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## College bound : factors that influence first generation college student process

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Claudia Y. Hernandez  
College Bound: Factors that  
Influence First Generation College  
Student Process

## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study explores the biopsychosocial factors that influence first-generation Latino students in their decision to attend college, including individuals' demographic characteristics, and how first generation Latino college students cope with changes in their environment when away from home. The fact that only one in ten Latino adults between the ages of 18 and 24 have a college degree (Brindis, Driscoll, Biggs, & Valderrama, 2002) is a staggering number that highlights part of the need for this study. Twelve first generation Latino College students residing in California, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and New York participated in this research study. They answered open-ended interview questions focusing on the following topics: 1) Biopsychosocial factors influencing first generation Latino students to attend college; 2) Challenges that first-generation Latino students encounter; 3) What helps students to cope more effectively during their first year of college enrollment; and 4) what helps Latino first-generation students to succeed in college. The findings showed that the greatest challenges in being a first generation college student were lack of support from immediate family; lack of information about college; and being of low socioeconomic status. All participants in this study described success as achieving their educational goals in life; helping future first generation college bound students; and being able to maintain financial stability for their own families. The findings also showed that many participants found their transition to the college environment difficult in terms of their individual autonomy and identity as a first generation Latino college student. Many affirmed the importance of having role models and

mentors in their communities during their early years in high school to help them visualize college as a real option after attaining a high school diploma. These findings suggest the importance of cultural awareness and the need for improved and accessible resources in communities where Latinos reside. Findings also suggest the need for social workers, educators, and other service providers to become knowledgeable of the strengths and challenge that first generation Latino College students may face in the process of attending college for the first time. Participants also identified resources that are necessary for higher education to implement in order to help first generation Latino students succeed in college.

**COLLEGE BOUND: FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE  
STUDENT PROCESS**

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2014

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

The Latino population within the United States has grown over the past decade from 35.3 million to 50.5 million, and now comprises 16.3% of the U.S. population (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas, & Albert, 2011). Notably, more than half of the growth in the U.S. population from 2000 to 2010 is attributed to the increase in the Latino population (Ennis et al., 2011). Yet, while the Latino population clearly constitutes a large portion of the U.S. population, our youth continue to face ongoing barriers in the pursuit of postsecondary education. Only 37% of Latino high school graduates between the ages of 18 and 24 are enrolled in college, compared to 40% of Black and 49% of White high school graduates (Santiago, 2011). Equally alarming is the fact that only one in ten Latino adults between the ages of 18 and 24 have a college degree (Brindis, Driscoll, Biggs, & Valderrama, 2002). In the 2007-2008 academic year, approximately one-half of all Latino-enrolled college students had parents whose highest level of education was a high school diploma or less (Santiago, 2011). If college enrollment and achievement gaps for Hispanic students are expected to reach the nation's degree attainment goals (Santiago, 2011), it is necessary for more Hispanic students from first generation college backgrounds to gain greater access to and success in college. This student population and their educational success will undeniably affect the future of the United States.

There are national polls that suggest that Latino students have high hopes for achieving a postsecondary education but these objectives are not always matched by outcomes. There is a combination of factors that place Latinos at a significant disadvantage compared to other ethnic groups when pursuing a college degree in the United States.

The purpose of this study was to explore the biopsychosocial factors that influence first generation Latino students in their decision to attend college, including individual demographic characteristics, and how first generation Latino college students cope with changes in their environment when away from home. This study intentionally focused on first generation Latino students because this group is found to have lower college aspirations than continuing generation college students (Brindis, Driscoll, Biggs, & Valderrama, 2002). Defining the criteria that informs whether or not a Latino student will attend college, and how they choose what college to attend will provide insight for increasing the likelihood of college enrollment and completion among this population group. Recognizing barriers and understanding their effects upon Latino students are important initial steps in raising the educational attainment of the Latino population. Findings from this study will provide information that can help high school counselors, college counselors, teachers and administrators in better exposing Latino students to college, providing resources and materials about college, and in identifying areas where greater support is needed to encourage Latino students to attend and succeed in college.

Data from existing research studies indicate that Latino adults often have lower levels of education compared to other ethnic groups. Year-after-year, statistical data demonstrates that there is a significant college graduation gap between Latino vs. non-Latino college students (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Data most often shows high disproportionate numbers between Latinos that fail to apply to college and those who opt to drop out of college during their first



year. Several factors attribute to Latino students' underrepresentation in postsecondary education. These include limited or lack of resources for higher education (Nora, 2012), academic preparedness (Boden, 2011; Murphy & Hicks, 2006), financial challenges, adjustment to college, familial support (Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998), and attachment (feeling included in the college environment) (Arbona & Nora, 2007).

Bradbury and Mather (2009) reported that in the 2003-2004 academic school year, 45% of new students enrolled in four-year institutions were first-generation students. This was especially true of Latino students who faced several obstacles in their pursuit of upward mobility. Latino students, like many of their first-generation peers, are more likely to come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, high-risk social environments, and educational systems that lag in resources. Economic resources, parental support, academic preparation, exposure to college and educational advancement, and mentoring are only some of the obstacles that first-generation Latino students face in their pursuit of college. When researchers examine actual rates of Latino college student participation, significant data emerges. A 2012 study by the Pew Hispanic Center showed that while many Latino high school graduates eventually enroll in some form of schooling, most Latino high school graduates make choices that are less likely to lead to degree completion. The discrepancy between 'degree intention' and 'degree completion' in the Latino community is real. Many Latino students delay college attendance rather than go to college immediately after graduating from high school; they pursue their studies only on a part-time basis, or they go to a community college rather than to a four-year institution (Fry, 2002).

Most research on the attrition rates of first-generation students suggests that Latinos are more likely to drop out of school during their freshman or sophomore year of study (Squire, 2013). Despite research findings that these students report the college going experience to be

stressful, most of this research fails to examine specifically first generation Latino college process and decision to attend college. A major reason for conducting the current study is the growing presence of Latinos now living in the U.S., and what supports are necessary to help first generation Latino college students' transition into college. Identification of specific barriers or challenges that prevent this population group from attending college allows administrators and other stakeholders to implement supports that are needed to help first generation students want to attend and to reach degree completion.

### **Important Operational Definitions**

For purposes of this study, the following definitions will be used:

1. Latino and Hispanic will be used throughout this study in order to reflect the diverse national origins of Latinos in the U.S. In this study, both refer to all persons of Latin American origin or descent, irrespective of language, race or culture
2. First Generation College Student indicates students whose parents or guardians have not received a college degree. The term identifies students who are the first member of their immediate family to attend college. Each participant in this study self-identified as a first generation college student.
3. Biopsychosocial Factors refer to the intersectional influence of environment, community and parental legacy; feelings, attitudes and other cognitive characteristics; and family/friends or societal influences.
4. College Success indicates Latino students who are currently enrolled and working towards degree completion.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review**

This literature review focuses primarily on research that elucidates the factors that influence first generation college student process, the decision to attend college, and how first generation Latino college students cope with changes in their environment as a result of being away from home. The chapter is divided into five sections. Section one provides the theoretical framework on which this research is based. Section two presents relevant pre-college factors and an overview of current statistics on first generation college students. Section three describes biopsychosocial factors influencing first generation Latino students. Section four addresses some of the challenges that first generation Latino students encounter, and section five identifies what helps students to cope more effectively during their first year of college enrollment in addition to considering what helps Latino first-generation students succeed in college.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

Tinto's model of student integration (Tinto, 1975) has been used widely as a framework for understanding college student persistence and departure, and is applied widely within the field of higher education (Guiffrida, 2006). Tinto's theory suggests that a student's departure from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the student, the academic environment, and social systems present within the college being attended by the student. If a student lacks academic integration (thought to be a mix of grade performance and cognitive development), lacks social integration (social interactions, relationships, and

attachment with family, peers, and teachers), and lacks willpower to overcome challenges (self-efficacy), the student will more likely have low institutional commitment and subsequently leave the institution (Tinto, 1975). Their departure suggests a mismatch in the student's biopsychosocial domains. This may especially apply to minority and diverse students' early departure from or failure to attend college, especially if they feel alienation and intimidation from the academic arena. For Latino first generation college students, it is especially important to understand precollege characteristics, institutional factors and environmental pull factors that will increase their attendance in college and support their degree completion.

