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The experience of Latinas attending predominately White colleges

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Attending Predominately
White Colleges

ABSTRACT

This study sought to gain an overall understanding of the experiences of Latinas that attend predominately white institutions (PWI). The research question explored was: What are the experiences that contribute to persistence, defined as continuing toward degree completion, for Latinas that attend PWI?

Seven Latina students participated in each focus group conducted at two small, predominately White, liberal arts colleges in the Northeast. Participants were asked questions about their general college experiences, persistence experiences, family experiences, coping strategies, and recommendations.

The study findings for Latinas attending PWI included beneficial and challenging experiences. Sharing their culture with others, being role models within their families and communities, acquiring knowledge from diverse groups of people, and gaining social privilege were cited as beneficial experiences. Participants' were found to experience minority status stresses and cultural incongruity that led to sociocultural alienation. Seeking support from their peers, with a shared experience, was found to be the most utilized coping strategy. Debunking negative stereotypes about Latina/os, experiencing or witnessing racism, poverty and oppression, being positive role models in their families and communities, making their families proud, and gaining social and economic privileges were experiences contributing to persistence.

THE EXPERIENCES OF LATINAS ATTENDING

PREDOMINATELY WHITE COLLEGES

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Significant gains have been made to the number of students of color attending

colleges and universities. From 1976 to 2004, the percentage of minority students

enrolled in college increased from 17% to 32% (National Center of Education Statistics

[NCES], 2007b). Of this 32%, Blacks made up approximately 13%, Hispanics 12%,

Asians 6%, and American Indians 1% (Seidman, 2005). Following Asians, Latinos had

the greatest increase in college enrollments (NCES, 2007b). Enrollment varied across

Latino groups. In the 2001-2002 academic year, Cuban high school graduates were

found to have the highest enrollment rate (45%), followed by Mexicans with 33% and

Puerto Ricans with 30% (Fry, 2002). Latina students were more likely to be enrolled in

higher education than Latinos (Gonzalez, Jovel, & Stoner, 2004). In 2004, there were

58.6% of Latinas enrolled in colleges and universities (NCES, 2007b).

Though Latino enrollment has increased, data suggest some challenges with

persistence and degree attainment. The six year persistence rates of various racial/ethnic

groups demonstrated disparity. The Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange

(CSRDE) found that for the fall of 1994, 61.1% of Asians, 56.9% of Whites and

35.8% of American Indians graduated within six years. Both Blacks and Latinos

graduated at 41.7% (Seidman, 2005). Latinos, the largest minority group in the United

States with 14% of the total population, were the least likely to be awarded a college

degree. In 2005, 11% of Latinos between the ages of 25 to 29 had a college degree

compared to 17.2% of Blacks, 33% of Whites and 61% of Asians (NCES, 2007b). Of

these degrees awarded, most were associates (Llagos, 2003). Within the Latino group

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there are some noted differences. Cubans, Columbians and Peruvians were more likely to hold a bachelor's degree than Mexicans (Fry, 2002). In 2001-2002, Latinas received 60% of the bachelor's degrees awarded (Muniz, 2006).

Several challenges impacted Latino students' persistence. In 2000, unlike other students of color, Latinos were more likely to be enrolled at 2 year institutions (Fry, 2002; Llagas, 2003; Muniz, 2006). Fry (2002) and Muniz (2006) found that Latinos were also more likely to attend on a part time basis, to come from low socioeconomic backgrounds, to be first generation college students, to be expected to contribute financially to their families, and to live at home. The U.S. Department of Education found that attending a two-year institution and attending part-time were risk factors for Latino academic nonpersistence (Fry, 2002). Part-time attendance coupled with the demands of work and family made it challenging for many Latinos to complete their degrees at two-year institutions. In 2004, 81% of students that attended four year institutions persisted to degree completion compared to 55% of students attending two-year institutions (Association of American Colleges and Universities [AACU], 2008). When Latinos attend four-year institutions, they were more likely to enroll in colleges with low rates of bachelor's degrees awarded and they have a different campus experience than their white peers (Fry, 2004). For Latinas, gender role conflict was found to impact persistence (Haro, Rodriguez & Gonzalez, 1994).

These data suggest that there are low numbers of Latina students attending four year, predominately white institutions (PWI). They are more likely to be first generation college students, and are more likely to have lower rates of persistence and degree attainment than other racial minorities. However, Latinas are more likely than Latinos to

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be enrolled in college and to hold a bachelor's degree. They are also more likely to have differential campus experience than their White peers and to experience gender role conflict.

The research into the particular experiences of Latina students attending PWI, while growing, remains sparse. Current retention and persistence research tends to focus on the experiences of students of color or Latinos, which might ellipse the experiences of Latina students. In order to improve on the persistence and degree attainment rates of Latinas, further research is needed.

This current research study will benefit and contribute to social work in several ways. First, it expands on the retention and persistence literature of students of color that attend PWI, with particular attention to the experiences of Latina students. Secondly, this research would benefit social workers who work with Latina college students to provide individual and group counseling, plan programs and/or who do advocacy work in education. Thirdly, the study would be useful to academic and student affairs administrators, faculty, and mental health professionals interested in understanding the psychosocial needs impacting Latinas academic achievement and persistence. Fourth, most of the studies conducted with Latinas that attend PWI include large colleges and universities in the West. This research study looks at the experiences of Latinas that attend small, highly selective PWI in the Northeast.

The overall purpose of this research study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of Latina students that attend PWI. Using qualitative data gathered from two focus groups, the research question to be examined is: What are the experiences that

contribute to persistence, defined as continuing toward degree completion, for Latinas attending PWI?

This study is divided into several sections. Chapter One provides an introduction into the current investigation. Chapter Two considers the pertinent literature related to the overall experiences of Latinas that attend PWI, in general and what experiences contribute to persistence, specifically. Chapter Three will give an overview of the methodology guiding the study. A report on the findings is included in Chapter Four. Chapter Five integrates the study findings with the related literature from Chapter Two.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This qualitative study seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of Latina students who attend predominately White institutions (PWI). The research question to be investigated is: What are the experiences that contribute to persistence, defined as continuing toward degree completion, for Latinas attending predominately White institutions (PWI)? In order to provide a framework for this current investigation a review of related literature is presented in four sections. The first section gives a profile of Latinos in the United States. The second section focuses on a review of literature for students of color and Latinos who attend PWI, particularly those experiences that lead to persistence. The third section examines Latina students' persistence experiences attending predominately White colleges. In the final section, the literature related to Latina identity development and persistence experiences will be presented.

Latinos in the U.S.

This section will provide a brief overview of Latinos in the United States. Information on Latino population and growth rates, places of residence, employment and educational trends, are included. The diversity among Latinos is demonstrated through these statistics.

Between 1990 and 2000, Latinos were the fastest growing minority in the United States (Marcotta & Garcia, 2003). In 2004, Latinos were the largest minority group, comprising 14.2% or 40.5 million of the U.S. population, with Mexicans making up 9.1%, Puerto Ricans 1.4%, Cubans .5%, and Dominicans .4% of the total U.S. population

(U.S. Census, 2007). Within the Latino group, Mexicans represented the largest subgroup. According to U.S. Census figures for 2004, Mexicans made up 64% of the Latino group, followed by Puerto Ricans (9.6%), Cubans (3.6%), Dominicans (2.6%), Central Americans (7.2%), and South Americans (5.5%) (U.S. Census, 2007). About 60% of Latinos were born in the U.S., Puerto Rico or a U.S. island area and another 11% became U.S. citizens through naturalization (ibid). From 2000-2006, the Hispanic growth rate was 24.3%, three times the rate of the total population (6.1%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). From 2000 to 2006, five states--Arkansas, Georgia, South and North Carolina and Tennessee--experienced the largest growth rate of Hispanics (ibid).

Latinos tend to reside in certain geographical areas, in family households. Two thirds of Latinos lived in California, Texas, New York, and Florida (U.S. Census, 2007). Illinois, Arizona, New Jersey, Colorado, and New Mexico were other states with a larger percentage of Latinos (ibid). Certain Latino groups were clustered in a particular geographic location. Seventy four percent of Cubans lived in the South, 61% of Puerto Ricans lived in the Northeast, and 55% of Mexicans lived in the West (Marcotta & Garcia, 2003). Ninety one percent of Latinos lived in urban areas (ibid). Latinos were also more likely to live in family households, with a higher percentage maintained by women. Seventy seven percent of Latinos lived in family households compared to 66% of non-Hispanic Whites (U.S. Census, 2007). Hispanic women maintained a higher portion of these households, with 19% for Hispanics compared to 9% for non-Hispanics (ibid).

Latinos were more likely to indicate they were White and to speak English in their homes. In 2005, 93% indicated they were White, 4% were single race Black,

1% American Indian and Alaskan Native, .6% Asian, and .3% Pacific Islander (U.S. Census, 2005). Mexicans and Puerto Ricans were most likely to speak only English in the home (U.S. Census, 2007). Most Latinos, spoke English in the home but there was an increase of Latino households that spoke Spanish from 1990 to 2000, going from 7% to 10% nationally. Some states like California, New Mexico, and Texas had a larger percentage of Latinos speaking Spanish in the home, ranging from 25% to 28%.

Marcotta and Garcia (2000) noted a correlation between higher levels of education and employment for Latinos. However, compared to the U.S. population across educational levels, Latinos tend to be unemployed at a higher rate. Sixty one percent of the Latino population worked in service, industrial, and agricultural jobs compared to the U.S. population where the majority (60%) worked in managerial and technical, sales and/or administrative jobs. The gender gap in employment was rapidly closing, from a 30% gap between men and women in the 70's to a 6% gap in 1998. The median income of Latino households was $36,000, which was less than ¾ of the $48,000 for non-Hispanic Whites (Fry, 2002). Cubans and Central and South Americans fared better with average household incomes of $40,000 (ibid).

Latino educational enrollment and degree attainment trends demonstrated variability among racial/ethnic groups. In 2005, Hispanics (70.2%) were less likely than Blacks (85.9%), Asians (95.8%), and Whites (92.3%) to have completed high school (NCES, 2007a). U.S. born Puerto Ricans (16.9%) and Dominicans (10.6%) were more likely to drop out. Foreign-born Latinos had higher drop out rates than those born in the U.S. This differs from Blacks with more U.S. born dropouts than foreign and Asians where there are no differences. Excluding Asians, Latinos were enrolled in college at a

higher percentage than the total population, but were not persisting toward degree completion (Fry, 2002). In 2004, 60% of Hispanics 25 and older were high school graduates and 13% had a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census, 2007). Compared to non-Hispanic of the same age where 89% were high school graduates and another 30% held bachelor's degrees. Cubans, Columbians, and Peruvians were more likely to hold a bachelor's degree than Mexicans. Latina students are more likely to be enrolled in higher education than Latinos (Gonzalez, Jovel, & Stoner, 2004) and to hold a bachelor's degree (Muniz, 2006).

Students Of Color At Predominately White Institutions

This section will give an overview of the research literature on the experiences of students of color who attend PWI and the coping strategies they employ when challenges are encountered. Persistence experiences will be discussed. The studies included in this review, either include Latinos in the sample or comprise the sample itself.

Researchers writing about the experiences of students of color and Latinos who attend PWI cite several factors that impact persistence. Castellanos and Gloria (2007) suggest persistence is impacted by psychological (i.e. personal beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions), social (i.e. networks, connection, role models, mentors), and cultural (i.e. values validation, meaningfulness) factors. Carter (2006) suggests that prior and current academic experiences, negative experiences in the college environment, and inadequate financial aid impact persistence. McNairy (1996) found that a combination of student and institutional factors must be considered to support the retention of students of color. Student factors included inadequate academic preparation and study habits, trouble with goal setting patterns, and the expectations students bring to higher education. Inadequate

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financial aid, college environments that do not support diversity, limited social activities of interest to students of color, and low numbers of role models and mentors were institutional factors. Consistent with these studies a review of the literature revealed a complex set of individual and institutional factors impacted persistence for students of color and Latinos attending PWI.

Academic Experiences

As students of color persist, challenging academic experiences created stressors (Loo & Rolison, 1986; Lopez, 2005; Malaney, 1991; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993). One of these challenging experiences was a concern over their academic abilities. Smedley, Myers, and Harrell (1993) study that measured different sources of stress for students of color found that Latino students reported the highest mean scores on academic achievement stress. Some of the items measured included: "Doubts about my ability to succeed," "Feeling less intelligent or capable than others," and "My academic background being inadequate" (p. 440). Female students reported higher levels of academic achievement stress. Time spent in the college did not lessen these stressors. Lopez (2005) longitudinal study with first year Latino students surveyed two weeks upon entering college and then again two weeks into their second quarter found academic achievement stress was ranked first both times. Academic achievement stress was the only stressors found to be "significantly and inversely associated with academic achievement" as measured by GPA (Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993, p. 445). Loo and Rolison (1986) examined sociocultural alienation and academic satisfaction for ethnic minority students and found 77% of Black and Chicano students reported they faced more academic difficulties than White students. These students pointed to culture shock

and inadequate academic preparation as leading causes for these difficulties (Loo &
Rolison, 1986). In a longitudinal study, Malaney (1991) found that first year White
students who reported their courses difficult declined nearly 70% as the year progressed,
while Hispanic students experienced a 4% increase. Perhaps in response to these
academic difficulties, Hispanic students demonstrated a 31% increase (50% to 81.8%) in
seeking out their academic advisors within the first year. Hispanic students also had the
highest withdrawal rate than other students (Asians, 10.5 %, Blacks, 5.8 %, Hispanics
20.3%, and Whites 6.3%). Thus, these studies revealed that students of color and Latinos
experienced academic achievement stress, had concerns about their academic
preparation, and felt they faced more difficulties than White students. Female students of
color seemed impacted by academic achievement stress to a greater extent.

Another challenging academic experience for students of color was negative
interactions with faculty. Jones, Castellanos, and Cole (2002) qualitative study revealed
students of color felt pressure when faculty called on them for the perspective of their
racial/ethnic group in the classroom. Students also felt some faculty judged them based
on stereotypes and held different expectations for them.

Satisfaction with the academic program and positive relationships with faculty
seemed to mitigate academic achievement stressors and contributed to persistence
(Bordes & Arrendondo, 2005; Gloria et al., 2005; Loo & Rolison, 1986). Loo & Rolison
(1986) found that despite ethnic minority students experiencing sociocultural alienation
and inadequate academic preparation, persistence was enhanced through positive student
faculty relationships and the quality of the education. Eight five percent of ethnic
minority students reported they were academically satisfied with the university. Having

professors who were accessible and supportive was more important to students of color than White students. Also, students of color felt more comfortable making contributions in classes taught by faculty of color and were more likely to have a faculty of color as their mentor than white students. Bordes and Arrendondo (2005) found that Latino first year college students who had a mentor reported more positive perceptions of the university environment than those students who did not have a mentor. The race of the mentor was found to be non significant. A faculty/staff mentorship was cited as leading to fewer nonpersistence decisions for Latino students (Gloria et al., 2005).

Campus Environment Experiences

Several studies found that for students of color persistence was impacted by negative experiences in the campus environment such as sociocultural alienation, racism, and discrimination, and low numbers of students of color (Bordes & Arrendondo, 2005; Gloria, et al., 2005; Attinasi, 1989; Loo & Rolison, 1986). Loo and Rolison (1986) found that students of color attending a PWI experienced significantly greater social alienation than White students. Thirty seven percent of Black and Chicano students reported feeling socially isolated on campus and 25% did not feel integrated. Forty percent of ethnic minority students reported they felt the college reflected their values "a little or not at all." While all students had thoughts of dropping out, White students cited academic reasons only and students of color cited both academics and sociocultural alienation. For Chicano students at one PWI, the low numbers of Chicanos, lack of Chicanos in political power, being in an English only environment, little representations of Chicanos in the physical environment (i.e. arts and architecture), and lack of Chicano knowledge being shared or available on campus created feelings of alienation and marginalization

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(Gonzalez, 2002). This lack of Chicano representation led to "cultural starvation" since students were being deprived of a culture that had given them strength, a sense of purpose, and sustenance (p. 214). Gloria et al. (2005) found that when Latino students had more positive perceptions of the university environment, increased cultural congruity, and experienced few perceived barriers, they made fewer decisions of withdrawal and of nonpersistence.

Several empirical studies revealed that students of color experience racism and discrimination in predominately White college environments (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002; Lopez, 2005; Malaney, 1991; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993). Malaney (1991) measured the change in students' social and academic experiences throughout their first year in a PWI. Black and Hispanic students reported higher levels than White students in experiencing racial harassment and discrimination. Latino students reported the highest levels of witnessing and hearing about racial discrimination. Black and Latino students were the least likely to think the university was making an adequate effort of fighting racism. These difficult experiences in the college environment resulted in a sharp decline, from 74% when they first entered to 44% by the end of the year, in Hispanic students feeling like they had made the right decision to attend the university. This was in marked contrast to students in other groups that experienced an increase or remained constant. In a longitudinal study with Latino first year students, Lopez (2005) found that racism stress, which had previously been ranked last two weeks after entering college, was ranked second two weeks into the spring quarter. Items measured on this indicator included: "being discriminated against," "being treated rudely because of my race," "others having expectations of poor performance,"

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and "White people expecting me to be a certain way because of my race" (p357). Socioeconomic status could mitigate experiences of racism. Vasti (2003) found that Latino students who considered themselves to have privilege and advantage were less able to recognize racism than those who did not perceive such privilege.

