A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF HISPANIC STUDENT PERSISTENCE IN THE ONLINE COLLEGE ENVIRONMENT

by

Lee Richard Wilson

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to find the essence of the experiences of Hispanic students who persist to complete online degrees at accredited universities. This information is essential to grasp the factors that motivated these students to complete their degrees. The central question is, "What are the experiences of Hispanic students who persisted to complete online undergraduate degree programs?" Purposeful sampling was used, and journal entries, interviews, and letters of advice were utilized through email and telephone communications. The Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1993) is a guide this study. This data is useful in studying how Hispanic students overcome obstacles and finish online degree programs. Participants are 11 Hispanic students who have completed undergraduate and graduate online degree programs during the last five years. Thematic data, gathered by grouping, clustering, and thematizing (Moustakas, 1994), was gathered through journal entry prompts, semi-structured interviews, and letters of advice. Major themes were analyzed by using codes, significant statements, and the essence of the experience.

Keywords: Hispanic education, Latino education, Hispanic culture, Latino culture, Hispanic learning, Latino learning, higher learning, online learning, distance education, hybrid learning

Copyright Page

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Abbreviations

Hispanic Serving Institutions (HIS)

Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit)

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Today, almost one out of five Americans is Hispanic (18%) as compared to one out of 20 (4.9%) in 1970 (Flores, Lopez & Krogstad, 2019; Krogstad & Lopez, 2017). As the Hispanic population has increased, educational studies have noted a continued disparity between White and Hispanic graduation rates (Coleman et al., 1966; Crisp, Taggart, & Nora, 2014; Fry & Lopez, 2012; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Johnson & Galy, 2013; Lee & Burkam, 2002; Parker, Segovia, & Tap, 2016; Snyder & Dillow, 2010). This disparity is part of what has come to be called the "achievement gap." It is defined as the "significant disparity in educational achievement among groups of students" (e.g., race/ethnicity, socioeconomic circumstances, gender, language) (Diamond, Furlong, & Quirk, 2016, p. 160) and as "the difference in academic performance between two subgroups when one group outperforms another group" (Kotok, 2017, p. 184). Although the achievement gaps are decreasing (Carnevale & Fasules, 2018; Kaupp, 2012; Paschall, Gershoff, & Kuhfeld, 2018), they are also showing little change in STEM subject areas (Olszewski-Kubilius, Steenbergen-Hu, Thomson, & Rosen, 2016) and are now leveling out (NAEP, 2019).

The United States Hispanic student population presents unique educational challenges (Gándara & Mordechay, 2017; Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011; Rodriguez, Parrish, & Parks, 2017) including how to increase enrollment, retention, and the development of culturally relevant curriculum design. The online learning platform may be one approach that helps close this achievement gap (Garcia, Abrego, & Calvillo, 2014). The increase of online students to 6.6 million students in 2017, demonstrates the viability of the distance-learning platform (NCES, 2019). Some studies indicate that Hispanic students are less likely to drop out of a hybrid or

online environment (Corry, 2016; Garcia et al., 2014; Ortagus, 2018). The online environment can address the common Hispanic cultural emphasis on entering the workforce as soon as possible and working during college education (Mellander, 2011; Nuñez & Sansone, 2016; Santiago, 2019). Consequently, online education could provide an opportunity for greater work flexibility. Hispanic students who have completed online degree programs (Defined as at least 80% of coursework through the online environment [Allen & Seaman, 2007]) can give voice to their persistence experiences that can inform schools and students as to this platform's advantages or disadvantages for this specific cultural group. This first chapter examines the background of the issue, my personal experience relating to the subject, the problem, the purpose statement, the significance of the study, and the research questions.

Background

The growing population of Hispanics in the United States, and the related educational achievement gap, presents a challenge to the American educational system (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2018; Gándara & Mordechay, 2017; Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011; Rodriguez et al., 2017). The cultural, and often, language backgrounds of Hispanics can present a specific set of dynamics unique to students in this ethnic group (Gonzalez, Stein, & Huq, 2012). The numbers of Hispanic students have increased at all levels of education and yet continue to reflect a lower achievement level as measured by attendance, graduation, and degree completion (NCES, 2019). In 1970 there were 9.6 million Hispanics in the United States (4.7%). Twenty years later (1990) the number had risen to 22.6 million (8.8%). By 2019, 59.9 million (18%) Hispanics were in the United States (Flores et al., 2019). That number included 17.8 million Hispanic students at all levels in 2016, up from 8.8 million in 1996 (a 102% increase) (United States Census Bureau, 2017).

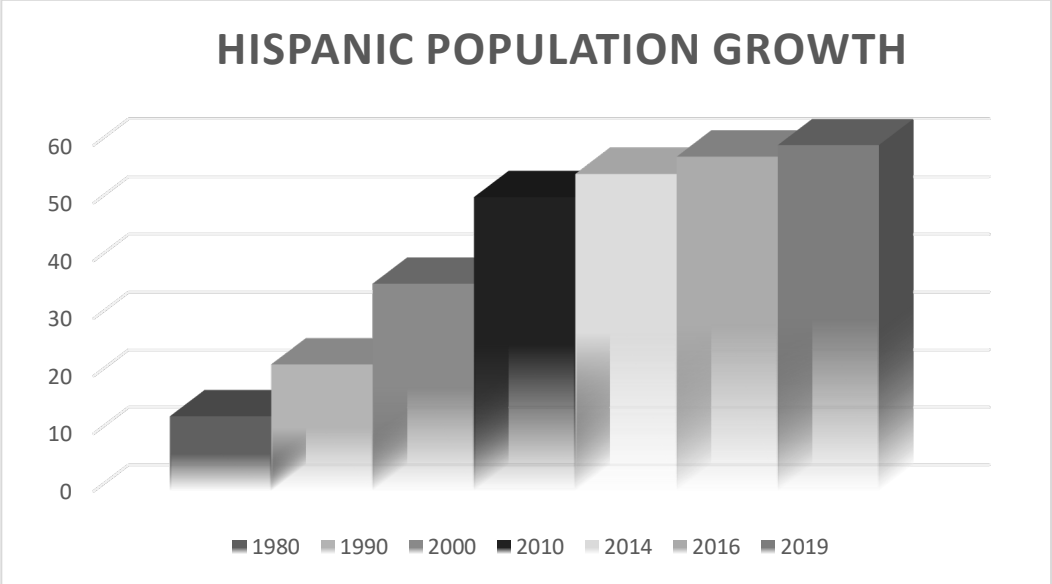

Figure 1. Hispanic population growth since 1970. Adapted from "How the U.S. Hispanic Population is Changing," by A. Flores, 2015, *Pew Hispanic Research Center.*

For several decades, as the Hispanic population has increased, a continued problem of lower graduation rates and higher dropout rates of Hispanics (as compared to Whites, African Americans, and Asians) has persisted (Crisp et al., 2014; Flores, 2017b; Fry & Lopez, 2012; Johnson & Galy, 2013; NAEP, 2019; Parker et al., 2016). These dropout rates reflect both high school and college/university educational data collected over the last four to five decades, although there is variation according to regions and specific acculturation levels of Hispanic students. Statistics show that the achievement gap, which at the college/university level includes lower graduation and degree completion rates and lower four-year degree completions (Fry & Lopez, 2012; García & Garza, 2016), is decreasing, but remains a serious problem (Carnevale & Fasules, 2018; Krogstad, 2016a, NAEP, 2019; Paschall et al., 2018).

Historical

The historical disparity in the Hispanic and White academic achievement gap has given rise to many studies concerning cultural differences which may have links to the phenomenon

(Consoli & Llamas, 2013; Crisp et al., 2014; Fry & Lopez, 2012; Gonzalez & Morrison, 2016; Johnson & Galy, 2013; Kaupp, 2012; Kirkland, 2011; Paschall et al., 2018; Reardon, Kalogrides, & Shores, 2016). Also, various interventions have been developed which can be useful in closing these gaps in academic success (Grateix, 2017; Núñez, Hoover, Pickett, Stuart-Carruthers, & Vazquez, 2013; Santiago, 2019). These studies have identified several consistent factors that are important in determining Hispanic student success. Crisp et al. (2015) identified these factors as:

> (a) Socio-cultural characteristics; (b) academic self-confidence; (c) beliefs, ethnic/racial identity, and coping styles; (d) precollege academic experiences; (e) college experiences; (f) internal motivation and commitment; (g) interactions with supportive individuals; (h) perceptions of the campus climate/environment; and (i) institutional type/characteristics has been shown to be related to one or more academic success outcomes for Latina/o students. (p. 255)

Hispanic student persistence to success (to degree completion) at the college level is a theme of this study. Because these above-mentioned factors are so important to Hispanic educational success, it is essential that this study examines how the online learning platform may benefit or challenge the Hispanic student in achieving success as defined by degree completion. That is, does the online learning platform assist the Hispanic higher education student in any of these areas, thereby providing them with additional tools for success?

Other emerging issues concerning Hispanic higher educational success have been technology accessibility, language difficulties, and financial challenges (Kaupp, 2012; Lopez, Gonzalez-Barrera, & Patten, 2013). Hispanics have been much less likely to borrow or be heavily in debt for education (Krogstad, 2016a). However, the increased attendance options for

higher education, including distance learning, present a major opportunity for Hispanic students and school personnel to increase (Hispanic) enrollment and degree completion. Schaffhauser (2017) wrote "the demographics are shifting to a student community primarily comprised of adult and other contemporary learners, for whom distance learning often provides the best path to a post-secondary education" (Para. 4). The online modality is especially accommodating for Hispanic students.

Social

The early view of Hispanic culture in the United States has often been tainted with prejudice and misunderstanding (Rook, 2013). Cultural clashes between Whites and Hispanics resulted in several conflicts, including the Mexican American War (Huntington, 2009). Hispanics have historically thought that they experienced ethnic oppression related to White positions of power (Rook, 2013). Compounding this lack of connection with American institutions has been the perceived discrimination in governmental entities including public schools (Bailliard, 2013; Chiachih et al., 2016; Potochnick, Perreira, & Fuligni, 2012).

Hispanics have only recently gained substantial political power and social influence, as the majority of their ethnic group is now American born (United States Census Bureau, 2015). Additionally, in 2018, 79% of all Hispanics were United States citizens (Noe-Bustamonte, 2019). Eligible Latino voters were 21 million in 2012 but will be 32 million in 2020 (Krogstad & Noe-Bustamonte, 2019; Swaine, 2017). However, the collectivist mindset of Hispanic culture can present a challenge to progress in the area of education. This collectivist paradigm is described as "… a societal framework in which common goals and values are established whereby societal groups possessing those commonalities are politically centralized" (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Such a paradigm encourages Hispanic students to view success as a

collective experience to be shared (Consoli, Delucio, Noriega, & Llamas, 2015; Rook, 2013). Therefore, the need for collective interaction can be a challenge for Hispanic online students. Online programs can provide this by highlighting group projects, discussion board interaction, and real-time video conferencing (Garcia et al., 2014).

Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) have developed culturally based interventions which attempt to reach out to families and students and allow them to experience the higher education setting (Contreras & Contreras, 2015). Educators and universities are actively being challenged to become culturally aware and adept in reaching the Hispanic community (Kiyama, Museus, & Vega, 2015). Even so, some researchers feel that HSI's are not performing at acceptable levels in elevating Hispanic degree completion and retention rates (Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Murphy, 2013).

Situation to Self

The researcher has a mixed heritage of Mexican American and Anglo-American family and culture. My mother is the daughter of a former Mexican farmworker and labor foreman. She was the first in her family to complete a university education, and later became a noted Chicana Literature writer and Spanish professor. As a second-generation Hispanic college student, the researcher has persevered through graduate online degree programs with Grand Canyon University (Masters in secondary education) and Liberty University (Ed.S. and current Ed.D. program). Additionally, my principal profession has been ministry with major involvement in the United States Hispanic community and in the cities and culture of Mexico. I have witnessed the collectivist advantage or disadvantage, which is experienced by Hispanic young people desiring to pursue higher education. Approximately 80% of my fellow Spanish bachelor's degree graduates shared some Hispanic heritage. Through these experiences and

research at the master's and doctoral levels, the researcher holds a good perspective on issues that affect Hispanic achievement in higher education.

Ontological assumptions are based on a realist point of view. It is believed that the participants shared this particular view of the reality of the experience. The interviews displayed axiological value laden responses based on shared interpretations. The rhetorical style was based on a first-person narrative and my methodology was inductive. I espouse a constructivist paradigm, which is reflected in this research through the viewpoints of the participants and myself. Creswell (2013) wrote that research should "… rely as much as possible on the participant's view of the situation … they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interpretation with others …" (p. 21).

Problem Statement

A problem exists in Hispanic persistence mechanisms which lead to academic success at the university level. Statistics reveal an achievement gap (attendance, retention, and graduation rates) in higher education between Hispanics and other ethnic groups. The numbers demonstrate the need to address and correct educational disparities among the growing and important Hispanic population. In 2019 there were about 60 million Hispanics in the United States (19.5 million foreign born) (Flores et al., 2019; Lopez & Radford, 2017), a 71% increase since 2000 (35 million) according to Stepler & Brown (2016). Gramlich (2017) observed "Between 1999 and 2016, the number of Hispanics enrolled in public and private nursery schools, K-12 schools and colleges increased 80%, from 9.9 million to 17.9 million" (Para. 4). Also, in 2016 there were 3.6 million Hispanic college students, up from 1.3 million in 1999, a 180% increase (Gramlich, 2017). However, as of 2012, Hispanics earned only 9% of four-year degrees among all ethnic groups (Fry & Lopez, 2012). Additionally, only 16.9% of Hispanics over 25 had

graduated from college, compared to 36% of Whites and 26% of African Americans (Johnson & Galy, 2013). In 2015, only 13% of Hispanics held a bachelor's degree, compared to 51% of Whites and 19% of African Americans (Parker et al., 2016). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2019) reported that in 2018, 21% of Hispanics between 19 and 24 years old had a bachelor's degree or higher. This data demonstrates the continued achievement gap between Hispanics and Whites in higher education. These figures reflect a disparity in degree completion. Interestingly, enrollment in online platforms has reached 6.6 million students in 2019 as it has become more cost-effective and far-reaching (NCES, 2019). Hispanic students may use the flexibility of online learning to narrow the achievement gap (Garcia et al., 2014) as Hispanic students, in some studies, were less likely to drop out of a hybrid or online environment (Corry, 2016). Their persistence mechanisms were somehow positively affected. Currently, there are no phenomenological qualitative studies giving a voice to how persistence mechanisms influence Hispanic college students to complete online undergraduate degrees. This study attempts to understand what persistence mechanisms Hispanic students employ in the online environment to achieve academic success.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of Hispanic students who have persisted to complete an undergraduate online degree at accredited universities within the last five years. At this stage in the research, the phenomenon is generally defined as persistence to degree completion as this provides a measurable outcome. Online is defined as at least 80% of coursework being taken through the internet (Allen & Seamon, 2007). The theory guiding this study is the Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1993) while focusing on the subcomponents of social and academic integration interpreted by Latino

Critical Race Theory (Gonzales & Morrison, 2016). These theories are useful in studying how Hispanic students overcome obstacles and achieve success through persistence.

Significance of the Study

This study adds to the literature describing Hispanic students' experiences in persistence and success in the online environment. It contributes to the areas of empirical, theoretical, and practical significance in the area of Hispanic higher education. It informs educators, universities, and students as to positive/negative Hispanic student perceptions of the online modality in higher education.

Empirical Significance

The results of the study can aid educators and students in understanding the perceived negative and positive aspects of an online degree program as experienced by a Hispanic graduate. The narratives can serve to provide useful information about the reality of this academic experience as viewed through real Hispanic students who are striving to proceed to degree completion. Barril (2017) wrote "As online education becomes ever more established in higher education, it is vital to examine the diversity of contemporary student populations and their learning preferences" (p. iii). Researchers and universities can benefit from first-hand accounts of these students in their academic journey by potentially adjusting programs of recruiting, retention, and curriculum to better accommodate Hispanic online students.

Theoretical Significance

Researchers and theorists can benefit from this study by analyzing the essence of how Hispanic adult students prefer to learn and how they utilize persistence mechanisms to complete online degree programs. Ké and Kwak (2013) researched online learning across ethnicity and age, finding conflicting results. This research adds to the literature regarding Hispanic student

persistence in higher education using Tinto's Student Integration Model (1993) and Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit). The LatCrit perspective adds to the theoretical literature in bringing "the voice of Latinos to the forefront" in the area of online education (Gonzales & Morrison, 2016, p. 89). This information further facilitates an understanding of how Hispanics express their experiences that relate to Hispanic centered higher educational theory.

Practical Significance

The essence of the experiences expressed by Hispanic students in this phenomenological study informs higher education online instructors, course designers, and advisors concerning factors that these students feel are important to academic success in the online environment. These findings also provide perspective to Hispanics considering online programs and strategies for persisting. The information can prove to be a positive influence in Hispanic online enrollment.

Research Questions

This study is designed to examine the personal experience of Hispanic students who have persisted to graduate from an online bachelor's program. It relies on research questions which are based on the problem and the purpose statement. Following are the central and sub-questions.

Central Research Question (CQ):

What are the experiences of Hispanic students who have persisted to complete online degree programs? This question elicits a phenomenological description of an experience. Creswell (2013) related that phenomenological theorists focused upon the lived experiences of persons and the evolving of "descriptions of the essences of these experiences" (p. 58). Moustakas (1994) described this method as an attempt to reach a free and open mind-set while

not being encumbered by the "customs, beliefs, and prejudices of normal science" (p. 41). The personal experiences and perceptions of the Hispanic students themselves are the focus of the study.

SQ1: What pre-entry attributes challenges do Hispanic students experience during their online degree program journey? This question elicits information regarding pre-college education, individual attributes, and family background. Tinto (1997), in his revised Student Retention Model, mentioned these three areas as being important in understanding student persistence. The question also seeks to understand specific self-identification concepts and perceived threats to academic success of Hispanic students.

SQ2: What academic participation challenges do Hispanic students face in an online program? Tinto (1993) included academic integration as a vital component in student retention and persistence. Technology access, online platform user friendliness, instructor availability, and online library navigation are some areas of potential academic participation challenges.

SQ3: What social participation challenges do Hispanic students face in an online program? Tinto (1997) noted that social integration into the college life is essential to success. Online students face challenges in connecting with students and instructors, as well as dealing with traditional obstacles such as family support, economic barriers, and balancing work and study (Parker et al., 2016).

Definitions

1. *Hispanic student* – A student who identifies culturally or ethnically as Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).
2. *Persistence* – The level of commitment to the college, career, and academic goals (Tinto, 1993)

3. *Attrition* – The number of individuals who leave a program of study before it has finished.
4. *Adult learner* – A person who is 25 years and up who is involved in forms of learning.
5. *Success in degree completion* – Completion of an undergraduate online degree program.
6. *Online degree program* – A program that contains at least 80% of the coursework (Allen & Seaman, 2007) offered online. These programs must be accredited and are limited to undergraduate degrees.
7. *HSI* - Hispanic serving institution. A college or university that has been recognized as being culturally informed and prepared to serve Hispanic students. Usually, it has over 25% Hispanic student population.

Summary

As the Hispanic population of United States continues to increase, higher education institutions must reduce the Hispanic achievement gap in degree completion. The recent expansion of online programs, and the continued increase in Hispanic higher education enrollment, present an opportunity for further progress in reducing this deficiency. This study seeks to understand how Hispanic higher education students are experiencing the online learning model and how have they successfully used this platform to obtain degrees. This qualitative phenomenological study gives voice to successful Hispanic students who have used the online platform to complete online degree programs. It primarily utilized the theoretical framework of Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Model. The study incorporates a transcendental phenomenological research approach. Data was gathered through journal entries, semi-structured interviews, and letters of advice, with the intention of arriving at the essence of the phenomenon. We will next review literature related to Hispanic student success at the secondary

and postsecondary levels. Also, we will examine the impact of how online learning has affected higher education and, specifically, Hispanic student success.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The Hispanic student population in the United States continues to rise but the achievement gap remains. In 2000, there were 35 million Hispanics living in the United States (Stepler & Brown, 2016) rising to 59 million in 2017, with 19.5 million being foreign born (Krogstad 2017; Lopez & Radford, 2017) increasing to 59.9 million in 2019 (Flores et al., 2019). This increase is also reflected in academic attendance. In 2016 there were 3.6 million Hispanic college students, up from 1.3 million in 1999, a 180% increase (Gramlich, 2017). In 2011 only 13% of Hispanics held a bachelor's degree and only 4% graduate degrees (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). Also, in 2011, only 16.9% of Hispanics over 25 had graduated from college, while 36% of Whites had done so (Johnson & Galy, 2013). By 2014, 15% of Hispanics held a bachelor's degree or higher as compared to 44% for Whites (Krogstad, 2017). In 2019 the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reported that in 2018, 21% of Hispanics between 19 and 24 years old had a bachelor's degree or higher. This data demonstrates the continued achievement gap between Hispanics and Whites in higher education.

This is not a new phenomenon, as educational statistics over the last four decades reveal a consistently lower Hispanic graduation rate and lower college completion rates than other major minorities (Crisp et al., 2014; Fry & Lopez, 2012; Johnson & Galy, 2013; Kaupp, 2012; Mellander, 2011; Parker et al., 2016). Even so, current enrollment rates, graduation rates, and performance measurements are increasing, though an achievement gap remains (Krogstad, 2016a; NAEP, 2019; Olszewski-Kubilius et al., 2016). Most of current data includes residential, hybrid, and distance education as a combined entity. However, recent studies suggest that online instruction offers a special set of characteristics (flexibility, self-pacing, course availability).

These characteristics could specifically benefit Hispanic students in their need for flexibility in mixing learning and work (Corry, 2016; Garcia et al., 2014; Kaupp, 2012; Lu & Cavazos Vela, 2015). More information is needed to understand how Hispanics are utilizing online platforms in completing degree programs. Therefore, Hispanic students who have completed these types of programs are representative of success and persistence that should be further studied (Lumbreras & Rupley, 2017).

This chapter reviews important current trends in the area of Hispanics in higher education. It includes literature that has focused on Hispanic college student achievement gap issues. It also reviews current literature including quantitative and qualitative research in the areas of barriers to Hispanic higher educational success, keys to persistence, and the potential benefits of online education. The literature generally includes the general population of residential, hybrid, and online students and their performances. However, the review also includes specific areas of research in online education. This research, which is more limited, is examined to understand if online learning could facilitate higher rates of success in Hispanic graduation rates at the college level. This study adds to the limited literature examining how Hispanic students experience and succeed in the online environment.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this study is Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Model. It also utilized the Latino Critical Race Theory to highlight the need for a unique Hispanic student voice (Gonzales & Morrison, 2014). The Student Integration Model theory has become a standard in studying student retention and motivation (Crisp & Nora, 2010; Gonzalez & Morrison, 2016; Lopez, 2015). One of the most important aspects of the model is persistence that is based on goal setting and integration with a specific group of students. There are many

studies that have adopted Tinto's model as a framework for examining Hispanic student persistence including Crisp and Nora (2009) and Crisp et al. (2015).

Tinto's (1993) work remains a standard in Hispanic academic studies because its emphasis upon self-identity. Self-identity continues to be an integral part of Hispanic or Latino research, although persistence studies demonstrate that Hispanic students become less attached to ethnic/racial identities as their college experience progresses (Gonzales & Morrison, 2016). Also, Hispanic learners generally tend to be motivated in a collectivist environment (Arevalo et al., 2016; Consoli et al., 2015; Rook, 2013), which has implications for both program development and course modality. This is, courses designed with collectivist style learning components should benefit Hispanic learners.

Gonzales and Morrison (2016) mentioned Latino Critical Race Theory, or LatCrit, rooted in Critical Race Theory (CRT), as a way "to bring the voice of Latinos to the forefront" (p. 89). They also mention the need for cultural knowledge as being essential for effective academic intervention. It is important that educators understand how minorities are perceiving their educational experience. Therefore, Acevedo-Gil, Santos, Alonso, and Solorzano (2015) described Critical Race Theory as one of "validation…to examine the experiences of Latino/a participants in developmental education" (p. 105). Acevedo-Gil et al. (2015), go on to describe the benefits of CRT as: Challenging predominant perspectives, commitment to social justice, valuing experiential knowledge, and maintaining an interdisciplinary perspective (p. 106). This theoretical perspective can be used to understand how Hispanics see social climates in their educational institution, courses, and student/instructor interaction. Chadderton (2017) explained "CRT … is used in education as an important contribution to the debate around how wider social inequities are produced and reproduced by the school system" (pp. 43-44).

Additional theoretical frameworks that are directed to Hispanic education address many of the previously mentioned components for academic achievement. Gonzales (2015) identified the Bridging Multiple Words Theory, the Social Capital Theory, and the Social Cognitive Career Theory as being useful to describe Hispanic college success (pp. 323-325). This study mainly utilized Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Model.

Related Literature

The unique phenomenon of Hispanic education in the United States merits a review of existing research. This review of the pertinent literature yielded significant information regarding Hispanic cultural orientations towards education, past Hispanic academic achievement indicators, and descriptions of interventions that benefit Hispanic educational achievement.

Hispanic Academic Achievement

The literature concerning Hispanic academic achievement revealed some common themes concerning this group's academic success. First of all, Hispanic families who support their children's education have a higher number of children finishing high school and attending college (Jodry, Robles-Peña, & Nichter, 2004; Paschall et al., 2018; Pstross, Rodríguez, Knopf, & Paris, 2016; Villalba, Gonzalez, Hines, & Borders, 2014). Secondly, evidence supports the implication that the lower level of education of immigrant Hispanic families, coupled with a higher dependence on labor focused employment, affects confidence in the benefits of higher education (Grateix, 2017; Pstross et al., 2016; Rook, 2013). Thirdly, educational data suggests a narrowing graduation and college attendance gap between Hispanics and other minorities (Kouyoumdjian, Guzmán, Nichole, & Talavera-Bustillos, 2017; NAEP, 2019). Also, studies propose that specialized programs, which attempt to build confidence in the value of education among Hispanic families, can lower this barrier and result in higher graduation rates

(Kouyoumdjian et al., 2017; Santiago, 2019). Finally, online education can be an avenue to facilitate higher Hispanic enrollment and academic success (Corry, 2016; Garcia et al., 2014; Lu & Cavazos Vela, 2015).

Cultural Factors Affecting Hispanic Academic Success

There are certain unique characteristics in the education of Hispanics that were noted in this study. Specifically, the literature concerning Hispanic achievement in higher education is almost universal in describing the elements integral to academic success. Crisp et al., (2015) wrote:

> Findings indicate that a combination of (a) sociocultural characteristics; (b) academic self-confidence; (c) beliefs, ethnic/racial identity, and coping styles; (d) precollege academic experiences; (e) college experiences; (f) internal motivation and commitment; (g) interactions with supportive individuals; (h) perceptions of the campus climate/environment; and (i) institutional type/characteristics has been shown to be related to one or more academic success outcomes for Latina/o students. (p. 255)

The above quote sheds light on several aspects inherent in this review. As a collectivist culture, Hispanics depend on family support for motivation and coping skills. Also, the experience of other Hispanics in the areas of education has an influence on each individual's educational aspirations and perceptions. The literature also supported the fact that institutions that are culturally sensitive to Hispanics will be more successful recruiting, retaining, and graduating these students. The following sections review these areas found in the literature.

Family support. Studies imply that a cultural barrier is a major factor in lower graduation rates among Hispanics (Kaupp, 2012; Paschall et al., 2018). One of the principal components of this barrier is the role of family and culture in the student's involvement in higher

education (Bliss & Sandiford, 2004; Pstross et al., 2016; Villalba et al., 2014). Again, literature demonstrates that Hispanic families have a strong influence on how their children view education, including college. Alon, Domina, and Tienda (2010) concluded that both second generation and acculturated Hispanic families aren't promoting the benefit of college education to the degree of Whites. They wrote:

> We find that group differences in parental education and nativity only partly explain the Hispanic-White gap in college enrollment, and not evenly over time. Both foreign-born and native-born college-educated Hispanic parents are handicapped in their ability to transmit their educational advantages to their children compared with White parents. (p. 1)

This could be explained by the less individualized characteristic of the Hispanic collectivist mindset. Literature reveals a major challenge to Hispanic students entering higher education is their attachment and loyalty to the collectivist nature of their families (Consolí, et al., 2018; Taggart, 2017; Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield, & Burgos-Cienfuegos, 2015). The collectivist aspect of Latino cultures and Hispanic families can lead to inner turmoil in the college student as they struggle with home and school values. Vasquez-Salgado et al. (2015) wrote:

> The potential for *home-school value conflict*— conflict between the individualistic behavioral demands of college and collectivistic behavioral demands of family—could peak in a 4-year college where the demands for individual academic achievement become noticeably greater than in high school, while spending time with family and assisting family with tasks becomes much more difficult. We conceptualize this as a conflict between internalized demands for family obligation behaviors and internalized demands

for academic performance. (p. 272)

Taggart (2017) explained the cultural conflict which often occurs when Hispanic students are presented with a different Eurocentric set of values at school. This value system or culture can be at odds, or at least very different, from the culture which they have been raised in. This can cause inward turmoil and can result in lower persistence in education. Taggart (2017) wrote about the subject of cultural discontinuity:

> Cultural discontinuity is conceptually defined as 'a school-based behavioral process where the cultural value-based learning preferences and practices of many ethnic minority students—those typically originating from home or parental socialization activities—are discontinued at school' [Tyler et al., 2008, p. 281]. Researchers have utilized the idea of cultural discontinuity to further explain the dynamics behind racial/ethnic minority student success or failure, hypothesizing that students who feel more culturally aligned with the school systems of which they are part will feel more motivated [Hudley & Daoud, 2008] and be more academically successful [Warzon & Ginsburg-Block, 2008], whereas cultural discontinuity may contribute to poor academic and psychological outcomes in culturally diverse students in schools [e.g., Cholewa & West-Olatunji, 2008; Deyhle, 1995; Lui, 2015]. (p. 732)

One of the cultural disconnections afore mentioned common in the Latino culture is the Hispanic school – family relationship. Many Hispanic families do not have the experience in education, in duration or importance, that most White Americans do.

Under-education of families. Many Hispanic families view higher education as it has related to their own experience in formal school learning environments. For example, over 63% of United States Hispanics trace their origins to Mexico (Flores, 2017b), a country with one of

the lowest educational rates among developed countries (OECD, 2019) where only 60% of adults graduate from a secondary schools, ranking 33 out of 37 participating OECD countries. Immigrants from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador share similar national educational achievement rankings. Also, as many of the immigrants are from the working class, education has not been as available or practical for their survival. These factors affect the attitudes of many recently arrived Hispanic families.

The importance that education has had in Hispanic families can be at least partially reflected by some of the following statistics (although there are factors which can explain much of the early barriers to education that Hispanics have encountered). Hispanic families traditionally enrolled half the percentage of their preschoolers in early childhood education programs than Whites or Blacks (Mellander, 2006). Fortunately, this level increased from 39% in 2007 to 52% in 2012 (Child Trends, 2014), but still remains lower than Whites. Interestingly also, in 2005, 41.3% of young Hispanic mothers had not even attended high school, while only 28.6% had graduated high school (Góndara, 2010). It is not surprising, then, that Hispanic family members who have not experienced secondary and higher education, may not support its benefits for their children. Because Latino students tend to be motivated in a collectivist/family environment, venturing outside one's family experiences can be emotionally and psychologically challenging (Arevalo et al., 2016; Chiachih et al., 2016; Taggart, 2017). Additionally, Vasquez-Salgado et al., (2015) also observed that a lack of family support can lead to home-school conflicts which further add to pressures associated with the acculturation of Hispanic college students. This may lead to some students simply giving up their educational pursuits, or "dropping out."

Identified culturally related risk factors. Dropping out of secondary school has historically plagued Hispanic students. Hispanics dropout rates are declining (8.2%) but are still higher than Whites (4.3) or African Americans (6.5) (NCES, 2019). Parker et al. (2016) named the following risk factors as affecting Hispanic dropout rates: high mobility, grades or lower grade point average, and childbearing prior to high school graduation (p. 57). These factors are known to lead to economic struggle, reliance upon public assistance, limited healthcare, and higher crime rates (Rumberger, 2013). A statistic which informs of cultural and economic factors related to this issue is that 15.2% of foreign-born Hispanics dropped out of high school in 2017, compared to only 6.2% of United States born Hispanics (NCES, Dropout rate, 2019). This statistic reflects the economic need that newly arriving Hispanic families are in. Nevertheless, as more Hispanics are staying in school and planning to attend college, another challenge remains: financing higher education.

The economic challenge. There is a direct correlation to Hispanic academic success and their economic status. Studies have focused on understanding how economic adversity and segregation have affected the Hispanic population. Gagnon and Mattingly (2018) wrote:

> The Stanford Education Data Archive [SEDA], which was made publicly available in 2016, represents the most comprehensive source of information on the demographic and socioeconomic conditions that underpin achievement gaps in U.S. school districts [Reardon, Kalogrides, Ho, Shear, Shores, & Fahle, 2016]. Several recent studies use SEDA to greatly expand our understanding of how factors such as income and segregation relate to achievement and racial/ethnic test disparities [Fahle & Reardon, 2016; Reardon et al., 2016, 2016a, 2016b].
>
> Economic disadvantage has had a long-studied effect on minorities. This is especially

true of Hispanics students coming from poorer, often immigrant families living in lower income communities and social structures. Gordon (2018) addressed this issue commenting:

> Arguably, one of the most debilitating issues impeding Hispanic adolescents' academic success is economic adversity [Altschul, 2012]. Currently, a disproportionate number of Hispanic families reside in low-income communities with limited resources; as a result, a large number of Hispanic youth attend schools that are grossly under-resourced, poorly maintained, and offers an education that barely meets minimum standards (Richmond et al., 2006; Toldson & Lemmons, 2013).

Paying for higher education, therefore, presents unique circumstances for many Hispanic college students. Findings relate that Hispanic families have traditionally emphasized or needed their children to enter the workforce as soon as possible (Crisp et al., 2015). The economic challenge of attending higher educational institution in the United States can be daunting for Hispanics and their families because of several factors. Financing their studies remains a challenge. Also, Hispanics are, generally, more reluctant to take out loans for their higher education (Barshay, 2018). Gilroy (2012) observed, "Hispanics are less likely than Whites or Blacks to take out loans because they are concerned about repayment." Santiago and Stettner (2013) added "Hispanics prefer *a pay as they go approach* while working part-time" Many Hispanics feel that they will not be eligible for government or private educational loans. Also, Hispanic students are less likely to pursue government programs, which require extensive family background questionnaires and long-term commitments (Amuedo-Dorantes & Pozo, 2019; Bailliard, 2013; Potochnick et al., 2012).

For many Hispanic families the financial sacrifice necessary for financing a college degree is often not considered feasible in light of immediate needs. More specifically, the

literature supports the implication that the lower level of education of immigrant Hispanic families coupled with a higher dependence on labor focused employment affects confidence in the benefits of higher education (Mellander, 2007, p. 11). It is important to note that the needs of many Hispanic families who come to the United States are focused upon gaining employment immediately. Mellander (2007) wrote:

> What do they (Hispanic students) do? They focus on a major reason why their families came to the United States. They came to get jobs. They achieve that goal. As a group, these teenage immigrants have high employment rates and earn considerably more than other youths. Their financial 'success' encourages others to drop out of school. (p. 11)

For many of these families, a long-term commitment to higher education would undermine their commitment and dependence on immediate gainful employment (Nuñez & Sansone, 2016). Accordingly, the economic need of Hispanic families will continue to be reality. For example, in 2010, between 35-40% of Hispanic college students aged 16-24 worked full-time or part-time while studying (Santiago, 2013). This reflects how Hispanic students and their families understand the importance of gainful employment and higher education. Income is often the primary concern and expectation of the adult Hispanic student.

Online education can offer the Hispanic student the ability to continue working while having a more flexible study schedule. This finding corresponds to more recent studies, which tie Hispanic academic success to family support and government programs targeting this minority (Kouyoumdjian et al., 2017). Additionally, online education has the potential to reduce degree program costs (Johnson & Galy, 2013; Lu & Cavazos Vela, 2015). This savings could potentially benefit more Hispanic students in being able to afford to enroll in a college or university. But aside from financial concerns, there remains obstacles related to cultural and

societal perceptions.

Fear of government discrimination. There has historically existed a mistrust of the educational system's treatment of Hispanic students' cultural differences (Bailliard, 2013; Emig & Vargas, 2016; Lewis, 1998). It is a historical fact that Hispanic culture in the United States has encountered prejudice and misunderstanding (Rook, 2013; Willis-Esqueda, Delgado, & Pedroza, 2017). Some of the early cultural clashes between Anglos and Latin Americans resulted in several wars and political conflicts. Also, many Hispanics have perceived ethnic oppression related to an Anglo position of power. Rook (2013) wrote "Although Mexican-American youth enrolled in schools experienced cultural and identity oppression during the 1920s and 1930s, Mexican-American adults also struggled in the workplace for acceptance, learning, and equality" (p. 56).

Historically, the need for farm laborers and factory workers dramatically increased the influx of Hispanics during the 20th century. Most of these workers were undereducated and had few ties with large higher educational institutions (Rook, 2013). Compounding this lack of connection with educational institutions has been the perceived discrimination toward Hispanics by United States governmental entities (Amuedo-Dorantes & Pozo, 2019; Bailliard, 2013; Potochnic et al., 2012). This cultural barrier of mistrust will remain unchanged among some Hispanics if new programs are not initiated which attempt to connect them to the educational system (a daunting task in light of the government's present position on immigration). Notwithstanding, recent studies reflect the greater success rates of Hispanic students whose families have been brought into the support structure of the higher educational process (Kouyoumdjian et al., 2017; Pstross et al., 2016; Santiago, 2019; Villalba et al., 2014). This building of trust among Hispanics in the benefits and cultural acceptance in educational

institutions can weaken the barrier of economic and cultural isolation.

It should be noted that Hispanics who fear deportation or government intervention in their immigrant status, and do not report personal information, could nullify the generalization of much of the Hispanic student data (Bailliard, 2013). That assumption implies that there are still large numbers of Hispanic families who do not participate in statistical studies and remain distanced from pressure to fully integrate into the American educational system, including early educational programs (Emig & Vargas, 2016; Lewis, 1998). Again, although many government services are available to undocumented Hispanics, the fear of participation in certain government programs remains (Amuedo-Dorantes & Pozo, 2019; Bailliard, 2013). Accordingly, distance-based education may give some Hispanic students and their families a sense of protected participation in higher learning without the intense day to day involvement and perceived loss of familial authority and protection which their children may encounter in a brick and mortar campus. This is a positive option, especially because of the economic necessity of more Hispanic college graduates.

