

**UCLA**

**UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations**

**Title**

Educational Resilience Inspired by Familial Cuentos (Narratives) and Consejos (Advice): Exploring How Low-Income Mexican-American Women's Assets Serve as Resources for College Persistence

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6v80v0zp>

**Author**

Rocha, Janet

**Publication Date**

2015

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Educational Resilience Inspired by Familial *Cuentos* (Narratives) and *Consejos* (Advice):  
Exploring How Low-Income Mexican-American Women's Assets Serve as Resources for  
College Persistence

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

by

Janet Rocha

2015

© Copyright by

Janet Rocha

2015

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Educational Resilience Inspired by Familial *Cuentos* (Narratives) and *Consejos* (Advice):  
Exploring How Low-Income Mexican-American Women's Assets Serve as Resources for  
College Persistence

by

Janet Rocha

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Daniel G. Solórzano, Co-Chair

Professor Kris D. Gutiérrez, Co-Chair

This study examines the first-year college transition of first-generation college women of Mexican heritage and the strategies they use to persist in college. The sample is comprised of seven low-income, first-year female college students of Mexican heritage at a large, highly competitive public university. I conducted one semi-structured interview, four open-ended interviews, and three photo-elicitation interviews with each participant (56 interviews in total). I also visited each woman's dorm room to document meaningful artifacts. Additionally, I conducted participant-observations during campus tours led by the women, and also conducted four focus groups to engage them in the process of analysis. This study identified the types of familial-cultural practices these women engaged in with their families and how they developed asset-based resources used to navigate their first year of college. A Latina/o critical race theory framework was used to analyze the raced and gendered layers of their experiences and highlight the forms of resilience and agency developed by study participants.

Findings from this study revealed the following: Firstly, familial *cuentos* and *consejos* serve as teaching tools that yield critical consciousness. These familial-cultural practices helped these women develop resilient behaviors and positive attitudes that they applied to experiences transitioning into a university setting. Secondly, first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage drew meaning from *cuentos* and *consejos*, developing them into asset-based resources that fostered their educational resilience. Thirdly, study participants entered higher education with asset-based resources and identified effective strategies to deploy their assets and resources. Lastly, participants used these strategies to overcome various challenges and persist through their first-year in college. Recommendations gleaned from this study include specific programming suggestions designed to help college administrators interested in college persistence among students of color gain a better understanding of the first-year experience of these students.

This study encourages postsecondary institutions to celebrate and honor students' multicultural college identities through policies and programming agendas that actively encourage personal, academic, and professional development. Understanding how students negotiate the demands of school and their family ties and commitments contributes to the development of methodologies that will better support these students in higher education. Once we more fully understand students' experiences and assets, universities can build upon their cultural wealth to better help them develop a sense of belonging at their institutions, which will lead to greater postsecondary success.

The dissertation of Janet Rocha is approved.

Frederick Erickson

Tara J. Yosso

Daniel G. Solórzano, Committee Co-Chair

Kris D. Gutiérrez, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2015

## DEDICATIONS

Dedicated to every person who played a pivotal role in helping me persist in the American educational pipeline. *¡Si Se Pudo!*



Kindergarten



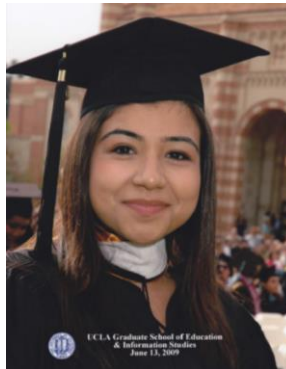
8<sup>th</sup> grade



H.S.



B.S.



M.A.



Ph.D.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>DEDICATIONS</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b> .....	<b>vi</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b> .....	<b>ix</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b> .....	<b>x</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	<b>xiii</b>
<b>VITA</b> .....	<b>xiv</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Purpose, Objectives, and Rationale</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Problem Statement</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Theoretical Framework</b> .....	<b>8</b>
Latina/o Critical Race Theory.....	9
Community Cultural Wealth Model.....	10
<b>Research Questions</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Developmental Engagement Model</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Overview of Chapters</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>Mexican American Students in Higher Education</b> .....	<b>17</b>
The American Educational Pipeline .....	17
First-Generation College Students .....	22
The First-Year Experience.....	23
<b>The Deficit Perspective</b> .....	<b>24</b>
<b>Predicting College Success</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>The Relevance of Social Forces</b> .....	<b>27</b>
<b>Familial and Cultural Assets</b> .....	<b>28</b>
Asset-Based Thinking.....	28
Documenting Cultural Strengths .....	29
The Role of <i>Familismo</i> .....	30
<b>College Retention Models</b> .....	<b>31</b>
Tinto’s Stages of Passage Model.....	32
Yosso’s Chicana/o Stages of Passage Model .....	34
<b>CHAPTER 3</b> .....	<b>37</b>
<b>Pilot Study and New Research Questions</b> .....	<b>38</b>
<b>Setting and Participants</b> .....	<b>42</b>
West Coast University .....	42
Recruitment Procedures .....	43
Study Participants.....	45
<b>Research Design</b> .....	<b>48</b>
<b>Data Sources by Research Question</b> .....	<b>52</b>
Research Questions 1 and 2.....	52
Research Question 3 .....	54
Research Question 4 .....	58
<b>Data Reduction and Analysis</b> .....	<b>59</b>



Preliminary Analysis Phase .....	60
Collaborative Analysis Phase .....	65
Final Analysis Phase.....	66
<b>Positionality of the Researcher .....</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4.....</b>	<b>71</b>
<b><i>Cuentos and Consejos: Examples of Familial-Cultural Pedagogical Tools</i> .....</b>	<b>72</b>
Connections Between Familial <i>Cuentos</i> and <i>Consejos</i> .....	74
<b>Transformation of Life Lessons to Educational Aspirations and Attainment.....</b>	<b>77</b>
Familial Economic Hardships and Sacrifices .....	78
Participants' <i>Cuentos</i> .....	85
Immigration Journeys and Sacrifices.....	87
Interactions with Inequality .....	96
Families' Words of Wisdom.....	101
<b>Analytical Summary of Chapter .....</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5.....</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>Development of Asset-Based Resources .....</b>	<b>112</b>
<b>Transforming Meaningful Information Into Asset-based Resources.....</b>	<b>112</b>
Defining and Contextualizing Asset-based Resources.....	113
<b>Maintaining Motivation .....</b>	<b>116</b>
Motivation to Excel Academically .....	117
Motivation to Challenge Social Inequality .....	118
<b>Development of Aspirations .....</b>	<b>121</b>
Aspiration to Obtain a College Degree .....	122
Aspiration to Help Parents Acquire Financial Stability.....	126
Aspiration to Become Role Models and Give Back to the Community.....	129
<b>Preservation of Familial, Ethnic, and Cultural Pride .....</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>Sustainment of Positivity/Optimism Through Faith .....</b>	<b>136</b>
<b>Exercise of a Strong Work Ethic.....</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>Analytical Summary of Chapter .....</b>	<b>140</b>
<b>CHAPTER 6.....</b>	<b>146</b>
<b>Display Various Types of Meaningful Artifacts .....</b>	<b>150</b>
Motivation.....	151
Aspirations.....	155
Familial, Ethic, and Cultural Pride.....	158
Positivity/Optimism .....	166
Work Ethic .....	169
<b>Connect with Family .....</b>	<b>171</b>
Motivation.....	172
Familial, Ethnic, and Cultural Pride.....	173
Positivity/Optimism .....	175
<b>Join Student Organizations.....</b>	<b>177</b>
Motivation.....	178
Familial, Ethnic, and Cultural Pride.....	179
<b>Connect with Academic Departments and Student Service Programs .....</b>	<b>181</b>
Motivation.....	182
Aspirations.....	183
Familial, Ethnic, and Cultural Pride .....	184
Work Ethic .....	188
<b>Locate Meaningful Unofficial Spaces.....</b>	<b>190</b>

Motivation.....	191
Aspirations.....	194
Familial, Ethnic, and Cultural Pride.....	196
Positivity/Optimism .....	199
Work Ethic .....	206
<b>Sustain Religious/Spiritual Practices.....</b>	<b>208</b>
Motivation.....	212
Positivity/Optimism .....	214
<b>Analytical Summary of Chapter .....</b>	<b>217</b>
<b>CHAPTER 7.....</b>	<b>223</b>
<b>Financial Hardships .....</b>	<b>226</b>
Jessica.....	227
Karina.....	231
<b>Sense of Guilt.....</b>	<b>237</b>
Elizabeth .....	238
Victoria .....	242
<b>Feelings of Pressure and Self-doubt.....</b>	<b>244</b>
Victoria .....	246
Rosie .....	246
Única.....	249
Elizabeth .....	250
<b>Sense of Belonging.....</b>	<b>251</b>
Negotiating Hostile Interactions in a Residential Environment.....	253
Negotiating Religious/Spiritual Practices in College .....	259
<b>Analytical Summary of Chapter .....</b>	<b>263</b>
<b>CHAPTER 8.....</b>	<b>268</b>
<b>Summary of Findings.....</b>	<b>270</b>
<b>Implications of the Findings .....</b>	<b>275</b>
Validation of Storytelling in Higher Education Research .....	275
Contribution to Theory.....	277
Contribution to Practice .....	281
Contribution to Methodology.....	285
<b>Suggestions for Future Research.....</b>	<b>287</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>289</b>
<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>291</b>
<b>Appendix A: Concepts and Definitions .....</b>	<b>291</b>
<b>Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer .....</b>	<b>292</b>
<b>Appendix C: Consent Form .....</b>	<b>293</b>
<b>Appendix D: Initial Open-Ended Interview Protocol .....</b>	<b>296</b>
<b>Appendix E: Initial Photo-Elicitation Interview Protocol .....</b>	<b>297</b>
<b>Appendix F: Dorm Room Inventory Record Sheet .....</b>	<b>298</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>299</b>

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1 <i>Overview of the Various Kinds of Familismo and Their Definitions</i> .....	30
Table 3.1 <i>Overview of Participants' Personal and Family Information</i> .....	47
Table 3.2 <i>Overview of the Data Sources</i> .....	49
Table 3.3 <i>Each Stage of the Study Chronology</i> .....	51
Table 3.4 <i>Overview of Data Sources for Research Question 1 and 2</i> .....	52
Table 3.5 <i>Overview of Data Sources for Research Question 3</i> .....	55
Table 3.6 <i>Overview of Data Sources for Research Question 4</i> .....	58
Table 3.7 <i>Example of a Set of Codes for the Open-Ended Interviews</i> .....	61
Table 3.8 <i>Example of Themes, Sub-Themes, Categories and Sub-Categories Addressing Research Question(1)</i> .....	62
Table 3.9 <i>Example of Major Assertions</i> .....	63
Table 3.10 <i>Examples of How the Resources Interconnect</i> .....	63
Table 3.11 <i>Examples of How Asset-based Resources are Converted into Strategies</i> .....	64
Table 3.12 <i>Overview of the Study's Course of Action Example of Themes</i> .....	66
Table 4.1 <i>Overview of Cuentos and Consejos Shared by Study Participants by Theme</i> .....	71
Table 4.2 <i>Two Types of Familial Cuentos</i> .....	74
Table 6.1 <i>Strategies used by Participants to Deploy Asset-based Resources</i> .....	149
Table 6.2 <i>Deployment of Asset-based Resources by Strategy</i> .....	150
Table 6.3 <i>Participants' Spiritual Practices Over time</i> .....	202
Table 7.1 <i>Four Major Challenges During First Year in College</i> .....	216

