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First-Generation Latina Commuter Students'
Perception of Factors that Influence their
Persistence toward College Completion

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
Requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

By

Faraah Ann Mullings

2015

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

First-Generation Latina Commuter Students'
Perception of Factors that Influence their
Persistence toward College Completion

By

Faraah Ann Mullings

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Sylvia Hurtado, Co-Chair

Professor Eugene Tucker, Co-Chair

This study examined the factors that influence the persistence of first-generation Latina commuter students toward college completion. This is a qualitative study that offered insight into the experiences of first-generation Latina commuter students attending a small independent, Catholic institution composed of a predominantly Hispanic student body in an urban environment. This study adds to the existing body of literature on the persistence of first-generation Latina college students and commuter students. Institutions of higher education can benefit from learning about the lived experiences shared by the participants, the issues that confront them and how best to support them in their endeavor toward college completion.

Prospective participants were collected from the Registrar's office at Mount St. Mary's College. Mount St. Mary's College is a Catholic, liberal arts, independent

institution of higher education primarily for women. There are two campuses based in Los Angeles; the downtown campus, Doheny and the baccalaureate campus, Chalon, where the study was conducted.

The study consisted of 19 first-generation Latina commuter students in their senior year. The study involved purposeful sampling utilizing a questionnaire as a screening device. Eligible participants were then invited for a one hour, semi-structured interview in which the researcher investigated pre-college experiences, institutional support received in transition and adjustment to college, challenges they overcame while in college, institutional programs, services and resources utilized, on- and off-campus networks, academic self-concept, and level of commitment to obtaining a college degree. Interviews were transcribed, coded and a comparative analysis was conducted across all participant transcripts to identify themes. Member check of transcripts was conducted to check for accuracy.

Several factors were found to influence their persistence. They include parental expectations to attend college and the emotional support they provided. As well, the aspirational, social, familial, and resistant capitals they employed to remain resilient and successful in college. These factors validate existing theoretical frameworks. While the participants felt they had to navigate college on their own, they found attending college opened doors to their future and a desire to make a difference in their families and communities.

The dissertation of Faraah Ann Mullings is approved.

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2015

DEDICATION PAGE

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother Fay Goodin and grandmother Thelma Goodin for whom college was not possible. Despite this, they set me on a trajectory for advancing my education. Thank you for the values imparted to me growing up and the passion for education you passed on.

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Embarking on the journey of obtaining a doctorate has been a dream upon completing my Masters degree. This dream became a reality in 2011 when I received the phone call acknowledging my acceptance from UCLA. The two women (my mother and grandmother) who have been by my side as cheerleaders, motivators, and prayer warriors inspire me to fulfill a life's dream that was not possible for them. Sadly, my grandmother, who inspired my zest for education, passed away one week after sharing the good news of my admission with her.

The journey has been long yet rewarding. I have been enlightened to learn about the academic pipeline, cracks and leaks in the pipeline, and subsequently have stoked a flame within me to help first-generation students find their way to completing college. This success is attributed to a community of individuals who stood alongside me. I want to give glory to God for opening the door of opportunity and granting me the privilege to receive a good education from such a prestigious university. I want to thank my mom, Fay Goodin, husband JaBari Brown, sister Ernestiene Woodstock, Aunt Pauline Goodin, and my church family at Calvary Chapel Crenshaw for their prayers and encouragement when the going was tough.

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- 2008-present Director of Student Programming and Commuter Services
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- 2002 California State University, Los Angeles Leadership Retreat
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St. Louis, Missouri
- 2004 NASPA Annual Meeting
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Roundtable Discussion: Finding Comfort in the Midst of Tragedy
Las Vegas, Nevada
- 2008 NASPA Western Regional Conference
Co-facilitator Roundtable Discussion Starter: Networking 101
Long Beach, California
- 2013 NASPA Western Regional Conference
Navigating the Landscape of the Doctoral Degree: Which Pathway is Right for Me?
Salt Lake City, Utah
- 2014 NASPA Western Regional Conference
Navigating the Landscape of the Doctoral Degree: Which Pathway is Right for Me?
Baltimore, Maryland

CHAPTER ONE

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction to the Problem

The landscape of the United States population is changing. There has been tremendous growth of racial and ethnic minority groups over the past decade. In particular, the Hispanic population increased by 43% between 2000 and 2010, reaching a record 50.5 million people (U.S. Census, 2012).¹ They now represent 16% of the total population of the United States. The impact of the rapid growth of racial and ethnic minorities means a demographic change in the composition of children entering the K-12 educational pipeline and eventual matriculation to postsecondary education. Hispanics now account for approximately 24% of the students enrolled in public school and 16.5% of college students (Fry & Lopez, 2012). As of 2011, Hispanics made up one quarter of the 18-24 year old students enrolled in community colleges and is the largest minority group attending four-year colleges and universities (Fry & Lopez, 2012).

While the enrollment of racial and ethnic minorities is increasing, college students' attrition rates remain a grave concern for institutions of higher education (Braunstein, McGrath, & Pescatrice, 2000; Kahn & Nautam, 2001). Since the 1990s, much attention has been given to the issue of retention. There have been numerous studies on student persistence. Most of these studies have been conducted at predominantly White institutions among resident students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005); yet, the theoretical frameworks undergirding these studies may not be relevant to the racial and ethnic minority students entering colleges today. This study

¹ Hispanic represents both the male and female population of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Central and South American origin (Dominguez, 2011). Latino/a and Hispanic are used interchangeably.

seeks to focus on one four-year institution in an urban setting that is considered a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). The student population is racially and ethnically diverse, and the majority of students commute to campus. Little is known about the persistence of Hispanic college students, particularly Hispanic females.

Hispanics significantly lag behind other racial groups in bachelor degree attainment. Of the bachelor's degrees conferred in 2010, 71% were awarded to non-Hispanic whites, 10% to non-Hispanic blacks, and 7% to non-Hispanic Asian/Pacific Islanders, while Hispanics accounted for only 8.5% (Fry & Lopez, 2012). Hispanics are typically first in their families to attend college, choose a college close to home and are more likely to commute to campus (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004). Despite the fact that Hispanic females enroll in college in greater numbers than Hispanic males, traditional gender roles for Hispanic females may pose a hindrance in degree completion (Ortega Parra, 2007). It is important that studies be conducted on factors that influence persistence in college for Hispanic students, in particular for Hispanic females. Hispanics are the fastest growing minority population in the United States, posing implications for the future of our country in preparing a college educated people to sustain the workforce, foster economic development, and contribute to global leadership. The purpose of this study is to examine the factors that first-generation Latina commuter students perceive to influence their persistence toward college completion.²

Background Information of the Problem

² First-generation students are defined as students who are first in their immediate family to attend college and whose parents do not have a college education or have not completed varying degrees of postsecondary education (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Padget, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012).

Hispanic public school enrollment. According to the Pew Hispanic Center (2012), there are more than 12.4 million Hispanics enrolled in the nation's pre-K through 12th grade public schools, which is nearly one quarter of the nation's public school enrollment and a significant increase from approximately 17% in 2000. In 2011, Hispanics made up 21% of all public high school enrollments (Pew Hispanic Center, 2012). California has the largest population of Hispanics in the nation. In Los Angeles alone, the Hispanic population exceeds 5 million (Pew Hispanic Center, 2012). Of major concern is the dropout rate of Hispanic females in high school. It is reported that for Hispanic females, the dropout rate was 13%, the highest among any other racial group (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).³

Hispanic college enrollment and graduation. The Pew Hispanic Center reports that there were more than 2 million Hispanics enrolled in college as of 2011. This figure represents 16.5% of the nation's 18-24 year old college students, one-quarter of whom are enrolled at two-year colleges and 13% at four-year colleges and universities (Fry & Lopez, 2012). Hispanics have become the largest minority group at four-year colleges and universities. This is consistent with the rapid growth in the overall Hispanic population in the nation.

There were an estimated 18 million undergraduate students enrolled in degree-granting institutions in the United States in fall 2010 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011), yet it was reported that over half of all students who enter higher education are not completing a bachelor's degree in six years (Museus & Quaye, 2009; NCES, 2012). Despite the increase in diversity, there are racial and ethnic disparities in the attainment of a college education. In a report produced by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2011), the national average of

³ Dropout rate refers to the percentage of 16-24 year olds who are not enrolled in school and have not earned a high school credential (NCES, 2012).

degree completion for first time postsecondary students seeking their first degree at a four-year institution for the class starting in 2004 was roughly 38%. When disaggregated by race, it was reported that approximately 28% of Hispanics completed their bachelor's degree in four years compared to over 40% for Whites and Asian Pacific Islanders (NCES, 2011). Specifically, for Hispanic females, only 31% completed their bachelor's degree in four years and 53% in six years (NCES, 2012).

It is estimated that the Hispanic population will comprise 29% of the U.S. population by 2050 (Howard, 2010). By 2020, it is estimated that 20% of the children in the United States will be Hispanic (Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009). While the numbers of Hispanics enrolling in postsecondary institutions are high, only approximately 10% of all Hispanic Americans ages 24-64 have graduated from a four-year institution (Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009). With more Latino students graduating from high school in the future, it is essential to concentrate efforts in improving the persistence of Latino college students toward college completion.

Hispanics and gender role. Latinas make up the largest female minority group in the United States. According to Ortega Parra (2007), Latinas are not nurtured, mentored, or encouraged to further their education. Often, Latinas find they have to fulfill cultural gender role obligations and support the family. Some of the obligations they are expected to fulfill include contributing to the family economically, provide support in caring for the well-being of family members such as siblings or elderly family members, or serving as the family translator when needed (Ortega Parra, 2007).

Hispanics as first-generation students. Hispanics are often the first in their families to pursue a college education. First-generation students are graduating at a lower rate than students

whose parents attended college (Jehangir, 2010). When compared with peers whose parents are college graduates, first-generation students tend to leave a four-year institution at the end of their first year and/or are less likely to persist toward completing a bachelor's degree after three years (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Reasons attributed to their failure to persist include poor academic preparation in high school, parental lack of knowledge of the college experience, economic disadvantage, lack of social and cultural capital, necessity to work, likelihood of the need to commute to campus, and a lack of sense of belonging at the college they attend (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004).

Hispanic students commute to college. First-generation students are more likely to commute to their college campus than live on campus. Commuter students represent 80% of U.S. college students today (NCES, 2012).⁴ Many commuting students may cycle in and out of college, often due to the necessity to work to help pay for tuition or fulfill obligations to care for family (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2011). Commuters often juggle multiple obligations and have constraints on their time that include taking care of their own or extended family, work and college commitments, and commute time which consequently results in less time to be engaged on campus and to persist toward degree completion (Torres, 2006; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2011). Their perception of the college experience is different from resident students. While resident students feel a sense of inclusivity and are able to build a community easily, the transitory nature of commuters who only come to campus and

⁴ Commuter students are defined as students who do not live in institution-owned housing on campus (Jacoby & Garland, 2004).

leave make it difficult for commuters to feel a sense of belonging within a college environment and want to persist (Jacoby & Garland, 2004; Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2011). Furthermore, commuter students have different motivations for attending college, access support networks off campus, have limited involvement on campus, and may experience feelings of isolation (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2011). In general, their priority is optimizing their time in light of their obligations, which limits time spent in activities that are presumed to lead to success such as developing relationships with peers and faculty (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2011). Therefore, first-generation Hispanic students who commute to campus are confronted with more challenges on the path to attaining a college degree than resident students.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Higher education institutions are witnessing an influx of racial and ethnic minority students. While there is an increase in the number of enrolled students from diverse backgrounds, there are a disproportionate number of racial and ethnic minority students not graduating from college with a bachelor's degree or higher. Therefore, for institutions of higher education to adequately meet the needs and prepare the new demographics of students pursuing postsecondary education, they will need to understand the cultures and factors that contribute to persistence to degree completion for these populations. In light of the state of California having the largest population of minority groups, in particular, Hispanics, it is imperative that action is taken to improve the persistence of Hispanic students toward college completion and bachelor's degree attainment.

The purpose of this study is to examine the factors that influence first-generation Latina commuter students to persist toward attaining a bachelor's degree from a four-year institution.

The following research questions will guide the study:

1. What are the factors that first-generation Latina commuter seniors perceive as influencing their persistence toward graduating with a bachelor's degree?
 - a. What pre-college experiences would they attribute to preparing them for college?
 - b. How did the institution support the transition/adjustment to college?
 - c. What challenges did they experience and overcome while in college?
 - d. What institutional programs, services, and resources did they utilize in navigating college that they would attribute to their persistence toward college graduation?
 - e. In what ways did on- and off-campus experiences or networks support their persistence toward college graduation?
 - f. How did their academic self-concept and their level of commitment to accomplishing their goal of attaining a bachelor's degree support their persistence toward college graduation?

Overview of the Study Site and Population

This study will address the graduation rate of Hispanic, commuter females at Mount St. Mary's College (MSMC), Chalon Campus. Mount St. Mary's College is a small, independent, Catholic liberal arts college. The college provides innovative programs for professional men and women on two historic campuses in Los Angeles. Mount St. Mary's College is situated in an urban environment and is recognized as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) with an enrollment of 48% Hispanic students. In addition, the traditional baccalaureate program at the Chalon

campus educates primarily women (95%). A large percentage of students (42%) are first-generation and a significant number of freshmen enroll as pre-nursing majors (Siebert, 2012). During the 2012 school year, the majority of the student population (55%) commuted to campus; however, approximately 66% resided on campus during their freshman year. MSMC is seeking to raise its current graduation rate of 58% for its overall student population. The graduation rate for Hispanics within four years of starting at MSMC is 48%, and the rate is 56% for Hispanics completing their degrees in 6 years (Brown, 2012). This outcome is problematic especially due to the escalating cost of tuition and fees and the tremendous debt students are incurring the longer they take to complete a bachelor's degree.

The college has experienced some challenges in its ability to generate institutional retention, graduation, and time-to-degree data. Between 2007 and 2012, there were several turnovers of staff in the areas of institutional research and information technology, as well as changes in reporting tools. Since 2008, efforts began to create and track data for all degree programs and disaggregate them by gender, race, ethnicity and Pell Grant status (Siebert, 2012). Retention data for the entering class in 2012 reflect commuters lagging behind resident students. Only 75% of commuter students were retained to sophomore year compared with 82% of resident students (H. Brown, personal communication, November, 18, 2013).

Students who withdraw from the college are asked to complete a confidential exit survey. Data for academic years 2010-2012 reflect cost as the most common reason students leave, whereby cost of attending MSMC was more than they had planned or they wanted to complete general studies requirements elsewhere for less money (H. Brown, personal communication, July, 1, 2013). The limitations with the exit survey data involve having it embedded in the

withdrawal process in which some students leave the institution without formally notifying the college of their intentions. Also, due to the anonymity of the respondents, researchers are unable to connect survey responses back to the data related to student retention (H. Brown, personal communication, July, 1, 2013). Efforts are being made to reform the process by creating an online survey that will capture student ID numbers and connect data to information stored by the registrar and campus business office.

Research Design

I conducted a qualitative study of first-generation Latina commuter undergraduate students in their senior year in order to understand their perception of factors that contribute to their persistence and whether those factors are similar to the findings from research on college persistence. I used purposeful sampling to identify participants. Hispanic female commuter students who enrolled in the institution as new, first-time college attendees and were classified as a senior graduating in May 2014 were eligible to participate in the study. Information gathered through data collection methodologies allowed these students to tell their stories and convey their lived experiences.