Rendón (1994) suggested there can be strong pressure for ethnic group students to adjust to a new, dominant institutional culture, and that these expectations may be linked to feelings of alienation and intimidation in the college environment. Similarly, these feelings may lead students to doubt their abilities to succeed in college. Rendón (1994) suggested that faculty, staff, and administrators could provide these students with positive academic and interpersonal validation that would counter some of the challenges they faced. He believed they needed validation and support to bolster their beliefs about their abilities to be powerful learners. Similarly, Hurtado and Carter (1997) proposed "a sense of belongingness as a useful measure for recognizing that marginalized students may simultaneously maintain affiliations with multiple communities as well as for assessing specifically which forms of social interaction may be academic and social, and which can further enhance students' affiliation and identity with their colleges" (p. 328). These authors all hold in common the belief that educators and institutions must recognize that students from diverse backgrounds, including first generation Latino students, will carry with them diverse ways of being and knowing. Rather than making an attempt to eliminate these cultural differences, educators and institutions must then find suitable

ways to help these students not only to maintain their senses of identity but also to develop these senses into unique strengths that contribute to their ultimate success in college. These theoretical considerations provide the beginning of a framework for considering how institutions may best serve Latino students, especially those who are first generation college students.

It is inherently problematic to think of first generation Latino college students who are struggling with the college process in terms of a deficits model. These students possess unique strengths and resiliencies that can be capitalized upon to fuel their academic success. Nora (2012) proposes a Student or Institution Engagement Model, in which the decision to withdraw from college is influenced by pre-college characteristics, as well as institutional factors, and various environmental factors. Equally important to mention is the study conducted by Hurtado and Carter on how campus climates impact students' sense of belonging, and the importance of existing social networks (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Bourdieu (1977, 1986) alternatively suggests that students develop their future aspirations through various socialization processes and are able to work toward attaining these aspirations through their accumulation or lack of accumulation of financial, informational, social, and other resources. These researchers have in common the extent to which they are willing to consider the experience of Latino first generation college students with a strengths-based perspective.

### **Influence of Pre-College Factors**

When youth are not exposed to postsecondary education in high school, they are less likely to view college as a viable option in their own life. Family, peers, role models, and other significant figures in their environment all play a role in the way college education is perceived by Latino youth. There is some evidence to suggest that Latino youth are likely to interact in environmental systems comprised primarily of other Latinos. In 2008, Latinos in the United

States were slightly more likely than black students (39.5 % versus 38.3 %) to attend hyper-segregated schools (Schneider, Martinez & Owens, 2006). Many Latino students lack access to peers from a diverse U.S. culture, which potentially inhibits their understanding of the norms, standards, and expectations of the broader society (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2008). As a result, many Latino students may not come into contact with anyone who has gone to college or who intends to go, so the aspirations and knowledge about getting to college may never develop. Latino students are likely to attend under-resourced schools with poorer facilities and less qualified teachers than mainstream students experience (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2013). Latino students attending under-resourced schools are sent the message that their education is not a priority, which means they do not perceive it as a valuable commodity themselves.

First generation students are less likely than continuing-generation students to enroll in the college track curriculum or in rigorous high school courses like Advanced Placement classes. This often results in lower high school GPA scores (Ward, Siegel & Davenport, 2012), lower college entrance examination scores (Schmidt, 2003), and poorly written college entrance essays among first generation college students. The result and cause of these differences may lead to lower educational aspirations and higher dropout rates among first generation students compared to continuing-generation college students (Bui, 2002; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996). According to Bui (2005), these findings suggest that college aspirations in youth may develop as early as middle school, dramatically influence the choices a student makes during high school and ultimately serve as a predictor of students' likelihood to attend college. If this is the case, then a student's introduction to college should begin before high school; and the youth should see benefits from furthering their education.

By comparison, research data shows that Latino adults often have lower levels of education completion than other ethnic groups (U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, 2012); and that there is a large college graduation gap between Latino and other college students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Research also shows that a significant numbers of Latino students fail to apply to college or choose to drop out of college during their freshman year (Gándara & Bial, 2001). This may be the result of limited resources, lack of access to higher education, financial stressors, and lack of preparedness (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). As demonstrated in the consideration of the relevant theoretical framework, these findings underscore the importance of understanding the extent to which multiple factors interact to affect the educational attainment of the Latino population.

In 2012, the Pew Research Center conducted a study based on information from the U.S. Census Bureau Report, which compared high school graduates enrolled in college by race. The study found that for the first time in history, more Latino graduates (49%) were perusing high education than their non-Latino peers (47%). However, college dropout rates are also the highest among Latinos compared to any other ethnic group (Pew Research Center, 2012). While college drop-out rates are high, it appears high school drop-out rates are decreasing. In 2000, 32% of Latino high school attendees dropped out before graduation, and in 2012, this rate decreased to 15%. These rates are especially noticeable because they are approaching drop-out rates of blacks, white non-Hispanics, and Asians. Furthermore, college enrolment was on the rise for the third consecutive year in 2012, with an all-time high of 2.4 million Latino students ages 18 to 24 enrolled. Overall, Latinos make up 19 % of all college students' ages 18 to 24, an increase of 12 % from 2008. On the other hand, the number of non-Hispanic groups enrolled in college fell between 2011 and 2012 (Pew Research Center, 2012).

The U.S. Census Bureau (2012) reports that one in every four public-school students nationwide identified as Latino, and the numbers continue to grow. Latino presence varies across different school levels and these numbers seem to decrease as educational levels go up. For example, among public high school students, Latinos only make up 23 % of the total student body. Despite the increase in representation in the public-school system, there is still a significant gap between Latinos and non-Latinos with respect to educational attainment. Latino students continue to lag behind other groups in earning a baccalaureate degree; and in 2012 only 14.5 % of Latino students between ages 25 and older had earned a baccalaureate degree. Non-Hispanic/Latino students were higher in college graduation success. Of those groups, 51 % of Asians, 34.5 % of whites and 21.2 % of blacks had earned a baccalaureate degree (United States Census Bureau, 2012).

### **Biopsychosocial Factors**

There are important demographic differences between Latino first generation college students and continuing-generation students. These characteristics play an important role in motivation to attend college, location of college, and academic and social integration while in college. Latino first-generation students are more likely to be lower-income, older, have dependent children, female gender, and primary caretaker (Choy, 2001; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Gibbons and Borders (2010) clarify that despite significant interest in attending college, many first generation students have low college-going self-efficacy expectations, perceive greater barriers, have less parental educational support, have lower positive outcome expectations related to degree completion, and fear losing friends or being alone. Gibbons and Borders (2010) also found that Latino students reported more negative college-going outcome



expectations and more perceived barriers than other racial and ethnic student groups. They also found a difference between first generation college students whose parents did not attend college and those students whose parents had some postsecondary education. Latino students whose parents have some postsecondary education felt that support from school personnel would be available to them and that they could ask for help, unlike those Latino students whose parents had no postsecondary education and knew nothing about resources (Gibbons & Borders, 2010).

Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Miller (2007) found that first generation college-bound status and racial and ethnic backgrounds independently effect college-going expectations and college choices among students. They also reported that the findings of Perez & McDonough (2008) and Gibbons & Borders (2010) suggested that race and ethnicity interact with one another as they impact the college-going expectations and college choices of Latino first-generation college students.

Nearly nine in ten Latinos report that it is ‘necessary’ to get a college education in order to get ahead in life, which is much higher than any other ethnic or racial group in the U.S. (USA Today, 2009). Latino voters say that education is a top issue for them, and Latinos are generally more likely than the general public to see a college degree as key to life’s success. In its ‘Report on the Status of Hispanics in Education: Overcoming a History of Neglect’, the National Education Association highlighted the importance of examining how language, cultural, and socioeconomic obstacles impede the academic success of Latino students (March, 2007). The report goes on to say that poverty rates among Latinos are two-to-nearly three times higher than whites; and 40% of the Latino population is foreign born, which may require to attend to special needs. This warrants overhauling the educational system to respond to these concerns in order to ensure that Latino students have educational equity (NEA Report, March, 2007).

Another study by the Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (2010) found that about 50% of the nation's first generation college students are products of parents who earned no more than a high school diploma; and that Latinos made up the largest demographics of students with parents that had a high school education or less. These percentages were shown as Latino and Hispanic parents (48.5%); black or African American parents (45%); Asian parents (32%); Native American parents (35%); and Caucasian parents (28%). These percentages are higher in minority groups, primarily in Latinos, which further demonstrates the lack of Latino presence in most academic settings.