## LIST OF FIGURES

<i>Figure 1.1.</i> Tara Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model.....	11
<i>Figure 1.2.</i> Developmental engagement model.....	14
<i>Figure 2.1.</i> High school push-out rates by race/ethnicity.....	19
<i>Figure 2.2.</i> The Chicana/o educational pipeline by socioeconomic status.....	21
<i>Figure 2.3.</i> Tinto (1993) stages of passage model.....	32
<i>Figure 2.4.</i> Yosso (2006) model of Chicana/o undergraduate stages of passage.....	34
<i>Figure 3.1.</i> Photo from pilot study .....	40
<i>Figure 4.1.</i> Basic epistemological understanding of meaning-making process. ....	72
<i>Figure 4.2.</i> Engagement 1: Recognition of important life lessons and values.. ..	107
<i>Figure 5.1.</i> Conceptualization of asset-based resources.....	113
<i>Figure 5.2.</i> Asset-based resources are interconnected and can be drawn upon simultaneously .	115
<i>Figure 5.3.</i> A poem for Rosie's mother.....	133
<i>Figure 5.4.</i> Photo of Elizabeth's father .....	134
<i>Figure 5.5.</i> Tattoo of <i>Hechale ganas</i> [Don't give up].....	138
<i>Figure 5.6.</i> Photograph of Karina and her mother.....	139
<i>Figure 5.7.</i> Engagement 1 and engagement 2 from the developmental engagement model.....	141
<i>Figure 6.1.</i> Jessica's collage.....	153
<i>Figure 6.2.</i> Victoria's desk with family photos .....	155
<i>Figure 6.3.</i> Única's bi-fold picture frame.....	157
<i>Figure 6.4.</i> Victoria's stuffed animals .....	159
<i>Figure 6.5.</i> Única's stuffed animals.....	160
<i>Figure 6.6.</i> Única's pillow .....	161
<i>Figure 6.7.</i> Elizabeth's Mexican flag, Virgin Mary portrait, and a <i>Chavo del Ocho piñata</i> .....	162

<i>Figure 6.8. Victoria’s wall collage</i> .....	163
<i>Figure 6.9. Victoria’s Virgen de Guadalupe drawing</i> .....	163
<i>Figure 6.10. Única’s El Cristo statue and Virgen de Guadalupe portrait</i> .....	165
<i>Figure 6.11. Karina’s La Cena frame</i> .....	166
<i>Figure 6.12. Elia’s desk with framed family photographs</i> .....	167
<i>Figure 6.13. Jessica visits family in Mexico</i> .....	173
<i>Figure 6.14. Rosie before her ballet Folklórico dance performance</i> .....	177
<i>Figure 6.15. Committed to Achievement Program (CAP) located at Heritage Hall</i> .....	179
<i>Figure 6.16. Rosie works at the Chicano library</i> .....	181
<i>Figure 6.17. Eileen’s office, Chicana/o Studies Department</i> .....	183
<i>Figure 6.18. Karina and son before a tutoring session</i> .....	184
<i>Figure 6.19. Standing woman statue</i> .....	186
<i>Figure 6.20. Spiral circles sculpture</i> .....	187
<i>Figure 6.21. Sunset in multiple social contexts</i> .....	188
<i>Figure 6.22. Elia’s mother excited about her daughters college career</i> .....	189
<i>Figure 6.23. Frutero</i> .....	190
<i>Figure 6.24. Palm trees, similar to date trees back home</i> .....	191
<i>Figure 6.25. Stress-free zone</i> .....	192
<i>Figure 6.26. View of the nature</i> .....	192
<i>Figure 6.27. View of the city</i> .....	192
<i>Figure 6.28. Calmness arrives after the rain storm</i> .....	194
<i>Figure 6.29. Rainbow after the rain</i> .....	195
<i>Figure 6.30. One step at a time</i> .....	196
<i>Figure 6.31. Karina at the beach</i> .....	197
<i>Figure 6.32. Squatting woman statue</i> .....	199

*Figure 6.33.* One of Elizabeth’s many church retreats .....204

*Figure 6.34.* Engagement 1, engagement 2, and engagement 3 from the developmental engagement model.....211

*Figure 7.1.* Screen shot of Jessica’s parents from her laptop .....220

*Figure 7.2.* Karina is studying and being a mommy.....226

*Figure 7.3.* Karina’s “I am not lucky, I’m just blessed” tattoo.....227

*Figure 7.4.* Elia’s mother frequently visits .....232

*Figure 7.5.* The wall of Rosie’s room.....238

*Figure 7.6.* Karina’s framed photos.....245

*Figure 7.7.* Karina’s family reunion .....246

*Figure 7.8.* Students’ developmental engagement process with their familial-cultural practices .....255

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply honored that Elia, Karina, Jessica, Única, Victoria, Rosie, and Elizabeth participated in this year-long study. This research would not have been possible without their commitment and inspirational *cuentos*. I am grateful that my dissertation was supported by the Ford Foundation Dissertation Fellowship and the UCLA Institute of American Cultures, a grant from the Chicano Studies Research Center. I am especially thankful for the love, support, and motivation received from my mom, siblings, nieces and nephews, as well as my *colegas*. A special thanks to Osbaldo who made sure I wrote every day and encouraged me to maintain a healthy lifestyle as I completed the dissertation. Lastly, thanks to the members of my dissertation committee who provided their expertise, insights, and guidance.

## VITA

**Janet Rocha**

---

### EDUCATION

*Ford Foundation Dissertation Fellowship Recipient*

**University of California, Los Angeles** 2009

Graduate School of Education & Information Studies

*Master of Arts* in the Division of Social Research Methodology

Faculty Advisors: Frederick Erickson, Ph.D. & Kris D. Gutiérrez, Ph.D.

**Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois** 2008

School of Education & Social Policy

*Bachelor of Science* in Learning and Organizational Change, with Sociology minor

*College Honors*

---

### RESEARCH INTERESTS

Campus Racial Climate; College Retention and Persistence; Underrepresented Populations; First-Year Experiences; Learning Communities; First-Generation College Students; Students' Perceptions of Family; Cultural Assets, Values, and Resources; Visual and Ethnographic Research Methods; Latino/a Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) and Methodologies; Feminist Epistemology Theory; Student Development and Engagement Theory;

---

### PUBLICATIONS

Davidson, P., Azziz, R., Morrison, J., **Rocha, J.**, Braun, J. (2012). Identifying and Developing Leadership Competencies in Health Research Organizations: A Pilot Study. *Journal of Health Administration Education Decision*, 29:2, pp. 135-154.

Philip, T.M., **Rocha, J.**, & Olivares Pasillas, M.C. Supporting Teachers of Color as they Negotiate Classroom Pedagogies of Race: A Case Study of a Teacher's Struggle with "Friendly-Fire" Racism. (Under review in *Equity & Excellence in Education*, July 2015).

Philip, T.M., Olivares Pasillas, M.C., & **Rocha, J.** The Entanglement of Data Literacy and Racial Literacy: A Case of Becoming Data Literate while Black. (Revise and resubmit in *Cognition and Instruction*, November 2014)



## CHAPTER 1

### PEDAGOGIES OF SACRIFICES:

#### MAKE FAMILIAL-CULTURAL ASSETS VISIBLE

#### IN HIGHER EDUCATION SETTINGS

The vision of la familia continues to be a form of discourse that provides Mexican Americans with identity, support, and comfort in an often hostile environment.

--Margarita Gangotena, 1994 (cited in Rodríguez, 2009, p. 19)

Margarita Gangotena's statement above exemplifies the lives of many Mexican-heritage, first-generation college students, including myself. Indeed, my family played a pivotal role in helping me persist as an undergraduate in what was oftentimes a hostile environment at a private, top-tier research institution. My interactions with my White counterparts made me feel "not good enough" to share a seat with them in the classroom. I felt that my admittance to the university was based on my Latina/o surname and not on academic merit.

When I felt "less than" my White counterparts and unworthy of being at a prestigious university because of my working-class background, I thought back to my mother's *consejos* [literally, advice]—a familial-cultural pedagogical tool used by families, often parents, to explicitly transfer wisdom and experiential knowledge to their children. There was one in particular that she emphasized to me and my siblings throughout my childhood:

*Mija, la educación es la llave para sus futuros. Les va abrir muchas oportunidades y nadie podrá quitarles su educación. Nosotros queremos lo mejor para ustedes. Tu papá y yo no tuvimos la oportunidad para ir a la escuela. Aquí, la educación es la llave para abrir sus sueños.*

Sweetie, education is the key to your futures. It will open many opportunities and no one will be able to take your education away. We want the best for you all. We did not have the opportunity to go to school. Here [in the United States], your education is the key to make your dreams a reality.

I valued my mother's wisdom when I encountered the unknown world of academia. As a child of immigrant parents and a first-generation college student (my father has a third grade education and my mother completed high school in Mexico), this predominantly White, prestigious, and upper-class world did not reflect my own experiences.

My university had a negative racial campus climate,<sup>1</sup> but I drew on the lessons I learned from my family and my familial and cultural strengths to persist and get through this higher education journey. Because I was living the dream of my immigrant mother to become successful in life, I could not and would not accept failure. I applied my mother's modeled work ethic and aspirations to my own hardships at the university as I sought to navigate an unknown world. Against the odds, I was resilient.

As I strove to continue through the higher education pipeline,<sup>2</sup> my mother's words of wisdom were symbolized in family photographs I displayed in my dorm room, helping me maintain a strong connection to my pre-college community. These photographs allowed me to focus on my mother's *consejos* and her desire for me to succeed in life. Her words proved to be my salvation in a hostile educational system not designed for students of color. My college years

---

<sup>1</sup> Campus climate is the "overall racial environment of the university that could potentially foster outstanding academic outcomes and graduation rates for all students but too often contributes to poor academic performance and high dropout rates for Students of Color" (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2009, p. 664). There are four elements that contribute to promoting a positive campus racial climate: "(a) the inclusion of Students, Faculty, and Administrators of Color; (b) a curriculum that reflects the historical and contemporary experiences of People of Color; (c) programs to support the recruitment, retention and graduation of Students of Color; and (d) a college/university mission that reinforces the institution's commitment to pluralism" (p. 664). A campus projects a negative racial climate when these elements are absent. Furthermore, Hurtado and Ponjuan (2005) suggested that a campus's climate is influenced by "a historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion of groups, by the structural diversity or numerical representation of diverse people, the nature of interactions among diverse groups, and the individual perceptions of the environment" (p. 236). In other words, racially and ethnically diverse students experience these domains of campus diversity differently, based on their cultural representation and relative social economic status on a campus.

