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THEIR STORY: COLLEGE PERSISTENCE OF HISPANIC/LATINO STUDENTS AT  
PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

By

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BA (University of Dayton) 2007

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Affiliated Faculty of

The College of Graduate and Professional Studies at the University of New England

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PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS

ABSTRACT

This phenomenological qualitative study examined the Hispanic/Latino students' college experiences at Predominantly White, 4-year institutions in an effort to better understand what these students perceived as contributing factors to their sense of belonging and persistence through their first year. Participants included individuals classified as first-year or second-year college students. Data was collected through individual interviews where personal stories were examined by using the student integration model and theory of mattering and marginality to identify reoccurring themes. Identifying these factors was the key motivating factor in determining success and persistence through their first year. From this study, four emergent themes shed light into students' ability to persist: sense of belonging, student involvement, mentoring, and familial expectations. These themes aided the researcher's understanding about which factors students attributed to their overall success and first-year persistence.

University of New England

Doctor of Education

Educational Leadership

This dissertation was presented

by

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## DEDICATION

A mis papás, Carlos y Yasmin.

Gracias por nunca darse por vencidos en momentos difíciles. Y más aún, gracias por enseñarme a seguir luchando y echar hacia adelante! Éste triunfo es por y para ustedes!

To my parents, Carlos and Yasmin.

Thank you for never giving up, especially during difficult times. And more so, thank you for teaching me to keep fighting and push forward! This accomplishment is for, and because of both of you!

A mis dos hijos, Francisco y Andrés.

Nunca se den por vencidos. Siempre den lo mejor de ustedes! Los amo!

To my two sons, Francisco and Andrés.

Never give up. Always give and do your best! I love you!

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¡Sí se pudo!

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Between the 1900's and the year 2000 the “number of non-Southern states with populations of at least 10% races other than White increased from 2% to 26%, reflecting the spread of diversity across the country” (Hobbs & Stoops, 2002, p. 10). From 1980 to 2000, the Hispanic/Latino population more than doubled producing a major demographic shift as this particular population became the largest minority group in the United States (Hobbs & Stoops, 2002). As of July 2017, the U.S. Census shared the Hispanic/Latino population in the United States comprised at least 18.1% of the total population (U.S. Census, 2010). Hobbs and Stoops (2002) confirmed that by the end of the century, three states – California, Hawaii, and New Mexico – and the District of Columbia had majority minority populations of Hispanics and Latinos (p. 10).

The U.S. Census Bureau (as cited in Colby & Ortman, 2015, p. 9) estimated that the Hispanic/Latino population is expected to increase by 114.8% between 2014 and 2060. This projection suggests that by the year 2060, at least 29% of the United States will be of Hispanic/Latino origin. This increase in population presents a challenge for colleges and universities as more Hispanic/Latino students are working to successfully graduate from high school and possibly further their education by attending college. With that said, there are several reasons for why Hispanics/Latinos are struggling to obtain a higher education degree. “Latinos are disproportionately poor, living in low-income communities where the schools aren't preparing children for the rigor of college courses. As they enter adulthood, many are supporting their families and don't have the luxury to focus on schoolwork” (Barshay, 2018). In addition, a report completed by Fry (2002) recognized the high cost of tuition and a need to work and earn money were all factors that contribute to Latino/as not attending college. In a more recent study

by Fry (2009), the percentage of Hispanics/Latinos entering the labor force increased from 40% in 1970 to 54% in 2007 (which includes joining the military). Another factor contributing to Hispanics/Latinos not attending college, or their failure to graduate, is having no faith in the education system. The best-prepared Hispanics/Latinos fare worse than Anglos of equal preparation, while Hispanics/Latinos overall are less prepared than their less prepared Anglo peers (Fry, 2004, 2009; Gupton, Castelo-Rodriguez, Martinez, & Quintanar, 2009; Lopez, 2009). A survey of Hispanic/Latino individuals by Lopez (2009) showed participants blamed Hispanic/Latinos' under-preparation on: (a) lacking English language proficiency, (b) poor parenting, and (c) Hispanic/Latinas' high rate of teenage pregnancy.

Santos and Reigadas (2002) stated that Hispanic/Latino student retention and graduation at 4-year institutions continues to be a major concern among college and university officials (p. 41). Moreover, there is little research that examines the impact that a sense of belonging and student engagement may have on Hispanic/Latino college students and their college persistence.

Persistence continues to be an issue for students in general, but especially for Hispanic/Latino students (Otero, Rivas, & Rivera, 2007; Zurita, 2004 as cited in Huerta & Bay, 2013). Learning communities continue to set the precedent for promoting student success and increasing persistence (Tinto, 2000)

### **Statement of the Problem**

Hispanics/Latinos are currently enrolling in large numbers in postsecondary institutions; however, many are enrolling part-time which has "adverse effects on their levels of degree completion" (Fry, 2002, p. 5). Consequently, lack of full-time enrollment continues to lead to low graduation rates according to the Pew Hispanic Center (Fry, 2002, p. 5). A goal for this study was to better understand what institutional (internal) factors Hispanic/Latino students

attribute to their sense of belonging, persistence and success through their first-year of college while attending a Predominately White Institution (PWI). Throughout the years, Tinto's student integration model (1975) was developed to explain student retention. Even with an increase in student retention (Barshay, 2018), however, Hispanic/Latino students still lag behind their White counterparts. The researcher sought to understand how the experiences of Hispanic/Latino college students at a PWI, whether positive or negative, impact first-year persistence.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine Hispanic/Latino students' college experiences at Predominantly White, 4-year institutions and to better understand what these students perceived as contributing factors to their sense of belonging and persistence through their first year. This study contributed to a literature gap concerning first-year Hispanic/Latino students and their abilities to persist through their first year of college. Participants included individuals classified as first or second year college students. It was the goal of this study to learn from Hispanic/Latino students what institutional (internal) factors, contributed to their success of persisting during their first-year of college.

### **Research Question**

To examine the experiences of Hispanic/Latino students at PWI's surrounding first-year persistence, the following research question was posed: What are some of the major institutional factors that contribute to Hispanic/Latino students' sense of belonging and promote first-year persistence at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI)?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The need to belong is a basic, fundamental value that has been linked to positive health, well-being, and cognitive processing outcomes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). According to

Baumeister and Leary (1995), the belonging hypothesis “is that human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quality of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (p. 497). There are two criteria that must be in place to satisfy this drive; first, there needs to be frequent interaction with others, and these interactions need to occur in “a framework of long-term, stable caring, and concern” (p. 520).

For this study, the researcher used a combination of Tinto’s (1975, 1993) final version of the student integration model (SIM); and Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering’s (1989) theory of mattering and marginality. Congruency between the student and the institution would show a strong commitment to an educational goal and commitment to remain with the institution (p. 124). Berger and Milem (1997) stated “involvement is believed to be critical in students’ process of persistence” (p. 388). Tinto (1975, 1993) asserted that the process of becoming integrated into the academic and social systems happens when students successfully navigate the stages of “separation, transition and the Theory of Student Integration stated that, for students to persist, “colleges must consist of two systems: academic and social” (as cited in Aljohani, 2016, p. 6). Students need to be integrated into both systems to persist in their academic institutions. The academic system, Tinto (1975, 1993) noted is primarily concerned with the formal education of students (i.e., intellectual integration); whereas, the social system is concerned with the interactions (membership) among students, faculty, and staff (i.e., social integration) (as cited in Aljohani, 2016).

Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) stated individuals are connected by the need to matter and the need to belong. Students must feel that they matter if they are to succeed in college (Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 44). A sense of belonging and appreciation must be present for students to feel motivated to succeed while in college. Ethnic minority students at PWIs are

somewhat susceptible to feelings of marginality if there is a lack of support and/or community (Moore & Upcraft, 1990, as cited in Hernandez & Lopez, 2004) as it is important for individuals to feel supported.

Essentially, this study rests on the framework that persistence occurs when Hispanic/Latino college students feel empowered and integrated into the campus community and/or culture. Tinto (1975, 1993, as cited in Berger and Milem, 1997), and Schlossberg et al., (1989), all stated that integration into the campus community allows Hispanic/Latino college students to persist past their first year in college.

### **Assumptions**

An intentional effort was made by the researcher to remain aware of any potential and personal bias and remain neutral to ensure the data and information collected was not tainted. Bias reduction was done by validating the interview protocol questions that were used, and obtaining, securing, and coding the data as it was collected through a thorough review. Participants were expected and assumed to be honest throughout their participation. They were also trusted with being truly invested in the study by remaining open-minded and sharing their personal experiences whether the experience is positive or negative.

Another assumption was that every Hispanic/Latino student attending a college or university who makes the decision to persist or drop out might be choosing to do so for similar reasons. Individuals made their own choices as to whether or not to drop out; however, the researcher's assumption was that interviewing those who chose to stay and persist provided insight into what factors contribute to those decisions.

### **Limitations**

Some of the limitations of this study include three factors. First, the study was limited in sample size. Fraenkel and Wallen (2000) explained that a population is more accurately represented the larger the random sample size. Second, while there was not one specific setting for the study, having different samples from different types of PWIs may limit the ability to generalize to the population and size of institution. Therefore, the results from this study will not reflect the experiences of Hispanic/Latino students at one specific site. Third, the pool was limited to Hispanic/Latino college students who were willing to participate in this study.

### **Scope of the Study**

Every college experience is different from individual to individual and can vary from year to year. For the scope of this study, participants were students who identified as Hispanic/Latino and who had successfully completed at least their first year in college. In addition, it was the hope of the study to provide information and resources for younger generations of Hispanic/Latino students concerning higher education and opportunities to learn about navigating through their first year.