Alvarez (2011) studied Latino first generation college students in an effort to explore the meaning of their unique experience, identify strengths, and conceptualize a grounded identity theory. Her sample was comprised of participants whose parents' educational background did not exceed high school in the United States or post-secondary education outside of the U.S., and siblings who had not attended college. Participants in this study were racially and ethnically diverse with the majority of students being from Central and South America. The biopsychosocial factors examined were family environment and university environment, which described the negotiation of experiences that identifies as Latino first generation college students. Participants in this study identified specific challenges as first generation Latino college students: (1) core identities of race and ethnicity; (2) gender; (3) role as College Student, and (4) role within family which represented multiple and intersecting dimensions referring to Latino students' identity as Latino first generation college students. Alvarez (2011) found Latino first generation college students negotiated Latino values and expectations; were aware of American values and expectations besides college; and were aware of family responsibilities, and pioneering higher education. Participants in this study also reported the pressure of the

responsibility to give back to the family and to the Latino Community, and a combination of pressure and pride. Living at the intersection of these multiple worlds, which includes experiences as "the first" to attend an institution of higher education and engaging both in Latino culture and in "American" culture contributed to the additional pressure as a first generation college student experience. Participants in this study also reported receiving some support from these distinct environments that enabled them to negotiate culturally and educationally distinct worlds, which made it easier for them to transition to college.

### **Challenges**

First generation Latino students often come from low-income families that do not have the same personal capital of middle- to high-income bracket students as other privileged groups. Parents of first generation Latino students often do not have life experiences to properly guide their children through the postsecondary experience. An article by Lynch (2004) states “first generation students may be less prepared than similar students whose parents are highly educated to make informed choices that potentially maximize educational progression and benefits.” The parents of Latino first generation students often are less prepared than students whose parents are more educated and are well informed about the college processes, which can potentially maximize the student’s educational progression. Colleges and universities indeed have a responsibility to offer enough support for this population of students. The Pew Hispanic Center (2012) also highlights the divide between aspirations to attend college and the reality of actually doing so, including linguistic barriers, parents’ abilities to play an active role in their child’s education, and the student’s desire to help support their families.

Immigration policies can have a profound effect on Latino first generation college students. The political and cultural differences over undocumented immigration tend to distract

attention from the much larger number of non-alien students who study in American colleges. The Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2012) attempted to clarify the relationship between immigration status and student aid in an effort to learn more about the experience of Latino first generation college students. It compares the subgroups of first and second-generation students to one another and to the overall undergraduate student population in higher education to provide the size and makeup of the campus immigrant population, and also on the nature of immigrant students' experiences in the colleges. Over all, about 23% of all the undergraduates in the year 2007-2008 were either immigrants themselves (10 %) or the children of first generation immigrants (13%). The proportions of these college students who fell into these categories were much higher in some of the states than others. In cities like California and New York, first or second generation immigrants made up 45% and 35% of all undergraduates, respectively; whereas the total was under 15 % in both Georgia and Minnesota.

Roughly two-thirds of Latino undergraduates and a full 93% of Asian students were either first or second-generation immigrants, compared to 23% of all undergraduates. More than half (55%) of Asian undergraduates were themselves first generation immigrants. The significance of these numbers was clearer when their socioeconomic and educational backgrounds were explored. Between 32% and 38% of first and second generation Asian and Latino undergraduates were in the lowest socioeconomic bracket in the United States, compared to about a quarter of all undergraduate students. Thirty-eight percent of Asian and 55% of Latino immigrant students were the first in their generation to attend college, which was about a third of all undergraduates. About 88% of all undergraduates grew up in homes where English was the primary spoken language. Approximately 18% of Latinos' primary language was English; 26%

of Asian immigrant students spoke English; and 48% and 59% of second-generation Hispanic and Asian undergraduates spoke English. Respectively, after examining this data, we can perceive the importance in offering resources to meet the needs of these students.

Research also reveals that Latinos often have limited resources to higher education. This often is linked to one of their biggest stressors during their first year of college. Latinos are among the least educated group in the United States: 11 % of those over the age of 25 have earned a bachelor's degree or higher compared with other ethnic groups, including blacks (17%), whites (30%), and Asian Americans (49%) in the same age group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). More than one-fourth of Hispanic or Latino adults have less than a ninth-grade education (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002b). These numbers represent all Latino groups and include recent immigrants as well. When examined by the country of origin, educational attainment for Latinos varies. Mexican Americans, who are the largest and fastest growing Hispanic or Latino subgroup in the United States, have the lowest rates of education compared with other ethnic groups. Most data sets do not distinguish among Latino subgroups, disregarding the importance of culture and economic differences amongst these groups.

Other barriers to educational advancement experienced by Latino students in the United States is lack of exposure to literacy activities at home as well as in early formalized settings of the school; teacher's assessment of students' proficiency in language unduly influencing the instructional practices; and how the relationship between Latino students and their predominantly non-Hispanic teachers encourages disengagement from academic work. The lack of academic guidance pertaining to curriculum selections and college choice also impedes Latinos from attending four-year colleges.

According to Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (CCAD) (1995), Some Latino students, especially younger ones, have negative or unrealistic expectations about work, the requirements for careers, and the courses and options for postsecondary education (CCAD, 1995). The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development paints a clear picture of the many assumptions about first generation college students. While, CCAD places the blame on high school students who are not being prepared for life after High School; the real problem is in relation to the lack of information that is given to Latino High School students. One of the surveys conducted by the CCDC showed that about half of the students enrolled in general education courses other than college preparatory courses aspired to obtain careers that required a college degree, which proves that during this period of academics there was a lack of information or miscommunication from those who worked closely with the students.

### **Coping Effectively with College**

There are some federally funded programs in place that specifically target first generation Latino college students. Some of these programs were created to lend academic and tutoring services to Latino students preparing for college or to offer supports within the college setting. The problem with these programs is that they are most often not mandatory and are vastly under-utilized. A better approach is proactive, mandated mentorship and advisement between students and professors, or other staff members who can provide real world guidance to Latino first generation students. Schools with especially high numbers of first generation students, like California State University Dominguez Hills, have implemented a workforce called “101” courses to bring up the social and intellectual skills of future graduates (California State University Dominguez Hills, 2013). It is not enough to assume that first generation students inherently know how to apply classroom skills to real world situations. Researching the needs of

Latino students and implementing action priorities should be key at institutions of higher education because such intervention practices will help institutions to form a better prepared student body and stronger workforce.

Another program with proven success that helps to motivate and encourage disadvantaged students from middle school through their doctoral studies is the TRIO Program, which is a federal program that provides funds to help low-income students to gain access to and succeed in college (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Two-thirds of the students served by TRIO programs must come from the families that have incomes under \$26,000 and parents who have not obtained a bachelor's degree. About 64 % of the TRIO students are members of diverse racial and ethnic groups and about 19 % of all TRIO students are Latinos. TRIO encompasses eight federal programs, six of which help these students to gain the skills needed to prepare for, enter, and complete college through the doctoral level. These programs provide various competitive grant opportunities to the institutions of higher education, public and private agencies, to community-based organizations, and to secondary schools. TRIO also funds professional development opportunities for TRIO projects to share their best practices with the other institutions and agencies that serve low-income students, but do not have TRIO grants.

One of the programs that is covered under the TRIO Program is the Upward Bound program. In this program Latino students seem to excel academically, often reaching their goals to attend college. When compared with similar students in a control group, Latino students who participated in Upward Bound earned more high school credits, and also were less likely to drop out of high school and to attend four-year colleges. ([www2.ed.gov](http://www2.ed.gov), 2014) Programs with demonstrated success often offer support in college preparation, encouraging Latino students to continue educational goals.

According to the Department of education, data shows that Latino students benefit significantly from participating in different school programs (Department of Education, 2014). There are many programs in place around the U.S. but not all public schools offer them. Colleges and universities also should place continued focus on developing skills and employability among minority students like Latino first generation college students.

### **Summary**

There is a paucity of literature on factors that influence first generation Latino college process. This lack of literature may result from the relatively recent focus placed on Latino college students. Another reason for the scarcity of research may be due to the lack of first generation Latino college students attending four-year colleges. However, more recent literature shows an increase in first generation Latino college students pursuing a four year college degree or higher. There also is a possibility that many Latino students that are enrolled in four-year colleges may be reluctant to participate in research studies due to their immigration status. Latino student reluctance to participate in these types of studies primarily comes from parents that have distrust of authority figures. Therefore, many Latinos may be skeptical that participating in research would benefit them.