Students of color had a range of reactions and coped with these experiences with racism in various ways. All students of color in a qualitative study conducted at a PWI reported experiencing overt racism and stated they did not feel safe to challenge these behaviors openly (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002). When students felt targeted by racism, they reported isolating themselves. Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that experiencing racial/ethnic tension contributed to a lower sense of belonging in PWI. However, those students involved in racial/ethnic support groups, who also reported racial/ethnic tension, had higher levels of sense of belonging than nonmembers of these groups. Vasti and Magolda (2007) qualitative longitudinal study with Latino students revealed that learning to recognize and cope with racism was a key developmental task. They suggested providing Latino students with support, from mentors, Latino/a peers, and other students of color, as they identify racism.

Being in a PWI seemed to increase the pressure students of color felt to represent their ethnic/racial group. Jones, Castellanos, and Lopez (2002) found that the low numbers of students of color at one PWI made them feel pressure to represent their racial and ethnic group on campus. While most students' involvement revolved around the cultural center and within their ethnic group, Latino students were more likely to be both involved with the cultural center and around campus. They cited the "importance of being

a change agent and being influential in a PWI," in order to challenge negative perceptions held about Latinos (p. 30).

Coping Strategies

As students of color persist at PWI, they employed various coping strategies to enhance their academic and campus experiences (Attinasi, 1989; Bordes & Arrendondo, 2005; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Lopez, 2005; Malaney, 1991). Connecting to other students with a shared experience, allowed first year Latino students to develop cognitive maps, knowing where to go on campus to access support and resources, all of which eased their transition into college (Attinasi, 1989; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Several studies confirmed that students of color seek a faculty mentor (Bordes & Arrendondo, 2005; Loo & Rolison, 1986) and seek advice from their academic advisors (Malaney, 1991). Gonzalez (2002) found that Latino students coped with a sense of alienation and marginalization by seeking "cultural nourishment," defined as staying in touch with aspects of one's culture that brings strength. Latinos received "cultural nourishment" by visiting with family and friends, attending student of color organizations, joining the cultural center, listening and dancing to their cultural music, eating familiar foods, and getting support from faculty of color (Gonzalez, 2002; Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002). Loo & Rolison (1996) found students of color actively utilized college programs that support students of color, in addition to the EOP, career counseling, and financial aid offices. In one study by the end of their first year at a PWI, Latino students became more comfortable addressing conflicts, talking about race, and feeling it was less important to fit in at their university than when they first entered (Lopez, 2005).

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On predominately white campuses, students of color often found social and cultural support from those within their ethnic group (Gonzalez, 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002; Loo & Rolison, 1986). The students of color in Loo & Rolison (1996) study selected their college based on academic characteristics as well as the amount of students from their ethnic group on campus. Students of color also found the cultural center on their campus supportive of their academic, social, and cultural needs, with Latino students considering it a "home away from home" (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002, p. 30). One benefit of participation in racial/ethnic groups was it created a buffer against racial/ethnic tension and members had higher levels of sense of belonging than nonmembers (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Gonzalez (2002) found that connecting with other Chicano students was an important form of "cultural nourishment," a way students replenished their cultural selves that aided in persistence.

As students of color found support in utilizing cultural centers and participating in groups made up of members of their racial/ethnic group, institutional factors created challenges (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002; Loo & Rolison, 1986). Students of color who attended one PWI felt there was a lack of funding to support diversity programs and initiatives in the cultural center. Latino/Chicano students who utilized the cultural center and felt it was like their home, also reported the college used it as a "scapegoat for all efforts that relate to ethnic minority students, minimizing campus wide responsibilities on issues of diversity" (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002, p. 28). Loo and Rolison (1986) found that White students and students of color held different views regarding racial/ethnic groups on campus, with White students viewing it as segregation and students of color as a form of cultural support.

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In summary, significant findings in the literature on students of color and Latinos attending PWI found they were experiencing "minority status stresses," namely academic achievement stresses, social climate stresses and racism and discrimination stresses (Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993). Not experienced by white students, minority status stresses "heighten feelings of not belonging and interfere with minority students' integration into the university community" (Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993, p. 435). For students of color and Latino students, doubts about their ability to succeed, feeling that they were less capable, and inadequate high school preparation led to academic achievement stresses. Feeling a pressure to represent their ethnic/racial group in the classroom, encountering professors that held different expectations, and feeling professors' judged them based on stereotypes were other academic stresses. Students of color held perceptions that White students did not have the same academic challenges. Time spent in the college environment did not decrease these academic achievement stresses. These findings differed by gender with females reporting higher levels of academic achievement stresses than males.

In the campus environment, students of color were experiencing social climate, and racism, and discrimination stresses. Low numbers of students of color and Latinos on campus and in positions of authority, college values that did not reflect their own, and lack of representation of different racial and cultural groups in the physical environment contributed to alienation and marginalization. For Latinos, being in an English only environment was also alienating. Students of color reported experiencing racism and discrimination. The low numbers of students of color put pressure on them to be involved to improve the campus climate. Latino students were more likely than other

students of color to be involved with activities across campus, while other students of color limited their involvement to the cultural center.

As students of color and Latino students persist, the research revealed several factors that impacted persistence. Positive faculty interactions, namely mentoring, contributed to more positive perceptions of the college environment and led to few decisions of academic nonpersistence. The race of the mentor was found to be significant in one study. However, there was a contrary finding in another. Satisfaction with the academic program contributed positively to persistence. Seeking support from peers, particularly those from their own racial/ethnic group provided cultural nourishment. Peers also allowed for the development of cognitive maps.

Latina Students In Predominately White Institutions

The previous section focused on the experiences of students of color and Latinos that attend PWI. This section will explore the research literature on Latina students that attend PWI to understand those experiences that lead to persistence. Cultural incongruity, gender role conflicts, family experiences, and the influence of negative gender and racial stereotypes are covered. Also included are the coping strategies Latina students utilize when challenges and stressors are encountered.

Lack of Cultural Congruity

The literature revealed that Latinas attending PWI experienced a lack of cultural congruity, the degree to which a student's values match or fit with those of the university (Bordes & Arrendondo, 2005; Capello, 1994; Castellanos, 1996; Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005). Some of the values Latina students were found to hold include: familism that places value and concern for the family over the individual (Sy, 2006; Schwartz,

2008;), respecto that emphasizes respect for a person's dignity and self worth and for those who are older and in a position of authority (Capello, 1994) and marianismo, the personal sacrifice Latina women are expected to make for their families (Sy, 2006). Vasquez (2001) noted that salient Latina values were the importance of the family, emphasis on family and group achievement, value of an extended family, present time focused, respect and trust for authority, and managing one's own problems. Cultural incongruity existed then for Latinas who encounter university environments that mirrored the dominant cultural values of rugged individualism and autonomy, importance of the nuclear family, progress and future time orientation, and ideas around help seeking.

Dr. Sylvia Ramos, a first generation college student and now President of Richard J. Daley College, explained the challenges Latinas might encounter in higher education:

> We are raised to be respectful of authority, taught not to be rude and expect to be given equal treatment . . . The art of negotiation does not come naturally to us. But once you are in higher ed, it is who can talk the loudest, or convince the group that you should be given a leadership position, who comes out ahead. (Horwedel, 2007, p. 2)

Experiencing cultural incongruity led Latinas to feel sociocultural alienation and had a negative effect on psychological well being and persistence. Some Latina students experienced the lack of cultural congruity as culture shock and felt uncomfortable with an emphasis on individualism due to their orientation toward collectivism (Castellanos, 1996). Capello (1994) found that Latina students participating in a support group reported feelings of alienation and low self worth from being in a university that did not reflect their cultural values. Gloria, Castellanos, and Orozco (2005) conducted a quantitative study of Latina students and found that cultural congruity was related to psychological well-being and that students who reported higher levels of cultural

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congruity also perceived fewer educational barriers that would result in them withdrawing from college. Like the studies with students of color, having a faculty mentor led to more positive perceptions of the university environment and higher cultural congruity (Bordes & Arrendondo, 2005).

Family Experiences

Several studies considered family influences as Latina students persist. The findings were mixed on the amount of support and stress Latina students experienced from their families (Aguilar, 1996; Capello, 1994; Chacon, Cohen, & Strover, 1986; Castellanos, 1996; Gonzalez, Jovel, & Strover, 2005; Sy, 2006). Chacon, Cohen, and Strover (1986) study found that parents were not as supportive of their daughters getting their education as parents were for their sons. Gonzalez, Jovel, and Strover (2005) and Aguilar (1996) found that parents were supportive of their daughter's educational attainment but did not want the educational opportunity to take their daughters away from the family (Gonzalez, Jovel, & Strover, 2005). Latina students wanted to study away from home to decrease dependence on their families. Vasti (2003) found parents were supportive of Latinas getting their education but were unaware of student demands and expectations. This created stress for Latinas as they worked to negotiate their family and student roles.

Spending time with family enabled Latina students to persist, though what they did in their spare time mattered (Sy, 2006; Capello, 1994; Chacon, Cohen, & Strover, 1986; Thorne, 1995). The finding in a study conducted by Sy (2006) demonstrated that Latinas that spent more time with their families had higher GPA's and slightly lower levels of stress. However, there was evidence that if Latina students were expected to

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carry out family obligations like language brokering (Sy, 2006) and caring for children and the family (Capello, 1994; Chacon, Cohen, & Strover, 1986; Thorne, 1995), they experienced more stress. Overall, parental support of Latina students' education contributed to academic success and persistence (Rodriguez et al., 2000).

As Latina students persist, they were experiencing gender role conflicts. Latinas were working to balance their role as students with their role as mothers and caretakers in the family (Thorne, 1995; Gonzalez, Jovel, & Stoner, 2005; Capello, 1994). One study found that Latina students pursing their doctoral degree experienced "sex-role traditionalism" (Thorne, 1995). These students held more egalitarian roles in their work and school environment but in their homes they assumed traditional roles. These women reported negative consequences like low self esteem, repression of achievement strivings, and illness. They also experienced feelings of guilt, resentment, and exhaustion that lead to conflictual interpersonal relationships. Capello (1994) also found that Latina students participating in a support group had cultural expectations to assist their family with the care of children, whether they were parents or not, and that they felt it was a barrier to their learning. Latina students in one study made decisions to study away from home in order to become more independent from their families (Gonzalez, Jovel, & Stoner, 2005).

Latina students struggled with their parents' expectations that they attend colleges close to home. Gonzalez, Jovel, and Stoner (2005) and Aguilar (1996) research with Latina students revealed a family and cultural belief that Latinas should live at home until they are married. Families learning that there was a church on campus and other Latino staff and students at the university alleviated concerns about their daughters studying away from home (Gonzalez, Jovel, & Stoner, 2005). Though Latina students wanted to

study away from home to increase their independence, potential barriers to college opportunity were finding that they continued to miss a close family connection throughout their college education. As these students were making decisions about graduate school, they were still struggling with questions about whether to study away or return home. Most students indicated that their families were expecting them to return home upon graduation.

Debunking Negative Stereotypes

Another stressor for Latina students was combating racial and gender stereotypes (Aguilar, 1996; Capello, 1994; Castellenos, 1996; Rodriguez et al., 2000). Rodriguez et al. (2000) explained cultural stereotypes of Latinos as "undisciplined, fatalistic, irrational, and passive and gender specific stereotypes of women as docile and submissive, with no ambition other than producing children" contributed to others holding low academic expectations of Latina students (p. 3). Latinas, of low SES, were found to come to college having internalized these negative messages. In a study of first and second year Latina college students, almost half of them reported experiencing racism and sexism (Aguilar, 1996). These students reported sexism as a double standard for boys and girls of the culture with girls being expected to marry and be submissive to their husbands and boys having more freedom to date, leave home, and experiment. In addition, Latina students, along with a similar finding in Castellanos (1996), reported feeling that people outside their culture judged them based on negative stereotypes and they had to work to disprove them. Capello (1994) found that Puerto Rican and Dominican students reported feeling disrespected by non-Latino men in higher authority who would make them feel

uncomfortable by putting their arms around them or kissing them when they did not want it.

Coping Strategies

The literature revealed that Latina students use a variety of coping strategies to persist in college. Several studies confirmed the most utilized strategy for coping with challenges and stressors was talking with family and friends (Capello, 1994; Castellanos, 1994; Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005). Taking a positive, planned action (Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005) and dissociating from the university environment (Castellanos, 1994) were additional strategies. Latina students were also found to utilize faculty mentors and role models (Aguilar, 1996; Capello, 1994; Castellanos, 1994; Rodriguez et al., 2000). Latina students also joined support groups that enabled them to learn about Latino history and find mutual understanding (Capello, 1994).

Methodological Considerations

Most studies looked at the experiences of first year students, employing a quantitative longitudinal research design. Half of the studies with Latinas utilized a cross-sectional, quantitative design and the rest were qualitative. Written surveys are utilized most frequently for data collection. The studies consider differences among students attending predominately White institutions, mainly Asian, Black, Latinos, and Whites. Gender differences were not considered for a majority of the studies conducted with students of color. Studies done with Latino students, however, included gender differences with females making up most of the sample. Mexican Americans/Chicanos were the largest Latino ethnic group included in the sample. Mostly, the studies captured

the experiences of students of color and Latinas attending large universities on the West Coast. Most did not take social economic status into account.

In summary, significant findings for Latina students in PWI were: One, parental support might vary, though most were supportive of their Latina daughters getting an education. The literature revealed that boys get more support and daughters might be expected to stay close to home. Also, Latina students continue to miss their families throughout their time in college. Secondly, Latinas experienced gender role conflicts. They might be expected to continue their roles as caretakers of the family while being college students. Third, they experienced racism and sexism on college campuses and worked to debunk racial and gender stereotypes. Fourth, they tend to experienced cultural incongruity, finding the university does not reflect their values. When Latina students experience higher levels of cultural congruity, there was a positive effect on persistence. Fifth, Latinas were found to employ a more egalitarian gender role in school and work but resume traditional gender roles in the family, which had a negative psychological effect.

Various coping strategies assisted Latina students as they persist. These students were talking with family and friends about their problems, fact finding and taking positive action, dissociating from the university culture, learning more about Latino history and culture, finding role models and mentors, and joining Latino support groups.

Latina Identity Development And Persistence

This section will discuss the connection between identity development, acculturative processes, and persistence for Latinas. Identity theorists argue that as college students enter young adulthood a key developmental task is identity formation. For Latinas, understanding what their ethnic and gender identity means to them is a key part of their identity development. Learning how to deal with racism and sexism and debunking negative stereotypes are other identity development tasks.

Erikson (1968) posited that when an individual experiences a psychosocial and psychosexual change they experience an identity crisis, which is "a necessary turning point, a crucial moment, when development must move one way or another, marshaling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation" (p. 16). For adolescences, the major developmental task is establishing their identity. They enter this period of experimentation when they find that those around them hold different expectations for them then when they were children. As a result, they have to decide for themselves whether to accept, reject or redefine the self-definition given by the family and society. At the end of late adolescence, the person has made a commitment to adult tasks and has consolidated their identity.

A number of researchers believe that forming an ethnic and racial identity is a crucial part of identity formation (Cross, 1978; Phinney, 1989; 1993). Cross (1978) developed a five stage racial identity model for African Americans that moves from a black person holding views that devalue blackness and affirm Whiteness (pre-encounter phase) to a more healthier racial identity where the person is proud to be black, has made commitments to work for the advancement of black people and can form relationships

with people from various racial groups (internalization-commitment phase). Phinney (1993) explains that ethnic identity formation is how "individuals come to understand the implications of their ethnicity and make decisions about its role in their lives, regardless of extent of ethnic involvement" (p. 64). Phinney (1989) developed a three stage ethnic identity model based on her research with Asian, Black and Hispanic tenth graders. At the first stage, a person with an *unexamined ethnic identity* has no concern with ethnic identity or adopts the view of others around them. At *moratorium stage*, a person is actively involved with seeking meaning of one's ethnic identity. As a result of exploration, the person makes a commitment about what their ethnic identity means in their lives, and moves into the final stage, an *achieved ethnic identity*. At this stage, the person has a clear and confident sense of their own ethnic identity and makes commitments that will guide future actions. Similar to Cross (1976), one benefit of an achieved ethnic identity was found to be improved self-esteem and psychological well being (Phinney, 1989; Phinney & Alipuria, 1987).