### **Significance**

Hispanics/Latinos are the fastest growing minority population in the United States (Marotta & Garcia, 2003). The number of Hispanic/Latino college graduates is also increasing. However, “colleges and universities need to find new ways to effectively support their students on the path to graduation” (Fishman, Ludgate, & Tutak, 2017, p. 4). Given the many challenges surrounding persistence, institutions of higher education continue to invest in student retention, while continuing to expand programming to target specific ethnic populations, such as



Hispanic/Latino students (Fishman, Ludgate & Tutak, 2017). This study can help illuminate the kind of opportunities Hispanic/Latino students believe they need to succeed and persist.

There are programs and resources specifically aimed at assisting Hispanic/Latino students persist through their first year such as mentoring programs and cultural centers, while others are geared towards the general population. This qualitative study provided the researcher with the opportunity to examine the current retention and programming efforts resources provided by different PWIs. These examples will in turn assist institutions in successfully and purposefully assisting their Hispanic/Latino student population to succeed and persist past their first-year. With this examination, the institution may use this study to impact future programming and retention efforts.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purposes of this study, the following terms and their definitions are presented. Often the words *persistence* and *retention* are used interchangeably (Hagedorn, 2005). In this study the definition offered by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), the primary source of student level retention data for the nation, were used. A separate definition for the word persistence is not provided in the IPEDS online glossary.

**First-Year Students** – Students who have completed less than the equivalent of one full year of undergraduate work; less than 30 semester hours (in a 120-hour degree program) (IPEDS glossary, 2018-2019). These students are often referred to as *freshmen*.

**Hispanic** – The term Hispanic and Latino continue to be used interchangeably; however, the term Hispanic “was first used by the U.S. government in the 1970s in an attempt to count people from Mexico, Cuba and Central and South America” (C. Rodriguez, 2014, CNN). Today

it encompasses much more than just those three countries. In essence, the term Hispanic refers to the language being spoken.

**Latino** – “The term Latino finally came to fruition in the 2000 census as a more inclusive way to include mixed races known as ‘mestizo’ or ‘mulato’ in Central and South America” (C. Rodriguez, 2014, CNN). In addition, the term “Latino” refers to those born in a Latin American country.

**Persistence** – The enrollment headcount of any cohort compared to its headcount on its initial official census date. The purpose is to assess the number of students who succeed from one term to the next and eventually to completion (Noel-Levitz, 2013)

**Predominantly White Institution (PWI)** - the term used to describe institutions of higher learning in which individuals identified as White account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment population.

**Retention** – The term retention is defined as a measure of the rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution, expressed as a percentage. For 4-year institutions, this is the percentage of first-time bachelors (or equivalent) degree-seeking undergraduates from the previous fall who are again enrolled in the current fall. For all other institutions this is the percentage of first-time degree/certificate-seeking students from the previous fall who either re-enrolled or successfully completed their program by the current fall. (IPEDS, 2018-2019)

**Second-Year Students** – Students who are in their second year of college; often used interchangeably with the term *sophomores* at traditional, 4-year institutions (Schaller, 2005).

**Sense of Belonging** - "the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment" (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema & Collier, 1992, p. 173).

### **Conclusion**

As more Hispanic/Latino students graduate high school and enroll in institutions of higher learning, it is becoming clear that many of these institutions are ill-prepared to assist the Hispanic/Latino student body to attain bachelor and associate degrees (Thomas, 2005). According to Fry (2004), universities must be aware of the change in Hispanic/Latino demographics and obstacles they face in college. The only way institutions will be able to ensure Hispanics/Latinos have an equal opportunity to graduate is by acknowledging the population trends and preparing for the obstacles Hispanic/Latino students encounter when they enroll in higher education institutions. This study focused on how Hispanic/Latino students navigated their first year in college.

The theoretical framework for this study was based on a more recent version of Tinto's (1975, 1993) SIM and Schlossberg et al.'s (1989) theory of mattering and marginality. Chapter 2 includes a literature review conducted by the researcher to help determine the different factors that influence the success and retention of Hispanic/Latinos college students within PWIs. Chapter 3 explained the interview protocol designed to gain insight into participants' perception of success as well as what they perceived as contributing factors to their persistence while attending an institution. Chapter 4 includes the collected data and information on how it was organized and aggregated to prepare for analysis. In addition, Chapter 4 discussed the interpretation of the data through the themes and subthemes that would emerge from the data

collected. Then in Chapter 5, interpretation of the findings, implications, and recommendations for future research will be provided.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, about “50.5 million (or 16%) of the population were of Hispanic or Latino origin” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). In 2002 Hispanics/Latinos comprised only 13% of the total population. Most of the growth in the total population came from increases in those who reported their ethnicity as Latino or Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), making Hispanics/Latinos the largest racial/ethnic group in the United States (Flores, 2017). The “educational attainment among U.S. Latinos has been changing rapidly in recent years, reflecting the group’s growth in the nation’s public K-12 schools and colleges” (Krogstad, 2016).

This literature review examined factors impacting student persistence and retention among the Hispanic/Latino student population at a PWI. A steady discrepancy between the enrollment of Hispanic/Latino students and the number of Hispanic/Latino students graduating from institutions of higher education is currently in existence (Longerbeam, Sedlacek, & Alatorre, 2004).

To explore the factors attributed to the first-year persistence of Hispanic/Latino students at a PWI this literature review was divided into several sections. The first section discusses the institutional (internal) influences such as the struggles and barriers Hispanic/Latino college students endure and potentially how their families impact their child(ren)’s life while enrolled at college. This section focuses on some of these challenges and how perhaps Hispanic/Latino college students may overcome them to successfully persist through their first year of college. In addition, there is a focus on the integration and impact of academic and social factors that may be attributed to the persistence of Hispanic/Latino college students.

Throughout this literature review, several possible factors were reviewed and addressed as to the impact (or lack thereof) these factors may have on the success and persistence of

Hispanic/Latino students through their first year while at a PWI. Following the literature review, the theoretical framework is included as it framed and grounded the study.

### **Institutional (Internal) Influences**

Review of the literature included major institutional (internal) influences that may impact Hispanic/Latino college students' sense of belonging, and persistence during their first-year in college. As Kember (1995) stated, institutional or internal influences "encompasses all elements of contact between an institution and the student" (p. 10) to include eliciting a sense of connectedness and belonging to the college community. Institutional influences are opportunities (or lack thereof) that can enhance or hinder a college student's desire or opportunity to persist in college, particularly during their first year in college.

Students' success is grounded in part upon the extent to which they feel welcomed. Hurtado and Carter (1997) also found memberships in social-community organizations are associated strongly with Latino/a students' sense of belonging. Hurtado and Ponjuan (2005) also found that when students participate in student organizations and become members of the community, Hispanic/Latino college students feel a sense of belonging and a sense of pride as a result of being a student at their present institution. The following section discusses the factors that may impact Hispanic/Latino college students' retention during their first year in college. The researcher began this section with an examination of a *sense of belonging*, a concept offered by Hurtado and Carter (1997) which "captures the individual's view of whether he or she feels included in the college community" (p. 327). Student Involvement, Learning Communities, First-Year Experiences, Mentoring Opportunities, and Familial Expectations soon follow as part of this review of the literature.

### **Sense of Belonging**

Several studies comparing levels of sense of belonging among minority and White students show that individuals from racially minoritized populations, including those identified as Hispanics/Latinos, are more likely to experience lower levels of sense of belonging than their White peers (Johnson, Soldner, Leonard, & Alvarez, 2007; Strayhorn, 2008). Students also differ by race regarding influences that shape sense of belonging (Johnson et al., 2007), which further emphasizes the role of race and ethnicity in individuals' sense of belonging.

One way to explore the impact of connectedness on students' campus experiences is to try to understand their own sense of belonging to their campus communities (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). For Hispanic/Latino students, finding a critical mass of students who are like them seems to be important. Hernandez (2000) found that finding a Hispanic/Latino community on a PWI had a positive impact on retention (p. 44). The support and comfort that Hispanic/Latino college students feel while attending a university with a community they can relate to or with can be very beneficial to their well-being and college achievement (Gloria, Castellanos, & Rosales, 2005 as cited in Medina & Posadas 2012). Maestas, Vaquera, & Muñoz Zehr (2007) believed that "sense of belonging, or the cohesion a student has with a particular institution, is an important aspect in retaining all students, and particularly students of color" (p. 238). Students attending institutions of higher education must feel connected to something or someone. Therefore, institutions of higher education have Greek organizations, intramural sports, and other social activities to connect their students with each other and to the institution.

In Strayhorn's (2012) conceptual review of sense of belonging and its use in college student research, he stated that sense of belonging has a "reciprocal quality" in which "each

member benefits from the group and the group, in a sense, benefits from the contributions of each member” (p. 3).

Under an array of circumstances, “Latino students may find it difficult to develop a sense of belonging on campus. This is troublesome as sense of belonging has been shown to be related to academic achievement, retention, and persistence to degree attainment” (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rhee, 2008 as cited in Strayhorn, 2008).

As cited in Maestas et al. (2007), Hurtado and Carter (1997) stated that sense of belonging “measures a student’s attachment to the campus community as a whole” (p. 240). This attachment to the campus community is often developed as students become involved in student organizations and/or extracurricular programs and may undoubtedly have an impact on the student’s desire and ability to remain in college despite the many challenges they might encounter throughout their time on campus.