Traditionally throughout Latino families, families maintain a close relationship, which may prevent Latino students from branching out to colleges away from home. This also may persuade first generation Latino college students to attend community colleges instead of perusing a college degree from four-year universities out of state and away from home. An individual perspective is especially useful in understanding college process among first generation Latino students and type of resources needed to help these students succeed when attending college for the first time. As we continue to research this particular population, we are



able to identify those resources that need to be put in place in order to facilitate a better learning environment for Latino students. Furthering research with this population provides a context for exploring the unique experiences of Latino college students and their strengths and challenges balancing acculturation with transition to college. Social workers, schools and communities must integrate services with cultural sensitivity and competency in order to most effectively serve this growing population of first generation Latino college students (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007).

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

The methodology for this research is described in five sections: study design, sampling procedures, data collection, analysis and protection of human subjects.

#### **Study Design**

The purpose of this research study was to identify biopsychosocial factors that influence first generation college students' decision to attend college. This study used qualitative data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Twelve first generation Latino students who either graduated from a four-year college or were in the process of obtaining a college degree from a four year institution were individually interviewed to obtain data on their decision to attend college, as well as family influence, exposure to mentors, friends and peers who attended college, exposure to college resources, financial supports and cost, socioeconomic status of parents, and resources while attending college. All interviews were transcribed and emerging themes were interpreted and analyzed for interpretation.

A qualitative research design was used for this study in order to properly investigate the richness of the subjective experiences of the participants. Qualitative questions allowed each participant the opportunity to share personal strengths and challenges as a first generation college student. The questions contained in the interview were open-ended to elicit narrative responses that described in depth the challenges, shifts, changes, and transitions to college experienced by

the Latino participants in this study. Gathering narrative data from participants was especially appropriate for this type of study.

### **Sampling Procedures**

This study used the semi-structured interview. I used several key open-ended questions to obtain data for my exploratory areas. This allowed me to deviate in order to pursue a participant's response in more detail, if needed. This sampling procedure provided some direction but allowed the participants to talk about that which was most important to them in answering the questions. The flexibility of this approach allowed for discovery and elaboration of information that was important to the participants, and allowed room for them to respond to information that may not have previously been considered by them.

I recruited participants by posting a recruitment flyer on bulletin boards at local colleges and universities in the Atlanta area. Social media also was used to recruit participants. Flyers were purposely posted on Facebook and craigslist to help attract younger generation Latino college students and to help create a snowball effect. Recruitment efforts were also disseminated through professional colleagues and peers.

Criteria for participation in the study included: self-identification as Latino; self-identification as a first generation college student, fluent English speaker, a current student at, or graduate of a 4-year college, and between the ages of 18-35. I contacted eligible participants who responded to these recruitment measures and explained the study. Consent forms (see Appendix A) and the interview guide (see Appendix C) were mailed to all participants before conducting the interviews in order to give them ample time to review the information and fully consent to participation. Prior to beginning all interviews, I explained the informed consent before obtaining a written signature. Each participant signed two informed consent forms. I

kept one copy and one copy was given to the participant for their records. Participants also signed consent to be either audiotaped or videotaped during the interview (see Appendix B). Participants in this study were recruited from California, Georgia, New York, North Carolina and Texas.

### **Instruments and Data Collection**

I utilized an informed consent form that provided an overview of the study, procedures, potential risks, benefits, participant rights and researcher contact information to report concerns or to contact the researcher (Appendix A); signature page for audiotaping (Appendix B); Screening Questions (Appendix C); demographic questions (Appendix D), and 26 open-ended interview questions (Appendix E).

I conducted all the interviews face-to-face in a secure location chosen by the participant. These locations included place of employment, agreed upon location near the participant's home, and four interviews conducted by Skype. The interviews lasted on average one to one-and-a-half hours. I recorded all the interviews with a recorder and took notes by hand. The interview questions were designed to focus on several aspects of the college process. The participants were asked about their decision to attend college; family influence; exposure to mentors, friends and peers who attended college; exposure to college resources; financial supports and costs; socioeconomic status of parents; and resources while attending college. Data collection took place from January 8, 2014 through March 30, 2014. Once all interviews were completed, they were transcribed and organized according to interview questions and then analyzed for thematic findings.

## **Data Analysis**

I used written notes to focus on key aspects of the participant's responses and behavior and an audiotape recorder to ensure accuracy of all participant responses. Before beginning the interviews, I reviewed the informed consent forms with participants and allowed them to raise questions if they had concerns or queries. I obtained written authorization for audio or video recording and obtained demographic information in order to acquire background information on participants. Demographic data was later placed in a table for easy viewing.

I separated all of the participants' responses according to the interview question. For example, all the responses for question one were placed in one section; all the responses for question two were placed in a different section, etc. Once this was completed, I looked for common themes through content analysis. Content analysis allowed me to code consistent themes that emerged throughout the interviews, which were identified as common words, statements or phrases used by participants. Finally, I selected clear and concise quotes from the participants that I intended to use in my findings chapter.

I integrated both emic and etic perspectives (Rubin & Babbie, 2007) in the process of creating the interview guide, conducting the interviews, and in interpreting the data. From an emic perspective of taking an insider's view, I approached the participants with as much understanding as possible about common experiences faced by first generation college students. From an etic perspective of maintaining an outsider's objectivity, I asked participants to explain and elaborate their responses as though their audience lacked prior knowledge. This approach also allowed participants to view their experience from a new perspective, by answering questions they may not have previously considered.

## **Protection of Human Subjects**

The recruitment flyer, informed consent form, demographic questions, and 26 open-ended interview questions were submitted with my Human Subjects Application for the protection of human subjects to the Smith College Human Subjects Review Committee. The application was reviewed by the committee and was approved on January 4, 2014 (Appendix F).

## **Study Limitations**

There are limitations to this study. The small sample size necessitates that generalizations should not be drawn with respect to the entire Latino population on the basis of the results found in this study. This study also chose to address factors that influenced the college decision making process among Latino students in general. It is likely that there are important regional and institutional differences that this study will not capture. For example, the decision to attend Hispanic serving institutions, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and majority serving institutions, including tribal colleges and universities. Geographic differences may also play an important role; a Latino student who attended a public high school in Georgia may have very different experiences and expectations than a Latino student who attended a public high school in California. Further research is recommended on the ways in which these differences may potentially influence the college decision making process, but they are beyond the scope of the current research. This study focuses on an important and specific population and examines their unique experiences in order to offer insight and recommendations for addressing Latino barriers to a postsecondary education.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Findings**

This qualitative study explored the biopsychosocial factors that influence first generation Latino students in their decision to attend college, including individuals' demographic characteristics, and how first generation Latino college students cope with changes in their environment when away from home. The study used open-ended interview questions to identify:

- 1) Biopsychosocial factors influencing first generation Latino students to attend college
- 2) Challenges that first-generation Latino students encounter during their transition
- 3) Variables that help students to cope effectively during their first year of college
- 4) Supports that help Latino first generation students to succeed in college.

This study's findings are presented in two sections: 1) Demographics and 2) Themes.

#### **Demographics**

I interviewed twelve participants that self-identified as Latino/as and either was studying for their bachelor's degree or had completed their bachelor's degree. Three participants were currently working on their masters' degree; and one participant had completed a second masters' degree. All participants were required to complete a demographic survey before beginning the interview, which ranged from 10 – 15 minutes long. All participants in this study self-identified as Latino first generation college students. Sixty-seven percent (n = 8) of the participants were female and 33% (n = 4) were male. All participants ranged in age between 21 – 30 years, with 33% (n = 4) of the participants between the ages of 21 – 24 and 67% (n = 8) were between the

ages of 25 – 30. Thirty three percent (n = 4) of the participants were currently enrolled in undergraduate programs, 33% (n = 4) had completed their undergraduate degree, and 25% (n = 3) had completed their undergraduate degree and were in graduate school at the time of this study. Nine percent (n = 1) of the participants had completed a second master's degree. Participants also were asked their Latino subgroup. Thirty three percent (n = 4) of the participants self-identified as Mexican; 16% Puerto Rican (n = 2), 16% Dominican (n = 2), 9% (n = 1) Salvadorian, 9% (n = 1) elected to simply report Latina; and individually, the remaining participants self-reported as ½ Philippina /½ Salvadorian (n = 1), ½ Guatemalan/½ White (n = 1). Forty-two percent (n = 5) of participants reported their income between \$45,001 - \$55,000 and 33% (n = 4) reported their income to be less than \$15,000. Table 1 shows these demographics.