A key ethnic identity developmental task is learning how to deal with racism and the negative stereotypes and societal messages that exist about one's ethnic group (Phinney, 1983; 1989; Vasquez, 1994). Phinney (1989) study with tenth grade Asian, Black, and Latino students revealed that regardless of stage of ethnic identity students identified dispelling negative images and stereotypes about their ethnic group and fighting discrimination and prejudice as concerns they have about their ethnicity. For Latino students in this study prejudice and experiencing conflicts between their values and the majority culture were recurrent themes. Vasquez (1994) writing specifically

about Latinas sums up the effects of racism and the importance of learning how to deal with it:

> Encounters with racism, regardless of age, are traumatic. Early in life, those experiences result in a feeling of lack of safety, and create dissonance and confusion. These experiences may result in a variety of responses and coping strategies. If one has been "inoculated" with a sense of pride, and given strong messages of entitlement and appreciation of one's group, then an individual may not internalize the negative messages so much. However, most people have to develop a cognitive, emotional, and behavioral map of how to deal with the hurt, including denial, anger and rage, achievement, perfectionism, and defensiveness and strategizing. (p122)

Phinney (1983) explains that an achieved ethnic identity gives an individual "a way of dealing with negative stereotypes and prejudice so that they do not internalize negative self perceptions and are clear about the meaning of ethnicity for them. This outcome contributes to a positive psychological adjustment" (p. 76). Thus, part of Latina students' ethnic development is externalizing negative messages and stereotypes and developing a strategy to deal with racism.

In addition to ethnic identity, several researchers point out the importance of understanding acculturation as an important aspect of Latino identity development (Casas & Pytluk, 1995; Ferdham & Gallegos, 2001; Ruiz, 1990; Vasti, 2003). Understanding the impact of acculturation, defined as the "socialization into an ethnic group other than one's own," (Casas & Pytluk, p. 158) and ethnic identity, how one is socialized into one's own cultural group, processes are important to understanding Hispanic/Latino identity formation (Casas & Pyluk, 1995; Torres, 2003). Ethnic identity is shaped by one's own ethnic group and through interaction with the dominant group. Torres (2003) research with Latino college students resulted in the creation and validation of the Bicultural Orientation Model. She found that students with a high ethnic identity and high

acculturation have a bicultural orientation. Those with high ethnic identity but low levels of acculturation have a Latino orientation, indicating a preference for Latino culture. Individuals with low ethnic identity and high acculturation have an Anglo orientation and those with low levels of ethnic identity and acculturation hold a marginal orientation. This model is different from other acculturation models that suggest that in order for Latinos to acculturate, they give up their ethnic identity (Casas & Pyluk, 1995).

Latinos must acculturate to U.S. notions of race. Ferdham and Gallegos (2001) explain that Latinos usually have to understand their identity within a U.S. racial construct that is shaped by the historical relationships between Black and Whites. There are six different identity orientations that can be present in Latinos. The first orientation are *Latino integrated* individuals, who hold a both/and orientation seeing the positive and negative attributes of Latinos as well as other ethnic groups. Second, *Latino identified* individuals hold a pan Latino identity and value the culture, history, and ethnic markers of being Latino. There emphasis is on actively fighting racism and discrimination against Latinos. *Subgroup Identified* individuals, the third orientation, only identify with their own ethnic group. They see themselves as different from Whites and do not necessarily align themselves with other Latinos. Culture, ethnicity, and nationality tend to be primary over racial constructs of identity. Fourth, *Latino as Other* are people who do not have a strong Latino background but because of mixed heritage, phenotype, and prevailing U.S. racial constructs view themselves as people of color. They do not adhere to Latino cultural values nor do they identify with White cultural values/norms. For these Latinos, race is a central construct that connects them with other people of color. *Undifferentiated Latinos* are the fifth orientation, and they do not recognize the impact of

race or culture. They want to see people as people and do not seek association with other Latinos. Lastly, those holding a *White identified* orientation tend to view themselves as White, distinct, and superior to people of color. Accepting the prevailing racial order, they can be assimilated into White culture and society disconnecting from other Latinos. Thus, for Latinos in the U.S., where race is a primary social construct, Latinos can have wide variability on whether being Latino is a racial category, is viewed as an ethnic category or denied all together.

Ethnic identity was found to be an important aspect of Latino students' identity when they enter a PWI (Ethier & Deaux, 1990; 1994; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Vasti, 2003). Phinney and Alipuria (1990) empirical study with Asian, Hispanic, Black, and White college students that found that two thirds of students of color rated ethnic identity as important compared to a quarter of the White students. Vasti (2003) study with first year Latino students revealed their ethnic identity mirrored their parents and they credited their parents with instilling them with a positive view of their ethnic identity. Ethier and Deaux (1990) study of first year Latino students found that 87% listed ethnicity as their most important identity with the most common attribute associated with the identity being proud. Females reported higher scores on importance of ethnic identity than males. This study also revealed that Latino students come to PWI feeling like a minority, are aware of their ethnicity, and feel different from White students.

For Latino college students, studies revealed that seeking support through Latino activities was important to their ethnic identity, despite the strength of their ethnic/cultural background (Ethier & Deaux, 1990; 1994; Vasti, 2003). Ethier and Deaux (1990) found that the strength of cultural background determined whether students would

become involved in Latino activities on campus. The strength of cultural background was measured by parents' birthplace, language spoken in the home, and percentage of home and school communities that were Hispanic. It appears for Latino students who come from predominately Latino (Ethier & Deaux, 1990; Vasti, 2003) or diverse racial/ethnic (Vasti, 2003) communities, they were more likely to become involve in Latino activities on campus and strengthen their identification upon entering college. For those students with a weak cultural background, one study found they were least likely to engage in Latino activities, had higher levels of stress, and perceived threat to their ethnicity (Ethier & Deaux, 1990). In contrast, Vasti (2003) found that Latino college students who come from predominately white environments and have high levels of acculturation held ethnic pride similar to students who grew up in predominately Latino environments. These students come to college interested in making connection to other Latinos and wanted to learn more about their ethnicity. However, they experienced feelings of alienation from other Latinos because they did not have strong ties to their ethnic/cultural group prior to entering college and/or did not speak Spanish. She wrote:

> Students in a predominately White college environment who come from places where Latinos are a critical mass focus on finding others that share their values and culture, while those who come from areas where there is no critical mass of Latinos or who have mixed backgrounds strive to be around other Latinos but feel left out if they do not speak the Spanish language. Language has always been a salient variable in identifying level of ethnicity, and these students confirm that speaking the language continues to be important. (p4)

Thus, regardless of strength of ethnic/cultural background support from other Latino students was important though the reasons students sought Latino activities were for different reasons.

Though Latino students come to college feeling their ethnic identity is important to them, a few empirical studies demonstrate that students explore and reexamine the meaning of their ethnicity in the college environment (Ethier & Deaux, 1990; 1994; Syed, Azmitia, & Phinney, 2007). As already mentioned, Ethier and Deaux (1990) found that the importance of Latino students' ethnic identity was related to their family background and the importance of their role as son or daughter. In a latter longitudinal study with first year Latino students, Ethier and Deaux (1994) found that this association became less significant in the spring and by the end of the year it was no longer significant. These students strengthened their identification and involvement with Latino activities throughout the year. Also, significant was the finding that for students with a strong cultural background, after they returned from their winter breaks they perceived more threat to their ethnicity then when they first entered college. This might account for the increase in identification and involvement with their ethnic group. They also found that first year Latino college students listed most often positive feelings (i.e. proud, aware, and loyal) about their group and background characteristics (i.e. culture, language, family and tradition) as being part of a Latino identity. Syed, Azmitia, and Phinney (2007) found that for first year Latino students at two different universities, one predominately ethnic students and the other predominately white, they experienced both progressive (moving to a higher stage of ethnic identity) and regressive shifts (moving back to a previous stage). They did find that for students born outside of the U.S., despite institutional context, were more likely to be engaged in ethnic identity exploration. Another significant finding was students of higher SES tend to be in the unexamined stage. Phinney and Alipuria (1987) study found that, in addition to rating their ethnic

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identity as important to them, Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians were more likely than Whites to be engaged in an ethnic identity search.

Several researchers found that shifts to ethnic identity can occur as a result of cognitive dissonance and/or experiencing a negative experience related to ethnicity. Vasti (2003; 2004) noted that Latino students experience changes in ethnic identity as a result of cognitive dissonance or internal conflict, when they found that previously held beliefs and values are incongruent with those held by others. These "critical moments," when a student reconstructs previously held beliefs, can occurred as a result of taking academic courses, interacting with peers and/or encountering an authority figure that provided different information (Vasti, 2004, p. 335). Experiencing a traumatic or embarrassing event connected to their ethnicity could also impact Latino students' ethnic identity (Ruiz, 1990). Vasti and Hernandez (2007) examined how ethnicity impacted the development of Latino students and found that negative experiences around their ethnicity could promote growth, stagnation, or regression. For students who could not make meaning of a negative situation or work through a crisis connected with their ethnicity, they experienced their development to be halted or regressed. These students usually did not have support from family and peers to explore options or alternative ways of thinking.

There is evidence that ethnic identity impacts persistence and academic achievement (Castillo et al., 2006; Negy et. al., 2003; Ong, Phinney, & Dennis, 2006). Castillo et al. (2006) found that ethnic identity was significantly correlated with persistence attitudes. Latino students that scored higher in ethnic identity had more negative perceptions of the university environment. Negy et al. (2003) conducted an

empirical study with 516 undergraduate and graduate students from various ethnic backgrounds to examine whether a preference for one's own ethnic group would lead to ethnocentricism or holding prejudicial attitudes toward another group. They found that for Hispanics and Whites the more they embraced their ethnicity the more negative views they held toward other people. These negative views might be a factor in negative perceptions of the university environment, a factor leading to decisions of academic nonpersistence. Ong, Phinney, and Dennis (2006) in a longitudinal study of low SES Latino students found that over a two-year period parental support and high scores on ethnic identity accounted for increase in academic achievement as measured by GPA.

In summary, this review of ethnic identity development literature has revealed several key findings. First, it appears that for many first year Latino college students they enter college feeling their ethnic identity is important to them, their ethnic identity mirrors their parents and they hold ethnic pride. Second, a major developmental task of ethnic identity formation is learning how to deal with racism and to externalize the negative stereotypes that exist about Latinos and Latinas. Third, Latino students enter a period of exploration when they are defining what their identity means to them. Fourth, high levels of ethnic identity coupled with parental support contribute to persistence.

Summary Of Literature Review

This review of the literature gave an overview of the experiences of students of color and Latinas' attending PWI in order to understand what experiences were enablers and barriers to persistence. Several barriers to persistence were found. First, minority status stresses, not experienced by white students, led to a lack of integration and belonging for students of color and Latinos. Having doubts about their ability to succeed,

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feeling incapable or less intelligent, feeling pressure to represent their racial/ethnic group in the classroom and feeling professors had different expectations and that they judged them on stereotypes led to academic achievement stresses. Females reported higher levels of academic achievement stress. Secondly, in the campus environment, sociocultural alienation and cultural marginalization led to social climate stresses. Some of these stresses included: experiencing cultural incongruity, being in an English only environment, and lacking Latino role models. In addition, experiences of racism and discrimination were reported. Thirdly, for Latina students, additional challenges included: being expected to study close to home, experiencing mixed parental support for their educational attainment, balancing school and family demands that led to gender role conflicts, and working to debunk racial and gender stereotypes. As Latinas enter PWI, their ethnic identity was found to be important, and they were in the moratorium stage of ethnic identity development. They also sought out Latino related activities.

Enablers to persistence were found. A faculty/student mentorship, presence of Latino role models, parental and peer support, and the quality of the academic program were found to contribute to persistence. Also important to combat sociocultural alienation and marginalization and to ethnic identity development was seeking out "cultural nourishment" (Gonzalez, 2002). Engaging in cultural activities, spending time with family and members of their own ethnic/racial group, and seeking out faculty of color were sources of cultural nourishment and coping strategies to persistence.

The current study seeks to expand on this literature. A qualitative research design, utilizing focus groups, will allow for an in depth exploration of the experiences of

Latinas students attending PWI, in general and the experiences that lead to persistence, in particular.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This qualitative research study examined the experiences of Latina students attending PWI. The research question explored was: What are the experiences that contribute to persistence, defined as continuing toward degree completion, of Latinas attending PWI? A flexible design method, using focus groups, was selected to allow for in-depth exploration of the quality of Latina students' experiences. Different from the quality of data collected in individual interviews, the focus group was chosen in order to allow for flexibility, exploration and elaboration on questions, and to help participants recall aspects of their experiences as they react and respond to one another (Anastas, 1999). Being a collective experience, the focus group was viewed as being congruent with participants' cultural values, particularly those that emphasize collectivism.

Type of Data

Data for this research study was gathered from two focus groups. The demographic questionnaire gathered personal information related to participants' age, home state, ethnicity, participants' and parents' generational status in U.S., and class year. Educational questions regarding GPA, high school background, and highest academic degree to be obtained were also included. There were some open-ended questions that became part of the narrative data analyzed. Data from the focus group was obtained from a facilitated dialogue that asked participants about their general college experiences, both beneficial and challenging, persistence experiences, coping strategies and student recommendations. Additional data sources included: notes taken before and

after each focus group and emails sent by participants sharing post focus group reflections.

College Characteristics

The selected colleges were two small, private, predominately White liberal arts colleges in the Northeast. In the 2008-2009 academic year, College A had 2,450 students enrolled, with 22% – 28% being students of color. International students comprised 8% of the student body. There were 102 Latina students registered in the Spring 2009 semester. College B had a total student population of 1169, of which students of color represented 31%. Another 6% of the student body was international students. In the Spring 2009 semester, there were 45 Latina students enrolled.

Sample

This researcher sought to recruit ten to twelve participants per college for each focus group. Participants had to meet three research criteria: (a) they had to self identified as Latina; (b) they needed to be between the ages of 18 and 27 years old, and (c) they had to be a current student at one of the selected colleges. One focus group each was held at College A and B, with seven participants in each one.

Data Collection

After approval from the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Board and each selected College's Institutional Review Board was obtained, procedures began to recruit participants (see Appendix A, B, & C). This researcher worked with each college administrator charged with providing support to Latina students on recruitment. Both administrators had a list of all Latina students registered for the Spring 2009 semester and sent an email to Latina students endorsing the research

study. They informed Latina students of an upcoming campus mailing that would

contain this researcher's recruitment materials. After the email was sent, potential

participants received a recruitment letter and flyer in their campus mailboxes that

explained the purpose of the study. Students were asked to contact the researcher directly

either by phone or email. College A also sent this researcher names of potential

participants. This researcher then sent these students a separate email indicating they

were recommended and invited their participation. On College B, two college

administrators sent targeted emails to Latina students they thought would be interested in

participating.

All participants expressed interest in the study by email. This researcher

confirmed through email that they met the research criteria and answered any questions

they had about the study. In some cases, participants responded to the email confirming

they met the research criteria, in others they did not. If a student did not respond, this

researcher assumed they met research criteria and kept them on the participants' list.

Once participants indicated they wanted to be part of the study, they received a

confirmation email with the informed consent form for review (see Appendix D).

Total participation in each focus group was no longer than two and a half hours

and each one was audio and video taped. The first half hour was an informal gathering

that allowed participants to settle in and meet one another. The researcher also confirmed

that each participant met the research criteria. When all participants arrived, the focus

group began with this researcher distributing to each participant two copies of the

informed consent, the demographic questionnaire, and a list of counseling referrals (see

Appendix E). The researcher reviewed the informed consent, answered questions, and

asked participants to sign two copies of the form. This researcher kept a copy and each participant retained a copy. Participants were then asked to fill out the demographic questionnaire. Once collected, this researcher began the focus group by facilitating a discussion using questions from the interview schedule (see Appendix F). The last fifteen minutes were reserved for debriefing. One week after each focus group, participants were contacted again to request post focus group reflections.

Data Analysis

This researcher transcribed the data collected from the focus groups and then used thematic content analysis (Anastas, 1999). The narrative data was analyzed and coded for themes. Each thematic code than received a label that contained a definition of what data would be included or excluded. The thematic codes were grouped together into categories. These categories were: beneficial experiences, challenges and stressors, persistence experiences, coping strategies, and student recommendations. There were implicit findings that were categorized under identity development. The demographic data was summarized using simple statistics.

Methodological Limitations

This researcher was aware of possible limitations in the use of focus groups to collect narrative data. One limitation was the focus group might have increased the potential for shame or embarrassment. Participants might have been reluctant to share personal information or to disagree with one another, particularly since they attended the same college. Furthermore, a "group think" effect could have prevented differences in the quality of the experiences to emerge (Anastas, 1999). In the end, the benefits of the focus group were thought to outweigh these limitations.

In conducting this investigation, this researcher was aware of potential biases. One possible bias was the researcher's ethnic and national background. As a U.S. born Puerto Rican woman, the researcher was aware of intragroup tensions that can exist among Latinos based on nation of origin and ethnic background. My specific ethnic and national background might have made some Latinas more comfortable to speak, while creating discomfort for others. To mitigate this potential bias, this researcher decided not to reveal her specific ethnic background to the participants until the end of the group.