### **Student Involvement**

Participation and involvement in student organizations and/or extracurricular activities is said to positively impact the retention of Hispanic/Latino college students (Hernandez, 2000, as cited in Hernandez & Lopez, 2004). It was also stated that “co-curricular involvement positively impacted the retention of Latino college students” (p. 47). Astin (1984) described student involvement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 518). The theory predicts that students who are more involved in college activities, in both the academic and social spheres, have better outcomes than students who are not as involved. Through participation in co-curricular activities students can make new friends (perhaps friends that are like them in background and values) and/or find caring and



supportive networks that could help in adapting to the much larger environment around them (Hernandez and Lopez, 2004).

However, extracurricular involvement may also negatively impact college students. Thompson (2008) discussed this concept when he wrote "the level of commitment is much more important than the specific activity" (p. 10). Another negative impact of extracurricular activities and/or student involvement is low academic performance and poor time management skills. Nonetheless, Hispanic/Latino college students need a sense of belonging. One way to achieve a sense of belonging is for the Hispanic/Latino student to join a learning community.

### **Learning Communities**

Learning communities began their existence in the 1920's (Zhao & Kuh, 2004); however, it was not until the 1980's "a contemporary version of the learning community resurfaced" (Zhao & Kuh, 2008, p. 115). Learning communities "begin with a kind of co-registration or block scheduling that enables students to take courses with other first-year students" (Tinto, 1999, p. 6). Learning communities have obtained recognition as being effective in promoting student learning and success (Huerta & Bray, 2013, p. 1). Learning communities aim to

. . . foster a sense of community among students and teachers, attempt to create curricular coherence and connections, teach skills in a meaningful context, encourage academic and social connections for students, offer a more intensified learning environment, and provide learning communities for teachers. (Huerta & Bray, 2013, p. 2)

Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, and Salomone (2002) found that first-year students who are involved with learning communities develop a greater sense of belonging compared to their peers who might enroll in general courses (as cited in Maestas, Vaquera, & Muñoz Zehr, 2007).

Co-enrolling students in two or more course ensures that students see one another frequently and spend a substantial amount of time engaged in common intellectual activities. Taken together, these features strengthen the social and intellectual connections between students, which, in turn, help build a sense of community among participants. (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith, 1990 as cited in Zhao & Kuh, 2004)

A quantitative study by Spanierman, Soble, Mayfield, Neville, Aber, Khuri, and De La Rosa (2013) examined the relationship between students' involvement in a Living Learning Community (LLC) and the students' perceived sense of belonging in the university and in the residence hall. The authors reasoned that "because the residence hall context is a primary site for students' day-to-day living and social interactions, sense of belonging in residence may be as important as sense of belonging on the larger campus" (Spanierman et al., 2013, p. 311).

Learning communities continue to have a tremendous impact on a student's sense of belonging and, in the long run, their success. In addition, learning communities provide faculty with the opportunity to reach a more diverse student population. In the end, the opportunity to provide a "welcoming campus environment that provides opportunities to incorporate the Latino culture is an important institutional contribution to lowering Latino student stress" (Longerbeam, et al., 2004, as cited in Hernandez & Lopez, 2004, p. 42). It is important to note that providing a welcoming campus environment is an essential part of a student's first-year experience.

### **First-Year Experience**

The first year of a student's college experience is considered "crucial for successful transition and for baccalaureate attainment" (Musoba, Collazo, & Placide, 2013, p. 356). First-year experiences play a large role in the success or failure of Hispanic/Latino students while pursuing a college degree. Traditionally, students from minority and economically disadvantaged

populations have had low levels of graduation rates (Keup, 2005, as cited in Otero, Rivas, & Rivera, 2007). In addition, Keup (2005) observed that the largest proportion of student attrition occur within their first year in college (as cited in Otero et al., p. 163).

Essentially, first-year experience programs share the common goal of “increasing student performance along with persistence and graduation rates” (Jamelske, 2009, p. 375). Institutions attempt to emphasize these outcomes through programming and experiences that may aid in the students’ overall success. While current research indicated that “the first year is a crucial period for students to get acclimated to the college environment” (Tinto, 1987), there is little-to-no research as to the importance or the role these first-year programs play in the retention and success of Hispanic/Latino students. Lincoln (n.d.) shared Hispanic/Latino college students often face many challenges while pursuing a college education such as language barriers, perceptions of being academically inferior to their White counterparts, familial pressures, and lack of guidance and support from parents and/or mentors. These challenges are said to be associated with lower graduation rates. Research indicates students can overcome these challenges when mentoring relationships are developed (Torres, 2006).

### **Mentoring Opportunities**

In his study, Torres (2006) concluded mentoring was among the experiences and opportunities that were important for Hispanic students; particularly throughout their first year in college. Students mentioned the importance of having a “...key person who helped them navigate the system” (p. 306). Torres (2006) explained how mentors or advisors who assisted Hispanic/Latino students to visualize their success at an early stage (i.e. their first year in college) would be important to their success (p. 306). Most mentoring relationships are said to develop naturally; however, different colleges and universities are seeking to sponsor planned

mentoring relationships in an effort to enhance opportunities for those students who might be less likely to have a mentor (Santos & Reigadas, 2002). In addition,

It is believed that planned mentoring programs may be a productive way of addressing the college adjustment needs of Latino students. Specifically, a relationship with a mentor may expand the student's awareness of resources available for coping successfully with demanding academic conditions and, by implication, his or her sense of personal competence and self-efficacy. (Santos & Reigadas, 2002, p. 41)

Another benefit of mentoring relationships is "the opportunities to engender positive self-perceptions in at-risk students as well as feelings of self-efficacy, personal control, respect for oneself, and a sense of being valued and respected by significant others" (Santos & Reigadas, 2002, p. 42). Providing students with peer to peer or faculty to peer mentoring relationships allow students to explore own skills as they navigate college. Lastly, the research conducted by Santos and Reigadas (2002) "illustrated how mentors facilitated Latino students' personal and social adjustment to college by providing emotional support and access to resources and information. Furthermore, it identified students' levels of social embeddedness and ethnic homogeneity in student-mentor backgrounds as important factors influencing the quality of the mentoring process and overall satisfaction" (p. 48).

It is reported that first-year experience programs are said to share a common goal of attempting to increase student performance in addition to being crucial in helping students adjust to the campus environment. Lastly, providing positive mentoring relationships also aids in the adjustment process for Hispanic/Latino students.

### **Familial Support and Expectations**

Previous researchers have discussed the importance of family support in Hispanic/Latino students' educational experiences and overall success (Contreras & Contreras, 2011; Hernandez, 2000; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Lopez-Turley, 2006). Schneider and Ward (2003) indicated that Hispanic peer support may not be enough and that students need additional support systems, such as familial support. Family is often described as a strong source of support and encouragement (Hernandez, 2000, as cited in Hernandez & Lopez, 2004, p. 41). Familial support and encouragement are sought out by Hispanic/Latino students (Hernandez, 2002). Proximity to family is a significant factor in the college choice processes of many Latino students (Contreras, 2011; Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012; Lopez-Turley, 2006, as cited in Contreras & Contreras, 2015); therefore, choosing to attend college far away from home may present as a hindrance to student success. Jose, Ryan, and Pryor (2012) stated that "family connectedness includes perceptions of family identity, family mutual activities, and family cohesiveness" (as cited in Vela et al., 2016, p. 262).

Hispanics/Latinos have "strong ties to their family" (Rendón & Taylor, 1990, as cited in Hernandez & Lopez, 2004); this is evident when the Hispanic/Latino student is away in college and he or she is needing that emotional security and support. Person and Rosenbaum (2006) conducted a study in which many Hispanic/Latino students noted family and friends as their main reason for enrolling in a particular institution (as cited in Pérez & McDonough, 2008, p. 251). Hispanic/Latinos rely heavily on family and friends for college information (Pérez & McDonough, 2015) and throughout their college career.

"The aspects of college life have many demands, and families' support may be necessary for a student to have successful academic performance" (DeFauw, Levering, Msipa & Abraham,

2018, p. 11). Family and home expectations do not need to be negative all the time. These familial relationships and expectations can and should be positively used as an effective retention tool by “familiarizing Latino parents with the college setting and providing them with an opportunity to meet and develop rapport with college educators and support staff” (Hernandez, 2000, as cited in Hernandez & Lopez, 2004, p. 41). Hispanic/Latino families need to feel supported and validated. Encouraging families to become active participants in the college experience can substantially benefit their student(s) throughout their time at the institution. In addition, providing families (i.e. parents) with an opportunity to understand and appreciate the overall college experience, primarily for those first-generation students, will allow the students to in turn feel supported.

**Familismo.** *Familismo* is a cultural value “emphasizing family closeness and loyalty” (Vega, 1990, as cited in Sy & Romero, 2008, p. 214). In addition, “*familismo* requires an individual family member choosing to put the needs of the family first, even if it means making personal sacrifices” (Sy & Romero, 2008, p. 214). *Familismo* may hinder a Hispanic/Latino student who might be a first-generation student, because many are tasked with putting their needs aside, to concentrate on family instead (Sy & Romero, 2008). This may cause disruption in the Hispanic/Latino student’s college career. Sy & Romero (2008) stated that any “requirement to fulfill such family obligations may detract from the amount of time students are able to devote to their college pursuits, and thus make the transition to higher education more challenging” (p. 215).