Dissemination of the Findings

Latinos are the fastest growing ethnic minority group in the U.S. and are presently not on the trajectory of President Obama's ambitious goal for the United States to have the highest percentage of people having earned post-secondary degrees and credentials by the year 2020. More institutional action is needed in supporting Hispanic students in their pursuit toward degree completion. Hurtado and Carter (1997) suggest additional studies are needed to validate the connection between the transition to college, students' perception of campus climate and the

sense of belonging of students from diverse racial-ethnic groups. Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) suggest examination of access to the full range of college experiences and the personal, social, and economic benefits derived from college experiences and degree completion. Newbold, Mehta, and Forbus (2011) recommend research to understand the balance of family, work, and school life aspects of commuter students.

My study will produce recommendations to Mount St. Mary's College that may result in reducing the high attrition rate. It will further contribute to the body of knowledge on commuter students and potentially lead to practices at Mount St. Mary's College that may increase the graduation rate of Hispanic females within four to six years, while further expanding research on persistence of first-generation Hispanic female students. I endeavor to have my dissertation published, submit articles to peer-reviewed journals, and present at national professional conferences.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Over the past two decades, higher education institutions have welcomed an influx of racial and ethnic minorities, yet these students still lag in attaining a bachelor's degree or higher compared with White students. Despite progress in college access for racial and ethnic minorities, college student attrition rates remain a concern for institutions of higher education. According to the most recent census, Hispanics are the fastest growing minority population in the United States. Of the more than 2 million Hispanics enrolled in college, only 8.5% reportedly earned a bachelor's degree in 2010 (Fry & Lopez, 2012). Knowledge about persistence of Hispanic college students, particularly Latinas, is limited. Studies speak to a number of factors that may impede persistence for Latina college students. Research signals the need for further examination of factors that influence the persistence of Hispanic females (Gloria, 1997; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Arana, Castaneda-Sound, Blanchard, & Aguilar, 2011). In addition, understanding the unique experiences and challenges of commuter college students is important.

First-generation, Latina commuter students have unique experiences and challenges to overcome to be successful in higher education. There are a number of factors that impede or contribute to the persistence of this population of students, such as lack of prior knowledge of navigating the college environment, managing competing demands on time, residence status, academic goals, and academic integration. I applied several theoretical frameworks to best inform the development of my research, including the non-traditional student attrition model

(Bean & Metzner, 1985), the student/institution engagement model (Nora, 2004), and the community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005). Through a review of the literature, I present a comprehensive summary of the first-generation Latina commuter college students' challenges and support systems. Next, I present findings on academic integration with regards to creating an inclusive environment, positive interactions, mentorship, and validation from faculty and staff. Further, I review external factors that have been shown to influence persistence. I conclude with a discussion of the role of the student's commitment toward goal attainment and academic self-concept.

Theoretical Framework Models

A number of theories address student attrition and persistence. College persistence is presumed to stem from complex interactions among personal and institutional factors (Tinto, 1993; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Nora, 2004). Collectively, there is agreement that attitudes, intentions, and behaviors influence persistence outcomes. The non-traditional student attrition model (Bean & Metzner, 1985), the student/institution engagement model (Nora, 2004) and the community cultural wealth framework (Yosso, 2005) provide a comprehensive understanding of college persistence for non-traditional students and Hispanic college students.

Nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model. I chose the nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model (Bean & Metzner, 1985) because it was the only model I could find specifically addressing the topic of retention for commuter students. In their theoretical model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition, Bean and Metzner examined numerous variables to explain attrition for nontraditional students, specifically students who commute to their college campuses. Major domains examined include academic performance,

intent to leave, and background and environmental variables. Speculation is that for the academic element, students leave due to poor academic performance. However, there are many other reasons for not completing college that can be overturned with good environmental support from family or other persons of influence in their life. Academic performance can be impacted by perception of levels of utility, satisfaction, goal commitment, or high levels of stress. They propose that academic and environmental variables are associated with the psychological outcome and attitudes toward school (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

A breakdown of the background, academic, and environmental variables provides insight into the best understanding of their attrition model. Background variables are suggested to be considered in an attrition model for commuter students given their form of interaction with an institution (Bean & Metzner, 1985).⁵ Academic variables that may affect persistence include study skills and study habits, academic advising, absenteeism, major certainty, and course availability.⁶ Environmental variables, including finances, working long hours, lack of encouragement, family responsibilities, and perceived opportunity to transfer, are likely to pull commuter students away from an institution.⁷

The model extends to include other variables that may impact attrition for non-traditional students such as social integration, academic and psychological outcomes, and intent to leave.

⁵ Background variables are aspects of the individual such as age, gender, ethnicity, residence, high school performance, educational goals, and parent's level of education (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

⁶ Academic variables are referred to as the primary way in which the student interacts with the institution and directly affects academic performance (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

⁷ Environmental variables are factors in which the higher education institution has little control over but may pull the student from the institution (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Social integration variables serve as a mechanism to keep the student enrolled in college.⁸ The outcome of persistence in this regard is predicated on the extensiveness and quality of interaction students experience with the members of the college's social system (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Social integration in particular is a challenge for students who commute because they spend limited time socializing on campus.

In the nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model, certain outcomes such as academic outcomes and psychological outcomes play major roles. It is suggested with regard to academic outcomes that students' academic performance affects attrition from college.⁹ In particular, academic outcomes serve as a predictor of persistence. Psychological outcomes are said to have an indirect impact on decisions to leave an institution.¹⁰ The indirect effect results from academic and environmental variables that act upon intentions to leave. Psychological outcomes can resemble perceptions of value of college education for personal development and prospects of future employment, satisfaction with intellectual stimulation, degree of importance of graduating from college, and last, stress from academic and non-academic demands (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Therefore, it is important that the student has positive academic and psychological outcomes in order to remain in college and prevent acting upon any considerations of intent to leave.

⁸ Social integration variables are defined as the extent and quality of student's interaction with the social system contained within the college environment (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

⁹ Academic outcomes are concerned primarily with the effect of GPA on attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

¹⁰ Psychological outcomes are factors such as utility, satisfaction, goal commitment, and stress that through students' intentions, have an indirect effect on attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Lastly, students' intention of leaving their present institution impacts persistence. Intent to leave is seen as a factor for consideration in the construct of the theoretical model of attrition. The reason is that students consider leaving their present institution before graduating either to transfer to other institutions or drop out of higher education entirely. When a student chooses to leave an institution, it often occurs between the freshman and sophomore year. Intent to leave then becomes a factor for consideration, especially for the commuter student who has external commitments to meet. Identifying and understanding what prompts such a student to consider leaving is important.

Student/Institution engagement model. The student/institution engagement model (Nora, 2004) looks specifically at persistence of the Hispanic student. Derived from studies conducted on Hispanic student persistence, the model provides a profile of Hispanic students' experience through college and factors that impact their decisions to persist in or withdraw from college. Overarching factors in this model include pre-college factors and pull factors, initial commitments, academic and social experiences, cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes, final commitments, and persistence. The constructs derived for this model include educational aspirations, finances and financial aid, academic and social campus experiences, institutional commitment, academic ability, pre-college social factors, undergraduate academic performance, and student persistence.

A closer examination of each construct details factors that influence each construct. Hispanic college students desire to earn an undergraduate degree upon entry to college yet the extent of their dedication affects their intention to leave or persist. There are factors that influence the educational aspirations of Hispanic college students. Factors preventing them from

fully engaging with their institution involve environmental factors such as family responsibilities, working off-campus, and long-distance commute. Additional factors influencing their educational aspirations include experiences of prejudice and discrimination on campus, academic performance, parental support and encouragement, and positive, validating classroom experiences.

The second construct speaks to financial aid. For Hispanic students, receiving financial assistance increased the likelihood of persistence. Financial aid is said to create an equal ground for recipients and non-recipients. In particular for Hispanic students, financial aid has an intangible effect in that there is reduced stress with ability to pay for college, and there is a commitment to remain enrolled at an institution because the institution provided the financial means to remain in college.

On social interactions, the most influential factor on Hispanic students' social experiences was encouragement and support provided by parents. Hispanic students who sought to get involved in their college campus were found to have greater institutional commitment. The social experience also contributes to the adjustment process of students to college.

A close look at academic ability reveals that the high school academic performance, type of courses taken, and grade point average earned during the first year or two of college impact withdrawal decisions. For example, Hispanic students who ranked in the top quartile of their high school were more likely to graduate within six years of college enrollment. For Latinos, perceptions of possessing academic capital while attending college factored into their decision to remain enrolled in college. For example, Hispanic students enrolled in developmental courses perform more poorly at the end of their first year in college than Hispanic students in non-

developmental courses. They were also less likely to graduate from college. In addition, how they perform during their first semester in college could impact their persistence or withdrawal decision for college. Perception of academic performance in the first two years of college may lead to withdrawal decisions. Examining pre-college factors, such as self-appraisal, positive self-concept, long-term goals, resiliency in the face of adversity, encouragement, support, and expectations from parents, quality of high school attended, and socio-economic status serve to impact retention of Hispanic students. Upon arriving to college, an explanation for student persistence is influenced by the size of the college enrollment, type of college, size of Latina/o population at the institution, and students' perception of their interaction with faculty, personal-emotional adjustment, ability to manage resources, having a support system, and feeling a sense of belonging on campus.

Community cultural wealth. Adding another layer is examining the cultural capital students of color bring to college. Through the use of critical race theory, Yosso (2005) shifts away from deficit view of *communities of color* to spotlight the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups. It addresses assumptions that people of color 'lack' the social and cultural capital required for social mobility.

Yosso (2005) present six forms of capital that are nurtured through cultural wealth which includes aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant capital. In aspirational capital, one looks at the resiliency and hopes and dreams of a better future despite real and perceived barriers. Resilience, found to be inner resources, social competencies, and cultural strategies to survive and thrive, harvests navigational capital. Navigational capital is

considered to be the skills applied in maneuvering through social institutions. To successfully navigate social institutions, social capital is required. Social capital is understood as networks of people and community resources that are fostered through peer and other social contacts which provide both instrumental and emotional support. Stemming from communication experiences and the use of more than one language, intellectual and social skills formulate linguistic capital. Linguistic capital is part of the cultural knowledge passed on among family, both immediate and extended, creating a sense of community history, memory, and cultural knowledge cultivating familial capital. The strong familial capital reinforces connection to cultural community and resources. Last, resistant capital challenges inequality as parents of color teach their children to engage in behaviors and maintain attitudes that challenge the status quo. Collectively, these forms of capital represent the cultural and social assets evident in communities of color that must be afforded importance in valuing what students of color bring with them to the classroom.

In conclusion, Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model, Nora's (2004) student/institution engagement model and Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework worked well together to frame this study. Bean and Metzner's model lends itself well to understanding the needs and experiences of non-traditional students, specifically the commuter student, and illustrates more clearly the impact of external obligations and demands on their time that may be attributed to their decisions to forfeit their goals and aspirations of a college education. Nora's model appropriately magnifies the experiences of the Hispanic college student, which is the focus of this study. Yosso's theory presents in a more positive light the assets that students of color bring to college. Together, aspects of all three theoretical frameworks served to frame the content of this study.

Review of the Literature

Institutional experience. Making the transition to college means learning how to navigate a new environment. Within this new environment is a new culture with unspoken norms, and students must learn how things work and adjust to making the college experience part of life. First-generation Hispanic commuter students may enter college with a lack of confidence in their academic ability and therefore require an environment that engages them and moves them through and on from college successfully to achieve their academic goals (Jacoby & Garland, 2004).

College transition and adjustment. The college experience for first-generation Latina commuter students is different in a few aspects from non-first generation students. As individuals with little to no intergenerational knowledge of the college experience, making the transition to college can be overwhelming. The transition to college can be complex given their family socio-economic status, the educational background of their parents as well as their own, their educational aspirations, the institutional culture, and social encounters with peers, faculty, and staff (Terenzini et al., 1994).

College students whose parents are college educated instill that pursuing a college degree is a natural progression immediately following high school, while first-generation students are not taught to think in the same way. Instead, they are more likely to be directed by their parents to find a job to help financially support the family. The adjustment to college is difficult for first-generation students particularly because attending college was not part of their family's tradition or expectation (Terenzini et al., 1994). Attending college is a promise of hope for economic mobility and improved lives for first-generation students (Terenzini et al., 1994). In

that regard, first-generation college students, especially Hispanics, often attend higher education institutions in close proximity to home. Due to family responsibilities and financial constraints, Hispanic females are less inclined to select college far away from home (Abraham, Lujan, Lopez, & Walker, 2002). Yet, despite the close proximity to home, they all experience a transitional phase in adjusting to college.

The transition and adjustment process to college can be challenging for students. It is especially challenging when students have many non-academic obligations and are not able to connect with or sustain connection with their campus community. With the many commitments and responsibilities to manage, the perception of the college environment is different for commuter students than traditional residential students. One theme found in a study was that commuters come to class and leave (Torres, 2006). Even though they may be aware of opportunities on campus, there is no time given to participate. This, in turn, contributes to their lack of sense of belonging. Specifically, commuter students are reported to often lack a sense of belonging on campus (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2011). This lack of sense of belonging can be attributed to the shorter periods of time spent on campus, which then limits interaction with members of the campus community such as faculty, staff, and peers. As a result, not being in a position to cultivate interpersonal relationships with members of the college further diminishes acquisition of knowledge of what is happening on campus (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2011).

Perception of campus climate. A student's perception of the campus climate affects his/her adjustment to life in college. The university environment and social support systems are essential in the success of Hispanic students (Gloria, 1997). Hispanic female students are positively influenced by the perception of a university environment that is friendly and

supportive (Gloria, 1997). Conversely, a campus climate ripe with racial tension has a direct negative effect on minority students (Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005).

Aspects of the college environment and specific college experiences, especially in the first and second year of college, have a direct effect on college adjustment (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). Furthermore, positive aspects of the college experience include enrollment in private institutions and institutions with higher percentage of Hispanic students enrolled (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). Students can experience negative impact on personal-emotional adjustment if there is a perception of racial/ethnic tension or actual reported experiences of discrimination (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996). When they perceive the university environment as negative, they may experience stress, alienation, isolation, and confusion regarding their place in the academic setting (Gloria, 1997; Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005). Studies that were conducted at predominantly White institutions speak of Hispanic students having negative perceptions of the campus climate compared with White students (Hurtado, 1994; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005). Negative perceptions can be attributed to a perception of racial/ethnic tensions within the environment, not feeling valued by faculty and administration, and experiences of discrimination and cultural incongruence (Hurtado, 1994; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora 1996; Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005). This perception is reinforced with other students believing that minority students are receiving special treatment in admission decisions (Hurtado, 1994). Such perceptions can result in marginalizing, devaluing, and silencing Hispanic students of the cultural wealth they bring to campus (Solorzano,

Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). Consequently, negative perceptions translate into educational barriers that impede persistence.

The type of institution a student attends may impact their perception of campus climate. For Hispanic students, an experience of discrimination and racial/ethnic tension is most probable at larger institutions, highly selective colleges, or colleges located in small towns (Hurtado, 1994). These incidents were least likely to occur on a campus with a larger population of racial/ethnic diverse student body or where there is high Hispanic undergraduate enrollment (Hurtado, 1994). It is suggested that the presence of other Hispanic students on campus facilitates better coping ability with the college environment (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004). Furthermore, the presence of other Hispanic students who are succeeding in college, or other minority students, enables the formation of a viable community resulting in the persistence of students of color (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004).