Economic Implications of Lower Educational Levels

There are long-term economic and social effects to the United States linked to the Hispanic success rates in higher education. In 2010 the Southeast United States dropout rate was 17%. However, the rate for Hispanics was 27% (Parker et al., 2016). This becomes more relevant to the economic outlook when one considers that by 2050 Hispanics students will comprise about 60% of the United States population growth (Mellander, 2011). Parker et al. (2016) wrote:

> The implications of these disparities in academic achievements are broad. More than a quarter of all Hispanic families are living in poverty. That is nearly 10% higher than the

> national rate. This figure is expected to grow at a faster pace than any other ethnic/racial group… (p. 56)

John Marcus (2018) observed that the vast number of Hispanic students and young adults in America will have a strong effect on future per capita earnings and spending:

> The most dramatic place to see this is in kindergarten through grade 12, where Hispanics make up nearly a quarter of enrollment nationwide, up from 16 percent in 2000. By 2060, more K-12 students will be Hispanic than any other race — 38 percent — while the proportion that is white drops from half to one third, according to projections by researchers at the University of Texas at Austin (Saenz, 2014). And they'll all be hurtling toward college age. Unless something changes, the shortfall in the total number of people with degrees will only grow bigger. "Our economy, our society, will be increasingly dependent on what happens to people who are now minorities." (Para. 15)

More Hispanic college graduates can help change the above projections. Because statistics show that higher education is correlated to higher income (Tamborini, Changwan, & Sakamoto, 2017), there is a need to integrate more Hispanic students into the college/university system. While Hispanics will continue emphasizing a need to work, e-learning can provide an alternative to the fixed schedules of brick and mortar schools (Corry, 2015; Garcia et al., 2014; Lu & Cavazos Vela, 2015). The online educational model can be a positive influence in both recruiting and retaining Hispanic students and helping them finish degree programs. This opportunity will increase Hispanic integration into higher paying professions.

Current Trends in Higher Hispanic Academic Success

Research revealed unique characteristics among Hispanic education. Hispanic high school students tended to have a higher dropout rate, but this is now decreasing. Recent

retention efforts have improved attendance and high school completion numbers. Also, more Hispanics are United States born and acculturated to its school systems. As a result, many more Hispanics are attending college. This higher attendance is led by the 2-year colleges, especially HSI community colleges. Notwithstanding, Hispanic graduation rates still lag behind other ethnic groups.

This could be partially the result of the increasing Hispanic population but also represents a higher emphasis on education among Hispanics. Accordingly, Hispanics 18 to 24 years old, not enrolled in high school, fell to 9% in 2015 (from 34% in 1998). Additionally, census information from 2019 revealed that national dropout rates of Hispanics went "from 27.8% to 8.2% for Hispanic youth… and the gap between White and Hispanic youth narrowed from 20.9 percentage points in 2000 to 3.9 percentage points in 2018" (NES, Dropout rates, 2019). These are substantial decreases. Retention efforts have also helped in Hispanic students staying in school.

Fewer Hispanics dropping out of high school. The latest census bureau statistics (2019) report of enrollment trends confirm more Hispanics are finishing high school while fewer are dropping out than 12 years ago (Fry & Lopez, 2012; NCES, 2019).

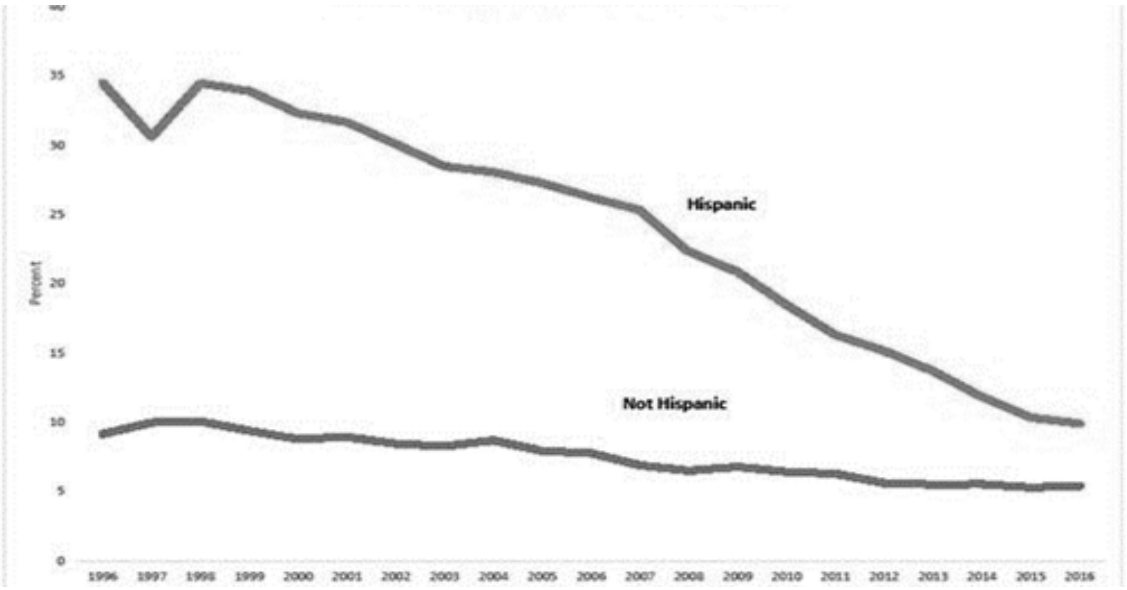

Figure 2. Percent of students ages 18 to 24 who have not completed high school and are not enrolled in school. Adapted from the "Current Population Survey, School Enrollment Supplement files, 1996-2016," by K. Bauman, 2017, United States Census Bureau.

Retention efforts increasing Hispanic enrollment. Aggressive retention efforts toward Hispanic dropouts and first year Hispanic college students have also helped raise attendance (Pstross et al., 2016; Sanchez, Usinger, & Thornton, 2015; Santiago, 2019; Tovar, 2015; Villalba et al., 2014). These efforts have principally focused upon educating Hispanic families to support their children's educational efforts, involving Hispanic families in learning about higher education choices, teaching school instructors and administrators culturally specific approaches to Hispanic students, and connecting Hispanic students with successful Hispanic graduates. Also, most Hispanic students are now United States born and acculturated to American educational systems.

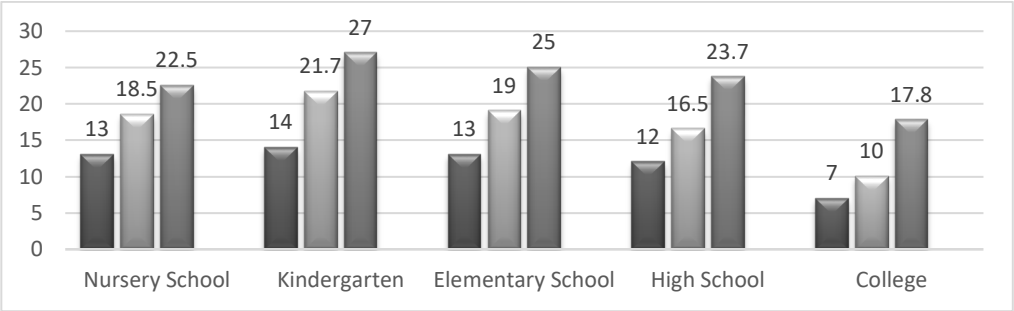

Figure 3. Hispanic students as a percentage of total enrollment by level of school, 1996-2016. Numbers in bars refer to millions of students. The bars are from 1996, 2006, and 2016. Adapted from the "Current Population Survey, School Enrollment Supplement files, 1996-2016," by K. Bauman, 2017, United States Census Bureau.

More Hispanic students are U.S. born and acculturated the educational system. The social phenomena of an increasing percentage of Hispanics who are born and raised in the United States has acculturated more of these students to the native educational process and environment. In 2016, 94% of Hispanic children under 18 were United States born (Patten, 2016) up from 90% in 2011 (Gilroy, 2012). Mellander (2007) explained, "Early-childhood arrivals, who receive all or nearly all their schooling in the United States and thus have the longest exposure to United States schools and society, are the most likely to succeed in school" (p. 10). This factor has continued to influence more Hispanic students to finish high school and enroll in Higher education. In addition, more Hispanics are going to colleges and universities.

Hispanic higher education attendance rising. In 2011, Hispanics comprised 17% of college students between the ages of 17 and 24 years old, an increase from 11% in 2006 (Crisp et al., 2014). In 2016 there were 3.6 million Hispanic college students, up from 1.3 million in 1999, a 180% increase (Gramlich, 2017). Also, from 2004 to 2014, White student higher education enrollment fell from 28.3 million to 24.9 million, a 13% decline, while Hispanic student enrollment increased from 9.3 million to 12.8 million, a 29% gain (NCES, 2017). Meanwhile, the percentage of Hispanic students went from 19% to 25% (NCES, 2017). Finally,

the *Condition of Education* government report in 2017 informed that Hispanic college attendance had risen from 22% to 37% of young people aged 18 to 24 years old (NCES, 2017, p. 237).

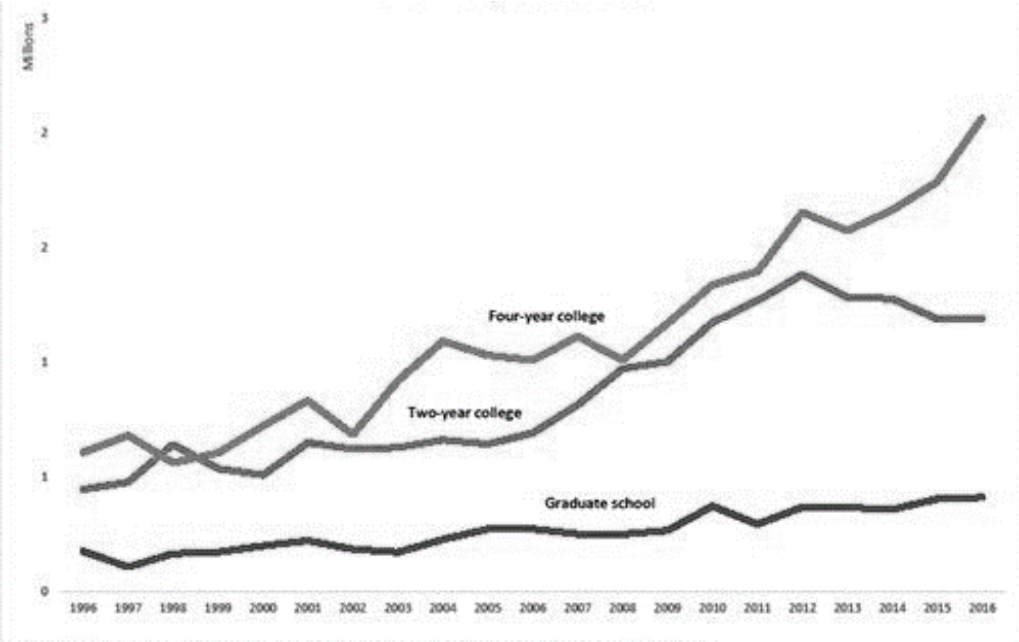

Figure 4. Number of Hispanic college students, by type of college enrollment, 1996-2016 Adapted from the "Current Population Survey, School Enrollment Supplement files, 1996-2016," by K. Bauman, 2017, United States Census Bureau.

Higher attendance rates, continued gap in completion rates. Hispanic student enrollment is increasing. In 2011 only 13% of Hispanics held a bachelor's degree and 4% graduate degrees (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011). In 2015, 13% of Hispanics held a bachelor's degree as compared to 51% of Whites and 19% of African Americans (Parker et al., 2016, p. 56). However, the 2019 NCES report on degrees by race and sex related that "At the bachelor's degree level, the number of degrees awarded to Hispanic students more than tripled between academic years 2000–01 and 2015–16 (a 202% increase, from 77,700 to 235,000) (NCES, Fast facts: Degrees conferred by race and sex, 2019)." The NCES (2019) also reported that in 2018, 21% of Hispanics between 19 and 24 had a bachelor's degree or higher.

However, recent statistics also reveal that Hispanics continue to lag in attaining post graduate degrees (a result of fewer having bachelor's degrees). In 2013, 3% of Latino adults had earned a master's degree, Asians (15%), Whites (8%), and African Americans (6%) (Santiago et al., 2015). In 2016, 13% of Hispanic students had earned a bachelor's degree (a 6% increase) and 65% of Whites had done so (a decrease of 12%) (NCES, Fast facts: Degrees conferred by race and sex, 2019). Nevertheless, there remained a 52% difference or gap. These figures are important because they demonstrate the continued challenge to increase Hispanic student enrollment and to promote the completing of their degree programs. A major focus on improving college graduation rates of Hispanics lies in the HSI community colleges.

Community colleges effectiveness and Hispanic enrollment. The government has promoted higher educational institutions which focus on recruiting, retaining, and graduating Hispanic students. These schools are called Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) and have been designated as universities that serve 25% of full-time equivalency Hispanic students. In 2013 these universities, which represented only 10% of all higher education institutions, contained 66% of Hispanic students in higher education (Murphy, 2013; Santiago, Calderon, & Taylor, 2015). The Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) reports that this percentage (66%) was still current in 2018 (HACU, 2019). This is significant because over 48% of Hispanic college students will enroll in community colleges, the majority of which are HSI institutions (Krogstad, 2016). This compared to 30% for Whites and 36% for African American students enrolled in community colleges.

One problem the literature highlights is that these institutions are not graduating Hispanics at the same rates that Whites and African Americans are graduating (Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Pyne & Means, 2013). They were not reporting sufficient increases in degree

completion and student retention (Murphy, 2013), although they were eligible to receive substantial financial grants which "can be used for a wide variety of programs including development and improvement of academic programs, faculty development, student support services, curriculum development, and even physical plant renovation" (p. 322). Shak (2018) examined Hispanic graduation rates at HSI universities with emerging HSI universities (those with less than 25% Hispanic students) and private non-HSI schools. He found that, yes, there was a smaller achievement gap at the HSI schools themselves, but that:

> … at the most selective institutions, the completion gaps were actually higher at emerging HSIs. The graduation rate gap at all other selective institutions is only 4.6 percent because the group includes some extremely selective and well-resourced institutions, such as Yale, that have been able to reduce or close the gap completely.

Field (2018) explained the problem that results in feeding Hispanic students into Hispanic Serving Institutions and lower tier colleges and universities can have. She noted:

> a weak academic foundation limits many Hispanics' options for college. Nearly two-thirds end up in overcrowded and underfunded community colleges or second-tier public universities, while only 15 percent attend one of the 500 most selective colleges, where graduation rates are the highest. (Para. 18)

HSI universities are definitely helping Hispanic students, however, they will not provide the competitive pathway for Hispanics to succeed at more demanding institutions with more prestigious and higher paying degrees. Hispanic students can be prepared for acceptance into more selective universities. It is evident, then, that new methods or interventions still need to be employed to increase Hispanic student retention.

Successful interventions to increase Hispanic success in higher education. There have been many recent interventions in Hispanic education which have shown promise in increasing academic success. Research demonstrates that addressing the Hispanic family's attitude toward education was extremely important. Another set of effective interventions have focused upon preparing Hispanic high school students for the academic challenges and experiences of college and university programs. Institutional interventions have focused upon making campuses accommodating to the Hispanic student and culture. Mentoring programs have challenged staff and support personnel to connect with students and families of Hispanics to promote smooth transitions to the college life. Peer mentoring has also been used as a successful intervention.

Promoting family support. Addressing the need to incorporate Hispanic families into the higher educational process has become a major focus in intervention research. Musoba and Krichevskiy (2014) affirmed that family support, financial aid, and campus cultural support are essential positive influences in Hispanic student success. In a research project by Texas A&M University Hispanic parents ($N = 80$) were studied and evaluated regarding level of education and ability to support their children's homework projects in the English language (Kirkland, 2011). Researchers investigated the impact of support classes on confidence. Testing showed increased levels of confidence in parents who supported their children's schoolwork (Kirkland, 2011).

Jodry et al. (2004) found positive results in Hispanic family intervention as a means of increasing student performance utilizing the Hispanic Academic Advancement Theory. The study examined the relationship of the home, school, and community, which influenced six Hispanic students to be involved in an advanced diploma course of studies. These students, who were from high poverty areas, were enrolled in General High School (Houston area). An

ethnographic methodology was used to interpret meaning to the social constructs working in the lives of these students and their families. Grounded Theory helped create a conceptual formulation from the findings (Jodry et al., 2004).

Educating parents concerning the college trajectory can provide a pathway for success for the Hispanic student. Hannon (2015) confirmed the direct correlation between parental education levels and test competency among Hispanic students. Reaching out to these parents can make a difference. Accordingly, Psross et al. (2014) described how the American Dream Academy outreach program helped parents to overcome Hispanic cultural barriers such as "lack of financial resources, problems in communication with schools, and low familiarity with the college planning process" (p. 650).

The home environment also can be used to help Hispanic college students. Vasquez-Salgado et al. (2015) shared the tremendous impact that promoting education in the home has on Hispanic students. In this study, many students reported conflict with family members who expected collective needs to be a top priority. In contrast to this possible tension, Villalba, Gonzalez, Hines, and Borders (2014), reported that instructing parents in the aspects and benefits of higher education had a positive impact on families preparing to send children to college. Their intervention *The Latino Parents-Learning About College (Lap-Lac) Program* was designed to focus upon middle and high school students and their families considering post-secondary education. Counselors from selected universities and colleges spent six sessions familiarizing groups of families with the benefits of higher education. The benefit of the program was to walk families through the whole process of matching their child with the appropriate institution, obtaining financial aid, and preparing for the details of the college transition. The family thus

became co-owners in the education decision and the required support. Sometimes, though, interventions at the high school level can promote college/university success.

Preparing Hispanic high school students for college. Interventions at the high school level can prepare Hispanic students for the expectations and challenges of college attendance. Athanases, Achinstein, Curry, and Ogawa (2016) developed a program which was implemented at a Hispanic majority high school, Urban College Academy. Their goal was the "development of a school-wide college-going culture with norms and roles that articulate high expectations and provide extensive supports toward college admissions…" (p. 7). Similarly, Pino, Martinez-Ramos, and Smith (2012) described the need to develop an academic ethic among Hispanic high school students and related, "The academic ethic is 'learned behavior,' and those who have an academic ethic 'place their studies above leisure activities; study on a daily or near-daily basis; and study in a disciplined, intense, and sober fashion" (p. 19). The authors suggested that high schools can focus upon developing this academic ethic among Hispanic students in order to support a successful transition into college.

Literature reveals that there are many intervention programs which have seen success in preparing Hispanic high school students for college enrollment. For example, Young, Lakin, Courtney, and Martiniello (2012) informed:

> Several early intervention programs have been developed to increase the college attendance rates of Latino students, including Upward Bound, SCORE (Success in a Rich CORE (Curriculum for Everyone), Project GRAD (Graduation Really Achieves Dreams), and the Puentes program. These programs, and others such as AVID and GEAR UP, provide information and support to at-risk students and their parents throughout high

> school so that they better understand the course requirements and financial assistance alternatives that are available. (p. 42)

Of course, the higher educational institutions themselves can help Hispanic student success by providing support systems and interventions which focus on their specific cultural and educational challenges. Many higher educational institutions are recognizing this and implementing Hispanic supporting programs.

Institutional support for Hispanic students. Universities and colleges are recognizing the need to support Hispanic students in order to help them feel comfortable. Leavitt and Hess (2019) commented "Overall, school climate explained over one fourth of the variance in achievement when accounting for socioeconomic status, English language learner status, and Latino ethnicity" (p. 270). Saladino and Martinez (2015) recognized four major areas that colleges and universities should concentrate to help Hispanic students: valuing Latino culture, leadership in changing instructional approaches, encouraging aspirational capital, and increasing institutional capacity (to graduate Hispanics) through researcher and practitioner collaboration (p. 106). Additionally, universities need to be aware of the value of promoting intrinsic motivation among Hispanic students. Trevino and DeFreitas (2014) found that "Hispanic students often persisted significantly more in the face of academic difficulties or failure in comparison to the other ethnic groups" (p. 300). This is probably the result many not having high extrinsic motivation factors such academic preparation and family support. They have to rely on an inner resiliency which is upheld by a positive attitude and confidence in their adaptability. To illustrate this, Cavazos et al. (2010) stated:

> the Latino students demonstrated resilience, by persisting and demonstrating strong effort towards their academic goals despite barriers such as limited finances and being new to

higher education .... Students in this study did not show any external motive for their resilience.

Not surprisingly, institutional support is now being recognized as an essential cornerstone of promoting Hispanic student success. Gildersleeve (2013) wrote "If schools garner the trust of families, then families have increased hope and incentive for supporting increased educational attainment. Schools can become the beacon of higher education trajectories" (p. 126). Wayne State University has seen success in Hispanic retention and graduation rates by developing an in-house Center for Latino/a Latin American Studies dedicated to recruiting, retaining, and graduation Latino students (Gonzales, Brammer, & Sawilowsky, 2015). Also, Crisp et al. (2015) related that one of the challenges found to affect Hispanic students was transferring from an HSI or community college to a four-year university. They wrote "Interviews with counselors at a Hispanic Serving community college in California indicated that the most perceptible barrier to the transfer process for Latina/o students was nonacademic issues related to external responsibilities …" (p. 258) such as work, financial aid, etc. Institutions which reach out to these students help with the transition from two-year colleges to four-year universities. This relates to the need for retaining students during transition.

Hispanic student retention interventions. The literature reveals successful interventions at the college level which focus on promoting Hispanic student retention. Harris (2017) mentioned the Fortitude County College honors program, FCC program, and the LaGuardia Community College honors program as viable interventions which have helped Hispanic students transition to Tier 1 universities. He cited Mellow (2013) who wrote "The honors model of small, student-centered classes lends itself well to the community college setting as it provides students with a strong network from which to get multilevel support: peer, faculty, and alumni"

(p. 68). Two-year institutions can use this cohort model to develop camaraderie and confidence in students who plan to transfer to Tier 1 four-year universities.

UCLA created the program Center for Community College Partnerships (CCCP) to "create programs to inform, motivate & prepare students to transfer" (Anonymous, 2019). Excelencia en Education described the program and its positive results in this manner:

> Summer Programs were developed to address pipeline issues, motivate & prepare students to be competitive at top research universities. In Fall 2018, 48% (92 out 193) of Latino CCCP participants were admitted to UCLA compared to the general transfer admit rate of 23%. (Anonymous, 2019)

The success of this intervention highlights the potential of other Hispanic support plans to actually increase the number of successfully finish their four-year degrees. The program has a component of peer mentoring which is an emerging intervention to help Hispanic achieve success at the university level.

Mentoring programs. Recent literature has concluded that community college faculty who support students will positively affect their academic success (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014; Deil-Amen, 2011; Dowd et al., 2013). This is especially true for Hispanic students who may feel isolated as a cultural group. Tovar (2015) studied the role of Hispanic student success and their intent to persist. He found that interactions with institutional agents exercised a small, but significant effect on Hispanic student success. The study indicated that when students understand they matter and feel they are noticed, and:

> instructors and counselors demonstrate sincere interest in their lives and academic pursuits, … *these influences* will likely lead students to believe they are valued, both as

> individuals and as members of the academic community and will influence how successful they will be. (Tovar, 2015, p. 67)

He added that community college staff must take a more direct approach as they work with Hispanic students and seek them out if they expect them to succeed.

Universities can provide additional support to Latino students by placing staff members who are Hispanic or Latino in positions of interaction with students, such as counselors, mentors, and instructors. This is just another area which can help Hispanic students feel they are in a friendly, understanding environment. Capers (2019) wrote that "… minority faculty representation is an important resource of higher education institutions because faculty provide role modeling and mentorship to minority students, and this mentorship is linked to student retention and completion [Contreras and Contreras, 2015; Oseguera, Locks, and Vega, 2009]" (p. 1116). Mentoring, then, is an essential element in the current drive to help Hispanic students feel welcome and understood in the university environment.

Hispanic friendly atmospheres. Being aware of the above-mentioned studies, more colleges and universities are purposely creating an atmosphere that encourages Hispanic interaction and success. Kiyama, Museus, and Vega (2015) described the Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model, which was produced by Museus (2014) from over 100 interviews and 20 years of extant research on multicultural student populations in universities and colleges. Kiyama et al., (2015) wrote "The CECE Model suggests that culturally engaging campus environments (i.e., environments that react and respond to their cultural communities of students) are associated with more positive student outcomes in college" (p. 29). Museus (2014) designed the CECE program to assist participating institutions in helping Hispanic students feel culturally engaged and relevant.

CSU Northridge's College of Engineering and Computer science received a five-year, $5.5 million HSI STEM grant from the U.S. Department of Education to create a program which would increase the number of low-income, Hispanic, and underrepresented students completing degrees from CSUN in the engineering and computer science fields. This collaborative program named AIMS² (for Attract, Inspire, Mentor and Support Students), was headed by CSUN, partnering with Glendale Community College (GCC) and the College of the Canyons (COC). The Excelencia in Education report stated:

> Students are assisted with stipends, special mentoring and advisement by faculty, tutoring, peer mentoring, social activities, field trips, and opportunities to take part in paid research projects. … Their results attest to the positive effects of student-faculty interaction, peer-peer interaction, and student research participation on Latino/a student experiences and learning. (Anonymous, Excelencia en Education, 2019)

The report goes on to inform that the number of Latino/a students graduating in computer engineering and computer science (CECS) majors has tripled, going from 57 in 2012-13, to 171 in 2016-17 (Anonymous, Excelencia in Education, 2019). As these types of programs and models are shared among multiple campuses, more Hispanic students will benefit from purposeful interventions which seek to help these students succeed.

Peer mentoring. One of the needs in creating comfortable atmospheres for Hispanic students in higher education is that of a Latino student campus community. Rios-Ellis et al., (2015) designed a peer education program entitled *Promotores de Educación* implemented at California State University, Long Beach (HSI) which was "aimed at reducing educational and professional barriers experienced by the university's growing Latino student population" (p. 33). The program developed Hispanic student mentorship and was part of a larger HSI initiative to

entitled *Mi Casa: Mi Universidad* (MCMU). It was developed to "provide Latino students with additional academic and service-related support, … and create Latino role models despite the paucity of Latino and Latino student-focused faculty" (Rios-Ellis et al., 2015, p. 33). Results were positive and a future report will outline their data analysis. Another major category affecting higher educational Hispanic student success is the availability of technological hardware, support, and internet access.

California State University at Sacramento has recently seen success with the INSPIRE program (Institutional Networks for [student] Success, [Peer] Programs and Instructional Redesign Efforts) launched in 2015. Its purpose is "to increase graduation rates for Hispanic and other underrepresented students and reduce "equity gaps," which are the differences in graduation rates between those groups and the University average" (Morales, 2019, para. 7). One of the focuses of the program is to provide Hispanic students with peer mentoring and support during the degree program journey. Morales (2019) reported:

> Campus administration, faculty and staff does not reflect the student body's diversity ... But the peer programs provide underrepresented students with diverse student leadership and resources, helping them navigate academic and non-academic parts of the college experience. "A student may not feel comfortable telling a faculty member or an advisor about something they are struggling with, but they will confide in a peer in a way that is very different," she said. "A peer can also effect more change, for example, by relating to the situation and saying, 'I was in the same situation, and here's how it played out for me.'" (para. 7)

Peer mentoring is one way a university can attempt to create the overall atmosphere of a Hispanic friendly campus.

The Role of Technology and Online Classes in Hispanic Student Success

Advances in online education technology and the growth of distance-learning-based degree programs have created new avenues toward achieving higher education success. Research, though, explains that there have been barriers for some ethnic groups. Historically, Hispanics have lagged in technology access. As recently as 2001 "31.6% of United States Latinos versus 59.9% of Whites used the Internet" (Dabbour & Ballard, 2011, p. 348). However, these dynamics are rapidly changing to the advantage of the Hispanic student.

Hispanic technology access increases. It is now evident that internet access is increasing among Hispanics and will continue approaching full equality with Whites. Lopez, Gonzalez-Barrera, and Patten (2013) reported:

> Between 2009 and 2012, the share of Latino adults who say they go online at least occasionally increased 14 percentage points, rising from 64% to 78%. Among Whites, internet use rates also increased, but only by half as much—from 80% in 2009 to 87% in 2012. Over the same period, the gap in cellphone ownership between Latinos and other groups either diminished or disappeared. In 2012, 86% of Latinos said they owned a cellphone, up from 76% in 2009. (Para. 2)

The U.S. Census report (2017) informed that in that year 70% of Hispanics had internet access either through: broadband (55%), computer (6.3%), or smartphone (8.2%). Whites reported a total of 78.8% internet access (64.6% broadband). Although many Hispanic households still do not have high-speed internet access, Hispanic young people tend to adapt to whatever is available. Dabbour and Ballard (2011) found that a larger number of Latino students (than White students) used online library services at California State University Northridge (p.

353), thereby adapting to lower in-home internet access availability. These studies demonstrate Hispanic adaptability and benefits from online technology.

A more recent report stated that from 2009 to 2015, Latino adults who were using the internet increased 20 percentage points, up from 64% to 84% in (Brown et al., 2016). This is a tremendous advance for the future of online education among Hispanic families. However, a different study by Lee and Barron (2015) revealed that among the sample (N=682), 73% of Hispanic families had computers as compared to 98% for Whites. They also reported that 68% of Hispanic families had internet access while 78% of Whites had this service (p. 18). This data supports the findings that Hispanics and African Americans tend to use their smart phones for internet access more than their White counterparts (Perrin, 2017). This is because of the economic disparity between these ethnic groups. Lower buying power translates into a lower percentage of computers and fixed internet service in the home (Perrin, 2017). Perrin identified this disparity and reported "Blacks and Hispanics remain less likely than Whites to own a traditional computer or have high-speed internet at home … But mobile devices are playing important roles in helping to bridge these differences" (p. 1).

There is also an age difference in the percentages of Hispanics who have Internet access or who go online. Brown et al. (2015) reported that:

> Internet use is over 90% among Hispanics younger than 50, but it drops to 67% among those ages 50 to 64 and only 42% among those ages 65 and older. … Two-thirds (67%) of Hispanics who have less than a high school education were online in 2015, compared with 95% of those with at least some college experience. (Para. 10)

Morse (2017) wrote:

> Millennials and Gen Z comprise over half of the entire U.S. Hispanic population, which makes their high adoption rate of smartphones easier to comprehend. When you consider that 36% of Hispanics are under the age of 25 and that Hispanics have one of the highest engagement rates on social media, it makes sense. (Para. 4)

This information supports the fact that Hispanic college age young people are the age group most likely to have technology and internet access. Therefore, online education is a viable opportunity for their educational pursuits. The literature informs that online enrollment, in general, is increasing significantly.

The increase of online programs and student enrollment. Online education has grown consistently for many years. Sheehy (2013) wrote that 62.4% of colleges offered internet-based degree programs by the end of 2012. This was up significantly from 32.5% in 2002 (Sheehy, 2013). Student online attendance was 5.6 million students in 2009 as online platforms became more cost-effective and far-reaching (Johnson & Galy, 2013, p. 330). Lu and Cavazos Vela (2015) reported that 12.2 million students were enrolled in online or similar classes in degree granting institution in 2008 (Lu & Cavazos Vela, 2015, p. 35). In 2015 there were about 6 million online students, representing 29.7% of all higher education enrollments, up from about 10% in 2010 (Shaffhauser, 2017). Total enrollment in online platforms reached 6.6 million students in 2019 as it became more cost-effective and far-reaching, (NCES, 2019).

There also appears to be a new demographic of online students. Shaffhauser (2017) reported:

> … the demographics are shifting to a student community primarily comprised of adult and other contemporary learners, for whom distance learning often provides the best path

> to a post-secondary education. As schools compete for students in this environment, distance-learning programs become essential to their ability to succeed. (p. 20)

Figlio, Rush, and Yin (2013) shed more light on online class diversity. They wrote "all 10 of the largest four-year colleges and universities in the United States offer online classes, some with over 400 sections and others with more than 10,000 students per term in at least one online class" (p. 764). Lu & Cavazos Vela (2015) stated that online classes were generally chosen according to the instructors, nature of the class, self-identity of the student (perceived learning style, etc.), and convenience (p. 35). Their research concluded that there were no statistical differences among students who took face-to-face or online classes, although Hispanic students were not isolated in the study. How, then, are Hispanics utilizing the online learning platform to achieve educational success? The literature dedicated to this phenomenon is still developing, and this study will add to the collection of knowledge on this subject. However, the studies inform on several aspects of Hispanics and the online learning platform.

Hispanics can benefit from the online environment. The theory that online-based educational programs can positively affect Hispanic student retention and program completion is just beginning to be studied. The purpose of Ke and Kwak (2013) was to understand "whether online learning interaction participation, perception, and learning satisfaction would be consistent across varied age and ethnicity groups" (p. 41). Data from students enrolled in 28 online courses was gathered using content analysis. The results of the study "… did not indicate a significant advantage or disadvantage in terms of the quality and quantity of online interaction participation for students of non-traditional age or minority status (Ke & Kwak, 2013, p. 41). However, the study results did modestly imply that students' ethnicity was linked to a more

positive perception of the "learner-to-instructor" model rather than the web-based online education.

An intriguing study by Ortagus (2018) described a study of first year Hispanic students who enrolled in online classes versus those who did not. He found:

> Enrolling in some online courses is associated with lower odds of dropping out of college. Additional results reveal a positive relationship between enrolling in some online courses and sub-baccalaureate indicators of long-term academic success, such as earning an associate degree and transferring from a community college to a 4-year institution. (p. 1035)

He reported that the convenience and flexibility of the online platform can give access to higher education for many students who might not otherwise be able to attend college. Previous studies had discovered that student traits linked with the highest opportunity costs of face-to-face education—such as being a full-time employee, a parent, or married—were more inclined to enroll in online courses (Jaggars, 2014; Ortagus, 2018). Ortagus observed:

> By enrolling in online courses during their first year in college, students who may not be able to enroll in certain face-to-face courses are afforded the opportunity to establish academic momentum by taking additional courses and making substantive progress toward a postsecondary degree. (p. 1035)

Notwithstanding these results, the question is still unresolved as to how beneficial online education may be in recruiting, retaining, and graduating Hispanic students.

Mixed results on benefits of online education for Hispanic students. Contrasting Ortagus' study, Barril (2017) did not find a strong correlation between ethnic identification and online/traditional learning preferences that Ke and Kwak (2013) described. That is:

> Rather than culture, age, gender, and class level were the primary student characteristics that influenced student preferences. … Culture, or ethnicity, was statistically significant on one cultural construct, however, the quantitative results only partially supported Ke and Chavez's findings. (p. 41)

No difference. A 2015 study by Wladis, Conway, and Hachey (2015) indicated no difference in measurable learning outcomes of Hispanic students using distance learning in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) subject areas of higher education. In their phenomenological mixed study about online STEM education platforms (N=3,600), they found no significant difference between Hispanic students (*n* = n/a) and White students (*n* =n/a) as far as potential success was concerned (Wladis et al., 2015). This study simply indicates that Hispanics may not achieve more successfully through distance education. However, recently, other studies are reporting a positive correlation between online learning and Hispanic academic success.

A positive correlation for academic achievement/success using online learning. Recent studies have indicated an increasingly positive perception of online learning by Hispanic students. Corry (2015) conducted a quantitative multivariate study of Arizona high school students (*N=16,* graduation rates; *N= 28,* dropout rates) in 2015 in online versus face-to-face study while isolating for Hispanics. He found that Hispanic students were less likely to drop out of a fully online environment (Corry, 2015, p. 257). Also, Kumi-Yeboah, Dogbey, and Guangii (2018) studied factors that promoted online learning experiences and academic self-concepts among African American and Hispanic K-12 students and found:

> Collaborative learning activities, access to resources, time convenience, student-teacher interactions, student-student interactions, improved academic behavior, and parental

support helped to enhance online learning experiences and academic self-concept of the minority students. (p. 2)

Another research study by Garcia et al. (2014) made a strong case for hybrid study platforms being more beneficial to Hispanic graduate students because of family, flexibility, and meeting personal needs (p. 5-7). The above studies reflected significant potential benefits for the Hispanic student using the online educational environment. However, additional studies are necessary to inform more clearly as to what specific factors assist in Hispanic online student success. A related phenomenon has now been observed which also will positively affect Hispanic online learning involvement; Hispanics are becoming more field independent learners.

Hispanic students are becoming more field-independent, preparing them for online learning. Hispanic learning styles are changing. Torres (2014) shared that Hispanic learning style had little effect on the GPA in a majority Latino community college (p. 366-368). The study concluded that Hispanic students seemed to be adaptable to learning style adjustments when in an atmosphere of support.

In the recent study by Jones and Blankenship (2017), students in a predominantly Hispanic University were studied to analyze their preferred learning style in an online environment. Among the Hispanic students (95 out of 121 total), the majority (39%) were classified as field-independent, while 26% were classified as field-dependent (22% were neutral). Historically, field-dependent learners, which Hispanics have been associated with, do not learn as comfortably in an unsupervised low interaction (including online) environment (Chambers, 2015; Griggs & Dunn, 1996; Irvine & York, 1995). However, these students displayed a high comfort level with online learning. The authors speculated that this difference may be caused by the rising English proficiency of Latinos (Jones & Blankenship, 2017). They

noted that 89% of United States born Latinos spoke English proficiently in 2013, up from 72% in 1980 (Jones & Blankenship, 2017; Krogstad, Stepler & Lopez, 2015). Also, Noe-Bustamonte (2019) reported that in 2017, 70% of all Latinos (United States and foreign born) spoke English proficiently.

Draus (2019) noted that various learning styles, including field dependent learners, can be reached through the online platform because of its adaptability and customizability. He commented:

> Cognitive styles are an important characteristic of learners that can be utilized to provide customized instruction leading to better performance. One recognized cognitive style is Field Dependence … One of the useful characteristics of online learning is the ability to simultaneously utilize multiple learning methods to present material to the students. (p. 1)

The above findings, therefore, advance the theory that online education, regardless of learning style preferences, is increasingly a realistic option for Hispanics in higher education. Additionally, literature supports the idea that online learning can be tailored to benefit Hispanic student needs.

Online classes can address unique needs of Hispanic students. Internet based education can be used to focus on specific ethnic groups to improve academic capacities. Interestingly, online technology has been extremely useful to help Hispanics in the area of public speaking. Munday, Oviedo, Ramirez, Taylor, & Flores (2014) conducted a study using a third-party online communications tutoring service to help Hispanic students with public presentations. They informed "Hispanic college students are at risk of not learning to effectively communicate as speech anxiety is high in students who learned English as a second language" (Munday et al, 2014, p. 3). The online service showed significant benefits.

Bradley, Brown, and Kenny (2017) proposed that students can feel more self-efficacy, or self-determination in being able to more control their learning environment when using the online platform. This can benefit students who feel less important or relevant in a brick and mortar class environment. Caruthers and Friend (2014) expressed their finding that the online environment can be used by instructors and students to express a more culture centered or positive learning experience. These potentials are certainly applicable to reaching the Hispanic student population.