### **Theoretical Framework**

As the Hispanic/Latino population continues to grow throughout the U.S. so do the opportunities for institutions of higher education to create learning environments that are

conducive to the success of Hispanic/Latino students (Fry, 2002). It is important to make a meaningful effort to understand Hispanic/Latino college students' experiences to help them successfully navigate their college career (Gloria et al., 2005). At the core of Tinto's (1975, 1993) student integration model (SIM) is the degree to which the individual works towards integration into the social and academic aspects of the university. This is important because students must feel a sense of belonging to feel they are a part of the institution, and that they are invested in their own success (McCubbin, 2003). The need to belong is a basic, fundamental need that has been linked to positive health, well-being and cognitive processing outcomes (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), the belonging hypothesis "is that human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quality of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497).

For this study, the researcher used a combination of Tinto's (1975, 1993) final version of the SIM and Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering's (1989) theory of mattering and marginality. Congruency between the student and the institution would show a strong commitment to an educational goal and commitment to remain with the institution (p. 124). Berger and Milem (1997) stated "involvement is believed to be critical in students' process of persistence" (p. 388). Tinto (1975, 1993) asserted that the process of becoming integrated into the academic and social systems happens when students successfully navigate the stages of "separation, transition and incorporation. The Theory of Student Integration stated that, for students to persist, 'colleges must consist of two systems: academic and social'" (as cited in Aljohani, 2016, p. 6). The academic system, Tinto (1975, 1993) noted was primarily concerned with the formal education of students (i.e., intellectual integration); whereas, the social system was concerned with the

interactions (membership) among students, faculty, and staff (i.e., social integration) (as cited in Aljohani, 2016).

Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) stated individuals are connected by the need to matter and the need to belong. Students must feel that they matter if they are to succeed in college (Schlossberg et al., 1989, p. 44). A sense of belonging and appreciation must be present for students to feel motivated to succeed while in college. Ethnic minority students at PWIs are somewhat susceptible to feelings of marginality if there is a lack of support and/or community (Moore & Upcraft, 1990, as cited in Hernandez & Lopez, 2004) as it is important for individuals to feel supported.

Essentially, this study used the framework that persistence occurs when students feel empowered and integrated into the campus community and/or culture. Tinto (1975, 1993, as cited in Berger and Milem, 1997), and Schlossberg et al., (1989), all stated that a connection between integration and retention allow students to persist past their first year in college.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter 2 examined factors currently impacting student persistence and retention among a diverse student population. Through the review of literature, the researcher attempted to explore the attributes and how institutional (internal) influences affect Hispanic/Latino college students at a PWI. Based on the current literature, several institutional factors were determined to have had some sort of impact on Hispanic/Latino students' perception surrounding sense of belonging and first-year persistence.

The theoretical framework was presented, and it provides the foundation for this research study. Both Tinto's (1975) SIM and Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering's (1989) theory of mattering and marginality seamlessly connected what the literature review provided concerning



the importance for first-year Hispanic/Latino college students. It is vital for these college students to feel connected to others and to their campus community because it promotes positive acclimation to the institution, which ultimately leads to persistence in college.

A phenomenological study was conducted to answer the research question through the learning and understanding of participants' personal stories and perspective. Chapter 3 presents a thorough and detailed explanation of the methodology for the study.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Santos and Reigadas (2002) stated that Hispanic/Latino student retention and graduation at 4-year institutions continues to be a major concern among college and university officials (p. 41). Moreover, there is little research that has documented the impact of a sense of belonging and student engagement have on Hispanic/Latino college students and their college persistence. The selection of a qualitative phenomenological research design concerning the Hispanic/Latino population at a PWI allowed the researcher to collect definitive, informative, and imperative data from individuals who self-identified as Hispanic/Latino currently enrolled at a PWI. It also allowed the researcher to obtain data describing these participants' experiences concerning their decision-making and their ability to successfully persist in college.

A phenomenological research study provided the researcher with opportunities to research a specific topic and find answers to specific research questions. Creswell (2014) described this process as an opportunity for researchers to better “describe the lives of individuals, collect and tell stories about people’s lives, and write narratives of individual experiences” (p. 504). This can be accomplished through the process of conducting interviews to gather the data and then spending the time making sense of the data collected. In addition, qualitative research is descriptive, in that the researcher will gain rich data through words or pictures (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research involves time and commitment. The main research question studied was: What are some of the major institutional influences impacting Hispanic/Latino students’ sense of belonging and the impact on first-year persistence at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)?

### **Setting**

There was not one single or specific setting for this study. The study focused on Hispanic/Latino college students who had completed their first-year and/or continuing through their second year at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). An environment where the Hispanic/Latino population is lower than its White counterparts and where they are considered a minority provided the perfect setting to look at the experiences of Hispanic/Latino college students concerning sense of belonging and persistence.

### **Participants**

Hispanic/Latino students who were currently enrolled and attending any Predominantly White Institution (PWI) throughout the U.S. were invited to voluntarily participate in this study. These participants ranged from students who had completed their first year of college to those that had returned for their second-year. The researcher used social media outlets, along with personal contacts to recruit participants for this study.

A call for participants was shared via Facebook and LinkedIn, two social media platforms, to gauge interest and participation. Participants were selected if all specific characteristics for the research were met. All participants were provided an informed consent form with the invitation to participate in the study. The form described important information regarding the study. Through the content on the informed consent form all prospective participants were made aware of the research study and reminded that their participation was strictly voluntary.

### **Participant Rights**

All participant's rights were considered in this research study. Participants were also assured confidentiality through individual semi-structured interviews and the use of pseudonyms.

Consent forms were distributed as invitations because it allowed potential participants the opportunity to review and/or complete the form prior to conducting the interviews. To ensure real and honest accounts of personal experiences were being shared confidentially, all participants were given the opportunity to create a pseudonym. A copy of the signed consent form was provided to each participant for his or her records to include the researcher's contact information. If a participant wished to terminate participation, he or she had the right to do so without penalty.

### **Data**

Study data was collected through 60-minute semi-structured interviews (Appendix A) with participants. All participants were asked questions related to their experiences as Hispanic/Latino college students at a PWI. Interview questions were developed using an adaptation of Tinto's (1975, 1993) final version of the student integration model (SIM); and Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering's (1989) theory of mattering and marginality as the framework. Interview questions collected participant demographics, and included both open-ended, and closed-ended questions that helped gather the necessary data to answer the research question and allowed the participants to describe how they were able to persist during their first year at a PWI. This data allowed the researcher to examine the specific factors that could influence the opportunities these participants may have experienced while working towards a college degree.

Data were collected by conducting individual semi-structured interviews with each participant via phone or the use of technology via a conferencing software to provide a more intimate and personal environment and to allow participants to feel comfortable in sharing their stories.

## **Interviews**

The interview questions were developed using an adaptation of Tinto's (1975, 1993) final version of the student integration model (SIM); and Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering's (1989) theory of mattering and marginality as framework. Questions allowed the researcher and the participants to dive further into the conversation and provide a holistic look at the overall experience. Most interview sessions lasted no more than 60 minutes; however, some of the interview lengths were dependent on the fluidity of each session and the participant's level of comfort and sharing of experiences during their respective interviews. A recording device was used in every interview to capture the data. After each interview, the researcher used Trint software to transcribe the audio files. Once the transcription process was completed, transcript reviews were conducted to ensure the accuracy of the data.

## **Analysis**

An interpretative phenomenological analysis method was used to analyze the participants' experiences reported during the interviews. Enough time was allotted to listen to all audio recordings before and after the transcription process. All interviews were transcribed by a professional service called Trint. After the interviews were transcribed and reviewed by participants, the transcripts were coded for themes. Coding involved the identification of themes throughout the data to better classify the information collected and alleviate the analysis process.

During the coding process, the researcher used the professional software Dedoose to identify themes. Creswell (2014) stated data can be segmented into themes by coding the responses from the participants (p. 513). Segmenting the data can in turn produce patterns that will assist in answering the main research question. For example, the researcher coded the data to ensure that each participant's voice was heard about how he or she was able to persist during his

or her first-year at their PWI. An effort was made to identify all themes and subthemes that emerged from coding the data. The researcher then presented the data in a logical manner and allowed the participants' voices to be heard.

### **Potential Limitations of the Study**

Some of the potential limitations facing this study included the use of an array of institutions throughout the United States. The use of several institutions lends itself to not gathering enough data to support the assumption that Hispanic/Latino students struggle while at a specific PWI. A second limitation facing this study was the small participant pool that was available to the researcher due to the timing of the study. While the number of potential participants was high due to the recruitment method and strategy, the number of participants who volunteered was limited due to timing and a strictly voluntary participation.

A third limitation was the potential for personal bias since the researcher identifies herself as a Hispanic/Latina; however, the researcher understood she needed to keep her bias at bay and allow the participants' voices to be heard. The researcher used bracketing and reflection in a personal journal to allow the regular documentation on what was said and how she felt during the interviews. Another limitation of qualitative research was the opportunity for human error to be introduced during data collection, transcription, and analysis. However, the researcher conducted transcript reviews and used her theoretical framework to guide her and reduce as much human error as possible.

### **Conclusion**

This research study was conducted through the course of individual interviews with seven participants who identified themselves as Hispanic/Latino students at PWIs around the United

States. All seven interviews were recorded and transcribed using a professional software called Trint and coded with the assistance of a software called Dedoose.

Upon the transcription process being completed transcript reviews were conducted to ensure the accuracy of the data. Chapter 4 includes the analysis of all collected data to include potential implications for future research opportunities.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

While research surrounding the experiences of Hispanic/Latino college students at PWIs continues to gain traction, there is still a gap in the research about some of the major institutional factors that may contribute to their sense of belonging, and in turn, promote first-year persistence at PWIs. Furthermore, just a small number of studies have shown the experiences of those who identify as Hispanic/Latino at PWIs. This study explored what major institutional factors may have contributed to Hispanic/Latino college students' sense of belonging, thereby promoting first-year persistence at PWIs.

