan-13	Consent Form	10 Minutes	Participant called me about participating in the study after reading flyer.
	12-Jan-13	Demographic Survey	6 Minutes	Backed up Electronic Version
	16-Jan-13	One on One Interview	38 Minutes	Transcribed the same afternoon that the interview took place.
	9-Feb-13	Member Check	Two Days	Adjusted age noted on Interview Sheet
	1-Feb-13	Journaling	4 Weeks	Sent to me Returned
	18-Mar-13	Focus Group	1 Hour	Negotiated Themes
Participant 5 HSI1	30-Jan-13	Consent Form	Brought With	Snowball
	30-Jan-13	Demographic Survey	Brought With	Backed up electronic version
	30-Jan-13	One on One Interview	35 Minutes	Transcribed next day.
	Feb-13	Journaling Collection	4 Weeks	Had challenge with journaling.
	9-Feb-13	Member Check	4 days	Approved as is

Date	Activity	Duration	Participants	Outcome
7-Dec-12	Pilot Screening Questions, Interview Questions, Assent Form and Invitation to Participate in Research Letter	30 mins 12:15pm to 12:45 pm	Three Hispanic undergraduate students at an HSI and one graduate	Feedback suggested that I add a phrase to inquire what country they immigrated from but the demographic survey addresses that issue. Mentioned that during the interview I should be sure to explain what a Hispanic Serving Institution is to each participant.

			Hispanic student.	
7-Dec-12	Began posting flyers on HSI1 Campus.	20 minutes		Some responses from prospective participants
8-Dec-12	Wrote to Dean at HSI2 Campus.	10 minutes		Quick response from HSI2
10-Dec-12	Flyer and information out to HSI2	2 days		Some responses from prospective participants
10-Dec-12	Began to meet with participants	See Sheet 2		
10-Dec-12	Set up Penzu account for particpant 1 HSI1	10 Minutes		Opened up Confidential email account in order to open up the confidential penzu account with pseudonym for participant

APPENDIX K

Permission to use survey and interview questions.