Online learning can be culturally transformative for Hispanics and Whites. The use of the online modality has been studied in bringing down cross cultural student perceptions and barriers. Online collaborative learning was used to analyze Hispanic cultural misunderstanding by Barraclough and McMahon (2013). They conducted a qualitative study by creating a joint online class including Hispanic students (n = 17) from South Texas and mostly White students (n = 16) from Kalamazoo, Michigan. The shared online format was used to encourage interaction in dialogue and ideological reflections of cultural values. The study was transformational in learning involving culture, education, and politics (Barraclough & McMahon, 2013). These phenomena demonstrate how online education can reduce cultural barriers while providing necessary accessibility, flexibility, and security for the Hispanics.

Summary

The findings in the research literature reflect the existing gap in high school graduation rates and college attendance among Hispanic students being narrowed during the last two decades due to aggressive interventions on the part of local school districts and public universities. Also, the natural acculturation of United States-born or reared Hispanic youth has lowered cultural and language barriers and resulted in higher school attendance and success.

There also appears to be a distinct advantage for Hispanic students who find academic support in their home environment. This support includes the immediate and extended family and their attitudes concerning higher education. Also, the data points to the success of Hispanic students who feel that the academic institution in which they are studying is both sympathetic and supportive of their specific cultural diversity, yet still challenges and offers success in student achievement. This atmosphere of Hispanic cultural awareness and inclusiveness should be extended to the online educational arena. Much of the data still does not accurately reflect the entire Hispanic population sufficiently. This is because there is still over 11 million Hispanics who are in the United States illegally (Krogstad, Passel, & Cohn, 2017), and families who fear deportation or government intervention (Amuedo-Dorantes & Pozo, 2019; Bailliard, 2013; Rook, 2013). Stelter (2009) wrote "…the census is a delicate subject for some minorities, including Hispanics. Language barriers and fear of filling out forms for the government limited participation in earlier counts" (p. 1). Nevertheless, online education, if designed with Hispanic students in mind, will increasingly offer an alternative academic pathway in recruiting Latino learners (Garcia et al., 2014). Further qualitative studies should be undertaken which analyze what Hispanic online students attribute to their success and which platforms and programs are more conducive to degree completion. Online education directed toward Hispanic Americans can continue to increase enrollment and graduation rates. However, careful attention must be made to incorporate lessons that have been learned concerning Hispanic persistence, culture, and successful interventions. This study proposed such research and filled a gap in the literature regarding this phenomenon. A phenomenological approach gives voice to Hispanic students who have successfully navigated through and completed online degree programs.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

Statistics and research have revealed a continuing achievement gap between Hispanic students and other major ethnic groups (Crisp et al., 2014; Fry & Lopez, 2012; Johnson & Galy, 2013; Kaupp, 2012; NAEP, 2019; Parker et al., 2016; Paschall et al., 2018). While the achievement gap is closing, it is still quite significant, especially at the higher education level. For example, in 2015, only 13% of Hispanics held a bachelor's degree, compared to 51% of Whites and 19% of African Americans (Parker et al., 2016). Most of this data reflects the general student population (residential, hybrid, and online programs) and is not isolated to study how Hispanics experience the online platform. Some recent studies suggest that Hispanic students were less likely to drop out of a hybrid or online environment (Corry, 2015: Garcia et al., 2014; Ortagus, 2017). An increase in Hispanic enrollment in online learning may help close the Hispanic achievement gap because of its flexibility (Garcia et al., 2014; Kaupp, 2012; Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2018; Lu & Cavazos Vela, 2015). Hispanic students who have completed online degree programs can give a voice to this phenomenon. However, no qualitative studies are describing how persistence mechanisms influenced Hispanic college students to complete online undergraduate degrees. This phenomenological study fills the gap in this literature. In the following sections, elements of the methodology are listed. The chapter explains the design, research questions, settings, participants, procedures, data collection methods, data analysis, trustworthiness, credibility, confirmability and transferability, ethical considerations, and a summary. The study uses the parameters that the participants must have taken at least 80% of classes at an online accredited college or university in the last five years. These are accepted

requirements according to recent scholarship concerning online program definition (Allen & Seamon, 2007).

Design

The qualitative method was chosen to for its ability to provide a detailed, personalized description "that creates verisimilitude and produces for the readers the feeling that they experience, or perhaps could experience the events described" (Creswell, 2013, p. 194). It is this experience that should be studied in order to understand the motivation of Hispanic students who completed online degree programs. There is a deficiency in the literature describing these students and their success in the online environment. Therefore, this qualitative phenomenological approach was chosen in order to explore the personal experiences of this unique group in online higher educational persistence.

Moustakas (1994) described phenomenology as the primary method of acquiring knowledge of reality "because it begins with 'things themselves': it is the final court of appeal" (p. 41). It is the attempt to eliminate all that is a prejudgment by eliminating presuppositions and attempting to reach a transcendental free and open mind-set. It is also defined as the ability to perceive a concept, while not being encumbered by the "customs, beliefs, and prejudices of normal science" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 41).

Phenomenology has roots in the philosophical writings of Edmond Hussurl (1859-1938) (Moustakas, 1994). Other notable contributors in the development of this theory were Kockelman, Brantono, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty (Moustakas, 1994; Speilberg, 1982). Phenomenology has been utilized in social and health sciences, nursing, and education (Creswell, 2013). It was developed further by Stewart and Mickunas (1990) and Van Maanen

(1990). These authors focused upon the lived experiences of persons and "the development of descriptions of the essences of these experiences" (Creswell, 2013, p. 58).

The phenomenological approach is best used for the researcher who wishes to describe "the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 57). Specifically, the transcendental phenomenological approach will be used in this study because it focuses "… less on the interpretations of and more on a description of the experiences of participants" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 25). Creswell (2013) helps clarify that in this method "the researcher sets aside prejudgments regarding the phenomenon being investigated. Also, the researcher relies on intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain a picture of the experience…" (p. 237). It will be necessary for me to attempt to bracket myself (epoche) out of the study as much as possible because it is important that the researcher does not enter into the study with preset expectations and prejudices (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) conceded that bracketing is often difficult, and perhaps not fully possible. Nevertheless, it is essential that the study reflect a fresh "transcendental" (p. 34) voice to the participants' experiences, which may differ substantially from the researcher's experience.

The importance of the shared experiences of these successful Hispanic students is the central focus of this study. As such, the phenomenon being evaluated is the Hispanic student's success in completing an online undergraduate degree program. Creswell (2013) wrote that the phenomenological approach was best suited for research:

> In which it is important to understand several individuals' common or shared experiences of a phenomenon. It would be important to understand these common experiences in order to develop practices or policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about features of the phenomenon. (p. 60)

This phenomenological research focuses, not on the lives of the individuals, "but rather on concepts or phenomena" and seeks to understand the meaning of this phenomenon among the participants (Creswell, 2013, p. 94). Harris (2017) utilized the phenomenological approach to study how Hispanic students from community colleges successfully transferred to four-year universities. Holodick-Reed (2013) also used this approach to study the persistence of first-generation college students who have completed degrees at four-year universities. Lumbreras and Rupley (2017) used this methodology to describe the successful acquisition of a graduate degree by a Hispanic student who used the online platform. Understanding the key components of persistence in Hispanic online college students was this study's goal. The researcher sought to find the essence of the lived experience common among these successful Hispanic students. This information further adds to the literature concerning Hispanic academic achievement through the online platform (Creswell, 2009).

Research Questions

This study was designed to examine the personal experience of Hispanic students who have graduated from an online bachelor's program. It relied on research questions which are based on the problem and the purpose statement.

Central Research Question (CQ):

What are the experiences of Hispanic students who have persisted to complete online degree programs?

Sub-question one (SQ1): What pre-entry attributes challenges do Hispanic students experience during their online degree program journey?

Sub-question two (SQ2): What academic participation challenges do Hispanic students face in an online program?

Sub-question three (SQ3): What social participation challenges do Hispanic students face in an online program?

Setting

In 2019 there were 59.9 million Hispanics in the United States (Flores et al., 2017). Nearly 12.8 million of them were in secondary education in 2014 (NCES, 2017). The research for this study was performed in this country. Hispanic online students who have graduated from accredited universities in the United States were the subjects utilized in this research. This study drew students from the three regions: the Southwest, the South, and the Southeast. The research was not geographically centered, as the participants were acquired through personal contacts and referrals, from Liberty University associates and professors, and from personal friends involved in university online education. Data homogeneity (the quality of being all of the same kind) was sought in order to gain insight into a shared experience (Moustakas, 1994). Data homogeneity is assured by using a small sampling of subjects with similar or shared characteristics. This investigation focused on Hispanic students who graduated from an online accredited four-year university program or graduate degree program within the last five years. Interviews were conducted by telephone and recorded with two devices.

It is important that participants felt comfortable in their interview setting because they needed to feel free to express personal experiences and perceptions about their educational experience (Thomas, Nelson, & Silverman, 2015). Ethnic groups such as Hispanics can be especially challenging in that care must be taken to prepare the interviewee to feel free to express their feelings, even though they may conflict with cultural or ideological values of other groups (Emig & Vargas, 2016; Lewis, 1998). It is important that interview atmosphere (whether it is in a home or via telephone) be conducive to open dialogue and cultural expression so the

participants were led into the conversation after first providing information concerning confidentiality, the purpose of the study, and the focus on open discussion. Fraelich (1989) described this method of leadership in the setting of a phenomenological study and expressed, "by doing this, each participant would be able to bring a rich set of experiences into the interview" (p. 68).

Participants

Participants were chosen using a purposeful and criterion-based method. Purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research when "… the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (Creswell, 2013, p. 125). Specifically, the criterion was Hispanic students defined as "people who identify with the terms 'Hispanic' or 'Latino' … those who classify themselves in one of the specific Hispanic categories listed on the decennial census questionnaire …" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Hispanic students must have completed an online degree program at an accredited college or university universities in the last 5 years (at least 80% of their classes online) in order to participate in this study. Participants were gathered through the snowball or chain method. These methods depend on one participant being the source of another and then that person bringing another participant into the study, hence the chain analogy. The snowball type of participant acquisition refers to participant bringing multiple contacts into a study, and then these new contacts bringing multiple potential persons to participate.

Participants were gathered from three different regions of the country. There were two from the Southeast, two from the South, and seven from the Southwest. A total of 11 participants were chosen between the ages of 23-47 years old. There were five women and six males with an

average age of 36.4 years old. Two participants were in their 20's, six in their 30's, and three in their 40's. Current educational levels were one male with a bachelor's degree, four males with a master's degree, and one male with a Doctorate. Four women had a master's degree, one a bachelor's, and with one of them was in a Doctoral program. Four were born in Latin America and six were second-generation Hispanics, with at least one Latin American born parent (two with both parents foreign born). There was one third generation Latina. Only one participant had ethnicity apart from Mexico (Paraguay).

Table 1.

Hispanic Graduate Participants

Name	Gender	Age	Education	Ethnicity/Nationality
Alicia	Female	25	bachelor	Mex/American
Bernardo	Male	29	master	Mexican
Delia	Female	31	master	Mex/American
Armando	Male	43	master	Mex/American
Edgar	Male	42	doctorate	Mexican – U.S.
Lisa	Female	38	master	Mex/American
Jose	Male	35	master	Paraguayan – U.S.
Steven	Male	33	master	Mex/American
John	Male	39	master	Mex/American
Maria	Female	47	master	Mexican – U.S.
Ester	Female	38	master, doctoral program	Mex/American

An invitation letter with information about the study was sent via e-mail and served as criteria verification for the desired participation characteristics. The invitation letter filtered potential participants to find individuals who were Hispanic, within the age parameters, and had completed an online degree in the last five years. Further evaluation was necessary to verify participants fully completed the criterion-based requirements for the study.

After choosing potential participants, informed consent forms were requested via electronic mail and returned and reviewed for completeness. Care was taken to ensure confidentiality through informing the participants concerning their benefits, expectations, and informed consent procedures (Creswell, 2013). Participants were encouraged to share the study experience with other potential participants by inviting them to be a part of the research. Several participants were gathered in this manner. The sample size was 11 participants thus fulfilling Moustakas' recommended number of 10-12 (1994). Creswell (2013) noted "it is also important to obtain participants written permission to be studied" (p. 125). Written permission is important because some participants may have felt vulnerable in sharing items such as personal immigration status, family immigration data, and financial information. Therefore, pseudonyms were used instead of real personal names. Also, all participants were asked to sign a permission form which explained ethical standards and confidentiality requirements (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

Procedures

IRB approval was sought and obtained before the study proceeded beyond the planning stage. The study must first have university and IRB approval in order to progress legally, and to ensure proper protection of the participants (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). After having obtained

IRB approval, the recruitment process bean and, eventually, 11 participants were acquired for the study.

A journal entry prompt question was emailed to participants. This journal entry was focused on cultural information and personal experiences while the participant was in their online academic program. Completed entries were written or dictated and returned to me via email. These entries became the first source of data.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via telephone. These types of interviews allow for the participants to express themselves more freely than in structured formats because they are encouraged to elaborate or comment outside of the exact questions they are asked. General questions covering personal information, family background, and early education preceded the anticipated description of the experience of the participant of the phenomenon (obtaining a bachelor's or graduate degree through an online educational format). Participants were asked to share their feelings and responses to the 17 interview questions which will follow. The interviews were recorded with two devices. They were later transcribed and analyzed as data for codes, significant statements, and the essential essence of the phenomenon.

Finally, participants were asked to write a letter of advice for the academic program that they participated in and completed using the online platform. Letters of advice are sometimes used in Hispanic college student phenomenological studies to obtain personal expressions from subjects which further reflect the "essence" of their experience (Arbelo-Marrero & Milacci, 2015). They were asked to describe in four paragraphs or less how they would recommend this institution and its online program to another potential Hispanic degree seeking student. The letters of advice were examined, coded, and reviewed for significant statements, and their contribution to the essence of the phenomenon.

The Researcher's Role

The researcher understands many of the challenges and benefits of online education having been an adult part-time online student. and has persevered through graduate online degree programs with Grand Canyon University (Masters in secondary education) and Liberty University (Ed.S. and current Ed.D. program). Also, the researcher is of mixed heritage of Mexican American/White family and culture and a second generation White/Hispanic college graduate. Hispanics, generally, appear to have a unique cultural perception of higher education as noted in the review of the literature (Crisp et al., 2015; Mellander, 2006). During the researcher's educational experience, it was witnessed of the collectivist advantage/disadvantage experienced by Hispanic young people desiring to pursue higher education. Through these experiences and research at the masters and doctoral level, the researcher has a good perspective on issues affecting Hispanic achievement in higher education. This study has grown out of a desire to understand how Hispanic students are utilizing online degree programs to address their cultural challenges and educational needs.

Researcher assumptions about Hispanic cultural awareness of the participants may be biased due to a career in ministry and education with major involvement in the communities in the United States and Mexico. Also, the researcher ideas of Hispanic identity may differ from those of participants. The researcher has attempted to "bracket out" these assumptions and enter the study with a fresh open mind toward the experiences of the potential participants (Moustakas, 1994). As a researcher in a qualitative study, the researcher is a human instrument that can influence the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) and has assured that no prior relationships with the participants could affect the trustworthiness of the research.

Data Collection

Data collection followed the procedures mentioned previously: journal entries, semi-structured interview, and letters of advice. Participants were sought using the snowball and chain method which occurs when one participant becomes the source of another and then that person brings another participant into the study, hence the chain analogy. The snowball type of participant acquisition refers to participant bringing multiple contacts into a study, and then these new contacts bringing multiple potential persons to the study. Potential participants will be sent letters of consent describing the study including benefits and potential negative experiences along with a basic questionnaire requesting qualifying information. After receiving completed letters of consent and research qualifying information from sufficient participants, participants were sent a journal entry question prompt via email that they responded to and returned, after completion, by email. Participants were also contacted through email or telephone to schedule an interview. The interview contained open ended questions and was conducted via telephone. Responses were transcribed and recorded on two devices. Also, participants were asked to fill out a letter of advice formatted for hypothetical potential Hispanic students who might be interested in the participants' experiences in their academic higher education journey. The letter of advice was solicited through email and was the final source of data for triangulation purposes. The three forms of data acquisition (journal entries, open-ended interview, and the letter of advice) fulfilled the best practice of utilizing multiple forms of data (triangulation) to acquire a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Carter et al., 2014; Patton, 1999).

Journal Entry Prompts

Upon IRB approval, journal entry question prompts were sent to participants via email. Participants responded to the question prompts and sent their journal entries back to me for

analysis. Questions were designed to elicit a self-description and self-identification, which should render Hispanic cultural information related to persistence (see Appendix A). Also, the writings served as an additional source of data regarding perceived components related to persistence to degree completion.

The rational for choosing the journal entry data collection method conforms to the models established by qualitative researchers such as Lincoln & Guba (1985). They posited that multiple sources, including first person data like journal entries and interviews served well for triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Hayman, Wikes, and Jackson (2012) stated that "Journaling as a method of data collection has long been accepted as a valid method of accessing rich qualitative data" (p. 28). Journal information was reviewed and analyzed to generate dominant themes and terms related to the experience of Hispanics who have finished an accredited four-year online degree.

Interviews

The interviews were conducted by telephone. The conversations were recorded with two recording instruments. The format was a semi-structured interview. It contained open-ended inquiries that utilized a 16-question format. These questions expanded and gave more detail to the research questions. The conversation began with a personal introduction of my background. I described my work with Hispanics and my experience in higher education on the online format. I then provided a description of the date and setting of the interview for the purpose of research credibility. Next, I initiated the interview using the 16 questions as a basis for the interview. These questions connected and expanded the research questions. They connected them by establishing a personal view of the participants including their history, education, ethnic identity, family relationship, and college/university academic experience using the online format. The

later questions focused upon how the subjects' related their Hispanic cultural values to success in the distance learning format.

The dialogue that was used follows:

Please share with me your name and brief personal information. Remember that this interview will be confidential and that your identity will not put into the study.

1. Please share with me your academic background and what online program you completed recently.
2. What was your K-12 experience and what did you do before enrolling in college?
3. Please share with me what factors influenced your choice to enroll in an online undergraduate degree program?
4. How can you describe to me challenges you experienced during your online degree program journey?
5. Please share with me concerning your identity or heritage in the Hispanic culture?
6. How can you explain to me Hispanic or other cultural values you possess that you feel contribute to your persistence?
7. Please explain what institutional supports you feel have helped you to achieve success in your online degree program?
8. Please relate what social supports you feel have helped you to achieve success in your online degree program?
9. Please inform me what family supports you feel have helped you to achieve success in your online degree program?
10. Please tell me what personal traits/characteristics you feel have helped you to achieve success in your online degree program?

11. Please share what cultural supports you feel have helped you to achieve success in your online degree program?
12. What individuals can you credit, beside yourself, as being most beneficial to your success?
13. As a Hispanic student who has completed an online program, what would you advise another Hispanic student to anticipate and look for if contemplating beginning a degree program through the online format?
14. If you could make changes or design your own online program, what would you do away with, modify, or add?
15. In your opinion, what do you feel are the biggest challenges that first-generation Hispanic students face in the online environment?
16. Please share with me any other comments you would like to add.

Questions one through three involve responses linked to non-emotional information (Patton, 2015), and served well to lead to questions about culture could have elicited more feelings of vulnerability. Emig and Vargas (2016) and Bailliard (2013) reported that Hispanic families might harbor distrust of educational institutions because of governmental links to immigration issues. Non-threatening questions, which imply a personal interest, served to drop such potential distrust.

Question four elicited a response linked to the emotional phenomenon of struggle. Individuals carry various levels of negativity towards struggle, however, questions which bring out reflections on accomplishments can further open dialogue (Patton, 2015). Crisp et al. (2015) brought out the finding that positive support and dialogue can serve to create motivation in

Hispanics toward education (p. 255). Therefore, positive dialogue about educational accomplishments facilitated a more comfortable atmosphere during the interview session.

Questions five and six deal specifically with Hispanic cultural identity and value interpretation. Cultural identity is often perceived as a personal and vulnerable construct. Because one's value system is received by heritage and often misunderstood by others outside of the cultural experience, interviewees can often feel threatened when queried about things that may be negatively evaluated by outsiders (Kouyoumdjian et al., 2017). Embracing one's identity as a component of a successful educational journey has been found to positively correlate with Hispanic academic success (Kouyoumdjian et al., 2017). Therefore, the questions were posed as embracing positive self-identity and heritage. The intent was to encourage positive outflow of information and help the participants be aware of his/her unique outlook or perspective (Patton, 2015).

Questions seven through twelve are designed to help the participant move into examining the positive and negative aspects of his/her academic journey. The subject matter attempted to move the participant into the place of an expert. Having completed a college degree, and representing a valued cultural group, the participant was then asked to share his/her experiences and keys to success. The implication is that the information will be utilized to help other students who will follow in their steps. Indeed, research reveals that search Hispanic college graduates are a rarer and valued group as compared to other ethnic divisions (Mellander, 2006; Parker et al., 2016). Hispanic college graduates, who have utilized the online environment, can become participants in the development of more effective retention and completion interventions designed with considerations toward their own unique cultural identity (Lumbreras & Rupley, 2017).

Questions 13-15 further the theme of taking ownership of their success and examining its components. Phenomenology seeks to give a voice to individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The participant was therefore sharing three vital perspectives. First, he/she was attempting to communicate to another student the essential elements of his/her success. Secondly, the participant was communicating to course designers, instructors, administrators, and professionals how the course can better serve Hispanic online students. Finally, the participant was asked to evaluate the challenges that his or her cultural group shared in approaching online higher educational achievement. Each one of these questions allowed the participants to have a voice that is larger than the individual student.

One of the significant advantages of inquiry is empowering marginalized groups through dialogue and criticism (Creswell, 2013). Barraclough & McMahon (2013) demonstrated how cultural awareness created transformational learning among Hispanic and Anglo students. Embracing the successful online Hispanic student's voice further develops potential interventions or modifications to degree programs seeking Hispanic student participation and completion.

The final question allowed the participant to conclude the interview with any information that he/she thought was pertinent to the discussion. It gave further voice to the participant as a member of the interpretive process. It was important to allow the participant to add input that was not scripted or anticipated in the interview (Creswell, 2013). These types of responses are often sought after in order to develop a truly transcendental interpretation of a phenomenon. The true essence of a phenomenon cannot be experienced without the liberated voice of the participants (Creswell, 2013).

Letter of Advice

Participants were asked to write a brief letter of advice in four paragraphs or less, in which they recommended or did not recommend their program of study and school to another student. This information is useful in providing another source of first-person expressions, from the participants, about the benefits and/or challenges of the online higher education format for Hispanic students. The instructions for the document were as follows:

Please write letter of advice for future students regarding the program and school from which you graduated. This open-ended letter will not be submitted for use by any university or other entity, but is designed to share your positive and negative experiences about your program with other potential students. Themes, which may be central to your letter, are: positive and/or negative aspects of the school, program, classes, content, fellow students, accomplishments, etc. Other possible aspects that may be mentioned are the flexibility of the online format, the rewards of obtaining a degree, and the value of personal interaction and new friendships. Please feel free to add additional aspects of your experience which you feel would be useful in a letter of advice.

Letters of advice are personal documents that demonstrate not only the information contained but also can highlights how a group of individuals perceives a phenomenon. The expressions and descriptions of an experience often lead to the development of a new meaning unit that may be triangulated with other data (Carter et al., 2014; Creswell, 2013).

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the suggested approach mentioned by Moustakas (1994) using the van Kaam method (p. 120-121). Data from the journal entries, interviews, and letter of advice were utilized to derive themes, significant statements, meaning units, and structural and textual descriptions (Creswell, 2013). Expressions and terms relevant to the experience were listed

(Horizonalization). Then, the process of reduction and elimination by determining if the experience is necessary for understanding and able to be labeled or defined, was utilized. Next, clustering and thematizing was used to acquire core themes to describe the phenomenon. Validation was then employed to make sure that the invariable constituents and themes were explicitly expressed, compatible, and relevant to the research. Following this, I provided a textural description of the phenomena, including verbatim examples from the transcribed interviews. Afterward, an individual structural description of the experience was constructed "based on the individual textural description in the imaginative variation" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). Finally, a textural structural description of the meanings and essences of the phenomena was developed, including the "invariant constituents and themes" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). The preceding steps allowed me to arrive at the goal of the data analysis, which was to find the essence of the phenomena of success among Hispanic online students (Moustakas, 1994). The essence is described as a central experience or theme to be discovered in phenomenological research (Creswell, 2009). Husserl (1931) described it as "that which is common or universal, the conditional quality without which anything would not be what it is" (p. 43). Descartes, Kant, and Hasserl agreed that "intuition and essence precede empirical knowledge" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Therefore, researchers must pursue understanding the essence of the study before being able to add to the collection of empirical knowledge.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the validity and reliability of research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) established the utilization of the terms: trustworthiness, credibility, authenticity, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as some of the terms necessary for validation in human research (p. 300). Eisner (1991) preferred to discuss the credibility of qualitative research

as opposed to the concept of validation. Lather (1991) described four categories of validation, including triangulation (the use of multiple data sources for validation). Finally, Wolcott (1990) suggested that validation should solely identify critical elements discussed through plausible interpretations (p. 146). I used the term trustworthiness in the place of validation and utilized the three subtopics of credibility, dependability, and transferability as the necessary components. Trustworthiness was accomplished in qualitative research through the observance of behaviors or actions that reoccur repeatedly (Eisner, 1991). Eisner (1991) reflected, "we seek a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility, that allows us to feel confident about our observations, interpretations, and conclusions" (p. 110).

Credibility

Credibility refers to the truthfulness of the findings and if they accurately describe reality. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described the acquisition of robust and rich accounts of the data. Also, triangulation of data through at least three different sources helps create credibility (Lather, 1991). Credibility was established in this study through triangulation of the data from the journal entries, the semi-structured interview, and the letter of advice. Patton (1990) observed that this means examining the points at which data intertwine in multiple data collection modes. Member checking, the use of participants to review data collection techniques, was employed to further credibility of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Colleagues were chosen to provide peer or expert reviews and/or audits in order to "keep the research honest" (Creswell, 2013, p. 208).

Dependability and Confirmability

An audit trail was provided containing an outline of the research process and the evolution of themes, categories, and related theory (Creswell, 2013, p. 291). An external auditor was invited to substantiate dependability of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This individual

was an Ed.D. in the area of Education (from Liberty University) and had familiarity with qualitative research. Also, an attempt was made to bracket out personal background by stating the researcher's part in the study and attempting to reduce the researcher's voice in arriving at the essence of the phenomenon (Malterud, 2001). Confirmability refers to the consistency that can come from providing rich and thick detail about the phenomenon being studied. The setting also was described in detail with an attempt to create a shared conclusion from the data. This study employed clearly defined and maintained data collection and methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability

Transferability was achieved by the use of thick descriptions and a detailed description of the settings and the participants. Transferability is another aspect of qualitative research that was considered; it refers to the possibility that what was found in one context is applicable to another context. It is important to researchers that conclusions from previous studies can be trusted to have relevance in similar situations with very similar parameters. This assumption provides a building block for further or related research and assists with more detailed or accurate conclusions from such future investigation. Therefore, I have used maximum variation by attempting to include participants from various nationalities, majors, genders, institutions, and ages. This expanded the pool of participants to provide greater application to future studies which will not need to confine participants to a small set of characteristics.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics are essential in human qualitative research because the participants are vulnerable in areas of personal privacy, personal information being shared illegally, and financial exploitation. It is essential that ethical guidelines direct three main areas of qualitative research.

These areas are: Researcher participant relationship, research design, and data gathering and analysis (Sanjari et al., 2014). Therefore, considerations were taken to ensure confidentiality, including IRB approval, informed consent, and participant and site pseudonyms. Participants were informed about the study and given an opportunity to voluntarily participate. They were also informed that they could leave the study at any time without any negative consequences. They could choose to allow their responses to be used in the study, or to have all of their information left out. Participants signed a letter of consent and pseudonyms were used to protect individual identities. Care was taken to respect cultural and ethnic identities and practices of the participants. If an undocumented immigrant was revealed, confidentiality was maintained. Data was stored in a locked cabinet with secure password codes. Electronic data was password protected.

Summary

The study is about first-hand experiences or the essence of Hispanic students who completed a bachelor's degree or a graduate degree program through an accredited online college or university. Some of the participants had completed additional graduate degrees, including doctoral degrees and post-doctoral graduate work. In this document, Tinto's Student Integration Model (1993) was the basis for the theoretical framework to underpin the connections from the data to the results. The purpose of this study was to inform universities, administrators, instructors, and students regarding the perceived advantages and disadvantages of the online environment for the Hispanic college student. An increase in Hispanic enrollment in online learning may help close the Hispanic achievement gap because of its flexibility. Documenting the future trajectory of the closing achievement gap because of online learning in the Hispanic student learning community will allow for future studies to build upon this case

study. Building into the literature a collection of the experiences of Hispanic students who have completed online degree programs will give a voice to a phenomenological analysis of data and results. Others will use patterns that emerge from the work in this study for future research in this field and other intersections of models, analysis and planning in online education.

This chapter described the design, research questions, settings, participants, procedures, data collection methods, data analysis, trustworthiness, credibility, confirmability and transferability, ethical considerations, and a summary of this study. The methodology employed in this chapter follows the accepted design of the analysis models of methodology, as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The chosen research methodology is in order to ensure the credibility of the nature of the phenomenological implications of how personal this study of Hispanic success must be to create a capture of the work done in the online environment. It is hoped that such transferability will contribute to the reception of this phenomenological study on the success of Hispanic students in the online environment and the lived experiences of the interviews and the resulting rigor of this study results in future analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of the study was to understand the lived phenomenological experiences of Hispanic graduates of online university degree programs. The study involved 11 Hispanic graduates who have completed bachelor's, master's, and post-graduate degree programs at accredited online universities. This chapter contains a description of each participant and includes their cultural and educational backgrounds in keeping with the framework of phenomenological analysis. The data for the study includes print journal responses, semi-structured interviews, and letters of advice. The resulting data was analyzed and grouped into themes. Based upon common themes arriving from the exposition of the participants' shared experiences, as expressed in their written and oral responses, this chapter describes how the data presents conclusions through brief descriptions of the participants themselves and thematic subtopics derived from the study. The data is a description of how the research questions, through participant evidence in excerpts from the written and oral responses in a narrative format, have many answers.

In the participant section, the interlocutors' first names serve as the label for the interview summaries, which relate the autobiographical nature of the case studies and the resulting data sets. In the themes section, the study develops the data and separates the correlating intersections of each participant's experiences as a Hispanic student attending an online degree program. To arrive at a summarized analysis, the findings of this study are reliant on the interviews in this chapter of the overall document.

Participants

Hispanic online students were recruited through professional contacts from previous schools where I worked and from fellow ministers who had potential participants in their congregations. One Liberty University staff member, an adjunct professor, directed me to two more participants, and one former fellow Liberty student also agreed to participate. He, in turn, found another fellow worker who was interested in being a part of the study. They participants resided in a broad range of states and are from three regions: The Southeast (two), the South (two), and the Southwest (seven). A total of 11 participants completed the data gathering activities. The compendium of individuals was not homogenous (completely analogous or similar), but, rather, came from varying ethnic, cultural, experiential, and age groupings. The 11 participants chosen were between the ages of 23-47 years old. There were five women and six males with an average age of 36.4 years old. Two participants were in their 20's, six in their 30's, and three in their 40's. Current educational levels were one male and one female with a bachelor's degree, four males with a master's degree, and one male with a doctorate. All five women had a master's degrees with one of them in a doctoral program. Four were born in Latin America and six were second-generation Hispanics, with at least one Latin American born parent (two with both parents foreign born). There was one third-generation Latina.

All of the individuals had graduated in the last five years from an online accredited degree program. The following is a rich description of each individual who participated in the study. Participants are presented in no specific order and their confidentiality is preserved with the use of pseudonyms.

Alicia

Alicia is a second-generation Hispanic young lady of 25 years of age. She's from the south Texas Area and completed her Bachelor of Business Administration degree. Both of her parents were from northern Mexico. Her mother graduated from high school and completed some college. Her father also graduated from high school in the United States and went on to complete PhD in education. He is currently a middle school principal in central Texas. She married and had a child after completing high school. She began working full-time to help support the family at a local elementary school. While there, she began to study online through Liberty University in order to eventually become a teacher. Although it was a heavy workload, her husband and father were very supportive. She thought that her Hispanic family infused in her the principle of working hard to achieve your goals. She related:

> I feel that the online structure was supportive to the way Hispanics like to study and interact because we understand the value of hard work due to our families coming to America for better work opportunities. The instructors and program were culturally sensitive to Hispanic students due to their flexibility. I was able to persist until I graduated because of the support from my loving family, the flexibility and understanding of my professors when life or school work became too difficult, and the Hispanic mindset I grew up with that always reminded me 'Si se puede!,' Spanish for 'Yes you can!'

Alicia is a good example of how a second-generation Mexican American young person benefits from strong Hispanic family cultural values. Several of the interviewed students, although not born or raised in Hispanic countries, attributed their success to a familial mentality

to succeed and better themselves in the United States. Also, she recognized her family was the most influential component in her academic perseverance to degree completion.

Bernardo

Bernardo was born in Tijuana Mexico and immigrated to the United States at 12 years old. His parents are from Mexico and were not educated. They moved to Memphis, TN and began working in the manual labor market to support the family. As Bernardo began his public-school journey, he was not aware of the different opportunities which would not be available to him because he was undocumented. He stated:

> Throughout my middle school and high school years I did not know what it meant to be undocumented. I was applying to several universities and colleges. They rejected me, because I wasn't a U.S. citizen. They couldn't provide me with enough financial aid. Part of my culture was that felt ashamed, I felt embarrassed to be undocumented. To be illegal in a way and to not have the same opportunities an American citizen would have.

He wanted to attend college so in his senior year he began to be more open about his need for financial aid due to his immigration status. He contacted school staff and began looking for other ways to fund his higher education studies. They were a great help to him in finding scholarship money for a program for undocumented students. However, he continued to struggle through several years of academic pursuits as he ended up needing to transfer after the first college he attended folded. He has been paying most of his tuition, through three master's programs by working full time while studying. His parents also had helped in his college expenses. He hopes to complete a PhD in Psychology in order to work as a psychologist helping Hispanic and minority students and/or teach at the university level.

Bernardo had some interesting insights into how his family contributed to his desire to succeed. He shared these thoughts:

> I saw the struggle of my parents during college for them to help pay for school. Selling food, doing yard work. yard sales to help me pay for school. So, my culture for me shaped me and to find my perspective. I had taken my culture for granted. I don't think they were wrong for bringing me over to a different country where I couldn't apply or go to college. I felt like an outcast. Now I feel different. … it is not about legalization. It was about if you have an education. It is about a conviction, and it's about your values. Of course, your culture does play a major role in your decision making. … Culture for me was the dividing line between the known and the unknown. For the unknown, not knowing I was an undocumented student. Revealing and knowing that maybe it pushed me to seek other boundaries, educationally speaking.

Bernardo is probably one of the most highly motivated students I have met. He is completing his third master's degree from a major university. He has done all of this while working full-time and paying for most of the costs himself. This workload has necessitated an online format.

Delia

Delia's parents are both from central Mexico. Each of them only finished third grade before leaving school and beginning to work. Delia is a first-generation U.S. born Hispanic. She is the middle child of seven children. She was the first child to complete her bachelor's and master's degree (Educational administration). Four other siblings have also completed some higher education. Two of them are in teaching. Delia had a difficult time completing her high school education. She moved out of the house at 16 years old. Her father was of the prevailing

traditional Hispanic cultural opinion that a woman's place was in the home, raising children, or helping the family. She explained:

> That is why moved out at the age of 16. My mother valued education for us. But she had a hard time advocating for the girls in the family. There are five girls and two boys in my family. I know she thought education was very important for us, but there was no guidance. Because of having a third-grade education it was difficult for them to guide us through our educational journey.

Delia was a bright and able student. She and her siblings relied on teamwork to finish projects and homework assignments. She related "I have brothers and sisters who would assist, if for some reason I needed help with homework, knowing that we could, because we would rely on each other, because we couldn't rely on our parents." This divide in educational priorities would be a division which would have effects on her relationship with her father.

She paid for most of her way through college, working at her local school district as a bilingual assistant. She eventually began substitute teaching. After receiving her bachelor's degree, she began pursuing her master's degree in an online program. While it provided the flexibility she needed, she thought there was not much cultural support or connection with her Hispanic background or lifestyle. She added:

> In this specific program there was not a lot interaction in the sense of understanding Hispanic culture *or* specific support for Hispanic students. I didn't really feel like my own culture was valued. There was not a lot of people in my class that looked and sounded like me. It was online, but every so often we would meet. I feel like we weren't very represented in these areas. The area where I live a lot of the students are predominantly Hispanic. I wondered why we lived in the area where there is so much need for parent

communication *and* the culture to be relevant. There is just a disconnect between the cultures.

Delia represents another aspect of Hispanic students in higher learning. Her experience reflects a need for a more flexible format, due to financial constraints, but also highlights the fact that some Hispanic families are not fully supportive of higher education. In this case the reason was the cultural ideal of women espoused by her Mexican father.

Armando

Armando is 43 years old, married, and is a father of two children. He is also a Spanish pastor and a minister at a large church where I have preached. He is a graduate of an accredited Christian University located in Southern California. His parents were both from Mexico. His father completed high school in the United States, but his mother did not. His only sibling also did not complete high school.

The area of San Diego where Armando was raised, one of the poorer mostly Hispanic neighborhoods, was plagued by crime and a lack of emphasis on education. After giving his life to God as a teenager, Armando recognized the need for education in order to elevate his goals and accomplishments in life. He did not want to follow the path of many of the Hispanic youths in his community. He related "My family's lack of educational advancement was a definite inspiration, not only in my high school days, but also in the long run. I would say that it still serves as an inspiration for my upcoming enrollment in a doctoral program." He also realized that education could provide an advancement in career paths and, consequently, a higher income. He wrote "… it did come to mind in that I understood that completing an MA would assist in placing my on a platform that could produce more income." His pastor, seeing Armando's desire to better himself, encouraged him to enroll in a college program which focused on business

skills. After completing this program, Armando waited for the next academic opportunity which would fit with his desire for more advanced ministerial skills and which would fit with his busy work schedule. When a fully accredited master's degree program in Christian Ministry was presented to him, he thought this was the perfect opportunity to go forward in his studies.

Armando attributed the flexibility of the online platform as the primary reason he was able to keep pursuing advanced degrees. He wrote about his experience,

> With regards to the online atmosphere, I would say the following: I would not have an MA if online education did not exist. The reason as to why I was able to take the MA program was because of the flexibility that online education provides.

Armando thought that the student interaction was not as present as he had experienced at a brick and mortar campus, but was sufficient because of the added weekly opportunities to interact in the discussion board assignments. He also thought the instructors were very supportive and timely in their responses. Thus, Armando represents the abundance of Hispanic students who wish to improve their skillsets and professional expertise, but who are limited by their work schedules. Armando's aspirations to be involved in the clergy as a career became available through the online platform. He is now becoming a highly trained and educated Hispanic pastor who is valuable in the Hispanic community in advancing higher education, career advancement, and personal achievement.