Table 1. Participant Demographics

Question	Level	Percent of Participants	Percent of Participants
Gender	Male	4	33%
	Female	8	67%
	Total	12	100%
*Level of Education	Currently Enrolled	4	33%
	4 Year Degree	4	33%
	4 Year Degree, working on a Master's Degree	3	25%
	Master's Degree	1	9%
	Total	12	100%
Age	21 – 24	4	33%
	25 – 30	8	67%
	Total	1	100%
Parental Family Income	<15,000	4	33%
	15,001 – 25,000		
	25,001 – 30,000	1	9%
	30,001 – 35,000		
	35,001 – 45,000	2	16%
	45,001 – 55,000	5	42%
	>than 55,001		
	Total	12	100%
Latino Subgroup	½ Philippina/ ½Salvadorian	1	8.5%
	½ Guatemalan/½ White	1	8.5%
	Mexican	4	33%
	Puerto Rican	2	16%
	Dominican	2	16%
	Salvadorian	1	9%
	Latina w/out subgroup	1	9%
	Total	12	100%
Enrolled in College of Choice	Yes	8	67%
	No	4	33%
	Total	12	100%

\*One participant has completed two Master's degrees, and another three students were working on a Masters degree. Thus, four students completed the baccalaureate degree and either completed or working on a Masters degree.

## **Common Themes**

The study used open-ended interview questions to identify factors that influenced first generation college student process among the twelve participants in this study. As previously mentioned, open-ended questions were used to determine: 1) Biopsychosocial factors influencing first generation Latino students to attend college; 2) Challenges first-generation Latino students encounter during their transition to college; 3) Variables that help first-generation students to cope effectively during their first year of college; and 4) Supports that help Latino first-generation students to succeed in college.

## **Biopsychosocial Factors**

For purposes of this study, biopsychosocial factors reflected influence of environment, community and parental legacy; feelings, attitudes and other cognitive characteristics; and family/friends or societal influences. The top four factors that were identified by participants in this study were parental expectations/aspirations; peers/friends; teachers/mentors; and military experience/community. Of the total respondents, 67% (n = 8) reported parental expectations and aspirations contributed significantly to their decision to attend college; and 58% (n = 7) contributed teachers/mentors for their enrollment in college. The remaining participants attributed peers/friends (50%, n = 6) and military/community (42%, n = 5), respectively. Participants 2, 3, and 12 gave especially salient examples of these influences. Participant 2 reported, "...since I was really young my mom always wanted me to go to college because my older siblings never did and she said America offers good education and free education and she wanted me to obtain that so-called American dream." Participant 3 stated, "...my mom always encouraged me to further my education even though she didn't really know how to do it." Participant 12 stated:

My mom was really set on me going and so it was kind of always talked about. I think my mother wanted to go to college and wasn't able to do so ... so she set that goal and I set some goals and the things I wanted to do needed a college education so those were the two biggest reasons

Participant 1 spoke of the positive influence of her friends:

I knew through my friends, I knew I had to take at least one AP class to start to look attractive to college. I was in the college prep class, which was totally fine, but I asked to be placed in the more advanced classes. I had to ask for it, they weren't just going to give it to me. That was pretty annoying. But my peers were that influence in terms of "you need to take these classes so you can be more attractive to these colleges.

Several participants spoke about the role the military played in their education. Participant 9 said that his guidance counselor encouraged him to attend college but he chose the military instead. While in the military, "... one of my POs pulled me aside and told me about free schooling and all the nine yards and that is how I fell into it". Other participants attributed military recruits, guidance counselors or work supervisors for introducing college to them. Participant 7 said,

When the recruiter came and told me I should join the Marine Corps so I could go to college for free. It helped a lot as far as getting me in, getting me into community college and helping me get accepted into the Naval Academy.

Participant 8 reported that his reason for attending college centered on his wanting to be an officer:

The idea was planted ... I didn't intend to go to college, the reason I did was because I wanted to be an officer and I needed a Bachelor's degree so I enrolled in college as soon as I could and went ever since.

Participant 10 decided to go to college when she was volunteering in a Department of Family and Children Services agency:

I was volunteering for a DFACS office and had just gone into the military, but I had sometime so I was volunteering at this place and I remember one of my co-workers who was just a little bit older than I was, asked me if I was in school and I guess I just remember asking myself 'why am I not in school?'" I think that was the first time anyone had ever asked me anything related to college.

The majority of the participants recognized family as the motivation for their academic success and college choice. Participants viewed their parents' struggles, hard work, sacrifices and limited resources as motivation for them to obtain a college degree to escape poverty and be able to care for their own families. Some participants reported they wanted a better life for themselves and their own families than their parents had, while other simply said they wanted 'to eliminate the struggles their parents went through'.

### **Challenges of First Generation College Students**

The two major challenges that were identified by the participants in this study were academic integration /preparation and lack of knowledge about the college experience. Of the total respondents, 58% (n = 7) equally identified academic integration/preparation and lack of knowledge about the college experience as major challenges for them as first generation Latino

college students. Fifty percent (n = 6) reported college tuition rates/financial aid as challenges; and the remaining participants reported family unable to related to the college experience (42%, n = 5), lack of mentoring relationships (42%, n = 5) and location of college (42%, n = 5) as challenges for them.

Feeling under-prepared to attend college, and a lack of knowledge about college were two major themes expressed by participants. Participants 5, 6, 9, 10 and 12 spoke directly to these themes. Participant 5 confessed:

I did not feel prepared the first time I went – understanding how college works. When I first started college I didn't understand what a student account was, how to get book money, how to pull money from the college account and get book money, they weren't very explanatory, you had to just figure it out on your own. The transition was a big eye opener, it was a lot more serious, like the school work. It was a lot more time consuming... I didn't get enough sleep because I had so much work to do. I'd start in the morning and sometimes not get out of class until midnight.

Participant 6 reported similar frustrations:

Not knowing what questions to ask, not knowing how to navigate a system, in general I was never really good at school but I know that it is good for me and good that I attended. Just a lot of being lost and I think part of it was because I had gone to a community college before, when you transfer, you don't get an orientation, your credits are just considered that you know what you are doing. Sometimes I wish that I did take that orientation, but I didn't.

Participant 9 spoke about the desire for a role model to help navigate the process:

I really didn't have that guidance, or advice from my parents and they are the ones I go to for everything. Adjusting was hard that first year, having to figure out how many classes I could do. The transition was smooth because I had really good help from the civilians on base. I have a math tutor because I hate math. I have a mentor in the Marine Corps, but not a mentor as far as college goes. The mentor is able to point out career paths and what might be best for me, even if it just comes down to personal issues they are able to help me.

Participant 10 highlights the importance of a supportive academic environment:

I think there were a few classes that were really hard for me the first year that I started at that four year college, but I definitely had some support. The school I attended had tutors and they were free so I took advantage of that whenever I needed that extra help. As far as being prepared the first time I went...the first school I attended that I ended up moving away from, I don't think I was prepared at that time. I was really young. It was definitely really tough and you know ... I remember that I really struggled with my writing that first year because the professor that I had at the time in my lit class would often give us essays to write and I remember I really wasn't scoring that high on those essays and I think it had a lot to do with the language barrier. So that was really tough for me that year. Other than that I don't think they had tutors in the area. My second time around going to college, it was a lot easier and I had enough support around me.

Participant 12 points out that “preparedness” was something that evolved the more time they spent in school:

By the time I got there, yes, because I had spent two years at a community college. When I got to community college, I don't think I was prepared at all... um... but, by the time I was done with that and did end up going to a four-year college, I think I was prepared. If you are asking if I was prepared right out of high school I would say no. I didn't know what I was getting into at all, even things like how to put together a class schedule and the registration process ... it was kind of hard to do it on my own, even going into the school and applying, these were all things I did by myself.

Overall, these participants highlight that a lack of preparedness can feel overwhelming and certainly have negative effects on their experience in school. However, more striking, is the powerful effect that positive role models have the potential to have on the experience of the first generation Latino college student.