<sup>2</sup> Researchers and policymakers often use the pipeline metaphor to depict critical stages in the educational process among certain groups: "The pipeline is said to be leaky—there is steady attrition of [students of color] at every level of [the American educational system]" (Varma & Hahn, 2008, p. 3). Tara Yosso (2006) referred to the educational pipeline as a system of interrelated institutions where students move from one level to the next. Students' trajectories vary and are shaped by school structures, policies, and culture.

were academically, socially, and emotionally difficult. However, those experiences inspired my research interest on the lived experiences of students of color in postsecondary education.

While I can honestly say that family and cultural assets played a crucial role in my persistence in postsecondary education, I wanted to gain a better understanding of the particular assets Mexican-heritage students bring to educational settings, and how such assets are utilized to overcome the challenges they face, especially in four-year universities. Lived experiences are too often unrecognized or underrepresented in higher education research. Thus, this study provides a critical and descriptive narration of the familial-cultural practices brought by women of Mexican heritage to their college careers. My research makes the invisible visible by allowing groups and individuals who have typically been silenced to share their subjective experiences and provide snapshots of their daily realities in the first year of higher education.

I began this chapter with this narrative in order to acknowledge and honor my own lived experiences as a first-generation college student. These experiences helped me develop a passion for better understanding the lived experiences of students who have been historically marginalized in higher education (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). Next, I more fully describe the purpose and problem statement of the current study, and then discuss the theoretical frameworks that I drew upon. I then lay out my study's conceptual framework by introducing a developmental engagement model that emerged from a pilot study. At the end of this chapter I provide an overview of the remaining chapters. Definitions of important concepts are provided in Appendix A.

### **Purpose, Objectives, and Rationale**

The purpose of this study was to understand how familial-cultural practices influence the first-year college experiences of high-achieving, low-income women of Mexican heritage. I define familial-cultural practices as the interactions individuals have with their families that

expose them to familial advice, wisdom, and experiential knowledge. I argue that these are transferred through familial-cultural pedagogical tools like *cuentos* and *consejos*. These practices can result in positive attitudes and behaviors towards education, such as the motivation to excel academically.

Bernal (2001) has discussed various approaches—“legends, *corridos*, storytelling, and behavior” (p. 624)—used to pass on community and familial knowledge from one generation to another among Mexican heritage families. Although this practice has been described as *storytelling* or *narratives*, I prefer to use the term *cuentos* to describe the practices of the seven participants in this study. I define *cuento* as a narrative about a lived experience that has an implied or explicit message for the recipient to create symbolic value. A *cuento* sometimes begins with a life experience and provides explicit advice, and the narrative justifies the validity of the shared advice. Thus, the recipient acknowledges the advice as genuine because of the source’s experiential knowledge. *Cuentos* can help “share the knowledge of conquest, segregation, labor market stratification, patriarchy, homophobia, assimilation, and resistance” (Bernal, 2001, pp. 624–625). Furthermore, the use of familial *cuentos* “can help us survive in everyday life by providing an understanding of certain situations and explanations about why things happen under certain conditions” (p. 625).

Conversely, Delgado-Gaitan (1994) has used the term *consejos* to describe the power of cultural narratives. I also use *consejos* to describe the direct words of wisdom handed from one generation to the next. Together, *cuentos* and *consejos* are the primary vehicles through which familial-cultural practices are imparted among Mexican heritage families (e.g., Bernal, 2001; Delgado-Gaitan, 1994). Regardless of the term used to describe them, scholars have found it vital to identify and examine these types of familial-cultural practices among communities of color. This study more specifically examined the role that *cuentos* and *consejos* play in students’

experiences and persistence in college. *Cuentos* and *consejos* can help acknowledge how communities of color have been marginalized and challenging majoritarian views can contribute to their college persistence.

In the context of the current study, students' engagement with familial-cultural practices involved recognition of important life lessons and values, meaning-making of information, and deployment of this knowledge in various educational settings. These practices resulted in pedagogies of sacrifices or the teachings of important life-lessons and values that students learn from their daily engagements in their families' cultural practices. The various types of *cuentos* and *consejos* allow students to value their familial and cultural experiences as children of marginalized families, and how their pursuit of education overcomes the hardships and sacrifices endured by their families.

My overarching goal was to understand how Latina college students leverage their cultural resources to transition and persist in college. Specifically, I examined how seven women recreated their familial-cultural practices as part of their college transition experiences. In the process, I explored: (a) the types of familial-cultural practices that female students of Mexican heritage engage in with their families; (b) the particular familial-cultural assets these women develop as a result of the symbolic value of such engagements; (c) the strategies they use to deploy such assets during their first-year experiences; and (d) the challenges they face as first-year university students.

I focus on women because it is important to understand how they deal with their multiple worlds. Research suggests that the responsibility to carry family commitments (e.g., help take care of siblings) usually falls on females (Espinoza, 2010; Sy & Romero, 2008). I hone in on the first-year experience because little empirical research has focused on the first-year experiences of women of Mexican heritage without grouping them with other women of Latin American origin,

males of Mexican heritage, or other racialized groups (Covarrubias, 2011; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). Furthermore, we have learned that a majority of students, who leave higher education do so during or immediately after their first year (e.g., Feldman & Newcomb, 1969/1994; Tinto, 1993). Thus, it is important for higher education scholars to gain a richer understanding of the first-year experience among these students, as well as contribute to more nuanced understandings of the decision-making process and the factors that influence student persistence and success.

### **Problem Statement**

According to the U.S. Department of Education, 1.7 million bachelor's degrees were awarded in 2010. Yet, only 9% of these were awarded to Latinas/os, compared to the 71% that were awarded to Whites. Taking into consideration that 16% of people in the United States population (50.5 million people) are of Hispanic or Latina/o origin (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), college degree attainment for Latinas/os is disproportionate to their representation in the general population. Pointing to these conflicting statistics, studies have disaggregated data by ethnicity and class, and have shown that few students of Mexican heritage from low-income backgrounds enter postsecondary institutions (Covarrubias, 2011; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). Those who do attend college are likely to come from middle-class families (Covarrubias, 2011).

Students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to attend college because “they face underresourced schools that spend a great deal of money on surveillance and enforcement, have the least experienced teachers, have densely populated schools, and are marked by other factors that hinder educational success” (Covarrubias, 2011, p. 15). In other words, these students lack the necessary pre-college support to make college a reality (Zarate & Gallimore, 2005). Therefore, it is important to document underrepresented students' college-

going experiences in order to capture the distinct challenges and barriers they encounter, as well as to document the factors that contribute to their persistence.

As I describe in more detail in Chapter 2, cultural deficit perspectives have been used to explain Mexican-heritage students' lack of success in the K–16 education system. Although there is a growing body of literature that documents the rich knowledge, beliefs, and worldviews of Mexican communities, only a handful of scholars have documented how students of color utilize their cultural wealth in their higher educational trajectories. Thus, it is important to uncover and understand the unique college-going experiences of students of Mexican heritage, and to learn more about the tools they use to negotiate these experiences.

This study takes on that challenge, and also expands on the methods employed in the examination of first-generation college students' experiences. Traditional higher education research tends to rely on surveys to understand college retention, persistence, engagement, and satisfaction (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). The lack of innovative methods can be explained by the overrepresentation of quantitative studies in this field (McDonough & Fann, 2007; Watford & Park, 2011). Taking into account the socially constructed nature of reality and its complexity, however, it is essential that we produce more textured accounts of the lives of students of color in higher education.

Thus, for this study, I used a multiple-interpretive method, involving multiple research techniques, to provide candid, rich, and varied accounts of the first-year college experiences of seven women of Mexican-heritage. In addition to traditional methods like semi-structured and open-ended interviews, I incorporated photo-elicitation interviews. Such an approach can yield detailed and nuanced information that is difficult to access through traditional interviewing methods (Harper, 2002). The approach opened a window into participants' personal spaces, such

as their dorm rooms and other meaningful locations on campus. Armed with digital cameras, these women had the power to capture their lives and provide snapshots that reflected their social worlds and everyday moments in their lives.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Central to the study is exploring how students leverage cultural assets and resources, or what have been referred to as *funds of knowledge* (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), *pedagogies of the home* (Bernal, 2001), *community cultural wealth* (Yosso, 2005), *pedagogies of migration* (Benavides Lopez, 2010), and *pedagogies of poverty* (Hernández, 2012). These concepts describe the types of assets and strengths that students of color learn through family and cultural practices. It is vital for scholars who study college persistence to consider these strengths when trying to understand issues related to student well-being in higher education.

I theorized that first-generation college-going women of Mexican heritage draw upon asset-based resources as they make their transitions to higher education. For this research, I have defined asset-based resources as those assets that are based in a person's interactions with their family's cultural practices, interactions that have raised their consciousness of oppressed experiences and contribute to educational aspirations and attainment. Families draw upon familial-cultural pedagogical tools—in this case, *cuentos* and *consejos*—to help transfer important life values, like the value of hard work. These values serve as internal resources that can be drawn upon in various settings to strengthen resilience.

As I describe in the subsection that follows, I also drew upon Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit) and Tara Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) model to make sense of students' racialized identities that can stem from their culture, language, phenotype, accent, immigration status, and surname.



## **Latina/o Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) originated from the work of legal scholars of color (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001), including Derrick A. Bell, Charles Lawrence, Richard Delgado, Lani Guinier, and Kimberle Crenshaw (Taylor, 2009). CRT scholars have identified racism as a normal fact of daily life in the United States that is neither unusual nor rare. This group of thinkers “redefined racism as not the act of individuals, but the larger, systemic, structural conventions and customs that uphold and sustain oppressive group relationships, status, income, and educational attainment” (Taylor, 2009, p. 4).

To investigate the marginalization of people of color in the United States, CRT scholars often use “storytelling, narrative, autobiography, and parable as a way to expose and challenge social constructions of race, in addition to refuting notions of merit and colorblindness” (Taylor, 2009, p. 8). In keeping with this approach, I employed photo-elicitation interviews because photographs get a closer look at what and whom participants consider important (Harper, 2002). As I discuss in later chapters, the resulting images, combined with participants’ narratives, allow the study findings to challenge normative views and majoritarian stories that often fail to capture how students of color navigate the American educational pipeline.