Edgar

Edgar is a 45-year-old educator and school administer. He recently completed his EdD in Educational Leadership. His story is one of perseverance through many cultural and economic challenges. He was born in Northern Mexico to a middle-class family. His father brought his family to California was a young boy. He shared:

> My dad was an accountant. We had a very nice house that was paid off in Mexico, but he always had this idea that there was more opportunity in the U.S. and certainly there was less corruption. Sadly, I think looking back now, this country is getting as corrupt as the places we left, as I see it.

His parents did not speak English and, consequently, struggled to find employment that would sustain a middle-class lifestyle. Young Edgar did not like the urban, struggling environment which have now become his home. He longed for nicer accommodations and lifestyle which he had been raised in in Mexico. He related:

> I remember Mexico being a very nice place. Then we moved to Los Angeles in the United States. I remember being just totally out of sync with everything. I didn't understand the language. The place was ugly to me. It was a big cultural shock.

His parents have moved family to the Los Angeles area to escape the corruption and lack of opportunities in their native country. The struggle of a different social and cultural standing in a new country had a lasting negative effect on his parents:

> My parents did sacrifice a lot coming to this country. They left all they had acquired there. They thought they would learn the language easily and then be able to get jobs according to their education in their country. That really didn't pan out like that. The language was harder to learn than they thought. It was very difficult for them to do anything, because they did not have the necessary skills. For my mother, it was very traumatic. Because she came from being upper middle class to poverty.

Edgar now faced the prejudices and stereotypes which have been directed against most newly arrived Hispanic immigrants. He was a bright child, but still had to work hard to catch up with the language skills of his classmates. He had to prove that he could speak English well

enough to continue advancing through the elementary grades. He heard negative comments about Hispanic immigrant children from some of his early teachers. Notwithstanding, he did have teachers who would encourage him to pursue a higher education. Even at the high school level he faced discrimination and prejudgment because of his immigrant background. It was assumed that he would not pursue an academic based career. Nevertheless, Edgar graduated early at 16 years old and enrolled in college immediately. Those teachers who had discouraged and encouraged him ended up being a motivation for young Edgar to aspire and to complete a bachelor's, a master's, and a Doctorate in Education. He wrote:

> My thing in getting my doctorate is that I wanted to prove to others that the stereotypes that are out there and are predominant throughout the nation are quite erroneous. We, as a Hispanic culture, can become highly educated and motivated and persevere through schooling.

Edgar's awareness of his cultural strengths began to develop as he moved from high school to college. One of his first professor's challenged him to think more about his heritage as a valuable tool in his life and career development. He expressed this transition in his journal response:

> At 16, I went to my first college class. I had a philosophy professor who was Latino, and he would make a statement about our culture. One of the assignments was to talk about your culture. In this essay I wrote what everyone was saying. No one needed to differentiate yourself. At the end of class, he pulled me aside and said, 'I read your essay. It was very well written essay. However, I just want you to think about what it means that you don't have a culture. You should really expand your horizon on the idea of culture.'

Edgar wrote that he began to realize that culture does have a large impact on who you are and how you view life. He began to embrace the differences he thought made Mexican culture valuable to himself and those around him. He thought that his whole understanding of who he was as a student and a person was changed. He explained:

> As I was taking classes there, it was coming to me that culture does have a very unique purpose. … *it* serves is to enlighten the people around you. So, being I am Mexican, and in the Mexican culture, we celebrate things, we take pride in certain things that are only particular to us. … in the language and also the nature of how we are. My Mexican culture is very happy, alive, emotional, very communal, not independent. Not in terms of extended family, but very close-knit and family. In that sense I had a 180° turnaround in my cultural view.

In the end, Edgar represents another gifted Hispanic student who had to overcome the tremendous cultural shock and the transition of coming to a country with a different language and a different dominant culture and worldview. Hispanics tend to view culture as emanating from a very close-knit family unit. Familial happiness and support are valued much higher than individual accomplishments and aspirations. Edgar and his brother felt a calling to make their parents' sacrifice valid and meaningful by pursuing higher advanced education. He wrote:

> For us, I have a brother who was always trying to make their sacrifice worthwhile. Even though they couldn't benefit from their hard work, we would. And in that way, they would feel a sense of accomplishment in us.

Edgar felt the calling to demonstrate that Hispanics are capable of obtaining educational and career success given the same opportunities as other, native-born, Americans. His story demonstrates the added barriers that first generation Hispanic students can face in pursuing

higher education. He was able to finish his Doctorate degree through an online university while working in a Hispanic dominated central California school district.

Lisa

Lisa is a devout Christian and is a second-generation Hispanic who is 38 years old, bilingual, and comes from a very hard-working Hispanic family. She has had to overcome tremendous physical obstacles in obtaining a bachelor's degree and two master's degrees. She aspires to be a family counselor. Her mother was from the border area of northern Mexico. Her father was born in Arizona, but his other siblings and parents were from the northern Mexican frontier area. Neither set of grandparents had an education beyond some elementary school. One grandfather could not read or write. All of them eventually came to the United States but never spoke much English. She shared in her journal entry:

> My grandparents on my mother's side are the ones that I know the most about. My grandfather did not have any education at all. He didn't even know how to write his name. My grandmother, my mom's mother, had a third-grade education. Everything that my grandfather learned was from my grandmother. She taught him how to write his name. … They lived in the United States more than half their lives, but they never fully learned English. They were very hard-working. My grandmother stayed home and cared for the children. She had 11 children and never worked outside the home a day in her life.

Lisa's home was always bilingual and located in the "barrio" section of her large southwest city's southside. She was a part of a Hispanic Pentecostal church in her neighborhood for most of her early life. Hispanic American culture is all she remembers from a youth. She wrote:

> We speak both languages in the house, predominantly English at home. We still do a lot of cultural things as far as the food, traditions, etc. Because I grew up Mexican American and predominantly in *the southern part of my home city*.

Lisa thought that her elementary school and middle school education were substandard. She believed that the predominately Hispanic "barrio" schools were not oriented to challenge the young immigrant and second-generation children. She said "I feel like my K-12 education was not very challenging. I didn't go to the best schools."

Although her parents did not have college degrees, they were supportive of Lisa's desire to go further than high school in her educational pursuits. She commented that her "mom tried to take a couple of courses at Pima Community College." And that "because my family did not go to college, I feel they were supportive and said that they were happy that I was getting an education." Even so, the family was not aware or prepared for the time factor that Lisa would have to dedicate herself to which would intrude upon their cultural and family traditions. Lisa commented:

> But at the same time, I don't believe that my family understood the time it took to do my program. There is still a lot of difficulty with that, because family is such a huge thing in my Hispanic culture. Maybe you cannot go to someone's birthday party or you can only stay a little time at a family function because there is homework to be done. So that was very frowned upon. I feel like even though they said, 'We are so happy that you are doing this', they weren't as supportive when it came down to actions … or understanding that there are hours of reading and there needed to be a quiet space for a period of time. There needed to be a balanced between college and working. Part of my challenge with my family was that they didn't understand the amount of dedication *necessary*.

Lisa thought that the problem in her family in understanding what she was doing was linked to their traditional understanding of how work was organized or scheduled in your life. You work during the day or during your shift, and then you leave it and come home to your family. Work (or studies) should not take away from your family time. Hispanic families in the United States have very often been involved in physical labor and, for them, rest time was an important part of cementing the bond of culture, unity, and happiness. They could not understand that an online program required participation when necessary at various, non-standardized hours. Although this was a benefit to Lisa, her family saw it as odd and unnecessary. She wrote:

> My family went to work and then they came home from the rough work all finished. They didn't understand that when I had an online program, I may be doing homework at different hours and there were deadlines that I had to keep.

Lisa's narrative reflects the situation that many Hispanic children find themselves in when being raised in Latino dominated immigrant and second-generation sections of large cities. The culture is often not aware of the opportunities and sacrifices available through educational perseverance. Expectations may not be high at the elementary and middle school level either because of lower budgets or lower cultural appreciation of academic pursuits. And, although the traditional Hispanic family values hard work and unity, there can be misunderstandings about how educational pursuits may cut into traditional family and community involvements. The frustration that Lisa thought about an apparent double standard in Hispanic support for career advancement has been explored and shared in other similar studies. That is, working Hispanics in the United States want to achieve career success, but are not often willing to sacrifice family and cultural involvements to facilitate the sacrifice necessary for study and academic assessment. In most cases the reasons are very simple; there is a need for immediate income (or a more

important perceived need) and few of these families have experienced the financial and social benefits of higher education.

Jose

Jose was born in South America and lived there before moving to Florida at a young age. His father was a doctor in South America but was not a large influence in his early life because he remained in South America after he divorced Jose's mother. Subsequently, Jose was raised in south Florida and spent his teenage years in the Miami area. He didn't mention much about his Hispanic culture there in Florida. However, after getting involved in the wrong crowd as a young teenager and experimenting with drugs, he went to live with his aunt who had been a Marine and was then in law enforcement working with youth. Her example of service inspired Jose to pursue a career in the military. He too joined the marines after high school and worked in aviation maintenance.

While in the marines, Jose began to take classes through the military distance education programs. After converting to a Pentecostal church in his twenties, he felt called to be a minister and began to aspire to complete a university degree in Christian ministry. While working secular and ministry related jobs, he was able to use the G.I. Bill and finance a degree career path in Christian ministry with a fully accredited online university. He is now pursuing a master's degree through the online platform.

Although Jose is Hispanic and bilingual, his disconnect with some of his family at an early age led him to seek a career with the marines. As becomes the case with many military members who are from minority backgrounds, the culture of service and United States patriotism often overlaps and dominates ethnic backgrounds. Service members are usually inculcated with a sense of brotherhood and loyalty that supersedes perceived ethnic divisiveness. Indeed, one

could postulate that many undereducated and at-risk minority young people have been transformed into productive citizens through their military experience. In Jose's case he does not attribute much influence of his Hispanic culture or ethnicity to his career path or success. He maintains that his discipline and determination were his greatest assets in persisting to degree completion. He does, however, affirm that the online environment was essential to his ability to finish his ministry degree while working. In succinct military style he wrote, "Luckily, I was able to use the GI Bill, and I kept at it. I put in the work, and I graduated from the *Christian University* with a B.S. in Christian Ministry." I would also add that the person who he attributed his academic success the most, his pastor, was also a former long-term marine with the same set of military values of self-discipline and determination. So, it seems that culture was indeed a factor in his success.

Steven

Steven is a second-generation Hispanic young man who is 25 years old. His father was born in Mexico and his mother in Southern California. His mother's family was from Mexico also. His father completed middle school in the United States and his mother completed high school (in the United States). Neither parent went to college. They both worked very hard to raise their family. The family had a side business doing gardening work, apart from regular jobs (his father was a welder). Steven remembers working with his family on weekend and holidays. He related:

> So, I got to see both of my parents work multiple jobs. I got to see the struggle. Their first new car was when I was a teenager. That was a big deal, I remember. The first home was bought when I was about 14 or 15. So I got to see, I got to see the whole renting of houses. Just a struggle economic wise.

Steven saw this economic struggle and determined to try to get a better paying type of career for himself. He realized that his family didn't have as much material possessions as many other American families around him. He tried to understand why. He concluded that an education might make a difference in his life. He said:

> I think just seeing my family struggle so much encouraged me to get my education. I got to see my dad get laid off. I was very interested in his hourly wage. As a kid. I just wanted to know. I would ask, "How much are you making, Dad?" Just comparing to other dads. You see the other families driving nicer cars. As a kid, you hear your friends talking about their ATVs. I never had all that stuff. My bike was not a nice bike. So, I wanted that, but I knew I could not ask for that also. I was very aware of our financial situation. So, when I graduated from high school, I wanted to get an education and get that better job. So that I would not be struggling as much.

Steven's parents encourage him to go farther in his education. They wanted him to do better financially than they had done. He shared, "I remember them telling me vaguely, 'you should go to college and finish your degree. Don't be like me. Don't be a welder. Use your head. Get a degree.'" He thought that they wanted his success to build on their progress from their family financial situations in having come recently from Mexico. He wrote:

> My parents always said, "We want you guys to do better than us. We want you to have a better future." I kind of knew that it was always in the back of my head, I have to be better in my generation. Because my parents were better than their previous generation, I felt like I had to keep that going.

Steven thought like his family bred in him a strong work ethic and a commitment to finish jobs and projects. It seems that the work ethic had the biggest impact on what he came to feel was the strong cultural embracing of work as a path to success.

> Working side jobs with my dad. I remember other families were taking vacations. Our vacation was a one-day trip to the beach and that was a financial burden for us. I kind of knew we worked on holidays. It was time to get ahead. We worked on side jobs around the house. On Saturdays I knew I was going out with my dad to do gardening. He had a full-time job and did gardening on the side. I think all of that work ethic and constant drive really helped with my education. I think that had a lot to do with my success in college.

He did not focus on applying himself very much in high school, but after graduating, he realized what he wanted to do was get a better education. He faced a financial challenge also. His family could not pay for his college. Eventually, he found financial aid and began studying. He found that he had what it took to do well. He had learned how to work hard already. He said:

> I didn't do really well in high school. I was lackadaisical with it. As soon as I started going to college, I started picking it up. I knew my parents were not going to pay for college. I had to start looking for other educational programs. I took advantage of a couple of programs. Some other low-income programs and financial assistance. Knowing that it was all on me and I needed to get it done, put a fire under me to get an education. I actually did really well. I graduated with the Magna Cum Laude. So, I really did good and I kind of surprised myself. I did kick myself and thought why didn't I do better in high school. It took me several years, but I think that persistence, the hard work ethic, seeing my parents, struggle … I made up my mind.

Steven went on to share that he thought he was not a naturally gifted student. Studying and taking tests did not come easily to him. He applied the same principles he had learned from his parents, that of applying oneself to the task until it was finished. Culturally, he thought that he understood what it took to finish a job. He just applied that principle to his education and finished his degree.

> When it comes to school, I know I don't naturally get it. I have to work hard and study *for* hours. My friend would ace a test. I would have to work and study for many hours and put my mind to it. I had to study a lot more. Is doesn't come easy to me. That persistence. We have to work until the job gets done. I remember as a kid starting a project and we would be out mowing lawns until it was nighttime. We had to get the job done. I think that does have a lot to do with that the work ethic from a cultural standpoint. Work is primary. It took precedence over a lot in our lives, vacations, going to the park, and having fun. We did that, but if there was an opportunity to work and make money, then we did.

Steven's story emphasizes the Hispanic cultural heritage of the value of hard work. While this may seem a stereotype of Hispanics as primarily laborers, for Steven, it was a reality he perceived in his formative years. He thought that hard work and persistence were traits which were demonstrated to him and required of him by his parents. Though he was somewhat disconnected to pursuing any kind of career path in his primary and secondary education, he experienced a change of heart as he contemplated his future. He chose to follow his parents' advice and example and seek a better life through applying himself to a college degree. He thought that this choice would give him more financial success and continue his family's trajectory of achievements through hard work.

John

John is a Hispanic high school teacher from south Texas. He is 39 years old and is bilingual. His father was from northern Mexico and his mother is second generation Hispanic American. Both parents had a middle school education. John was the first on his mother's side to get a bachelor's degree. His father passed away while John was an adolescent and his uncle took him under his wing. He encouraged him to pursue a college education so that he could better support himself. He did not receive help or much encouragement from his immediate family but was supported from more distant relatives. He wrote, "I did not have support from my immediate family because they were not in my life at the time."

Besides a lack of support from immediate family members, John faced the very real need to make a living while trying to better himself. Therefore, financial issues were the biggest challenge in finishing his degree. He believed, however, that the sacrifice would be worth the sacrifice and the effort. He shared:

> After graduating from high school and entering college, I have had to work and support myself through both of my degrees as well as depend on student loans. Even though I have graduated and received my bachelor's and master's, I still find it difficult at times in repaying my student loans. Although it has been difficult for me financially, I knew that pursuing and completing my degree and getting a job was my only way out to living a better life.

The above comments also highlight John's need for a study plan which would allow him to continue working a regular job with daily hours. He could not attend a brick and mortar school and keep a weekday class schedule. He thought that the online platform did support the Hispanic collective and collaborative mindset. He added, "I feel that the online structure was supportive to

the way Hispanics like to study and interact." He also thought that the school staff was available and a positive help in his program journey.

> I found myself in challenging situations throughout my schooling, but my teachers were very understanding and supportive at these times. I believe my overall experience through my online program was very positive and a great experience as well.

John's uncle was the first in the greater family group to obtain a degree. In mentoring John, this uncle became a great encouragement and guide to navigating the college journey. Today John enjoys a good career teaching and being involved with youth who share some of the same immediate challenging which he faced as young man. John is passing on that support to the present generation of young Hispanic first and second-generation youth who come from undereducated families.

Maria

Maria is a 47-year-old counselor/administrator who works in the elderly care industry for a large care provide in the southwest. She was born in Mexico to parents who had some elementary education. They were forced to leave elementary school in order to help the family survive. She came to southern California at a young age and in her twenties became a young, single mother of three trying to support herself. After marrying a white American young man and becoming a Pentecostal Christian, she began to pursue education as a way to improve her career path and help support her family. She completed a bachelor's and a master's degree (online) which help her move up in her field and has allowed her to make a good income today. She shared:

> I am currently employed full time as a manager in a health plan. I currently work to support my church, myself, my spouse and my child. Therefore, it was a challenge to find

> a program which was compatible with my work schedule as all of the master's programs were online and there were no options to attend on ground.

The program she needed to complete became available online. Although she speaks English well, her dominant language is Spanish. The resources helped her to understand the curriculum better as her English comprehension needed extra effort, at times. She could take her time and use the online resources to explain the lecture better. She explained:

> Attending online as a Spanish speaker was easier due to the fact that the online library was assessable. The school made it easy to submit papers for review prior to submission. I enjoyed reading through the lectures rather than listen in person as I could read and re-read the content making it easier to comprehend.

Maria represents a first-generation Hispanic young woman who had to overcome financial and linguistic challenges to finish her college degrees. During her second marriage her husband has battled with severe illnesses, at times. She has leaned on her faith in God and involvement in church as a way to deal with the stress. The online format was essential to her career advancement as she became the chief wage earner, at times, in her family of six. She is a hardworking, positive, and persistent person who is a wonderful example of what Hispanic young women can accomplish when they believe in themselves and lean on their faith in God's help.

Esther

Esther is a 38-year-old third-generation Hispanic single mother of three who is currently finishing a doctoral program online. She is bilingual and also completed her bachelor's degree mostly online. Both sets of grandparents were born to in the northern Mexico border area. They were raised in western United States border cities where the culture was Spanish speaking and

Mexican heritage dominant. Her grandfather was a farm laborer who eventually became a business owner in California. These relatives had a great influence on her life. She commented, "I am Hispanic on my father's side. His mother is from Mexico and came to the United States when she was late in her teens or early young adulthood." This grandmother, the daughter of a farm worker, was the first to complete a college degree, eventually becoming a Spanish professor. Esther's Hispanic family now has several members who have post graduate degrees.

Esther went through a troubled marriage while trying to secure a degree to, hopefully, provide a path for a teaching career. She has also battle severe rheumatoid arthritis since the birth of her third child and is classified as partially handicapped. Esther related:

> I am currently a single mother and have been in a contentious divorce. I was separated for most of the time that I went back to school. It was challenging for me to find a school in the beginning that, once I was a single mom, was going to fit into my schedule. To be able to go back to a school in that area (San Francisco Bay Area) also had my interest in being diverse and supporting my cultural values of family.

After completing her bachelor's degree at a prestigious historically women's college in California, Esther began a master's program with a large Christian university. She needed an online environment in order to accommodate family and research obligations. She wrote, "It was the first time that I had interacted in an online internet community. I felt that it was supportive of my college education in allowing me to be whom I wanted to be."

Hispanic culture was an important component of Esther's identity, family values, and career dedication. She explained:

> The online atmosphere allowed me to interact without my Hispanic culture being taken into consideration and also allowed me to present my Hispanic culture when I wanted to

> do so without the complications of being judged *on being* white or *being* not white or marginalized.

She continued:

> Also as a culturally sensitive student, I could put my views forth in an online discussion and it would not be as much of a personal affront as it could have been an escalated environment … but that I could actually talk to people online about where they were coming from with a logical argument and/or let them know this is where they had interacted with my culture.

She completed a Master's degree in Music Ethnocology. Her music research has spanned Latin American performers and composers to tribal African heritage music and African gospel traditions in North America and in African countries. The online format allowed extensive research to be done while studying and researching in Africa:

> Liberty gave me a grant to go out of the country and to study in-country. Doing that, I connected with the Mexican embassy in Kenya and was able to go to events there that were culturally supportive of me being Hispanic. That experience would not have happened if I was located on a map. I would've had to travel back into the environment to report, to talk, to think, and I would have lost my awareness to being a Hispanic student in-country the way I was afforded to do so by an online program.

For Esther, the online format allowed her to support and interact with her children while continuing her education. She thought that the online format was very supportive, because her family represented a cultural value in itself. She further explained "I could not *have* realized this until I had been in a student group with other women that also had children where things were being handled very separately, like *getting* a job." She was able to travel and take in culture and

then translate that back to her work while not being required to geographically be at a location apart from her intensive research.

Esther represents a continuing trend of Hispanic young people who are embracing their cultural heritage at least partly as a means of providing a strong personal identity in a very diverse society. Culture, for Esther and many other young Hispanics, represents a connection to the accomplishments and persistence of a previous generation. It also can connect a person with positive role models who share similar challenges and have overcome societal prejudice and marginalization. As a single mother, Esther identifies with other strong Hispanic young women who have overcome abuse and financial adversity in order to achieve academic success and financial stability. These goals align with the traditional family values and dedication to advancement that Hispanic culture in America.

Results

This study demonstrated significant themes related to the experiences of the Hispanic student graduates. There were six major themes which came to light, each of which had some subthemes. The following sections explain how these themes developed and what they were.

Theme Development

Data analysis followed the suggested approach mentioned by Moustakas (1994) using the van Kaam method (p. 120-121). Data from the journal entries, interviews, and letter of advice were utilized to derive themes, significant statements, meaning units, and structural and textual descriptions (Creswell, 2013). Expressions and terms relevant to the experience were listed (Horizontalization). Then, the process of reduction and elimination by determining if the experience is necessary for understanding and able to be labeled or defined, was utilized. Next, clustering and thematizing was used to acquire core themes to describe the phenomenon.

Validation was then employed to make sure that the invariable constituents and themes were explicitly expressed, compatible, and relevant to the research. Following this, I provided a structural description of the experience was constructed based on the individual textural description in the imaginative variation" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). Finally, a description of the meanings and essences of the phenomena was developed, including the "invariant constituents and themes" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). The preceding steps allowed me to arrive at the goal of the data analysis, which was to find the essence of the phenomena of success among Hispanic online students (Moustakas, 1994). The essence is described as a central experience or theme to be discovered in phenomenological research (Creswell, 2009). In this study, the six major themes expressed the phenomena of being a Hispanic student who succeeds in an online program. Husserl (1931) described it as "that which is common or universal, the conditional quality without which anything would not be what it is" (p. 43). Descartes, Kant, and Hasserl agreed that "intuition and essence precede empirical knowledge" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Therefore, researchers must pursue understanding the essence of the study before being able to add to the collection of empirical knowledge.

From all of the collected data, six major themes were developed by the previous process. After a thorough reading, rereading and contemplation, the themes and subthemes were selected and organized into main clustered groups. I reviewed each subgroup to compare where it would fit best into the six major groups initially recognized. I was able to reduce the groups to six after attempting to imagine how the participants where expressing their experiences. What were the important things they were trying to say? I set up a categorized list of each major theme with subgroupings. Then I developed a matrix (see Appendix B) showing how each major theme and

subthemes correlated with the guiding study questions. From this matrix I developed an outline for the study question results section.

The order of the themes does not reflect the level of importance to the study. The participants emphasized their Hispanic identity and culture as being integral to their perceived personal strengths relevant to degree completion. "I am different" and "My challenges are different" were the natural starting points to a more coherent expression of how these themes were connected. The following three themes start with the words "I am successful because …" These themes reflect the major reasons why the participants understood that they were successful. These were the most significant themes relating to their lived experiences during their program journeys. All of the themes were related in some way to their Hispanic identity.

Themes Encountered

The significant statements developed six major thematic areas related to the lived experiences of successful Hispanic online program student graduates. These themes focused on their: cultural self-identity, personal strengths related to education, perceived academic challenges, and professional trajectory related their program journeys. I grouped them as (a) "I am different" – Hispanic students are different. They have a different set of experiences, challenges, and self-identity; (b) "My challenges are different" – My culture has unique challenges in education; (c) "I am successful because of who I am" – Hispanic students have unique gifts. How they approach education; (d) "I am successful because of others" – Social, cultural, and familial support; (e) "I am successful because I chose my path" – Hispanic students discover – They found ways to succeed; (f) "I can show Hispanics how" – Hispanic students share – How other Hispanics can succeed. Although other non-Hispanic students may feel that they share many of these attributes, this study presented the distinct experiences of Latinos who

have been successful in a non-Latino dominated culture and educational system. Their voice is unique and powerful.

"I am different." Hispanic students are different – They have a different set of experiences and self-identity. The participants spoke of their Hispanic heritage in language that expressed their feelings of being different from other Americans. These differences included where their families came from, why their families came to the United States, and how their parents and grandparents had to face many challenges in order to make a living and succeed here. They also expressed a unique identity of being Hispanic and how it made them feel indebted to follow their family history of perseverance. Finally, many of them who took their culture for granted came to an epiphany in their lives when they began to embrace and identify more fully with their Hispanic culture.

Because my family is different. All of the participants shared their family stories of immigration from Latin American countries. There were four students who were foreign born (Three in Mexico and one in Paraguay) and all came to the U.S. in their childhood or youth. Six others had at least one parent from Mexico, and one reported a grandparent from Mexico. All of the students identified with the Hispanic cultural heritage of their families, though they embraced it to differing degrees and in different ways.

Family history starts with a narrative of origins. Some participants simply mentioned their origins as a matter of fact. Alicia, Delia, and Armando related what states and cities in Mexico their parents were from. Bernardo added the aspect of his being brought with his parents to the United States "I was born in Tijuana, Baja, Mexico. I came to the States when I was 12 years of age." Edgar asserted his Mexican identity because of this heritage "I am Mexican. I was born in Leon, Mexico. I remember being in Mexico until I was approximately five years old."

Maria shared this sense of being truly Mexican in her heritage "My grandparents, my parents, all of my recent ancestors from the last three generations were from Mexico. Mainly Mayan or Aztec indigenous people from Mexico."

While Lisa tied her family's nativity to her culture:

> My cultural background is that my parents are both Mexican American. My mother was born in Sonora, Mexico. She came to the United States with her family when she was four years old. My dad was born in Arizona… and his parents were all born in Nogales, Mexico.

For all of the graduates who didn't have direct personal or dual parental (both parents) descent from Latin American countries, Hispanic identity was still without question. Steven, shared the mixed national heritage that several of the participants espoused. He stated, "My father was from Mexico. He was real young, maybe a couple months old, when his dad brought him over to the US. His father was a US citizen." John added "I am Hispanic/Latino, my mother being from the U.S. and my father being from Mexico." Esther shared Mexican heritage from grandparents from Sonora, Mexico. Jose, who did not claim much cultural support for his educational success, yet whose parents were from South America, still identified, without question, with the Hispanic identity (because of his parents national and cultural heritage). However, one common theme related to having immigrant family histories was the stories of the observed and experienced economic hardship that came with being new to America.

Parents who struggled financially and worked hard after coming to the United States. The graduates recognized that their families had generally encountered economic challenges because of their coming to a new country. The economic struggle which their families had gone

through was etched in their minds as a motivation to persevere to their goals by working hard. Delia illustrated the kind of life her parents faced when they came to this country:

> When my family came here, my parents worked in the dairy work and out in the fields. We moved from place to place. … I they knew that they were here in this country because it provided their children with other opportunities … Another thing that contributed to me working hard was the fact that my parents worked hard.

Lisa added to this narrative when describing her family, "They were very hard-working. My grandmother stayed home and cared for the children." Steven added:

> So, I got to see both of my parents work multiple jobs. I got to see the struggle. Their first new car was when I was a teenager. That was a big deal, I remember. The first home was bought when I was about 14 or 15. So I got to see, I got to see the whole renting of houses. Just a struggle economic wise.

Steven continued describing how his parents' economic struggle would later motivate him to pursue higher education:

> I think just seeing my family struggle so much to encourage me to get my education. I got to see my dad get laid off. I was very interested in his hourly wage. As a kid. I just wanted to know. I would ask, "How much are you making, Dad?" Just comparing to other dads. You see the other families driving nicer cars. As a kid, you hear your friends talking about their ATVs. I never had all that stuff. My bike was not a nice bike. So, I wanted that, but I knew I could not ask for that also. I was very aware of our financial situation. So, when I graduated from high school, I wanted to get an education and get that better job. So that I would not be struggling as much.

Bernardo's parents actually helped pay for some of his early college education, even though they were laborers. Because Bernardo was undocumented, as a family they sacrificed financially by working hard to help advance his opportunities. He related "I saw the struggle of my parents during college for them to help pay for school. Selling food, doing yard work, yard sales to help me pay for school." He would go on to earn two bachelor's degrees and three master's degrees while working to pay for most of his own education. That common thread of economic disadvantage was often linked to another shared experience among most participant's families, that of learning a new language.

Parents who didn't speak English well. Most of the participants (80%) shared the experience of having parents who did not speak English when they came to this country. Some of these parents and grandparents, never did gain full mastery of English despite living in the United States for many years. This created challenges which would shape the identity of their families. The narratives revealed a recognition that English acquisition was a barrier which challenged their family's economic success and social acceptance. This phenomenon carried a noted negative emotional recollection among many of the graduates. Alicia recounted that her father, who would later become a PhD, was discouraged from pursuing education because of his perceived English language deficiencies. He felt hurt by the negative estimation of his potential which was solely based on his childhood English skills. She shared that lot of the motivation to succeed came from him: "... it was my father. He came to the United States not speaking any English …" and yet he was able to overcome and gain a career in education.

Delia recounted:

> My parents do not speak English. Our primary language is Spanish. … I felt like there was a lot of people in life that disregarded them or disrespected them for the lack of

> English language that they spoke. At a very young age I knew that if I wanted to be somebody that I needed to speak the English language well, I needed to articulate well, and I needed to make sure that everything that I did was to be the most professional that I could be.

Edgar, in his narrative explained how the challenge of learning English was more difficult than his parents anticipated, and that affected their lives in America:

> They left all they had acquired there (in Mexico). They thought they would learn the language easily and then be able to get jobs according to their education in their country. That really didn't pan out like that. The language was harder to learn than they thought. It was very difficult for them to do anything, because they did not have the necessary skills.

Edgar would continue to describe how his parents never really recovered the style of life they were used to in Mexico. His mother was heart-broken and he was disillusioned, for a time, as to why they even came to the United States.

Lisa reflected that her grandparents who immigrated with their children, "… lived in the United States more than half their lives, but they never fully learned English." This was common for many new Hispanic immigrants who have little training in grammar and language acquisition. Steven also shared that he noticed these language problems in his family. He said he remembers, "Seeing their struggles and my grandparents. There were some language barriers. The opportunities were not there." The fact that language acquisition affected their families' economic opportunities was a major theme among the Hispanic participants. Additionally, though, a majority of them would also express their feelings that a lack of formal education of their parents (beyond elementary or middle school) and grandparents created a gap that would become difficult for the participants to cross (completing high school and college).

Parents with little education. Most immigrant Hispanic families have little secondary or higher education. Only Alicia, Jose, and Esther came from families whose parents or grandparents had college degrees. A very common theme was parents or grandparents with very little primary education. There was a progressive improvement in this area as the families acculturated in the United States (the exception was Jose - whose father was educated in Uruguay). Many of the participants were the first member of their families to finish high school.

Armando's family lived in a Hispanic neighborhood in southern California. Although his parents lived most of their lives in the United States, they never completed high school. He shared, "My family's lack of educational advancement was a definite inspiration, not only in my High School days, but also in the long run." He was the first to graduate from high school, and also college.

Lisa explained how her family's lack of education went back to Mexico. She related:

> My grandfather did not have any education at all. He didn't even know how to write his name. My grandmother, my mom's mother, had a third-grade education. Everything that my grandfather learned was from my grandmother. She taught him how to write his name.… My parents both have a high school education. … My mom tried to take a couple of courses at … college. She wanted to go into accounting but did not.

Steven explained that "… my dad completed up until middle school and that was it. … My mother…completed *the* 12th grade. It was a continuation school." He continued explaining that neither of them had gone to college. John added, "My mother and father had middle school educations. I was the first from my mother's side of the family to receive a bachelor's degree."

Maria explained that her parents had to go to work as soon as possible, in Mexico. She said, "Both of my parents lacked education as they were forced to work from a young age."

Maria was also the first member of her family to complete a bachelor's and master's degree Bernardo added, "I am the first person from my mother's and my father's side to ever go to college." And Delia recounted that:

> My mother had a third-year education. My father as well. … The area that they lived in, as soon as they learn to read or write, they were taken out of school. … I am the first member of my family to complete my bachelor's degree, as well as my Masters' degree.

Responses for those whose parents had some education came from Jose, Alicia, and Esther. Even though Jose's father was educated in Medicine in South America (His grandfather was an engineer there also), there was a discontinuity that transpired after his mother and grandparents came to the United States. He found himself disconnected from his family and entered into a destructive life until finding discipline in a military environment and beginning to focus on self-improvement. Alicia's father was the aforementioned Mexican born child who overcame a lack of English skills to eventually receive a doctorate in Education (after a time in the United States military). And Ester's great-grandparents were farm laborers who encouraged their oldest daughter to pursue education. This daughter was the first to get a degree (eventually a PhD) and served as an inspiration for the rest of her family, including Esther, to pursue a higher education. And so, every one of the participants shared a common experience of knowing that education was a challenge in the histories of their families. A few students also recall first-person accounts of the trauma of being immigrants from a different culture and country.

Trauma of immigration and fear of deportation. For some participants, the trauma and fear associated with being undocumented or isolated was emotionally impacting. Delia's family was initially unsure about where to eventually settle down. She related:

> When my parents decided to get married and have kids they didn't know if they wanted to live in the United States or Mexico. My mom with my brothers and sisters would travel back-and-forth, before finally deciding that she would stay in the United States.

It was a long process to acculturate to the dominant lifestyles and thinking of America. Al least, they thought that they had some choice in the decision. Edgar wasn't so privileged. Although he was from a middle-class family in northern Mexico, his parents decided to move to California and settled in the urban sprawl of a Los Angeles area barrio. The move changed his whole life, he felt, in a negative way. He remembered:

> I remember Mexico being a very nice place. Then we moved to Los Angeles in the United States. I remember being just totally out of sync with everything. I didn't understand the language. The place was ugly to me. It was a big cultural shock. My family was very well off in Mexico. My dad was an accountant. We had a very nice house that was paid off in Mexico. But he always had this idea that there was more opportunity in the U.S. … They left all they had acquired there. … For my mother, it was very traumatic. Because she came from being upper middle class to poverty.

Jose added his experience coming from South America to Florida. His family was also middle class in Chile and Argentina. But economic necessity changed their lives completely. He said:

> When my grandparents moved to the United States, my Mother and I followed. By age two, my mother and I had lived in 3 different countries on two different continents. We stayed for a few years with my grandparents ... But chasing good jobs, led us to *two other cities* and finally we ended up in the … area of Miami where I stayed. At 13, my mother learned that I had experimented with drugs, so she moved me into my Aunt's

> house. … *She* was a United States Marine, and she worked in intelligence as a translator. Her servitude inspired me.

Jose would go on to join the Marines following graduation. He credits this culture and his conversion to Christ as what would finally stabilize his life.

Bernardo came to the United States without papers. He related that he only became aware of the very negative effects of being undocumented when he was in high school. He shared:

> I didn't know what it was to be undocumented. … I was applying to several universities and colleges. They rejected me, because I wasn't a U.S. citizen…. Part of my culture was *that* I felt ashamed, I felt embarrassed to be undocumented. To be illegal in a way and to not have the same opportunities an American citizen would have.

These experiences would cause Bernardo to dedicate his life to helping other Hispanics who were underprivileged or who were marginalized socially and emotionally.

Lower expectations because of ethnicity. Some participants also experienced institutional prejudice or marginalization in the public-school system. This was manifest in what they perceived as lower quality schools in Hispanic communities, lower expectations because of ethnicity, and cultural prejudice. Edgar related that when his family emigrated to the United States, he was in second grade. He recounted:

> I had a very horrible experience. The teacher had all the Hispanic students sitting at one table. She had a para-professional that was going to be translating for us. I remember sitting down next to my friend who spoke Spanish. I heard the teacher say my name as she spoke to the translator. I asked my friend what she was saying. She said "here comes another one from Mexico who probably doesn't know anything. He's probably retarded

> just like the rest of them." They got me pretty upset, knowing I was pretty intelligent. She didn't realize it, but she had just clumped us all together.

Edgar would go on to surprise them with his command of math and science, and would eventually graduate high school early. Nevertheless, he still felt there were cultural barriers in his path at his magnet high school. He recounted:

> My friends were in the club called Upward Bound. It was for a group of high achievers. They took field trips to universities. I wondered why I was not in this group because I had the same grades. When I was in eighth grade, I had a teacher that had us do a group project and I was the one to present it to the class. Afterword, she really praised me and made me feel confident and she said that I would be going to university and that I had did this *project* well. So that gave me a roadmap to my education.

Edgar thought that even though there were many Hispanics at his schools, he stood out (with some others) because they were from Mexico and didn't know the culture or the language as well as other acculturated students. Schools were also a theme of some participants.

Lower performing primary and secondary schools. Delia thought that the type of schools she attended as a farm laborer's child were often not up to the standards of the big city California ones. She shared "We moved from place to place. In the same town I went to two country schools. That was from Kindergarten through eighth grade." She began to realize that not everybody who was involved in education at that level was really there to help the students. She recalled "That is where I learned that people were there just to work. If assignments were not turned then, then there was not a care in the world on their end." She would later dedicate herself to primary and middle education with a focus on bilingual education. Edgar shared "My K to 12 experience was very haphazard." Lisa recalled "Because I grew up Mexican American

and predominantly in South Phoenix. I feel like my K-12 education was not very challenging. I didn't go to the best schools." She added that because she lived in that area:

> I feel like because the schools were predominantly Spanish, maybe we didn't get the teachers that we needed. I don't feel like we were challenged. I feel like going to another school was kind of a shock as far as how much dedication it required.