All responses from participants were transcribed, coded, and analyzed with the goal of identifying themes and subthemes and developing a connection with the predetermined themes of sense of belonging, student involvement, learning communities, first-year experience, mentoring opportunities, and familial support that had been identified in the literature review.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Overview**

Seven students attending PWIs across the United States volunteered to participate in semi-structured individual interviews with the researcher. These individual interviews took place via phone and/or video depending on the level of comfort for the participant. Making each participant feel safe was important to the researcher because this allowed the participant to feel comfortable and share his or her story and experiences.

Using individual interviews, the participants' stories and experiences came alive and data were obtained. The interview questions were divided into sections with each section representing the main themes previously outlined in the literature review. The participants' section focused on participants' demographic information to include their personal and educational backgrounds. The section focused on attending college provided background and context on their motivation



for attending college and whether participants felt they had made the right choice by attending their particular PWI. The sections focusing on sense of belonging and student engagement provided participants with an opportunity to dive deeper into their relationships and experiences within the institution and to describe what participants perceived as being important to their personal and educational success during and after their first-year. Lastly, each participant was asked about their overall experiences as a Hispanic/Latino student at a PWI allowing each participant to further expand on anything previously shared, whether positive or negative.

All seven interview recordings were transcribed using a professional service called Trint and later coded with assistance from the software Dedoose to identify themes and subthemes. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality and privacy. Participants were offered one week to respond to the researcher regarding the verification for accuracy of their individual transcripts. Two out of the seven participants responded. Only one out of those two participants responded with minor edits to the transcript.

After transcription of all recordings, each transcript was read and reviewed several times to allow the researcher to re-familiarize herself with the data. These readings allowed the researcher the opportunity for note taking and for the initial identification of themes. These themes were identified through a color-coding process with notes being added throughout the transcripts. An attempt was made to identify connections and relationships between the identified themes found in the transcripts.

The process of connecting themes was achieved by listing all themes found in every transcript on a separate sheet of paper. Similarities were sought out once all were listed on the same page. Following the identification of themes, the researcher took note of how the themes were emerging and the context in which these themes were emerging throughout the transcripts.

Once all the themes were identified it was then time to bring each participant's narrative to life by sharing their stories.

### **Results**

Emergent themes were identified by the researcher throughout the seven interviews on the experiences of Hispanic/Latino students at PWIs. The themes that were identified during the literature review based on past and current research included sense of belonging, student involvement, learning communities, first-year experience, mentoring opportunities and familial support. Through the course of the research study and participant interviews, the four predetermined or *a priori* themes were used to guide the coding process. For the participants, the four themes that emerged from the literature were the most important and critical when it came to feel supported while at their institution.

### **Participants**

Seven participants from several PWIs throughout the United States participated in the interviews. Due to the interviews occurring during the summer semester all seven participants were transitioning from either their first year into their second year or from their second year into their third year at their institution. Rising sophomores identified here with pseudonyms included Paola, Pamela, Pablo, Juan, and Jessica. Two rising juniors, also identified here with pseudonyms, included Ricardo and Ana. All participants have attended their institution since their first year. While it was already established all participants identified as Hispanic/Latino, all participants were asked about their race and/or ethnicity and how they felt their race and/or ethnicity impacted their motivation and decision to attend a PWI. All PWIs where participants are currently attending have been identified using pseudonyms.

**Pamela.** Pamela described herself as Hispanic/Latino, more specifically as Mexican-American. Pamela is a sophomore, psychology major at a PWI in California. As a sophomore, Pamela has had an array of different experiences regarding her college journey. Pamela noted that education is a priority for her and for her family. While she was growing up her parents instilled a sense of urgency and priority when it came to obtaining a college degree; therefore, attending college was a must for her. Pamela mentioned, “This urgency was passed on to me and it became my priority.” She continued to say that this priority began with her attending boarding school miles away from home. Her boarding school experience helped her prepare for college.

The researcher asked Pamela to further expand on why she felt choosing this college had been the right choice for her and how it may have impacted her ability to persist through her first year. Pamela recounted that during her first year, her experiences were not that positive. While she had been used to being far away from home struggling to connect with other individuals, the institution was a major challenge for her. Pamela described college, “It’s a whole new environment, and you get exposed to very different situations than you would in high school. In high school, we were really sheltered.” However, Pamela stated she would end up finding her group of friends and adapt to the new environment. Given the challenges faced during her first year, Pamela shared, “I don’t know if it [this college] is the best fit, I also don’t know if I see myself at another institution.”

**Paola.** Paola also described herself as Hispanic/Latino, more specifically Paola shared she was born in Venezuela and raised in the United States since childhood. While Paola has spent most of her life in the United States, she said, “We still have a lot of connections back home.” Paola is a sophomore, computer science major at a PWI in South Carolina. Regarding Paola’s early months as a Hispanic/Latino student at that PWI, she mentioned:

It [the experience] was what I expected because [the school] is a predominantly White school, so I didn't really expect to see that many Latinos, like Latino communities. So, I mean my roommate was White. My neighbors were White. There is one Indian girl and another one that was from Korea, I think, on my floor. But everyone else was White. So, I didn't really expect to find other Latinos.

When the researcher asked for further explanation on how these experiences may have impacted her decision to stay on campus or move off campus (living arrangements), Paola introduced the idea of looking for a space or group where she could feel comfortable being herself. Paola said:

So, being Latina and on campus it made me just want to find other Latinas/Latinos. And I mean, I got along with my roommates. I just didn't feel like I particularly fit in with them sometimes. Like we couldn't understand, well, not understand, we couldn't relate on certain things. And so, this fall I'm moving in with a Latina. We're roommates for the fall and in the spring.

**Pablo.** Pablo also described himself as Hispanic/Latino, more specifically Colombian. He was a sophomore, industrial engineering major at the same school as Paola. Pablo shared he was born in Colombia and lived there until he turned eleven years old at which point he moved to the United States with his mother. Pablo mentioned how he likes “to go down there a lot for vacation and just visiting my parents. Well, my dad is over there and his whole side of the family.” He also shared some of the challenges living so far away from one of his parents; however, the opportunities to travel back and forth have helped him overcome those challenges.

The researcher began the interview by asking Pablo about his motivation for attending school. Pablo recounted how it was the standard growing up. Pablo said:

It was always the standard. I mean I come from a family, I'm very thankful for that, it's a very educated family. My mom and my dad, not my dad but my stepdad, went to college and you know, it's always been the education comes first kind of mentality. So, it was kind of what was expected, and I knew I had to do good in school.

The researcher also asked Pablo about his reasons for choosing to attend a PWI, given his strong ties to his cultural background. Pablo shared how demographics did not bother him, therefore they had no bearing on his decision-making process. He said:

You know, I know different cultures and just the way people might treat you or might not. So, it was just a matter of where I think I see myself ending up being a better professional...I went to visit and just completely fell in love with the campus. And I knew that just how I've made it this far moving around so much, I just had to find a good group of friends that supported me and were all around good individuals.

**Juan.** Juan also identified himself as Hispanic/Latino, more specifically Mexican-American. He is a sophomore, mechanical engineering major at a PWI in Georgia. For context, the university that Juan is attending has three different campuses, and he attends the main campus. Juan shared that he was born in Mexico and that while he moved to the United States when he was two years old, he is very connected to his Mexican roots as he still has some family in Mexico. When the researcher asked Juan about his own motivation for attending college Juan mentioned several reasons. He said:

You do need a degree to get a really good job, especially if you want to live financially stable throughout life. But, not only that, but because my parents came to the States for a better life for me and my siblings. For us to have a better life, a better education. So, it [a better life] was kind of a motivation to pursue college.

Juan had a different path into this university. He recounted this institution was not his top choice and that he ended up here as a last resort; however, after having completed two years his mindset has changed. Juan shared:

I've met so many great people here. I've gotten very involved on campus. I don't think I would've met close friends if I would've gone to my top choice because I know that choice is much more rigorous than [this is].

In addition, Juan mentioned that regardless of the reasons he ended up at this university, he truly believes this institution is a good fit for him. Juan said:

I think it's a good fit for me because I make it a good fit for me. Usually, I'm with people that I associate with or I find close. I usually hang out with people that have certain views that are the same as me, so I kind of make it fit.

**Jessica.** Jessica also identified herself as Hispanic/Latino, more specifically she is from Puerto Rico. She is a sophomore, Spanish and philosophy major with a minor in vocal performance at the same university Juan attended. Jessica completed her first year at the downtown campus; however, has since then moved to the main campus due to her major. Jessica was born and raised in Puerto Rico and has been in the States for about five to six years. Given Jessica moved into a new environment rather abruptly she shared it was certainly challenging.

Jessica recalled:

Moving to the States was very hard because I was going into eighth grade in Puerto Rico and didn't want to leave because I was going to leave all my friends and I really wanted to graduate with them. So, leaving, I always wanted to move to the United States. But once it actually happened I guess it happened at a time I wasn't really excited for it.

Jessica has only been in the States for about five to six years, and she had a very

interesting experience regarding finding her niche at her institution. Jessica shared:

I guess, specifically knowing my background and who I am and where I come from it is different because I don't necessarily relate to a lot of people and what they choose to do. Also, it's weird because of the way I look. I don't look Hispanic/Latino, so people don't assume that of me. Lastly, depending on which campus you are located in there is a lot more of the Hispanic/Latino culture. Like, the downtown campus has a lot more of that because they have a lot of DACA students. On this campus, there's less of the Hispanic/Latino population so it's a little harder to find that place where you feel you belong.