CRT has branched out into various disciplines (see Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In the field of education, Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso (2001) have defined critical race theory as “a framework or set of basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out of the classroom” (p. 25). In addition, CRT now includes specific branches of scholarship focused on Latinas/os (LatCrit), women (FemCrit), Asian Americans (AsianCrit), and Whites (WhiteCrit) (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

For this research I drew upon Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit), which specifically places at the center of analysis the lived experiences of Latina/os and aspects that are relevant to them such as race/ethnicity, language, culture, phenotype, and immigration status that may be overlooked by the predominance of the Black/White binary of racial discourse (Perez Huber, 2009). By utilizing a LatCrit framework, my work: (a) centralizes race, racism, and other “-isms” (e.g., sexism or ageism) in the study; (b) challenges existing dominant ideologies and traditional scholarship; (c) commits to a social justice and advocacy agenda; (d) centers experiential knowledge in the analysis; and (e) draws from an interdisciplinary perspective (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

### **Community Cultural Wealth Model**

Unlike many scholars who have used deficit thinking (e.g., genetic pathology, cultural poverty, or cultural accumulated environmental deficits) to explain what happens to students in the educational pipeline, I drew upon Tara Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model, which primarily focuses on recognizing and acknowledging the assets that students of color bring with them to school settings. Specifically, I built upon Yosso’s model to assess how students of color utilize familial and cultural histories, as well as community resources, to navigate first-year experiences in higher education. Figure 1, illustrates the community cultural wealth model, which refers to the “array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro- and micro-forms of oppression” (Yosso, 2005, p. 77).

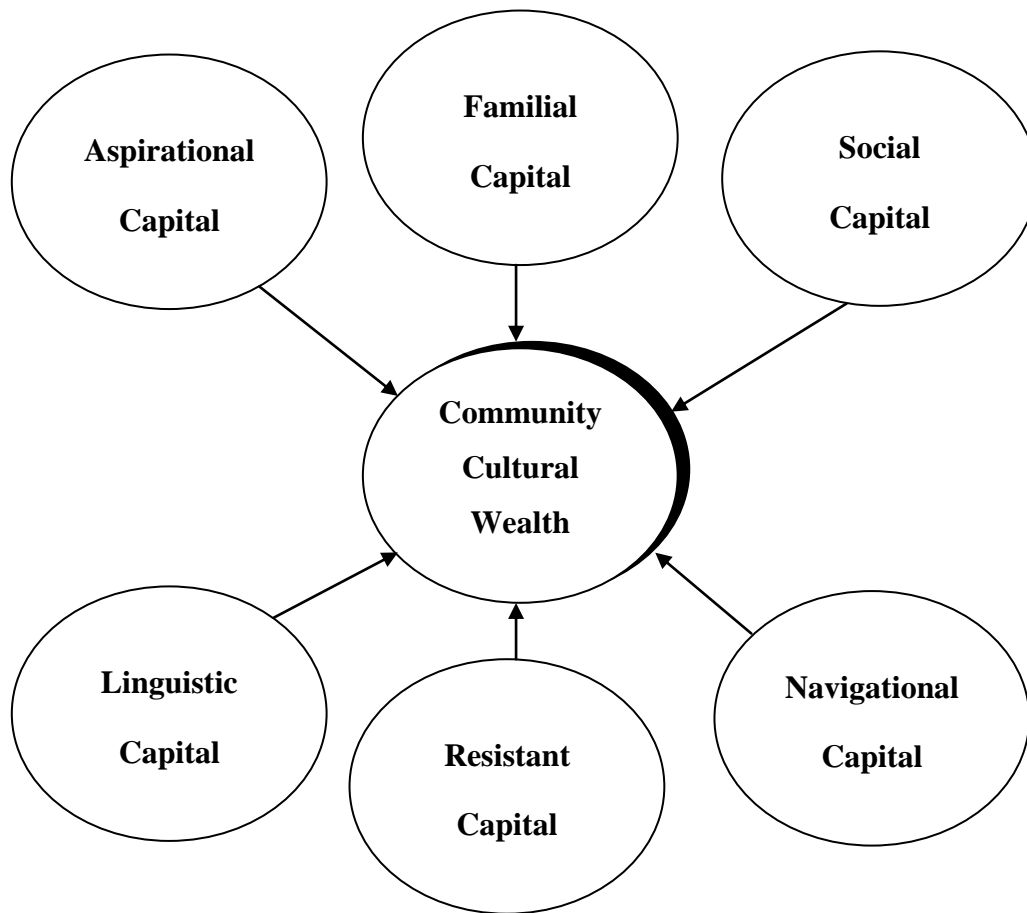


Figure 1.1. Tara Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model.

The model consists of six interconnected forms of capital that build on one another to comprise community cultural wealth:

- **Aspirational capital:** the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real or perceived barriers.
- **Familial capital:** cultural knowledge nurtured among families that carries a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition.
- **Social capital:** the networks of people and community resources that provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions.
- **Linguistic capital:** the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style.
- **Resistant capital:** knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality.
- **Navigational capital:** skills of maneuvering through social institutions that are not created with communities of color in mind.

Although all of the forms of capital are interconnected, I brought students' familial capital to the forefront during data analysis. This capital is nurtured among *familia* (kin), and from these kinship ties we learn the importance of maintaining a healthy connection to the community and its resources (Yosso, 2005). In short, a focus on familial capital enabled me to better understand how the participants in my study utilized their familial-cultural knowledge and maintained a connection to their communities and resources as they dealt with the demands of higher education during their first-year experiences.

### **Research Questions**

There is a dearth of literature that examines how first-generation university women of Mexican heritage draw on their family histories, familial-cultural assets, and familial resilience to negotiate their first year in postsecondary education. As such, the following four research questions guided this study:

1. What types of familial-cultural practices do first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage engage in with their families, and how do they apply symbolic value to such practices? (Chapter 4)
2. In what ways do the familial interactions and practices of first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage contribute to their educational persistence? (Chapter 5)
3. In what ways do first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage deploy their asset-based resources during their first-year experiences? (Chapter 6)
4. What challenges do first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage face in their first-year in college and how do they overcome these challenges? (Chapter 7)

### **Developmental Engagement Model**

Most higher education scholarship has not considered familial-cultural assets as a resource to sustain persistence in higher education. Moreover, the few scholars who have examined cultural assets as tools for academic success have not considered *how* these assets are developed and deployed to effectively overcome hurdles in higher education. Thus, I propose a

model to better understand how familial-cultural assets can contribute to students’ college persistence and success.

I developed this engagement model from a pilot study that employed a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Four women participated in observations and a wide range of interviews (e.g., semi-structured, open-ended, ethnographic and photo-elicitation interviews) concerning their experiences transitioning to college. They were also asked focused questions on the appropriateness of the methods used. The pilot study findings suggested that first-generation college students’ perceptions of their families helped facilitate the transition to college life and persistence during college-going experiences. Chapter 3 delves deeper into the pilot study.

The current study focuses on one of many types of interactions students have with their social worlds—interactions with their families. A developmental engagement model (Figure 1.2) guided my analyses of students’ involvement with their families’ cultural practices (i.e., *cuentos* and *consejos*). Specifically, I theorized that three developmental engagements could make a difference in students’ educational aspirations, achievements, and success, and help students develop positive life-long behaviors and attitudes towards education.

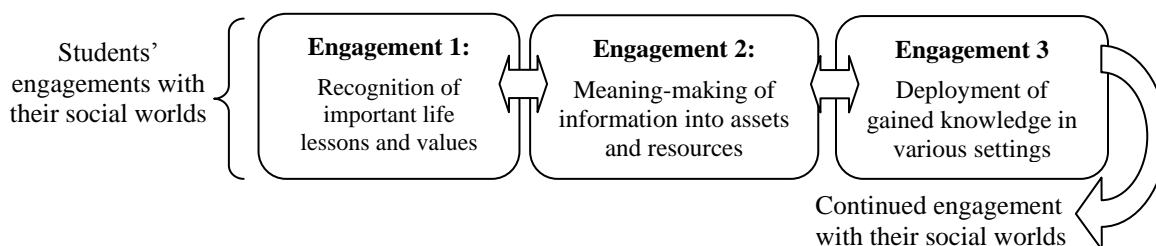


Figure 1.2. Developmental engagement model.

As seen in Figure 1.2, *Engagement 1* involves the recognition of important life lessons and values from interactions with our social worlds (e.g., families, communities, schools, and other complex sociopolitical structures). *Engagement 2* involves the meaning-making of

information that we recognize as important to the development of resilience behaviors and attitudes. Finally, *Engagement 3* results in the deployment of such meaningful knowledge in various settings, like schools. As indicated by the arrow, students continue to engage with their social worlds as they move in and out of these three engagements.

Meaning-making has been understood as internalization but I follow the model of appropriation articulated by Rogoff (1995, 1997; Rogoff et al., 1995) and I adapted Rogoff's (1995, 1997) model by applying it to a different demographic—first-generation college students of Mexican heritage. When examining the actual process by which “children participate with other people in cultural activities [or practices], and the ways in which they transform their participation” (Rogoff et al., 1995, pp. 56–57), internalization is one-directional or “static, bounded acquisition or transmission of piece of knowledge” (Rogoff, 1995, p. 153). However, appropriation is a process of transformation that functions by “engaging in [a cultural] activity [or practice], participating in its meaning, and mak[ing] ongoing contributions” (p. 150). In this study, I developed how this process of transformation takes place among women of Mexican heritage. The developmental typology of engagements has been shown to be a transformation of participation through three specific engagements: a) recognition, b) meaning-making, and c) deployment. In later chapters I discuss these engagements further.

### **Overview of Chapters**

**Chapter 1** has provided an overview of the dissertation, including the purpose, objective, and rationale, as well as the problem statement, theoretical framework, and research questions. I have also summarized the developmental engagement model that informed the research. At the end of the chapter I will provide definitions of important concepts in the study.

**Chapter 2** examines pivotal articles that speak to the educational experiences of Mexican-heritage students. In particular, I highlight scholarship that was influential on my thinking about the current study.

**Chapter 3** begins with a concise overview of how the dissertation builds on the pilot study and introduces the modified research design. Next, I discuss the research population, data sources, and the process for data reduction and analysis. Lastly, I discuss my positionality as the researcher.

**Chapter 4** is the first of four results chapters. Here I examine seven women's engagements with the familial *cuentos* and *consejos* that were used by their families to socialize them to education. Participants identified important life lessons and values garnered from these engagements, the varying themes of which are also introduced.

**Chapter 5** explores how participants translated familial *cuentos* and *consejos* to their daily lives, resulting in positive attitudes and behaviors towards education. Vital to their academic survival, this meaning-making encouraged them to seek out asset-based resources such as motivation, aspirations, and familial and ethnic pride, in addition to positivity/optimism and a strong work ethic.

**Chapter 6** examines the strategies these women used to deploy asset-based resources during their first year in higher education. For example, I delineate the different ways they acknowledged and honored their familial-cultural assets and resources.

**Chapter 7** presents four case studies that reveal participants' first-year challenges. I illustrate how they drew upon an array of strategies to overcome emotional and psychological challenges to persist through their first-year experiences.