Another potential bias was over identification. In addition to being a Latina, this researcher shared other similar characteristics and experiences as the participants. The researcher had attended and worked as an administrator supporting students of color at one of the colleges included in the study. In addition, there was more familiarity with one campus than the other. Due to having shared characteristics and experiences as the participants, the researcher might have neglected to probe or explore questions.

Having worked as an administrator at one of the colleges, the researcher had a prior relationship with two students in one of the focus groups. One had been a former staff member, though the student did not directly report to the researcher. In addition, the participant had participated in programs administered by the researcher. The other had served on the same campus committee with the researcher. These prior relationships could have created more comfort for the participants or limited what they shared in the group.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

This qualitative research study investigated the experiences of Latina students that attend predominately white colleges. The research question was: What are the experiences that lead to persistence, defined as working toward degree completion, for Latina students that attend PWI? This chapter reports the findings gathered from two focus groups held at private, predominately white colleges in the Northeast.

Participants

Fourteen Latina students participated in this investigation. There were seven participants in each focus group, including two first years, six sophomores, three juniors and three seniors. All but three of the students were born in the United States; one student was born in Brazil and the others in the Dominican Republic. Most of the participants were the first generation to be born in the United States. Ten participants had mothers who were not born in the U.S. and nine participants had fathers who were not born in the U.S. Participants in the study came from various racial/ethnic groups. Two self identified as Mexican, one as Mexican American, three as Dominicans, one as Puerto Rican, one as Afro-Dominican, two as Latina, one as Hispanic/Latina, one as Brazilian, one as Dominican and Puerto Rican, and another as Chilean and American. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 21 years old with a median age of 19.5 years old. New York was the home state of nine participants while one participant each came from Arizona, Texas, Brazil, New Jersey, and Florida. Participants' GPAs ranged from 2.75 to 3.7, with a median of 3.17. Six of the participants attended high schools that were predominately

white, seven attended high schools in which the majority of the student body was primarily their own ethnic group, and one student attended a school that was mixed. Half of the participants were first generation college students, and all of the participants had aspirations to obtain a graduate or professional degree. Five students were interested in pursuing a PhD, five students their Masters, one a JD, and another two students a JD/PhD. One student was undecided.

Themes

The findings were developed using thematic analysis (Anastas, 1999). Participants were asked several opened-ended questions in the focus groups that would lead to a deeper understanding of the experiences of Latinas who attend a predominately white college and what experiences contribute to persistence. Five themes were identified in the responses: Beneficial Experiences, Challenges and Stressors, Coping Strategies, Persistence Experiences, and Recommendations. Additional implicit findings that emerged from the data are also presented. Participants were also asked to respond to several closed ended questions about their experiences in a brief survey; these responses will be summarized under the relevant themes.

Beneficial Experiences

This section presents several findings related to participants' beneficial experiences as they persist in PWI. Beneficial experiences included: sharing their culture with others, having the freedom to explore their identity, being role models in their families and communities, gaining social privilege, and learning from and finding support from students and faculty of color.

Though some participants felt being an educator on campus was burdensome, others felt sharing their culture with others was a positive experience that resulted in pride and satisfaction. This cultural sharing took the form of educating others about their history or sharing cultural practices like dancing, music, and food.

> I like teaching people how to dance that's the best, 'cause I don't think a lot of people at [names the school] can dance and that really disturbs me. It like irks my head that like people cannot dance. I mean not all Latinas can dance. I feel like the culture comes with like dancing. So me coming here and being able teach [gives the name of another student] how to you, know, how to do some salsa (group laughing), I don't know, that's nice to me. I like that. (1st year)

Another benefit participants described was gaining exposure to other educated Latinas who were modeling different ways of being a Latina. In addition, as the participants learned more about their history, they began to challenge commonly held assumptions and to make changes to their self-identity. One example of ethnic and gender identity exploration surrounded the way Latinas were expected to wear their hair. Some participants described cultural expectations that they perm and straighten their hair.

> This is like a theory of mine. I feel like a lot of the more educated Latinas are starting to get into this trend of like naturalness and like you know embracing . . . your nature beauty and not feeding into all this stuff that people tell you, that you need to look a certain way. So, I don't know [if it's] an education thing, you know 'cause like the more books you read, like the more craziness you think. So, I was like hold up, I like my nature curls, I like that my hair is frizzy. I like that it's kinky. So what? So here I feel like people accept it a little more because we are all here to educate ourselves about like people's differences. Rather than back home, first thing people say when I walk in the door is, "Are you going to do your hair?" and I was like "I did do my hair! I just did it yesterday to come to NY." (2nd year)

Participants were aware that obtaining their college degree made them role models within their families and communities. One participant shared that her mother had

decided to return to school due to her and her sister attending college. Others spoke about encouraging cousins, partners, and friends to get their education.

> I have a lot of friends from back home that weren't in college . . . they like see that I'm like traveling the world and doing all these internships . . . they see that I'm doing it and they are going back to school now. "I'm going to BMCC but I'm going to move up from there" and I'm like "That's great! Start off at like a community college and do something else." (3rd year)

Participants mentioned privileges they were receiving once others learned they were attending a prestigious college. One participant talked about getting extra time with her doctor who wanted to learn more about her college experiences. Another student described going to conferences and having people become more interested in her once they learned what college she attended. Participants were aware that they would have an advantage when applying to graduate and professional school or when applying for a job. These positive experiences were also cited as a contributing factor to participants' persistence.

Participants valued meeting students and faculty of diverse racial and cultural backgrounds and felt this enhanced their educational experience. One participant who grew up in a predominately Black and Puerto Rican neighborhood was able to make Dominican friends for the first time. A participant described how attending a PWI was beneficial.

> I feel like if I would have gone to college at a place that was more like my high school, I probably wouldn't have many Black friends . . . like in high school, it was mostly Latino and Black . . . there was a lot of tension between those two groups and like I kind of carried that with me . . . then when I saw myself here, in a sea of whiteness, I was like, oh I need to find something to [which to] cling. . . it allowed me to look beyond that and to see that not everyone is the same way as the people in my high school . . . you know, to be able to see, more easily, the commonalities I share with a varied group of people, not just between Latinos and blacks, but just along the whole spectrum of races. So, that's one of the things

I'm most grateful about being here as a Latina . . . my interactions with different people now are a lot better and I'm so much more open minded. (Senior)

Equally beneficial for these participants was the quality of their relationships with faculty of color. They felt professors of color understood their experiences in ways that white professors could not. Participants also valued the courses that faculty of color offered.

> I think that being a Latina is great when trying to connect with professors of color at [names the school]. I know when I went to my first meet and greet at the [gives name of the Cultural Center], there were a lot of professors of color there, trying to greet the freshmen, and that was amazing . . . I'm a lot closer to professors of color than I am to white professors just because they care about you . . . they know that some people are struggling just because they are not use to being in a predominately white environment . . . they go out of their way to talk to you and make sure you are alright. So, that's something I really enjoyed here. (2nd year)

Positive experiences with students and faculty of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds led participants to be more open-minded, to learn about experiences they shared in common and to make new friendships. Furthermore, professors of color served as mentors and advisors to Latinas.

Challenges And Stressors

As Latina students persist toward degree completion, they talked about a variety of experiences that presented challenges and stressors. Academic, campus environment, and family experiences were cited as challenging.

Academic Experiences. There are a number of academic experiences that participants found challenging. These academic challenges included: feeling a pressure to represent their race/culture in the classroom, having a belief that they are not academically prepared, and feeling their colleges were not offering adequate academic support.

Study participants discussed feeling pressured to represent not only their own race and culture in the classroom but to be an authority on race matters. Latina students described the mixed feelings they had about this expectation. On the one hand, they wanted to share information that would educate others or to correct misinformation. On the other, some felt it was a challenge to share their experiences in a predominately white classroom. Participants described external pressure from some professors that gave nonverbal messages that communicated the expectation that Latina students share their perspectives. A participant described this challenging class experience.

> I've had similar experiences and like sometimes even though it's a burden sometimes to just be . . . like especially like when professors talk about race and they look straight at you (nods and agreement from some of the students in the group) and expect you to say some enlightened, beautiful story about oppression . . . I'm like yeah, I have those kind of stories but it's like, sometimes you don't want to share . . . sometimes you don't feel comfortable sharing in a predominately white group . . . to have everyone in the class look at you for like a Mexican experience, when you may not be Mexican or you know because you are of color, you represent everyone, even black, [and] Puerto Rican . . . it's just annoying. (2nd year)

A factor complicating the pressure to speak in the classroom emerged from study participants' concern that they were academically unprepared due to prior high school experiences. This concern led to a fear that they would confirm stereotypes of Latinas as being unintelligent and who therefore did not belong at the college. In order to compensate, participants found that they worked harder at their assignments, took longer to do their work, and that these efforts were still undermined by the fact that they were still were not grasping the material.

> You're not prepared academically as well as people who went to private school or people who did amazing summer intern programs in like medical schools. They are like in another level as you. To that, I don't know how to write research papers. My public high school never required that of me. So, [you are] trying to

adjust academically and trying to catch up to where your peers are. . . as a Latina student, when you raise your hand in class, you're not as eloquent as other people. Your ideas are so well [formulated] in your head but [when] they come out . . . I say "Oh man, did I just fulfill that stereotype of the babbling, unintelligent Latina." . . . it's really difficult . . . I have to represent my culture 'cause [I'm] the only one in this room . . . everyone is going to look at you and say "well, they are all like that." So, it's just too much and for me, I'm still dealing with that. I'm still trying to catch up. We will see. I sometimes feel like I'm not learning as much as the other people in my class . . . they retain it quicker, they already had prior experiences, prior knowledge of it . . . what they are being taught, they are taking it to another level. . . when I'm just trying to digest it. (2nd year)

Feeling academically under prepared, some participants questioned their belonging at the college and felt they were admitted to the college due to affirmative action. They questioned their qualifications and feared they were admitted to fill a quota. Hearing other white students describe their prior high school experiences and the number of AP courses they took, led some participants to have self-doubt about their sense of belonging at the college.

I've always had this fear that I actually don't belong. Like, I'm not qualified to be here and that I'm just a quota. Like, "Okay, we want to have at least ten percent Hispanics here, so we are going to choose her". That's always been my fear . . . I've always talked to people about how many AP courses they have took. . . I only took three because that's all my high school offered but [white students say] "Oh I took two my sophomore year, two my junior year and my whole schedule was AP senior year." . . . even if I wanted to do that, I couldn't because it just wasn't offered. (2nd year)

Participants felt the college treated all students as if they had the same level of academic preparation, although they had the experience of needing additional academic support to write papers. In addition, they struggled to learn the terminology of certain subjects and felt professors should do more to help students by stressing key terms that are important to learn in each subject. Participants felt a lack of academic support did not allow them to reach their full academic potential.

. . . since we are all at [names the school] everyone just assumes that we are on a certain level and that is not the case . . . I feel like I'm not able to explore my full potential. Just because I need help in other ways that [names the school] isn't doing it for me . . . I feel like I'm not being taught certain things that I need to be taught that I wasn't taught before. (Senior)

Campus Experiences. A number of campus experiences created challenges and stressors for participants. Challenging campus experiences included: a lack of campus support for diversity, a need to work harder than White students, the low numbers of Latinos on campus, intergroup and intragroup conflicts, and cultural differences amongst all students.

Participants described experiences where they felt there was a lack of support for racial and cultural diversity on campus. Some participants were frustrated by the apathy White students demonstrated when they did not attend Latino social and cultural activities. Participants described making extra efforts to invite White students to their events only to have their overtures rejected.

I just hate it when we have events . . . we make it so clear (strong emphasis, slapping her hands together) that it's open to everybody and they still feel like they are excluded . . . you will be like, "Come with me. I want you to come with me. It will be fun. I promise." . . . they are just like (makes a sound that indicates a lack of interest), "Maybe next time." (2nd year)

Due to the extra efforts participants made to be inclusive and invite white students to their events, they felt white students were communicating a lack of interest in them.

Other participants felt the college was only superficially interested in diversity and that people's cultures were being treated as a "side show." Other participants felt the college treated diversity as a commodity, utilizing students of color to recruit other students of color to the college without a genuine interest in the quality of their campus

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experiences. Participants were critical of recruitment efforts and programs that over

represented the number of students of color at the college.

Participants felt they had to work harder than white students to improve the racial

and cultural environment. As mentioned earlier some participants enjoyed sharing their

culture and educating others. However, some participants felt it created a burden. Two

participants discussed the differential experiences Latina and White students have at their

colleges.

> I feel like students of color on campus are constantly working for equality and
> constantly working. While, White students can like play ultimate Frisbee. I mean
> like we can do that but they can join knitting club . . . that's where there time goes
> . . . for students of color, a huge chuck of their time is dedicated to student of
> color organizations . . . I get really defensive, really quickly. So, my immediate
> reaction is to like reject that . . . to do everything I want to do and to show
> everyone like I can do the same things. So, I think that's where it gets really
> complicated because there is a huge part of me of course that wants to be with
> people that understand me. (3rd year)

> Why does that have to be on her back or our backs when there are a bunch of
> White people here . . . they don't do anything and they come out with all the
> benefits . . . they get the good jobs but did they care about the school. . . no, they
> only cared about there own self and they still benefit. But, we have to be carrying
> this, still doing well, still trying to get people to listen to us. It's harder. (2nd year)

Regardless of whether Latina students coped with this burden by rejecting it or accepting

it, it had a negative psychological impact. For some participants, it meant feeling angry

and estranged from other Latinas and for still others, having to work harder than white

students that created resentment.

In PWI, participants' social experiences, particularly dating, were impacted by the

low numbers of Latino men on their campuses and an uncertainty about dating White

men. Some participants viewed the Latino men on their campus familially, rather than

romantically. Others felt Latinos were not interested in dating Latinas, preferring to date

White women instead. Participants described feeling ambivalent about dating White

men, citing the fear that they would not have anything in common with them. Still other

participants mentioned that White men had not shown an interest in being friends with

Latinas, much less dating them. Thus, participants described feeling frustrated by their

lack of dating options.

Participants who were interested in dating women cited additional barriers.

One participant expressed that being lesbian or bisexual was not accepted in Latino

communities. Another participant wondered if holding one of these sexual identities

would lead to being further oppressed and targeted. One participant interested in dating

women explained her challenges.

> I think more people are out then people think. I just don't have to wear a pride
> shirt to say, "Hey I'm bisexual." . . . I don't really care about race. It is harder if
> you are interested in girls . . . you don't really know how to approach her . . . it's
> complicated. . . . I think it is harder 'cause then you fall into the stereotype of
> being overly sexualized. You associate homosexuality for a female with like
> being promiscuous and then you are kind of stuck . . . I told this one guy that I
> was and he was like "Oh, really!" and, I was like "Yuck, get away from me." . . .
> you don't want to fall into that sort of notion of being promiscuous. (1st year)

Some participants who identified as lesbian or bisexual expressed that they had limited

support to talk with their peers and family about their social experiences at the college.

Participants described challenging intergroup conflicts that were stressful and

feeling their interactions with White students were less genuine. White students were

described as being avoidant and to be "walking on eggshells," particularly in

conversations about race and culture. Participants described experiences when white

students would encounter a group of students of color and they would avoid joining in the

group. These intergroup experiences with White students created feelings of anger,

frustration, and anxiety. One participant described her social experiences with white

students.

> If I'm in a room with like my White friends and race suddenly comes up, it's like they completely ignore it. They won't say anything about it because they think they are going to say something that offends me . . . I'm like speak your mind . . . if you say something offensive, I'm going to say something (group laughing) . . . don't think you can't say anything on the subject because you are entitled as much as I am. I'm not like the spoke person for race . . . that's difficult. (2nd year)

Though participants described positive interactions and friendships with Black

students, they also described a number of challenging intergroup conflicts. Whereas,

White students seemed reluctant to talk about race and culture, Black students pressured

Latinas to claim a racial identity. A participant who embraced a cultural identity

described a stressful social interaction with her Black friend.

> . . . Last year, my mom came to visit for a weekend . . . my neighbor, who is African American, is always telling me, "You need to admit to yourself that you are black," and I'm like, "I don't deny that I have African ancestry." I don't understand what this issue is with like labeling myself as Black . . . in this country that is directly associated with being African American . . . like in my culture, it's not a denial of African ancestry, like it's a appraisal of being a Dominican, like the Dominican identity . . . my mom came to visit . . . my mom is dark and he told my mom . . . "You are Black," and my mom is like, "Yes, but I'm Dominican," and he is like, "No, but you're Black." I'm like "Oh, Lord." (3rd year)

Another participant that could pass for White and also embraced a cultural identity

demonstrated how Black students put Latinas into racial categories.

> I remember like with her, when they kept telling her that she was Black and she was getting frustrated I would be like, "If you are calling her Black, then you have to call me Black too 'cause I'm Dominican too." . . . they would be like "Oh, but you are not Black." . . . I would be like "I'm just as Black as she is" . . . I would be like "Yea, you don't get it, so stop calling her Black." (Senior)

Some participants felt the U.S. racial binary created these difficult social interactions with

Black students. Others thought being in a predominately White environment made race

more salient for Black students and thus building a community was important.