Steven explained that the crime in his Hispanic dominated area in southern California was so bad that many relatives had entered into gangs, drugs, and alcohol. He recalled A "lot of family members were in and out of prison. Even before my father had his experiences with drugs and alcohol." His family enrolled him in a local Christian school which he recalled, "really helped me to stay-based and have that solid foundation. I received my high school diploma at the Christian school." A few participants attended magnet schools, Christian schools, or charter schools as an alternative to, what they thought, were underperforming elementary, middle, and high schools. Yet, in spite of all of the aforementioned, sometimes negative, associations with their Hispanic cultural and educational experiences, all of the students embraced their Hispanic cultural roots. This self-identity was important to them.

"Because I am Hispanic" - Hispanic identity. A cultural identity can serve to help a person feel that they belong to something of worth. These students associated their Hispanic identity with such things as Latino celebrations, cuisine, music, dances, and family values. They also attributed emotional traits such as happiness, integrity, loyalty, and humility to their heritage. A major characteristic which these participants associated with their Hispanic identity was toughness, hard work, and perseverance. Alicia expressed the later with this statement, "… and the Hispanic mindset I grew up with that always reminded me 'Si se puede!', Spanish for

'Yes you can!'" She related that in her upbringing and family Hispanic culture on the south Texas border with Mexico:

> In middle school and specially in high school they had a lot of fiestas. There was a festival called Charro Days and it was basically the joining of Mexico and America. It was incredible at the time. … It was a really nice experience to be able to just be a part of that culture. You know I had always heard about it, but actually seeing it and listening to it and being a part of it was really special in high school and of course, my family. We had a lot of family traditions. I had a quinceanera.

It was evident that Alicia was fond of these experiences and had every intention to continue participating and identifying with her culture. Bernardo shared that he thought "that my ethnic background, my roots, would play a big role in my determination of pursuing my education." He also perceived that humility and respect were Hispanic aspects which he identified with. He said:

> Humility was one of the components of my culture. I grew up with family members that were very humble in their jobs. They did their job with a large amount of pure humility and respect. That was very dear to my heart. Seeing this humility in my Hispanic culture helped me to be inspired to finish my degree. To be grounded and stay focused.

Delia shared that although her siblings were all binational and became bi-cultural, she chose to embrace her Hispanic heritage as her de facto identity:

> Some of my brothers and sisters were born in Mexico and some of them were born here in the United States. I identify with the culture because it is my culture. It is what it is … I am what I am. It is my culture … I have all the beliefs. I follow the culture. I followed the traditions that we have. We make tamales at Christmastime. We are family. It is who I am.

This was a common theme. The Mexican Americans and naturalized United States Latin Americans all felt at peace being Hispanics in America. Armando, a Mexican American, said:

> As far as our culture, we were raised in a Hispanic home where we were in the Hispanic mode of living was what we knew. In our home, it was very Hispanic oriented …We had a lot of extended family on both sides that were Hispanic.

Edgar explained his perception of what makes Hispanics unique culturally:

> So, being I am Mexican, and in the Mexican culture, we celebrate things, we take pride in certain things that are only particular to us. For example, in the language and also the nature of how we are. My Mexican culture is very happy, alive, emotional, very communal, not independent. Not in terms of extended family, but very close-knit and family. In that sense I had a 180° turnaround in my cultural view.

He went on to explain that when his family immigrated to the United States, his mom wanted them to speak only English. She wanted them to learn English fast. But there was someone that asked her, "Why do you want them to learn English so fast? If they learn it so fast, they will forget their Spanish." So, she listened to that advice. The person said, "They are going to be in school for 12 years." So, she spoke Spanish to them so they could keep their Spanish. Edgar went on to comment, "… a lot of cultural aspects of Mexican culture. … I tend to gravitate towards the old things. For example, movies and music. Because that's what my parents would showcase for us." For Edgar, Hispanic culture was to be understood, cherished, and passed on.

Lisa shared that her whole world was Hispanic, even though she was raised in the United States:

> My parents both speak Spanish and English. We speak both languages in the house, … We still do a lot of cultural things as far as the food, traditions, etc. Because I grew up

> Mexican American … I feel like the cultural heritage, the food, language, everything about the Hispanic culture, we were immersed with. Also, because in the neighborhood where I lived most of the people I had known all of my life and they were all Hispanic. No Caucasians lived in our neighborhood. Going out of my world was very much a bubble of Hispanic culture and Hispanic people.

Jose, who was born in South America, but came to the United States at an early age related, "I am the only one that now really considers myself to be American. But I was born in South America." While he considers himself American, he still embraces Hispanic values. He shared:

> Culturally, I was raised speaking Spanish. We ate all the food. We had our own festivities. We were very culturally Hispanic. Hispanics are very, very tight knit. When I was younger, we were that *way*. We would always spend time at each other's families' houses. Holidays were always spent together.

Steven was very frank in his assessment of his roots. He explained "I think being born in the United States, I would consider myself to be more American with my background as Hispanic …" He does go on to identify how his family culture makes him different:

> … but I do definitely see where the work ethic comes in. That's all I know how to do is work. Get the job done. … What I observed of my family is that they can be pretty stubborn. Since I have been raised around Hispanics, I believe that that is part of our culture. And I have the same thing. Once I get something in my head, I don't stop thinking about it until I have my way.

John said that his Hispanic cultural background was very family oriented. He said simply "My parents are Hispanic." For him, that was enough of a connection. He described some

aspects which he learned from this culture as how to be "persistent and how to be a hard worker."

Esther was the only third-generation Hispanic in among the participants. Nevertheless, she has embraced her Hispanic identity, not only as who she is, but also as an extension of her family history and experience:

> I grew up with my grandmother and she is Hispanic. She spoke Spanish and English around me when I was with her. My father was always interested in his work with being connected to our Mexican heritage. I lived in Mexico as a child.

Esther would go on to study Hispanic music and write a study about a famous female Mexican composer and singer and how her culture affected her career. The project drew her even closer to her grandmother's experience and Esther's own Hispanic identity. She commented:

> And I constructed my paper and my research very differently after that because it was about a Mexican woman interfacing with a white man in an interracial marriage and coming from economic disparity but also having to put forward her art and that kind of thing. So, I don't think without my grandmother's perspective of what it was like to be a Mexican woman among white mixed society, I don't think I would have approached my education the same way, especially for that project.

For Esther there was no question about her identity and its potential to help her overcome.

"My challenges are different." Hispanics have unique challenges in education. The participants thought that they had specific challenges to higher education that weren't shared by most students. These included the need to work while attending college, the tendency to pay as they progressed through their programs (as opposed to borrowing), overcoming Hispanic

stereotypes, language difficulties, bicultural challenges, overcoming Hispanic familial attitudes about higher education, Hispanic gender roles, and non-Hispanic friendly school atmospheres.

Financial hardship in going to college. The participants described finances as the biggest challenge to their higher education. They simply had to work. And for many, school loans were not easily obtained, if available at all. Bernardo wasn't a citizen yet said "When I graduated from high school, there wasn't many resources for going to college." He paid as he went. His parents helped. Eventually, he found some aid for undocumented students. But it was never enough. One reason he chose online education was because he could pursue degrees from out of state immigrant friendly institutions while paying in state tuition. He explained that, "Number one … would be the finances for an online degree. A lot of programs want you to still pay out-of-state tuition when you live in another state. Because if you don't qualify for grants or loans, it can be very expensive."

Delia, a single working mother, supported herself and her child explained, "Financially, I took care of myself through the university. I worked the entire time I was in school." She said she was going to graduate from high school and transition into a four-year university. She continued, "… and there was no support there to help me. So, I attended the 2-year college until I had enough money."

Jose was also challenged financially because of his South American citizenship, but was able to pay for college after joining the United States military. He recounted "Luckily, I was able to use the GI Bill, and I kept at it. I put in the work, and I graduated from the Apostolic School of Theology with a B.S. in Christian Ministry." He just did what he had to do.

Steven's parents were from Mexico and didn't have good paying jobs. He said "I knew my parents were not going to pay for college. I had to start looking for other educational

programs." He found a couple of programs; some low-income programs and financial aid. He said he just decided he would work and pay as he went:

> Knowing that it was all on me and I needed to get it done, put a fire under me to get an education. … It was all resting on my shoulders. I did take a loan out in Texas when I was making decent money. I was actually paying for my classes as I went. When I graduated then a few months after, I had all my schooling paid off.

Steven went on to explain that he was motivated to finish his education in order to provide a better life for his family.

> My wife also, I wanted to get her a better house, better vehicles. We wanted to have children after five years of marriage and have everything set up for them. We wanted a home in a nice neighborhood and everything that we needed to afford for the kids. This was what was driving me.

John shared his story of needing to work and study at one. He did end up taking out loans which he now feels are a burden to him economically. He explained:

> I have had to work and support myself through both of my degrees as well as depend on student loans. Even though I have graduated and received my bachelor's and master's, I still find it difficult at times in repaying my student loans. Although it has been difficult for me financially, I knew that pursuing and completing my degree and getting a job was my only way out to living a better life.

Maria, who was born in Mexico, but became a naturalized citizen, worked and found programs to help her through college. Her work helped pay for her recent master's degree. Even at 47 years old, she "currently work*s* to support my church, myself, my spouse and my child." Esther is the fourth Hispanic working mother who sacrificed to go through college. She related:

> I am currently a single mother and have been in a contentious divorce…. It was challenging for me to find a school in the beginning that, once I was a single mom, was going to fit into my schedule. I found out that my Hispanic culture there in that program supported me by allowing me to apply for separate scholarships and grants.

Esther, now teaching at a major university, and pursuing her doctorate, remembers when she didn't have money for a computer, or transportation to classes. She sees Hispanic students in her classes that remind her of this tremendous economic challenge:

> And as a Hispanic student, I have seen other students, because now I teach Hispanic students, actually this has helped me in persevere in a PhD. … I had to worry about whether or not to pay tuition or whether or not I had a computer that worked or if I could get to school or not. When I thought about it, I had to make whatever sacrifice it was to stay in the program and finish, because in the future my earnings, and my success, my happiness would depend on whether or not I finished.

Overcoming Hispanic educational stereotypes. A very real, an often unspoken, experience which some Hispanic students recounted was the challenge of overcoming stereotypes about Latino students. Several participants were very aware of the lower educational rates of Hispanics in the United States. Specifically, many Americans seem to think that Hispanics are good for manual labor and lower paying professions. There is an unspoken stereotype that can be a weight on the hopes and aspirations of young, academic minded Hispanics.

Armando recognized the achievement gap in his community and his family but purposed to be different. He shared "I would say that my cultural background did serve as inspiration in

that I was aware that there is gaping hole when it comes to Hispanic people that have completed Graduate level education." He went on to say:

> I have a brother that is four years older than me. He dropped out of high school. I never had the motivation for education. It wasn't until high school, my freshman year, just out of nowhere I just made up my mind that I did not want to fail. Therefore, it turned things around educationally. It would be the drive to not allow our culture to keep me down. There is so much stereotype to Hispanics here in America. When you look at Hispanics in America and you think they're just fieldworkers, hard workers, laborers. The fight against that and to become more than that is one of the things that has helped me.

Edgar added his strong feelings about this phenomenon. He was determined to overcome the false narratives about Hispanics:

> My thing in getting my doctorate is that I wanted to prove to others that the stereotypes that are out there and are predominant throughout the nation are quite erroneous. We, as a Hispanic culture, can become highly educated and motivated and persevere through schooling.

Edgar also was determined to teach his children that these stereotypes are imaginary and needed to be proven wrong. He differentiated in Hispanic values and Mexican American youth and families who have followed a less noble set of value systems. He determined not to be a victim or accept poverty. He shared:

> I feel like the Mexican American cultures are all into gangs. I was never into that. As I mentioned, I am a person of faith. I don't associate myself with crime. We never identified with living in poverty. We lived in the same house until I was 16 and that was because it was going *to be demolished.* I don't like being clumped into a Western stigma.

> I tell my children if you are going to speak Spanish, speak Spanish well. If you are going to speak English, speak English well.

Edgar's comments on language reflect the next challenge some participants shared, that of studying in a non-native language, or being less than perfect grammatically in English.

Language difficulties. Six of the participants didn't know any English as young children. Most of them began attending school here during the elementary level. Bernardo related that he had to learn English as a child, "When I came to the United States it was an adjustment to learn the language." Edgar related that his first year in the United States was difficult because of his lack of English skills. He shared:

> It was a horrible year in second grade. She wanted to keep retaining me in second grade, even though I was smart, because I didn't know the language. Which was unfair because I was smart. My mom fought for me, so I was able to go ahead and continue to the third grade.

Delia related her struggles at school when she had difficulties learning:

> I am an English language learner, so I speak from experience. I speak from valuing those teachers that I had growing up. Also, teachers that didn't do a great job and didn't understand either my culture or the reason why I faced different things. For years it was always just "you are smart, so I don't know why *there is* this trouble with you." "You understand the English language, can you be here and translate for your parents."

Delia expressed the challenge of learning English well enough to read, write, and speak it well. She related that:

> At a very young age I knew that if I wanted to be somebody that I needed to speak the English language well, I needed to articulate well, and I needed to make sure that everything that I did was to be the most professional that I could be.

Maria also would struggle throughout her education because she thought she understood verbal communications much better in Spanish. And that was a challenge for many of the students.

Tensions in Bicultural Hispanic American students. Some of the graduates also related the phenomenon of feeling different than first generation Hispanics while being stereotyped as non-acculturated Latinos by others. Delia described the experience as a disconnect:

> I identify with the culture because it is my culture. It is what it is. I feel when I go back to Mexico to visit family members that there is a huge disconnect between my family there and here. I believe it us because the way we were raised here. It is a lot different from the way that they're raised in Mexico.

She went on to relate how that at school she was misunderstood because she still had trouble understanding some of the subject matter. She continued the dialogue referred to previously:

> For years it was always just “you are smart, so I don't know why *there is* this trouble with you.” “You understand the English language, can you be here and translate for your parents.” There was always a lot of trust put in me, but I think it is because that's the way my parents were at home. It was anytime there was a need for something it was one of their children who could be the representative to go. I had to go pay bills.

So, she could translate for her parents and go pay the bills, but she still struggled, at times, at school. People didn't understand that.

Steven explained this difference that he felt affected him. He had to go out and look for Hispanic related support (financial aid) because he was not a stereotypical (in his view) Latino. No Hispanic students or staff reached out to him. He related:

> I wouldn't say I had a lot of cultural support. I think there was a barrier culturally. I didn't have a lot of people reaching out and telling me, "Hey, there is this program or that one… you are Hispanic, and you can go get it." I had to research programs for myself.

Esther added to the same theme. She thought that being Hispanic was often judged by the color of your skin, or your last name. Because her last name was Anglo and she was light skinned, she was not generally perceived as qualified to share the Hispanic heritage. Yet she was Hispanic and had shared many of the cultural experiences of that heritage. She clarified:

> Although, because my skin is light and I don't carry my culture visibly, there were times where that was in conflict with what people expected in the classroom and where I was actually coming from.

She explained that her life was, indeed, influenced by the Hispanic culture, and yet, at the university level, there was sometimes a barrier of acceptance from the Latino student population itself:

> And I was lucky enough that there was Spanish in my household. It wasn't necessarily a first-generation immigrant experience, and so then you add that to the lightness and being young and sometimes *the idea* of "latinidad" and what it means to be a Latino comes up. Even though, most of the people that I meet are young Hispanic adults that are here in America are second and third generation. There is still this varying capacity of what it is that makes you Mexican, and, you know, how do you identify with your Hispanic heritage and cultural background.

She continued reasoning about how Hispanic young people now are often mixed race or are married to Anglo or other ethnicities. For these people. There is often a tension when one identifies with the Hispanic culture. She continued:

> The Hispanic intermarriage rates. The people I know that are Mexican or married to varying different *kinds* of Americans. So, we think of ourselves as Mexican Americans and we have Hispanic ancestry. But it is not necessarily that our partners identify us as Hispanic. So, then there's this other thing that happens we create families. Or I have kids that are from mixed backgrounds. I try to talk to them like they are Mexican. They already have a parent that is not perpetuating that in the home. So, it becomes what is Mexican and what is not. You're Mexican and I am not. You speak Spanish and I don't. They all have taken Spanish for more than a couple years in their education. Being Latino is a very … it's a spectrum.

And for some the spectrum of being Spanish is interpreted by strangers. Another challenge that these Hispanic graduates faced in their academic journey was how their parents viewed education.

Hispanic parents' educational concepts. Although most of the participants would report a general familial support for education, there was distinct theme of the challenge of what these families really expected and understood about the value ascribed and the time necessary to obtain a degree.

Delia shared that "I felt like my family was not supportive of the college program like I said before. She said that they just didn't see the value of a higher education. She continued:

> It *(education)* wasn't something that my family, my parents valued. I they knew that they were here in this country because it provided their children with other opportunities, but

> they didn't know what that meant. Nor did they know how to translate that to what they wanted out of us as kids or adults.

She explained that their own lack of education was connected to why they didn't promote it for their children.

> My mother had a third-year education. My father as well. The area that they lived in, as soon as they learn to read or write, they were taken out of school. Because of having a third-grade education it was difficult for them to guide us through our educational journey.

Lisa explained her family's attitude about education with the following narrative:

> So, because my family did not go to college, I feel they were supportive and said that they were happy that I was getting an education. But at the same time, I don't believe that my family understood the time it took to do my program. There is still a lot of difficulty with that, because family is such a huge thing in my Hispanic culture. Maybe you cannot go to someone's birthday party or you can only stay a little time at a family function because there is homework to be done. So that was very frowned upon. I feel like even though they said, "We are so happy that you are doing this…", they weren't as supportive when it came down to actions … or understanding that there are hours of reading and there needed to be a quiet space for a period of time. There needed to be a balanced between college and working.

She tried to explain that she knew they weren't opposed to her educational plans. It just didn't fit in with their expectations. Lisa continued "I know this sounds terrible. But I don't know that I felt any family support. They would say 'We're glad you're doing this degree, good job.' But I don't know that they were actually supporting me." What she needed was understanding and

space to do what it took to finish her degree, things “like giving me time to study.” She explained “There wasn't someone I could go to for support and guidance. They were not against it. They were definitely for it.”

Esther seemed to grasp the Hispanic family disconnect when a member was very involved in a degree program. She commented:

> I think the value of an education to a Hispanic family can sometimes be in question and so an online program doesn't even make sense to them. How is this even a class, there is no teacher. She doesn't know you or they don't know you. Information is not right in front of you, so how are you supposed to be learning? Once they have decided to go to school you are just sitting on your laptop at home or you are studying between 7 and 12 at night when you should be spending time with your family or not seeing things happen. It doesn't really jive with someone with cultural values of what an education is.

About workload and degree obligations. Alicia furthered this theme when contemplating how Hispanic families conceptualize what education should be like. She thought that they could not understand sometimes that you were really working, although from your home and at different hours of the day. She explained “They are so used to being on a work schedule. If we are not working on our jobs, we are working in our home. A lot of Hispanic families do not understand how much work it (education) really is.” Lisa expressed the same thought. She recounted:

> Part of my challenge with my family was that they didn't understand the amount of dedication *necessary*. My family went to work and then they came home from the rough work all finished. They didn't understand that when I had an online program, I may be doing homework at different hours and there were deadlines that I had to keep.

About gender roles and women in the workforce. Some of the female participants expressed the feeling that traditional Hispanic family attitudes about women sometimes challenged their plans to get a degree. Again, four out of five of the women who obtained degrees were raising children. All of them were working.

Delia explained how this affected her life. She wanted to be more than a stay at home mom, and this caused tension. She said "I moved out of my parents' home when I was 16 years old. My father's ideology of women, was a family stay at home mother who takes care of the children and he didn't value ideas of education for women." She thought that this wasn't the life she wanted to live. She tried to communicate this to her mother. She continued:

> I always told my mom that I did not fit the norm of whatever it was that her and my dad wanted me to be. In my culture, the norm was that women are to be a stay at home person while the men are out working. I could never wrap my brain around the fact that that's who I had to be. I feel that was one of the key factors of what I felt contributed to me working so hard because school came very easily to me.

She thought that her mother wanted her daughters to go ahead and continue their education but was unable or unwilling to try to change her father's perspective. She simply stated "My mother valued education for us. But she had a hard time advocating for the girls in the family." This challenge was a very real experience for these women. Leaving the subtheme of Hispanic family attitudes about education, the final challenge expressed by the Hispanic graduates was that some schools, including colleges and universities, are not Hispanic friendly (culturally sensitive or having cultural awareness).

Lack of Hispanic friendly atmosphere. The subject of how the participants felt at various schools a reoccurring theme. The participants expressed that schools which had a decent

Hispanic population were more comfortable for them. Others would comment (in a section following) that they felt comfortable at their schools because they were embraced as Hispanic students. Delia expressed that in one of her programs "there was not a lot interaction in the sense of understanding Hispanic culture or specific support for Hispanic students. I didn't really feel like my own culture was valued." She went on to comment that even though her area in California had a high Hispanic population:

> I feel like we weren't very represented in these areas … The area where I live a lot of the students are predominantly Hispanic. I wondered why we lived in the area where there is so much need for parent communication *and* the culture to be relevant." She thought like there was "just a disconnect between the cultures.

Lisa related that in her program online she didn't feel there was much awareness of Hispanic students or their needs. She shared "I cannot actually say that I remember there being any cultural support. There were not any people that I had known that were doing any online educational programs at the same time that I was doing mine who were also Hispanic.

"I am successful because of who I am." Hispanic students have unique gifts – how they approach education. Successful Hispanic online graduates shared their personal traits as being a major factor in finishing their programs. They related that seeing their parents succeed, their Hispanic cultural traits, and their family system made them strong.

I have seen success. They felt called to follow family achievement. The narratives of first and second-generation Hispanic families was on of overcoming. The participants identified and participated in this progressive social and economic improvement. Alicia recalled that "… our families came to America for better work opportunities." She related that her father had shown her and her family that is was possible to be successful despite his challenges:

> He came to the United States not speaking any English and he would always tell me this one story. He is an author for children's books. It is his basic life story how he came, and he goes to college. …. So, he used to tell us the story … that when he was in high school he told his high school counsellor "I really want to go to college" but was discouraged by him. … Later, he would go on and be persistent about wanting to go to college and learning English. And he did. … and he went on to do really good things in order to get me and my brothers a better life. A great life. In order to give me the opportunity to go to college as well. So, I always kept that in my mind.

Edgar's parents evidently never reached the level they had hoped for in the United States yet he thought that his family's sacrifice to give them better opportunities was an example for him and his brother to follow. "For us, I have a brother who was always trying to make their sacrifice worthwhile, even though, they couldn't benefit from their hard work, we would. And in that way, they would feel a sense of accomplishment in us." He continued "Also, having family ties that you give back to your family. The way you give back to your family is to have their hopes and dreams be realized through your hard work." Lisa's parents were poor but worked hard to eventually reach a better life. She shared:

> My parents were very hard-working. They both worked and had three children. One of them, myself, is a special needs child. They did very well for themselves. They made good investments. They are now in a much better place financially than when I was growing up.

Jose opened up about how his family eventually reached a better economic situation after a life-changing move from South America. He said that his family story explained who he was:

> My family was very determined people. My grandfather was an engineer in Argentina. When he got to the United States, he then transferred everything that he had so he could continue to work as an engineer. So, he had to go through the whole process of being indoctrinated *(recertified?).* My mom is the one that really put it into me to work hard. My mom was working a full-time job. She also went to school full-time. And … every time that she had off, she was going down to the local prison to volunteer as a guardian angel? Determination and working until the job is done was very much in my family. It has taken me as well.

Steven described his family's struggle to make a better life as a motivation for him. While they were working, they were pointing him to a better life. He recalled "My parents kind of encouraged me to go to school. I remember them telling me vaguely, "you should go to college and finish your degree. Don't be like me. Don't be a welder." His dad would say, "Use your head. Get a degree." He recalled that both of his parents would encourage him:

> My parents always said, "We want you guys to do better than us. We want you to have a better future." I kind of knew that it was always in the back of my head, I have to be better in my generation. Because my parents were better than their previous generation, I felt like I had to keep that going. …Seeing their struggles and my grandparents. There were some language barriers. The opportunities were not there. I just really felt the need, I got to roll with this. I got to better myself. That was my goal. I had more opportunities. I wanted to provide for my family for the things that I did not have. That was my goal. I don't want my kids to go through what I went through when I was a kid.

John shared that for him, one of the most important drives to achieve came from:

> A family background. Appreciating where you came from. …You want to just contribute to their two parents, to your family, to history, to try and do better. Generation to generation that would be the main goal.

Maria shared that conviction. She said "You want to do best for your family and know when it succeeds for your family. So that played a part in it in just making your family proud of accomplishing something." She said that she observed the careful diligence of her parents in their journey to create a good life in the United States. She recounted:

> My father was a very hard-working man. He always wanted us girls to keep busy. He always wanted us to be punctual and to succeed in everything we did. The way that he brought us up with the Mexican culture was like, "if you do something you are going to do your best, you're going to prepare." Anytime we had an appointment we would drive there the night before to know exactly where it was so that there was no confusion and you wouldn't be late. Having my Dad to teach us that. Because of my dad and mom's culture you went to a job and you worked your entire life and you gave it your best and you didn't jump from company to company. Having that and being in the job that I truly liked, helped me in deciding where I wanted to go to school and know what I wanted to do. I wanted it to be like that when I get to a job, I wanted to be able to love it enough where I wanted to stay there forever. Loyalty.

Esther identified with the Hispanic cultural family values she saw in the West. She was from a family that came initially as agricultural workers, but who persevered to produce many economically successful families. Her Hispanic family history was an expression of why she persists. She said:

> I identified with the California American Mexican which is very different than Latino Hispanic cultural values more specific to how you are raised in your mindset. I think that in California and Arizona, areas we are from, people that were immigrants and the worker population and where they were expected to succeed and there is a large Mexican culture in California and Arizona where they group together. In some ways they are grouped together by people outside and inside. You are expected to speak Spanish at home and English proficiently. You are expected to be educated because you came here for your grandparents and parents came here for the American dream. And so, I didn't realize that growing up there was a lot of the American dream built in me to the way I was raised. Seeing my grandmother succeed, and or her brothers (*succeed)*. Or seeing my aunts or my father. People in the second and third generation succeed. …It was just expected that you were there to succeed and in line with the American dream values. I think that the persistence came from being surrounded by people that have the same value system within our culture. It was expected with the other Hispanic part of the family that we would achieve American ideas of what the American dream held. An education is one of them.

Esther explained that family cooperation also was part of the Hispanic achievement identity.

We work together. I can succeed with my family's help. This common theme is part of the participant self-identity section because it was expressed as a personal strength which help them to succeed. Delia explained that she knew she could complete her college work because "I have brothers and sisters who would assist, if for some reason I needed help with homework, knowing that we could, because we would rely on each other, because we couldn't rely on our parents." She possessed that confidence that a team effort (from her siblings) was available:

> I did very well in school. I got a lot of help from my brothers and sisters when there *were* things that I did not know. … In my culture it is important for us to take care of each other. Although, there is no financial support, I think that with my son, my brothers and sisters knew it was part of the culture to help take care of him, because it is part of our culture that we need to support each other; not necessarily financially but to be there for each other because we are brothers and sisters.

My culture makes me strong. An awakening to the importance of Hispanic culture in their lives. Several Hispanic participants referred to an awakening to the value of their cultural identity as it related to their academic success. Bernardo shared that while he was in high school, he was realizing how different his situation was. He decided to embrace his culture even more:

> A little bit of the time I was trying to find who I was. Identity. My last year of High School I decided to demonstrate and come out of the shadows and let the school know that I was an undocumented student and I was looking for financial resources that could get me through school. That is when I met different counselors and mentors who were a great help to me. I had taken my culture for granted. I don't think they were wrong for bringing me over to a different country where I couldn't apply or go to college. I felt like an outcast. Now I feel different. … It is about a conviction, and it's about your values. Of course, your culture does play a major role in your decision making. Culture for me was the dividing line between the known and the unknown. For the unknown, not knowing I was an undocumented student. Revealing and knowing that maybe it pushed me to seek other boundaries, educationally speaking. I could not have made it, if I hadn't woken up one day and realized my culture and knowing who I was as a person.

Edgar shared his awakening to the importance of the Hispanic culture in his life:

> At 16, I went to my first college class. I had a philosophy professor who was Latino, and he would make statements about our culture. One of the assignments was to talk about your culture. In this essay I wrote what everyone was saying. No one needed to differentiate yourself. At the end of class, he pulled me aside and said, "I read your essay. It was very well written essay. However, I just want you to think about what it means that you don't have a culture. You should really expand your horizon on the idea of culture." … it was coming to me that culture does have a very unique purpose. A very unique purpose that culture serves is to enlighten the people around you. … In that sense I had a 180° turnaround in my cultural view. The greatest cultural value that I possess is probably persistence.

Steven recognized that he had unconsciously adopted a "can do" mentality from his Hispanic upbringing. He didn't necessarily feel it was always the best approach, but it did shape his ability to conquer challenges. He said it became who he was. He valued opportunities:

> Another thing I just wanted to throw out there. when someone I would me "hey, can you do this?" And I knew it was too much, I would automatically just say yes anyway. I was scared to say no because I didn't want to lose an opportunity. I didn't want anyone to think I was weak, and I couldn't do it. I knew with other Hispanic workers I have watched and asked them, "Can you do this?" and they will say "Yes." "Can you work? I notice you're limping." They will always say, "No, I can go to work." I think that is something I inherited, not wanting to say no.

Esther didn't question her Hispanic identity while she was young but embraced it more later as an adult when it was questioned by others. She decided that she was, indeed, Hispanic and would integrate the culture into her academic career. She recalled of her cultural identity:

> But, I had always taken it for granted, I didn't think about growing up and going out on my own that things like how light skinned I was, or if I had lived in Mexico or not, or if I had spoken Spanish or learned, or how I spoke Spanish was going to factor into it, and it did. It ended up being one of those things.

I am a persistent/hard worker. The most common self-described characteristic shared by the participants was persistence. They thought that this was who they were. Some attributed this to their family cultural values. Delia said "I think that that influence of everybody's roles (in my family) was huge in contributing to my persistence." She added:

> Persistence is the number one trait and that's just who I am as a person. I am very persistent. … The other trait that I think I have is I work really hard. Sometimes I would stay up all night getting a project done.

Edgar commented "The cultural value that I possess is probably persistence." He explained "I am very independent in what I do. I tend to be very analytical and introverted in my thinking. The other trait that I possess is *that* I want to finish. I persevere." Lisa said "I feel like one of the things that has been infused in me and my parents from the culture is determination." Lisa added:

> I feel like every generation, my grandparents, my parents, even with their limited education they were hard-working. They were very determined people. I feel like those kinds of words and thinking have transferred to me, related to my studies. Being persistent and being determined to get this done and to see it through. I think it just goes back to being determined and finish something that I started. ... I think that finishing the program that I have started is really important to me. I think the determination and work ethics that I got from my parents come from my family.

Steven shared the same outlook “It took me several years, but I think that persistence, the hard work ethic, seeing my parents, struggle… I made up my mind.” He said family taught him this:

> Working side jobs with my dad. … He had a full-time job and did gardening on the side. I think all of that work ethic and constant drive really helped with my education. I think that had a lot to do with my success in college. That's all I know how to do is work. Get the job done. I know Hispanics, construction workers, farm workers have that grit to just get it done whatever it takes. It doesn't matter if the body breaks down, you just have to keep going and keep working. I think that has a lot to do with it. Putting my very best effort. That was the thing.

John thought that his greatest inward trait which helped him finish his degrees was persistence. He learned this through the journey of struggle in his life:

> I would say persistence. I think I have developed that throughout years of being disciplined. Like I said, I grew up and learned to be persistent after coming through everything. It’s kind of comparative. I just wanted to do better.

Maria attributed her persistence to her cultural upbringing. She shared:

> Part of our Mexican culture is that we value hard work, dedication, exceeding in all we do. High achieving. Using your time wisely. Just learning about the environment and caring for it. Family. We value family. You want to do best for your family and know when it succeeds for your family. So that played a part in it in just making your family proud of accomplishing something.

Esther shared that through all of her struggles, her health, her divorce, her lack of finances, she just leaned on persistence to get her through her programs:

> So, I just kept persevering personally … because I felt that was one of my means of success for long term employment over the course of my life versus stopping *and* making money doing something that might plug a hole, but would not make me successful in the long term.

Alicia simply described her persistence as being part of her nature. She said "I know that I'm very strong-willed. I would want to be able to tell my daughter, there is no excuse, I did it when you were one, two, and three years old." She went on to say "I am very persistent. I knew I wanted a career and I knew I wanted to be a teacher. I just didn't stop."

I am self-motivated. Self-motivation was the second most common theme related to how Hispanic online students persisted to degree completion. This was followed by being organized. Armando thought that the desire to better himself served as an intrinsic motivation:

> I think that it would be the desire to better myself. To not limit what I feel with the direction I need to go to where I need to end up being. Motivation. Having a motivation to succeed. Because of the way I was raised, I didn't have that early on in life. But after my conversion, as I said, I was about 19 years old, my life changed, and I became motivated. Motivated to become everything I can become.

Jose thought that motivation was about "Not procrastinating, getting down to business. Just getting after it." Steven explained that it was essential to his success at school and on his current well-paying job. He informed:

> Because you are not in the classroom setting, you have to do a lot of the legwork, more research. … I think being self-motivated. Even the company I'm with now, my boss really doesn't have to tell me what to do. I pretty much know what is expected of me. I don't wait for anybody asking me to do something, I just do it.

Maria thought the same way about herself. She has accomplished so much because "I am a person that is a go getter. I thrive on busyness and learning." She explained how she attacked her studies "So, every class I felt was something that I wanted to do, to learn, and I wanted to know *more* so that I could help people." She perceived that these personal traits were what has made her a success "Just being able to show the success to the family. Lots of energy. Lots of charisma. Just enjoying life. Trying to be positive. Determination."

Delia explained that being organized is a trait that helped her in her studies "The other thing is I'm very organized in keeping everything. I needed to do this at keeping timelines, keeping a binder of just papers of things that needed to be printed." Steven added "I am also goal driven. I like to get certifications. I ran a marathon a few years ago. I just like to have accomplishments."

Bernardo thought that humility, integrity, and self-worth were values that guided him to achieving success in finishing three master's degree programs. He said it's important to:

> Have humility, like being on a mission, to know who you are. Acknowledging those kind of family values like persistence, self-worth, and identity. Humility, that you do the right thing when no one is watching and that you have integrity, respect for culture and people. I feel like I have a sense of integrity, responsibility, leadership, and self-confidence. Also, being culturally aware and open-minded helped me a lot. That was definitely something that helped me. Self-confidence, authenticity, a sense of responsibility, confidence, self-worth, a sense of identity, and humility.

Exceptional Hispanic students. A theme that emerged as I recorded and transcribed the documents these participants shared with me was that they were all exceptional students. Most, if not all, were highly intelligent and academically oriented. Their responses demonstrated that

these students were aware that they possessed special gifts that have allowed them to overcome obstacles and succeed in education. Here are some of their statements about this area:

Bernardo recalled that "In third grade we were already learning about advanced math. It wasn't challenging to me, because it was my native language." Bernardo, it ends up, was a very gifted student. How gifted was he? Well, he elaborated:

> I took math and English with straight A's, so I was able to skip seventh grade and start in eighth grade in the fall. I graduated from eighth grade with honors. I went to eighth through twelfth in Memphis at a public institution. This wasn't a challenge academically. I felt like I was very prepared. From my tenth to my twelfth grade, I took AP classes (honors classes) so I always had a very rigorous schedule. I focused mostly on science, math, English, and history. I was able to exceed in those subjects. I ended up being the valedictorian of my high school.

Delia related in her journal entry "Education came very easy to me at a young age." She also recounted that:

> I did very well in school. I got a lot of help from my brothers and sisters when there *were* things that I did not know. For the most part, I was involved in and *a part of* every club, in … every activity. I was a straight "A" student. I was Valedictorian when I graduated from eighth grade.

Edgar was a very gifted student too. He matter-of-factly mentioned "I graduated early at the age of 16. At 16 I went to my first college class." Steven recalled that "I didn't do really well in high school. I was lackadaisical with it." However, once he was challenged in college, he began to excel. He continued "As soon as I started going to college, I started picking it up. … I actually did really well. I graduated … Magna Cum Laude."

Esther commented “After graduating from high school at 15 years old, I went to community college. I received an associate degree at age 17.”

“I am successful because of others.” Social, cultural, and family support. The participants expressed strong understanding that their success was partly influence by certain individuals or groups. Heading the list of these influences were family members, religious leaders, educators, counselors, social groups, cultural supports, and co-workers.

Relatives who finished college. Some of the participants had relatives who had completed a degree. This was a direct positive influence and convinced them that they could finish a degree also. Not only did it inspire them, but some of these relatives who had graduated helped the participants navigate the college/university experience. Alicia stated:

> I felt my family was incredibly supportive of my college education. My father knew what hard work it was to complete a college education and understood that with my heavy workload, I would need a lot of support.

Steven added “My older sister, that is three and a half years older than me, got her degree in Psychology. I remember some of my cousins finished their degrees.” He continued naming others “*Chuckie*, He is my cousin. He got his degree as well. So, I did see several of my family members getting their degrees.” He related how it inspired him “It pumped me up. If they can do it, I can do it. That helped pave the way as well.” His wife’s mother also inspired him:

> Other individuals like my mother in law who is a college professor. I knew I was going to make her happy as well. Both of her children did not go to college. So that was a really motivating factor for myself.

John shared his story and explained "One of my uncles has been a big support since high school. He had already been through his bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs. He was a big help in helping me choose what courses and what degree *to enroll in*."

Family support (most students). Most of the participants reported that their success was influenced by family support. Alicia stated simply "I was able to persist until I graduated because of the support from my loving family." She explained:

> My father and my stepmother would take care of my daughter while I continued to do my homework at night. After school they would pick her up from daycare and give me that extra hour too. Every now and then my dad would say, "I will buy your books this semester" or he would give me $100 to go towards my books. My father has always been incredibly helpful. He just knows the ins and outs of financial aid and applications.

Bernardo also related that his family was very integral to his academic success:

> My father, my mother, my brother, my sister, they were all big supporters. They allowed me to express myself freely by taking classes, working extra hours, by helping me pay for school. By helping me pay for a book or paying for a clinical site. They were always there. They respected my decision, as long as I prayed about it and I felt comfortable with it, and I was confident with it, go for it. Family was a big, big support. Financially as well. And spiritually as well. That was extremely helpful.

Although there was some lack of support in Delia's family because of gender role ideas, she still reported that there was help. She reported "Any family member that took care of my son for me while I was in school was a huge blessing. I couldn't do it with a two-year old."

Armando's wife was his biggest help. He said:

> Ultimately, my wife. … She supported me on the whole process. She never complained. .... She understood that it was a period of time and she made it easy for me. Just the blessing of having a good wife was the biggest support I had."

Edgar's parents encouraged him to get a degree. He recounted that "My mother would say 'education is a great equalizer and that it will sweep away any kind of poverty.'"