A climate of support encourages persistence and consists of a welcoming, diverse, and engaging campus environment allowing formal and informal social interaction (Arana, Castaneda-Sound, Blanchard, & Aguilar, 2011). Creating a climate of support is conducive for students overwhelmed by their circumstances and the transition to college. It empowers them to feel capable of weathering the challenges and persist. The composition of the peer environment within postsecondary institutions contributes to persistence toward degree completion. For example, attending a more selective institution and engaging with resources and academically-oriented peers can influence students' retention (Oseguera & Rhee, 2009). Peer attitudes in this regard are a positive influence to remain in school and persist toward degree completion. Consequently, the successful transition and adjustment to the college environment, and a campus

climate conducive for students to thrive, lends itself to a culture that could facilitate an academic integration process for the student.

Academic integration. There are several ways in which an institution can facilitate the academic integration of first-generation Latina commuter students. Academic integration can be achieved by creating an inclusive environment, positive interaction, mentorship, and validation from faculty. Academic integration is warranted especially for students who commute and who often feel disconnected from the institution due to their complex lifestyle (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2011).

Inclusive environment. It is incumbent upon faculty, staff, and administrators to create an environment in which first-generation Latina commuter students feel they are welcomed and can envision and experience opportunities to be successful. This can be achieved with the creation of inclusive environments. Within an inclusive environment, students understand their ability to succeed academically, socially, and culturally regardless of institutional size, student demographics, and location (Martin Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Inclusive environments involve understanding and accommodating the transitional needs of first-generation students (Terenzini et al., 1994).

Faculty interaction. Furthermore, findings suggest that faculty-student interactions may have positive influence in the college experience (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Martin Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Tinto, 1993). A wide range of faculty contact enhances the likelihood of persistence and increases connection to the intellectual life of the institution. In particular, faculty interactions pose an opportunity for a student to learn and acquire confidence. The enthusiasm and availability of faculty is a source of engagement for students, as is actively

engaging students in learning in the classroom (Arana, Castaneda-Sound, Blanchard, & Aguilar, 2011; Tinto, 1993). Such support provides guidance in navigating the college environment and developing identity (Arana, Castaneda-Sound, Blanchard, & Aguilar, 2011). The enthusiasm of faculty and quality of teaching serve to encourage students to remain committed toward their educational goals, whereas the lack thereof reportedly derails educational aspirations of students (Arana, Castaneda-Sound, Blanchard, & Aguilar, 2011). Even more meaningful is the opportunity for mentorship provided to the student by a faculty member.

Faculty mentorship. The quality of the relationship that students develop with faculty contributes to academic success. In fact, mentorship from faculty also contributes to persistence. It is suggested that a key social support variable on academic persistence is mentoring (Bordes-Edgar, Arredondo, Robinson Kurpius, & Rund, 2011). Students who graduated reported being mentored more than those who dropped out (Bordes-Edgar, Arredondo, Robinson Kurpius, & Rund, 2011). In particular, females are reportedly the recipients of more mentoring support than males (Crisp & Cruz, 2010). The significant aspect of the mentoring relationship is having someone who believed in them. Other types of support derived from a mentoring relationship include psychological and emotional support, degree and career support, support for academic subject knowledge and identifying a role model (Crisp & Cruz, 2010).

Beyond mentorship, faculty members can serve as role models. It is suggested that the presence of Hispanic faculty has a positive effect on retention when they serve as role models and a source of validation (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004). As institutional agents, first-generation Hispanic students are more likely to be responsive to Hispanic faculty providing assistance in their socialization to college, taking interest in their success and expressing confidence in their

potential assistance (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004). Therefore, it is essential for faculty to provide outreach to first-generation Hispanic female commuter students by offering support and encouragement through a mentoring relationship.

Validation. In addition to the formal and informal interaction and mentoring, faculty in-class validation is valuable to first-generation students (Rendon, 1994). Validation can serve to empower, confirm, and support first-generation commuter students. It is manifested in experiences inside and outside of the classroom whereby these students feel a sense of acceptance in their new environment, signals that they can be successful, are valued and are worthy to be in college (Terezini et al., 1994). Faculty can demonstrate this through genuine concern for teaching students, being personable, treating students equally, creating learning experiences where students see themselves as capable learners, and providing meaningful feedback to students (Rendon, 1994). With such support from faculty, students learn to trust and be trusted as well as to respect differences in how knowledge is constructed. As a result, they possess the freedom to learn (Rendon, 1994).

External environmental factors. Aspects of the student's background, their institutional experience, and their academic integration impact persistence. However, unique to the first-generation Hispanic female who commutes are the external environmental factors for which she must manage. External factors are described as forces outside of the college environment that act upon the student's decisions to persist. External factors are beyond the control of the student and the institution (Bean, 2005). In the external environment, factors such as finances, significant others, opportunities to transfer, opportunities to work, and family

responsibilities relate to retention, which sometimes affect the intention to leave and a student's integration into the institution (Bean, 2005).

Familial support. The strong connection to family and community enhances success for students of color (Solozano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). Several studies confirm that family is important in ensuring Hispanic student persistence toward college graduation (Cardoza, 1991; Gloria, 1997; Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005; Rendon, 1994; Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Vasquez, 1982). As students who typically are first-generation and commute to campus, the Hispanic female college student relies on a network of individuals external to their campus community to provide the support they need. Students both from first-generation student populations and traditional students identify one or more members of their immediate family as being important in their life (Terenzini et al., 1994). Parents, significant others, or siblings provide support in helping first-generation students adjust to college. However, this support network may be in need of institutional support in understanding the college going experience, academic and time demands, and how to deal with the stress of college attendance due to their potential lack of knowledge of the transition experience (Terenzini et al., 1994).

Family encouragement for first-generation Hispanic females is important. Some studies site these students turning to parents and families as a coping response to discuss problems (Gloria, Castellanos, & Orozco, 2005). As well, parents and family members validating these students' capacity to succeed academically is essential to counter the negative messaging they receive in the classroom and in society that is often internalized (Vasquez, 1982; Rendon, 1994). Furthermore, there is evidence of the impact of Hispanic parents having high educational aspirations for their children's educational pursuits as being influential in persistence outcomes

for first generation Hispanic females (Cardoza, 1991). The amount of family support received influences the educational pursuits of Hispanic female students.

The support from family and friends can serve as the motivation for a student to succeed in their commitment to achieve their goals. This motivation is exemplified by parents and other family members pushing them to go to school and work hard. However, family can also be an impediment. Challenged by encounters with unexpected family crises, family responsibilities, or having to juggle family, work, and academic obligations can impact motivation and influence the decision to drop out (Arana, Castaneda-Sound, Blanchard, & Aguilar, 2011).

Financial status. The recent escalating cost of college education in the form of tuition and fees has created a financial burden for families. Parents of first-generation students are generally not financially positioned to support costs of a college education. Socio-economic status could therefore pose an impediment to persisting and induce stress (Hill & Castillo, 2004). For these students there is greater reliance on financial aid such as scholarships, grants and loans to meet educational expenses (Martin Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Furthermore, financial aid is shown to influence persistence decisions for first-generation students (Ishitani, 2006; Martin Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). However, with government spending cuts, financial aid resources in the form of grants and scholarships are becoming scarce. Students and parents are finding themselves assuming greater financial responsibility and acquiring debt (Perna, 2006). This additional financial responsibility comes at a time when parents look to their children to contribute to supporting the family. First-generation commuter students are more likely to work off campus to support family and finance their education than residential students. It is reported that commuter students work more hours than resident students, working on average 20 or more

hours off campus (Jacoby & Garland, 2004). This inevitably takes away opportunity to be engaged socially on campus. Consequently, these external environmental factors may impact the level of commitment toward accomplishing educational goals.

Student Commitment

Goal attainment. Despite class, cultural, or gender attributes that first-generation Hispanic female commuter students bring with them to college, a strong motivating force at play is their desire to accomplish a dream, to successfully complete college, and to earn a degree (Arana, Castaneda-Sound, Blanchard, & Aguilar, 2011). The drive to go further than their parents and make a better future for their families is instrumental in shaping their self-concept of their ability to succeed in college. First-generation Hispanic female students who do enroll into college are privileged to have messages of encouragement from parents and other critical figures reinforcing confidence in their abilities and serving to combat negative messaging from society about gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status that so often is internalized (Vasquez, 1982).

Academic self-concept. The messages heard in prior academic settings may undermine first-generation Hispanic female commuter students' perception of their ability to succeed in college. In particular, Hispanic commuter students may enter college with uncertainty that they could make it due to low expectations and lack of encouragement received in high school (Torres, 2006). However, being shown the way to navigate college plays a positive role in the development of academic self-concept (Torres, 2006). This is achieved through connections with mentoring relationships, finding someone who believes in them, the use of special academic assistance programs, and the perception of cultural congruence in the college environment (Torres, 2006). In addition, academic self-concept is connected to persistence decisions (Bordes-

Edgar, Arredondo, Robinson Kurpius, & Rund, 2011).¹¹ Academic self-concept is further developed from messaging that reinforces confidence in abilities. Evidence of perceived support from friends and mentors are identified as important factors in Hispanic students' beliefs that they too can succeed and persist in school (Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez, & Rosales, 2005).

Summary

College persistence is a process that is very complex, with many factors at work influencing decisions to remain enrolled and finish. The models identified above suggest that persistence involves what the student brings with her to the college environment, what opportunities exist within the college environment to support her success, and the degree and quality of the interaction she has with the agents within the college environment. Being a first-generation Hispanic female commuter college student is not an easy venture. Many challenges must be overcome to achieve success. If institutions can be aware and more sensitive to the needs of this student population, tap into the cultural wealth these students bring to college, and provide the assurance and validation that they are worthy to be college educated and have the capacity to succeed these students may remain committed to their education goal and persist toward college completion.

¹¹ Academic self-concept is defined as a student's evaluation of their academic abilities (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In the preceding chapters, I presented information on the challenge of persistence that Hispanic female commuter students experience in the pursuit of higher education. Hispanics significantly lag behind other racial groups in bachelor degree attainment. With only 8.5% of the Hispanic population having attained a bachelor's degree, further exploration is needed as to what can be done to increase persistence toward graduation (Fry & Lopez, 2012). Hispanic college students are typically first in their families to attend college and are thus described as first-generation college students. They generally choose a college close to home and are more likely to commute to campus (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2011; Hernandez & Lopez, 2004). In addition, their background, institutional experience, academic integration, external environmental factors, and level of commitment to accomplishing their goal influence their decision to persist toward college completion.

Research Questions

The goal of this research was to contribute to the body of knowledge regarding college persistence among Hispanic female students who commute to college and are first-generation students. Specifically, I hoped to identify what first-generation Latina commuter students perceived to be the factors that influence their persistence toward college completion. To address this objective, the following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the factors that first-generation Latina commuter seniors perceive as influencing their persistence toward graduating with a bachelor's degree?
 - a. What pre-college experiences would they attribute to preparing them for college?
 - b. How did the institution support the transition/adjustment to college?
 - c. What challenges did they experience and overcome while in college?
 - d. What institutional programs, services, and resources did they utilize in navigating college that they would attribute to their persistence toward college graduation?
 - e. In what ways did on- and off-campus experiences or networks support their persistence toward college graduation?
 - f. How do their academic self-concept and their level of commitment to accomplishing their goal of attaining a bachelor's degree support their persistence toward college graduation?

The first section of this chapter describes my methodology, followed by data collection and content analysis, and the chapter concludes by identifying and addressing credibility and trustworthiness, as well as potential ethical issues and researcher bias.

The Research Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of first-generation Latina commuter students and understand their perception of the factors that influence their persistence toward college completion. The perspective from which I implemented this approach was through a constructivist worldview (Creswell, 2009). I was interested in perceptions, context, and meaning experienced by these students. Therefore, a qualitative research method was the best approach to gather the data that will answer my research questions.

The perception of factors that influence persistence toward college completion is best captured using a qualitative approach which is appropriate for investigating individual perceptions and experiences. The qualitative approach allows for inductive data analysis and for participants to contribute to and validate the interpretation of the data (Creswell, 2009). A qualitative approach offers greater flexibility to learn the stories of the students, gain a deeper understanding of their experiences, and learn what the institution can do differently to best support these students to successfully complete their goal. A quantitative or mixed methods approach would not accomplish the objective of this study because it is not my intention to test theories, examine relationships among variables, or control for alternative explanations (Creswell, 2009).

Conducted in the natural setting in which the participants gain their experience, the qualitative approach allows for better understanding of the context of the problem. Coming from a constructivist worldview, whereby an individual's meaning making of their experiences are subjective, I relied on the participants' view of their experiences (Creswell, 2009). The assumptions that come with a constructivist worldview include the construction of meaning based on how individuals engage with the world, the historical and social perspectives derived as a result of the context of study engagement, and the manner in which meaning is determined (Creswell, 2009).

Research Site

Mount St. Mary's College is a Catholic, liberal arts, independent institution of higher education founded by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet in 1925. The college first opened its doors on September 15, 1925 at St. Mary's Academy, and in 1931 it relocated to the Chalon

Campus in Brentwood on top of the Santa Monica Mountains (Perey, Ross, & Sandoval, 2000). The vision of the founding sister, provincial supervisor Mother Margaret Mary Brady, was to establish an institution to educate young women in the liberal arts and develop sound Christian principles (Perey, Ross, & Sandoval, 2000). In fall of 1957, the college expanded its educational opportunities. Opening an off-campus center in downtown Los Angeles, it offered adult education classes available to in-service teachers and other religious and secular students (Perey, Ross, & Sandoval, 2000). In 1962, the college acquired exclusive use of the Doheny Estate that was bequeathed to the Archdiocese of Los Angeles to continue its educational programs (Perey, Ross, & Sandoval, 2000). In addition to its adult education program, it established a two-year program whereby students could earn an Associate of Arts degree. Today, the traditional baccalaureate program is offered at the Chalon Campus, enrolling a few male students into the nursing and music programs. The Doheny Campus houses the graduate and professional programs, the Weekend College for non-traditional adult students, and the Associate of Arts program for traditional-age students.

Surroundings. The Chalon Campus is located on the west side of Los Angeles, two miles north on Bundy Drive from Sunset Boulevard. The road to the Chalon Campus is paved with a narrow, steep, and curvy road and lined with beautiful multi-million dollar estate homes with occupants who are affluent. This is a stark contrast to the neighborhoods from which Mount St. Mary's students come. Students who commute to campus drive, take public transportation, or take the inter-campus shuttle from the Doheny Campus located downtown. Daily commuters pour onto the campus to take classes. They either climb the staircase from the

six-level parking structure to the Humanities Building or descend from the shuttle bus in the middle of campus down the hill to their classes.

Demographic profile of the Chalon campus. As of fall 2013, there were 1,300 undergraduate students enrolled at the Chalon Campus. Approximately 62% of the undergraduate population commutes to campus. The Mount St. Mary's College student population has evolved over the past three decades to reflect the changing population of Los Angeles, growing ever increasingly more racially and ethnically diverse. In 1982, the College began providing higher education to women from different ethnic backgrounds. Today, Hispanics account for 50% of the student body, followed by Asian Americans (16%), White (15%), African American (9%), and multi-racial (10%) (H. Brown, personal communication, January, 3, 2013). Recognized as a predominantly women's college, female students account for 90 percent of the student population. The most popular majors are nursing, biology, psychology, sociology, and business. The retention rate for freshmen to sophomore year (Fall 2011 to Fall 2012) was 79% (H. Brown, personal communication, November, 18, 2013). Among the students enrolled as of fall 2012, 46% were first-generation college students, 70% come from public high schools, 70% from the greater Los Angeles area, and 98% received some form of financial aid (Brown, 2012). The increase in enrollment of Hispanic students has been steady since the mid-1980s, with enrollment at approximately 23% Hispanics in 1987, at 42% in 2000, and at 50% of the enrollment in 2013.