**Ricardo.** Ricardo also identified himself as Hispanic/Latino, more specifically as Mexican American. At the time of the interview Ricardo had just completed his sophomore year as a civil engineering major attending the same school as Paola and Pablo. One of the initial things Ricardo mentioned during his interview was how important attending college was for him. Ricardo discussed:

My motivation to attend college stems mainly from my mom, because I was raised by a single mother, so she kind of pushed me to get an education and be one of the first in our family. My mom would always give me the talk about education and its importance. And so, I ended up being as motivated because of her and how determined she was to put me through college.

During Ricardo's interview it was evident that while Ricardo had no real expectations for attending this PWI, it was just a matter of time for him to find his niche while on campus. After two years there and joining a Latino-based Greek organization Ricardo shared:

During my sophomore year it was when I felt I was starting to belong. I had joined a Latino-based Greek organization which allowed me to be myself and meet others from similar backgrounds. I just felt really like at home; I guess I felt like happy.

**Ana.** Lastly, there is Ana, who also identified herself as Hispanic/Latino, more specifically half Mexican and half Vietnamese. She is a rising junior, fashion merchandising major at her PWI in Georgia. The researcher began the interview by asking Ana about her motivation for attending school. Ana mentioned she comes from a family where one side had gone to college; while the other side did not. Ana explained:

My dad went to college and my mom didn't, so I felt it was what I needed to do. They influenced me a lot, and while my mother did not attend college she really wanted me to go to school because as an adult woman she knew how difficult it was for someone without a college degree to get a job and to be a professional. She wanted me to do what she didn't get to do. Lastly, I wanted to become educated and take advantage of the opportunity to develop professionally and to have a lasting career that I enjoy.

One of the questions the researcher asked Ana was concerning her sense of belonging during her time so far at the university. Ana shared how given her mixed background sharing her experiences with others has been challenging. She explained:

I think it depends on the setting I am in and the context. Because if I am in a class and I have a couple of RA's [Resident Assistants] in the class then I can kind of identify myself with that group. But then maybe in the context of just other RA's sometimes I don't feel like I fit. I mean, in a school where there's a lot of sorority women, there's a lot of individuals in Greek life and, I would say that that's a huge part of this school, and I don't really identify with that at all. It can be difficult to feel like I fit in here. So, I have



attempted to join organizations and become involved in ways that make me involved, and to find, to try and find other people that I can associate with closely. But, it can be difficult sometimes.

Furthermore, Ana mentioned her mixed background can sometimes contribute to the lack of belonging. She explained:

I think ethnicity ties in with culture and the cultures that people are raised in. Being mixed is very difficult because people will say well, you're not Hispanic. You're not Hispanic enough, you don't speak Spanish so you're not a real Mexican. So, I'm kind of not associating with other Hispanics because I know how that conversation goes and I've been in that position before where I'm not enough for a variety of reasons. So, it's hard to share my culture with other people because for the most part it's not accepted.

All seven participants attending PWI institutions throughout the United States have had both positive and negative experiences concerning persisting through their first-year as a Hispanic/Latino student at a PWI. While all participants showed how they successfully persisted it did not come easy for them as is evident in the different themes that emerged in the interviews of student involvement, sense of belonging, mentoring and familial support. These emergent themes are explored further within each participant's interview.

### **Emergent Themes**

Derived through the process of coding, emergent themes were used to categorize and organize participant narratives. The emergent themes were *sense of belonging*, *mentoring*, *familial support and expectations*, and *student involvement*. The themes presented in this chapter are reflective of patterns and similarities within the interview with each participant.

## **Sense of Belonging**

The first theme to be explored further is sense of belonging among Hispanic/Latino students at their respective PWIs. As a basic human need, sense of belonging can affect well-being, motivate behavior (Strayhorn, 2012), and promote positive academic outcomes for college students (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Sanchez, Colon, & Esparza, 2005). For Hispanic/Latino students, finding a critical mass of students who are like them seems to be important.

All seven participants shared that feeling a type of connection to their institution was crucial to their overall experience; however, not every participant found this connection to be always positive. Juan mentioned the importance of having a sense of belonging as a student, primarily a first-year transitioning into his second year. Juan stated, “I feel like I belong because I make time to create an environment in which I know I’ll belong.” Furthermore, Paola described that “while I do feel like I belong at my institution, I don’t feel like I matter too much because they usually listen to the strongest voice which is usually the largest population here.” Jessica also mentioned how joining the new student orientation program helped her create an environment in which she felt empowered and connected to the institution. She explained, “during my first semester I didn’t look for any clubs, but I did prepare myself for when it was time. That’s when I joined [the orientation program], and that is where I found I belonged and where I felt important. Because it’s with these opportunities that you are empowered, and you are shown what you are capable of.”

In his interview, Ricardo also mentioned the impact feeling like he belonged had on him during his transition into his sophomore year. He shared “I felt like I belonged when it was my

sophomore year because that's when I joined a Latino fraternity. I was starting to know a lot of different people in the Greek Life community. I just really felt at home. I guess I felt happy.”

Pamela also described how she felt that she belonged; however, Pamela's experience was one that was very different in comparison to the rest of the participants. She shared, “Saying I feel like I belong wouldn't be an accurate statement given my experiences and challenges; however, I have made strong enough connections that I don't think I'd see myself at a different institution.”

Pablo also described similar experiences. He shared how much he loves going to class and that is just because “of the fact that I am aware of my culture and where I am bound to fit within my own culture.” Ana was one of the participants who described a different experience regarding sense of belonging. Ana shared that while her current institution was not her first choice she has found her niche by finding a job that has helped her become a part of the institution and feel like she belongs regardless of her challenges.

All seven participants shared an array of experiences concerning their sense of belonging at their respective institutions. Many of them attributed their sense of belonging to the student involvement opportunities that had been provided to them. This theme is explored further below.

### **Familial Support and Expectations**

The importance of family support was prevalent in the interviews with all seven participants. Participants shared how their families were a strong support system for them since day one. Family support was defined in different ways, from emotional to financial support. For many of the participants the desire to attend college and obtain a college degree stemmed from their families' support, and encouragement. For some, this desire stemmed from the parental expectations for them to be and do better than themselves.

Ana mentioned her experience regarding family support was two-fold. Her father attended and graduated college while her mother did not. It was, however, the support and motivation from her mother that motivated her to attend college and has supported her from one year to the next. Ana explained, “My mother really wanted me to go to school because she didn’t, and as a working adult woman she knew how difficult it would be for someone without a college degree to get a job and to be a professional.” Ana went on to further share how she felt her mother’s strong encouragement to be more of an expectation to attend college since she had not had the same opportunity. She recalled using that feeling to push through the challenges she encountered, connect with her community and persist.

Jessica also shared the important role her family, mostly her mother, has had on her experience. Both sides of Jessica’s family are well-educated; however, since she was eight years old, she lived with her mother who has pushed, motivated, and supported her all along. Jessica’s support system is a little different than the rest of the participants given that Jessica’s mother works at the same institution Jessica attends. Jessica described “having my mother work on campus has its advantages, and I enjoy it very much. I feel I can go to her any moment I may need something or just a pick-me-up.”

Ricardo described how his support system played a different role. Ricardo had applied to over six different institutions; however, most of them were private institutions and financially it was almost impossible for him to attend. “The support I received from my family in making my decision to attend [this institution] was unexpected; however, I always knew I could count on my family as education is something that is important for us all.”

Juan said the support he has received from his family is more so emotional support as his family does not have the means to support him financially. Nonetheless, Juan shared, “the

emotional support my family provides me is exactly what I need during the times I get homesick or struggle to stay afloat.”

Pablo talked about the role his family played when he considered withdrawing from school due to emotional and mental hardships. Pablo was reminded what his family always said, “withdrawing or giving up was never an option. And no matter how tough things would get it’s just something that needs to get done.” Pablo also shared that going to college was always about making himself and his family proud as his parents had sacrifice for him to be where he is at right now.

Paola told the researcher, “My family is my biggest support system and motivation to be successful.” In addition, Paola’s explained that her older sister is also a student at the same institution, and they are very close and always supporting each other. Paola recalled how during her first year she experienced some difficult challenges and obstacles and that “if it wasn’t because of my sister being physically here with me and the emotional support from my family far away, I don’t think I would’ve made it through those challenges.”

Lastly, Pamela’s experience showed how family support can play different roles in a student’s college experience. Pamela described how her family had made the decision to send her away to boarding school for her high school years; however, they were hesitant for Pamela to go away for college. Pamela explained, “Education is really important for my family and I; however, giving back to our community is even more important, therefore, my family wanted to make sure I chose an institution that would allow me to give back to our community both as a student and as a professional thereafter.” Pamela also shared that while she had set her own expectation to start and finish college, this same expectation and pressure also came from her family. Pamela was clear that for her to persist, she needed to find her place on campus. She

recalled how “feeling this pressure to persist and finish gave me the opportunity to find ways to feel a part of the campus community.”

Emotional support is critical for Hispanic/Latino students as many of them are miles away from their families, and for many Hispanic/Latino students this support stems from the relationships and strong bonds they have with their family (i.e. parents, siblings, etc.). All participants shared the importance of family in their ability to feel supported and encouraged to persist while attending their PWI. Several of the participants shared that pursuing a college degree went beyond their own expectations. Their family expected them to attend and finish college because of their own (or lack thereof) experiences.