Jose's story was somewhat different. After joining the military, there was somewhat of a disconnect. He commented about his getting an education "My real blood family, they didn't even know. When I got in the Marine Corps and I left, and I just had my own life." But he later clarified that they did want him to succeed. He said "Yes, my family did want me to make something out of myself and get a degree."

Steven explained how his family supported his education. He related that "They have always encouraged me to do better than they did. At the same time, my sister and I both knew that if we wanted to go to college that was totally up to us. They didn't have the means to pay for it."

John's uncle was a great support (as mentioned earlier). But most of his immediate family was not. He explained "I did not have support from my immediate family because they were not in my life at the time. A lot of my support came from either distant family or friends from school." He clarified that his uncle's support was essential to his success:

> I would first and foremost, my Uncle. He has been there and has been like a father to me. I lost my father at 11. … And also, my brother just being "my brother" *and* going through it all with me.

Maria had to persist to degree completion while working full-time and having four young adult children in the house. She had the support of her whole Hispanic family. She said:

> My immediate family, my children, my spouse, my parents, my siblings were an amazing support. My sister in law because she would offer to take care of the children while I studied. … my husband and I did most of our master's program together. We would share the homework. We would encourage each other. We would talk about the lessons. We were able to help each other, because we were both doing the same courses. And my children. There were times I didn't understand what the professor was saying in the lesson. I would have to listen to it over and over and over again. Especially the statistics classes. I would fall asleep. One time my son said after seven times of listening to it, he said mom wake up, wake up, listen, you got to do it mom. They were there to support me and to make sure I was on track.

Esther was working, studying, and going through a divorce while finishing her master's degree and doctoral program. She attributed some of her success to a supportive family:

> My parents have helped me, number one. I went to through a difficult divorce and separation marriage while returning back to school. All the way from my undergraduate degree until now. Without them there as a backstop, I don't think that I would have felt like I had somebody that was changing my world while also I was trying to complete programs. Second, my kids. … And my grandmother, who is Mexican was educated and also coming from a feminist Mexican background, …

And so, the theme of help from the family was expressed by every participant. Another sub-theme in the grouping of outside influences that helped these participants graduate was their religious faith and their church support.

Reliance on God for help - Christian values. Almost all, if not all, of the participants are Christians. Most of them expressed the feeling that God was a direct helper in their academic

journey. Others mentioned how their Pastor's or their church members helped support their academic pursuits. Bernardo shared "At graduation, I spoke about listening to the Word of God and how my faith and my personal conviction and being an immigrant Hispanic student was part of how I was able to go through school." He explained "I feel like my faith and my Hispanic culture and my family values are very big. I was able to incorporate Christian values and Christian faith and convictions with my education." Steven said "I relate a lot of things back to the Scripture as well, as far as reading the stories of David in Psalms where he motivated himself." He talked about how, when he was away working and studying, his faith helped him persevere. He expressed "Being away from my wife and family, I went to a good church in Texas. Having a good spiritual support system. Also, reading the Bible. I just encouraged myself." Bernardo related how his pastor was very important in encouraging his education:

> First of all, my pastor was a big support. … He always knew about my situation and whenever he found any resources for the Hispanic community or in Memphis, he really encouraged me to participate in different programs and different activities to help with the Hispanic population. My pastor's wife was also a big social supporter.

Armando's pastor was also a great influence on his educational success. His senior pastor is also an educator and holds a doctorate in that field. His pastor also has advanced degrees. Armando described his church support this way "Dr Wilson, my pastor, and his wife. They all three felt like I could do it. … So, my own church provided a motivation for myself as well. It was not just about me, but about them too." Jose also credited his pastor as the most influential person in his educational dreams:

> My pastor, Ted Erskine encourage me to do this. He said it would be great for our church for me to do this. And when I took this program it was really good for myself and a help

> for my church. … I have never met anyone who is more determined than him. … Always to finish what he started.

Maria stated that her church allowed her to interact with what she was learning. She said "The church was a big support because any time you needed to discuss a topic or ask questions, *(in her projects)* having the church to be there *proved* to be a support …"

Positive educators helped these Hispanic students. There were times when these participants needed an academic voice of encouragement or affirmation during their studies. Special teachers, professors, and mentors helped many of the participants continue on their academic journey to success. Edgar related:

> Mrs. Finley had a conference with my mother and said, "I think he is like your other son. So, let's have you practice the test. I guess it was a reclassification test. So, you could transition into English. So, Mrs. Finely gave us a test to take home and study. So, I studied with my mom for English for three months. After three months I took the test and transition into the English class.

He continued describing how that in Junior high he was surprised to receive a reward during the end of school presentations. He recalled:

> When we returned to our classroom. I and asked Mrs. Peterson why did I receive this award? She said because when I went through all your transcripts and grades, your work showed every year that you had gained a lot every year in your English. For me that was a huge confidence booster.

He continued recognizing teachers from high school and college who helped him succeed:

Mrs. Peterson, I credit her for having that holistic view without looking at everything that I did as a boy. Motivating me. Finding that, first of all, you can do it. You can go from the inner city and go to college. I had a teacher, Nora, she was instrumental to me getting into college.

Edgar recently finished his Educational Doctorate. He expressed his feeling that a specific chairperson helped him succeed. He said "… my dissertation chair is really good. … He has helped me throughout the process. …. He's trying to motivate me to finish. Lisa recognized a special instructor who helped her choose a path of study:

> Dr. Cindy Miller. She is the one that got me into counselling, which is in the field that I am in. She is a counselor. She has been my mentor. She has been the one to encourage me. She has believed in me and told me that I should pursue it. Even before I realized that it was something I wanted to do.

Esther definitely recognized some instructors and college staff who were part of her success. She named them and then said

> The third person … who is a teacher who became my friend, who watched my kids. *She* and her husband have written recommendation letters for me for jobs and academic institutions. I was told that I received my teaching stipend based off of their recommendation to the kind of person that I was. I don't think I would be where I'm at without them.

Program staff and counselors. Surprisingly, almost all of the participants reflected that counselors in their online program were integral to their success. There was a consensus that the counselors were very helpful, available, and interested in their success. Alicia said:

> But I do know that the professors were readily available by email and I have spoken to some of them in text or even phone calls. When life events occur … I did reach out and

> they were really understanding about it. They were giving me (at those times) extensions or explaining the material to me when I didn't understand it.

Bernardo related "There were definitely guidance counsellors that I knew. They knew my situation, so they were able to help." He added that "If I needed extra time to pay for my classes or extra time to complete an assignment, they were very supportive." He said of the professors "I had different workers helping me. I always felt that they (my professors) were trying to help me get to my finish line just as much as I was helping myself." He continued:

> The academic advisers played a major role because they really took the time to explain the structure of the program, the classes, the clinicals, what you needed to graduate, practicum and different information that I needed. They did more than enough to give me the research that I needed. The students that assisted them also and the alumni.

Lisa thought that her program staff provided her with excellent support. She recalled:

> There were a lot of phone calls I got from the institution that kept tract of me. Some of the advisers would call. I really wasn't expecting that because they were just going calling to make sure that I was okay or if I needed anything.

Cultural supports. Some participants reported that social group support was a factor in their success. Alicia said "I just know that my Hispanic family is very connected. They are very willing to help each other no matter what." Bernardo added "One of the cultural supports I had was 'Más que Sueños.' It translated to 'more than dreaming.' It was a Hispanic organization and we promote literacy, skills and, in education in our communities." He also thought that his church, which is a Spanish language multicultural group, was a great social support. He expressed "Another cultural support was definitely my church. We have a big melting pot of diversity from many different cultures. They were very encouraging."

Armando recounted that his Spanish speaking congregation helped support his academic program. He said "… the fact that I pastored a Spanish-speaking work, I still do, that was another social context that was helpful for me because I understand that in this area that the better I become, the better I can equip them to become."

Esther thought that Hispanic support groups were very helpful in her degree completion. When I asked if there was any Hispanic cultural support in her program, her response was:

> A hundred percent I don't think I would have been able to achieve at the program in any way without the Mathena grant. It is a grant to encourage people that are in the School of Music to make or study music outside of normative culture. … I originally was going to Cuba. They approved that but when I changed it to Kenya they approved that. I think without the ethnic musicology research grant I probably would not have been able to finish my degree. It was a cultural and ethnic sensitive grant.

While she was completing her research in Africa, she reached out to Hispanic groups in her area. She was able to feel somewhat comfortable in a foreign environment when she connected with this Hispanic cultural group network:

> I joined the Mexican Embassy and their group. It became two things to me. One, they connected me with people that were in-country doing teaching or research and that kind of thing that were Mexican academics. The other thing was that they had cool parties with food like tortillas and stuff that we can't get there (in Kenya). It made me feel like I wasn't going to go insane for doing what I was doing because I had to stay.

Social groups and networks. Social groups and networks were also contributors to the participants' academic success. Bernardo recalled "Networking was another support. Networking from Activists and from professors and working from different alumni, different

teachers." The groups connected him with different organizations in Memphis that student resources. He said "They connected me with public services and counseling. They connected me with services for the Hispanic population." He added "A big social support was actually the Hispanic population."

Jose had strong support from his military comrades. There was a strong support for education and advancement in his group. He explained "I was in the Marine Corps. We had a couple of different things (educational programs). We have what they called the Marine Corps Institute." He added that their courses could also be used for credit at regular universities "They would give you some credit towards a degree and whatever you chose. Luckily, it would be something that was required for your own personal promotion."

Esther had strong support from the expatriate missionary community in East Africa. Even though she was not in a ministry, and was there to study, she said "The missionary community in the place where I went to study in Kenya ended up being the people that helped support me in finding the resources that I needed around education for the year that I was in-country, the year and a half."

Helpful co-students. Fellow students in a program were a major support to the participants. Bernardo related "A group of friends who were also undocumented Hispanics supported me. We encouraged each other when we went through high school and college together." Delia also recalled "One or two people who completed the program before I did that helped me. Maybe, if there was a project that I needed for them to look at. If they had taken the teacher or just looking at things in different eyes."

Armando recalled "I had some friends that were in the program the year before I was, and the fact that they were doing it provided the motivation for me to also do it." Edgar and his

brother were co-students in a post graduate online degree program. They helped each other by motivation, comparing, and sometimes competing:

> With my Educational Specialist degree my brother and I have always taken the same classes. But since it was online, we would just check in with each other and ask, "Did you finish this?' We would just touch bases with each other. I would tell him I got this grade, what did you get? It was a competition between us.

Jose related a similar situation in his program journey. He remembered:

> When I was attending the ... theology school program… there was another student that was going through the exact same course. We were in the same classes 90% of the time. We would get together and talk about stuff. We would talk about why his essay got more points than mine, did. (laugh).

John explained how co-students developed supportive relationships. He said "Just throughout the courses you build relationships with other students. Group discussions, discussion boards and things like that." Their co-operation helped forge helpful camaraderie that would assist them in the program as a whole. He explained "Group presentations and group work that we did. We just stayed in contact with each other and helped each other throughout the term."

Esther explained that her study group in Africa maintained contact during her time there and helped her during her whole program experience. She added these thoughts:

> I ended up with five or six people that I knew in the country that were in the same program and we formed our own social core group and stayed in contact with each other outside of the academic … program. While I was in the program doing things we would do, like send each other papers, talking about experiences in the program I believe that that really helped.

Encouraging co-workers. Some participants received support and encouragement from their employers and co-workers. They thought that their job site support helped their academic program success. Alicia said her boss was always supportive when she needed special considerations in order to do her homework during her lunch hour or breaks. Her boss answered "Yes, you take that 45 minutes every day go do your homework. I know that that's really important to you and that you need that. You are very persistent." She said that helped her finish. Maria recalled recounted that her employer was instrumental in her educational journey:

> Before going to college, I worked a job as a paraeducator. My administrator, my principal said, "*Maria* you have so much potential, if you go to school and get your degree, I will open a classroom for you." So, that is what jump-started my journey to education.

Later, one of her employers would help support her tuition for her online master's program. She finished this program while working for the same company. Even her co-workers followed her progress through her studies. She shared:

> One of them was the support of my job. That was a big one because they helped pay for part of my school. Knowing that they were there to support me not getting in debt and offering to pay. The support of my co-workers, because they were cheering you on wanting you to succeed. They would ask you about the courses. They were wanting you to know where you were with it.

While Steven worked for a large delivery company, he was encouraged to pursue a degree program. He related how "One of the qualifications was they wanted you to have some sort of degree or they asked if I was going to college." He added "I was a supervisor part-time and they wanted to me to become a full-time supervisor . . . They were steering me towards the business degree."

All of the participants thought that outside help from individuals and groups were essential to their success. However, there was a definite theme related to decision making that appeared in the data. The participants all shared that they chose their educational path so it would fit their life needs and goals. They researched, found opportunities, and choose their own path.

"I am successful because I chose my path." Hispanic students discover – They found ways to succeed. The path these students choose included an online degree program at a fully accredited university. Many of them today, are already benefitting from higher paying employment than previous to their degree attainment. All of them have the confidence and self-worth that comes with finishing a degree program. How did they do this as Hispanic online students? They said it was because they researched, found opportunities, and choose their own educational path.

Flexibility of online study – work schedule. Hispanic online program graduates expressed the strong need for an academic pathway which would allow them to work and take care of family needs. This is one reason Bernardo chose an online program. He said "I felt like the course material online is always accessible. It helps with the balance of family and work, while pursuing an education." He said the accessibility of this platform was essential for him. He said he needed the "Flexibility. I can work and do my classes in my spare time. In the morning, at night, on the weekends." Alicia needed that variable accessibility. She recounted "I married and had a child when I was young and because of this, I had to work full time to maintain a home as well as raise a family with my husband." She explained:

> I got married and then I became pregnant, I began to work full-time. I worked at a daycare. I worked while I was pregnant, but once I had the baby that was really the big

> factor in doing online schooling. Scheduling, because of the crazy hours with the baby. So, convenience and flexibility for sure.

Delia was also raising a child. She was single and needed to care for her child. She said:

> Once I started working and I had a full-time job, (My son was two at the time), I needed something that was going to work with my schedule. I am a night owl so something that I could do between the hours of 7 PM and 2 AM *was necessary*. Something where I did not have to drive *and* where I did not have to be sitting in a seat in a classroom but that I could acquire all the information I needed at the click of a button. Where I would be able to complete my coursework at my own pace in the leisure of my home. Also, without having to find a babysitter and without having to leave my house. I needed it to fit with my schedule and it was flexible enough. I didn't care if I was losing sleep, but that I would be able to complete that through the online program.

Armando wanted to advance his ministerial training and capacities. He was very sure that the online degree platform was what allowed him to get a degree. He expressed his feelings:

> With regards to the online atmosphere, I would say the following: I would not have an MA if online education did not exist. The reason as to why I was able to take the MA program was because of the flexibility that online education provides.

He went on to describe how, after high school, he had finished a certificate program at a local college. He wanted to finish a ministerial degree program but could not because of his work obligations. He recalled:

> Before I decided to go to Bible College. This was back in 1998. Back then there was no online bible colleges. So, naturally I had to move to attend one. … After that bible college experience, I went full-fledged into ministry…. through the years the online

> colleges component began to develop. The *theology* college went completely online. They began to offer a master's degree program. Due to the fact that it was fully online, I was able to do that (enroll). If it was not for being online, I would not have joined for any other reason.

Edgar explained that the online format "gave me the flexibility to work on an independent manner. … I was used to doing things online at that point in time." He added:

> I'm more of a getting down and working on my own pace *(type of person)*. I like waking up really early because I will not sacrifice my family's *time* for my own time. So, I would always wake up at three or four in the morning. That's what gravitated me towards online. I could get up and work in the mornings, on my own time.

Lisa's story was similar. She needed the flexibility to suit her learning preferences. She said "I think flexibility is the biggest thing for me. I love the fact that I could do the class work at 3 o'clock in the morning." She added "… I am a night person and I work better at night. My brain is awake at three or four in the morning. That Is the way I have always worked. … I think it is more of convenient also for me." Jose said that:

> That was definitely one of the benefits of going through *the program*. It was flexible. That way you could work on your own ministry and still go to school. … When I was working at the church my hours needed to be flexible. There are days you get up early, days you stay up late. It was great having the flexibility when you could choose to work on your schoolwork.

Steven added his experience to the ongoing theme of flexibility. He explained:

> The reason I chose that online program was because It aligned with the BCSP certifications and then also I could still work a full-time job. To do what I needed to. I

> had a mortgage. It was flexible, I figured I could work during the day. At home Monday to Sunday I could do my schoolwork.

Steven tried to explain his financial situation and how the only way for him to finish a degree to advance his career, was to do it online. He recounted:

> This was number one *(the flexibility)* and the fact that I got to go to school full-time. This is huge for me. If I did not have that option, I don't think I would have gotten my degree. I didn't have the time and I couldn't have afforded it. I couldn't just stop working and go to college.

John added the flexibility included being free to study where you want, when you want:

> As far as the online program, the factor was that you can do it around your own schedule that had the most influence, its convenience. Not having to go to the campus as much. Setting my own schedule around my own time. Especially, if you are holding a job at the same time you are going to college. It was easier for me.

John added "I was always working and providing for myself and I found it difficult to attend a campus on a regular basis. An online program allowed me to stay home and create my own schedule."

Maria explained that her life was too busy to go to a fixed school campus and that her program became only available online. She said

> I currently work to support my church, myself, my spouse and my child. Therefore, it was a challenge to find a program which was compatible with my work schedule as all of the master's programs were online and there were no options to attend on ground.

Esther was able to finish her degree research in another country while progressing through a specialized online ethnomusicology degree program. This allowed her to continue her

quest to be a college teacher. She explained that she chose the online platform "For the flexibility of being able to study in-country (Kenya) and a course work online and the possibility of teaching online with that experience in the future." She added in her letter of advice:

> I would highly recommend this course of study to other Hispanic students as it was very beneficial to me because it allowed me to study at my own schedule and to locate my racial identity in relationship to my ethnic identity – a Hispanic American.

That Hispanic identity also, often prefers a collective study environment, which is possible online.

Collective study environment. Hispanics have been historically classified as collective learners. The participants thought that their programs promoted that. Alicia said "I feel that the online structure was supportive to the way Hispanics like to study and interact …" Bernardo commented "I feel like this program has more interaction and greater ability to concentrate. This online course offers the opportunity to be a larger part of discussions and face-to-face sessions." Armando added "… you will also have the opportunity to engage with your classmates on a weekly basis, this communication is important because you will make new friends that may be around for the rest of your life."

Lisa recalled "When I was a part of this program there were a lot of opportunities for me to be interactive in person." And John related that "I feel that the online structure was supportive to the way Hispanics like to study and interact." Finally, Esther shared "During the program I was able to establish friendships with fellow students and gained a lifelong cohort of people that were studying around the world."

Often, they are less expensive. Some participants found that online programs tended to be less expensive than programs based at brick and mortar schools. Bernardo shared:

> The reason I choose … schools in Texas, is because Texas, Colorado, and California tend to be more helpful with Hispanic studies. They combine more services for Hispanic students. So, I was able to afford the tuition, because they give me basically in-state status. … I love how the online programs don't have any difference whether you're in-state or out-of-state. That makes it a more affordable to pay.

John had the same opinion. He said "financially it just worked out with me being able to study online versus with all the extra fees and programs at the campus. It was cheaper online."

More interested and helpful counselors and teachers. Most, but not all of the graduates thought that their online school staff was more involved in their education than in regular programs. Alicia commented:

> I was able to persist until I graduated because of … the understanding of my professors when life or schoolwork became too difficult … The program, curriculum, and professors were Hispanic friendly and supportive because they understood the hardships we face (i.e. raising a family, language barriers, and busy work schedules) and were flexible whenever I needed them to be.

Delia said "I think having access to teachers who are emailing you and staying up to date with information. … I think that it was important that when it came time to registering for school and the fact that it was all done online. She also perceived that the professors were very supportive. She said "The instructors were also helpful in the organization of when assignments were due and giving encouragement through personal emails when assignments were not completed." Armando related that he thought the staff was very supportive and interested:

> I believe that all my professors were very much available. They were interested in what you had to say. They themselves, were the front line of institutional support in the

> program that I was in. … I never felt that there was any other support that I needed in the online program.

Jose added "The office staff was very on top of the game. If I needed something, it would be done very quickly. They would always send me in the right direction." He sensed that that this university was well organized and efficient. He recounted "Everybody knew what they were doing and were well trained in what they were doing. There was very little downtime to somebody figuring out how to help."

John shared that he experienced good support in his online program "I found myself in challenging situations throughout my schooling, but my teachers were very understanding and supportive at these times." He went on to describe how the staff helped him stay on schedule:

> The counselors that check in on you periodically just to make sure you're doing okay and if you need help or guidance as well. Just the communication between your professors and yourself. Emails, sometimes giving their phone number. Some of the professors didn't mind you calling them or emailing them. Responding in the same day the communication worked better.

Maria also expressed her experience with her staff was very supportive. She shared:

> Having my student advisor, in case I was struggling with anything, or I needed help with something, he was always available. He checked in on us at the beginning of each class and he would say, "are you ready for your class?" Here's what you are going to do to prepare. Then he would check in with us towards the end of the class assuring that we understood everything and that we submitted everything in time. He gave us at least a couple of weeks warning that the class was going to be over and to look at everything and

> make sure that you are on score to finish it successfully. The instructors were all helpful in explaining difficulties and providing encouragement.

Veterans can get special attention. Jose found out that some online schools give special tuition rates and attention to veterans. He chose schools that focused on his past service and gave him extra support for it. He reported "I think probably more than anything was me being a military veteran. It made me stand out above everybody and so they gave me more attention."

Some are Hispanic culture friendly. Some participants found schools that were very supportive to Hispanics. This helped them both socially and academically. They sensed that this was an aspect that proved helpful to them finishing their degree. Alicia sensed "The instructors and program were culturally sensitive to Hispanic students due to their flexibility." Lisa said "I would highly recommend the program there because it is a smaller school … There are a lot of Hispanic students that are part of this program." She added "Many of the advisers were also Hispanic. That was very helpful to me." Esther looked for a program that valued her Hispanic identity. She explained:

> I felt that it was supportive of my college education in allowing me to be whom I wanted to be. And also as a culturally sensitive student, I could put my views forth in an online discussion and it would not be as much of a personal affront as it could have been an escalated environment … but that I could actually talk to people online about where they were coming from with a logical argument and/or let them know this is where they had interacted with my culture.

She added that the university was able to help get her financial help based on her Hispanic identity:

> They were also able to offer grants to Hispanic students and that made a difference. I believe my application had attention because I was coming from an ethnic background. … I won that grant over quite a few people in my program. I think that made a difference.

Esther also recommended the program for other Hispanic students. She sensed that it fit them well:

> I would highly recommend this course of study to other Hispanic students as it was very beneficial to me because it allowed me to study at my own schedule and to locate my racial identity in relationship to my ethnic identity – a Hispanic American.

Some participants expressed that online learning just fit the way they liked to study much better than the traditional classroom teacher/student discourse.

Online learning allows you to concentrate more. There are less distractions. Some graduates expressed their feelings that the online format allowed them to learn more efficiently. Bernardo thought "You can concentrate better online in doing your reports due to the lack of classroom activities." Edgar added "I really don't appreciate going to the classrooms and hearing lectures. I really thrive in just learning the material from reading it."

You have more control of your own learning and pace. The ability to take control of your learning pace and mode of instruction was instrumental to the participants' success. Alicia said "I feel like you learn so much more through the online format because you are teaching yourself. You have to understand it and so much more depth then if you are just in the classroom observing." She sensed that it was a much more "proactive more than passive" learning experience.

Bernardo explained his feelings about online education when he commented, "I feel like you will learn more in this program than a traditional on ground program. You will have full

control of your own learning. You can work accelerated." Delia reported no problems studying online. She said "I didn't have any issues completing coursework. Everyone worked at their own pace on their own schedule." Armando commented that the online platform has some advantages because you can go back over the recorded lessons or videos. He explained:

> … and in some ways it is an added benefit. For instance, the lecture for the classes are recorded, which is a strength because it affords you the opportunity to take meticulous notes by stopping the lecture and repeating certain parts that you need to replay.

Edgar sensed that that it just worked better for his personality and work approach. He said:

> I have always been a loner type. I work more independent. Online is more beneficial to me. I tend to avoid group projects. I'm not saying it is better. I know that communal sense of learning is actually better. That is what's being promoted nowadays an education.

Lisa pointed out that you can often choose the pace you study at. She said "They are flexible. They have eight week-classes and also five-week classes that you can take."

Learning at your own pace can help L1 Spanish speakers. Maria pointed out that online classes can help L1 Spanish speakers because you can go back over the lessons and assignments prior to turning them in:

> Attending online as a Spanish speaker was easier due to the fact that the online library was accessible. The school made it easy to submit papers for review prior to submission. I enjoyed reading through the lectures rather than listen in person as I could read and re-read the content making it easier to comprehend.

See further explained that the technology used in most online programs helped her to put together better assignments and papers. She said "Since Spanish being your first language and

sometimes struggling with the grammar and punctuation. Being able to turn my documents into get reviewed, before I submitted them was really, really helpful."

Online education gives responsibility, independence, and decision making to the student. Some graduates sensed that that their experience enhanced their own self-discipline and responsibility. Alicia recalled "As my years of study went by, I became very self-disciplined … I highly recommend studying and graduating from an online program. It helped me expand my self-discipline and knowledge to the career I have today." Bernardo added "I love the skills that you learn such as, being independent, you develop great critical thinking skills, and reasoning skills. You develop a lot of decision-making on your own." Besides increasing your control and decision-making, online education can enhance your technical skills.

Advance technical skills. The very environment of online learning requires developing skills in navigating various portals, down-loading, uploading, online document editing, and many more technical skills which are valuable in our society. Some participants expressed this benefit in choosing this type of education. Bernardo said "I also recommend this online program as it will help you increase your technical skills. This program even offers tutoring. This program included creating documents, incorporating audio and video materials, training sessions, and research papers."

John and Maria commented that learning to research through their universities online library was a big benefit to their program success. Maria explained:

> Having the online library. I wouldn't have to go in and check out a book. I would just browse through the digital library and pull out whatever I needed. For me the online lab was great. Being able to submit my online documents.

Online learning can advance networking in your area of studies. Three participants brought out the fact that online learning can unite and connect students with resources and people who will further your education. Bernardo sensed that that online education can "make you an advocate in your community. It has a lot of resources and will connect you to the other people."

Maria added "During the program I was able to establish relationships and professional contacts with fellow students." Esther also stated "During the program I was able to establish friendships with fellow students and gained a lifelong cohort of people that were studying around the world."

Online learning can provide easier access to very specific career fields. Certain career fields have specific online degree programs that are often difficult to find except at certain land-based university programs. Steven, Maria, Esther, Jose, and Armando found online programs that would address very specific career paths. Maria explained how she found an online program that would advance her career in a specific field but wasn't available at a land-based campus at that time. She related:

> I researched a couple of schools. I couldn't really find any programs that fit my schedule with work. I reached out to Grand Canyon University and they put me on a waiting list for over a year. They couldn't find enough students to attend on the ground classes. So, I gave up and started to do it online. They said most working people don't want to come to the campus, they want to do it online. Convenience was the answer.

Steven searched for a program that was specific to industrial safety inspections, which was his career field. He shared how he found an online program that would work for him:

> Some of the colleges at the time didn't align and wouldn't be able to apply to your education for the qualification for the exams for the national certifications. Someone told me that at Columbia Southern University has a great program. They align with the board of board-certified safety professionals. So, I transferred my credits over to there. I ended up completing my Bachelor of Science degree.

You can learn without the limits of geography or culture. Several participants emphasized that online programs provide freedom from geographic educational limitations. They expressed that they were helped to succeed in part because on being free from needing to travel to a school several times a week. Lisa explained this benefit and said:

> Because I didn't have to drive to school. … I also don't have to waste gas going somewhere. I can do it remotely. I can take a vacation to San Francisco and take my computer with me to be in class….

Jose wrote in his letter of advice:

> Gone are the days of driving to class, buying parking passes and reading from actual books. … if your schedule is tight; … or you're just not ready to leave home, there are several online learning programs available for you…

Surprisingly, some participants said that online programs helped them to be free from cultural limitations in their area or in localized regions. Armando was from a very financially limited and culturally myopic background. He recalled "This program allowed me to explore a world that I never knew, much less understood. It is a unique and specialized program that is tailor made … and that open*s* your eyes to the real world of greatness."

Esther added a perspective of feeling that in the online format she was able to connect, culturally, with people that were like her. She explained:

> I feel that the online format was also supportive, because my family is also a cultural value for me. I could not realize this until I had been in a student group with other women that also had children where things were being handled very separately, like got a job.

She added later:

> I really enjoyed … the diversity of experiences. I didn't have to go to the same classroom with the same people. I was experiencing the information while I was travelling or doing something else that sort of applied to my real-world experience.

The ability to be free from being at a campus location gave Esther the ability to finish her program while in Africa and learn about new cultures while still embracing her own. She said:

> I was able to travel and take in culture then translate that back while not being required to cartographically show up to a location point which then impacted my immersiveness. So, for instance, my university gave me a grant to go out of the country and to study in-country. Doing that, I connected with the Mexican embassy in Kenya and was able to go to events there that were culturally supportive of me being Hispanic. That experience would not have happened if I was located on a map. I would've had to travel back into the environment to report, to talk, to think, and I would have lost my awareness to being a Hispanic student in-country the way I was afforded to do so by an online program.

"I can show Hispanics how." Hispanic students share. How other Hispanics can succeed. Although other non-Hispanic students may feel that they share many of these experiences (in persisting to degree completion), this study presented the distinct experiences of Latinos who have been successful in a non-Latino dominated culture and educational system. Their voice is unique and powerful. Their voices focused around three areas in how to be successful in the online format: how to choose the right program, how to overcome the

challenges of the online environment, and how universities could modify their programs to better suit Hispanic students.

How to choose the right program. Hispanic participants shared that they would advise Latino students to seek a program that is of high quality, Hispanic friendly, and supportive culturally and financially.

Accreditation. Participants sensed that that accreditation was essential in a good program. Bernardo said "They need to look for a program that is accredited. To me a regional accreditation is important to support to your degree." He added "I would advise the student to look at regionally accredited institutions. You will need accreditation in the future to apply for practical hours. It is important to do the research and look for schools that are accredited."

Know what program is best for your future. Steven recommended that students know a career or academic direction they want to take. Then, they can choose a program that fits. He said "… know what you want to do. I have that already figured out. For me, it worked. I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I didn't waste any time. I just went after the field that I wanted to pursue online."

Look for financial and academic resources. Maria commented that academic resources for Hispanics are available. The student needs to see what universities offer these supports. For Hispanics, this can be challenging. Maria explained:

> When this is not your culture and not where you were raised. Like in my hometown, it is an indigenous town with no libraries, one school, no universities. So, when you come out of that and you come to the U.S. and all of a sudden there are all of these programs. Although we would have been paid for your college or student loans, financial aid. Programs that will help you pay for books. Programs that will help you pay for childcare.

Maria further commented that Hispanic students need to spend time finding out what programs are available before choosing a school. This will help the Hispanic student make a better decision. She clarified:

> Not knowing that they are out there and that makes it a little bit harder because you don't know that those resources exist. Sometimes you just learned the hard way. The not knowing of how the student loans work. How in the long run you could end up paying a lot more money with interest and when you first attend school, they kind of guide you into whatever they are doing for everyone. You are not making an informed decision … Make sure that you are active utilizing resources and be informed of the programs.

Look for a Hispanic advisor. Esther suggested that Hispanic students look for Hispanic advisors. As other students recounted earlier, they felt more confident with advisors who understood where they were coming from, their culture, their challenges. Esther said:

> I would immediately look for a Hispanic adviser. I would tell this to any student that walks in, that it seems like a very biased thing to do, but if you are coming from a cultural background, look for someone who is from your family's culture that has made it and is currently employed.

Look for a Hispanic friendly school. Bernardo referred to the fact that some universities are already Hispanic Serving Institutions "schools that are serving Hispanic students." These might make a good choice for a Hispanic student. He advised to investigate the school, whatever type it is, and see how they treat Hispanics. Bernardo said he would advise "… them to reach out to different counsellors, advisers, alumni or different organization. Talk to them and see how the school treats students." He explained that this is necessary because "We are talking about students with different cultures ... Are there scholarships with special talents, or special needs?"

How to overcome the challenges of the online environment. The participants acknowledged that there were challenges in the online platform. However, they shared how they overcome these challenges and completed their degree. They explained how a Hispanic student could follow in their steps and successfully persist until degree completion. One variable which was recognized by participants was that the difficulties in completing an online degree could depend on the acculturation of the Hispanic student to the culture of the United States.

The degree of challenge depends on the acculturation of the student. Armando and Edgar pointed out that acculturation could be a factor in how difficult an online degree might be for a Hispanic student. Armando observed:

> I think that is dependent on the student. For instance, I was raised here in America. You have two Hispanic students. 19 years old at this time. One was raised in the United States and the other one was raised in Mexico, but came over to the United States at 14 or 15 years of age and was taught English in Spanish, and both are Hispanic. When it comes to that question, the biggest challenge that first-generation Hispanics students would have, I believe … would depend if you were raised in Mexico or the United States. Raised here in the United States they have an advantage of being more tech savvy. Because of that, the person raised in the United States would be more prepared for online environment than someone that came from a third world country that didn't have computer training.

Edgar, who was a first-generation Hispanic student, sensed that it might be better for such students to take a year of college at a regular land-based university first, and then enroll online. He explained:

> If you're a first-generation Hispanic student, I would not recommend having your first college as being an online degree. I think you need to have that one-on-one contact with a

> person. I think with the first degree you need to be on campus. There are several different kinds of tutors that can help you in any way. In your language, with your writing, with your math. So, with the first (Hispanic college student) learners, I would not take the online program.

He added that first-generation Hispanics might benefit from having better access to on-campus Hispanic support. He elaborated:

> I would recommend going to a physical university. This is because these types of campuses have their own student support on the school grounds, which can help you find the academic help you need more easily.

The challenge of procrastinating. Participants reminded me that when the schedule is up to the student, procrastination can become a major problem. Alicia recalled "A lot of it at first was managing my time. In my sophomore year I was procrastinating." Armando said he would advise students "… to make sure that you don't allow the flexibility of the online environment to procrastinate. Procrastination. Discipline." Armando added "Being that online is flexible, you do not want to let it escape you by the upfront convenience of procrastination." He said that he had to make time for schoolwork. He recommended "Look at your life, and schedule daily schoolwork; this is something that made me successful in completing my graduate degree program."

Although his statement could be misunderstood, Jose sensed that Hispanic students needed to be aware of a cultural tendency to procrastinate. He said "I have noticed with Hispanics, if you give them the opportunity to not do something right now, they tend to procrastinate until it is too late. Don't put off anything. You have to work on it right now."

Steven understood that many are reluctant to study online because they feel they don't have the discipline necessary. He said "They would say, 'You are in an online degree program? I am just not disciplined or self-motivated.' Because you are not in the classroom setting, you have to do a lot of the legwork, more research." Esther advised "If you are an incoming student from a brick and mortar institution, the programs require a measure of self-discipline." This led to another sub-theme; organizing your time or time management.

Organizing your time. Time management was a major theme in how participants were able to finish an online degree. They noted that some classes required more time to learn than others. Alicia noted:

> Another challenge was, when I did get to the harder classes, teaching myself that difficult material and not giving myself enough time to even learn that difficult material or be able to reach out to anybody to help me with that. So, a lot of it was managing my time.

Bernardo said the biggest challenge can be "Learning how to organize your time. Another thing I was taking too many classes on the graduate level at the same time. Not being able enough to spend quality time on each class."

Delia explained that a student has to look at their schedule and find some time to study. She said "When you have classes at nighttime, and you have things on your own schedule, you know you just have to juggle and make things work."

John was very honest about his adapting to the online format. He recalled:

> The biggest challenge to me was the first semester just finding discipline. It was something new, priorities, setting the schedule. I guess just discipline, finding the time to just sit down and just do as much as you can. Time management.

He continued "I would recommend that they set a schedule and stick with it throughout the semester in order to have a successful semester and not get too overwhelmed."

Bernardo advised "You need to know and be determined yourself because online courses require a lot of work." He said that making time to study was essential "You have to be organized when it comes to your time. …You have to make quality time to do your schoolwork, read, go over assignments." Armando agreed with this outlook. He said:

> Look for a good healthy schedule where *you* can devote their time to their online classes. The coursework I went through, the lectures were all recorded. … and you have to be there and log in at a certain time. … schedule certain periods of time in a day, or evening, or afternoon where they can hit the books. Where they can get it done. … Put it all together and do your best create your own educational format that works where you can focus and at the same time you don't feel other stuff.

Edgar liked to get up very early and study. He suggested "… that you wake early in the morning to do your coursework. The format offered in this program will give you the flexibility to do your work when you need to …". John suggested to "Make sure you set apart time for the schoolwork. Set a schedule." He said it was much different than studying at a land-based program:

> When you have a class on campus it may be at a set time like three-and-a-half-hour class or four hours, so you already have your schedule for when you need to turn things in. Online is not as structured. You have to create that structure for yourself.

Self-discipline and motivation. Self-discipline and motivation were also mentioned as essential traits in finishing an online degree program. Included in this motivation is a sense of perseverance. Bernardo simply said that in order to succeed "You have to be persevering."

Delia added:

> I would simply say to those that are Hispanic and that are looking at the online education, jump into it, don't be afraid of it, because this opportunity was not there for their parents. So, let's take advantage of the opportunities. Whatever your cultural family experience is, don't allow that to influence you in a negative way, use it and allow it to turn pressure in a positive way so that you don't repeat the cycle.

Edgar advised the Hispanic student to be motivated to "Study, be very independent. If you need to have that social support, then you have to go out and look for it." John said "Be organized and a lot of preparation, discipline." The online format itself requires acclimation.

Getting used to the online format. Several students commented that students need to get used to how the online learning environment works. There is a difference between in-person face-to-face instruction and internet-based learning. Students also have to navigate the online platform including using a student portal. Armando recounted "I was so used to being face-to-face contact with the students and the professor in a classroom. In a classroom setting the lecturer is there, you are able to ask questions." This was a challenge for him "For me, right up front, it was just getting used to the online format."

Lisa sensed that not being able to see and interact with the teacher left her wondering what they were really wanting to communicate. She said students need to expect this:

> I think the fact that you are not in class. You don't really know people. One of the challenges for me, when I have to do an assignment, is to understand what the teachers like. I feel that because not personally seeing the teacher, I cannot read their personality. I cannot read their facial expressions. I am just going to them through their email, so I cannot read them as well.

Jose added “Online learning is super great because you have the flexibility. You can do whatever you want to do. The downside is you don't have anybody physically in front of you wanting to help you.” The absence of face-to-face interaction, then, led to the subtheme of the need to be proactive in the degree program. The participants had to get information and answers through all available means.