**Chapter 8** concludes the dissertation. I offer a concise summary of findings from each of the preceding chapters. I also discuss the study's contribution to theory, practice, and methodology, and end with suggestions for future research.



## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter primarily evaluates scholarship that speaks to the experiences of Mexican-heritage students. I first delineate the degree attainment disparities in the American educational pipeline among students of color, and then examine the studies that specifically identify the major challenges that women of Mexican heritage face in postsecondary education. Next, I critique current deficit-perspective research that blames families for their children's limited educational attainment. I go on to evaluate how previous scholarship has identified appropriate markers of success, and then discuss existing scholarship that highlights students' cultural assets in educational settings. Finally, I examine two important college retention models that shed light on students' transitions to college.

#### **Mexican American Students in Higher Education**

In this section, I begin with an overview of the current educational realities for students of Mexican heritage in higher education. Then, I specifically examine the major challenges that women of Mexican heritage face as first-generation college students and as first-year students.

#### **The American Educational Pipeline**

Documenting and understanding the educational experiences of Mexican-heritage students is crucial. This population currently represents the largest ethnic minority group in the United States. According to the 2010 Census, 308.7 million people reside in the United States, and 50.5 million (or 16%) are of Hispanic or Latina/o origin. People of Mexican origin make up the largest Latina/o group, representing 63% of the total Latina/o population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Furthermore, students of Mexican heritage are the fastest-growing ethnic population in the U.S. public school system (National Center for Education Statistics

[NCES], 2011). In 2010, 50% of students in California's K–12 school system were of Mexican heritage (Children Now, 2010).

Despite growing rates of enrollment in public schools, only 22% of the nation's elementary and high school students and 11% of U.S. college students were Latina/o, and only 55.5% of Latina/o students graduated from high school in four years and 14% had a bachelor's degree or higher (National Council of la Raza, n.d.). Currently, Latina/o students do not enroll in or graduate from college at rates proportional to their representation in the United States, or to their White counterparts (NCES, 2011). Ultimately, students' ethnic backgrounds are closely tied to their educational attainment. In addition, scholars argue that income plays a crucial role in college access and degree attainment. Students from higher income levels are more likely to attain a college degree than students from lower income levels (Covarrubias, 2011). Few low-income students of Mexican heritage enter the postsecondary educational pipeline, and even fewer graduate (Covarrubias, 2011; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Solórzano & Yosso, 2006).

Taking a closer look at the educational pipeline for Mexican-heritage students is important if we are to understand why so few enter college. Alejandro Covarrubias (2011) drew upon the March 2009 Supplement of the Current Population Survey, the most complete recent data available with the variables of interest (ethnicity/race and socioeconomic status). Covarrubias examined Latinas/os in general, and people of Mexican heritage specifically, to shed light on the educational disparities in high school graduation rates and overall educational attainment. Utilizing the critical race framework in Kimberly Crenshaw's (1989) work on intersectionality, Covarrubias (2011) examined the educational pipeline for Mexican-heritage students, or those who referred to themselves as Chicanas/os, using a quantitative intersectional

analysis by disaggregating data along the intersection of race, class, gender, and citizenship status.

Covarrubias (2011) noted that U.S. Latinas/os (who are mostly of Mexican origin), have been the largest minority group in the country for over a decade. At the same time, however, they have the highest push-out rates in the American educational system.<sup>3</sup> As seen in Figure 2.1, Covarrubias (2011) clearly illustrated that even when controlling for socioeconomic status across all the major racial/ethnic groups in the United States, Latinas/os generally, and Chicanas/os specifically, continue to be pushed-out at the highest levels.

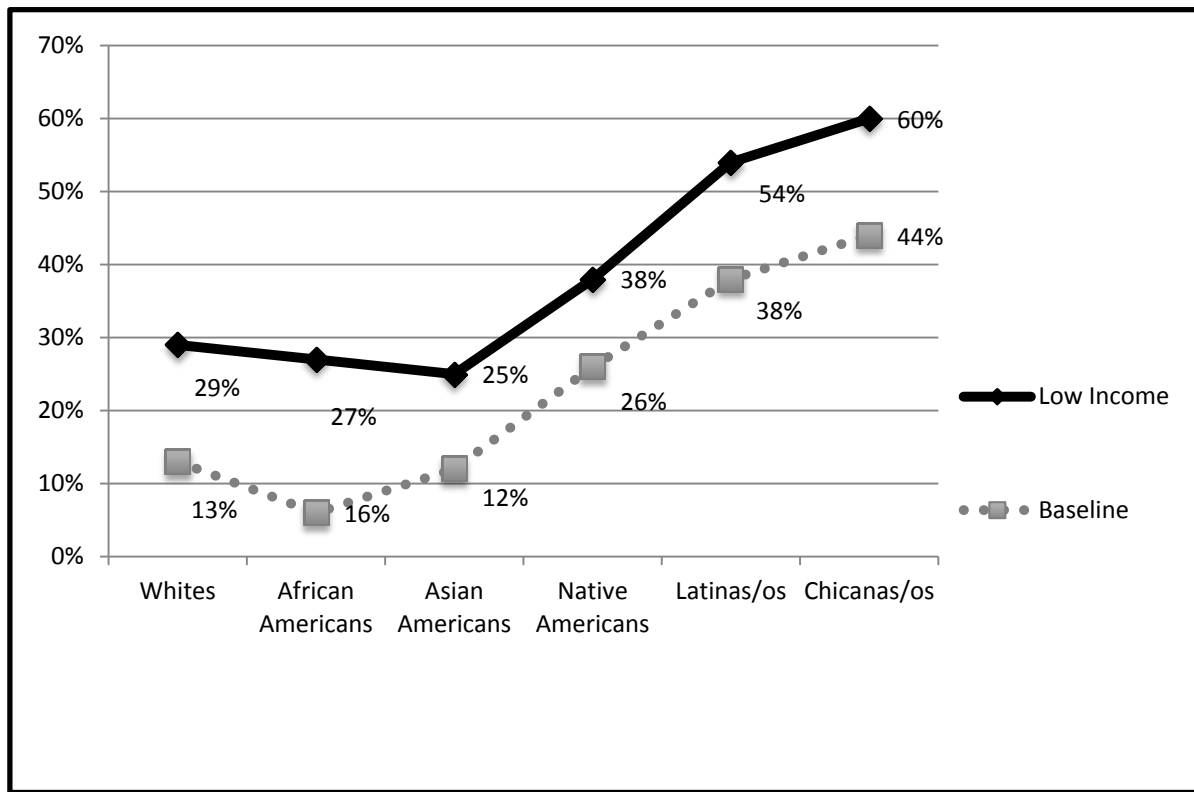


Figure 2.1. High school push-out rates by race/ethnicity.

<sup>3</sup> Traditionally, the term “drop out” has been used to blame students for the decision to leave the school system. The term “push out” is used to argue that the burden of retention and graduation lies with the school, rather than the student (Solórzano, Ledesma, Pérez, Burciaga, & Ornelas, 2003).

Figure 2.1 shows, via the blue line, a baseline for all distinct racialized groups: a 13% school push-out rate for Whites, 16% for African Americans, 12% for Asian Americans, 26% for Native Americans, 38% for Latinas/os, generally, and 44% for Chicanas/os, specifically. Yet, when Covarrubias (2011) controlled for income, the educational disparities further increased: Among low-income students, Whites had a 29% push-out rate, Blacks 27%, Asian Americans 25%, Native Americans 38%, Latinas/os 54%, and Chicanas/os a staggering 60% rate, as represented via the red line in Figure 2.1. In other words, socioeconomic status (SES) exacerbates disparities in educational attainment. Across all groups, high school students with lower socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to get pushed out of secondary education, suggesting that SES plays a crucial role in academic success.

Figure 2.2 delineates the educational realities of Chicana/o students passing through the educational pipeline.<sup>4</sup> For every 100 elementary school Chicana/o students, only 56 will graduate from high school. Of those high school graduates, only 27 will enroll in college, and 10 will actually earn a bachelor's degree. Additionally, Covarrubias (2011) concluded that those who do attend college are likely to come from middle-class families. From 100 low-income Mexican-heritage students, only three who graduate from college are from lower-income households (i.e., in the lowest quartile).

---

<sup>4</sup> The Chicana/o educational pipeline, first introduced by Daniel Solórzano, Octavio Villalpando, and Leticia Oseguera (2005), *has been widely utilized to capture a snapshot of current educational realities for people of Mexican descent, depict a predictable pattern of educational outcomes, and offer policy recommendations aimed at transforming unjust experiences* (Covarrubias, 2011).

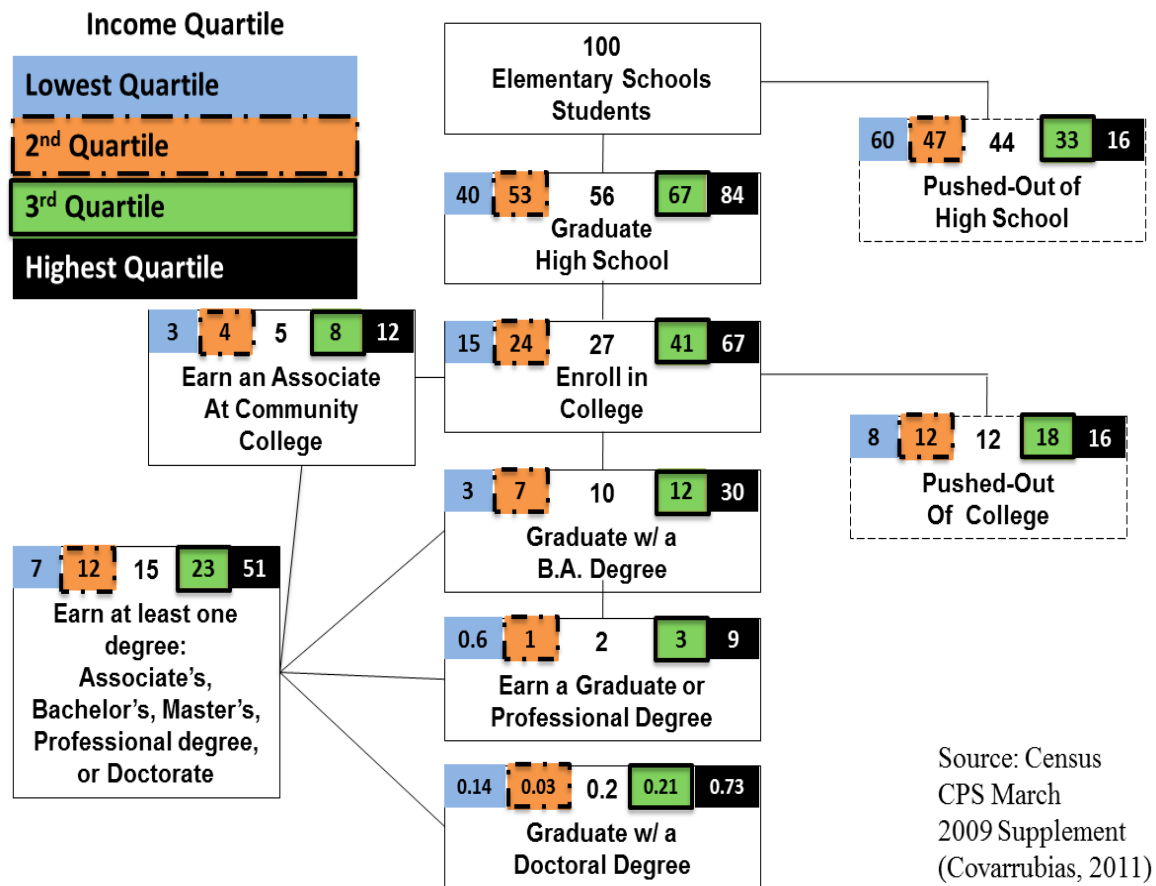


Figure 2.2. The Chicana/o educational pipeline by socioeconomic status.