This study specifically addressed the persistence and graduation rates of Latina commuter students at Mount St. Mary's College, which is situated in an urban environment, and is recognized as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). Mount St. Mary's College is seeking to raise

its current graduation rate of 58% for its overall student population. Four-year graduation rates for Hispanics are 48% and 56% for those completing their degrees in 6 years (Brown, 2012). Persistence data was difficult to analyze as it is only collected from freshman year to sophomore year and is only disaggregated by residential status.

Sample Selection and Access

This study involved purposeful sampling of participants. Purposeful sampling enabled the most to be learned from people with information-rich experiences related to the purpose of the inquiry (Merriam, 2009). The attributes essential for participation in this study include students who are female; enrolled in the traditional baccalaureate program; entered college immediately after high school; of senior class standing in college who applied for graduation in May of 2014; are the first in their family to attend college with neither parent having obtained a college degree; do not reside in campus housing; of Hispanic heritage and demonstrated persistence in college by maintaining consistent enrollment each year from their freshman year to graduation in the same institution. Therefore, the college students selected for this study account for the majority of the total enrolled Hispanic undergraduates at the research site. First-generation Hispanic female college students were ideal participants due to their documented low graduation rates and college completion data.

To recruit participants for my study, I contacted the Registrar's Office to request the list of prospective graduates and their emails for May 2014. I then sent a letter via email directly to the seniors with commuter status, a total of 235 students, inviting them to participate in the study. It was my hope that this approach would garner a sufficient sample of first-generation Latina commuter students to participate in my study. The invitation included a description of the

purpose of the study and how it will benefit future generations of first-generation Latina commuter college students at the institution.

During the spring semester of 2014 I sought to engage prospective graduates in a conversation about their college experience as undergraduate students at Mount St. Mary's College. In particular, I screened respondents who matched the profile of the ideal participant for the study – first-generation Latina commuter college students who would be graduating in May 2014. Emails were sent out to the list of prospective graduates soliciting their participation. I received a considerable response over a period of nine weeks. From the pool of 53 respondents, 25 matched the demographic profile required to participate in the next stage of the study – the interview process. Although twenty-three interviews were conducted, the final participant pool was 19.

Data Collection Process

There was one major research question and six sub-research questions to be answered in this study. Due to the complexity of the nature of college persistence, I recognized that there were several factors that influence persistence. I used a questionnaire to identify information-rich participants. The questionnaire asked potential participants for their contact information if they wished to participate in the study. Then, I utilized individual interviews to answer the research question sub-questions 1a-1f. From the pool of 53 completed questionnaires, I interviewed students who met the criteria for the study.

Twenty five students were found to be eligible to participate in the interview portion of the study. Of the twenty-five, I interviewed a total of 23 students because one student was non-responsive to voicemail messages and email attempts to schedule an interview and another

student cancelled her appointment and did not reschedule. Each participant was subject to a 1 hour semi-structured interview. Students were selected to be interviewed based on their willingness to continue participation in the study beyond completing the questionnaire and availability to sit for a one hour in-person interview. Individual interviews allowed me to delve deeper in to the college experiences of these students by learning more about their institutional experience, process of academic integration, environmental factors that they have had to contend with and their perception of their academic self-concept and commitment to accomplishing their goal.

Questionnaire. The initial instrument for collecting data was a questionnaire used as a screening device to determine the pool of participants for the interview process. The questionnaire collected demographic information and included some open-ended responses. The questionnaire solicited responses regarding the student's ethnicity (specific to Hispanic heritage – Mexican American, Guatemalan, Salvadoran, etc.), if the student entered college immediately after high school, the number of semesters commuted, whether the student is the first in her family to go to college, worked off- and or on-campus, parent's highest level of education, and her marital status. The questionnaire also inquired about age and number of years expected to complete her bachelor's degree, as well as transfer status. Students who indicated they had transferred to the Chalon Campus were removed from the pool of potential participants for the interview process and their questionnaire was not included. No further participation was required of students once they were removed from the process.

The questionnaires that were kept served to inform me of the applicants eligible to be invited to be interviewed in the next phase of the study. Data collected from the questionnaire

was also used to summarize the characteristics of the participants of the study. The questionnaire was disseminated on February 20, 2014. The questionnaire was distributed in an electronic format via Survey Monkey and included as a link in the body of the email to students. The questionnaire remained active for nine weeks following the initial distribution of the email invitation to participate in the study, and the study concluded on April 29, 2014. Reminder messages to complete the questionnaire were sent every two weeks. Only students matching the demographic profile in my study as identified in questionnaire responses were selected for the next phase, the interview process. See Appendix A for the questionnaire.

Individual interviews. The majority of the data for my research was collected from individual interviews. Interviews allowed me to find out information that could not be directly observed, and they allowed for individuals to share past events from their perspective (Merriam, 2009). Since it is a qualitative study and my interest is to delve into the experiences of each student, I sought to collect rich data from direct quotes to ensure trustworthiness and appropriate inferences to the population at the research site.

The interview protocol consisted of semi-structured questions pertaining to student perception of factors that influence their persistence toward college completion. A semi-structured interview method allowed me to have structure and consistency in questions asked of participants while allowing flexibility for additional questions to emerge as a result of responses shared by participants (Merriam, 2009). The final number of participants in the study was nineteen. Each student was interviewed for approximately one hour. Participants were called or emailed to schedule the interview. To best accommodate the schedules of the participants, the interviews were conducted in a variety of locations most convenient and comfortable for the

student. Interviews were conducted at both Chalon and Doheny campuses in offices and meeting rooms. See Appendix B for the interview questions.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face. Face-to-face interviews were recorded on one digital recording device. The recording of each interview was uploaded to a computer within 24 hours. Each interview was transcribed by me within seven days of it being uploaded. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Each interview transcript was corroborated for accuracy with the recording. Member check was conducted by having each student interviewed read their own transcript to ensure it reflected what they wanted to say.

Data Analysis

Each person interviewed had a unique story to tell. Questions were formatted to address major domains in each research question. Data analysis was performed as each interview was conducted. Each transcript was reviewed at least three times by me. The first review was to examine the relevance to the research question. A codebook was created to include a priori and emergent codes. Comparative analysis was conducted across all participant transcripts. The second review of the transcripts was to conduct a comparative analysis from which additional codes were created. Simultaneous data collection and analysis helped me to organize and refine my data in preparation for the writing of my findings (Merriam, 2009). A third review of the transcripts was done to place quotes closely matching the major themes and sub-themes identified, generating core categories to work with (Merriam, 2009). Once common themes were identified, a thematic analysis across all interviews was conducted to examine patterns among participant experiences and responses. When this process was completed, I was then able to

compose findings of my research, incorporating specific quotes that best illustrate examples for each theme. Completing the three step process of analysis took about one month.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

It was important to be forthright about every step of the process with the participants. Consistency in the administration of the questionnaire and questions asked during the interview process was important. Students received reminders to complete and submit their questionnaire over a period of nine weeks, from February 20, 2014 to April 29, 2014. For students interviewed, the process was conducted in a way to encourage participants to freely answer each question and not give me the answer they thought I was looking for. Questions were carefully worded to avoid bias. Taken a step further, all participants were eliminated from the pool to be interviewed if I had taught them or were employed by me during their college career so as to eliminate response based on my position as the Director of Student Programming and Commuter Services.

In analyzing the data, I took time to verify accuracy of the digital recording with the transcription in order to minimize errors in evaluating content. I conducted member check by providing participants with a copy of the transcript for review, allowing them the opportunity to clarify or add information that they believed best stated their answer to the questions posed. Further, all themes and codes were determined and defined to ensure what I have recorded accurately reflected their lived experiences. Finally, I triangulated questionnaire data and interview responses to objectively allow the data to paint a picture of what these students' college experience has been and summarized their perception of factors that contribute to

persistence toward college completion avoiding any bias or assumptions from me as the researcher.

Ethical Issues

There are potential ethical issues that could have resulted from this study. Potential ethical issues included concern from students about the researcher maintaining confidentiality and anonymity of participants. To avoid the potential for ethical issues arising, I excluded identifying data from the findings and other aspects of the study. I asked participants to choose their own pseudonym. I informed participants of the purpose of the study and my plans for the use of the findings through consent forms and at the start of individual interviews. I also asked that all participants of the questionnaire and interview process sign an informed consent form before engaging in the research. No attempt was made to coerce students to participate. It was strictly a voluntary process. Participants had the option of opting out of the study anytime or not participating in answering questions with which they were uncomfortable. I did not interview anyone with whom I have worked. I made available a copy of my findings to the participants. The questionnaire responses and transcripts were backed up on a USB stored away from the college campus in a locked filing cabinet, and also on a cloud interface using Dropbox. Once responses were compiled, themed, and coded for summarization of findings, the questionnaire responses and transcripts were shredded or deleted.

Researcher Bias

There was the potential for interference given the privilege available to me as an employee at the site that oversees the commuter population. To best manage my role during the data collection process, I informed participants that I was a researcher from UCLA. I removed

my hat as Director. One concern I had in preparing for this process is the reluctance of students during the interview to not disclose much to me because I am not of their ethnic background. I anticipated this possibility and in those instances, I attempted to probe based on responses given. I also identified locations to meet, both at the Chalon and Doheny campuses, that were convenient for most commuters to access, and that was also quiet and comfortable. I scheduled interviews during periods when school was not in session or times most convenient to the interviewee. Further, I expressed my gratitude to the students for participating in the process with a thank you note for their time and a \$10 gift card to Target. In addition, I assured them that the findings will serve a greater good in improving graduation rates for future generations of Hispanic female commuter students at the research site.

Limitations

The findings from this research study will serve to make a small contribution to the existing literature on persistence as it relates to first-generation Latina commuter college students. This research is limited to the extent that it cannot be generalized as it is a small sample size and specific to an institution type. However, it contributes to better understanding the college experiences today of first-generation Latina commuter college students.

I realize in retrospect that there are things I would do differently. I realize that I should have cast my net wider by including transfer students and students who transferred from the Doheny Campus. The response rate to the invitation to participate in the study was high but many had to be eliminated due to the specificity of the subjects I was looking for who were not transfer students in any regard.

Another population that was not able to be studied in this study was students who took more than 4 years to complete their degree. I noticed in the survey responses that there were transfer students whose college journey took more than four years to complete. Because they did not fit the criteria, I will not know what factors delayed their college completion and what influenced their persistence. Likewise, there are students who left the institution as well. I believe including participants who withdrew from the institution and who fit the characteristics of the subjects of this study would have served to enhance the findings of this study.

Summary

The methods described above were effective in collecting and analyzing the data for this study. Participants were recruited from a reliable source that identified commuter students of senior standing who were listed as prospective graduates in May 2014. Information from the survey questionnaire was coded, and individual interviews were transcribed and coded to identify emergent themes. The themes were then categorized for analysis and presentation of findings.

The following chapter will present the findings generated from the survey questionnaire and individual interviews. Factors relating to students' background, transition to college, institutional experience, and commitment to completing will be discussed.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Introduction

During the spring semester of 2014, I sought to engage prospective graduates in a conversation about their college experience as undergraduate students at Mount St. Mary's College. The focus of the study was to examine perceptions of factors that influence persistence toward college completion for first-generation Latina commuter students. The findings from this chapter are based on my analysis of both a demographics questionnaire and a one hour individual semi-structured interview.

Participant Profile

A total of 23 students were interviewed but four were eliminated due to not meeting the criteria for the research participants leaving a balance of 19 qualified participants. These first-generation Latina commuter college students were all preparing to graduate in May 2014. Among the 19 student participants in this study, some came from immigrant parents of different Latin American countries. The ethnic identities reported by participants included Mexican, Mexican-American, Argentinian, Guatemalan, and Salvadoran. Eleven participants reported their father's highest level of schooling was less than a high school diploma, seven reported their father had at least a high school diploma or GED, and one stated that her father had some college but no degree. In regards to the participants' mothers' highest schooling, ten reported it to be less than a high school diploma, eight had at least a high school diploma, and one was unknown. All students were traditional college age (21-22 years old) and were single, never married.

Table 4-1. Participant Profile

Name	Ethnicity	Type of High School	College Preparation	Semesters a Commuter	Miles	Involvement On-Campus	Job On-Campus	Hours/Week On-Campus	Job Off-Campus	Hours/Week Off-Campus	Years to Baccalaureate Degree	Highest Schooling Mother	Highest Schooling Father
Maria	Mexican-American	Private	AP Classes (5); Co-curricular Activities	2	60	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	8	4	Less than HS degree	Some college but no degree
Eve	Mexican-American	Public	AP Classes; AVID	8	45	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	5	4	Less than HS degree	Less than HS degree
Leslie	Mexican-American	Public	AP Classes (4); AVID; DART	4	80	Yes	No	N/A	No	0	4	HS degree or GED	Less than HS degree
Melissa	Mexican-American	Charter School	Debate team; No AP Classes offered; New charter school	8	26	No	No	N/A	No	0	4	Less than HS degree	Less than HS degree
Ally	Mexican-American & Argentinian	Unknown	AP Classes; Co-curricular Activities	2	65	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	12	4	HS degree or GED	HS degree or GED
Tony	Salvadoran	Private	AP Classes (1)	8	40	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	24-30	4	HS degree or GED	HS degree or GED
Lisset	Guatemalan	Unknown	AP Classes (2); Co-curricular Activities	8	22	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	12-24	4	Less than HS degree	Less than HS degree
Gabby	Mexican-American	Public	Co-curricular Activities	7	40	Yes	No	N/A	No	N/A	4	HS degree or GED	HS degree or GED
Olivia	Mexican	Public	AP Classes (4); AVID; Delians Honor Society	8	12	Yes	No	N/A	No	N/A	4	HS degree or GED	Less than HS degree

Name	Ethnicity	Type of High School	College Preparation	Semesters a Commuter	Miles	Involvement On-Campus	Job On-Campus	Hours/Week On-Campus	Job Off-Campus	Hours/Week Off-Campus	Years to Baccalaureate Degree	Highest Schooling Mother	Highest Schooling Father
Karen	Mexican-American	Private	International Baccalaureate Program; Co-curricular activities	2	80	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	24	4	HS degree or GED	Less than HS degree
Jenny	Salvadoran, Guatemalan	Charter School	AP Classes (2); Co-curricular Activities; New charter school	8	40	Yes	No	N/A	No	N/A	4	Less than HS degree	Less than HS degree
Nessa	Mexican	Public (Fr,So) and Charter School (Jr, Sr)	AP Classes (4); Co-curricular Activity	4	30	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	16	3.5	Less than HS degree	HS degree or GED
Judith	Mexican, Salvadoran	Public	UC Med Core and Educational Talent Search	2	20-30	Yes	No	N/A	Yes	14	4	HS degree or GED	HS degree or GED
Lisa	Other: Chicana	Public	AP Classes; College level courses; AVID	3	46	Yes	Yes	10	No	N/A	4	Less than HS degree	Less than HS degree
Carmen	Mexican-American	Private	AP Classes (2); Co-curricular Activities	4	20	Yes	Yes	8	Yes	28	4	Unknown	Less than HS degree
Josie	Mexican-American	Public	AP Classes (7); Project Steps; College level courses	6	33	Yes	No	N/A	No	N/A	3	HS degree or GED	HS degree or GED
Victoria	Guatemalan	Private	AP Classes (3); Health Careers Program	8	30	No	No	N/A	Yes	8	4	Less than HS degree	HS degree or GED
Marielle	Mexican	Public	AP Classes (3); AVID	4	70	Yes	Yes	10	Yes	30	4	Less than HS degree	Less than HS degree

Name	Ethnicity	Type of High School	College Preparation	Semesters a Commuter	Miles	Involvement On-Campus	Job On-Campus	Hours/Week On-Campus	Job Off-Campus	Hours/Week Off-Campus	Years to Baccalaureate Degree	Highest Schooling Mother	Highest Schooling Father
Madison	Mexican, Mexican-American	Private	Co-curricular Activities	6	80	Yes	Yes	6	Yes	10	4	Less than HS degree	Less than HS degree

The women’s pre-college background varied. Six attended a private high school, nine attended a public high school, three attended a charter high school, and two did not disclose the type of high school they attended. According to the participants, 17 out of the 19 felt their pre-college experience either “adequately prepared them” whereas two out of the 19 felt their pre-college experience “did not prepare them sufficiently” for their journey through college. During high school, 14 had taken one or more advanced placement classes, 11 had participated in a college preparatory program such as Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), Duarte Area Resource Team (DART), International Baccalaureate Program, Educational Talent Search, UC Med Core, Project Steps, and Health Careers, and ten were involved in co-curricular activities such as student government, clubs, and athletics.