### **Coping Strategies for Participants in the First Year of College**

When asked about coping strategies that were meaningful to participants during their first year of college, the majority of participants spoke about the importance of finding a school that was a “good fit” and the cultural climate of the campus. More than half (58%,  $n = 7$ ) stated that feeling comfortable and welcomed on campus and being able to establish relationships and seek resources were important to relieving stress and helping them to cope. Participants underscored the importance of support from networks of peers, family, and mentors and the ways this facilitated their to college. Participant 1 described a welcoming campus climate “... I felt welcomed there. It was a laid back place and it made me feel at home”. Participant 2 visited the

college before attending and stated, “It felt like home right away; it was very nice.” Participant 3 researched the college before attending and found that “... it had a large non-traditional student population and I liked that. It was relatively close to my family and where I was planning to move when I got out.” Participant 5 stated that being at home with the family was important and eliminated pressure and stress. Participant 6 also stated the college “was close to home ... and that that was important.” Participant 7 said “...having mentors on campus, having tutors ... knowing that there were resources to help ... family support helped to cope that first year”. Other participants spoke of peer groups and friends, having study groups and having parents or teachers to talk to made it easier to cope. Participant 2 also reflected on the importance of being strong and steadfast when dealing with stress and learning to cope during transition.

I think like they say ... work hard and you'll do good. You'll be fine. It will be hard but never let someone's opinions put you down. It's a hard and long process and no one understands – like “why four years that's a long time ... and you could just get a career at a two year school or just get any training.... [When you're down,] just stay strong and have good communication with those that do encourage you.

## **Challenges**

Participants also spoke of many factors that were stressful for them during their attendance at four-year institutions. The most stress-producing factors were being away from home and away from family, friends and support groups, language barriers, lack of preparation for the college process, financial challenges, struggling with day-to-day pressures in demanding classes, teacher expectations;, feeling isolated, being the first in the family to attend college, and not knowing how to navigate the system. Familial involvement and connections with family,



peers, and university personnel, i.e., professors, mentors and resources, were critical to the coping of Latino first generation participants in this study.

### **Motivators for College Success**

All twelve (100%) of the participants in this study reported that financial stability for self and family was the key and motivating source for their success and motivation to attend college. Each of the participants spoke of the hardships of their parents, the sacrifices and difficulties that had been made by their parents, and how they wanted a life better than that of their parents. There was a strong sense of obligation towards family among the participants in this study and some participants obtained a bachelor's degree to honor their parents as well as to secure a well-paid career for themselves and their own families. Participant 1 spoke about how early family experiences had motivated their desire for a better future:

“That it would lead to a better future for me, whether you know, what I would provide for my children in terms of financial and emotional needs that they may have and also I knew that it would improve my career path. I guess some background for why I'm answering this way, both my parents immigrated from their countries and when they came here ... so my father... he grew up in a pretty poor family in the Philippines, so he came here and started off as a bus boy. My mother came from a middle class family in El Salvador and when she came here she started off in a hotel like as a hotel maid. I'm not saying that I had an awful childhood, I just knew that I wanted to provide more.”

Similarly, Participant 3 reported: “For me to be able to provide for my family ... to be able to live comfortably, not having to worry about where the next mortgage payment is coming from, having food in the fridge for my kids”. The remaining participants all also spoke of their desire

to achieve more financial stability in order to improve the quality of their (and their family's) lives.

The second most highly reported variable for college success among this participant group was belief in self, mentors and tutors (42%, n = 5). Participants identified the following four actions as critical for first generation Latino college student success.

### **Social connection to first generation students**

The participants in this study stated their transition to college was a stressful period, and was oftentimes frightening. They reported the need to obtain support from others, whether these individuals were professors, peers, mentors and or tutors. They also reported that joining clubs and organizations, especially ethnic and cultural groups was important. Participant 1 stated:

It is helpful for first generation Latino students to know there are other organizations with people who are like you, having that experience. ... I was in culture shock... it was scary ... and at the same time exciting. I wish I had sought out more resources, more peer related stuff.

Participant 2 spoke about the support networks inherently available in the school's structure:

My school had a thing where once you were a freshman, an upper classman would take you under their wing, without you realizing that they were taking care of you, they encourage you to do this... to do that... to try new classes... to even look at your schedule. I didn't even know this person was my quote un quote mentor until my sophomore year, but it was helpful.

### **Access to a variety of programs**

Several participants spoke of the need to utilize on and off campus resources. Some of the participants took advantage of mentoring programs, as previously mentioned as well as the

variety of programs designed to help minority and first generation students. Some of the participants took advantage of services offered by the offices for ethnic minority students, including student advising programs, tutorial programs, career centers, and financial aid programs. Because many of the participants in this study did not know how to navigate the college process and or felt misunderstood and disconnected, these programs proved helpful to their success in college. Two students spoke of being mentored by upper classmen.

### **Expressing feelings**

Sharing their feelings and communicating with other Latino students also proved helpful to many participants in this study. Many of the participants found comfort and encouragement in communicating their experiences with family and friends. Some participants, however, felt isolation and disappointment in the lack of understanding and knowledge of their parents about the college process. For these participants, reliance and support from peers and teachers became important to their success.

### **Mentoring and access to faculty**

Mentoring and access to college professors also was reported as important to the participant's success. Being able to meet with college professors and or to ask questions brought confidence and belief that they could succeed in college. Participant 12 spoke about mentoring siblings and helping prepare them for the college process as a way of passing on learned experience:

When it was time for my sisters [to attend college], there was more of an understanding so my parents were more involved and even I sat down with my sisters and made their first college schedule and helped them fill out FAFSA and all of those things. Even know that if there is a question I'm the one who gets the

phone call of ‘how do I do this’. It’s what is expected of me. I didn’t really have that person. I had to figure it out because there wasn’t anyone else around who knew.

### **Supports for First Generation College Success**

All participants in this study (100%, n = 12) addressed the importance of family, financial aid, mentors, tutors, and environment as important to their success as first generation Latino students. Participants identified desired income level, family involvement, resources and obtaining financial aid as key components to their success. Academic readiness, tutors, mentors and preparation for the college process were equally as important. Many of the parents of participants in this study proved to be great sources of support and motivation for the participants, and exercised much influence over the participants. The lack of college going experience and knowledge of the participants’ parents were barriers to their academic, social and cultural transitions to college life. How these participants learned to navigate the system on their own, and the help of mentors or other resources, impacted their ability to succeed in college.

### **Additional Findings**

Participants in this study identified necessary supports to help first generation Latino students attend and succeed in college. Their responses are as follows:

Participant 1:

“I think being exposed and to be given or shown, or educated about the different options that are available and to know about financial aid resources...so not only the, you know, student loans, but the fact that there are scholarships and awards....I feel like the schools need to do a better job – you know the high school counselors, more accessible, even if it’s just freshman year doing a workshop for everyone, to kind of see ... these are the different classes you can take—but you

are just kind of led into whatever track someone decides [and this may not be the best choice sic].

Participant 2:

“I think having programs in colleges, but I think most do, but I think each school should have a community, a multi-cultural office in which you know the student feels welcomed and they can learn about all the resources there, and get encouraged and also get a mentor.”

Participant 3:

“Letting students know it’s possible to go to college. Letting them know if they want to go, they have all these tools available to them. Have college be a real choice for Latino students. Making sure even from the time they are young, continue to talk to them about college because I would assume that that is not happening at home. If I were a counselor, I would talk to my elementary school kids – the Latinos and the other kids about college.

Participant 4:

“I would advise high school students to take all the opportunities to get all the scholarships you can...apply for FAFSA, grants... explain the difference between student loans, grants, scholarships. I would share my own experiences, my struggles so they can put it into their own life. Everyone’s life is different. Get parents and families involved... helping them, guiding them. I would use pamphlets, parent conferences, newsletters and the internet as sources to get the word out about college.”

Participant 5:

“I think if someone in the family has experience already in that field...like if my parents had gone to college they would have been able to give me advice...how it is supposed to go, what to expect, to have someone mentor you or lead you in the way to go. The colleges have to be more

willing to give information, maybe hold a class or even give a list of instructions on what to do when you first get there – how everything works...I think families need to be more supportive of our children and our dreams, rather than keep us in this culturally tight expectation...”

Participant 6:

“I think there will have to be a cultural shift. I wasn’t raised knowing about college. I always heard about college from outside influences, not so much in the house. I think until that happens, you can’t expect schools or public service campaigns to fix that...it’s a cultural thing.”

Participant 7:

“I think being pushed towards more AP classes, more difficult classes, going to community college. What worked for me was joining the Marine Corps...I guess overall finding the resources and being proactive about finding them. ...Also seeking mentors...if you don’t find one where you are, find someone who has gone to college...another guidance counselor....another school.”