### **Student Involvement**

Six out of the seven participants interviewed mentioned how involvement upon arrival to their campus played a significance role in their ability to persist past their first and/or second-years. Two participants shared how being involved in a Latino fraternity had helped them be successful. Both Pablo and Ricardo made the decision to join a Latino fraternity during their first and second-year respectively. Pablo shared “getting involved in a Latino fraternity allowed me to find a core group of guys that have the same ambitions as I do in life and who are working to uplift one another.” Ricardo shared, “I felt as if I found my niche during my sophomore year because that’s when I joined a Latino fraternity. Like I was getting to know a lot of different people, and it felt like home.”

One participant, Jessica, described the positive impact being involved with the new student orientation program has had on her college experience. Jessica shared how being part of that program really helped her find her place on campus and gave her “a reason to stay and make

a difference in other students' lives." Juan also reported that he was looking for involvement opportunities that dealt with Hispanics or Latinos,

...just because I'm an advocate for creating a sense of awareness for the Hispanic/Latino students here at the university and just create of presence of us. So, every organization I've joined either has Latino/Hispanic roots or values or is either an organization dedicated to bringing cultural awareness for Hispanic/Latinos.

While four of the five participants said involvement within the Hispanic/Latino culture was important and helped shaped their experiences, Ana's experience was different. She believed student involvement was important; however, she had found involvement in the Honors program as a student employee during her first-year. She discussed the opportunities being involved as an RA provided her. Ana stated, "As a member of the honors program and by being an RA I feel a part of the university and make myself known." She mentioned "being involved allows students to have similar experiences together. So, I think being involved allows me to find a group of people that I can have a sense of community with and I can be friends with."

Through the participants' experiences, it was clear student involvement played a noticeable and crucial role in each of their lives. Student involvement also provided participants with opportunities to connect with the PWIs and others within the campus environment, especially faculty or staff who in turn became mentors for these students.

### **Mentoring**

Three out of the seven participants mentioned the importance of mentoring relationships, particularly within their first two years. Juan described how "having a true mentor has been instrumental in my growth both as a student and a future professional." Juan mentioned, "I've gotten really close with some of my professors who have even written letters of recommendation

whenever I've needed one. I have truly felt the support from faculty and staff and their investment in my personal and professional growth.”

Pamela also felt having a mentor was important for her overall success; however, she did state how “difficult finding a good mentor that would be invested in me” had been during her first-year. In terms of finding a good mentor Pamela continued, “After a few tries of attempting to connect with a mentor, I made the decision to not force a relationship, instead allow the mentor/mentee relationship to grow on its own.” Pamela’s decision to let the relationship bloom naturally allowed for the connection to feel more intentional and honest.

Pablo’s experience with mentoring was quite different. Pablo quickly shared how important having a mentor was; however, he did not have a mentor during his first year. Instead, Pablo found the motivation to serve as a mentor himself to younger kids. Pablo mentioned that being a member of a mentoring group has been beneficial for him. “As an organization we go around to different elementary schools and we mentor the kids down there and just show them that anything they set their minds to is possible.” In addition, Pablo did share how he believed “having a mentor during my first or even second-year could’ve helped me adapt easier or quicker to the institution and not struggle as much.” Nonetheless, he said he appreciates and understands the importance of having a mentor and continues to serve as one himself.

Mentor relationships can also serve as a support system for many individuals; however, participants agreed there is no support system like the support system individuals may receive from their own families.

### **Multicultural Centers**

Two out of the seven participants discussed the importance of universities having multicultural centers that reflected their student population. For instance, Ana explained that



even when there are spaces on campus designed with Hispanic/Latino students in mind, many are still unable to connect given there is usually “no representation of the Hispanic/Latino student population within said offices”. Ricardo further shared the challenges he encountered when attempting to connect with his institution’s Office of Multicultural Affairs. He mentioned that he “failed to see himself within the administration.” This strengthened the need for him to bring a Latino fraternity to his campus to feel connected to his campus.

Through these two participants’ experiences, it was evident that multicultural centers should have staff that reflect their student’s population because they will feel more connected to their university.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter presented the experiences of Hispanic/Latino students at PWIs. The findings were organized through the participant narratives and emergent themes. Data from each individual narrative was portrayed individually and within the emergent themes. The primary finding of this study was that many Hispanic/Latino students face difficulties in developing a sense of belonging or even finding ways to be involved while at PWIs; however, there are resources in place to assist them in their journey to feel they belong and persist from one year to the next. Through the course of the study all participants who were interviewed shared similar yet different experiences as Hispanic/Latino students at a PWI. It was evident the different challenges students faced depending on how connected they felt to their culture and their institution.

The findings and the themes of sense of belonging, student involvement, mentoring, and familial expectations are discussed as relevant to the literature in Chapter 5. In addition, a

discussion on how this study informs the practice of educators and recommendations for future research is provided.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Hispanic/Latino student retention and graduation at 4-year institutions continues to be a major concern among college and university officials (Santos and Reigadas, 2002, p. 41). In addition, there has been little research that aims to understand the impact sense of belonging and student engagement may have on Hispanic/Latino college students and their college persistence. Persistence continues to be an issue for students in general, but more so for Hispanic/Latino students (Otero, Rivas, & Rivera, 2007; Zurita, 2004 as cited in Huerta & Bay, 2013).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine Hispanic/Latino students' college experiences at predominantly White, 4-year institutions and to better understand what these students perceived as contributing factors to their sense of belonging and persistence through their first and second-year. The problem is that Hispanics/Latinos are currently enrolling in large numbers in postsecondary institutions; however, many are enrolling part-time which has "adverse effects on their levels of degree completion" (Fry, 2002, p. 5).

This study sought to fill the gap concerning first-year Hispanic/Latino students and their ability to persist through their first year of college. Participants included individuals classified as first-year or second-year college students. It was the goal of this study to learn from Hispanic/Latino students and understand what institutional (internal) factors, contributed to their success of persisting during their first-year of college.

Four of the predetermined themes identified during the literature review—sense of belonging, student involvement, familial expectations, and mentoring—were used as guides in this research in collecting the data from interviews from Hispanic/Latino students at PWIs. An adaptation of Tinto's (1975, 1993) final version of the student integration model (SIM) and Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering's (1989) theory of mattering and marginality served as the study's framework and provided much of the foundational work in developing the interview

protocol. This framework, along with the predetermined themes enabled some of the understanding of the additional themes that arose from participant interview responses.

This research study used a qualitative phenomenological methodology to gain insight into the experiences of seven college students at PWIs. All seven participants volunteered to be interviewed for the study. The participants in the study were all students who self-identified as first or second-year Hispanic/Latino at PWIs. The main goal in the data analysis process was to allow the voices of each participant to be heard honestly and in their entirety.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The research question that guided the study to better understand the experiences of Hispanic/Latino students at PWIs concerning their sense of belonging and persistence was:

What are some of the major institutional factors that contribute to Hispanic/Latino students' sense of belonging and promote first-year persistence at Predominantly White Institutions (PWI)?

To answer this question, the researcher examined how participants perceived the impact sense of belonging (or lack thereof) as a Hispanic/Latino student at their respective PWI may have had on their ability to persist past their first year. The emergent themes of *sense of belonging, student involvement, familial support and expectations, and mentoring opportunities*, along with what each participant shared during their respective interviews were used to help address the research question. Overall, all seven participants shared that feeling a type of connection or sense of belonging to their institution was crucial to their experience. Research has shown that sense of belonging is a critical concept in relation to college student experiences. Fundamentally, sense of belonging is a basic human need (Strayhorn, 2012) and can adversely affect individual well-being if not present (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, &

Collier, 1992; Hagerty, Williams, Coyne, & Early, 1996). Particularly within the field of higher education, sense of belonging is important because of its connection to positive student academic outcomes including academic motivation, attendance, and persistence (Hausmann et al., 2007). Six of the seven participants described feeling a sense of belonging from the beginning of their college experience due in part to their already established connections within their institution. For the other participant, finding a space or group in which to connect with others during the first year was critical to belonging and therefore overall success.

Six of the seven participants interviewed mentioned how involvement upon arrival to their campus played a significant role in their ability to persist past their first and/or second years. Two participants shared how being involved in a fraternity had helped them be successful and feel as if they had a voice on their campus. As mentioned in the literature, participation and involvement in student organizations and/or extracurricular activities is said to positively impact the retention of Hispanic/Latino college students (Hernandez, 2000, as cited in Hernandez & Lopez, 2004). Through participation in co-curricular activities students can make new friends (perhaps friends that are like them in background and values) and/or find caring and supportive networks that could help in adapting to the much larger environment around them (Hernandez and Lopez, 2004). Participants described how finding support networks within groups and organizations during their first and second year allowed them to develop a deeper, more intentional connection and a sense of belonging to their institution. Some of the participants described finding one or two support networks while others found themselves involved and engaged in several organizations and programs before feeling they belonged and/or mattered at their institution. Upon having that connection to the institution participants described feeling empowered and encouraged to succeed academically and persist past their first year. As

Maestas, Vaquera, & Muñoz Zehr (2007) stated, “sense of belonging, or the cohesion a student has with a particular institution, is an important aspect in retaining all students, and particularly students of color” (p. 238).

Participants also described family support and expectations as critical to their success. According to the literature, several researchers have discussed the importance of family support in Hispanic/Latino students’ educational experiences and overall success (Contreras & Contreras, 2011; Hernandez, 2000; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Lopez-Turley, 2006). Schneider and Ward (2003) indicated that Hispanic peer support may not be enough and that students need additional support systems, such as familial support. Family is often described as a strong source of support and encouragement (Hernandez, 2000, as cited in Hernandez & Lopez, 2004, p. 41). Familial support and encouragement are sought out by Hispanic/Latino students (Hernandez, 2002). Participants shared the importance of feeling supported by their family during their first two years, particularly those who made the decision to travel far away from home. Support was also evident from friends, faculty and/or staff members according to the participants’ stories. Two of the participants sought out Greek organizations in which they not only felt they finally belonged but supported as well. For another participant, support came in the form of having her mother work at the same institution. Knowing someone she trusted was within arms-reach allowed her to feel supported and cared for during her first two years. Feeling supported allowed these students to create a long-lasting relationship and connection to their institution.