All 19 participants began college immediately following high school and were either the first in their family to go to a four-year institution or among the first generation in their family to obtain a bachelor’s degree. Some started their college career living on campus and then transitioned to become a commuter student, while a few commuted all four years. Twelve of the 19 resided on-campus at least one semester starting their first year of college. The number of miles a student commuted averaged 30 miles round-trip; however, three drove approximately 80

miles round trip. Sixteen out of 19 were involved in on-campus clubs and organizations throughout their college years with some assuming leadership roles, while three noted they were not involved in on-campus activities. Four of the participants had college work-study aid and were employed on-campus at the start of their college career. Two maintained their work-study position all four years, two for three years, working between 6-10 hours per week on average. Twelve participants reported working an off-campus job ranging anywhere from 8-30 hours per week. All participants were graduating within four years or less.

Findings

The purpose of the study was to learn about the perceived factors that influence persistence toward college completion for first-generation Latina commuter college students. To comprehensively analyze these factors, I sought to learn about the participants' pre-college experiences, transition and adjustment to college, their engagement with the institution, challenges they encountered during college, resources they used, networks of support, and academic self-concept held while in college. There were five major factors that emerged that first-generation Latina commuter college students perceived to influence their persistence toward college completion. Those factors include parental expectation to pursue higher education, campus culture, professors, staff and peers impacting their sense of belonging and transition to college, having to overcome challenges such as commuting to school, time management, fulfilling parental expectations and academic demands, strategies implemented coupled with physical and emotional support from on-campus and off-campus networks, academic self-concept, and the level of commitment to fulfilling their goal contribute to success and persistence.

A major finding is that education is valued and the pursuit of higher education is expected by parents. What was common among the participants was that education was important to them. The value of education was instilled by their parents from early childhood. In thinking about the future, parents imposed upon them the expectation of pursuing higher education for a better life. This value was further reinforced by messaging received during high school from teachers, counselors, and college preparatory programs in which they participated.

Campus culture, professors, staff, and peers impact their sense of belonging and transition to college. The transition and adjustment in college is critical. In the case of Mount St. Mary's College, participants described that they liked it because it was a small and close knit community. The institution created a sense of belonging for them through the professors getting to know students, being accessible, and challenging and supporting students. Participants described other aspects of their college experience at Mount St. Mary's College that played a part in their transition and adjustment in college. They shared that staff provided support, being available and accessible to answer questions. Participants described finding peers with shared experiences who seek to keep each other motivated. Finally, the college provided a variety of activities from which to choose for engagement in student life. While being involved on campus was particularly challenging for most participants, those who resided on campus their freshman year and got involved continued their involvement throughout their college years, even after transitioning to becoming a commuter.

First-generation Latina commuter students have to overcome many challenges. As first-generation Latina commuter students, they perceived their experience as being difficult; they perceived it to be difficult because their parents did not go to college which meant they had to

figure things out on their own without the guidance of their parents. Having to commute to school is challenging in terms of managing time, coordinating transportation, waking up early, and sometimes not having parents who understand their college experience. Throughout their college years, they stated the greatest challenges they encountered included academics, time management, commuting, and adjusting to college.

Strategies implemented coupled with physical and emotional support from on-campus and off-campus networks contribute to success and persistence. Being able to persist was influenced by strategies utilized such as time management, asking for help, studying, and self-motivation. Success and persistence was also attributed to receiving a lot of physical and emotional support from family with mothers playing a major role in the life of the first-generation Latina commuter student, having an academic support system among peers, and professors serving as a professional resource by being available and accessible and challenging them to be better students.

Academic self-concept and the level of commitment to fulfilling their goal was a prominent driver for first-generation students. They perceived getting a college degree as achieving more for their life, overcoming cultural stereotypes in their communities, serving as role models for future generations in their families, and positioning themselves to help their family financially as well as others in their communities.

I will now discuss these major findings more in depth by delving into the findings from the sub-research questions.

Pre-college experiences. Education was very important to the participants, a value instilled by their parents, and the pursuit of higher education was an expectation imposed upon them by

their parents. One of the students, Lisa, shared that her mother told her as a young girl to go to college because she considered it her inheritance. The value of education was further reinforced for the participants by messaging received during high school from teachers, counselors, and college preparatory programs in which they participated. The first sub-question addressed pre-college experiences of the participants. There were three key factors that emerged. Students reported that they were enrolled in advanced placement (AP) courses, received college knowledge from a college preparatory program, and were strongly encouraged to attend college by a teacher, counselor, or principal. There were only two participants who felt their high school failed to prepare them for college.

Enrollment in advanced placement courses. Fourteen students reported having taken one or more AP classes. The quantity and variety of AP classes differed by each student and the type of high school they attended. Students who attended public high schools reported having taken more AP classes than students who attended private high schools, and one student who attended a charter high school did not take any AP courses. The types of AP classes most commonly cited as taken include English, Calculus, Spanish, World History, and Government. Other subjects include English Literature, French, Psychology, Biology, Language and Composition, Economics, European History, and Chemistry.

College preparatory programs. Besides AP courses, the next highest pre-college experience mentioned by participants was receiving college knowledge through participation in a college preparatory program. Eleven students mentioned having participated in a college preparatory program in the public high school they attended. The types of college preparatory programs included Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID), Duarte Area Resource Team

(DART), International Baccalaureate Program, Educational Talent Search, UC Med Core, Project Steps, and Health Careers. There were five participants who stated they participated in the AVID program. AVID, which stands for Advancement Via Individual Determination, is a global nonprofit organization dedicated to closing the achievement gap by preparing all students for college and other postsecondary opportunities (Avid, 2014). This program is available in elementary school, high school, and at higher educational institutions. The five participants who participated in AVID described their experience as preparing them to succeed academically by attending college preparatory workshops that educated students and their parents about researching and applying to colleges, going on college tours, and receiving encouragement to go to college. Students who participated in other college prep programs reported similar experiences. Volunteer and community service experiences, a requirement for the college preparatory programs, were mentioned a few times as well.

Encouragement from counselors and teachers. There were a few other pre-college experiences mentioned that were common for a few students and unique to others. One common experience that surfaced for seven participants was encouragement received from a teacher or college counselor. Examples of some of the actions taken by high school counselors that demonstrated encouragement include organizing college prep workshops, scheduling appointments to meet with college representatives, and assisting with the logistics of applying to colleges. High school teachers demonstrated encouragement by placing college banners in the classroom introducing the idea of college and the possibility that they could attend, spoke of colleges where they earned their degrees, and physically drove students to a college campus to tour or submit their application for enrollment. Three students also credited their English

teacher's emphasis on writing and grammar that prepared them for college. One example is presented by Maria. She reflected:

...I remember one teacher she would always talk about college and always tell us "you guys need to have great grammar [and] writing skills because that is an essential tool you are going to be using for the rest of your life" and she was definitely an influence in that way of preparing us for college.

Maria now recognizes the significant impact of her teacher's comment about writing and good grammar. It is a lesson she brought with her to college that prepared her to meet her academic demands. Unfortunately, not everyone felt they were adequately prepared for college in high school.

Contrary to the majority of participants, there were two students who stated that they felt their high school did not prepare them for college. Those two students attended a new charter high school and both were among the second graduating class for their respective schools. One participant in particular described how she felt she was not prepared for college. Jenny described it as follows:

Honestly, I don't think my high school prepared me for the experiences in college. I went to a charter school. ... I was their second graduating class. So I think I've been feeling like a guinea pig for my high school but in a good way. You know they are testing on us new students and sending us to college but they were testing the grounds with us. But now my little brother is going to school there I see them improving so that's why I would say my high school did not prepare me as much.

Jenny is able to compare her experience with that of her brother knowing she was a member of the second graduating class. Now that her brother is enrolled there, she can see the marked difference in experience and preparation for college. While the participants' pre-college experiences varied, they all took something positive with them and applied it to their college experience.

Institutional support. The next sub-question addresses the institutional support received in transitioning or adjusting to college. As first-generation students, these women did not have a legacy of college attendance in their family. Consequently, the participants shared that the expectations with which they had about college varied from uncertainty of what to expect to expectations being shaped by what they saw portrayed in the media. Further, the participants identified two factors that impacted their transition and adjustment to college. They found that their transition and adjustment to college were greatly impacted by their academic and social experiences in college, and the institution created a sense of belonging through activities and supportive staff members.

Expectations of college. The expectations these first-generation Latina commuter students had of coming to college were very different than their experience. Not knowing what really to expect, anticipation of what college would be like varied. Three participants expected the small class environment similar to their private high school, two expected it to be a lot more work and that it would require many hours of studying, one student expected to meet a lot of new friends, one student expected not to get all her classes, and one student expected to see a lot more activity and people on campus. One student expected Mass every day like she was used to at a Catholic institution.

Of the 19 participants in the study, four shared that they expected college to be harder or different than high school, while another four stated that their expectation of college was based on what they saw portrayed in movies. For example, Maria says:

I never really thought how college would be. I didn't know what to expect in reality. I didn't know if it was going to be like high school in terms of it's all going to be paperwork? Is it going to be studying? ...I didn't have someone in my family [to] tell me 'oh look this is what's going to happen' or 'this is what you are going to see' ... so I wasn't prepared mentally for college I guess. And although I may have received mental guidance through high school I feel like I never got a personal one-on-one experience... I only saw what's in the movies.

Maria's lack of knowledge of what to really expect when she went to college led her to rely on the images she saw in movies. Maria seemed she would have benefited from having someone in her immediate family share first-hand knowledge of their personal experience.

Another participant also spoke of her lack of clarity on what to expect in college. Gabby stated:

As a freshman I really didn't have a clear understanding of what college would be. I've really only gotten my visual of what college would be based on TV shows or movies. You know on TV shows and movies you always see students carrying around a lot of books and they are always working hard and they are always in the library doing work and they never seem to have any social life so that was my idea of college was based off of those media.

Gabby shares a similar experience as Maria with reliance on media portrayal of college life to shape her idea of what to expect in college. Though these young women do not have a concrete frame of reference, imagery from external sources filled the void. Despite what is portrayed in the media, there were participants who imagined experiences that they found to be either similar or different in their expectations of college.

Though these participants started their college career uncertain of what to expect or were influenced by the media, their academic and social experiences had a great impact on their transition and adjustment to college. College life at Mount St. Mary's College was different from what the media portrayed in that students were more focused on their academics at Mount St. Mary's. For example, Ally describes her college expectation as

...a little bit different because you know how the media portrays college as this whole party school and party atmosphere and then you do your studies but they mainly focus on the party aspect which that's not the type of person I am at all so it was different because at the Mount it is very different than what you see at other bigger universities. I feel like most people at the Mount are very focused.

Ally's expectations of college were contrary to her reality in a positive way. Collectively we see that Maria, Gabby, and Ally's expectations of college as portrayed by the media is dismissed quickly by what they found to be true of the college culture at Mount St. Mary's College.

Professors. Students reported having difficulty transitioning to college academically. Unlike high school, there were no constant reminders of assignments but rather the student was responsible for remembering and managing their time. Professors helped first generation Latina commuter students' transition successfully to college. Three students stated the transition to

college was difficult and referenced the positive influence of professors. Olivia spoke of one professor saying:

I think professors helped me the most just given that my family didn't have that college experience. ...especially you know the (freshman seminar) teacher... telling us this is what to expect, go here for these resources. This is what we have to offer you guys. ...professors were the ones who really helped me with that transition especially the order of classes.

Olivia valued her freshman seminar teacher guiding her to campus resources and informing her of what to expect. The professor was a valuable resource in pointing her in the right direction and getting her started on her college journey. Professors were also perceived to be helpful in other ways.

Students remarked that their professors' teaching style had an impact on them. When asked what professors did inside or outside of the classroom that they would attribute to their success, thirteen students expressed appreciation for their professors' teaching style. While the style may vary, examples of techniques included providing PowerPoint presentations to expound on the content of the book, educating nursing students on how to treat patients, teaching them how to apply academic material to real world experiences, maintaining high expectations of their students, pushing students out of their comfort zone, picking on the more shy students to encourage them talk, inviting guest speakers into the classroom who served as a motivation, and having open classroom discussions. Five students spoke of being challenged to be a better student. Josie commented:

I think that a lot of professors made it easy for me to transition because they broke things down. They had separate deadlines for our paper. They broke it down into sections so that knowing how students are we wouldn't all rush it at the end. And that really helped. Of course, like I said, my Psychology professor would talk to me, reassure me, that everything is going to be fine.

Another student, Eve, stated:

They helped me challenge myself. I had some professors that were a little bit critical when it came to writing and stuff and picking on me in class. So they challenged me to be a better student. I, at the time, did not like what they did but now when I think about it, yeah this person helped me a lot because they challenged me. So I wanted to show them that I could do it. I could be a better student.

While Josie found it beneficial when professors presented assignments in manageable sections and provided assurance, Eve valued professors challenging her to be a better student. The challenge and support techniques offered by professors proved to be impactful in these participants' adjustment to college.

Seven students perceived their professors as a professional resource. They found their professors to be a resource in providing leads on internships, writing letters of recommendations, and providing examples from their own professional career experiences. For example, some professors worked their professional trade by day and taught at night. Jenny commented:

One of the things I liked about the Sociology department, [and] throughout the Mount, is that you don't just have a professor teaching you out of the book but a professor or doctor teaching out of their experience and their career.

Jenny expressed an appreciation for both expert and theoretical knowledge. However, not all students take advantage of utilizing professors as a resource.

Only two participants stated they did not receive any help from professors in their transition to college. Jenny sought help from staff in her transition to college, and Melissa blamed herself for not getting help from professors because she did not talk with her professors. While only two of the participants did not credit professors in helping with their transition to college, a majority attribute assistance and support from professors as being part of institutional support. Beyond the classroom, first-generation Latina commuter students found social experiences contributed to their transition to college.

Social experiences. Four students mentioned the amount of freedom and independence they had, in particular the time between classes for social experiences. Josie spoke of discovering her independence. She commented:

I expected college to be a lot harder than it is now. I really thought that you had barely any time to do anything. That there really wasn't any time to socialize or if you did, you had to be in a fraternity or something but it is really different. It is a lot calmer than I thought it was going to be. I definitely like the freedom to do things. [I] like the independence.

Josie's expressed joy in discovering her independence in college is evident. It stands in stark contrast to what she was expecting or what other participants expressed they perceived social life in college would be based on the media.