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Participants described feelings that ranged from empathy to anger as they continued to be pressured to claim a Black racial identity.

In spite of feeling strengthened by the presence of other Latinos on campus, participants also described challenging campus experiences in their interactions. Due to the diversity among Latinos it was not always clear there was common ground between them. Participants described tensions among Latinas that were born in Latino countries and those that were born in the United States, both of whom might claim the same cultural identity. Two participants shared their frustration with other Latinos who either invalidated their cultural identity or assumed all Latinas had the same cultural experience.

> . . . there is this whole other conflict, between students from the island and students from the mainland . . . my family is Dominican and I grew up being told I was Dominican. I never had this idea of an American identity, that didn't exist for me. I had no idea of a Dominican identity. So, then to meet other students here, who are from the Dominican Republic and then have them tell me that I'm not Dominican because I was not born there, is frustrating in and of itself. (3rd year)

> . . . I think it's also interesting that difference isn't just the way people perceive you but it's also we're very different and so like and their isn't always a shared experience between Latinas or when you identify as Latina, it doesn't mean you come from Mexico . . . it's sometimes even hard to connect to other people who are Latina because they are trying to project onto you what they feel . . . it's totally nature because it's like finally I found someone I can relate to . . . "So, you like this and you like this" and I'm like "Yes, I'm really happy you are Latina but no, I don't like that. No, that's not my experience" or "I don't speak Spanish,". . . I think it's hard. (Senior)

Thus, in their social interactions with other Latinas, the range of ethnic, cultural, and geographical differences presented participants with challenges. Since Latinas would utilize Latino organizations as a form of support, they were surprised to encounter these tensions. As one Mexican American participant pointed out, even though she was with

other Latinas and she appreciated her friends, she did not have anyone else at the college that shared her ethnic/cultural background, which was lonely for her.

In predominately White campus environments, participants experienced cultural differences that created challenges and stressors. One challenge participants described was attending "bad parties" were there was an emphasis on drinking and talking. One participant described that a good Dominican party would include merengue and dancing. She did not understand how parties at her college did not include dancing. Some participants feared they might be adopting the social habits of white students by drinking too much. Another challenge participants talked about was their experiences around greeting practices. One participant appreciated taking Hispanic studies courses and encountering professors who would kiss her on the check, a familiar cultural greeting. Participants also spoke about the challenge of not having access to their own cultural foods. Though the college had days when they attempted to serve Mexican or Caribbean food, the participants did not consider the food authentic or good. Participants described calling their mothers up before school breaks to request their favorite cultural dishes. For those participants who are part of Latino organizations, having authentic ethnic food was possible either because students cooked it themselves or they brought it from local Latino restaurants. Not feeling free to listen to their cultural music was also listed as a stressor. One participant summarized the various cultural differences found in the campus environment.

> You go to a class and people are talking about religion and they are spiritual but
> not religious. I don't understand what that means . . . [then] when you walk into
> places and platanos are the exciting food. It's so hard to have a cultural
> disconnect from everyone around you . . . these are not little charms that I am
> carrying around, this is who I am and this is who I grew up as. Oh, and the music

I listen to isn't cool and hip . . . having to explain who you are all the time and why you do things the way you do, all the time . . . it's so hard . . . and missing physically being able to touch people. (Senior)

Language was another cultural difference to which participants had to adjust. Never having thought about how they spoke English, coming to a predominately white college made participants more aware of their accents. Participants described experiences with White students and staff that made inquires about their English speaking accents and who would ask several questions to glean Latinas' ethnic/cultural backgrounds. After a painful and embarrassing encounter with a member of the health staff who asked several intrusive questions regarding her accent, one participant described her efforts to eliminate her accent in an effort to sound more like White people. These experiences made participants feel like they did not belong. A participant shared her negative experience with her accent.

I think when I first got here, the first thing that people asked me was "Where are you from? You have an accent." Now, that question like pisses me off, 'cause honestly, I never thought I had an accent. I just thought I spoke how I spoke . . . they are trying to figure me out, like I'm a puzzle. So, I was like okay hold up, "I live in Brooklyn, NYC, [and I'm] Dominican" . . . "I don't know what to tell you" . . . what is it that you want to hear, that "I'm like exotic from like some crazy place, . . . what do you want to know?" . . . being, I guess, around my people all the time didn't make me feel different, until I got here. Then, everyone is like, "You are from somewhere." First, they are like are "You African American?", then I'm like "No." Then, they are like are, "You have a Caribbean accent. You have a NY accent." . . . "What? I don't know what these things are". . . It was just shocking to see that that was the main thing that people needed to know once they met me . . . "How about you ask me my name?" or like, "What year I am . . . you ask everyone else their name. You don't go up to them and say you have an accent, where are you from. Tell me your life story. What does it matter to you?" I don't mind sharing, telling people where I'm from . . . but have a genuine interest not because you want to make me into a freak show. (2nd year)

The emphasis White students and staff placed on participants' accents left them with feelings of frustration, stress, anxiety, and anger. In addition, they felt they did not fit in and were different from other students.

Participants also found it challenging being in an English speaking environment. Across class years, Latina students talked about how they missed speaking or listening to music in Spanish.

> I met one of my closest friends, who happens to be this Dominican boy from the Bronx and I'm this Dominican girl from the Bronx (group laughing). It was like perfect . . . we come straight to each other and go "Oh, my gosh," and like talking Spanish with him is just amazing . . . I miss cursing in Spanish and listening to my mom in Spanish. (2nd year)

> . . . especially with music, even if I'm playing Hip hop in my room, that's okay. My neighbor won't mind it because that's already part of American culture . . . if I play Reggeaton, even Reggeaton is becoming like more acceptable but if I put Merengue (Spanish music) or Bachata (Spanish music) on, "Oh, my God. What are you listening to?" . . . little things like that frustrate me like that only another Latino or Latina will understand . . . if you are not, you will not understand the frustration with that, so. (3rd year)

For these participants, they did not find support in the college environment for the way they spoke English. Furthermore, participants had little opportunity to speak Spanish or to listen to Spanish music.

Family Experiences. Study participants came from families that were supportive of participants getting an education and that were proud of them. However, participants also spoke about some family experiences that created stressors. Challenging experiences included: holding different values than the family, realizing family members might not understand their college experiences, feeling guilt over the cost of a private education, and being aware that family members feared that they were loosing their cultural identity.

As participants' persist, holding different values than their parents was described as a challenging family experience. Expectations around dating were cited as a stressor. some participants, family members wanted them to date a Latino, while others wanted the student to date a "nice Catholic boy." Participants expressed frustration with realistically fulfilling these expectations given the low number of Latinos at the college, or being interested in dating women rather than men. Premarital sex was also a value that participants had mixed or different feeling than their parents, with participants holding more liberal values.

For some participants juggling family demands was a stressor. Participants struggled with how to balance their role as a student and their role within the family. One senior shared that she made her decision to attend a college outside her community, in order to enhance her likelihood that she would complete her degree, stating had she studied close to home she would not be graduating. She realized as the oldest child in a single parent family, her mother depended on her to help with chores and with the care for her younger sibling. A participant shared her family experience.

> I don't know if this happens to you guys . . . when I go home, my mom is like very adamant about me being really involved with the family just because I've not been home for so long. . . . Winter break is like the only time when I get to spend a long period of time with my family and that's right after finals week. So, when I go home, I just want to pass out on my bed and sleep for hours and watch TV for like days . . . my mom is like "No, you have to go to the park with your brother and you have to go to church every Sunday" . . . trying to be the ideal daughter, when you . . . want to take a time out from college. It's just a lot of responsibilities. Sometimes, you feel like you are spending too much time on yourself, on your personal [life], academics, and your social life and not enough time with your family . . . when I go home, I also want to spend time with my friends, who I haven't seen from high school, in a very long time . . . sometimes, I feel guilty going to a party and seeing my friends from home and not spending enough time with my family . . . it's very short, it's like a month. Then, I'm back to school. Then, I usually have something to do during Spring break and it's like

May . . . it's like the whole year [has passed], expect for like a couple of months . . . [in the] summer, you want to work and it's like "Baby sit your brothers. Spend time with your brothers." It's, it's difficult. (2nd year)

Similar to this participant, others struggled with juggling their student roles with what was expected of them as daughters in their families. Furthermore, participants felt college administrators and faculty failed to realize Latinas were expected to maintain strong ties to their families, which created stressors.

Participants described how their families' economic status impacted their education. Participants reported the sacrifices their families were making to support their education, with some parents working extra hours. Being in a college environment, where the institution's expectation was that students' avail themselves of all the college's programs and offerings, their families' economic situation impacted them.

I definitely agree, there is an economic. . . you feel guilt . . . especially when you want to do things that [names the college] offers that are supplemental, educational stuff that cost money. For like example, I want, I'm doing the Spring break Caribbean trip . . . [in] an IS [International Studies]class . . . I had to come up with the money. I couldn't go to my mom. It's not that I couldn't go to my mom. After the financial aid of course, it would be, to me, for my guilt, it would be too much for me to say, "I want to go to the Caribbean for two weeks. Can you pay for it?" So, like I'm paying for it . . . I couldn't ever go to her and say, "You are paying some tuition and pay this instead, add this as well." . . . going JYA, like the idea of being in a country for a semester and not working. . . , where is that money going to come. Then, where are you going to find this money that is . . . for food . . . it's so much stress . . . my parents can't afford, which is why I have to work during the break . . . I have to work during the summer and I have to work all my hours . . . you feel guilty going to then saying, "I want to be for a semester, in another country. Can you give me pocket money?" I can't. (2nd year)

For these Latinas, they struggled with feeling beloved because their parents were making sacrifices for their education and feeling guilty their parents were spending a lot of money for tuition. To assist their families, they worked extra hours, did not ask for amenities and in some cases had to decide to forgo certain educational opportunities like

studying abroad. Participants held perceptions that White students did not have a similar economic struggle.

As participants' became more educated, they began to notice it created tension in their families. These tensions arose due to family members wanting Latinas to maintain their cultural identity, to family members not being able to relate to Latinas' college experiences and to family members holding different values. While families were supportive of Latinas getting their education, they also conveyed that they did not want Latinas to loose their cultural identity. One student described a challenging experience with her father.

> . . . like my dad when he comes here, he gets really angry . . . he will be like, "Oh, it's all those white people, white people." That's all he ever says . . . then it's frustrating because he will be like, "You are becoming, you are forgetting where you are from and your people . . . why are you trying to act like them and going to that school?" Because, "I'm not here to be like them, I'm here to get a good education." So, it's not like the people aren't affecting me here and like my dad gets a little angry about that. (1st year)

Due to their educational experiences, participants began to notice they could not relate to their families in the same way. One reason participants gave for this sudden obstacle was being a first generation college students. They felt like their parents did not understand the experiences and expectations of going to college. One first generation participant felt she could not talk with her mother about her college experiences, since it created more stress.

> I feel like I can't really talk to my mom. I don't know how I divide [it]. It's like the life I have with my mother . . . then my life separate, like my life here at [names the school], with career plans. It's like my mom just doesn't understand and can't relate . . . she is like, "What are you studying again? Are you going to get a job? Are you going to make money? You should be a doctor." "No! No! I don't like that. I don't want to be in school for the rest of my life. It's not for me. I can't handle it." . . . so, like first year, when I was having issues, like always her

first solution to every single problem is like "Why don't you come home?" and I was like, "Forget it. No, that's not it! I know it sucks right now but it's going to get better . . . you need to be telling me this, not me telling myself this." So, she just can't relate. She can't give me the right advice on how to deal with things. So, I'm just like, "Thanks mom. I'm not going home." So, it's like two stressors. I'm dealing with the crap I have to deal with here . . . then, my mom stressing because she thinks I'm having this horrendous time [and] that I need to go home right away [or] I'm just going to implode. . . that's kind of rough. (3rd year)

Another reason cited was personal growth; becoming open minded as a result of their education caused clashes with some of their family's beliefs. In addition, family members told participants they were holding superior attitudes because they were getting educated. One participant said she grew up hearing that her commitment to education meant that she thought she was better than everyone in the family. Other participants described that as they themselves were getting educated, family members felt that they were not smart. One participant said "It sucks that you make people feel stupid when you do not even mean to." Two participants described the challenge of speaking to family and friends who are not educated.

I just feel like it's harder to relate to people when they are not educated. I don't feel like I'm better than them (family) but it's like I said, I feel like I've become so open minded to certain ways and I feel like I see things so differently . . . when people start acting a certain way or say certain things, I understand why . . . they don't and then it's like you can't talk about certain things 'cause they're going to think you are crazy or you are just on some college rant about something . . . I feel like that's harder. It's hard to relate to people on that level. (Senior)

As participants become educated, they noticed that they were undergoing change, an experience that created mixed feelings.

I kind of agree with you . . . when I go back home, I see how different it is and like I know that I'm changing in a way . . . at the same time, I don't want to change . . . I don't want to like loose myself and like I don't know I feel like I don't want to become bugi, white middle class person. I want to still maintain my identity but still make it . . . it's so hard doing that. (3rd year)

Though it is clear that family members were supportive of Latinas becoming educated, participants' families conveyed other messages that caused distress.

Coping Strategies

This section presents findings related to study participants coping strategies when stressors and challenges are encountered. Latina students' experiences with the multicultural office and with counseling services, from which they sought support are presented. The qualities participants' valued in their support persons are also discussed. Participants were asked how they cope when they encounter a challenge or a stressor. All participants utilized more than one coping strategy, with all of the participants indicating that their most common coping strategy was talking with a friend. The next three most frequently cited coping strategies were speaking with their faculty mentor (57%), speaking with a family member (57%), and developing a plan of action to address the challenge (57%). The least frequently used strategies were seeking counseling (21%), attending the multicultural center (21%), attending the Latino student group (21%), and doing nothing (14%). Some Latina students coped by utilizing individual strategies like writing in journals, exercising, thinking and analyzing a problem to find a solution and seeking support from a campus office. Others used collective strategies like talking and hanging out with friends, attending student groups, and planning social and cultural activities with others. Off campus, participants would speak to their family members, former friends, and mentors. Speaking with their mothers was cited most often as an off campus support.

Some participants coped with stressors by talking to others and they went to support persons for different reasons. Lived experience seemed to be an important factor.

Participants cited speaking with their friends, particularly since friends could understand their college experiences. One participant explained that she does not go to her friends when she is experiencing an academic problem but rather seeks advice from graduate students who have already successfully navigated their undergraduate experience. Some participants felt comfortable only going to a white professor with academic problems. Others would speak with other students of color or a professor of color about their personal and family challenges. One Mexican participant went to professors for different purposes.

> I had two [professors] and one . . . was Mexican and the other one was White. It was interesting . . . when they were both here, I would go to them for two different reasons. One [White professor] would be more academic and the other would be more academic and the social and the family life . . . when she [the Mexican professor] left I had to learn, I guess how to communicate with him in all aspects. That was interesting 'cause there's still this sort of thing where, "You are still White. You still don't understand." (Senior)

This participant felt that a White professor could not relate to her social and family life in the way her Mexican professor could. Even when she did begin sharing all aspects of her life with the white professor, she felt he did not understand. Thus, participants sought out a support person that had a common, lived experience. They also valued support persons who listened to them, validated their feelings, were non-judgmental, made them feel like they understood their college experiences, and were honest.

There were mixed findings on whether participants viewed their family as a source of support that helped them when they faced challenges and stressors. If they thought that family members would understand them and generally gave them good advice, they shared their experiences. Other students felt their parents could not relate or understand their college experiences and decided not to share concerns with them. Other

Latina students coped by selectively sharing their college experiences with their parents. Participants who utilized this strategy reported that they wanted to protect parents from being upset if they learned their child was experiencing problems, to ease or avoid family tensions, and to avoid having to explain experiences they felt their parents would not understand. Some also felt their family's advice was not helpful.

As they persist, participants shared their experiences with the college office and cultural center charged with providing support to Latina students. Some Latinas found the cultural center to be supportive. They described it as a place where they felt at home, were affirmed, were provided social and cultural activities, and where they could connect with other students who understood their experiences. This participant captured the support some participants found in the college's cultural center.

> I had the same hesitancy joining the cultural center organizations. When I did join them, it made me so much happier . . . you can have an experience outside of the classroom. You can have White friends . . . I still have that and I don't have an issue . . . sometimes, you just have to feel like your home and talk with people that know exactly what you are talking about . . . not having to explain anything . . . being really frank with people and them understanding you. That's a blessing and that I use all the time. (2nd year)

Other participants did not express similar views about the cultural center/office's support of Latina students. Some students felt the cultural center sent the message that participants were not qualified to be at the college since they needed extra help that white students did not need. Others felt attending the cultural center would lead to being pigeonholed or burdened with the expectation that they would become involved in working for social change at their college. Other Latina students wanted support from the cultural center/office but felt it did not meet their interest and needs.