Existing research has provided insights into students' persistence in higher education. Based on the detailed portrait of the educational trajectory of Mexican-heritage students in Figure 2.2, it is clear that we must capture the distinct challenges and barriers encountered, as well as document the factors that contribute to academic persistence and success. With this in mind, the current study focuses on low-income Mexican-heritage students entering a four-year university [as children of immigrant], and neither parent has earned a college degree, making these students part of the first-generation in their families to pursue a college education, in general, and a top tier research institution, specifically.

## **First-Generation College Students**

Scholars consistently argue that first-generation college students—i.e., students who come from families where neither parent has more than a high school education—are more likely to be at a disadvantage in accessing and understanding information relevant to making beneficial “college-going” decisions. Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) found that the level of parental postsecondary education has a significant and unique influence on the academic and non-academic experiences that one has during college. Overall, research has shown that students who are the first in their families to attend college tend to enter with less academic preparation and with limited access to information about the college-going experience (Thayer, 2000; Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Pascarella et al., 2004) and they have more difficulty transitioning from high school to college (Pascarella et al., 2004).

College students with highly educated parents may have a distinct advantage over first-generation college students in understanding the culture of higher education. Nolan Cabrera and Amado Padilla (2004) defined the “culture of college” as “the knowledge that many middle-class parents possess and that they use to guide their children toward a college education” (p. 154). In other words, highly-educated parents provide their children with the appropriate resources to make college a realistic goal. This knowledge includes “college preparatory classes in middle and high school, the importance of extracurricular activities, preparation for the college admission test (e.g., SAT and ACT), the college application process itself, and scholarships and other ways of obtaining financial assistance if necessary” (p. 154).

Although we have this level of understanding about the effects of first-generation status on postsecondary experiences, what we currently lack is an understanding of how parents with a limited education can and do provide their children with resources that help them negotiate the

American educational pipeline. More research is needed on how students' familial-cultural practices promote educational resilience, specifically during the first year of college.

### **The First-Year Experience**

The literature on the first-year experience acknowledges that this period can be particularly difficult for all students. College is a time for personal, academic, and professional development and, as a result, the first year can be particularly stressful (for examples, see Brougham, Zail, Mendoza, & Miller, 2009; Dyson & Renk, 2006; Towbes & Cohen, 1996). In fact, the majority of U.S. students who leave institutions of higher education do so during or immediately after their first year of study (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969/1994; Levitz & Noel, 1989; Tinto, 1993). About 25% of first-year students do not continue with their second year at four-year colleges (ACT, 2011). Factors affecting attrition include individual student characteristics, social integration with other students and faculty, and the overall college environment (Braxton, Milem, & Shaw Sullivan, 2000).

During the past 35 years in particular, research has shown that there has been an ongoing interest and effort on college campuses to enhance the first-year college experience (DeAngelo, 2014). Scholars identify the lack of preparedness from high school as a prime factor that often influenced students to experience unexpected challenges that hindered their academic development during their first-year in college (e.g., Hernandez, 2002; Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Students' perception about their limited preparation to compete and adjust to the rigor of college is also shown to reduce their on campus involvements. In Hernandez's (2002) study, seven out of the ten Latina/o students, "described the difficulty of making the decision to devote their available time to their academic studies, even if it was at the expense of extracurricular involvement" (p. 76). As discussed in the previous section, learning the "culture of college" is crucial for successfully negotiating in and navigating through the higher education pipeline.

Scholars share recommendations for improving the first-year experience. Walpole et al (2008) provide insight into the critical role of summer bridge programs on students' college transition, while Soria and Stubblefield (2014) recommend assisting first-year college students to discover their strengths to better build a foundation for student engagement and academic excellence. Although the impact of the first-year experience has been investigated, there is limited information on how this experience is negotiated among first-generation women of Mexican heritage college students who are also children of immigrants at top-tier research institutions.

According to various scholars (e.g., Chacon, Cohen, & Strover, 1986; Muñoz, 1986), women of Mexican-heritage generally experience significantly more stress in their college careers than other students do, specifically with regards to financial constraints, academic issues, family obligations and expectations, and gender-role stereotyping (Rodriguez, Guido-DiBrito, Torres, & Talbot, 2000). Compounding these stresses are psychological challenges that include a sense of not belonging, guilt, and pressure to perform academically (González, Jovel, & Stoner, 2004; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011). Because these challenges can impede or derail students' college careers, more research is needed to better understand how some are able to overcome them. Oftentimes, *pre-college* indicators of *academic preparation* are utilized to predict college persistence and success, and I will discuss these indicators at length. First, however, it is important to acknowledge the deficit views of Latinas/os in education that have dominated how we look at this population in schooling.

### **The Deficit Perspective**

In the 1950s and 1960s, social scientists promoted a “cultural deficit model” to explain the lack of Mexican-heritage students in higher education (Escobedo, 1980). The myth that Mexican Americans do not value education was argued as early as the 1920s, for example in



Taylor's (1927) master's thesis, entitled, *Retardation of Mexican Children in the Albuquerque Schools*. Work of this sort made its way to scholarly publication and was consequently deemed legitimate (Valencia & Black, 2002).

Mexican Americans, in particular, were stereotyped as undisciplined, fatalistic, irrational, and passive (Andrade, 1982). Mexican students and their families were seen as at fault for poor academic performance because of beliefs that children entered school without the prerequisite cultural knowledge and skills, or because their parents neither valued nor supported their children's education (Valencia & Solórzano, 1997; García & Guerra, 2004). For example, Havighurst (1966) asserted that Mexican American children experienced poor academic achievement because they lacked "two parents who read a good deal; read to [them]; and show [them] that they believe in the value of education" (p. 18).

The myth that Mexican Americans do not value education "lies in the pseudoscientific notion of 'deficit thinking'" (Valencia & Black, 2002, p. 83). Deficit thinking is referred to as "an endogenous theory of school failure that 'blames the victim,' rather than examining how schools and the political economy are structured to prevent students from learning optimally" (Valencia, 2002, p. 83). In their study of myth debunking, Richard Valencia and Mary Black (2002) helped demystify the belief that Mexican-heritage individuals do not value education by describing how Mexican Americans have historically struggled for equal educational opportunity. They asserted that Mexican Americans have participated in litigation and legislation efforts to improve educational equity, founded advocacy organizations and become individual activists, and engaged in political demonstrations to display dissatisfaction with oppression.

Valencia and Black (2002) also documented positive parental involvement in education. They presented a case study illustrating a "more subtle type of parental involvement that is often

difficult to capture such as the attitudes and practices concerning school that are initiated by the family and found exclusively in the home itself” (pp. 96–97). In other words, engagements such as telling family stories about school experiences and making sure children arrive at school on time each day are examples of parent involvement that take place outside of the school setting, and these are important to acknowledge as investments.

### **Predicting College Success**

Higher education scholars have traditionally focused on *pre-college* indicators of *academic preparation* because they can be valuable predictors of college persistence and success. These include standardized test scores for college admissions, such as the American College Testing (ACT) and *SAT Reasoning Test* (SAT), performance on Advanced Placement exams, and high school grade point average or rank in class (Brower, 1992; Dougherty, Mellor, & Jian, 2005; Mattern, Shaw, & Xiong, 2009; Nora & Cabrera, 1996; Pascarella, Duby, & Iverson, 1993). Scholars argue that performing well on these indicators of *academic preparation* is related to the ability to complete a pathway to success in college. Unfortunately, however, these predictors may be incomplete, in part because they often fail to acknowledge familial and cultural assets that can enable college persistence and success.

Oftentimes, studies of first-generation students’ college-going experiences rely on surveys (e.g., CIRP Freshman Survey and the Your First College Year Survey) in order to understand retention, persistence, engagement, and satisfaction. This approach falls short, however, of capturing the complexity of challenges related to first-generation college-going status, gender, race, and culture. We need more textured accounts of the lives of students of color in higher education; we must better report on everyday life from the points of view of those who live it. In short, undeniable gaps will exist in our understanding of Mexican-heritage

students and their college-going experiences if we *only* rely upon traditional predictors to assess college outcomes.

### **The Relevance of Social Forces**

Zambrana's (1988) review of cultural studies notes, "the most limiting aspect of the majority of studies has been their neglect of the relationship of racial/ethnic groups to the social structure" (p. 63). In fact, a growing number of scholars have documented how the lives of racial/ethnic minorities are shaped by social forces such as racism, sexism, and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991; Friere, 1970), and conclude that communities of color have long experienced the explicit and implicit effects of racism through social institutions, including universities (García, 2001; Moreno, 1999).

Laura Rendón, Romero Jalomo, and Amaury Nora (2000) argued that "Many researchers tend to view people of color as if they have all the options and privileges of White, middle-class Americans, when this is not often the case" (p. 142). Students of color encounter different experiences than their White, middle-class counterparts and, as a result, these scholars have lobbied for "culturally and racially based studies that can uncover new variables and that can offer insightful and meaningful findings to transform institutional structures that preclude academic success [and satisfaction] for minority students" (p. 143). For the most part, the realities that students of color face are less likely to be captured by traditional higher education research since there are invisible hierarchies that have more consequential outcomes for marginalized students such as allocation of school resources to vocational pathways rather than college readiness opportunities (e.g. limited Advance Placement courses).

It is important for higher education scholars to gain a richer understanding of the first-year experience of all students, as well as to contribute to more nuanced understandings of the decision-making process and the factors that influence student persistence and retention.

Research on students' lived experiences and experiential knowledge aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of their everyday realities, providing insightful descriptions of the way people experience the world, and acknowledging what their actions mean to them (Erickson, 2011).