Participant 8:

“The biggest thing would be parents. I don’t know how everyone else’s parents are, but they should encourage their children to go to college. That was a factor for me...my parents always told me not to be like them. They used themselves as an example to not emulate...to make sure I went to school. Start in the home...value education”.

Participant 9:

“...it’s a well known fact that you need education to progress in the real world. I guess the Education Centers are important. I wandered around...looked at pamphlets...looked at the bulletin boards to see what I would qualify for.”

Participant 10:

“...in order for Latinos to go to college and for rates to go up, I think parents have to be educated... invite parents to school to show them what is available for their children... expose them to opportunities for their children...”

Participant 11:

“...you need to know that you need a college diploma rather than a two year diploma...or a dual diploma. More information is needed on financial aid...that there is free money out there and to apply for it...it’s not hard. Don’t be afraid to ask questions. There are people out there to answer questions. For college students, it’s that you are always learning, maybe you will have a downfall because you are not used to the material given in college but you need to step it up, get advice, don’t be afraid of changing majors...”

Participant 12:

“Based on my experience...more of an effort needs to be put in place on talking to parents. Even now parents are so important in what their children do and how they view education is a real indicator of how their children are going to view education. So more outreach to parents on how to get into college and what that means....Parents are such a vital part of their children’s education and they have no idea about the process.”

### **Summary**

The twelve participants in this study reported the importance of financial independence and caring for family as important to their college success. All participants mentioned family either as the direct or indirect force beyond their desire to complete college. For example, either the parents consistently addressed the importance of an education and improving oneself or the participants wanted more for themselves than their parents had. All of the participants saw a college degree as a way out of “poverty”. These participants discussed how their parents’

struggles, hard work and ongoing sacrifices kept them motivated to succeed and improve their own lives. Many wanted their parents to be proud of them and to be able to give back to their parents and families.

Participants in this study also reported the importance of mentors, tutors and access to college professors. The majority of participants in this study did not know about the college process and did not know how to navigate the collegial system. Having someone to assist them or support them in their journey was important to them. Financial aid was the tipping point for many of these participants' enrollment in college; yet none of them were familiar with the financial aid application process, how to seek funds, and what funds and or scholarships were available to them. Due to their parents' lack of education and familiarity with the college process, they were not able to assist the participants in this study with college application, financial aid applications, what to expect from college, and how to deal with challenges.

Participants in this study also spoke of the importance of educating parents to the college process, inviting parents to workshops and to schools to show them what is available for their children, to discuss college opportunities, and to inform parents of funding sources for their students. Participant 6 and Participant 8, in particular, spoke of a cultural shift and the need to work with parents. These participants stated that parents are the key to Latino first generation students going to college and succeeding.

Lastly, participants in this study provided specific recommendations for first generation Latino's success in college and what resources are needed to ensure their success. Among the most vital resources was the need for high school and college mentors, tutoring programs, multi-cultural offices and programs on college campuses, a how-to book about college with specific information on navigating financial aid and the college process, and involving parents in their



children's education through meetings, support groups and social media distributions such as newsletters, brochures, pamphlets, television, personalized letters and home visits.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to identify biopsychosocial factors that influence first generation college students' decision to attend college, including individuals' demographic characteristics, and how first generation Latino college students cope with changes in their environment when away from home. This study used qualitative data collection and analysis for interpretation. Research data shows that Latino adult education attainment levels are lower than other ethnic groups (U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, 2012); and that there is a large college graduation gap between Latino and other college students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). The data also confirms that a significant number of Latino students fail to apply to college or choose to drop out of college in their freshman year (Gandara & Bial, 2001). Limited resources, lack of access to higher education, financial stressors, and lack of academic preparation interact to contribute to the underperforming rates of first generation Latino college completion (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). This type of research suggests the need to identify barriers that affect Latino college process and gain understanding on how to raise the educational attainment of the Latino population.

My research was based upon the assumption that psychosocial factors, lack of knowledge about the college process, and family are critical components of Latino college success. The current study's findings found that all participants identified financial stability in relation to self and family as the primary motivator and drive to attend and to succeed in college. Study

participants reported the need to accomplish more and to do better than their parents. For them, seeing the struggles and hardship of their parents and their own desire to do better for themselves and their own families was the determining factor for their decision to attend college.

Participants also wanted their parents to be proud of them and to take advantage of the American Dream, the land of plenty. Every participant connected their academic success and motivation to their family, which speaks of the deep familismo values ingrained in the Latino community.

Within the Latino community, familismo is very important to our well-being and exemplifies our strong ties to immediate and extended family. Pride, belongingness and family obligation continue to be attributes of Latino families despite length of time within the U.S. As such, families are a critical support system for Latinos. Related to this, are the participant's desires to achieve financial stability. Overall, the results of this study privilege the value of the family system over the individual, which is not surprising in a Latino sample.

Participants also identified access to financial aid and scholarships as necessary for their matriculation through college. Access to college is a direct consequence of lower socioeconomic status for many Latino students. Without financial aid, college is prohibitive for many students; and the economic status of Latino populations is lower than that of other groups. Latino parents in most instances are unable to financially support their children's education and without knowledge and access to funding opportunities, these students are omitted from higher education attainment. Because many of the parents of the participants in this study did not themselves attend college, they lacked the knowledge and ability to help these participants explore what opportunities availed them. This disadvantage often stems from parents' immigrant and socioeconomic status and their lack of knowledge about the U.S. Education System (Schneider, Martinez & Ownes, 2006).

The biopsychosocial findings of this study, i.e., family, peers and friendship groups, tutoring programs and teachers/mentors as important factors for Latino college student success, are consistent with other research findings (National Hispanic Caucus of State Legislators (NHCSL), April 2004; Nelson & DeBacker, 2008; Spencer, 2013; The Education Trust, 2003). These factors were rated highly by the participants in this study. The participants in this study took mentoring very seriously and saw it as an important part of their college success. Participants who preceded their siblings became mentors for their siblings and helped them to navigate the college process. The majority of parents in this study knew the importance of education and as previously mentioned, either directly or indirectly, impacted the participants' decision to attend college.

Lastly, participants in this study offered viable recommendations to increase education attainment among Latino students. Participants offered personal insight for improving the education of Latino students. These recommendations included: (1) inform parents and family members when their children are in middle and high school about access to college and provide supports for them to help their children to attain a degree; (2) improve the college-readiness and participation rates of high school graduates by assigning or providing them tutors, mentors and workshops about the college process while these students are still in high school; (3) require students to take AP classes while in high school to prepare them for college choices; (4) guarantee financial aid and access to funding opportunities for all need-based Latino students; (5) develop a 'how-to' book about college with specific information on navigating financial aid and the college process for Latino students and their families; and (6) involve parents in their children's education through meetings, support groups and social media distributions such as

newsletters, brochures, pamphlets, television, personalized letters and home visits. We cannot overlook that familismo values are deeply rooted within the Hispanic/Latino community.

Findings from this study align current literature in the field. Results of the present study found financial stability in relation to self and family (100%), biopsychosocial factors (67%), and teachers/mentors, academic integration/preparation, lack of knowledge about the college process and college location and climate (58% respectively) to be critical components to Latino education attainment. Bui (2002) suggests that by attending college, first-generation students feel they bring status and honor to their families. The participants' responses in this study were similar to the research conducted by Acker-Ball on the "Influence of family on First Generation College Students' Educational Aspirations Post High School" (Acker-Ball, 2007). Acker-Ball links socioeconomic level and parental involvement as a significant impact upon a student's educational achievement in a post-secondary institution. It also validates the importance of family, peers, financial support, tutoring and mentoring programs for these particular students (Acker-Ball, 2007).

### **Future Recommendations**

This study should be duplicated with a larger sample population from a greater radius. If this is done, some of the interview questions can be modified or deleted. As is, it is a rather lengthy interview and some questions are duplicative.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

Latino students have lower college attainment than other minority groups. Many Latino students either do not apply to college or drop out during their freshman year. Therefore by defining those criteria that Latino students use to choose college and how they arrive at the decision to attend college, we have the opportunity to increase the likelihood of college

enrollment and completion among this population group. Recognizing barriers and understanding their effects upon Latino students are important initial steps in raising the educational attainment of the Latino population. Findings from this study provides information that is helpful for high school counselors, college counselors, teachers and administrators in better exposing Latino students and their families to college, providing resources about college, and identifying areas where greater support is needed to encourage Latino students to attend and succeed in college. Recommended resources and outreach activities are provided to assist outreach to Latino students.