> The office of multicultural affairs in most higher education institutions, they, even though there are a lot of Latino students attending these institutions, there hardly is ever much attention paid to the students . . . whenever you have multicultural centers their main goal, their main focus always tends to be the black students. (3rd year)

Thus, some participants stated the cultural center/office was serving its purpose, some participants held mixed feelings about it, and still others were frustrated that it was not serving its purpose.

Study participants spoke about utilizing the counseling service on their campuses. While one participant reported having mixed experiences with the counseling service, participants generally shared that mental health services were not effective in helping them with problems they were encountering. Participants described experiences in which they did not feel their counselor understood them or was able to assist them in solving their problems.

> I have this very nice but White lady that doesn't understand where I am coming from culturally or socio-economically. So, I feel like I have to explain everything to her . . . I waste like 45 minutes. Well this is my background information and 15 minutes for my problem. So, like all I did was cry a lot. I have a headache and I have to leave. (Senior)

> When I tried the counseling service . . . I was just sitting there with this White man and it's was just him asking me all these questions . . . I would say something and he would be like, "You know, can you explain that? Tell me more about." . . . I was just sitting there crying, crying in front of this man . . . I was like, "I can't do this." So, like I've never gone back. (2nd year)

These experiences left participants feeling more anxious and without the support they were seeking, which appears to have influenced many participants' decision not to return after their first sessions.

Persistence Experiences

Study participants were asked what experiences contribute to persistence as they attend predominately white colleges. Findings included experiences within: their family, at their former high schools, former places of employment, and/or within the college environment. Positive and negative experiences contributed to participants' persistence. Participants were asked what experiences led them to think of taking time off from the college. The most common responses listed were doubts about their ability (50%) and an alienating campus (50%). Thirty-five percent of participants spoke about financial stress. The low number of Latinos (28.5%), and college values that did not match their own (28.5%) were also given. Interestingly, though participants had thought about talking time off from college, most of them (78%) indicated they would recommend another Latina student attend their college. Two students gave conditional responses saying yes and no, while another student was not sure.

Participants cited various positive family experiences and other more challenging experiences that aided in their persistence. Several participants discussed making their parents proud. Being a role model to younger siblings, cousins and in some cases their parents also contributed to persistence. Some participants spoke about their families' struggles being low income wage earners and living in poverty as a motivator to pursue an education as a means of improving their own and their family's social and economic condition. Witnessing the challenges and oppression their mothers' encountered and how hard they worked in order to send their daughters to college also contributed to their persistence. For these participants, getting their education was a gift to their mothers in acknowledgement of their hard work while raising them. Within the family, a close

relationship with their mothers led participants to persist. One participant described

family experiences that impact persistence.

> Just because she [her mother] struggled so much for me to be in the United States
> . . . when she first got here, she got a factory job . . . she went to CCNY to take
> English courses just to learn English . . . she did have a college degree in the
> Dominican Republic but it's slightly different here. It really doesn't hold much
> weight but it's still a college degree . . . so I am in higher education because of
> that. She has always pushed me and she is kind of opposite of your mother
> (referring to another student in the group). She always pushed me to be a
> millionaire, like "you gotta go to a good college and you gotta be a doctor or a
> lawyer and make so much money. So when you grow up, you can say, like yeah
> you were not born here but look at were you are." (2nd year)

Study participants were persisting to improve their own social and economic

condition and that of their families and communities. Participants viewed themselves as

role models and people of influence in their communities. They cited experiences where

they had already begun to encourage others to enroll in college. They also noticed they

were beginning to reap social privilege and knew persisting would give them an

advantage when applying to graduate/professional school or when applying for a job.   In

addition, some participants were clear that they wanted to have professional careers that

would benefit other Latinos. Other participants felt connected to a larger trend of Latinas

who are in college and who collectively are working to improve conditions for other

Latinos. One participant wanted to get her education to be a mentor and begin an

organization that would encourage Latinas to pursue their education. She realized that in

her community she is in a small minority of Latinas becoming educated, with too many

young Latinas becoming pregnant at a young age. A participant described how her

persistence would lead to personal and group empowerment.

> At the same time what keeps me here is, even though I know we are a small few,
> like of Latina women in college, a lot of my friends in high school winded up

going to top schools too . . . when I go back home, I don't feel like I'm one out of 50,000 people that go to school. I feel like there's a lot more Latinas going to school. So, I feel like that keeps me motivated as well. . . knowing that I'm going to have other people that are going to look out for me that are also Dominican makes me want to do it even more, makes me want to prove . . . like the second generation Dominicans have more students attending higher education than any other Hispanic group. We are also the, the population that is at the lowest rank of economic poverty. So, like knowing that that makes me like want to push people . . . I don't know. I feel like I do this sometimes . . . I want to represent my whole . . . I don't know. It's so bad. Knowing the statistics makes me want to keep at it and motivate friends who are in school to go back. Like I have a lot of friends from back home that weren't in college and they like see that I'm like traveling the world and doing all these internships . . . they see that I'm doing it and they are going back to school now . . . I don't feel like I'm doing it for myself. I feel like I'm doing it for other people. (3rd year)

Participants described painful experiences either in their former high school or currently in college where guidance counselors, advisors, teachers, and professors were discouraging and not supportive. Participants felt others doubted their ability to succeed at a private, elite college. One participant remembers a White student jokingly saying "How the hell did you get into this college!" and shared that other students had made similar comments. These participants persisted in order to prove these people wrong.

. . . I remember my guidance counselor from like High School. She was Hispanic. I remember her saying, "Oh you cannot go to Boston University. That's too expensive." . . . just from that cut off point, I was like nothing is too expensive . . . no class is going to be too hard unless I make it that hard . . . I guess that [is why I] want to strive and succeed . . . I don't know. It's kind of like a personal issue and like a societal issue. . . Yea, probably just like, like all the professors or like the teachers that wrote those recommendations for me. I am doing it for them but also a lot for myself . . . a lot because . . . she was Hispanic herself telling to another Hispanic . . . there is only like ten other Hispanic kids in the top 5 percent. It was so hard to hear that and as you can see, something that still stays with me (Student begins to cry). (2nd year)

It was both painful and shocking to participants when another Latina expressed these doubts, because of their expectations that another Latina would be more encouraging and supportive.

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Other study participants described experiencing or witnessing racial oppression and discrimination, which led them to persist. Study participants described how painful and challenging it can be when others judge you based on racial and gender stereotypes. One participant recounted a negative experience with racism and oppression.

> That is kind of why I also decided to go to [names the school] because of like the oppressors. I've seen like people go up to my mom . . . she actually looks foreign and tell her you should go back to your country and take your kids back with you and you should leave. "My husband is part of the Ku Klux Klan and whatever and he will come after you and kill you because you are not suppose to be in this country." . . . just seeing that and knowing that my mom is like an endocrinologist and in a very successful profession was kind of like challenging. It's just like such a contradiction because you see people who just judge on appearance and not on intellect at all. (2nd year)

Recommendations

Participants made several recommendations to college administrators that would assist them as they persist toward their degree. They included having more academic support before they begin college, as in a bridge program and while attending college. Latina students felt this support was necessary to enhance their academic success. They also discussed the need for classes that are of interest to Latina students. Having classes on the Caribbean was given as one example. In addition, participants wanted more administrative support in improving their social and cultural experiences at the college. They requested more programs that would focus on the needs and interest of Latina students and they do not necessarily want to shoulder all the responsibility to coordinate them. Latina students also discussed the need for having more faculty and staff of color that can serve as role models and mentors. While they realized White professors could be supportive, they felt these professors needed faculty development to understand the experiences of Latina students, in order to provide better support.

Implicit Findings

Though Latina students were not asked specific questions regarding their ethnic and gender identity, a number of findings emerged related to identity development. Participants revealed that a Latina identity was complex. Many participants were actively engaged in ethnic and gender identity exploration, a time described as challenging, difficult and isolating. Being in PWI can be a barrier or enabler to identity exploration.

In PWI, participants acknowledged that holding a Latina identity was complex due to racial, ethnic, cultural, and geographical differences. For some participants being Latina was a racial identity, for others it was a cultural identity, and for yet others, a Latina identity embraced both a racial and cultural identity. Participants also discussed the impact of regional and national differences on Latina identity. Another participant emphasized the different campus experiences Latinas can have depending on physical characteristics, since some Latinas look white, others black and some have the stereotypical Latina look.

Some Latinas experienced thinking about their racial and ethnic identity all the time, while other students did not think about it at all. Students that tended to think about their racial and ethnic identity often came from high schools and neighborhoods that were predominately their own ethnic group or more racially and ethnically diverse. These students were having their first experience in a predominately white environment. Two students described a shift from not thinking about their racial/ethnic identity to having frequent thoughts about it.

Sometimes people get here and then start to identify who they think [they] really are . . . some people don't really think about race and stuff like that until they get here. . . then they are like "Oh, I'm the only brown person in my class. What do I do now?" . . . if you are use to going, let's say to a predominately all Latino school, you come here and you are like "Oh, now I have to actually say I'm Latino, people will not assume it. I have to, you know, be a certain way. I have to advocate for like Latinos." . . . it can make or break your identity . . . college is such a rough time, not only academically. . . also [for a] social life and like meeting people. (2nd year)

This researcher observed that students who had physical characteristics that marked them as Latina or Black said they thought about their racial/ethnic identity all the time. Some students described being forced to think about their racial and cultural identity due to others emphasizing racial and cultural difference. For instance, Latina students described experiences when they met white students for the first time and were asked questions that pointed to a racial and cultural difference. Students who did not think about their racial and ethnic identity often had two defining characteristics: they could pass for White and attended predominately White high schools. One exception was a Latina who appeared White and was not born in the United States.

For many participants, part of their identity in PWI was being a student and an educator. In their daily interactions, they described having to educate others about their Latina identity and their ethnic group. In the classroom, Latinas spoke about either feeling pressure to educate others when a professor looked to them when a matter of race or ethnicity was discussed or felt compelled to speak due to misinformation being shared. In their social interactions, participants sometimes had to educate others who did not understand their preference for embracing a cultural identity rather than a racial identity. Many in the group seemed to be active in either Latino organizations or within student of color groups and worked to create learning opportunities for other students. Interestingly,

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Latina students did not identify coming to a predominately white college to educate other students about their experiences as one of their goals. It appeared to become an aspect of their identity imposed by others by others once they arrived on a predominately White campus. This role was usually spoken about as a burden and an additional stressor since participants usually had to work harder academically than White students. However, there were some participants who felt empowered in their role as educators.

Participants discussed working to combat negative ethnic and gender stereotypes that others hold about Latinas. These stereotypes restricted or limited their experiences. Some participants spoke of the fear that men only want to interact with them to have a sexual relationship and are impacted by the stereotype that Latinas are hot, sexy, not intelligent, servile, promiscuous and like to be at home having babies. One participant who shared a post focus group reflection shared that in many of her interactions with men, they felt entitled to touch her body inappropriately due to her Latina identity. A Latina that identifies as bisexual spoke about the challenge of being open about her sexuality for fear of confirming the stereotype of the overly sexed Latina. Other Latinas spoke about the pressure they feel to speak intelligently in the classroom because of a desire to defy a stereotype of Latinas as unintelligent. This student's academic experience prior to coming to college and the feeling like she might be judged by a stereotype created an academic and personal challenge. Some participants felt others had a preconceived notion of Latinas as being "light skin with curly hair" that created a stressor for Latinas with different physical characteristics. Participants who did not look like the stereotypical Latina had their identity either ignored or invalidated. Two participants described how stereotypes negatively impacted them.

It's kind of hard . . . I don't dress like the stereotypical Latina . . . I haven't had the like stereotypical experiences . . . I would say that at least at home the majority of my friends are white and one of them even told me that she like considered me white or something . . . I was like, "What! I'm not white," and she was like, "Yes you are," and I was like "That's not cool." . . . I got like really mad. I don't know. For me, it's kind of annoying just 'cause I don't fall into a lot of those categories. People may consider me like not really like Latina even though my Puerto Rican culture plays such a big role in my life, especially at home with my family . . . people don't see that side of me. You know. (2nd year)

I think my experience so far is I've gotten a lot of exoticism just because I'm brown and I'm Hispanic. I mean there is this kind of notion if you are Latina, you are light skin with curly hair. I'm neither. So, I'm stuck between, as you said being Black and being Hispanic, which I embrace both but it does get difficult at times. (1st year)

Due to their awareness that negative stereotypes exist, participants seemed guarded in their behavior in order to disprove them, creating a stressor. In the classroom, it meant feeling internal pressure to speak intelligently and in their daily interactions to underscore their sexuality. Being judged on stereotypes seemed to invalidate their experiences.

Attending a predominately white college can be an enabler or barrier for Latina students' identity development. Some participants described college experiences that allowed them to explore what being a Latina meant to them. Many discussed exploring societal and cultural norms of beauty in relation to their personal choice, identifying a cultural and ethnic identity, and the exploration of sexual identities.

While participants embraced their ethnic/cultural identity, they also were also working to redefine gender roles. Participants were rejecting the idea that Latinas had to be subservient housewives and mothers. Participants wanted to have different experiences than their mothers and other Latinas in their neighborhoods, many who were becoming mothers at a young age. They described feeling a sense of pride and empowerment for being in a position to help others in their families and communities,

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including other Latino men, by encouraging them to become educated. As they explored

what being an educated Latina meant to them, it was apparent that it created opportunities

and at the same time was challenging. Some participants shared that working to balance

their desire to obtain a professional degree and to plan for a family was challenging. One

participant discussed how Latinas are working to redefine gender roles within their

culture.

> I have more of a cultural problem. I'm more . . . I don't know how to describe it
> but my mom is very traditional . . . my mom, she does want me to get an
> education but she doesn't understand liberal concepts . . . if I'm talking to her
> about pre-marital sex, she's like "Oh, my God! How are you going to say
> something like that?" I don't know . . . it would be something like, liberal, liberal
> arts educated kind of mind . . . she doesn't quite get it yet. Like I'm still trying to
> teach her . . . at the same time holding on to my Dominican culture, while not
> being subjugated to being like a woman in that culture. You know. Being more
> the man. (1st year)

As participants gained new knowledge, they were experiencing shifts in their

ethnic and gender identity. New information came through courses taken or from

relationships with others. Some participants described changing from being Latinas that

did not interact with black students to developing close friendships with these students.

Coming from high schools where there were tensions between blacks and Latinos, in

PWI they began to identify a shared experience that lead to rethinking previously held

assumptions.

> I feel like if I would have gone to college at a place that was more like my high
> school, I probably wouldn't have many Black friends . . . in high school, it was
> mostly Latino and Black . . . there was a lot of tension between those two groups .
> . . I kind of carried that with me . . . then when I saw myself here in a sea of
> whiteness, I was like "Oh I need to find something to cling." It allowed me to
> look beyond that and to see that not everyone is the same way as the people in my
> high school . . . to be able to see, more easily, the commonalities I share with a
> varied group of people . . . not just between Latinos and Blacks but just along the
> whole spectrum of races. So that's one of the things I'm most grateful about

being here as a Latina. My interactions with different people now are a lot better and I'm so much more open minded. (Senior)

Study participants mostly described identity exploration as a challenging, difficult and isolating time. Because changes in how they identify were not congruent with other family members and old friends, at times it created conflict and tension. Two participants shared how changes in their identity caused a dilemma.

> Then, you change and you grow . . . you get more frustrated and then you want to stand up for who you are . . . it was hard and it was also hard having my family not wanting me to put myself in a status that they think would put me in a disadvantage position in the States . . . so identifying as Latina is not something that my father likes me to do because he suffered so much when he came. Who am I is a constant struggle and who do I identify with is a constant struggle. (Senior)

> I don't want to talk all the time but it's like I kind of agree with you . . . when I go back home, I see how different it is . . . I know that I'm changing in a way and at the same time I don't want to change . . . I don't want to like loose myself . . . I don't know. I feel like I don't want to become [a] bugi, white, middle class person. I want to still maintain my identity but still make it . . . it's so hard doing that. (3rd year)

As study participants actively determine what aspects of their ethnic identity they wanted to keep, discard or redefine, it was a difficult time to negotiate both internally and in their interactions with family and friends.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This qualitative study investigated the experiences of Latinas that attend predominately White institutions (PWI). Data was collected from one focus group each at two small, liberal arts, predominately White colleges. The research question was: What experiences contribute to persistence, defined as continuing toward degree completion, for Latinas attending PWI? This chapter will integrate the literature with the study findings in four areas: academic experiences, campus environment experiences, family experiences, and persistence experiences. A discussion of the strengths and limitations of the study and recommendations on promoting Latina students persistence are also included.