By stepping into a foreign environment, these students soon discovered the need to develop new social relationships. Some found their roommates, classmates, neighbor friend at home, sorority sister, or ex-boyfriend to be most helpful in the transition to college. Two participants stated they had to make new friends because they were the only ones from their high school to attend Mount St. Mary's. In contrast, three participants knew students who came to the Mount from their high school and immediately bonded as friends, forming a support system for each other. Three students found getting involved in a program (e.g., Institute for Student Academic Enrichment, Women's Leadership) helpful in developing friendships. While many of the participants were able to develop social relationships, two reported that they were not able to make any friends in college. One student struggled initially in making friends because she did not attend the first-year student orientation.

Campus activities. The participants' transition and adjustment to college was made easier with the institution providing a sense of belonging for them. Eight participants spoke fondly of the activities they witnessed and participated in on campus. There are memories etched in their minds from orientation, commuter events, and interactive activities in general for all students. Carmen said, "well they always have activities to offer which I felt part of it. You felt a part of Mount St. Mary's with all those activities like being able to be involved."

Tony said:

Definitely, the commuter activities that they would have or the activities in general that they have outside, I think that's very welcoming. Especially because we are such a small school so as soon as you get off that shuttle that's the first thing you see. They just hold a lot of things here for students to join to become a community and interact with each other.

Carmen's delight to see a variety of activities offered made her feel like she could get involved and be a part of student life. Tony describes the sense of community being promoted the moment she walks off the shuttle on to campus. Community is also important in the way institutional support is provided.

They spoke of the small, close-knit community they found at the Mount, which made them feel safe and enabled everyone to get to know more people. Clubs and organizations also facilitated a sense of belonging on campus. Four students appreciated that there were different clubs and organizations on campus that were open and welcoming to students. Two participants remarked about seeing the empowerment of women exhibited in the form of leadership and in the classroom. Olivia stated her "opinion mattered" and Jenny saw getting a higher education as a path to being the head of household with an education.

Staff. While professors were lauded as being a helpful resource to these participants, staff who provide support services to students outside of the classroom also play a vital role in providing institutional support in the adjustment to college for first-generation Latina commuter students. Some remarked about utilizing the services from various areas such as Transportation Services for the shuttles, Commuter Services, the library, Career Services, financial services offices and specialized programmatic departments such as Women's Leadership and the Institute

for Student Academic Enrichment (ISAE) which provides academic support for first generation, low-income students and students with disabilities. Overall, half of the participants commented that they found staff across the campus to be helpful and approachable.

Challenges overcome while in college. Making the transition to college presented challenges that confronted first-generation Latina commuter students. Along their college career, they encountered numerous obstacles to overcome. Being a commuter student was the greatest challenge for these participants. Three other challenges first-generation Latina commuter college students had to contend with included time management, fulfilling obligations at home, and managing academic stressors of each year in college.

First-generation Latinas found being a commuter to be difficult. As a commuter student, the challenges include having to wake up incredibly early in the morning around 4:00 a.m. or 5:00 a.m. to get their day started, enduring a commute that consumes three to four hours of their day, negotiating transportation, and mastering time management. These challenges are evident in a few participants' lived experience as a commuter. For example, Ally is a student who shared her woes:

I'm in a very demanding major... sometimes there are things that they don't fully understand like having to get up at 4 or 5 in the morning to get to clinical on time and then coming home from clinical. I feel... my parents don't really understand how really tired I am and then to be expected to write all these papers. ...the commuting, I feel makes you more tired. ...I spend maybe 3 or 4 hours a day commuting.

Ally described the demands on her time due to the nature of her major. What complicated her college experience is the early start to her day, managing the fulfillment of academic requirements, and the amount of hours spent commuting. She noticed the difficulty her parents have in empathizing with her feeling tired. Karen shares a similar experience:

I live a good 40-50 miles away, so it's hard. ...overall in the day [it takes] 2-4 hours out of my day commuting. I notice I'm a little bit more tired just getting up earlier... sometimes I go home and I still have to do other things home related. [My parents] don't realize I just spent this whole time on the road, I need to catch up with homework and projects and things like that.

Karen felt the impact of a long commute and the realization of her day has not ended when she gets home. Karen not only has to fulfill responsibilities at home but also complete homework assignments. This can take a toll over time as there is no down time to transition to concentrate on her school work. Melissa also mentioned having to wake up early in the morning:

The commuting part is hard especially taking the public transit system. I have to wake up early to take the bus so I can get the early shuttle. For a 7 o'clock class I would wake up at 4:30 a.m. to get the metro, to get here to get the 6:30 a.m. shuttle.

Melissa's challenge is one of having to rely on multiple sources of transportation to get to campus. Relying on public transportation and coordinating her travel schedule to be in sync with the intercampus shuttle provided by the college demands that she wakes up significantly early. This dependence compounds stress on a commuter as their punctuality partly depends on the reliability of the transportation service.

Time management posed the greatest challenge for commuter students. Participants stated there was not enough time to study, they could not study at home, the length of time it takes to commute takes up a lot of time in their day, they suffer from sleep deprivation, they are not able to be involved on campus, and they have to plan for transportation. Additionally, scheduling conflicts resulted in not being able to go to professors' office hours and difficulty scheduling tutoring sessions or group project meetings. For example, Jenny describes her experience as follows:

...my parents don't know what kind of environment or what kind of expectation it is to be a college student that they would understand. ...it's not like high school that you do homework in an hour or two. No, it takes time. You have to study, and aside from that you have to do your homework... you have homework for each class. Like it's time management affected. They don't see I have the same time management I did in high school.

Jenny conveys the struggle she had in getting her parents to see that her experience in college is not like how it was for her in high school. In college she had to manage her time differently which meant negotiating with her parents expectations for fulfilling obligations at home.

Not many participants had the privilege of being a college student without obligations to fulfill in the home and contributing to the needs and livelihood of their family. Eight students stated that they had chores to complete when they came home from school. Five students stated they had to work to help pay for college and household needs. Some served as a second parent to younger siblings or relatives. Two had to care for a sick parent. Living at home they had to contend with restrictions of freedom from parents, the expectations of coming home and doing

chores, misunderstandings with parents about reasons for coming home late, and having to work to support the family. Maria's experience was one of living in the residence halls then returning home to live with her parents so she could finish her college career.

It's been hard commuting. ...my parents since they don't know what it's like to be in college and they don't know what work and effort you have to put into it, they don't understand really the experience of studying you know. ...it's kind of a bit of a battle cause if I come home late they think I'm out doing something not school related. But it's because I'm at school. ...what I miss about dorming [is] that I didn't have to tell my parents oh "I'm going here, I'm going there". ...at school I had a little bit of freedom but now I'm little bit constricted on in terms of freedom.

Maria's experience speaks to conflicting experiences while in college. When she lived on campus, she enjoyed her independence. However, upon returning home, she lost her freedom to do as she pleases. She is once again subject to parental restrictions and fulfilling their expectations.

Challenges each year. As first-generation college students, making the transition to college was difficult because they had to figure things out on their own. They did not have parents who attended college. Hence, their parents did not understand what they were experiencing in college. Though these students often shared with parents, siblings, or other family members what they were experiencing by discussing the events of their day, classes, assignments, and exams, most confided in siblings and other family members who had college experience or were preparing for college.

Although commuting, adjusting to college, time management, and academics posed the greatest challenge in the first year of college, these students learned that each year came with its own set of challenges to overcome. Sophomore year in college proved to be a little more comfortable with students feeling more adjusted, knowing how to ask for help, studying and expanding their social group. It was also the year when a couple of the students changed their major, which resulted in having to get to know new professors in new academic departments.

Participants reported that their junior year was their hardest year because classes were harder as they were now taking upper division courses for their major; professors expected more, and they had to think more critically. Time management continued to be a challenge as some had competing commitments for their time such as club leadership roles, internships, commuting, off-campus work, and taking a lot more units – as many as 18 units of coursework. Three students made the transition to becoming a commuter in their junior year which required adjusting to the woes of commuting to college. Some students also experienced changes within their family, such as family relocating to another city or the passing of a relative.

Senior year carried with it its own set of challenges. While participants were finally getting the hang of being a college student, they were once again confronted with closing another chapter of their life. One student mentioned that she realized she was finishing college, another student was trying to figure out the rest of her life, and a third was trying to complete her Honors thesis. One student expressed the great challenge of taking 18 units while juggling an internship, a part-time off-campus job, and her work-study job on campus. Her work week consisted of traveling back and forth between jobs and classes.

Transition to commuter status. Some students did not become commuters until their sophomore, junior, and senior years; it was not always by choice. For financial reasons, twelve students stated they had to return to living at home with their parents due to the cost of living on campus. Due to family circumstances, the financial decision was to save parents \$10,000 in loans. The financial aid awarded to the student was not enough to cover the expenses. Other reasons cited for commuting were changes in the nursing program class schedule with limited class sessions scheduled on campus in the senior year, close proximity of home to campus where they can catch the inter-campus shuttle, and the need to support the household by caring for a sick parent or providing financially for the family.

Navigating college. First-generation Latina commuter college students utilized institutional programs, services, and resources, and they implemented strategies throughout their college careers to be successful and persist. Fourteen students were actively involved in a club or organization at the start of their college career. Some remained involved when they transitioned from being a resident to becoming a commuter student. A few assumed leadership roles in those clubs and organizations. About 10 students participated in volunteer or community service-oriented activities that were affiliated with the institution, fulfilled class requirements or served their home and church community educationally. The types of programs some participants took advantage of were serving as an orientation leader, being a leadership scholar or campus tour guide, participating in intramural sports, or joining the ISAE program. Only three participants stated they were not actively involved as commuter students. Four students mentioned completing an internship as well as having worked on campus. Some participants

found services on campus that met their needs such as tutoring, Counseling and Psychological Services, and workshops sponsored by the Learning Center and Career Services.

First-generation Latina commuter students learned through involvement on campus that they had to implement strategies to be a successful college student. The strategies employed for success and persistence included asking for help, time management, being organized, study skills, self-motivation, and making connections with professors, staff, and peers. In terms of asking for help, participants reported that they started communicating with professors, received advice from advisors or other students on classes to take, asked friends for help on papers, utilized the free services offered by the institution, learned how to vocalize feelings and needs, and negotiated a flexible work schedule with supervisors at jobs. Leslie stated, “I also started communicating more with professors... and my counselor, my advisor. Well as soon as I notice they are very helpful with me I just start going to them and then asking them for help.” The positive response from taking the initiative to reach out to ask for help stirred a sense of confidence to continue being communicative of needs.

Time management was also a strategy that students implemented. Time management was specific to striking a balance with multiple commitments such as family, school, work, social life, and transportation. For example, Marielle described her approach:

I think the most important was time management. Time management really helped me especially with the fact that I had 18 units with different, three different jobs and managing my time on when I was going to do my homework, when I had to get everything done was really important because I had a time limit for everything. What I did was the most important thing, don't go home. If I go

home I will get distracted. I would go straight either to the Library, to Starbucks or with a friend... and we would push each other to finish what we had to do.

Participants also spoke about being organized and developing study skills as strategies for their success and persistence. Being organized consisted of writing everything in a planner, getting school work done before class, and securing all classes. Studying required mastering the art of studying, which included reading and outlining material, printing and reviewing professors' PowerPoint presentations, going to the library or other location to study, and studying with friends who would serve as a motivational force to keep going.

A few students looked to self-motivation to keep going. One student said she would remind herself that she is going to get through all four years; another, to stay focused and determined; a third lived by the maxim instilled by her mother, "to push herself as far as she can go and then go a little bit more." Receiving encouragement from parents, family, and friends who were positive and supporting was also important.

Several students mentioned the connections with professors, staff, and peers through their journey in college. These students expressed appreciation for the career advice, support, and help received from professors. In particular, they appreciated that professors provided guidance on job searches, shared internship opportunities, and wrote letters of recommendations. There was a sense of comfort achieved by reaching out to professors about personal and academic problems and receiving empathy from professors when a loved one passed away. There were five students who undoubtedly made connections with their professors because their professors knew them by name. In terms of staff, the connections made were in the form of encouragement to get involved on campus, teaching tips on professionalism, having an open door and being

available to answer questions, and providing the help needed. Last, peers formed social networks for providing academic and emotional support through challenges with classes or personal problems which served as motivation to keep going.

Influences of persistence on- and off-campus. Connections made on- and off-campus were important to first-generation Latina commuter students. For these students, their off-campus networks consisted of family members, high school friends, and high school counselors, while on-campus networks were peers, programs and services, and professors and staff.

Off-campus. The role of family was highly regarded as supporting participants in this study to persist toward college completion. Twelve students stated that family gave them what they needed to get through college in terms of physical needs, encouragement and support, moral support, listening, and older siblings who went to college and relayed their knowledge of navigating the system. Ally stated:

All of my family in general, they all made it so easy to adapt to college because they have always given me what I've needed. If my parents couldn't pay for something, my aunts were always there to help. And then my cousins, my other cousin got her associates degree so she is a nurse also. So she helped with the nursing aspect as far as you get through it, like everything will be ok.

Another student, Leslie, stated:

My family because they just told me it was, well from their experiences especially my siblings, from their experiences they just told me what to expect. They might have gone to different schools but they told me some of the stuff that I needed to do.

Ally and Leslie spoke of ways family members demonstrated their support. Siblings and extended family making provisions and providing guidance or emotional support proved comforting.

Mothers were arguably their number one supporter – always there to give encouragement and positive words, listen, and provide a home-cooked meal. Other family members were also supportive by serving as a source of transportation or providing an outlet to relieve stress.

Another off-campus network was high school counselors. Some participants in this study were still in communication with their high school counselors. They would inform them about their experience in college and would receive encouragement from them to do their best. Jenny commented:

Well one way is that like I mentioned some of my high school friends came to the Mount at Doheny so we were both experiencing the same thing. But I was up here, that was the only difference, and aside from that I think at the end of the semester we would meet up with our high school counselor. We still meet every break and we catch up on each other.

Jenny maintained close ties to her network from off-campus, and they helped to hold her accountable and keep her motivated as she progressed through school. The connections formed in high school provided a support system and shared experience in being able to succeed and persist.

On-campus: peers. While having off-campus networks is important for these students, on-campus networks also proved to be valuable as well. Peers with whom they socialized on campus emerged as an important network in the persistence of first-generation Latina commuter

college students. There was great reliance on high school friends who came to the Mount to provide academic support. Friends in college were helpful in studying or doing homework together, being able to bounce ideas off each other for classes and projects, getting feedback on papers, or acting as an information source upon absence from classes. Likewise, there was support received from high school friends who did not attend the Mount. Five participants viewed friends as those who are in the same boat with a shared experience. In those instances, they were perceived to understand the struggle with commuting, relied on each other to figure things out, and could experience college together. One participant discussed the support she received from friends who were going through the same program because they shared the same experiences and kept each other grounded and motivated. Peers were perceived as providing extra support and being available to talk about school, struggles, obstacles, and giving each other the needed support.

On-campus: programs and services and professional staff. There were other connections made with programs and services, professors, and staff that contributed to the success and persistence of first-generation Latina commuter students. Taking advantage of programs and services were helpful in providing support such as involvement in clubs and organizations, community service and internships, as well as, the ISAE program and commuter events.

Professors were credited with providing motivation and encouragement, their teaching style, being available and accessible via office hours, email or before or after class and providing assistance, which were identified as being most impactful. Most notable was that professors were perceived as providing assistance academically with papers or guidance in areas for

improvement for those struggling in class, tips on where to go for resources, and planning course scheduling. Staff was also credited with being helpful and approachable. They encouraged students to get involved on campus and referred them to services available.