Be proactive. Jose and Maria mentioned that the online format requires students to push themselves and find what they need to achieve success. Jose observed “You have to push yourself. Hispanics also tend to not ask for help.” He added “There are so many online assistance and programs, tutors, YouTube and Google, answer any questions you need today. So, if you need an answer, ask for help.” Maria advised the potential Hispanic student to:

> use all of the tools the school has available. Like I said, if they have a learning lab, taking advantage of the learning lab. Go and ask for help because they're there to help you succeed. Also, looking at is the school to see if they offer any partnerships, any peer mentors, or any student groups that might be able to help support you. Being proactive and not passive.

Expect a serious workload. Four participants sensed that knowing that online education (at least their programs) often required a serious workload. If a student realizes this, they will be prepared to be successful. Alicia shared “The number one thing that I would advise a Hispanic student to anticipate is the workload. At the beginning, I didn't think you worked a lot.” She added that the effort was rewarding “… It takes a lot of work, but at the end of the day it's completely worth it.” Edgar also counselled “Be advised that the assignments are rigorous and are sometimes weighted pretty heavily. So, you must be self-motivated and disciplined to do well.”

Steven explained “It's going to be quicker pace than the classrooms. You have to do a lot of research also, and you have to do a lot of heavy lifting. You also do a lot of writing.” And John added “I wouldn't try to attack it too hard. That was another thing for me. I tried to do three classes and it was a shock, an eye-opener, of how much time you need for each class.” Taking too many classes at once was difficult in his first semester. He recalled:

> So, it was kind of stressful the first semester in my online program. It was very stressful trying to stay on top of it. Try not to fall behind but don't let it stress you out. You have to complete the course and the term. Just keep on going.

Understanding the expectations and the schedule. Delia remembered that an important aspect of completing your courses successfully was to “Familiarize yourself with whatever online portal online access … you will be using. Take the time to really read the syllabus.” Understanding how online learning works includes expecting to wait for electronic responses.

Corresponding electronically. Communication in an online program is mostly through school email or the school portal. Responses are usually not immediate. Though a majority of the students reported being happy with staff response times, it can be a challenge to get answers when you want them quickly. Esther had problems with some staff in this area:

> The challenge was getting back responses from instructors and timely responses. Because although deadlines were listed, sometimes I felt like there wasn't enough time built in between the assignment being released and the assignment being turned in to get enough feedback from instructors to be able to complete the assignment … One of the courses I actually dropped, because I couldn’t get the instructor to respond back.

She added “I would have liked to have had more interaction with instructors.” The answer was sometimes to reach out to other staff and attempt to call the department.

You must be diligent with student interaction. Student interaction is a large part of online learning in today's academic environment. Curriculum design requires a portion of student discussion boards and collaborative projects. Grades are usually somewhat based on one's participation in these areas. Participants shared that they had to be proactive in keeping up with student interaction.

Armando spoke of this subject with little emotion "The student interaction, though not the same as on a physical campus, was sufficient enough in the program with weekly opportunities to interact online in the coursework." Evidently it wasn't a problem for him. On the other hand, Edgar didn't feel that student interaction was sufficient. He said:

> Other than that, I think there is very little support online. When I went to one of my dissertation seminars in Virginia, they had a discussion about this in class. Research has shown in online classes if you have a communal board meeting you do much better.

Steven shared that there were times he felt alone in his program. He related "There were times that I felt isolated and didn't have any support around me." He didn't feel the support from fellow students. He continued "There were no other students around saying 'hey we are going through this too.' There were message boards, but I didn't really feel comfortable emailing. I felt kind of isolated and alone."

Maria didn't feel isolated but felt frustrated at times with the group projects. Some members didn't participate and do their part. She recalled:

> One of the challenges I experienced was when I was working on a group project and being the "A" type person like I am, you can be a little controlling, and you want to have everybody finished the part when it is convenient for you. But, not everybody does that. So, that was kind of hard waiting for people to respond to emails.

Another subtheme related to online interaction is technology issues. If you can't connect, you can't do your work or communicate.

Technology issues. Online programs involve technology. Computer functionality, compatibility, and internet access issues can be challenging. These issues can cause frustration to the student who depends on technology to advance in their degree program. Three participants commented on this area. Delia had taken a new program that was completely online. There were some kinks to work out. She recounted her experience:

The program in this area was new. The teachers that they hired during that time were still learning how to use the systems. They didn't really know how to manage it right to go online. They would try to upload things to portals, with problems. I think that one of the challenges was just navigating the system. It was not user-friendly.

John said this might be a concern for some students "Maybe some technology issues, depending on how savvy they are." Esther, who was struggling financially to have a modern computer and internet access at home, did have technology issues. She said "I have watched students coming and they don't have the technology and I have been in this position. I haven't had the technology or the means to be the perfect college student."

Fast pace of many classes. Many online programs offer accelerated classes. Participants who took these classes sensed that people needed to be aware of the load and challenge of keeping up with the schedule in these types of programs. Bernardo commented "It was a major challenge trying to see how the teachers organized their syllabus. … I would wish I had more days to complete a class. The fast-paced kind of got to me." Lisa added "I think that online programs are more time-consuming. A lot of the classes I have taken are the eight-week classes which are accelerated." Steven remembered:

> There were times that I had a lot on my plate with work and taking three classes a semester which was pretty tough. I did this because I wanted to get it done quicker. I overloaded myself. I think working a full-time job and taking too many classes was very challenging to me being away from my family.

Language difficulties. Alicia, Steven, John, and Maria all commented that language difficulties may affect first-generation Hispanics if they aren't fully comfortable with advanced English instruction. Alicia said "I feel like a big one challenge is language …" John said "I think the biggest challenge would be language and communication." Steven commented that he felt like English skills could be daunting for some Hispanic students (depending on acculturation). He said "… the English and writing. I feel like with a lot of Hispanics it can be a complex (feeling, or intricate) that is a big hurdle to get over…"

The final challenge expressed by the participants, was that Hispanic parents may not understand how online education works and how much time it requires.

Your family may not understand your commitment. This study described, in the literature review, that Hispanic families may not place a high priority on higher education. There are various aforementioned reasons for this. Some participants experienced this yet persevered to degree completion. They recommended that the new Hispanic student try to explain their commitment along with its benefits and how it will affect their interaction with the family.

Lisa suggested this approach for new Hispanic online students:

> I would let them know that there are going to be challenges with the family that they might not always understand. I would tell them to anticipate the amount of work and the amount of time that it will take. Do not think that it will be so easy. Remind them that this will take a big chunk of your time. Think, anticipate, realize that if you are going to

> school the education has to come first. If people don't understand, just do it anyway because it's worth it.

Esther had similar thought on preparing your family for the sacrifice in time and attention that the program would require:

> The second thing is to talk to your family about why an education is important to you to make sure that they understand that this is something that benefits you in the long term because they are going to avoid see a lot of the short term values, or things that may violate cultural values for them. Is going to be important to talk to them about as much as you know. As a matter of fact I would talk to you the person's family so that they understand when I need to buy a computer or when I need a printer at home or when I know you need to go the weekend retreat, or if I need to spend time writing instead of being with the family. This needs to be talked about ahead of time because when it comes up there can be a lot of problems for a family. People that are coming from a background that are not used to a Eurocentrocism in the American educational system.

How universities could modify their programs to better suit Hispanic students. The participants were asked to share how they perceived their online program could have been improved. They shared some advice on 11 different potential improvements.

Update material. Some participants commented that their classes needed to be updated. Bernardo said "The research could be more up-to-date on the classes. Information. A lot of times online schools do not keep up with the most up-to-date research information." He added that there are areas which need to be constantly upgraded "Examples can be in education, scientific discoveries, etc. Maybe allowing students to be updated on what is going on." He added "Online

classes must offer programs that are updated with the latest technology, or advanced math, education, equipment, and more recent research."

Delia observed that online some programs could have more variety and creativity. She expressed her ideas this way:

> I would probably do away with the fact that every week it is the same structure of how things are done with all these cookie-cutter components. You have to look at the PowerPoint, do the activities, a paper to write. There are other ways to get teachers and people involved in the educational piece rather than just doing what I think they should know.

Provide more lecture options. Participants suggested that programs alternate lecture options. Armando said "If I was to design an online program myself, I would like to provide both methods when it pertains to the lectures. Live lectures and pre-recorded lectures. I would think that you could provide options." Edgar said there should be a balance of video instruction and text. He commented "I think there has to be a balance. I think the online format with Liberty is what I would rather have. It has postings, assignments. The assignments are rigorous, they are weighted pretty heavily."

Jose suggested "I would add like a live webinar maybe once a month or periodically to make the class interesting." Steven said "I think having more visual *components*. Maybe more Skype's and videos in the online degree program." John added "If I could add maybe having more … video of instruction." Maria, an L1 Spanish speaker suggested:

> I would definitely make changes for the visual learners; I would dictate the lesson so that you could also translate it into Spanish. … Having the lesson being translated would be amazing. If there is a written copy, I just translate the page. Also, the books, if you go to

> the internet, they have a section that says translate this page. But a lot of the schools do not have that. I would have the school transcribe the audio onto written *text*. And then when it is written you can translate the page.

Esther, who is in a doctoral program and teaches at a major university, has experience in curriculum design. She shared what she has done to some of her online component classes, and what she would recommend for new online programs:

> So, what I did because it was like 65 students it was like a live chat, like Google documents has a chat function which can be used. While also allowing flexibility that can be used that doesn't require anything other than the institutional sign in and or if someone is coming from their own personal account, if they have a link they can sign in. Also, supplemental books, a list of books, links to libraries, library formats.

More networking of students. As Esther mentioned above, networking of students was a common aspect that the participants said should be improved in some online programs. Almost every participant expressed a desire to know their classmates more personally. Delia explained:

> I don't think that there is enough time or chances for students to discuss who they are as a person. I think when I took classes online it was not so much relevance of who you were where you came from, but what is your background. It was more of "I have 15 students on the roster. I am gonna count all the people and these are the things that need to be completed" ...There wasn't anything to do with students based on where they were at in life and what kind of support they had.

She added she wanted to connect with people like herself, but perceived that like she didn't have as much of an opportunity to do that because so little personal interaction was offered. She said:

> A challenge that I felt that I faced was just that I was the only one or two of everybody who came from a Hispanic background who was an English language learner. I have trouble connecting with people.

Lisa acknowledge her university has a student forum in each class, but she wished there was something more casual or dedicated to just getting to know her fellow students:

> I think one of the things, thinking of Liberty, that they do have a forum that you can go to and kind of talk to students, maybe having the same issues. I do appreciate that, but I think there should be some kind of Google hangout. I think there should be more support, maybe facetime support or more of a support group you can see your peers face-to-face. I think the interaction would make it more real, instead of just talking to some random person.

John added "I know that there is a discussion board you can attach a photo *(to)*. If it was just a little more interactive." He suggested "Like a short video of your professor and maybe other people you're working with. I think that would help things be a little more accountable."

Check portals and recommended sites for ease and accessibility. Delia brought up the fact that her program had links and recommended sites that were inactive, or which required special access. She suggested a more thorough checking of recommended sites and links. She said "First, I would do a lot of research to all of these portals to find out where there is a portal that was a lot easier to access. For students to access things. Not just a lot of places where they have to download things."

More group projects/workshops. The participants who mentioned this area were divided. Some, like Bernardo, wanted more of them. He commented he would like "Maybe a research project where you work in the community or you work with the other leaders or different

organizations." He added he would recommend more workshops. He said "Another thing that was important to me was workshops."

Less group projects. Alicia suggested no group projects. "The only thing that I can see right now that I would modify would be the group projects. To be more mindful of them. I had probably three groups and I had to carry two of them. It is difficult to manage adults. Maybe just eliminate group projects."

More student feedback. Delia wanted to see more student feedback. She said:

> I would add more opportunities for students to give their feedback throughout. I know in the process of taking these classes there was only one time to give feedback and it was at the end of the class, once the class was over, and it was a question about a paragraph that you will have to answer. I would create different types of opportunities throughout the course to give feedback, not only about teachers, but also about the program and the structure of the program itself.

More instructor accountability to return communications. Esther sensed her program needed more instructor accountability, particularly in the area of response times and keeping available office hour or contact times. She suggested:

> An instructor accountability of some sort. Like office hours being held online or some sort of Slack Channel in business or use in a huge way and Slack provides resources to any supervisor about what going on underneath them. It's like a sign-up process through an organization where everybody has access and is transparent.

Validating assessments. John wanted to validate that students are really personally taking their tests. He suggested "Another thing would be just to validate quizzes and texts. If I was a

professor, I would require you to take your quiz and test at a campus somewhere. To prove you are the one that did the work."

More Hispanic focused recruiting and support. Finally, Bernardo, Delia, and Esther suggested universities with online programs invest in more serious and specialized marketing, cultural support, and curriculum design for Hispanic students. Delia suggested:

> There should always be a cultural component embedded in either lessons that the students are doing or a class that they have to take. That is so relevant to how we are as a people. It is important for people to understand the culture of which they are servicing in any environment, but more cultural sensitivity.

Bernardo said there needed to be:

> More resources for Hispanics students. By that, I mean more schools that are helping students' papers for school, offering them grants, other alternatives. Maybe schools can be more aware of what is going on in the government and what is going on with Hispanic population so they can better serve Hispanics.

Esther shared her feelings that marketing to Hispanics helps enrich educational programs and American culture. She gave her opinion stating:

> I think it's very important that those students *(Hispanics)* are marketed to by educational institutions. … I think if people that are involved furthering education online, particularly marketing Latinos, to let you know what you've received in return, is another influx of voice of diversity that asks questions and is grateful for the experience *which* carries their heritage and experience with pride. And then that changes the way that the online system works for other people too, because any added voice of diversity adds the richness to the environment and the experience of every American.

Research Question Responses

The purpose of my study was to understand the "essence" of the experiences of Hispanic students who had persisted until graduation from an online degree program. I developed a central research question (CQ) which was "What are the experiences of Hispanic students who have persisted to complete online undergraduate degree programs?" Also, I derived three sub-questions from this main question. They were: (SQ1) What pre-entry attributes challenges do Hispanic students experience during their online degree program journey?, (SQ2) What academic participation challenges do Hispanic students face in an online program?, and (SQ3) What social participation challenges do Hispanic students face in an online program? The answers to these questions was developed through six major themes. These themes were: 1) "I am different," 2) "My challenges are different," 3) "I am successful because of who I am," 4) "I am successful because of others," 5) "I am successful because I chose my path," and 6) "I can show Hispanics how."

CQ: What are the experiences of Hispanic students who have persisted to complete online degree programs?

There are components of all six major themes included in responses to this question. However, the pre-program experiences are related more specifically to sub-question number one: "My challenges are different." The sixth and final major theme "I can show Hispanics how" is addressed primarily under sub-questions two and three.

Program academic experiences. Some of the students began at community colleges and then transferred to universities. Most of the students completed at least one program completely at the same online university. Most students had at least some experience at a land-based university or college before beginning an online degree program. The theme "I am

successful because I chose my path" included the participants' explanations about the benefits of the online platform in their degree completion journey.

The participants highly valued the flexibility of the online program. This is one reason Bernardo chose an online program. He said "I felt like the course material online is always accessible. It helps with the balance of family and work, while pursuing an education." Armando added:

> With regards to the online atmosphere …I would not have an MA if online education did not exist. The reason as to why I was able to take the MA program was because of the flexibility that online education provides.

Steven added "This was number one *(the flexibility)* and the fact that I got to go to school full-time. This is huge for me. If I did not have that option, I don't think I would have gotten my degree." Jose added "Online learning is super great because you have the flexibility. You can do whatever you want to do."

Most students were pleased with the staff and online instructional support. Alicia reported "… I do know that the professors were readily available by email and I have spoken to some of them in text or even phone calls." Bernardo related "There were definitely guidance counsellors that I knew. They knew my situation, so they were able to help." He added "If I needed extra time to pay for my classes or extra time to complete an assignment, they were very supportive." He said of the professors "I had different workers helping me. I always felt that they (my professors) were trying to help me get to my finish line just as much as I was helping myself."

John shared that he experienced good support in his online program. "I found myself in challenging situations throughout my schooling, but my teachers were very understanding and

supportive at these times." He went on to describe how the staff helped him stay on schedule "The counselors that check in on you periodically just to make sure you're doing okay and if you need help or guidance as well."

The participants valued their control over their education. The path these students choose included an online degree program at a fully accredited university. Many of them are already benefitting from higher paying employment than previous to their degree attainment. They said it was because they researched, found opportunities, and choose their own educational path.

Alicia said "I feel like you learn so much more through the online format because you are teaching yourself. You have to understand it and so much more depth then if you are just in the classroom observing." She thought it was a much more "proactive more than passive" learning experience.

Bernardo explained his feelings about online education when he commented "I feel like you will learn more in this program than a traditional on ground program. You will have full control of your own learning. You can work accelerated." Delia added "Everyone worked at their own pace on their own schedule." Armando explained "In some ways it is an added benefit *(studying online).* For instance, the lecture for the classes are recorded, which is a strength because it affords you the opportunity to take meticulous notes by stopping the lecture and repeating certain parts that you need to replay."

The participants developed characteristics of discipline, time management, and perseverance. Alicia recalled "As my years of study went by, I became very self-disciplined … I highly recommend studying and graduating from an online program. It helped me expand my self-discipline and knowledge to the career I have today." Bernardo added "I love the skills that

you learn such as, being independent, you develop great critical thinking skills, and reasoning skills. You develop a lot of decision-making on your own." Bernardo said "I also recommend this online program as it will help you increase your technical skills. This program even offers tutoring. This program included creating documents, incorporating audio and video materials, training sessions, and research papers."

Most participants thought that their own personal strengths helped them graduate. This perception was directly related to the third major theme "I am successful because of who I am." Successful Hispanic online graduates shared their personal traits and Hispanic identity as being a major factor in finishing their programs. They related that seeing their parents succeed, having Hispanic cultural traits, and their family system made them strong.

Most participants thought that there were other important people who helped them succeed. The participants expressed strong understanding that their success was partly influence by certain individuals or groups. This was related directly to the fourth major theme "I am successful because of others." Heading the list of these influences were family members, religious leaders, educators, counselors, social groups, cultural supports, and co-workers.

The participants faced some challenges related to being Hispanic students. This phenomenon related to the themes one and two: "I am different" and "My challenges are different." These challenges were listed in the previous section but included: financial hardship, overcoming Hispanic stereotypes, language difficulties, cultural tensions for bicultural students, family educational concepts, gender roles in Hispanic families, and non-Hispanic friendly atmospheres in some schools.

Some participants thought that the online format served their Hispanic culture well. Again, this perception among the participants related directly to themes one and two: "I am

different" and "My challenges are different." Participants mostly thought their online platform accommodated their learning cultural preferences. Alicia said "I feel that the online structure was supportive to the way Hispanics like to study and interact ….". Bernardo commented "I feel like this program has more interaction and greater ability to concentrate. This online course offers the opportunity to be a larger part of discussions and face-to-face sessions." Alicia commented:

> I was able to persist until I graduated because of …the understanding of my professors when life or schoolwork became too difficult … The program, curriculum, and professors were Hispanic friendly and supportive because they understood the hardships we face (i.e. raising a family, language barriers, and busy work schedules) and were flexible whenever I needed them to be.

Most participants highly recommended the online platform for Hispanic students.

SQ1: What pre-entry attributes challenges do Hispanic students experience during their online degree program journey? The first two major themes "I am different" and "My challenges are different" both included the cultural heritage and attitudes about higher education that were mentioned in our literature review and participant narratives. The participants expressed that their cultural heritage and embraced Hispanic values all affected their pre-program self-identity. Therefore, parts of these two themes influenced expressions shared by the participants related to pre-entry (degree program) attributes. The attributes which they thought produced challenges to their online academic journey are discussed below.

They depended on the acculturation of the student. The pre-program experiences of the participants depended on their cultural and economic backgrounds. Specifically, first-generation Hispanic students tended to reflect many of the family influences traditionally passed

down from Latin cultures. Second and third-generation Hispanic students tended to be more acculturated to the general United States culture. Armando observed:

> I think that is dependent on the student. For instance, I was raised here in America. You have two Hispanic students. 19 years old at this time. One was raised in the United States and the other one was raised in Mexico, but came over to the United States at 14 or 15 years of age and was taught English in Spanish, and both are Hispanic. When it comes to that question, the biggest challenge that first-generation Hispanics students would have, I believe … would depend if you were raised in Mexico or the United States. Raised here in the US they have an advantage of being more tech savvy. Because of that, the person raised in the US would be more prepared for online environment than someone that came from a third world country that didn't have computer training.

Therefore, there was less tension in their early education and university program journey. About half of the students were fully acculturated to the United States educational structure by the time they began enrolling in higher education. However, all of the students embraced Hispanic values and, therefore, attributed much of their pre-program mindset and experiences to their Latino roots.

Family background, cultural challenges, and economic hardship. Most participants reflected that their family immigrant roots did not give them an economic advantage. Delia illustrated the kind of life her parents faced when they came to this country:

> When my family came here, my parents worked in the dairy work and out in the fields. We moved from place to place. … I they knew that they were here in this country because it provided their children with other opportunities.

Steven added:

> So, I got to see both of my parents work multiple jobs. I got to see the struggle. Their first new car was when I was a teenager. That was a big deal, I remember. The first home was bought when I was about 14 or 15. So I got to see, I got to see the whole renting of houses. Just a struggle economic wise.

Because Bernardo was undocumented, as a family they sacrificed financially by working hard to help advance his opportunities. He related "I saw the struggle of my parents during college for them to help pay for school. Selling food, doing yard work, yard sales to help me pay for school."

The participants described finances as the biggest challenge to their higher education. Bernardo, who wasn't a citizen yet said "When I graduated from high school, there wasn't many resources for going to college." He paid as he went. He explained "Number one … would be the finances for an online degree. A lot of programs want you to still pay out-of-state tuition when you live in another state. Because if you don't qualify for grants or loans, it can be very expensive." Delia, a single working mother, supported herself and her child explained "Financially, I took care of myself through the university. I worked the entire time I was in school." Steven's parents were from Mexico and didn't have good paying jobs. He said "I knew my parents were not going to pay for college. I had to start looking for other educational programs."

Under educated parents. Undereducated parents could not understand or sufficiently support higher education fort their children. Lisa explained how her family's lack of education went back to Mexico. She related:

> My grandfather did not have any education at all. He didn't even know how to write his name. My grandmother, my mom's mother, had a third-grade education. Everything that my grandfather learned was from my grandmother. She taught him how to write his name.… My parents both have a high school education. … My mom tried to take a couple of courses at … college. She wanted to go into accounting but did not.

Steven explained "… my dad completed up until middle school and that was it. … My mother… completed *the* 12th grade. It was a continuation school." He continued explaining that neither of them had gone to college. John added "My mother and father had middle school educations. I was the first from my mother's side of the family to receive a bachelor's degree."

Maria recalled "Both of my parents lacked education as they were forced to work from a young age." Bernardo added "I am the first person from my mother's and my father's side to ever go to college." And Delia recounted:

> My mother had a third-year education. My father as well. … The area that they lived in, as soon as they learn to read or write, they were taken out of school. … I am the first member of my family to complete my bachelor's degree, as well as my Masters' degree.

Armando looked upon his family's lack of education as an inspiration for him. He shared "My family's lack of educational advancement was a definite inspiration, not only in my High School days, but also in the long run." He was the first to graduate from high school, and also college.

Lower performing schools. Several students reported that their ethnic isolation often contributed to them attending low performing schools. Delia, whose family had to work in the fields, shared "We moved from place to place. In the same town I went to two country schools. That was from Kindergarten through eighth grade." She began to realize that not everybody who was involved in education at that level was really there to help the students. She recalled "That is

where I learned that people were there just to work. If assignments were not turned then, then there was not a care in the world on their end." Edgar recalled "My K to 12 experience was very haphazard." Lisa recalled "Because I grew up Mexican American and predominantly in South Phoenix. I feel like my K-12 education was not very challenging. I didn't go to the best schools." She added that because she lived in that area:

> I feel like because the schools were predominantly Spanish, maybe we didn't get the teachers that we needed. I don't feel like we were challenged. I feel like going to another school was kind of a shock as far as how much dedication it required.

Language challenges. Most students reflected that their parents had challenges with the English language. Alicia recounted that her father, who would later become a PhD, was discouraged from pursuing education because of his perceived English language deficiencies. He felt hurt by the negative estimation of his potential which was solely based on his childhood English skills. She shared that lot of the motivation to succeed came from him: "... it was my father. He came to the United States not speaking any English …" and yet he was able to overcome and gain a career in education. Delia's recounted:

> My parents do not speak English. Our primary language is Spanish. … I felt like there was a lot of people in life that disregarded them or disrespected them for the lack of English language that they spoke.

Edgar, in his narrative explained how the challenge of learning English was more difficult than his parents anticipated, and that affected their lives in America:

> They left all they had acquired there (in Mexico). They thought they would learn the language easily and then be able to get jobs according to their education in their country.

> That really didn't pan out like that. The language was harder to learn than they thought. It was very difficult for them to do anything, because they did not have the necessary skills.

Lisa reflected that her grandparents who immigrated with their children "… lived in the United States more than half their lives, but they never fully learned English." Steven also shared that he noticed these language problems in his family. He said he remembers "Seeing their struggles and my grandparents. There were some language barriers. The opportunities were not there."

Cultural prejudice. About half of the students reported cultural isolation or prejudice in their upbringing or at all. Edgar expressed:

> I remember Mexico being a very nice place. Then we moved to Los Angeles in the United States. I remember being just totally out of sync with everything. I didn't understand the language. The place was ugly to me. It was a big cultural shock.

Edgar also related that when his family emigrated to the United States, he was in second grade. He recounted that in the second grade:

> I had a very horrible experience. The teacher had all the Hispanic students sitting at one table. She had a para-professional that was going to be translating for us. I remember sitting down next to my friend who spoke Spanish. I heard the teacher say my name as she spoke to the translator. I asked my friend what she was saying. She said "here comes another one from Mexico who probably doesn't know anything. He's probably retarded just like the rest of them." They got me pretty upset, knowing I was pretty intelligent. She didn't realize it, but she had just clumped us all together.

Hispanic educational stereotypes. Several participants were very aware of the lower educational rates of Hispanics in the United States. Many Americans tend to think that Hispanics are best suited for manual labor and lower paying professions. Armando recognized

the achievement gap in his community and his family, but purposed to be different. He shared "I would say that my cultural background did serve as inspiration in that I was aware that there is gaping hole when it comes to Hispanic people that have completed graduate level education." He went on to say:

> It would be the drive to not allow our culture to keep me down. There is so much stereotype to Hispanics here in America. When you look at Hispanics in America and you think they're just fieldworkers, hard workers, laborers. The fight against that and to become more than that is one of the things that has helped me.

Edgar added his strong feelings about this phenomenon. He was determined to overcome the false narratives about Hispanics:

> My thing in getting my doctorate is that I wanted to prove to others that the stereotypes that are out there and are predominant throughout the nation are quite erroneous. We, as a Hispanic culture, can become highly educated and motivated and persevere through schooling.

Edgar also was determined to teach his children that these stereotypes are imaginary and needed to be proven wrong. He differentiated in Hispanic values and Mexican American youth and families who have followed a less noble set of value systems. He determined not to be a victim or accept poverty. He shared:

> I feel like the Mexican American cultures are all into gangs. I was never into that. As I mentioned, I am a person of faith. I don't associate myself with crime. We never identified with living in poverty. We lived in the same house until I was 16 and that was because it was going *to be demolished.* I don't like being clumped into a Western stigma.

Hispanic attitudes about higher education. Several participants described a disconnect of understanding or support from their families regarding higher education. They thought this was related to their own life experience and the Hispanic culture. Delia shared "I felt like my family was not supportive of the college *program* like I said before. She said they just didn't see the value of a higher education. She continued:

> … it *(education)* wasn't something that my family, my parents valued. I they knew that they were here in this country because it provided their children with other opportunities, but they didn't know what that meant. Nor did they know how to translate that to what they wanted out of us as kids or adults.

She explained that their own lack of education was connected to why they didn't promote it for their children:

> My mother had a third-year education. My father as well. The area that they lived in, as soon as they learn to read or write, they were taken out of school. Because of having a third-grade education it was difficult for them to guide us through our educational journey.

Lisa explained her family's attitude about education with the following narrative:

> So, because my family did not go to college, I feel they were supportive and said that they were happy that I was getting an education. But at the same time, I don't believe that my family understood the time it took to do my program. There is still a lot of difficulty with that, because family is such a huge thing in my Hispanic culture. Maybe you cannot go to someone's birthday party or you can only stay a little time at a family function because there is homework to be done. So that was very frowned upon. I feel like even though they said, "We are so happy that you are doing this…", they weren't as supportive

> when it came down to actions … or understanding that there are hours of reading and there needed to be a quiet space for a period of time. There needed to be a balanced between college and working.

She tried to explain that she knew they weren't opposed to her educational plans. It just didn't fit in with their expectations. Lisa continued "I know this sounds terrible. But I don't know that I felt any family support. They would say 'We're glad you're doing this degree, good job.' But I don't know that they were actually supporting me." What she needed was understanding and space to do what it took to finish her degree, things "like giving me time to study." She explained "There wasn't someone I could go to for support and guidance. They were not against it. They were definitely for it."

Esther seemed to grasp the Hispanic family disconnect when a member was very involved in a degree program. She commented:

> I think the value of an education to a Hispanic family can sometimes be in question and so an online program doesn't even make sense to them. How is this even a class, there is no teacher. She doesn't know you or they don't know you. Information is not right in front of you, so how are you supposed to be learning? Once they have decided to go to school you are just sitting on your laptop at home or you are studying between 7 and 12 at night when you should be spending time with your family or not seeing things happen. It doesn't really jive with someone with cultural values of what an education is.

Women are often not encouraged to pursue education in Hispanic, male-dominated, cultures. Delia recounted her story "I moved out of my parents' home when I was 16 years old. My father's ideology of women, was a family stay at home mother who takes care of the children

and he didn't value ideas of education for women." She thought this wasn't the life she wanted to live. She tried to communicate this to her mother. She continued:

> I always told my mom that I did not fit the norm of whatever it was that her and my dad wanted me to be. In my culture, the norm was that women are to be a stay at home person while the men are out working. I could never wrap my brain around the fact that that's who I had to be. I feel that was one of the key factors of what I felt contributed to me working so hard because school came very easily to me.

Being unaware of educational opportunities and career paths. Newer immigrant families are often unaware of how to benefit from Hispanic directed programs which help Latinos go to college. Maria observed that Hispanic students need to spend time finding out what programs are available before choosing a school. She clarified:

> Not knowing that they are out there and that makes it a little bit harder because you don't know that those resources exist. Sometimes you just learned the hard way. The not knowing of how the student loans work. How in the long run you could end up paying a lot more money with interest and when you first attend school they kind of guide you into whatever they are doing for everyone. You are not making an informed decision, … Make sure that you are active utilizing resources and be informed of the programs.

SQ2: What academic participation challenges do Hispanic students face in an online program? The participants described their challenges in the thematic section grouped under "My challenges are different." These challenges related almost exclusively to Hispanic related cultural and social issues and characteristics. In the sixth major theme, "I can show Hispanics how" the participants related how they overcame academic online journey challenges. Therefore, the sub-question above is addressed in both of these themes: "My challenges are

different" and "I can show Hispanics how." Below are narratives derived from these two themes.

Procrastination. Participants reminded me that when the schedule is up to the student, procrastination can become a major problem. Alicia recalled "A lot of it at first was managing my time. In my sophomore year I was procrastinating." Armando said that he would advise students "… to make sure that you don't allow the flexibility of the online environment to procrastinate. Procrastination. Discipline." Armando added "Being that online is flexible, you do not want to let it escape you by the upfront convenience of procrastination." He said that he had to make time for schoolwork. He recommended "Look at your life, and schedule daily schoolwork; this is something that made me successful in completing my graduate degree program."

Time management. Time management was a major theme in how participants were able to finish an online degree. Bernardo said the biggest challenge can be "Learning how to organize your time. Another thing I was taking too many classes on the graduate level at the same time. Not being able enough to spend quality time on each class."

Delia explained that a student has to look at their schedule and find some time to study. She said "When you have classes at nighttime, and you have things on your own schedule, you know you just have to juggle and make things work". John was very honest about his adapting to the online format. He recalled:

> The biggest challenge to me was the first semester just finding discipline. It was something new, priorities, setting the schedule. I guess just discipline, finding the time to just sit down and just do as much as you can. Time management.

He continued "I would recommend that they set a schedule and stick with it throughout the semester in order to have a successful semester and not get too overwhelmed."

Bernardo advised "You need to know and be determined yourself because online courses require a lot of work." He said that making time to study was essential "You have to be organized when it comes to your time. …You have to make quality time to do your schoolwork, read, go over assignments." Armando agreed with this outlook. He said:

> Look for a good healthy schedule where *you* can devote their time to their online classes. The coursework I went through, the lectures were all recorded. … and you have to be there and log in at a certain time. … schedule certain periods of time in a day, or evening, or afternoon where they can hit the books. Where they can get it done. … Put it all together and do your best create your own educational format that works where you can focus and at the same time you don't feel other stuff.

John suggested to "Make sure you set apart time for the schoolwork. Set a schedule." He said it was much different than studying at a land-based program:

> When you have a class on campus it may be at a set time like three-and-a-half-hour class or four hours, so you already have your schedule for when you need to turn things in. Online is not as structured. You have to create that structure for yourself.

Discipline and motivation. Self-discipline and motivation were also mentioned as essential traits in finishing an online degree program. Included in this motivation is a sense of perseverance. Bernardo simply said that in order to succeed "You have to be persevering." Delia added:

> I would simply say to those that are Hispanic and that are looking at the online education, jump into it, don't be afraid of it, because this opportunity was not there for their parents.

> So, let's take advantage of the opportunities. Whatever your cultural family experience is, don't allow that to influence you in a negative way, use it and allow it to turn pressure in a positive way so that you don't repeat the cycle.

Edgar advised the Hispanic student to be motivated to "Study, be very independent. If you need to have that social support, then you have to go out and look for it." John said "Be organized and a lot of preparation, discipline." The online format itself requires acclimation.

Getting used to online learning environments. Armando recounted "I was so used to being face-to-face contact with the students and the professor in a classroom. In a classroom setting the lecturer is there, you are able to ask questions." This was a challenge for him "For me, right up front, it was just getting used to the online format."

Lisa thought that not being able to see and interact with the teacher left her wondering what they were really wanting to communicate. She said students need to expect this:

> I think the fact that you are not in class. You don't really know people. One of the challenges for me, when I have to do an assignment, is to understand what the teachers like. I feel that because not personally seeing the teacher, I cannot read their personality. I cannot read their facial expressions. I am just going to them through their email, so I cannot read them as well.

Technology issues. Delia recounted her experience:

> The program in this area was new. The teachers that they hired during that time were still learning how to use the systems. They didn't really know how to manage it right to go online. They would try to upload things to portals, with problems. I think that one of the challenges was just navigating the system. It was not user-friendly.

John said this might be a concern for some students "Maybe some technology issues, depending on how savvy they are." Esther said "I have watched students coming and they don't have the technology and I have been in this position. I haven't had the technology or the means to be the perfect college student."

Communications and response times. Esther had problems with some staff in this area. She recalled "The challenge was getting back responses from instructors and timely responses." She added "I would have liked to have had more interaction with instructors." Working in group projects. Maria didn't feel isolated, but felt frustrated at times with the group projects. Some members didn't participate and do their part. She recalled:

> One of the challenges I experienced was when I was working on a group project and being the "A" type person like I am, you can be a little controlling, and you want to have everybody finished the part when it is convenient for you. But, not everybody does that. So, that was kind of hard waiting for people to respond to emails.

Alicia suggested online curricula don't need group projects:

> The only thing that I can see right now that I would modify would be the group projects. To be more mindful of them. I had probably three groups and I had to carry two of them. It is difficult to manage adults. Maybe just eliminate group projects.

Getting used to accelerated education. Alicia shared "The number one thing that I would advise a Hispanic student to anticipate is the workload. At the beginning, I didn't think you worked a lot." She added that the effort was rewarding "… It takes a lot of work, but at the end of the day it's completely worth it." Edgar also counselled "Be advised that the assignments are rigorous and are sometimes weighted pretty heavily. So, you must be self-motivated and disciplined to do well." Steven explained "It's going to be quicker pace than the classrooms.

You have to do a lot of research also, and you have to do a lot of heavy lifting. You also do a lot of writing."

SQ3: What social participation challenges do Hispanic students face in an online program?

The participants described their social and cultural challenges in the second thematic grouping called "My challenges are different." These challenges related almost exclusively to Hispanic related cultural and social issues and characteristics. However, some of these social challenges were not expressed until the participants began to advise how they would tell new Hispanic online students how to overcome program obstacles. These expressions related to social challenges experienced during their program journey, such as cultural isolation, impersonal co-student and instructor relationships, social isolation, and lack of family support. Therefore, the expression of the following subthemes is also correlated to the sixth major theme, "I can show Hispanics how" (That is, how to succeed in an online program.).

Cultural isolation. Delia expressed that in one of her programs "there was not a lot interaction in the sense of understanding Hispanic culture or specific support for Hispanic students. I didn't really feel like my own culture was valued." She went on to comment that even though her area in California had a high Hispanic population:

> I feel like we weren't very represented in these areas … The area where I live a lot of the students are predominantly Hispanic. I wondered why we lived in the area where there is so much need for parent communication and the culture to be relevant.

She thought there was "just a disconnect between the cultures."

Lisa related that in her program online she didn't feel there was much awareness of Hispanic students or their needs. She shared:

> I cannot actually say that I remember there being any cultural support. There were not any people that I had known that were doing any online educational programs at the same time that I was doing mine who were also Hispanic.

Social isolation. Steven shared that there were times he felt alone in his program. He related "There were times that I felt isolated and didn't have any support around me." He didn't feel the support from fellow students. He continued "There were not other students around saying 'hey we are going through this too.' There were message boards, but I didn't really feel comfortable emailing. I felt kind of isolated and alone."

Lack of some family support. Lisa explained her family's attitude about education with the following narrative:

> So, because my family did not go to college, I feel they were supportive and said that they were happy that I was getting an education. But at the same time, I don't believe that my family understood the time it took to do my program. There is still a lot of difficulty with that, because family is such a huge thing in my Hispanic culture. Maybe you cannot go to someone's birthday party or you can only stay a little time at a family function because there is homework to be done. So that was very frowned upon. I feel like even though they said, "We are so happy that you are doing this…", they weren't as supportive when it came down to actions … or understanding that there are hours of reading and there needed to be a quiet space for a period of time. There needed to be a balanced between college and working.

She tried to explain that she knew they weren't opposed to her educational plans. It just didn't fit in with their expectations. Lisa continued "I know this sounds terrible. But I don't know that I felt any family support. They would say, 'We're glad you're doing this degree, good job.' But I

don't know that they were actually supporting me." What she needed was understanding and space to do what it took to finish her degree, things "like giving me time to study." She explained "There wasn't someone I could go to for support and guidance. They were not against it. They were definitely for it."