Study findings revealed a combination of beneficial and challenging experiences as Latinas persist at PWI. Sharing their culture with others, being role models, acquiring knowledge from diverse groups of people, and gaining social privilege were cited as beneficial experiences. A number of academic, campus, and family experiences created challenges and stressors. In the academic realm, participants felt a pressure to represent their race/culture in the classroom, felt they were not academically prepared, were impacted by negative stereotypes, and held perceptions that their colleges were not offering adequate academic support. Challenging campus experiences included a: lack of campus support for diversity, perception that they were working harder than White students to improve the campus climate, low numbers of Latinos, difficult intergroup and intragroup conflicts, and lack of cultural congruity. Family experiences that created

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stress and tension were discovering they could not relate to their families in the same way, experiencing guilt over the cost of a private education, and receiving pressure from family members that they not change or loose their cultural identity. Evidence that Latina identity was complex, that participants were engaged in identity exploration and that it was a time described as challenging and isolating were implicit findings. To overcome these challenges, the study found that participants utilized talking to friends that shared a common experience the most often. They also spoke with faculty and advisors, sought support from campus offices, including the cultural center and counseling center, wrote in their journals, exercised, analyzed the problems for a solution, and spoke to family members. This study found that positive and negative experiences contributed to persistence for Latina students. They persist to defy negative racial and gender stereotypes, to be role models, to improve the social and economic conditions of their families and communities, and to make themselves and their families proud. Integrating these findings with the research literature now follows.

Academic Experiences

Academic achievement stresses was one of the highest ranked minority status stresses in two studies conducted with students of color (Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993) and Latino/a students (Lopez, 2005) and was also found to be experienced by Latina students at PWI. Like these previous investigations, participants cited "doubts about their ability to succeed," "inadequate high school preparation," and "feeling less intelligent or capable them others" as factors that contributed to academic achievement stresses (Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993, p. 440). Not measured in these quantitative studies, study participants identified additional academic achievement stresses that

included feeling: a pressure to represent their ethnic/racial group in the classroom, a fear that they would confirm negative stereotypes about Latinas as unintelligent, and a lack of academic support to meet the needs of Latina students. These academic achievement stresses increased feelings of alienation, leaving some with fears they were not qualified to be at the college and were admitted to fulfill an affirmative action quota. Participants gave an indication that these stresses impacted persistence. One of the most commonly cited reasons for thinking about taking time off or transferring to another college was "doubts about my ability," an academic achievement stresses found in Smedley, Myers, and Harrell (1993).

One of the academic achievement stresses Latinas spoke about was having doubts about their academic abilities. Several factors impacted Latinas self doubt about their academic abilities: prior high school preparation, negative racial and gender stereotypes, and lack of differentiation between students' academic ability by the college. Latina students wanted additional academic support due to inadequate high school preparation. However, they were in campus environments that utilized a "one size fits all" model that assumed every one had the same academic preparation. Participants made statements like: "you're trying to catch up to where your peers are," "you're not as eloquent in the classroom," "people are talking like thirty year old business men with their vocabulary so intense," and "[I'm] not being taught what I need to be taught that I wasn't . . . before." At the same time, they expressed fears that they would confirm negative stereotypes about Latinas. One participant expressed her concern after making a class comment, "Oh, man did I just confirm that stereotype of the babbling, unintelligent Latina?" Working to debunk these negative stereotypes compelled Latinas to speak in

class; however, they did not feel they could express their ideas as intelligently or eloquently as they wanted. In a PWI, the fear of confirming negative stereotypes might be magnified and be a barrier to Latinas seeking out additional academic support, despite them feeling like they needed this support. Furthermore, if these academic support centers are not culturally and racially diverse, Latinas might not feel comfortable seeking services. Also, Latina students identified being in campus environments that assumed all students had the same level of academic preparation. To cope with these academic challenges, participants felt they had to work twice as long on assignments and had to educate themselves on how to write papers.

Similar to a finding in Jones, Castellanos, and Cole (2002), one of the academic stresses mentioned was feeling a pressure to represent their racial/ethnic group in the classroom. Not only were participants expected to know about their own culture, but they were also called upon to give a minority perspective or to be a "race-culture representative" (Seidman, 2005). Several psychosocial factors might contribute to this challenging classroom experience. First, due to low numbers of Latinos at the college and being in a predominately White classroom, Latinas ethnic and cultural differences might be more pronounced. Many of the participants confirmed that since coming to a PWI, they thought about their ethnic identity all the time, while they had not had this experience in their communities. Secondly, since whiteness is generally associated with intelligence and being hard working and being Latino with being unintelligent and lazy, being in predominately White classrooms might increase the pressure to positively represent their group. Many of the participants confirmed they were working to debunk negative stereotypes. Third, if classroom participation counts toward a final grade,

participants might feel compelled to share their race/culture experiences. Lastly, professors' inexperience with teaching in a diverse classroom could be a factor. Participants described classroom experiences were professors communicated, through a glance or being directly chosen, an expectation that they contribute to any discussions of race or culture. Participants were frustrated that they were expected to have knowledge about not only their ethnic group but for other ethnic groups as well. As Seidman (2005) noted being a "race-culture representative" creates a barrier to institutional acculturation and interferes with the academic purpose for minority students.

Latina students reported that positive faculty interactions and the quality of their academic experience impacted persistence, similar to a finding by Loo and Rolison (1986). Latina students confirmed that it was important to have faculty mentors and role models (Aguilar, 1996; Capello, 1994; Castellanos, 1994; Horwedel, 2007; Rodriguez et al., 2000) and the race of the mentor was important (Loo & Rolison, 1986). Participants felt faculty of color understood what it felt like to be a person of color in a PWI and reached out to Latina students in ways that White faculty did not. They also valued the classes that faculty of color taught. Participants felt more comfortable sharing all aspects of their college experience with faculty of color. Whereas, they only spoke with White faculty about academic matters. This supports a finding by Loo & Rolison (1986) that found students of color felt more comfortable making contributions in classes taught by faculty of color and more than White students reported their mentors were faculty of color. In addition, participants valued the quality of their education citing small classes and exposure to diverse knowledge and people. Becoming more open minded as a result of their educational experiences was cited as a beneficial experience.

Campus Environment Experiences

As Latina students persist, experiencing cultural incongruity (Bordes &
Arrendondo, 2005) led to sociocultural alienation (Loo & Rolison, 1986) in their campus
environments.   Several experiences contributed to cultural incongruity. Participants
missed being able to speak Spanish with their families and friends, listen to their cultural
music, eat their own ethnic foods, and greet one another in culturally congruent ways.
The low numbers of Latino students contributed to difficult social and cultural
experiences, particularly around dating. In addition, the low numbers of Latinos coupled
with regional, ethnic, and national differences sometimes made finding other Latinos
with a shared experience difficult, and at times led to intragroup conflicts. Consistent
with previous studies with Latina students that found cultural incongruity led to increased
alienation (Capello, 1994) and low levels of psychological well-being (Gloria,
Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005), participants in this study described feelings of anger,
frustration, alienation, and self doubt. Similar to a finding in Loo & Rolison (1986)
where students of color cited academic challenges and sociocultural alienation as barriers
to persistence, seven participants rated an alienating campus environment as one of the
reasons they thought about taking time off from school or transferring.

Gonzalez (2002) found that Latino students attending a predominately White
college experienced cultural marginalization. Similarly, participants held perceptions
that diversity and various cultures were marginalized on campus. Students described that
cultural diversity was treated as a "side show" and there was no desire to learn about the
history of people of different cultures or to understand their cultural practices.
Participants also described experiences with White students who were apathetic about

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attending Latino related events and not interested in being out of their comfort zone and learning about other cultures. These experiences with White students made participants feel like White students did not care if they were at the college. This cultural marginalization might be a factor in Latinas feeling like they had to work harder to represent their culture, both inside and outside the classroom.

Another form of cultural marginalization expressed was treating diversity and Latino culture as a commodity. Participants felt the college only valued diversity to attract other students of color to the college. Once students were admitted, participants held perceptions that their academic, social, and cultural needs were not supported, consist with a finding by Loo & Rolison (1986) that found Black and Chicano students attending a PWI felt the university was unsupportive. Participants felt that recruitment events that focused on increasing the racial and cultural diversity at the college were flawed in several ways. First, these recruitment programs utilized the same students, which was overwhelming and burdensome. Secondly, the programs misrepresented diversity giving the impression that there were more students of color than there were at the college. Third, the programs did not represent the range of experiences students of color can have on a PWI. Participants felt they were overly positive and did not speak about challenges and stressors that could be encountered.

The study found that Latinas experience "racial microaggressions," which are "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavior and environmental indignities, intentional or not, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (Wong, 2007, p. 273). In many of their interactions with White students and staff, they described hostile, derogatory, or negative experiences. One

example of a racial microaggression was that of a first year, black and Dominican student, who was asked several times by a White staff member where she was from, even after the student said she was from the Bronx. Not satisfied with the answer because the staff member was really trying to ask about her ethnic/cultural background, the staff member continued to ask, "No, where are you from?" When she finally gave the "right" answer, the staff person revealed she was probing further because she detected the student's accent. This student felt embarrassed and angry by this interaction and tried to get rid of her accent in order to fit in to her new environment, an indication that the experience left her feeling like she did not belong. Similar to Wong et al. (2000; 2008) studies with Black and Asian students that found racial microaggressions led to feelings of invisibility, anger and stress, belittlement, rage, frustration and alienation, Latina students described similar feelings after these interactions.

Though these studies considered racial microaggressions in interactions between White people and people of color, this study confirmed that interactions between Black students and Latinos contained what could be called cultural or ethnic microaggressions. Latinas described negative experiences with Black students who invalidated their ethnic/cultural identity. Black students wanted Latinas to claim a racial identity and would invalidate Latinas that claimed a cultural identity. This was demonstrated when one Black student told her friend's mother, who identified as Dominican, that she needed to admit that she was Black already. These interactions created stressors for Latina students that perhaps were more challenging because they were friends with Black students.

Latina Identity Development

With regard to identity development, most of the Latina students in this study demonstrated that their ethnic identity was important, had interest in engaging in Latino activities, and were in the moratorium stage of ethnic identity development (Phinney, 1989). Consistent with this phase, Latina students were engaged in an exploration of what their ethnic identity meant to them and where questioning prescribed gender and ethnic roles. Participants spoke about challenging notions of what it meant to be a Latina in their families and ethnic group and were rejecting ideas of being "subservient housewives" and becoming mothers at a young age. As participants gained new knowledge from courses or from their interactions with others, similar to Vasti (2004) who found that cognitive development created shifts in identity, they made changes to their ethnic identity. Latina students, contrary to what their parents wanted, demonstrated that they were deciding to date non-Latinos, women and were deferring motherhood until they obtained advanced degrees.

This study found that many participants were working to debunk negative racial and gender stereotypes, a key development task of ethnic identity development (Phinney, 1983; 1989; Vasquez, 1994; Vasti, 2003; Vasti & Hernandez, 2007). One reason participants gave for their academic achievement and persistence was to disprove negative stereotypes that Latinas are unintelligent. Furthermore, aware of negative stereotypes about Latinas as highly sexed, used to explain high births, they were careful not to be overly sexual and did not want men to sexualize them.

Depending on levels of acculturation and Latino orientation, Latina students had varying experiences in PWI. Some Latina students who appeared White and were born outside the U.S. had difficult experiences adjusting to the campus climate. These students seemed to hold a subgroup identified or Latino identified orientation (Ferdham & Gallegos, 2001) and had high ethnic identity and low levels of acculturation (Vasti, 2003). Though these students could pass for White, their strong ethnic identity led to feelings of not belonging and cultural incongruity (Bordes & Arrendondo, 2005). Their experiences were complicated by the fact that others perceived them to be White and would make negative racial statements, leaving them hurt and confused. There were other students who could pass for White, who did not feel culturally different from other White students. These students, who might hold a undifferentiated Latino or a White identified orientation, were U.S. born, raised in predominately White neighborhoods and went to predominately White high schools (Ferdham & Gallegos, 2001). They also were of higher SES. For Latina students that indicated they thought about their ethnic identity all the time and described challenging campus experiences, they had high ethnic identity and low levels of acculturation (Vasti, 2003). These Latinas attended high schools were there was more ethnic and racial diversity and were born either inside or outside of the United States. This has important implications for intragroup and intergroup relationships inside and outside the classroom and would be helpful for faculty and administrators. Levels of acculturation and Latino orientation contribute to the diversity within the Latino group, which impacted Latina students' college experiences.

As Latina students persist, it was unclear whether being in a PWI facilitated Latina identity development or was a barrier. There were experiences that were enablers

to Latina identity development. There was evidence that Latinas had opportunities to meet other Latina students who model different ways of being a Latina, which led to shifts in identity development. Latinas were also able to be in leadership positions at the college. They were also becoming role models in their families and communities. Interactions with students and faculty from various racial and cultural groups impacted their identity development as well. These experiences that facilitated identity development for Latinas were also cited as contributing to their persistence.

At the same time, being in a PWI could make debunking negative stereotypes, a key developmental task of ethnic identity development, challenging in several ways. One, there were not a lot of Latina role models in the environment that could reflect back to Latina students academic achievement and persistence. This lack of mirroring might explain the self-doubts Latina students expressed regarding their academic abilities. In addition, those Latinos at the college worked in service occupations as cooks and janitors. Latina students spoke about feeling connected to these employees, while feeling they also wanted Latinos to be in administrative and faculty positions. If Latina students only see people that look like them working in service jobs, it could reinforce notions that they do not belong at the college. Secondly, PWI colleges are a microcosm of society and thus, often replicate race and class divisions. This seemed to present a challenge for Latina students, who unlike many White middle and upper middle class students, crossed the lines between service workers and students. One participant shared she enjoyed talking and spending time with the woman that cleans her dorm, an interaction that is not often seen between White students and service employees. In fact, at the college where this researcher worked there were special programs being implemented to increase contact

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between students and service employees. Thirdly, there may not be enough opportunities for Latina students to learn about their own history, culture, and traditions. One way to combat negative stereotypes about one's ethnic group is learning about Latino history and culture. Many of the students spoke about valuing a course taught by a Latina professor who raised issues of race and culture. Another Dominican student wanted courses taught in the Caribbean stating that most of the course taught in the Hispanic Studies department focused on Latin America. She wanted to learn more about the region where her parents were from. Learning about Latino history and culture, particularly identifying Latina role models, was a strategy used by Capello (1994) to support the identity development and persistence of a group of Latina students.

Family Experiences

This study confirmed that participants come from families that are generally supportive and proud of them, similar to a finding in Aguilar (1996) where 70% of parents were supportive of their daughters getting an education. However, participants described experiences with their families that were stressful. Capello (1994) and Chacon, Cohen, and Strover (1986) and Thorne (1995) found that carrying out family obligations increased stress. Participants reported increased pressure when they were expected to carry out family obligations like taking care of siblings and family. Some participants, due to the expectation that they care for their siblings, spoke about making decisions to study away in order to persist.

As participants gained new knowledge, they began to notice they could no longer relate to their families, an alienating and stressful experience. They expressed distress that they were making their family members feel stupid. Family members sometimes

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were dismissive of new knowledge that Latinas shared, saying they were on "college rants" or holding "you think you are better than us" attitudes. Many participants coped with this tension by splitting their home and college experiences and not speaking with their parents about what happened at college. Often viewed as a pathological defense, Chin (1994) cites splitting as a useful defense for bicultural individuals. One way to understand the distress that Latinas students were experiencing relates to the cultural value placed on "respecto," (Capello, 1994) a respect for and trust in authority and elders. First generation college students and those raised in traditional Latino households might experience more distress around sharing what they are learning at college for fear they will disrespect their elders. Thus, while families valued Latinas pursing their education, they did not hold in high regard Latinas sharing their new knowledge.

Persistence Experiences

Despite these challenging academic and college experiences, Latina students had positive and negative experiences that impacted persistence. Participants described positive experiences with family and friends who were proud of their educational achievements. In addition, they were noticing increased attention and privilege by others as a result of the college they attended. For Latinas raised in families that value respect, this increased respect could be a strong factor on persistence. Similar to the Latina students in Aguilar (1996) study, experiences with poverty and oppression were negative experiences that impacted persistence. Thus, obtaining their degree was viewed as a way to improve their own and their families' social and economic condition. In addition, consistent with a finding in Castellanos (1996), participants were working to defy

negative stereotypes that exist about Latinas and felt persisting increased their changes of becoming role models in their families and communities.

As they persist they were utilizing various coping strategies. Consistent with Gloria, Castellanos, and Orozco (2005) findings, Latina students coped with stressors by talking with friends and relatives. However, this study confirmed, they were more likely to talk with their peers than with family members. While some participants did receive support from their families, most spoke about either not speaking with their family about college or selectively sharing information that would not cause tension. As was already mentioned, Latinas utilized faculty/student mentoring particularly with faculty of color to cope with being in a PWI. The cultural center helped some Latinas persist and cope with challenges. It was cited as a place where Latina students could access social support from their peers and receive cultural nourishment.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

This study had several possible limitations. The sample consisted of a small number of Latina students that attend small, liberal arts, predominately White colleges. The findings may not be generalizable to Latinas that attend larger colleges and universities. It should also be noted that being on a liberal arts campus can impact participants' experiences and they could have had a different experience in campus environments that are more conservative. The use of the focus group could have made it difficult for individual students to express dissent.