### **Familial and Cultural Assets**

We need a better understanding of how students navigate between multiple worlds—e.g., their families and colleges—drawing upon the assets that develop as a result of their interactions with family practices. In particular, how students utilize familial-cultural assets to fuel their educational persistence has been ignored in traditional educational research. In the context of this research, I argue for the reconsideration of these non-traditional predictors to involve students of color as “creators of knowledge” to inform postsecondary programming and policymaking (Bernal, 1998). In this section, I acknowledge the continuity of cultural assets and resources utilized by students of Mexican heritage in educational settings. I assess previous work that was instrumental to how I conceptualized the current study because it describes the type of assets and strengths students of color learn from their families and communities.

#### **Asset-Based Thinking**

There is a growing body of literature that acknowledges the rich knowledge, beliefs, and worldviews of Mexican/Chicana/o communities in ways that are oftentimes devalued in educational settings. Luis Moll, Cathy Amanti, Deborah Neff, and Norma Gonzalez (1992) introduced the concept *funds of knowledge* to challenge deficit modeling, referring to the “historically accumulated and cultural developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (p. 133). Dolores Delgado-Bernal’s (2001) concept of *pedagogies of the home* acknowledges the “communication, practices, and learning that occur in the home and community [which] often serve as a cultural knowledge base that

helps students survive and succeed within an educational system that often excludes and silences them” (p. 623). And Tara Yosso (2005) introduced six capitals of *community cultural wealth*, which comprises the “array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro- and micro-forms of oppression” (p. 77). By exploring and highlighting the life-long strengths and assets that families of color instill in their children, scholars like these demonstrate a need to challenge deficit perspectives.

### **Documenting Cultural Strengths**

In the K–12 literature, numerous scholars have provided powerful testimony about the cultural strengths and assets of Mexican American family education. For example, ethnographic studies have sought to describe the hopes, dilemmas, and strengths of Mexican American families as they relate to educational, social, political, and economic institutions (e.g., Carger, 1996; Delgado-Gaitan, 1996, 1992; Romo & Falbo, 1996; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995; Trueba, Rodriguez, Zou, & Cintrón, 1993; Valdés, 1996; Vasquez, Pease-Alvarez, & Shannon, 1994; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999). Furthermore, Concha Delgado-Gaitan (1994) argued that the *consejos* that parents share with their children transmit cultural values and morals that prove powerful in guiding them toward positive behavior and decision-making.

Bernal (2001) highlighted the various approaches—legends, *corridos*, storytelling, and behavior—that have been used to pass on community and family knowledge from one generation to another. Storytelling has been found to facilitate literacy development among young students (e.g., Cooper, 2005; Coskie, Trudel, & Vohs, 2010; Olmedo, 2005; Snow & Goldfield, 1982). However, there is a lack of research on the benefits of storytelling/narratives to students’ higher education experiences. Indeed, traditionally, sharing family stories has not been seen as a pedagogical tool to help children persist through the educational system. The current study

addresses this directly by documenting the benefits of *cuentos* and *consejos* for students’ life-long behaviors and attitudes in general, and their educational trajectories more specifically.

### The Role of *Familismo*

Scholarship on Latinas in education discusses the concept of *familismo*—a cultural value that emphasizes family closeness and loyalty. *Familismo* contributes to Latinas’ feelings of obligation to spend time with the family and stay close to home (Espinoza, 2010), take care of siblings (Gándara, 1995, 1999), and make financial contributions to the family (Fulgini & Peterson, 2002). Miller (1980), in particular, “view[s] *familismo* as a multidimensional concept comprising such distinct aspects as structure, behavior, norms, and attitudes, and social identity as well” (cited in Zinn, 1982, p. 225). Table 2.1 summarizes various kinds of *familismo*, including demographic, structural, normative, behavioral, and political (Zinn, 1975).

Table 2.1

#### *Overview of the Various Kinds of Familismo and Their Definitions*

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Demographic <i>familismo</i></b>	Emphasizes mostly macro characteristics of the family and contrasts fertility, family size, endogamy, and family intactness of Mexicans to others.
<b>Structural <i>familismo</i></b>	Incorporates such characteristics as the cohesion of extended kin networks, and strength of collateral and fictive relations. This approach tends to concentrate on the examination of residential proximity patterns among kin, the availability of extended kin within variously defined geographic and or social settings, and the extent to which households include both nuclear or extended families.
<b>Normative <i>familismo</i></b>	Refers to a set of attitudes that reflect the importance people give to the family. It is commonly measured by agreement–disagreement responses to items that capture a particular opinion about family life.
<b>Behavioral <i>familismo</i></b>	Includes actual contact among kin and mutual aid in the form of emotional or material exchange and support.
<b>Political <i>familismo</i></b>	Refers to the fusing of cultural and political resistance—a process of cultural and political activism that involves the participation of total family units in the movement for liberation and a phenomenon in which the continuity of family groups and the adherence to family ideology provide the basis for struggle.

The literature on *familismo* has not acknowledged how students learn valuable familial-cultural practices, nor does it account for the crucial role that family can play in students' educational resilience. Scholars like Tinto (1993) have argued that students' *familismo* may conflict with their schooling and make the transition to higher education more challenging. More recent research has found, however, that family ties can be *beneficial* for students academically. For example, the assets that students of Mexican heritage bring with them to the university have been found to support college-going persistence (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2005, 2006). Other studies suggest that maintaining strong family relationships while attending college helps students successfully adjust to college life (Gándara, 1995; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Sánchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2006).

While family ties may be both an *advantage* and a *challenge* for students of color (e.g., when there is a family gathering the weekend before an exam), we need greater understanding of the complexity of these relationships for first-generation college women of Mexican heritage. We need studies that illustrate how students draw on their assets, not only to persist, but also to remain resilient when dealing with the challenges of higher education. Thus, it is *educational familismo* that is absent from the literature. The current study seeks to address this gap by providing concrete illustrations of how women of Mexican heritage in their first year of college draw upon their culture, families, and community when dealing with the crucial demands of postsecondary education.

### **College Retention Models**

In this section, I draw upon the work of leading-scholars in the field to better understand the candid, vivid, and various accounts of the college experiences of students of color. Namely, I build upon the work of Tinto (1993) and Yosso (2006) to conceptualize how Mexican-heritage students make the transition to college. The first model provides a majoritarian view to what is a

“normal” college transition, where the latter model offers an alternative view of how students of color negotiate their experiences in college. In order to have the most comprehensive view of students’ college transition, I applied both models when examining the lived experiences of seven Mexican American women’s college transitions.

### **Tinto’s Stages of Passage Model**

Much of the research on college student persistence is based on applying retention models to diverse student populations and validates Vincent Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) highly acclaimed model of student departure (Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000). Tinto argued that academic and social integration are essential to student retention. Employing Dutch anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep’s (1960) rites-of-passage framework, Tinto developed his theory of student departure, which includes a three-phase process of separation, transition, and incorporation. Figure 2.3 depicts Tinto’s (1993) stages of passage model, which argues that undergraduates separate themselves from their families and communities in order to help their college transitions, and they ultimately incorporate themselves into college life only after that separation occurs.



*Figure 2.3.* Tinto’s (1993) stages of passage model.

In this model, individuals *separate* from their past associations and limit or eliminate interactions with members of their original group. In the *transition* stage, they begin to interact in different ways with members of the new group. They undergo rituals such as “isolation,



training...sometimes ordeals are employed as mechanisms to ensure the separation of the individual from past associations and the adaptation of behaviors and norms appropriate to membership in the new group” (Tinto, 1993, p. 93). In the *incorporation* stage, individuals take on new patterns of interaction with members of the new group and establish their membership. Though they are able to interact with members of the old group, they now do so only as fully-integrated members of the new group (Tinto, 1987).

In their article, Valencia and Black (2002) discussed Mexican American people’s struggle for equal educational opportunity, and explained how historically the American educational pipeline was not designed with communities of color in mind. As a result of this phenomenon, college retention models like Tinto’s (1993) expect students to adapt to the institution’s dominant cultural code or norms if they are to succeed, experience personal satisfaction, and persist. Although Tinto (1993) once argued that retention requires students to break away from past communities, he did later (2006) recognize that, for some students, “the ability to remain connected to their past communities, family, church, or tribe is essential to their persistence” (p. 4). As such, defining “stages of passage” exclusively as a function of students’ separation, transition, and incorporation (as Tinto did in 1993) limits views in what is a “normal” college transition, and the model therefore marginalizes students who deviate from these norms. Ultimately, Tinto’s model fails to reflect the experiences of underrepresented populations in higher education.

Although we have yet to see the creation of a persistence model for students of color, several researchers (e.g., Attinasi, 1989; Kraemer, 1997; Tierney, 1992; Yosso, 2006) have challenged the assumption that underrepresented populations in higher education must separate from their cultural realities in order to successfully incorporate into the postsecondary academic

and social spheres. Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2000), for example, laid out the three assumptions made by Tinto's model:

1. An individual's values and beliefs rooted in his or her cultural background must be abandoned to successfully incorporate the values and beliefs of the institution and of the majoritarian population. Only in this way can an individual student become integrated into the new environment.
2. There is one dominant culture and in order to succeed, members of minority cultures should become more similar to the dominant culture.
3. It is relatively easy to find membership and acceptance in the new college world, and individuals who become integrated will have little or no contact with members of their old groups.

It is important for researchers and practitioners alike to recognize that issues surrounding the retention of students from underrepresented populations may differ from the issues faced by majority students. Instead, it is crucial to understand how the literature has theorized how underrepresented populations' transitions into college. I turn now to a discussion of Tara Yosso's (2006) work in this regard.

### **Yosso's Chicana/o Stages of Passage Model**

Yosso (2006) offered a conceptual model that counters the assimilationist tendencies of Tinto's stages of passage, and seeks to account for how Chicana/o students negotiate their experiences. Figure 2.4 presents what Yosso (2006) referred to as the Chicana/o undergraduate stages of passage model, which illustrates how certain Chicanas/os may feel in the midst of a negative campus climate.



*Figure 2.4.* Yosso's (2006) model of Chicana/o undergraduate stages of passage.

The first stage is when students of color experience culture shock/rejection at their university. Unlike what is suggested in Tinto's (1993) model, certain Chicana/o undergraduates may not separate from their families and communities. They may instead see their families and communities as a *resource* to combat the isolation, alienation, and discrimination, and build a sense of community to ease the culture shock/rejection. Yosso, Smith, Ceja, and Solórzano (2009) examined this sense of rejection and concluded: "In response to these pervasive messages of rejection, Latinas/os foster academic and social counterspaces in which they build a culturally supportive community and develop skills to critically navigate between their worlds of school and home" (p. 660). In the current study, I examine two familial-cultural practices that students engaged in with their families: *cuentos* and *consejos*. These practices help cultivate familial-cultural assets used by students to overcome various challenges in higher education.