The profession of social work is committed to act to expand choice and opportunity for all people, with special regard for vulnerable, disadvantaged, oppressed, and exploited people and groups (Social Work Code of Ethics, 6.04 Social and Political Action). As social workers we are vested in helping those in need and advocating for the rights of access of all individuals to equal opportunity. The fact that Latinos have the lowest level of educational attainment is a substantial social problem that must be addressed by the profession. We must acknowledge the needs, barriers and challenges that this population group faces and assist them in building more positive outcomes for self and families. The success of Latino students positively impacts health outcomes, employment outcomes, family outcomes and economic outcomes, and ultimately decreases the racial and educational divide that exist in the United States (Santiago, 2011).

## **Summary**

There are several reasons why Latino students either do not attend college or fail to complete their degree when attending. These reasons range from lack of knowledge about the college process, lack of financial aid or funding assistance to attend college, lack of academic integration/preparation for college, unwelcoming college environment/cultural climate, lack of mentoring and tutoring programs, family lack of knowledge about how to access college and what is needed, and poor advisement while attending high schools, as well as poor integration and adjustment of Latino students to a large campus and student population unlike their own.

The findings from this study address these issues and offer corrective recommendations. This study's findings showed that the greatest challenges in being a first generation college student included lack of support from immediate family; lack of information about college; and being of low socioeconomic status. The participants in this study affirmed the importance of having role models and mentors in their communities during their early years in high school to help them visualize college as a real option after attaining a high school diploma. These findings suggest the importance of cultural awareness and the need for improved and accessible resources in communities where Latinos reside.

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**Appendix A**

Informed Consent Form

**Consent to Participate in a Research Study  
Smith College School for Social Work • Northampton, MA**

.....

**Title of Study:** College Bound: Factors that Influence First Generation Latino College Process

**Investigator(s):** Claudia Hernandez, Smith College: MSW Graduate Student, XXX-XXX-XXXX

.....

**Introduction**

- You are being asked to be in a research study of factors that influence first generation Latino college process. This study is intended to identify those factors that influence first-generation Latino students in their decision to attend college.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you self-identify as a first-generation college student Latino. You are also currently enrolled or have graduated from a 4-year college; you speak English and are between the ages of 18 – 35 years of age.
- We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear of if you need more information.

**Purpose of Study**

- The purpose of the study is intended to identify those factors that influence first-generation Latino students in their decision to attend college.
- This study is being conducted as a research requirement for my master’s in social work degree. Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

**Description of the Study Procedures**

- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: I will ask voluntary participants to take part of a five minute pre-interview over the phone to make sure they meet criteria and demographics for participation in the study. Once participants are approved for study participation, I will ask participants to participate in a 40-minute face-to-face interview in which I will ask questions about their college choice, process and factors that led to their decision to attend college. The interview will take place on their college campus to ensure the participants’ safety or at a mutually agreed upon site if the participant is a graduate or prefers to meet off campus.

**Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study**

- The risks of this study are minimal. The topics in the survey may upset some respondents. Participant will be notified at the beginning of the interview about their right to end the interview at any given time during the interview.

**Benefits of Being in the Study**

- There will be no direct benefit to you for your participation in this study. However, we hope that the information obtained from this study will provide valuable information that can help parents, high school counselors, college counselors, teachers and administrators in how to better support Latino students to attend college, provide resources about college, and in identifying what type of support is needed to encourage and support Latino students to succeed and graduate from college.
- The benefits to social work/society: The results of this study will provide insight into the challenges and obstacles faced by Latino students in college process and choice. Social workers, society and government entities will be better informed about what influences Latino students, positively or negatively, to attend college, what additional resources are needed, and how best to ensure their success and graduation.

### **Confidentiality**

Your participation will be kept confidential. For the purposes of this research project your comments will be reported in collective form without identifying you specifically. Your personal identify will be protected in all data reporting. Every effort will be made by the researcher to preserve your confidentiality including the following:

- Notes, interview transcriptions, and transcribed notes and any other identifying participant information will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the personal possession of the researcher. When no longer necessary for research, all materials will be destroyed.
- The researcher and the members of the researcher's committee will review the researcher's collected data. Information from this research will be used solely for the purpose of this study and any publications that may result from this study. All participants involved in this study will not be identified by name and their confidentiality will be maintained.
- Each participant has the opportunity to obtain a transcribed copy of his or her interview. Participants should tell the researcher if a copy of the interview is desired.
- All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

### **Payments/gift**

- You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.

### **Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time (up to the date noted below) without affecting your relationship with the researchers of this study or Smith College. Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely up to the point noted below. If you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify me of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by April 20, 2014. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis, dissertation or final report.

**Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns**

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Claudia Hernandez at [chernandez@smith.edu](mailto:chernandez@smith.edu) or by telephone at XXX-XXX-XXXX. If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

**Consent**

- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep.

.....



**Appendix B**

**Consent to Audio or Videotape**

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

.....

**[if using audio or video recording, use next section for signatures:]**

**1. I agree to be [audio  or video ] taped for this interview: Please check your choice.**

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped:**

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### Interview Guide

#### Screening Questions:

Screening questions focused on identifying qualifying factors for the study. Further demographic information was collected during second interview.

- Are you willing to voluntarily participate in a study on Factors that Influence First Generation Latino College Process?
- Do you understand that your participation is strictly voluntary and that you will not be compensated?
- Do you self-identify as Latino? What ethnicity/ethnicities do you identify with?
- How many are in your immediate family? Did anyone in your family go to college?
- Are you currently enrolled in a four-year college OR have you graduated from a four-year college?
- Is English your primary or secondary language?
- Are you between the ages of 18 to 35 years of age?

## Appendix D

### Demographic Questions

#### Demographic Questions:

- How old are you?
- What is your gender?
- What is your place of birth?
- What is your marital status?
- Do you have children? If so, how many?
- Is English your primary or secondary language?
- What is your educational background?
- Did you obtain a high school diploma or GED?
- Are you currently a full-time college student?
- Are you currently working?
- How do you define your income/family's income?
  - a. >15,000    b. 15,001-25,000    c. 25,001-30,000    d. 30,001-35,000
  - e. 35,001-45,000    f. 45,001-55,000    g. 55,001 or greater

## Appendix E

### Interview Questions

#### Interview Questions:

- What would you say was the biggest factor in choosing to attend college?
- When did you decide to go to college? Why did you decide to go to college?
- What type of challenges have you encountered as a first generation college student?
- How do you define success?
- Did your parents expect you to go to college? Were they influential in your decision to attend college?
- What kind of messages did you receive from high school about attending college?
- Did your high school provide you with information about college? Four-year colleges? In what form? From whom? When?
- Did you have a mentor in high school?
- Did you talk to your friends about college? How did they impact your decision?
- Was financial aid a factor in your decision to attend college?
- How did your family influence your financial aid decisions?
- What were factors in choosing your college?
- Did you feel you were prepared for the college you chose? How did you feel about transition to college? Do/did you have a tutor(s) in college? Do/did you have a mentor in college?
- Did you know anyone prior to attending your college who went to that college or was going to go there? Did you know anyone at the other colleges you considered? Was that a concern for you?

- Did you apply for financial aid? Were you offered financial aid?
- What kind of financial aid: grants, loans, work-study, etc? Did anyone discuss financial aid with you? Did you accept financial aid?
- Did you apply to any other colleges? If so, which ones? Which ones were you accepted to? What was your first choice college? Did you visit any of these or other colleges?
- Did anyone influence your college choice? If so, what affect do you feel their influence had on you? Who did you talk to even if it didn't affect your college choice?
- Were you able to enroll at your first choice college? If not, what was your first choice?
- Did race or ethnicity factor into your choice of college? Did you choose to or not to go to any schools based on their racial makeup? Why?
- If you were choosing what college to attend today, would you choose a different college? If so, which one? Why? Why not the college you currently attend?
- If you could go to any college, which one would you go to?
- What would have to be different for you to go there?
- What do you think Latino students need to know about college?
- How can going to college be made easier for Latino students? What supports are needed? What has worked for you that you think would work for others?
- Is there anything else you would like to add that was not covered during this interview that would be helpful for this study?

## Appendix F

### Human Subjects Review Committee Approval Letter



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**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts  
01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

January 4, 2014

Claudia Hernandez

Dear Claudia,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.  
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Narviar Barker, Research Advisor