Academic self-concept and level of commitment. Academic self-concept and level of commitment to accomplishing their goal of attaining a bachelor's degree does support the persistence of first-generation Latina commuter college students toward college completion. After settling into life as a college student, the students found personal motivational factors to keep them persisting toward college completion beyond what they received from family, peers, professors, and staff. Five students stated they wanted to achieve more in life than their parents. There was a strong desire to achieve more, to not be left behind, and to not be looked down upon or perceived as ignorant. Two expressed a desire to be identified by more than where they lived. Melissa said:

I guess I want to do something better than where I am cause when I was younger I lived in a horrible area and I don't want to be here for the rest of my life. And I don't want to end up like the girls I've seen older than me twenty something and have three or four kids. I don't want that and I don't want to end up just not doing anything like living off of assistance or something cause that's usually what I would see...

Melissa's personal motivation stems from her living environment and the recognition that she can do better. She wants to rise above the cultural stereotypes and avoid mistakes made by other girls her age. She saw a bright future for herself and wants to achieve more. The perception of being able to achieve more in life is also fueled by a desire to be positioned to help others and

make a difference. Some see themselves as making a difference as a nurse or educator. Lisa said:

I think that coming here is just motivation. And also thinking about the opportunities that I have had and not taking advantage of them would be a shame. ..sometimes I feel like I put my life into perspective and think about how my life could be and how my life is. I just feel like when I think about other people's lives, it makes me want to do more for myself and do more for others. ... I need to help myself and be educated in order for me to do things for other people...

Lisa's perspective on her life is not only about doing well in life but seeing how educating herself positions her to elevate others around her as well. She gives thought to helping her community.

Family help. Some participants are motivated by the desire to help their parents and family. Recognizing the sacrifices made to put them through college, some want to help their parents and pay them back or help their family financially. Victoria said:

I think just striving for a little bit more than what you have is what drove me to become that and being able to help my mother financially. That's one of the biggest things. You know, my mom works a lot just to keep me here and still be able to provide the essentials for us.

Victoria recognized the sacrifice of her mother who is a single parent to provide her with a college education. The sacrifice is to reciprocate the assistance she was provided by providing for her mother.

Respect from family. Others are driven by the fact that they want to make their parents proud. They felt they have something to prove to their family. For example, Eve said, “my whole mentality was... make my parents proud. Being able to graduate, being able to show my family you can do it.” They want to be a role model to young siblings, nieces, nephews, and cousins; they have a desire to break cultural stereotypes and a desire to fulfil their own potential and not give up. Gabby said, “I guess it was proving people wrong. A lot of people didn’t think that I would be able to do well in college.” Olivia’s motivation was determination to not be perceived as being ignorant.

“I was sick and tired of being looked down upon or being seen as ignorant so it really pushed me to learn as much as I could to keep an open mind about everything that I was learning even though I may not have agreed with it, it just pushed me to keep going, just absorb everything like a sponge basically that way I’d be able to not only better myself but I guess just be a stronger individual.”

Graduate school. Along with the self-motivation to persist, a majority have aspirations of pursuing a higher level of education. Fifteen of the 19 students stated they have plans to attend graduate school to earn a Master’s degree. Four students are looking beyond their Master’s degree to completing a terminal degree related to their major and three aspire to get a Ph.D in nursing. In the immediate future, however, the primary focus is to find a job. Many of the career aspirations reflect that of professors and high school teachers that have graced their educational path. Career aspirations include becoming a nurse practitioner, registered nurse or pediatric nurse, Los Angeles police officer, elementary school teacher, high school counselor, a

senator, marriage and family therapist, or a speech pathologist. The light at the end of the tunnel was more visible, and completion of their baccalaureate degree was within reach.

Summary

In examining the reasons for selecting Mount St. Mary's College, nearly all the participants (15 out of 19) stated they liked that it was a small college. The religious affiliation, reputable academic programs, and generous financial aid packages were appealing. In addition, the close proximity to home, the sense of community, likelihood to receive lots of personal attention, professors getting to know them, early priority acceptance, quiet campus, feeling of comfort, and the ability to continue their education in a similar educational environment they were used to were also factors that influenced their choice to attend the Mount.

All 19 participants came to Mount St. Mary's College with the dream of pursuing a degree in higher education. They were advised that they should go to college from multiple sources. They were equipped with the knowledge to gain access and thrive. Despite challenges along their path, the physical and emotional support received both at home and on campus, and the determination to make more of their life, enabled these 19 students to persist and complete college.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the findings of this study. I will also discuss the implications this study has for Mount St. Mary's College in serving first-generation Latina commuter college students. I will conclude with recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

This study examined the factors that influence the persistence of first-generation Latina commuter students toward college completion. Based on an analysis of the semi-structured interviews of 19 first-generation Latina commuter college students who have since completed their bachelor's degree, a number of factors were identified as being most influential in the persistence of these students.

This chapter begins with a summary of the findings and then a discussion of how these findings relate to the literature that was reviewed. Next, conclusions are offered, followed by implications for Mount St. Mary's College and higher education institutions serving a similar population and finally, recommendations for further research and practice. This chapter concludes with the plan to disseminate the findings.

This study contributes to the existing body of literature on the persistence of first-generation Latina college students and on commuter students in several ways. Unlike other studies related to the topic on persistence that have been conducted at predominantly White institutions with residential students, this study is unique in terms of the institutional type, size, location, and specificity of the participants. Finally, this is a qualitative study that offered insight into the experiences of first-generation Latina commuter students attending a small independent, Catholic institution composed of a predominantly Hispanic student body in an urban environment. These factors are important to validate the relevance of existing theoretical frameworks constructed from studies conducted at larger institutions.

Summary of Findings

The findings presented in the previous chapter identified several factors that first-generation Latina commuter students perceived to be influencing their persistence toward graduating with a baccalaureate degree. Upholding the value of education instilled by parents and the encouragement of counselors and high school teachers, students took advantage of pre-college experiences in an effort to prepare them for college. They found the transition and adjustment to college to be challenging because they had to figure things out on their own. Their parents not having attended college struggled to comprehend the academic demands of college these students were experiencing. What these participants found at Mount St. Mary's College was an environment where professors, staff, and peers were accessible to support and encourage their pursuit of a college education. Some participants who started their college career residing on campus retained their involvement in clubs and organizations as well as their attendance at co-curricular programs despite their transition to becoming a commuter student. Through involvement, they found an increased sense of belonging that students who started and remained a commuter student struggled to achieve.

According to student participants, being a commuter student presented a unique set of challenges. The challenges that commuting presented include having to manage time wisely, coordinating modes of transportation among family members or public entities and experiencing sleep deprivation. Despite these challenges, the study participants identified strategies to ensure success. Accessing networks on- and off-campus, learning how to manage their time, asking for help, being organized, and developing good study habits contributed to their success and persistence. Culminating the entire experience is the academic self-concept and level of

commitment these students possessed in completing their college education. They perceived getting a college degree as achieving more for their life, elevating their family's socio-economic status, resisting cultural stereotypes in their communities, and serving as role models for future generations of family members.

Discussion

In Chapter 2, I articulated that this study was based on theoretical frameworks of Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model, Nora's (2004) student/institution engagement model and Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework. These frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of college persistence for non-traditional students and Hispanic college students. Bean and Metzner's model lends itself well to understanding the needs and experiences of students who commute to college, and it illustrates more clearly the impact of external obligations and demands on their time that may be attributed to their decisions to forfeit their goals and aspirations of a college education. Nora speaks to Hispanic student persistence, and the model provides a profile of Hispanic students' experience through college and factors that impact their decisions to persist in or withdraw from college. Yosso spotlights the assets students of color bring to their college experience through the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups.

I anticipated finding data similar to the constructs in the models referenced. The literature cited factors that would pull the study participants' commitment further away from college such as family responsibilities, working long hours, commuting long distances, lack of encouragement, and perceived opportunity to transfer as outlined in Bean and Metzner's (1985)

nontraditional undergraduate student attrition model and Nora's (2004) student/institution engagement model. Further, I anticipated I would find other factors such as resiliency in face of adversity, expectations from parents based on gender roles, pre-college experiences impacting retention, the size of the college enrollment, type of college, size of Latina/o population at the institution, students' perception of their interaction with faculty, having a support system, and feeling a sense of belonging on campus as described in Nora's (2004) model, all of which impacted their persistence. I also thought about the array of capital as identified by Yosso that these students brought with them to college and utilized to persist toward completion. As Yosso (2005) identified in her community cultural wealth model, students possess six forms of capital: aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial, and resistant. To some degree what I found was aligned with the literature but there were a few differences.

Differences in findings from the literature. Having identified the factors that influence the persistence of first-generation Latina commuter students, three emerged that were different from the literature. Those factors include expectations from parents, financial concerns, and support systems.

Expectations from parents. Fulfilling the expectations of parents was sometimes a source of motivation and sometimes a source of contention. The participants shared that education was important and the pursuit of higher education was expected of them by their parents. This finding is unique because current literature on the subject claims that for Latinas, the parental expectation is for them to assume traditional gender roles of staying at home and caring for family (Ortega Parra, 2007). The exact opposite was found. Although some students mentioned some contention with parents expecting them to complete chores or provide care for

younger siblings or relatives upon arrival at home, tensions dissipated when participants explained that their time had to be spent completing homework assignments and studying in order to secure a good job after college and ultimately help the family in the long term. An additional finding of observing women role models at Mount St. Mary's College, though not prevalent among all participants, introduced a sense of empowerment that was not always explicit at home. As First-generation Latina commuter students were trying to balance their academic pursuits and obligations at home an additional stressor occurred when considering the financial burden of their pursuits.

Financial concern. The participants' financial concerns caused them to make sacrifices such as choosing to commute and working part-time off campus while attending school. Concern over the ability to pay initially weighed heavily on the participants' college selection process but concerns were laid to rest with the financial aid package offered by Mount St. Mary's College. For many participants, the financial aid offered was sufficient for tuition however it was not adequate to cover the cost of living on campus or could only sustain the cost of living on campus for the first couple of years of their schooling. The participants would have preferred to reside on campus but it was too expensive. It was cost prohibitive for them because they did not want to burden their parents with additional loans. These students placed their parents' financial situation at the forefront and made the selfless choice to sacrifice. They witnessed the sacrifices made by their parents just to make tuition payments, in turn the participants sacrificed alongside their parents by choosing to commute.

Another way the participants sacrificed was by seeking employment. Thirteen out of the 19 participants had part-time employment in addition to attending school full-time. Two

participants in addition to holding a part-time job off campus also worked on-campus because they were awarded work-study aid. While Bean and Metzner's model suggested that working long hours was a pull factor, there were seven participants who did not work, seven who worked less than 20 hours per week and only six who worked 20-30 hours per week. The six who worked more than 20 hours per week did it out of necessity to provide for their personal needs or to contribute to the family.

Support systems. Bean and Metzner's (1985) model identified lack of encouragement as a factor that would pull on students' commitment to college. The participants of this study did not have the pull that Bean and Metzner described. All participants spoke of sources of encouragement received all throughout college from parents, family, peers, professors, and staff. Collectively, the group reported positive academic and psychological outcomes during their college career that contributed to their persistence toward college completion. Academic outcomes consisted of developing good study habits and accountability from peers. Psychological outcomes consisted of perceived value of their college education and prospects of future employment, satisfaction with intellectual stimulation and degree of importance of graduating from college.

Similarities in the findings with the literature. There were also factors that emerged from this study that supported existing literature. Those factors include a sense of belonging, receiving encouragement through networks of support, and academic self-concept and level of commitment.

Sense of belonging. The institution assisted with the transition to college for these students by helping to create a sense of belonging on campus. The study participants expressed a

sense of belonging due to the institutional fit, their involvement, and their connections with individuals within the community. Nora (2004) explains that upon arriving at college, student persistence is influenced by the size of the college enrollment, type of college, size of Latina/o population at the institution and students' perception of their interaction with faculty, personal-emotional adjustment, ability to manage resources, having a support system, and feeling a sense of belonging on campus. This study concurred with current literature as 15 out of 19 participants stated that their reason for choosing Mount St. Mary's College was that they liked that it was a small college and found the religious affiliation and academic program reputation to be appealing. Though four mentioned they thought about leaving Mount St. Mary's College at the end of their freshman year, their reasons differed. The reasons included concerns about not getting into the nursing program, difficulty adjusting to college, not having a particular major and not enough financial aid. All concerns were resolved with getting the major desired, more financial aid provided, or realizing the college was a good fit for her.

Next, the personal attention received from professors, staff, and peers fostered a support system that helped the study participants to thrive and ultimately created a sense of belonging. While the institution is a small campus and has a close-knit community feel, the ability for commuters to connect on campus can be difficult. However, the assorted opportunities to get involved on campus and make connections with members of the community are plentiful. It is interesting to note that students who started off their college career residing on campus and got involved in co-curricular activities maintained some level of involvement after becoming a commuter. They found their friendships and experiences to be worth the sacrifice of their time.

Those students on the other hand who had never resided on campus found it more difficult to get involved, make friendships, and therefore create a sense of belonging.

Finally, commuter students made connections in the classroom with their peers and professors. Connections established with peers were due to their shared college experiences. Professors because they made themselves accessible to answer students' questions, served as a professional reference or are perceived professional role models in their career field. These students extracted from their educational experience academic support and validation boosting their confidence to persist and seeing they possessed academic capital and were capable learners (Nora, 2004; Rendon, 1994).

Encouragement from networks of support. The next factor is receiving encouragement from networks of support. Making the transition to college was difficult for these first-generation Latina commuter college students. The reasons offered include anxiety about getting into the nursing program, performing well academically, managing time well, challenges with commuting to campus, and learning how to study. Socially, these students had to learn to develop new friendships in a new environment. Consistent with Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model, students harnessed resilience and tapped into their social and navigational capital. The participants demonstrated the use of social capital when they gravitated towards associating with the familiar faces known from high school that had also enrolled in the college or when they extended their social network by getting involved in activities on-campus. Peers became an integral part in influencing the successful transition to college. Stories were shared of great reliance on peers to provide academic advice and support, and a source of understanding. The participants' rationale for these actions was that their peers had shared experiences and

relying on someone who they could relate to was comforting. The participants thrived on the aspirational capital that existed among their peers' determination to perform well academically which motivated them to do the same and to stay the course when stress levels rose. Finally, peers provided a depth of accountability to each other alongside family members.

Members of the family served as an external network of support for the participants as well. Yosso (2005) refers to this as exercising familial capital. By these participants stepping out into uncharted territory, they changed the course of history in their family and subsequently elevated the value and significant contribution that members of the family played in their success. The participants shared stories of their parents, in particular their mothers, offering moral support when life at school became stressful and members of the family rallied to support. While fathers and siblings were mentioned as transporting students to school, mothers repeatedly was named as the number one supporter for the students. Mothers listened attentively, expressed interest in the daily happenings, and provided the majority of emotional support.

Academic self-concept and level of commitment. The academic self-concept and level of commitment to accomplishing the goal of attaining a bachelor's degree was incredibly high for participants in this study and illustrated what Yosso (2005) described as resistant capital. These students came to college with a purpose and endeavored to successfully finish. Highly motivated by their family's situation, a desire to achieve more in life than their parents and make their parents proud, the participants revealed their tenacity to break cultural stereotypes within their family structure and in society. They overcame the challenges they encountered along their path. They did not accept what they saw in their environment as their destiny or endorsed ideals

of cultural gender roles. They were affirmed along the way. In achieving success, they endeavor to make a difference in their families and communities for generations to come.