The study also had some strengths. Contrary to other studies with Latina students that tend to focus on Mexican American students, this study had a diverse sample of students from various Latino ethnic groups. The ethnicity of the researcher may have

influenced the information that participant provided. Participants conveyed they felt more comfortable sharing their experiences with this researcher due to her Latina background. In addition, participants wanted the focus groups to go longer with some sharing they valued having the opportunity to speak about their experiences in a group setting, some for the first time. Unlike individual interviews, the focus group was also culturally syntonic with some of the Latino cultural values that stress the importance of personal relationships and interconnectedness.

Recommendations

This study confirmed that Latina students attending PWI are experiencing beneficial experiences that support their persistence. However, they encounter challenges and stressors that create alienation and cultural marginalization, both inside and outside the classroom. To support Latina students' persistence, predominately white colleges should adopt strategies that promote academic achievement and increase a sense of belonging.

Several strategies to promote Latina students' academic achievement could be adopted. As Latina students in this study suggest, a bridge program could focus on building academic skills, while also addressing the social and cultural challenges Latina students might encounter in a PWI. In addition, college courses could be offered that would interest Latina students. Caribbean studies courses are one example given by participants. Offices charged with providing academic support should assess whether their services are meeting the needs of Latina students. Latina students want academic support and at the same time are working not to confirm negative stereotypes that Latinas are not qualified to be at the college or are unintelligent. Thus, they may be unlikely to

access traditional academic support services. One possibility would be working with the cultural center to explore ways to offer academic support services in ways that are culturally congruent for Latina students. For instance, working with the cultural center and/or Latino student organizations on recruitment, Latina peer tutors could be identified to lead a writing workshop in the cultural center. These peer tutors could also work at the academic support office. Another strategy that could be utilized is the recruitment of faculty of color to lead these workshops, since Latina students view these faculty as mentors and advisors.

Faculty development in pedagogical approaches to enhance the academic achievement of Latina students and to facilitate difficult dialogues around race and culture are needed. Professors could be assisted in examining the verbal and nonverbal messages they are conveying to Latina students. In addition, Latinas should not be made to feel like they have to share personal stories about race and oppression in the classroom or that they have to be a "race-culture representative" (Seidman, 2005). At the same time, faculty should recognize the tremendous pressure Latinas feel to both combat negative stereotypes about their group, which may compel them to speak. Some Latinas may feel self doubt about their ability to express their ideas due to their prior academic preparation. Professors might consider ways of assisting Latina students with these concerns. Since participants felt they are not getting the academic support needed, faculty might consider reaching out to Latina students outside of the classroom to see how they are experiencing the course. This personal outreach strategy utilized by faculty of color was appreciated and valued by Latina students.

Since some of the challenges and stressors Latinas are experiencing is a result of the low numbers of Latinos at PWI and a lack of Latino role models, one strategy would include increasing the recruitment of Latino students and faculty. During student recruitment events, the college should be sensitive to Latino students' concerns that they are not qualified to attend the college and are being admitted to fill an affirmative action quota. Latino students might need to be educated on how affirmative action works at their colleges. Also, the college should examine their recruitment events to ensure they give Latina students a balance picture of the benefits and challenges they will experience at a PWI. In addition, attempts should be made to rotate the students asked to be on student panels as not to put too much of a burden on the same students. The recruitment of more Latino students can increase feelings of belonging, and provide additional opportunities for social and cultural support.

Though there were some participants that did not utilize the cultural center on their campus, most participants felt it was a valuable resource in supporting Latina students' persistence and promoted a sense of belonging. However, this study illuminates the need for cultural centers to provide support and programs that meet the academic, social and cultural needs of Latina students. Cultural centers might consider offering programs that focus on the shared experience of students of color and in addition offer programs for Latino/a students. For instance, if these cultural centers host orientation programs for students of color, individual breakout sessions could be held for students from various racial/ethnic groups. In these sessions, the particular experience of ethnic/racial groups in PWI could be addressed. In addition, cultural centers should play a role in partnering with the academic support and counseling offices to address the Latina

academic and psychosocial needs that impact academic achievement and persistence. To assist with expanded outreach efforts with other offices, colleges should ensure that cultural centers have the necessary human and financial resources needed to support the persistence of Latinas and other students of color.

College counseling centers should become familiar with the unique academic, social and cultural needs that Latinas encounter. In addition, difficult counseling experiences that participants described could be address by conducting staff training that would educate counselors on the academic and psychosocial experiences of Latina students. In addition, counselors should be aware that Latina students might not understand the intake process where there are many personal questions asked in order to make an assessment to help solve the problem. These clinical encounters seemed to replicate the problem Latina students were facing on campus. This study confirmed that most Latina students were seeking support from their Latino peers and other students of color. To augment individual counseling services, peer support groups could be implemented that would give Latinas the opportunities to develop strategies for success, and to provide mutual support.

Latina students in the study demonstrated they are employing a number of strategies to assist them as they persist. They are utilizing peers for support, speaking to their faculty mentors and advisors, working longer hours on their assignments, and planning Latino events. Latinas might consider organizing a group that would discuss strategies to enhance their academic success. Another student could lead the group or Latina students could identify a professor or administrator who could facilitate it. They could also consider whether the Latino student organization could add promoting

academic achievement as one of their goals.   Meeting professors during their office

hours to discuss their ideas or share an outline could be a useful strategy. These meetings

can be helpful for clarifying the assignment, narrowing a topic, developing a focus, and

assistance in organizing central ideas. Building a relationship with the professor would

be another benefit. This faculty/student relationship could be beneficial if a

recommendation is needed and/or if future advice when taking other courses in that

department is required. Latinas could also meet with key administrators to outline

academic, social and cultural supports that would assist them as they persist. Adopting

some of these strategies could increase a sense of belonging and promote group

empowerment for Latinas.

Conclusion

This qualitative study sought to gain an overall understanding of the experiences

of Latinas that attend PWI. The research question explored was: What are the

experiences that contribute to persistence, defined as continuing toward degree

completion, for Latinas that attend PWI?

Several of the study findings could benefit college administrators, faculty

members and mental health professionals interested in supporting the academic

achievement and persistence of Latina students attending PWI. First, this study

confirmed that as Latina students persist, they encounter beneficial and challenging

college experiences. Sharing their culture with others, being role models within their

families and communities, acquiring knowledge from diverse groups of people, and

gaining social privilege were cited as beneficial experiences. Second, Latina students

were found to be experiencing "minority status stresses" that "heighten feelings of not

belonging and interfere with minority students' integration" (Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993, p. 435). Academic achievement stress and social climate stress were the top ranked of the minority status stresses. Third, as Latina students become educated, they were experiencing shifts in their ethnic and gender identity that created both opportunities, as well as personal and family challenges. Fourth, Latinas come from families that are supportive of their daughters becoming educated. However, family members did not always understand student expectations and experiences, which created stressors for Latinas. Fifth, Latina students were found to cope with challenges by utilizing peers, with a shared experience, for support. Often times, these peers were other Latino/a students and students of color. They also identified with and sought support from faculty of color who they perceived could understand their experiences in a PWI. In order to maintain harmony and connection with their family, Latinas coped with family tensions by selectively shared their college experiences. Lastly, Latina students confirmed that positive and negative experiences contributed to their persistence. Debunking negative stereotypes about Latina/os, experiencing or witnessing racism, poverty and oppression, being positive role models in their families and communities, making their families proud, and gaining social and economic privileges were contributing persistence experiences.

In summary, Latina students are persisting toward degree completion and have further aspirations to obtain professional and graduate degrees. As this study confirmed, they have a number of positive and beneficial experiences that can facilitate persistence. At the same time, challenges and stressors present barriers to persistence. PWI should consider implementing recruitment and retention strategies and programs that increase

Latina students' sense of belonging. Considering the academic, social, cultural, and family experiences that can be enablers or barriers to Latina students' academic achievement and persistence is recommended.

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Appendix A

Smith College School for Social Work Approval Letter

December 6, 2008

Yolanda Ramos

Dear Yolanda,

Your revised materials have been reviewed. You have done an excellent job with your revisions and all is now in order. We are happy to give final approval to this very interesting study (one little change…after three years you have to destroy the transcriptions etc., not just the tapes. Please correct this.)
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.

Good luck with your project. The focus group is an excellent way of gathering data. I would guess that your materials will be very rich. Your questions for consideration are very much expanded and improved. They are sure to encourage discussion. I wonder if you will find any differences between a women's college and a co-ed college.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,
Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee
CC: Joanne Corbin, Research Advisor

Appendix B

HAVERFORD C O L L E G E

Institutional Review Board for Human Subject Research

Yolanda Ramos
Smith College School for Social Work
73 Barrett St. #6197
Northampton, MA 01060

Dear Yolanda,

Members of Haverford College's Institutional Review Board
for Human Subject Research have reviewed your proposal entitled,
"Experiences of Latina students attending predominately white
colleges" (dated December 9, 2008). We have approved your proposal
under the Expedited Review Procedure of Haverford College's
Institutional Review Board under the Office of Human Research
Protection Guidelines. You may proceed with the study as described in
your proposal.

The IRB approval of this proposal is valid until May 31,
2009. Before this date, we ask that you submit either a final report
or request for a continuation of IRB approval, using a form downloaded
from our website (www.haverford.edu/provost/IRB).

I wish to draw your attention to several policies that
are based on the federal regulations that apply to Human Subject
Research at Haverford College as well as the procedures document that
governs Haverford's IRB:

• In the event this approved research leads to unanticipated
problems involving negative consequences or risks to subjects or
others, you must report this immediately to the IRB Chairperson
(within the next few days I will be turning over this role to Prof.
Richard Ball, rball@haverford.edu, 610-896-1437).

• You must make a request to the IRB before making any changes to
the approved protocol. Such changes may not be implemented during the
approval period without re-review and approval by the IRB, except as
necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazard to the subjects.

• If you have a written consent form (i.e. if you did not
request a waiver of documentation of informed consent), you must

provide each human subject with a copy of the consent form at the time it is signed. If the consent is obtained by a computer form from the subject's own computer, you should prominently add the text "Please print a copy of this page for your records" to the consent form page.

- You are responsible for obtaining and securely storing (until three years after the submission, to the IRB, of final report for this project) the signed Informed Consent Forms from all subjects participating in the research. If you obtain the consent by computer form, printed documentation of the forms and form submissions should be stored.

If you have any questions about these or other policies affecting human subject research at Haverford, please contact me.

A copy of this letter will be filed in our Provost's Office.

Sincerely
Robert Scarrow, IRB Chairperson

cc: Joanne Corbin, PhD, co-investigator*

Annette Barone, IRB Executive Assistant

*Joanne Corbin
Smith College School for Social Work
Lilly Hall
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

Appendix C

Re: IRB approval
From: Yolanda Ramos
To: dezeifman@vassar.edu
BC:
Date: Monday - January 26, 2009 10:20 AM

Dear Yolanda,

        As per our phone conversation, you will be hearing shortly that your research proposal has been approved by Vassar's IRB. You may wish to clarify (in the consent form) the minor point that we discussed on the phone concerning the use of the videotapes. That is, you may want to add a line in the consent form that states outright that videotapes will be used for transcription purposes only and that participants' images will not be used in future publications or research presentations (as is sometimes the case).

Good luck with your research-- it sounds interesting-- and thanks for your patience.

Best,

Debra

Appendix D

Informed Consent Form

Dear Participant,

My name is Yolanda Ramos and I am a graduate student at the Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a qualitative, research study with Latina students to understand your experiences attending a predominately white college and what experiences contribute to your continuing toward degree completion. The data collected will be used for my thesis as part of the requirements for the Master of Social Work degree, for future presentations and publications. In addition, the data will be shared, in an executive summary without identifying information included, with you and with the college administrators that provide support to Latinas students on your campus.

Your participation in a focus group is requested because you are a Latina student attending a predominately white college with important experiences to share. The focus group will consist of 10 to 12 other Latinas students from your college. Total participation will be no longer than 2 ½ hours. The focus group is being audio and video recorded so that I can analyze the information shared for themes. Before the focus group discussion begins, I will ask you to fill out a demographic questionnaire, which collects some personal information related to your age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, class year, etc. and your educational experiences. Once the focus group begins, I will facilitate a discussion that relates to your campus experiences, sources of social support, family and cultural values and coping strategies utilized when challenges or stressors are encountered. One week after the group, I will contact you via email to ask if you have any additional thoughts that emerged after the focus group ended that you would like included in the study.

While there is no financial benefit for participation in this research study, you may benefit from knowing you are contributing to the expansion of knowledge on Latina students attending predominately white colleges. In addition, you might benefit from learning other Latina students share similar experiences. You might also feel like you are impacting the experiences of future Latina students. You may also benefit from receiving the opportunity to share your experience and gain a new perspective. The potential for forming new support networks with other Latina students might also be a benefit.

You may find it difficult to discuss challenges you encounter at your college. The focus group might uncover uncomfortable feelings and thoughts, which might be stressful. Because you will be sharing your experiences with students from your own college, feelings of shame or embarrassment might arise. All participants will be provided with a list of support and counseling referrals.

Confidentiality will be maintained, as consistent with federal regulations and the mandates of the social work profession. I will ask all participants to keep information shared in the group confidential. However, strict confidentiality cannot be provided due

to the nature of a focus group. This means that others in the group will be hearing your comments and someone from this group might talk about the focus group or comments made, outside the group despite my requesting that this not happen. Your identity will be protected, as names and identifying information will be changed in the reporting of the data. Your name will never be associated with the information you provide in the questionnaire or the focus group. When using quotes or a vignette, the information will be disguised and your name will not be given. All notes, tapes and transcripts will be kept in a secure location for three years as required by Federal guidelines and after that time, they will be destroyed or continue to be kept secured as long as I need them. Any data stored electronically will be protected. The only other person that will have access to this data, after identifying information has been removed, will be my thesis advisor. If a transcriber is used, he/she will sign a confidentiality pledge.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to refuse to answer specific questions and to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw during or after participation, you cannot withdraw your responses because they are interconnected with what other students share. However, if you contact me before February 28, 2009, I can destroy your demographic questionnaire, with no penalty of any kind.

If you have additional questions about the study or wish to withdraw, please feel free to contact me at the contact information below. If you have any concerns about your rights or about any aspect of this study, I encourage you to give me a call or the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974. (I will also have to tailor this informed consent by adding the contact person for Institutional Review Boards at Haverford and at Vassar College).

Yolanda Ramos
413-588-8454
yramos@email.smith.edu

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY. YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

_____   _____
Participant's Signature   Researcher's Signature

_____   _____
Date   Date

Thank you for your time, and I greatly look forward to having you as a participant in my study.

Appendix E

Demographic Questionnaire

Age:_____   Ethnic/Racial Background: _____

School Attending: _____ Home State: _____

Class Year:_____   GPA:_____

Where you born in the United States? Yes ___ No___

Parents born in the United States: Mother Yes___ No___   Father Yes___ No___

Do you live on campus or in campus housing? Yes_____ No_____

High School Attended: Circle One
Predominately White   Mixed   Predominately my same ethnic/racial group

Are you the first in your family to attend college? Yes_____No_____

What is the highest academic degree you hope to obtain?_____

If you experiencing a challenge or problem at school, how do you deal with it? *(Check all that apply)*
___ Talk to a friend at school   ___Do nothing
___Talk to a family member   ___Seek out my faculty mentor
___Go to the Multicultural Center   ___Developing a plan of action to address it
___Seek counseling   ___Gather more information about the problem
___Attend Latino student group meeting
___Other:_____

Have any of the following ever made you think of taking time off from school or transferring to another college? *(Check all that apply)*
___Financial stress   ___ No faculty/staff role models at school
___Doubts about my ability to succeed   ___Experiences of racism at school
___Lack of social support at school   ___ Lack of family support
___ Alienating campus environment   ___Low numbers of Latino students
___ College values do not match mine   ___ No faculty mentor
___Lack of support for diversity on campus ___Lack of academic support
___Other:_____

Would you recommend this school to another Latina student? Yes_____ No _____
Explain:_____

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Appendix F

Interview Guide
General campus experiences
As a Latina, what is it like being a student at a predominately white college?

What are some positive experiences you encounter? Any challenging ones?

If you had to name the top stressors you experience, what would they be? How do you deal with them?

In what ways would you say Latina students experience discrimination at this college? Could you explain.

Are there any stereotypes others hold about Latinas that affect you as a student? How do you deal with this?

Despite these stressors and challenges, are you making progress toward completing your degree? What experiences help you as you work toward getting your degree?
Social Support
At this school, who provides you with support while your pursing your degree? At home?

For those who have a faculty mentor, how has this experience been for you?

What have been your experiences with the Latina/o student organization on campus?

What about your experiences with the cultural center or multicultural office?
Family and Culture
What cultural or family experiences bring you strength and help you cope with being at this school? What personal beliefs do you hold that help you continue toward your degree?

As a student, are there particular family and cultural messages held about Latinas that are a source of tension for you? Are there conflicts between your personal values and what this college values?

What recommendations would you make to college administrators to help support Latina students as they work to complete their degrees?

In closing, is there something that you wished I would have asked to help understand your experiences at this college? How was it to participate in this focus group?