Esther seemed to grasp the Hispanic family disconnect when a member was very involved in a degree program. She commented:

> I think the value of an education to a Hispanic family can sometimes be in question and so an online program doesn't even make sense to them. How is this even a class, there is no teacher. She doesn't know you or they don't know you. Information is not right in front of you, so how are you supposed to be learning? Once they have decided to go to school you are just sitting on your laptop at home or you are studying between 7 and 12 at night when you should be spending time with your family or not seeing things happen. It doesn't really jive with someone with cultural values of what an education is.

Some participants recommended that the new Hispanic student try to explain their commitment along with its benefits and how it will affect their interaction with the family.

Lisa suggested this approach for new Hispanic online students:

> I would let them know that there are going to be challenges with the family that they might not always understand. I would tell them to anticipate the amount of work and the amount of time that it will take. Do not think that it will be so easy. Remind them that this will take a big chunk of your time. Think, anticipate, realize that if you are going to school the education has to come first. If people don't understand, just do it anyway because it's worth it.

Esther had similar thought on preparing your family for the sacrifice in time and attention that the program would require:

> The second thing is to talk to your family about why an education is important to you to make sure that they understand that this is something that benefits you in the long term because they are going to avoid see a lot of the short term values, or things that may violate cultural values for them. Is going to be important to talk to them about as much as you know. As a matter of fact I would talk to you the person's family so that they understand when I need to buy a computer or when I need a printer at home or when I know you need to go the weekend retreat, or if I need to spend time writing instead of being with the family. This needs to be talked about ahead of time because when it comes up there can be a lot of problems for a family. People that are coming from a background that are not used to a Eurocentrocism in the American educational system.

Summary

In this chapter, the groupings of the study's participants and his/her unique position in the aggregate data set as a Hispanic online degree graduate locates their unique autobiographical experiences in the broader context of online undergraduate and graduate degree programs. In the Results section of this chapter - the description of the participants' experiences is analyzed and grouped into six thematic categories with supporting narrative. The analysis of the interviews is reliant on common language and meanings in metaphorical and phenomenological intersecting words, phrases, and sentence structures. The description of how the data was analyzed and how six major themes developed was inclusive of the sub-questions that were asked and answered subjectively. In each case study, the data supported the formation of the research questions applicability to the environment that an online student encounters when of Hispanic origin.

Thematic content included in the participant's interviews included: “Lower performing primary and secondary schools, Hispanic identity challenges, financial hardship, overcoming Hispanic educational stereotypes, language difficulties, tensions in bicultural Hispanic American students, and Hispanic parental models of family structure; values and gender issue.” The interviews and data in this chapter are essential to the findings and conclusions of the overall study and are integral to the inevitable conclusions of analytical models considering Hispanic students online.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived phenomenological experiences of Hispanic graduates of online university degree programs. This study involved 11 Hispanic graduates who have completed bachelor, master's, and post-master's degree programs at accredited online universities. The following sections include a summary of the findings, a discussion of the findings and the implications in light of the relevant literature and theory, an implications section (methodological and practical), an outline of the study delimitations and limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of my study was to understand the "essence" of the experiences of Hispanic students who had persisted until graduation from an online degree program. Six major themes developed from the answers to the main research question and the three sub-questions (which are listed below). These themes were: "I am different," "My challenges are different," "I am successful because of who I am," "I am successful because of others," "I am successful because I chose my path," and "I can show Hispanics how."

CQ: "What are the experiences of Hispanic students who have persisted to complete online degree programs?"

Elicited mostly positive responses regarding the online method of study. The participants highly valued the flexibility of their online programs and most of them were pleased with the staff and online instructional support. They valued having control over their education and learning structure stating that the experience also developed characteristics of discipline, time management, and perseverance. All of the participants added that they thought that their own

personal strengths helped them graduate including their Hispanic identity and characteristics. Most of them related that there were other important people who helped them in their degree journey. The graduates did face some challenges related to being Hispanic students, however, they highly recommended the online platform for degree seeking Latinos.

SQ1: "What pre-entry attributes challenges do Hispanic students experience during their online degree program journey?"

This sub-question related to the first two major themes "I am different" and "My challenges are different." The participants' experiences differed according to how long they and their family had been in the United States. Many shared having a family background of cultural challenges and economic hardship. Undereducated parents affected how education was valued and understood by the whole family. Many students attended lower performing schools in their youth. Language challenges, cultural prejudice, and Hispanic educational stereotypes were also challenges students faced before attending college.

SQ2: "What academic participation challenges do Hispanic students face in an online program?"

This sub-question related to themes "My challenges are different" and "I can show Hispanics how." They described their biggest participation challenges as procrastination, time management, discipline, motivation, and getting used to the online platform and its unique issues. The online platform sometimes produced technology issues, communication delays, asynchronous work groups issues, and challenging accelerated education.

SQ3: "What social participation challenges do Hispanic students face in an online program?"

The final sub-question related directly to the theme "My challenges are different." Some of these social challenge responses were related to how they would tell new Hispanic online students how to overcome program obstacles. These responses included cultural isolation, impersonal co-student and instructor relationships, social isolation, and lack of family support.

Discussion

The purpose of my study was to understand the lived experiences Hispanics who persisted to graduate from online university programs. My study provided a first-person description of how the participants described their program journey. These 11 participants provided a rich description of how they were able to overcome cultural and academic obstacles to obtain their degrees. On a practical level, my desire is that this study will inform educators, program designers, and university support staff how to better recruit, retain, and graduate more Hispanic online students. My higher hope is that the path of these unique "trail blazer" Hispanic online graduates can somehow illuminate a path for many more Latino students to complete their degrees.

Empirical Literature Discussion

This study confirmed empirical data regarding various Hispanic educational trends. Perhaps, the most obvious finding was that the participants' family support was instrumental in influencing their educational progress both positively and negatively (Jodry et al., 2004; Paschall et al., 2018; Pstross et al., 2016; Villalba et al., 2014). Also, the participants' families' economic needs and undereducation put pressure on them not to attend a land-based campus which was supported by previous literature (Grateix, 2017; Pstross et al., 2016; Rook, 2013). The study strongly supported literature that online education can be an avenue to facilitate higher Hispanic enrollment and academic success (Corry, 2016; Garcia et al., 2014; Lu & Cavazos Vela, 2015).

Cultural factors affecting Hispanic academic success. The study confirmed literature suggesting cultural factors which can affect Hispanic academic success. Crisp et al. (2015) wrote:

> Findings indicate that a combination of (a) sociocultural characteristics; (b) academic self-confidence; (c) beliefs, ethnic/racial identity, and coping styles; (d) precollege academic experiences; (e) college experiences; (f) internal motivation and commitment; (g) interactions with supportive individuals; (h) perceptions of the campus climate/environment; and (i) institutional type/characteristics has been shown to be related to one or more academic success outcomes for Latina/o students. (p. 255)

The participants believed that being Hispanic carried strengths and challenges to their online degree completion journey. All of the above areas were mentioned in their expressions of the major themes how they persisted to finish their degrees.

Undereducated families. Lower adult graduation rates affected these students. Most of their first-generation parents did not finish high school. Most of the participants' parents did not attend college (eight of 11), and nine out of 11 families came from Mexico. This concurs with recent data. In 2016, 63% of United States Hispanics trace their origins to Mexico (Flores, 2017a), where, in 2018, only 60% of young adults graduated from a secondary school (OECD, 2019).

Family attitudes about education. Additionally, the study revealed that the majority of the first-generation Hispanic families were not promoting higher education for their children (although some were) as Alon, Domina, and Tienda (2010) had reported. Some participant families, however, did encourage their children to attend college. And four students (Bernardo, Edgar, Jose, and Maria), who came to the United States with their parents, did graduate from

college. Jose's father was a college graduate in South America.

Several students revealed that student home conflict was an issue. Delia, Lisa, Jose, and Esther either experienced or observed this. Vasquez-Salgado et al. (2015) explained this phenomenon well:

> The potential for *home-school value conflict*— conflict between the individualistic behavioral demands of college and collectivistic behavioral demands of family—could peak in a 4-year college where the demands for individual academic achievement become noticeably greater than in high school, while spending time with family and assisting family with tasks becomes much more difficult. We conceptualize this as a conflict between internalized demands for family obligation behaviors and internalized demands for academic performance. (p. 272)

The study confirmed literature suggesting that Latino students tend to be motivated in a collectivist/family environment, venturing outside one's family experiences can be emotionally and psychologically challenging (Arevalo et al., 2016; Chiachih et al., 2016; Taggart, 2017). Some participants overcame this.

Collectivism in education. The participants recognized the Hispanic tendency toward a collectivist nature as reported by Consolí et al. (2018) and Taggart (2017). Some expressed that they felt somewhat isolated in the online environment (Delia and Steven). Others thought that they didn't need much social interaction (Edgar and Jose). While most thought the interaction was sufficient (Armando and John) or very good (Alicia, Bernardo, Lisa, Maria, and Esther). However, almost all of the students recommended curriculum changes with more student interaction.

Several participants experienced cultural discontinuity in their early education (Bernardo,

Edgar, Delia, Lisa, and Armando) and/or didn't feel wholly understood or represented in college. Taggart (2017) has described this discontinuity as a possible challenge for Hispanic students. Accordingly, a slight majority of the graduates thought there were different educational values being disseminated at school than those at home.

The economic challenge. Every student expressed a need to work because of economic needs. Most explained the economic need extended from their family's immigrant history. Gordon (2018) addressed this issue commenting, "Arguably, one of the most debilitating issues impeding Hispanic adolescents' academic success is economic adversity. Most students did not use much student loans. Literature informed that Hispanics are, generally, more reluctant to take out loans for their higher education (Barshay, 2018). Edgar, Bernardo, Jose, and Maria struggled to find ways to pay for their education as their citizenship status was in question.

These students had to work. Four out of five women were helping support or supporting their families. Only one student was free to study fulltime (Lisa). For many of these families, a long-term commitment to land-based higher education would undermine their commitment and dependence on immediate gainful employment as mentioned by Nuñez and Sansone (2016). The study reinforced literature findings that while Hispanics will continue emphasizing a need to work, e-learning can provide an alternative to the fixed schedules of brick and mortar schools (Corry, 2015; Garcia et al., 2014; Lu & Cavazos Vela, 2015).

Online education made a degree possible. There was one major factor that directed them to study online: flexibility. They could advance their academic qualifications while they worked. Every participant agreed upon this theme. Also as suggested by Tamborini, Changwan, and Sakamoto (2017), each graduate had realized a greater earning capacity and a wider set of work options Many graduates shared that the costs of their online programs were less which

allowed them to pay for their degree journey. The experience agreed with studies by Johnson and Galy (2013) and Lu and Cavazos Vela (2015).

Interventions that increase degree attainment for Hispanics. This study has supported literature which described interventions which work in helping Hispanic students get degrees. Participants referred directly to some of these particular interventions.

Promoting family support. Participants who received encouragement from family tended to feel more confidence in their academic future. Literature noted that educating parents concerning the college trajectory can provide a pathway for success for the Hispanic student (Hannon, 2015; Psross et al., 2014). Vasquez-Salgado et al. (2015) shared the tremendous impact that promoting education in the home has on Hispanic students. Gildersleeve (2013) wrote "If schools garner the trust of families, then families have increased hope and incentive for supporting increased educational attainment. Schools can become the beacon of higher education trajectories" (p. 126).

Preparing Hispanic high school students for college. Bernardo, Edgar, and Delia were all L1 Spanish speakers who were targeted in middle and high school for special academic preparation. They were encouraged to prepare for higher education, and they overcame statistics and graduated. Literature informs that interventions at the high school level can prepare Hispanic students for the expectations and challenges of college attendance Athanases et al. (2016) developed a program which was implemented at a Hispanic majority high school. Their goal was the "development of a school-wide college-going culture with norms and roles that articulate high expectations and provide extensive supports toward college admissions…" (p. 7).

Institutional support for Hispanic students. Most participants noted that institutional support for Hispanics was highly desirable in their choice for a university program. Eight of the

11 participants thought that their university was supportive of their culture (Although some of these desired more cultural awareness and Hispanic support.). The literature agreed that universities and colleges are recognizing the need to support Hispanic students in order to help them feel comfortable (Leavitt & Hess, 2019; Saladino & Martinez, 2015). Not surprisingly, institutional support is now being recognized as an essential cornerstone of promoting Hispanic student success.

Hispanic student retention interventions. There were not much Hispanic related student retention efforts in the participants' expressions. However, Bernardo, Lisa, and Esther, all reported that Hispanic related staff support was instrumental to their graduation. Literature revealed various successful interventions at the college level which focused on promoting Hispanic student retention (Harris, 2017; Latino CCP, Anonymous, 2019; Mellow, 2013).

Mentor and faculty support programs. Some of the participants reported feeling culturally isolated. Almost all would have liked more student interaction. Recent literature has concluded that community college faculty who support students will positively affect their academic success (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2014; Deil-Amen, 2011; Dowd et al., 2013). Tovar (2015) reported that this is especially true for Hispanic students who may feel isolated as a cultural group. Hispanic supportive staff also increases retention agreeing with studies by Contreras and Contreras (2015) and Oseguera, Locks, and Vega (2009).

The role of technology and online classes in Hispanic student success. The only technology issues reported by the participants was in getting used to online interaction and portal glitches. This reflected the current trend that Hispanics are gaining technology experience and access.

The technology gap has decreased. The graduates all expressed good knowledge of navigating the technology of computers, internet sites, and online education. Economic barriers to technology were mentioned very little. Although one student, Esther, struggled to afford a decent computer. However, the neediest students tended to use public internet. This supports literature that the Hispanic technology gap in decreasing. Literature reports that it is now evident that internet access is increasing among Hispanics and will continue approaching full equality with Whites (Brown et al., 2015; Lopez et al., 2013; Morse, 2017)

The increase of online programs and student enrollment. Many of the participants were in their thirties. Some were in their forties. The median age was 33 years old. They are a part of the overall increase of online students and older adult learners. Shaffhauser (2017) reported "… the demographics are shifting to a student community primarily comprised of adult and other contemporary learners, for whom distance learning often provides the best path to a post-secondary education" (p. 20). In 2015 there were about 6 million online students, representing 29.7% of all higher education enrollments, up from about 10% in 2010 (Shaffhauser, 2017). Total enrollment in online platforms reached 6.6 million students in 2019 (NCES, 2019).

Hispanics can benefit from the online environment. The participants were enthusiastic about their choice to pursue an online degree. They thought it was the best fit for working Hispanic students. They highly recommended the online mode for all levels of higher education (except for Edgar who thought first-generation Hispanic students should develop their skills at a land-based school for a few years).

In developing literature, some studies suggest no difference in the effective learning among Hispanics or minorities between the online or land-based mode (Barril, 2017; Ke & Kwak, 2013). A study by Wladis, Conway, and Hachey (2015) indicated no difference in

measurable learning outcomes of Hispanic students using distance learning in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) subject areas of higher education.

On the other hand, Ortagus (2018) described a study of first year Hispanic students who enrolled in online classes versus those who did not. He found:

> Enrolling in some online courses is associated with lower odds of dropping out of college. Additional results reveal a positive relationship between enrolling in some online courses and sub-baccalaureate indicators of long-term academic success, such as earning an associate degree and transferring from a community college to a 4-year institution. (p. 47)

He reported that the convenience and flexibility of the online platform can give access to higher education for many students who might not otherwise be able to attend college. The participants' expressions all supported this conclusion. Previous studies had discovered that student traits linked with the highest opportunity costs of face-to-face education—such as being a full-time employee, a parent, or married—were more inclined to enroll in online courses (Jaggars, 2014; Ortagus, 2018). Also, a research study by Garcia et al. (2014) made a strong case for hybrid study platforms being more beneficial to Hispanic graduate students because of family, flexibility, and meeting personal needs (p. 5-7). My study strongly supported this conclusion.

Hispanic students are becoming more field-independent, preparing them for online learning. As we will discuss later, our participants represent a newer generation of Hispanic students. They are more aggressive, more informed, and more learning independent. The literature reflects this change in Hispanic culture.

The participants were all acculturated to some extent. The second-generation (six of 11) and third-generation (one) were very confident in their ability to navigate an English based, technology heavy online program. Various studies reflect that Hispanic learning styles are changing because of acculturation. Torres (2014) concluded that Hispanic students seemed to be adaptable to learning style adjustments when in an atmosphere of support. Noe-Bustamonte (2019) reported that in 2017, 70% of all Latinos (United States and foreign born) spoke English proficiently. Acculturated Hispanic youth, like my participants, who are adaptable learners, now make up a large population of the United States college age potential student body.

Pioneering Hispanic students. This study revealed an aspect of successful Hispanic online students that was not anticipated. All of the students were gifted and highly motivated. Three of them graduated from high school early. Three of them were valedictorians although they came from undereducated families. All of them were very proactive. Some of them had special support from relatives who had obtained degrees. I would observe that each one of these students were also very resilient and academically adaptive. I see them, therefore, as pioneers. They are the forerunners of Hispanic students who will choose the online platform as their means of obtaining a college degree. These are the students who overcame familial, economic, and cultural adversity to persist to degree attainment in the online platform. They may not have been fearless, but they were certainly not afraid going out on their own and choosing a different path (than most Hispanic students) with a more flexible but socially isolated study platform.

Empirical literature discussion summary. The findings in this study corroborate the research literature's description of Hispanic challenges in higher education. The participants reported that family and cultural histories could affect their educational trajectory. Undereducated parents, economic challenges, and attitudes about education were very real

experiences in the lives of most of the participants. Also, the participants reflected that the natural acculturation of U.S.-born or reared Hispanic youth has lowered cultural and language barriers and resulted in higher educational success. Those who had family support were more likely to persist. This support included the extended family, especially those who had degrees. The graduate testimonies supported data that Hispanic students succeed when they feel the academic institution in which they are studying is both sympathetic and supportive of their specific cultural diversity. The students desired more co-student interaction.

All students highly recommended online education for Hispanics and recommended increasing recruitment and marketing to Latino learners. This agreed with the findings by Garcia et al. (2014) that online learning can be specially suited for Hispanics. Finally, these participants were a special kind of Hispanic students. They were gifted, tough, highly motivated, and socially and technologically adaptive in their quest to obtain a degree online.

Theoretical Findings

Researchers and theorists can benefit from this study by analyzing the essence of how successful Hispanic online students preferred to learn and how they utilized persistence mechanisms to complete online degree programs. This research adds to the literature regarding Hispanic student persistence in higher education using Tinto's Student Integration Model (1993) and Latino Critical Race Theory (LatCrit).

Tinto's Student Integration Model. This model was the theoretical lens utilized to view the persistence of Hispanic online university graduates. Tinto (1993) attempted to explain the process of persistence in higher education as a function of student-institution "fit." He theorized that the principal factors which produced successful persistence could be reduced down into: "(a)

factors that are drawn from experiences prior to college and individual student characteristics and (b) factors that are drawn from experiences at college" (Carr, 2000, p. A40).

These two main areas mentioned above, prior to college experiences and actual college experienced are those that the study examined. The research questions focused on the overall program or degree journey experience of the Hispanic online graduate. The sub-questions investigated the pre-program experiences and specific academic and cultural challenges encountered during the program. Integration into the college experience was further examined from the perspective of being a Hispanic student. As all of these students did persist to degree completion, how they integrated or how they felt about their participation is essential to the understanding Hispanic student success.

Carr (2000) explained "Experiences before college and student characteristics are input variables that cannot be affected greatly by schools. However, student experiences subsequent to admission, which Tinto referred to as "integration" variables, are affected by school policies and practices" (p. A40). Tinto (1987) commented "the more central one's membership is to the mainstream of institutional life the more likely, other things being equal, is one to persist" (p. 123). Therefore, the student's feeling about their program's inclusion, cultural sensitivity and support reflects his/her level of comfort or integration into the school's student climate and academic community. Carr (2000) commented "Tinto's student integration model explains the student integration process as mostly a function of academic and social experiences in college" (p. A40).

Accordingly, the participants generally felt accepted, but not fully understood by their institutions. Some did feel a desire for greater interaction with other co-students. The online environment presented communications challenges along with potential interpersonal isolation.

However, most students thought the interaction was sufficient to motivate and support them to degree completion. This was the outstanding achievement which the students valued, being able to advance academically within their family and economic limitations. All, but possibly one student (Esther) thought that their support staff (guidance counselors, mentors, professors, and general support personnel) were very effective and integral to their success. In this respect, most students thought they received better overall support than land-based institutions. Therefore, their persistence reflected how well they integrated into their particular school program.

This study contrasts to Tinto's ideas of successful student integration as being measured by "the development and frequency of positive interactions with peers and faculty and involvement in extracurricular activity" (Carr, 2000, p. A40). Online programs do not provide person to person community projects or extracurricular opportunities. The higher motivation to succeed and learning adaptability of these students provided them with sufficient persistence mechanisms to finish their programs. Tinto (1975) observed that "in the final analysis, it is the interplay between the individual's commitment to the goal of college completion and his [or her] commitment to the institution that determines whether or not the individual decides to dropout from college …" (p. 96) or, I would add, to persist to degree completion.

LatCrit Theoretical Perspective. The Latino Critical Race Theory, or the LatCrit perspective, adds to the theoretical literature in bringing "the voice of Latinos to the forefront" in the area of online education (Gonzales & Morrison, 2016, p. 89). This study provides the unique voices of successful Hispanic online program graduates to the body of higher educational literature. Their voices further facilitate an understanding and appreciation of how Hispanics express their experiences related to Hispanic centered higher educational theory.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) theory and its related theory, LatCrit, are also a part of the theoretical framework for this study as it related to a phenomenological narratives. William Tierney described these theories as "an attempt to understand the oppressive aspects of society in order to generate societal and individual transformation" (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001, p. 311). Deborah Farrington (2018) commented that "LatCrit has its roots in the analysis of experiences and structures of oppression and is generative by its motivation for social and individual transformation." This study only focused on giving a culturally flavored voice to the Hispanic online graduates. It does serve the LatCrit perspective in informing of a "… centrality experiential knowledge, and a value for interdisciplinary perspective as lenses through which analysts can view social structures" (Farrington, 2018).

The students all expressed a deep personal identification with Hispanic culture. There was also an apparent underlying desire to be more understood and appreciates as Hispanic college students. Their embracing of online education stemmed, partly, from their unique Hispanic family needs, values, and cultural traditions. They had to overcome some aspects of dominant American Anglo-based educational ideologies to become successful (such as Euro-centrism and individualism in educational models and curriculum). Their perspective is valuable in understanding how they perceived the online educational environment as being Hispanic friendly or non-friendly and how they adapted to challenges in cultural isolation.

Implications

The purpose of this section is to address the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study.

Theoretical Implications

My study suggests two implication for theoretical systems which can guide online student studies. First, most persistence theories are not constructed to measure online student's experiences. Tinto's (1993) Model of Student Integration perseverance was used as a guiding theoretic lens to understand the persistence to degree completion journeys of the 11 Hispanic online graduates. Tinto (1993) theorized that the principal factors which produced successful persistence could be reduced down to: "(a) factors that are drawn from experiences prior to college and individual student characteristics and (b) factors that are drawn from experiences at college" (Carr, 2000, p. A40). The study strongly confirmed these ideas. However, Tinto (1993) further measured student integration by G.P.A. and involvement in extra-curricular activities. The online format does not allow for the second measurement, and the former was not a part of my study. My study measured success by degree completion. The students did struggle with social integration because of the impersonal format of most online programs. Nonetheless, they, mostly, did not feel so isolated that they would drop out.

Much of Tinto's (1975) work has focused on why students drop out and do not persist. This study noted a general overall positive perception of the online experience, including staff support, the general format of their curriculums, and instructor interaction. My study is one of few that focused on Hispanic student persistence in the online format. There are also very few studies and applicable theories which can guide the persistence of online students. Modified theories must be utilized to fully appreciate what online students experience and, specifically, how Hispanics can be better served to support degree completion.

The second theoretical implication is based upon my observation that Hispanic cultural awareness is not emphasized in most online formatted university curriculums. Therefore, the

experience of Hispanic students is that they must use the flexibility of the program and overcome the cultural isolation. Their voice is suppressed in this study mode. LatCrit theory can, potentially, be used where Hispanic students feel free to express themselves, and I hope my participants felt such freedom. However, there seemed to be an unopened "can of worms" that pointed to the reality that most online platforms and atmospheres are not geared to help Hispanic students feel embraced or understood. While this is not a welcome criticism in many political and campus circles, it is a valid issue if universities wish to enroll and graduate more online Hispanic students. Somehow Hispanic related social theories must be able to penetrate into the studying of online programs, especially since the enrollment in these platforms is rapidly increasing.

Empirical Implications

The data gathered through the journals, interviews, and letters of advice have empirical implications for those involved in online education and Hispanic student recruiting, retention, and graduation. The major themes resolutely call for an understanding of why Hispanic students have different challenges. Their family and cultural heritage needs to be understood. This included the undereducation of parents and siblings, economic challenges, and social isolation. Hispanics simply don't get the familial, economic, and cultural support to go to college full-time that other ethnic groups in the United States do. They still are behind African Americans in graduation rates in most statistical areas. How can university program designers help? By proactively becoming aware of and targeting Hispanic cultural interventions which increase Latino interest in higher education. This study has mentioned interventions in areas of Hispanic family involvement, high school and community college Hispanic student interventions, along with staff interventions at the university level. Studies have demonstrated that the more Hispanic

friendly recruiting, support, curriculum content, and instructor awareness is experienced, higher Latino student success will follow. This is true of the online format also.

Online course designers should listen to the voices of the participants from this study. These were the top-level Latino students. They made it because of their exceptional self-motivation, discipline, and adaptability. Read their stories. Put yourself in their place. They shared how they made it and explained where the online format was challenging and could be modified. The most reoccurring suggestion was more student interaction. In the end, we should be asking ourselves, why aren't more Hispanics using this format to graduate? The answer is probably because most Hispanic students don't have the gifts and endurance to overcome the social isolation and lack of almost any reaching out to Latinos that most online programs demonstrate. All stake holders need to become aware that Hispanic college age young adults desperately need programs which make them feel wanted and supported. Anything we can do to achieve that goal will open the doors for, hopefully, many thousands of Hispanic online students.

Practical Implications

Practical applications related to the study include program recommendations by the participants, the need for university staff Hispanic cultural awareness, and an attempt to further integrate Latino students into a welcoming university atmosphere.

The study has practical applications for online program designers. The recommendations expressed by the participants emphasized a desire for more student interaction. Opportunities can be created for more personal interaction by allowing the students to share more about their studies and personal lives (if they desire to do so). Program designers who are tasked with higher Hispanic cultural awareness can also include opportunities for the students to share their heritage at different junctions (classes or special group projects) of a degree journey.

The study also has implications for recruiters, counselors, staff support, and instructors. University personnel can help recruit more Hispanic students by informing all affected staff concerning unique Hispanic student cultural needs and challenges. Such information should lead to practices in recruiting that bridge the potential gap in family attitudes about higher education. Successful interventions are described in this study and many more are being developed to reach out and include the Hispanic family into the university recruiting process. Recruiters and counselors who have been prepared to reach Hispanic students can also reach into the primary, middle school, and high school systems to introduce the college/university mindset into the minds of Hispanic students and Latino culture groups.

Counselors should be aware of family to school conflicts and of the potential for Hispanic discontinuity with Anglo dominated and Eurocentric learning expectations (individualistic and institutionally motivated). Such awareness can help counselors and support staff to interact with Hispanic students with more understanding and effectiveness. Support staff who help keep up with student progress, financial aid, and communications should also be aware of the special needs of many Hispanic learners.

An overall attempt to bridge potential cultural isolation will help retain and graduate more Latino degree seekers. Persistence to degree completion was accomplished by the 11 participants who were academically gifted and highly motivated students. Tinto (1993) related that university integration was a major component in student retention. This is true in the online setting also. Recruiting and retaining Hispanic students who have more difficulty overcoming online cultural isolation will require more work on the part of university staff. Marketing, advertising, and, again recruiting, should be done by people who are well trained, if not experts, in understanding Latino cultural influences. Having Hispanic staff members who have

experienced the academic journey to degree completion can be a dynamic and an integral component of a Latino recruitment and retention university program.

Delimitations and Limitations

I chose delimitations of participants between the ages of 24 and 47 years old. These numbers represented the present age spread of modern online adult students. The study mentioned that the demographics of online students are moving toward older adults and ethnic minority groups. In short, these groups represent those who need flexibility to maintain full-time employment, existing careers, and family obligations. Hispanics were chosen as a basis of the focus of the study. Online degree programs which were accredited were chosen because of expected higher academic standards and measurements along with a homogeneous access to financial aid and student support departments. An equal division of genders was desired to manifest similar or divergent experiences across gender social and academic experiences. The grouping from the South and West was chosen because of its higher current Hispanic populations and, thus, transferability of the findings to these states. Finally, the decision to limit the study to students who had completed a degree program in the last five years was made to make the findings more transferable to contemporary online learning platforms.

Limitations of the study are linked to the small sample, the geographical challenges, and the differences in Hispanic cultural influences upon first, second, and third generation Latino students. The small sample could not fully express the many experiences of Hispanic students who have accomplished program journeys around the country and in many different colleges and universities. A larger sample size might give a more transferable set of findings. However, it is doubtful that a homogeneous set of findings can be produced that would apply across the various

regions of the United States. This is because newer Hispanic populations can contain more immigrants from different countries and have less acculturated students.

The largest challenge to transferability and homogeneity is the different cultural experiences and levels of acculturation that Hispanic students possess. First-generation and many second-generation Hispanic students feel much more socially and culturally challenged in the United States educational system than many second and third-generation students. Furthermore, the many Latin American cultures that generate Hispanic United States immigrants have a broad range of cultural differences regarding formal education and gender roles. These differences make one study like this difficult to apply to the myriad of experiences of Hispanic higher education students.

Recommendations for Future Research

In consideration of my study's findings, limitations, and the delimitations I put forward several recommendations and directions for future research. I suggest three areas of further research into how Hispanic higher education students can benefit from online education. These three areas of study would each focus one or more of the following areas: 1) the marketing of online education to Hispanic students; 2) the differences in first, second, and third-generation Hispanic student learning preferences and educational cultural challenges; and 3) the effectiveness of online programs which have been designed with an emphasis to support and retain Hispanic students.

The first area of marketing would analyze how universities are advertising and recruiting Hispanic students. This phenomenological study would include participants who were newer students who have entered into an online program that has specifically recruited Hispanic learners. This could be done by finding universities which have implemented interventions to

recruit Hispanics, and then interviewing those Latinos who have entered their programs. Probably, the participants should be past their first year, so they have an idea if the program is fulfilling their expectations. A small 10 to 12 cross gender sample would be sufficient.

A larger sample size mixed qualitative quantitative study could be undertaken to ascertain what percentages of matriculated online Hispanic students are first, second, or third and fourth Latino students. Data could also be secured concerning how the students feel about their Hispanic cultural identity and how it might relate to their university studies. This type of study might yield more understanding of the differences these Hispanic student groups bring to consideration for the purposes of recruiting and support.

Finally, an institutional design study should be undertaken to compare Hispanic recruiting and retention statistics between universities which have Latino interventions, retention, and curriculum design in place and those which do not. This would be a challenging study because few online programs that I am aware of have such interventions in place. Studies of this type have been performed in comparing HSI community colleges and universities with non HSI community colleges and universities. If an online program could be found which had a valid set of Hispanic recruiting, retention, and support programs, this type of study could be performed. It would yield important statistical information about the benefits of Hispanic based intervention to online program recruitment and Hispanic university graduation rates.

Summary

This qualitative study analyzed what 11 Hispanic online student graduates attributed to their persistence to degree completion. It examined what barriers and challenges they thought they overcame in their degree journey. It also expressed the "essence" of major themes which emphasized their Hispanic identity, their personal motivational strengths, and their program

experiences. It contained specific affirmations of Tinto's (1993) Student Integration Model and contained Hispanic cultural expressions as described in the LatCrit (Gonzalez & Morrison, 2016) Latino Critical Race Theory (CRT). These expressions are useful unique voices for educators and for more Hispanic cultural awareness in education as a whole.

The study affirmed previous literature concerning the effects of Hispanic family cultural influence on the educational journeys of their children. Undereducated parents and family, gender roles, and economic needs were reported barriers for most of the participants. Hispanic stereotypes, cultural isolation, and family misconceptions about online education were also reported challenges.

Persistence to degree completion in the online environment did not include university extra-curricular involvement. Tinto (1993) had envisioned that his was a major indicator of student integration. Instead, the 11 graduates mostly thought that the online programs gave them good staff support and personalized attention (at least more than at a land-based program). However, almost all students desired more interaction with other students and some reported feeling very real isolation (both general and cultural). Nevertheless, the students overcame this because they embraced the opportunity to acquire a degree that allowed them the flexibility to work, continue their career path, and maintain family commitments. They thought a land-based program wouldn't work for them.

A major takeaway of this study was the realization that these were exceptional students, blessed with above average intelligence, perseverance, and adaptability. The study mentioned that three of the first-generation Hispanic students became valedictorians, while two of them (one first generation) graduated early from high school. Four of the five women were working and raising children while getting their degrees (four had received a master's degree). They all

persevered through various cultural, economic, and family challenges. They all considered themselves resilient, hard-working, and driven. Every one of them considered their Hispanic background and their families desire to better themselves as integral to their own sense of dedication to achievement through obstacles.

The second major surprise was that these students were not overly challenged by the lack of Hispanic cultural awareness, and that they were highly adaptable to program differences and platform styles and deficiencies. The 11 students were proactive to find the help they needed in explaining program curriculum and technology issues. They were highly aware of things that the online program designers could implement to improve interest and learning outcomes. Every single one of them had mastered their program technological requirements early in their journeys. Many of them had experiences in substandard schools in their youth. Most had studied at land-based colleges and universities. Most of them had very limited finances while on their program journey. Yet all of them adapted to the technology, social challenges, communication differences, and accelerated education of the online platform. They all graduated! Most of them do so in graduate programs. Again, this demonstrated the adaptability that Hispanic students are bringing to contemporary education.

I consider these participants, and those like them, the "pioneers" of contemporary online education. Other less motivated or academically gifted Hispanic students need more cultural support and understanding to enter into online and graduate from online programs. The social isolation and cultural vacuum in most online programs can be addressed and improved through conscious efforts to accommodate and welcome Hispanic learners in recruiting, support, and program design.

Online education directed toward Hispanic Americans will continue to increase enrollment and graduation rates. This will help in the continued narrowing of the White/Hispanic achievement gap. University marketing to Hispanics should highlight the online platform's flexibility, personal support, and social interaction. However, careful attention must be made to incorporate lessons that have been learned in studies such as this concerning Hispanic persistence, culture, and effective interventions.

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APPENDIX A: Journal entry question

In one page or less please describe your cultural/ethnic background and how it has benefitted/challenged/or not affected your persistence to degree completion in an online format.

Journal entry prompts: Family educational background, family support, economic needs, online atmosphere, student interaction, instructor interaction, understanding of Hispanic culture, program Hispanic support, Hispanic cultural values.

APPENDIX B: Theme matrix correlating questions with themes and subthemes

Major themes generated	***Sub-themes generated***	**CQ: Degree journey experiences**	**SQ1: Pre-degree attributes challenges**	**SQ2: Degree academic participation challenges**	**SQ3: Degree social participation challenges**
Family background challenges					
	Parents foreign born		X		
	Parents who didn't speak English well		X		
	Parents who were undereducated	X	X		X
	Parents who worked hard but struggled financially		X		
	Trauma of being an immigrant		X		
	Lower quality primary and secondary education	X	X		
Exceptional Students					
	All students were exceptional in academic abilities	X	X	X	
Perceived Hispanic cultural heritage					
	Perceived Hispanic Identity	X	X		X
	Following example of parents to improve their lives, seek success		X		
	Expected help from siblings	X	X	X	X
	Awakening to the importance of their Hispanic cultural identity	X	X		X

Major themes generated	***Sub-themes generated***	**CQ: Degree journey experiences**	**SQ1: Pre-degree attributes challenges**	**SQ2: Degree academic participation challenges**	**SQ3: Degree social participation challenges**
Perceived academic challenges					
	Financial hardship	X	X	X	
	Overcoming Hispanic educational stereotypes	X	X		
	English language difficulties	X	X	X	X
	Tensions related to education among bi-cultural or second and third generation Hispanic Americans		X	X	X
	Hispanic parents' concepts of education	X	X	X	X
	Hispanic traditional gender roles		X		X
	Lack of Hispanic friendly atmosphere			X	X
Perceived personal strengths					
	Persistence / hard worker	X	X		
	Self-motivated	X			
	Organized	X			
	Miscellaneous				

Major themes generated	***Sub-themes generated***	**CQ: Degree journey experiences**	**SQ1: Pre-degree attributes challenges**	**SQ2: Degree academic participation challenges**	**SQ3: Degree social participation challenges**
Positive personal academic influences					
	Relatives who had completed degrees	X	X		X
	Reliance on God, church	X			X
	Pastors, church leaders	X			X
	Family	X			X
	Positive educators	X			X
	counselors	X			X
	Social groups, networks	X			X
	Hispanic cultural supports	X			X
	Co-students	X			X
	Co-workers	X			X
Why they choose online education					
	Flexibility/work	X			
	Collective study environment	X			X
	Cost – less expensive	X			
	Learn responsibility and decision-making	X			
	Teachers and counselors more interested	X			X
	Easier to concentrate/More control of your learning	X			
	Helpful for Spanish speakers	X			X
	Specific career paths	X			

Major themes generated	***Sub-themes generated***	**CQ: Degree journey experiences**	**SQ1: Pre-degree attributes challenges**	**SQ2: Degree academic participation challenges**	**SQ3: Degree social participation challenges**
	Freedom from geographic and cultural limitations	X			
Online program challenges					
	According to student acculturation		X	X	X
	Procrastination motivation	X		X	
	Organizing your time	X		X	
	Getting used to the format	X		X	
	Response times	X		X	
	Technology issues	X		X	
	Fast pace of formats	X		X	
	Language challenges	X		X	
	Student interaction	X		X	X
	Paying as you go	X			
Advice for Hispanic students considering an online program					
	Seek accredited universities	X			
	Hispanic friendly	X			X
	Self discipline motivation	X		X	
	Be proactive	X		X	
	Expect a serious workload	X		X	
	Time management	X		X	
	Search for academic resources	X		X	
	Expect possible family misunderstandings	X			X

Major themes generated	***Sub-themes generated***	**CQ: Degree journey experiences**	**SQ1: Pre-degree attributes challenges**	**SQ2: Degree academic participation challenges**	**SQ3: Degree social participation challenges**
Recommended improvements for online programs for Hispanics					
	More updated material	X			
	More lecture options	X			
	More opportunities to network with students	X			
	More/less groups projects	X			
	More Hispanic focused recruiting	X			
	More student feedback	X			
	More instructor accountability	X			