Conclusion

College for the first-generation Latina commuter college students who participated in this study were predominantly based on an illusion conjured by scenes projected in the media. What the participants found at Mount St. Mary's College was contrary to the anticipated movie portrayal of college to be about partying and studying. They described Mount St. Mary's College to be more challenging than high school. They found professors to be helpful and accessible. Finally, they found that college was a time for them to explore their freedom and independence, expand their horizons and shape their character. The exposure to college opened windows and doors to dream bigger for their future. It afforded them the opportunity to learn from professionals in their career of choice, be connected to internships to develop professional skills, and think about continuing their education to earn a graduate or terminal degree. These students are not selfish. They perceive getting an education as an opportunity to reach back to help others. They envision going back to make a difference in their immediate family to teach future generations the path they took and how to succeed. Educate members of their communities about getting an education and improving their lives. These students' experience crystalized for them the tenacity to remain focused and persist despite the challenges to fulfilling their dream.

Implications and Recommendations

The lived experiences shared by the participants, present implications for institutions who serve commuter students, first-generation students, and a Latina student population. Institutions

should be mindful of the needs and issues that confront this population. This study brought to light the challenges experienced by the participants with parental lack of understanding of their college experience, having to find their way on their own, satisfying parental expectations to contribute to home life and meeting the demands of academic rigor as a college student. Furthermore, coping with the struggles of commuting, its impact on time management and experiencing sleep deprivation. This study provided insight to the experiences of this particular population during their college career. As such, the following recommendations are suggested to better serve this population. A network for mentoring should be created by establishing a peer mentoring program. Due to the transient lifestyle of commuter students, viral messages should be created by providing on-going correspondence with commuter students about tips related to best practices for time management, studying, practicing self-care and communicating with parents and college personnel about their needs. To assist parents of first-generation commuter college students, provide a seminar where they can receive insight on what they can expect will be demanded of their student academically and an overview of the college experience. Outreach from student services staff members to commuter students to encourage them to get involved on campus and communicate to them the benefits personally and academically. Since professors are a prominent point of contact for commuter students, campuses should encourage professors to informally check in with their students about how they are doing academically and emotionally in terms of challenging stressors. Lastly, institutions such as Mount St. Mary's College should strive to make it a priority to track the retention and persistence of commuter students because it can inform and shape the objectives and outcomes of the services provided to commuter students and enhance retention rates.

Commuter Peer Mentor Program. The recommendations offered can be implemented not only by Mount St. Mary's College but also by institutions serving similar populations of students. Students who are first-generation will not readily reveal they are the first in their families to attend college. While their aspirational capital is high and their social capital is strong, this study demonstrates that first-generation Latina commuter students rely on each other to navigate college. Efforts should be made to match first-year commuter students with an upperclassman peer mentor who is strong academically and is quite familiar with navigating the institution to serve as a resource guide. This can be achieved by creating a commuter peer mentor program. The outcome would highlight the presence of other students who are succeeding in college and create a climate of support (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004; Arana, Castaneda-Sound, Blanchard, & Aguilar, 2010). A commuter peer mentor program can be achieved by recruiting upperclassmen commuter students who demonstrate high academic achievement and are student leaders in co-curricular activities to serve as a resource guide for first-year commuter students. This can be a one year commitment to provide adequate time for the support of the first-year commuter student being mentored to transition and adjust to college. Commuter peer mentors would receive leadership training in serving as a mentor and if possible, a stipend. The commuter peer mentor program can be semi-structured whereby commuter peer mentors would check in with their first year commuter student to be mentored once a month providing advice and support on adjusting to college. I believe the impact would be great for mentors and mentees. It would meet the need of a student population who would no longer have to figure things out on their own and would give current commuter students an opportunity to expand their affiliation to the institution by giving back.

Seminar for parents of first-generation commuter students. The findings of this study revealed that Latina college students receive encouragement and motivation from parents, primarily mothers. They have a personal desire to elevate themselves and their family to a higher socio-economic status. For them, attending college is empowering. Institutions can further empower families by educating parents of first-generation commuter students of the demands of college, the challenges of commuting, and the lifestyle their student would have to develop in order to be successful at the start of their children's college career. We learned that students participated in preparatory programs in high school to receive information about applying to college and that parents attended workshops with them. Upon admission, it would be incumbent upon a college institution to continue the education process for these parents to inform them of the college culture, what the academic experience will be for their commuter student, and to encourage involvement in student life. The seminar can feature current commuter students to share their lived experience as a commuter college student. The lived experiences would describe the transition and adjustment from high school to college, the challenges of commuting and suggestions to help prepare parents on how best to support their child when they come to college. The seminar should also be made available in multiple languages to which parents can understand. The outcome achieved would be a demonstration of institutional support to parents in understanding the college going experience (Terenzini et al., 1994).

Commuter student viral messages. This study revealed key experiences of a student who commutes to college. An institution can enhance the educational experience of its commuter population by creating messages that can go viral via social media to address topics such as time management, practicing self-care, and communicating effectively with parents and

college personnel about needs. In regards to time management, it is a skill that commuter students quickly have to cultivate to be successful. The demands on time are different for each commuter student depending on distance traveled, modes of transportation they have to take and more importantly, their major. The study revealed that students are traveling upwards of 80 miles round trip, starting their day as early as 4:00 a.m., and returning home late at night. Academic requirements such as completing internship hours or clinical hours on top of academic course loads contribute to the demands on time that commuter students have to juggle. Consequently, the long hours spent in transit and late hours spent on academics result in these commuter students being sleep deprived. Further, the participants' parents lack of first-hand experience of attending college prevent them from fully comprehending the magnitude of the stress experienced by their child in fulfilling academic expectations. Therefore, institutions of higher education serving commuter students should utilize measures of reaching these students through viral messages that can easily access. Measures can include short videos from currently enrolled students sharing tips, postings on Facebook with tips that they can read at their leisure, images on Instagram or Pinterest with messages addressing topics of time management, self-care, studying, or communicating with parents could be effective in assisting these students manage the day-to-day experience of being in college.

Outreach by student services staff. Outreach should occur from student services staff members to commuter students to encourage them to get involved on campus. The participants who developed a relationship with student services staff were able to because of work-study employment within those offices. We also learned of the staff members on campus who had the most contact with commuter students were the shuttle drivers and cafeteria employees. Student

services staff members should attempt to connect with commuter students by being more visible and interactive with students. This can be achieved by sponsoring events on campus, holding workshops, and creating a social media campaign to reach commuter students. The result of the outreach can inform commuters of their services and foster relationships with the students whereby students can receive guidance and resources to support them through their journey in college. They can also serve to contribute to the personal development of the student by encouraging commuter students to engage in co-curricular activities that will enhance their academic experience outside of the classroom and build their leadership skills.

Professors conducting informal check-in. Professors, like teachers in high school, have an immediate and long lasting impact on the lives of first-generation Latina commuter students. They are perceived to be a source of encouragement and support for these students. Colleges should encourage professors to conduct informal check-ins with their students about how they are doing academically and emotionally. Professors have the most contact with commuter students and thus can do more to not only challenge them intellectually but also support them through informal conversations about their well-being. Utilizing faculty professional development workshops or faculty assembly meetings will provide access to full-time and adjunct faculty. These opportunities can be modes to convey the importance of their interaction with commuter students. In addition, educating faculty about the resources and services available to students and how they can be accessed will equip them with the knowledge necessary to appropriately make referrals to students. At an institution such as Mount St. Mary's College where class sizes are small, a few minutes of class time twice a semester to check-in with students where they are emotionally or what challenges they are experiencing academically

can make a difference in the college experience for a student who is first-generation and commuting. The difference made would be being able to refer them to services on campus that can assist in their development, academic performance, and integration into the culture of the institution. Taking active interest in their socialization and success as a student expresses confidence in their potential (Hernandez & Lopez, 2004).

Track the retention and persistence of commuter students. Institutions such as Mount St. Mary's College should strive to make it a priority to track the retention and persistence of commuter students because it can inform and shape the objectives and outcomes of the services provided to commuter students and enhance retention rates. Mount St. Mary's College serves a population of students where the majority is Latina and two-thirds of the population commutes. Presently there is no record maintained tracking the retention and persistence of students by resident status. In other words, beyond the first year in college, the institution is unable to produce information regarding retention and persistence data for students who reside on campus versus those who commute. Creating a database to track this information would be helpful in determining the institution's effectiveness in meeting the needs of its student population. Cracks in the pipeline can be determined quickly if they are able to pinpoint aspects of the student experience that triggers departure such as issues inherent in majors, course offerings, class scheduling, academic advising, or financial aid.

Recommendations for Further Research

Hearing the stories of these students is evidence that the love and support of family, peers, and agents of influence can positively impact students in their completion of college. However, there were quite a few stories that remained untold. A recommendation for further

research is to learn about the experiences of students who transferred from other institutions. Perhaps, compare and contrast the experiences of transfer students with students who started at Mount St. Mary's College immediately after high school. I make this suggestion because the pool of participants for this study all seem to be graduating within four years; it is inconsistent with the relatively low graduation rate that Mount St. Mary's College is reporting. By researching the experience of transfer students, it would determine if transfer students experience longer terms of semesters in completing their baccalaureate degree. In addition, include in the pool of participants students who made their start at the Doheny campus. Students who begin at the Doheny campus are students who are not academically prepared for college, but through course work and academic support services, receive the assistance needed to continue on to complete their bachelor's degree. By including Doheny students who transfer to the Chalon campus, I believe this would reveal whether there is consistency in college experience, number of years in degree completion and factors that influence their persistence toward college completion. It may be interesting to compare the experiences of first-generation commuter students from other ethnic backgrounds. This would reveal how similar or different the values, pre-college experiences, college transition, challenges, social networks, and motivations would be for different ethnic groups. Would the factors impacting college persistence be consistent and are they graduating at the same rates?

Dissemination of Findings

The findings from this research will be shared through various platforms. A copy of the dissertation will be shared with each of the participants in this study and with the Provost and Academic Vice President of Mount St. Mary's College. I also plan to submit proposals to

present at conferences to spread awareness of the needs of this student population and to look at Mount St. Mary's College as a model institution for supporting these students toward college completion. In working with commuter student populations, the commonalities of experience will add to the literature related to commuter students. Institutions can glean from this study the needs of today's commuter students, and further understand how best to support students who are first-generation Latina commuter students.

Reflections

I am grateful for the opportunity to have performed this study. I thoroughly enjoyed conducting this study and talking with students. It afforded me insight into the lives of first generation commuter college students. Though this study focused specifically on Latina students, I observed that majority of my participants focused primarily on their status as a first-generation and commuter student. While I was enlightened by the experience, there were some valuable lessons learned.

There were findings that I thought would emerge from the interviews. Having read the literature related to the persistence of first-generation college students, Latina college students and commuter college students, I anticipated hearing stories from my participants that would reflect the images projected. Most similar were the challenges of parents' lack of college knowledge and multiple commitments placing demands on time for commuter students. What did not emerge were the traditional gender expectations of Latinas to stay home and work. Unlike the experiences of Latinas at predominantly White institutions, Latinas at Mount St. Mary's College, a Hispanic Serving Institution, found the environment welcoming, nurturing and community oriented similar to the culture of their families.

Appendix A

Preliminary Questionnaire

I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership Program at UCLA. I am conducting a study on first generation Latina commuter students and factors that influence their persistence toward college graduation. Latinas presently lag behind other racial groups in attaining a college degree. In an effort to increase the graduation rate among Latinas in higher education, this research seeks to learn from students who are successful in order to inform practice and serve future generations of Latina college students in their persistence in college completion. If you would like to contribute to research on first generation Latina commuter college students please complete the following questionnaire. If your responses meet the necessary characteristics of the study and you indicate that you are willing to participate, you will be included in the final stage of the study, an individual interview. Selected participants for the individual interview process will receive a \$10 Target gift card. Please email the information below to:

Faraah Mullings

Faraah.mullings@gmail.com

Name: _____

1. Age: _____
2. Ethnicity (e.g. Mexican American, Central American, Puerto Rican): _____
3. Did you enter college right after high school? __Yes __No
4. Did you transfer from the Doheny campus? __Yes __No
5. Did you transfer from another institution (community college or 4 year college)? __Yes __No
6. What is your major? _____
 - a. Did you change your major during your time in college? __Yes __No
 - b. If yes, please list all your previous majors: _____
7. How many semesters have you been a commuter student? _____
8. Miles travelled round trip per day to campus: _____
9. Do you have a job on campus? __Yes __No
 - 9a. If yes, how many hours per week do you work? _____
 - 9b. List departments you have worked for: _____
10. Do you have a job off campus? __Yes __No
 - 10a. If yes, how many hours per week do you work? _____
11. How many years is it taking to complete your bachelor's degree? _____
12. Are you the first in your family to go to college? __Yes __No
13. Mother's highest educational achievement (e.g. elementary, junior high, high school, some college): _____
14. Father's highest educational achievement (e.g. elementary, junior high, high school, some college): _____
15. Educational Aspiration – highest degree you want to attain (e.g. bachelors, masters, doctorate): _____
16. Marital Status: (mark one) __single __married __divorced __separated __domestic partnership
17. Are you willing to participate in the study? __Yes __No
18. If "YES", please supply your contact information.

Phone number: (____) _____

Best time to reach you: _____

Email: _____

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Introduction

My name is Faraah Mullings and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership Program at UCLA. I am conducting a study on first generation Latina commuter college students. The purpose of this interview is to learn about factors that influenced your persistence toward college graduation while a student at Mount St. Mary's College. A pseudonym will be used to ensure your anonymity and confidentiality. Do I have your permission to record this interview?

Interview Questions

1. What values were placed on going to college by your parents, extended family members, or high school teachers, counselors that impacted your decision to go to college? What things were said or done?
Probes: What concerns did you have about going to college?
In what ways were you encouraged or discouraged about going to college?
2. What experiences in high school prepared you for college?
Probes: What classes, assignments, people, programs, services did you participate in during high school?
3. What made you decide to attend Mount St. Mary's College?
Probes: Describe what it is like being a first-generation Latina commuter student at the Mount St. Mary's College?
How did you communicate your experiences with members of your family?
What did you tell your parents?
4. What challenges have you experienced during your years in college?
Probes: What impacted you academically, socially, and in your family during your first year?
How was your experience similar or different from what you expected college would be?
What obligations if any, did you have to fulfill to your family while going to college?
Who helped you most in the transition to college?
How did family assist with your transition to college?
How did peers help you transition/adjust to college?
How did professors help you in your transition to college?
How did staff help you in your transition to college?
Describe the challenges you experienced in your sophomore and junior year?
What strategies did you utilize to succeed and persist?
How did peers, professors and/or staff impact your success and persistence?
How did family impact your success and persistence?
5. What similarities and/or differences do you notice being a commuter v. a resident at the Mount?
Probes: Why did you decide to commute to MSMC?

How did your experience as a commuter student affect your success in college?
(give examples)

What co-curricular activities were you involved in?

As a commuter student, did you work? If yes, where? How many hours per week? Why?

6. Have you ever contemplated leaving Mount St. Mary's College? Why?

Probes: What made you decide to stay?

7. Who would you identify as best supporting you the most throughout your college years to succeed and in what ways?

Probes: How did Mount St. Mary's foster a sense of belonging on campus?

What did you participate in while at the Mount that you would attribute to your success?

What connections did you make with professors, staff and peers that supported you through your journey in college? Site examples.

What did professors do (e.g. advising, teaching, present at conferences) inside or outside of the classroom that you would attribute to your success thus far?

8. What goals do you have for your life after college?

Probes: What personal motivation helped you persist through college?

9. What recommendations would you make to the institution to enhance student success?

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