Lastly, the literature review showed the importance of mentoring relationships for Hispanic/Latino students. Torres (2006) concluded mentoring was among the experiences and opportunities that were important for Hispanic students; particularly throughout their first year in college. Students mentioned the importance of having a “...key person who helped them

navigate the system” (p. 306). Three of the seven participants described how mentoring had provided them with opportunities to connect and develop relationships that ended up assisting them and encouraging them to persist through their first year. One of these three participants thought to take his mentoring relationships to the next level by becoming a mentor himself; giving him the opportunity to make an impact the same way his mentors had done for him. On the other hand, one of the participants discovered how allowing mentoring relationships to develop on their own had a stronger impact on her overall experiences. She stated how “difficult finding a good mentor that would be invested in me” had been during her first year. After a few tries of attempting to connect with a mentor, she made the decision to let the relationship bloom naturally, which in turn allowed for the connection to feel more intentional and honest.

### **Implications**

This study utilized a combination of Tinto’s (1975, 1993) final version of the student integration model (SIM) and Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering’s (1989) theory of mattering and marginality as the framework. This theoretical framework was used to provide a better understanding of the perceptions of Hispanic/Latino students about the impact sense of belonging may have had on their ability to persist past their first year. Furthermore, the results of this study have implications for potential educational change on the organizational or institutional level. The lack of information surrounding perceptions of Hispanic/Latino college students in the literature presents a challenge as it relates to understanding sense of belonging and first-year persistence among the Hispanic/Latino student population.

In terms of the implications for potential educational change within higher education, the results from this study provide an opportunity for institutions to listen to their students to provide the best opportunities possible to better provide sense of belonging and support and encourage

student success. This study revealed that Hispanic/Latino students have a desire to feel connected to their institution, especially within PWIs. Strayhorn (2012) described sense of belonging as a basic human need. Several of the participants described how feeling connected to the institution was crucial to their overall success.

This study provided crucial information to aid in students' success. It is important for Hispanic/Latino students to *see themselves* within their institutions, whether via administration or those who take on the journey of serving as their mentors. In addition, familial relationships are also important and family members would serve best as motivators for their students to feel encouraged and empowered to succeed and persist past their first year. Built upon these implications are two recommendations for action that are outlined in the next section.

### **Recommendations for Action**

This study examined the perceptions of Hispanic/Latino college students in relation to sense of belonging and first-year persistence at PWIs. The results of this study revealed that although many of the students interviewed considered their experiences overall to be positive, all participants had a desire to have a more cultural and personal connection to their institution. Participants reported having meaningful relationships with other students and the administration; however, many of the participants described this process as a bit challenging. It is recommended that if institutions are open to listening and understanding their student populations they will be more prone to providing those enriching opportunities for growth and belonging; particularly for the Hispanic/Latino student population.

#### **Recommendation #1 – Multicultural Centers**

While many PWIs are aware of their distinctive student populations, some are still lagging in creating spaces where the Hispanic/Latino population can feel comfortable and



empowered to be themselves and develop an intentional connection to their institution. It is notable that multicultural centers with intentional programming are crucial to the development and growth for Hispanic/Latino students, particularly during their first year. “Multicultural student services offices have played a significant role in supporting underrepresented populations on campus and in developing systemic change around multicultural issues within institutions” (Stewart, 2011, p. 29).

Interviews revealed current multicultural centers were aimed (whether intentional or unintentional) at different ethnic groups other than the Hispanic/Latino student population. One participant shared that even when there are spaces on campus designed with Hispanic/Latino population in mind, many offices are still unable to connect given there is usually no representation of the Hispanic/Latino among faculty and staff. Another participant explained the challenges he encountered when attempting to connect with his institution’s Office of Multicultural Affairs. The participant noticed that he did not see himself within the administration and therefore, he brought a Latino fraternity to his campus in an effort to feel connected to his campus.

Developing intentional programming and multicultural centers will certainly provide numerous opportunities for Hispanic/Latino students to feel welcomed and connected to their institution, particularly, at institutions where Hispanic/Latino students are not the majority, therefore sometimes overlooked.

### **Recommendation #2 – Mentors/Mentoring Programs**

From the research study, three of the seven participants stated they’ve had mixed experiences with mentoring through the course of their time at their institution. Nonetheless, and regarding their different experiences, all three participants stated that mentors should be

individuals willing and able to bridge any gaps or challenges students might be experiencing and successfully help them towards the right path. Institutions of higher learning should be able to create spaces or programs where every student feels welcomed and supported. Programs such as minority advisement programs are developed with the goal on making students feel welcome and supported in a space where they might not feel judged. Minority advisement programs are developed for minority incoming students to be matched with upperclassmen to assist with their acclimation to college life. Some of these programs are ran by students; while others are more structured and ran by faculty or staff. Mentoring programs are opportunities for students to connect with other students and faculty or staff who are willing to take on the responsibility to show support and advocate for these students when needed. Furthermore, it is believed that structured mentoring programs may be a productive way of addressing the college adjustment needs of Latino students. Specifically, a relationship with a mentor may expand the student's awareness of resources available for coping successfully with demanding academic conditions and, by implication, his or her sense of personal competence and self-efficacy (Santos & Reigadas, 2002, p. 41).

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

The Hispanic/Latino college student population continues to grow, and as their experiences continue to evolve, it will continue to provide numerous opportunities for further study. The experiences of Hispanic/Latino college students at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) should be studied as this could provide further information as to how different types of institutions tailor their programming and resources towards the Hispanic/Latino population based on the type of institution. It would be interesting to see if the experiences of Hispanic/Latino students at HSIs differ in any way from those at PWIs in terms of sense of belonging and first-

year persistence. Another future study could focus on the retention of Hispanic/Latino students at either PWIs or HSIs and comparing how Hispanic/Latino students at institutions tailored to the Hispanic/Latino student population may have different experiences from those Hispanic/Latino students at PWIs.

Lastly, it is also recommended that this same study be conducted with a larger sample of Hispanic/Latino students at PWIs as this could provide an even clearer picture of the needs and wants of this specific population and their need belong and feel connected to their campus culture in order to effectively persist and be successful.

### **Conclusion**

Hispanics/Latinos are the fastest growing minority population in the United States (Marotta & Garcia, 2003). The number of Hispanic/Latino college graduates is also increasing. However, “colleges and universities need to find new ways to effectively support their students on the path to graduation” (Fishman, Ludgate, & Tutak, 2017, p. 4). This study aimed to identify the kind of opportunities Hispanic/Latino students believed they needed to succeed and persist past their first-year, particularly when attending PWIs. Knowing what students believed may benefit them will ensure institutions are successfully and purposefully assisting their Hispanic/Latino student population to succeed and persist past their first year.

The results from this study revealed Hispanic/Latino students at PWIs have an urgent need to belong, an urgent need to feel accepted and supported, not only by their peers, but also by their institution. Results from this study showed that Hispanic/Latino support comes from different areas, and institutions must be aware of their students’ needs and wants to feel a part of the institution, feel empowered, and be encouraged to be successful.

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## Appendix A

### *Interview Protocol*

*Script:* Hello, my name is Zwisel Gandía and I am working on my doctoral degree in Educational Leadership at the University of New England. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed.

I am interested in learning more about your experiences as a Hispanic/Latino student at your institution and how these experiences may influence your decision to stay in college. I am going to ask you several questions about your educational and cultural background and about different things that may contribute to the quality of your college experience. If you do not feel comfortable with any of these questions please let me know, and we will move on to the next one. In addition, please note that your participation in this study or your decision not to continue in this study at any time will not have an impact on your grades or your standing in college.

The interview will be recorded in an effort to help review what was shared during the interview. Would you agree to be recorded? As I begin the recording, I want to confirm that you have agreed to be recorded.

### *Interview Questions*

#### **Demographics**

1. What year are you in college?
2. What is your major?
3. Do you live on campus or off campus?

#### **Attending College**

4. What was your motivation to attend college?
5. Why did you choose this college?

#### **Sense of Belonging**

6. Do you feel this environment is a good “fit” for you? (Why/Why not?)
7. What’s your ideal environment in order to feel you “belong” or you “matter” on campus?
8. Do you feel you are an important part of the college?

9. How confident are you that your decision to attend this college is/was the right choice for you?
10. How likely is that you will reenroll for next semester and the semesters to follow?
11. Do you feel loyal to the college based on your experiences thus far? (Why/Why not?)
12. Since becoming a student have you ever thought about withdrawing/dropping out? If yes, what prompted you to consider withdrawing/dropping out? If no, what is it that motivates you to continue to pursue your education?

### **Student Engagement**

13. Do you feel empowered or encouraged to participate in student organizations?
14. Are you involved on campus? (Follow up: What kind of activities are you involved in?)
  - a. What is your perception of student involvement?
  - b. Why are you involved?
15. Are you aware of resources such as the first-year experience, clubs and organizations, mentoring programs, residence hall programing, etc? (Follow up: Do you utilize these resources?)
  - a. Why/Why not?
  - b. How do you choose which to participate in?
16. In general, how satisfied are with your experience(s) as a Hispanic/Latino student thus far?

### **Miscellaneous**

17. What is your definition of success?