In the second stage of the model, *community building*, students of color seek to create counterspaces, such as student-initiated organizations, to form connections and ease culture shock/rejection (Yosso, 2006). And in the *critical navigation* stage, students continue to draw on their family and community as they utilize "the margin as a navigational resource" (Yosso, 2006, p. 123). In other words, Yosso suggests that students use their families and communities as resources, which challenge deficit scholars who suggest these nontraditional "resources" interfere with students' academic achievements. In fact, these types of resources contribute to students' educational persistence and ultimately college success. Ironically, this crucial navigation between multiple worlds actually helps incorporate students into "various university communities and greatly contributes to [their] academic and social success" (Yosso, 2006, p. 123). However, there is limited understanding as to *how* students recognize, create meaning, and utilize their families and communities as resources. In the current research, I examine the array

of strategies that students use to deploy their assets that include in higher education and provide concrete illustrations of students' navigational processes between their multiple worlds.

It is important that we achieve a greater understanding of how students of Mexican heritage negotiate major challenges in higher education. Culture shock/rejection is just one example of the many obstacles faced by these, although, compared to Tinto (1993), Yosso (2006) has provided a more precise account of how Chicana/o students negotiate higher education. However, defining Chicanas/os' undergraduate stages of passage exclusively as a function of their culture shock/rejection, community building, and critical navigation does not explicitly acknowledge or honor the value of familial-cultural assets and resources. Thus, to expand on this model, it is crucial to investigate whether students see their families and communities as resources to combat isolation, alienation, and discrimination and, if so, what this process looks like.

In the next chapter I describe how this dissertation research was built on the findings from a pilot study. I introduce the modified research design, describe the study participants and data sources, and delineate the process for data reduction and analysis. I also discuss my positionality as the researcher.

## CHAPTER 3

### A MULTI-METHOD APPROACH TO QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

The present study theorizes that students of Mexican heritage draw upon asset-based resources learned from engaging with familial-cultural practices to negotiate challenges experienced as first-generation college students. These challenges may include difficulty adjusting to college life, overcoming academic struggles, and developing a sense of belonging within a postsecondary institution (Moreno & Banuelos, 2013; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Phinney & Haas, 2003). Drawing on the work of existing scholars, I utilize asset-based constructs—e.g., funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), pedagogies of the home (Bernal, 2001), and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005)—to examine the particular assets and resources that seven women of Mexican heritage possessed and deployed during their first-year experiences at a four-year university.

To better report everyday experiences from the points of view of students of color in higher education, it is essential to produce textured accounts through a wide range of methodological practices. This approach is well-suited to the examination of everyday life and it better captures social phenomena in the context of individuals' personal circumstances or settings (Erickson, 1986). This approach helped me to arrive at a more vivid and dynamic picture of the challenges that first-generation Mexican-American students face in higher education.

Qualitative inquiry in education research typically involves structured interviews that are generally initiated and led by the researcher (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2005), placing the researcher in a position of power. To counter this tendency, I drew upon Latina/o critical race (LatCrit) theory, as well the methodological tool known as photovoice, which uses pictures taken

by study participants to elicit commentary about the meaning of the scenes in the photographs (Wang & Burris, 1997).<sup>5</sup> In doing so, I conceptualized the research participants as “holders and creators of knowledge” (Bernal, 1998). This approach renegotiates researcher–subject power relationships by integrating participants into the research process, from data collection to analysis (Bernal, 2001; Perez Huber, 2009). As such, the present study provides a more accurate description of how family history, familial-cultural assets, and obligations and problems influence first-generation Mexican-American students’ first-year in college.

In the sections that follow I describe a pilot study that formed the foundation of the dissertation research. I then discuss the current study, including the research population, data sources, and process for data reduction and analysis. Lastly, I discuss my positionality as researcher.

### **Pilot Study and New Research Questions**

Taking into account the complexity of underrepresented populations’ experiences in higher education, I conducted a pilot study in order to refine my ideas, to test methods for designing a larger study, and to explore their implications. From this pilot study, I inductively developed grounded theory (Maxwell, 1996) to inform the developmental engagement model that will help me better understand the meaning students give to the notion of family during their college transition. The six-month pilot study addressed the following research question: *What role does family play in the college-going experiences of first-generation college students during their first year at a research institution?* The findings suggested that relationships between first-generation college students and their families do, indeed, help facilitate the transition to college life and persistence through college-going experiences.

---

<sup>5</sup> Photovoice was originally developed by Wang and Burris (1997) in the field of public health as a photographic technique to enable vulnerable populations (e.g., rural Chinese women) to identify, represent, and enhance their communities.

In the pilot study, I employed several interpretive methods, including classroom observations, personal documentation of student lives, and various interviewing techniques that included semi-structured, open-ended, ethnographic, and photo-elicitation interviews. I explored these various methods to identify their benefits and limitations for capturing a dynamic understanding of these women's worlds. The use of multiple-interpretive methods can help gain more textured accounts than otherwise would have been obtained with a single method. One method can capture what the other cannot, and triangulating the collected data helps to provide a more complete account of the phenomenon in question. Ultimately, I determined that photo-elicitation interviews were the most useful method, as they allowed for the richest documentation of the lived experiences of women of Mexican heritage.

The quotation from the pilot study below highlights how a photo-elicitation interview—i.e., the insertion of photographs into a research interview (Harper, 2002)—can yield detailed and nuanced information that is often difficult to garner through traditional interviewing methods:



*Figure 3.1.* Photo from pilot study

My family is very close and [they are] very important to me because, like I said before, if you don't have that support, like you can't... Like what happened with me when I failed chemistry—I could have totally dropped out. These experiences I can't share with my family because I am the first one [to go to college]. But I have my parents and they keep pushing [me], “You have to keep going.” Like [in my dorm room], I have a portrait of my parents (see circle 1). I have that—that's the one [thing that reminds me] of home. I wake up, and I see it, and I say, “I got to keep going.” —Anita, Mexican-heritage woman, first-year student<sup>6</sup>

Through a photo-elicitation interview, Anita was able to provide candid, rich, and varied accounts of her experiences with and perspectives on college life. For instance, her own photo of her dorm room captures a family portrait displayed on her desk. By building the conversation around items like this, I gained a more layered understanding of the particular role that family had played in Anita's college-going experiences.

As Anita described it, she wakes up, sees the family portrait on her desk, and tells herself, “I got to keep going,” especially when she fails a class. Such elicitations are important to examine, as they call into question assertions of previous scholars who argue that undergraduates must separate themselves both physically and emotionally from their family and pre-college

---

<sup>6</sup> All names in this document are pseudonyms.



communities in order to fully immerse themselves in college life (Tinto, 1993). This separation asks students to adopt the institution's dominant norms in order to persist and succeed academically. As illuminated in the pilot study, these women, in fact, developed new norms and behaviors in order to persist, but they did so while retaining their family and cultural ties.

The pilot study made clear that the use of various interpretive methods, including photo-elicitation interviews, would best capture what Kris Gutiérrez and Barbra Rogoff (2003) described as the regularity and variance of the participants. Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003) argued “against the common approach of assuming that regularities are static, and that general traits of individuals are attributable categorically to ethnic group membership” (p. 19). In other words, we cannot assume that all members from a group encounter the same experiences. Although members from a specific group may have similar experiences, those experiences *vary* from individual to individual. Therefore, Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003) encouraged us to focus “attention on variations in individuals’ and groups’ histories of engagement in cultural practices” because “variations reside not as traits of individuals or collections of individuals, but as proclivities of people with certain histories of engagement with specific cultural activities. Thus, individuals’ and groups’ experience in activities—not their traits—[should become] the focus.” (p. 19).

The pilot study pointed to the value of family for students of color, especially those of Mexican heritage, and it provided some initial understanding about how the use of several interpretative methods can better capture the story of students’ transitions from immigrant communities to the college environment. The current study continued to focus on students’ familial capital and the vital role it plays in college experiences and persistence. As a direct result of the pilot study, the following research questions emerged:

1. What types of familial-cultural practices do first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage engage in with their families, and how do they apply symbolic value to such practices? (Chapter 4)
2. In what ways do the familial interactions and practices of first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage contribute to their educational persistence? (Chapter 5)
3. In what ways do first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage deploy their asset-based resources during their first-year experiences? (Chapter 6)
4. What challenges do first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage face in their first-year in college and how do they overcome these challenges? (Chapter 7)

### **Setting and Participants**

#### **West Coast University**

The participating institution, referred to in this study as West Coast University (WCU), is Carnegie-classified as “doctoral/research university-extensive” or what was formerly known as a Research I university (McCormick & Zhou, 2005). Bringing in millions of dollars annually for research, WCU has truly earned its recognition as a prestigious institution. Located in a metropolitan area, it is seen as “one of the world’s most ethnically and culturally diverse communities” in higher education, where “students come from all 50 states and more than 100 foreign countries” (WCU Campus Profile, 2012). According to the institution’s official campus profile, undergraduate enrollment consists of approximately 28,000 students, of which 29% are White and 37% are Asian. Percentages are much lower for students who are African American/Black (4%), Latina/o (17%), and American Indian/Alaska Native (.6%). As a result of low enrollment percentages for these students, WCU offers a university-based student diversity program, referred to here as the Committed to Achievement Program (CAP). CAP recruits and retains undergraduates from diverse populations who have been historically underserved by and underrepresented in higher education; this includes students of color, first-generation college students, and low-income students. The program encourages them to achieve academic excellence by offering various resources and programming.

WCU's percentage of Latinas/os on campus, a majority of whom are Mexican-heritage, is higher than other similar universities in the area. For example, the student body of another nearby, well-known research university is 13% Latina/o. Thus, WCU was an appropriate setting for the study. It is important to note, however, that WCU's percentage of enrolled Latinas/os is still not proportionate to the number of Latinas/os who reside in the state—they make up 38% of that population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

### **Recruitment Procedures**

Following IRB approval, I recruited students who had participated in a program I refer to as the Summer Transitional Excellence Program (STEP). Offered by the Committed to Achievement Program (CAP) at WCU, STEP is a rigorous, academic, seven-week summer bridge residential program. It runs each year from late July to mid-September and allows first-year students to experience the academic demands of WCU as they take actual general education classes before starting at the university. More importantly, the program helps attendees feel more comfortable as WCU students by exposing them to an array of on-campus resources that facilitate personal, academic, and professional development to facilitate their college transitions and college-going experiences.

The primary methods of recruitment were through the CAP whose students met the criteria for study participation. Emails were distributed through their listserv and announcements were made in a seminar on the issues faced by historically underrepresented first-year students in higher education. The email provided a detailed description of the study, criteria for participation, and my contact information (see Appendix B). For the classroom announcements, I began by introducing myself as “a graduate student who is recruiting first-year women of Mexican heritage for my dissertation.” I reminded them that, a few days ago, they should have received a “participants needed for a study” email. I described my study to the seminar students

and addressed their questions and concerns. I left flyers with the instructor for students to refer to, if they were interested. To increase the sample size, I also used snowball sampling (also referred to as network sampling), which helps with recruitment when the desired participants' characteristics are rare at the participating setting. This type of sampling relies on referrals from initial participants to generate additional recruits (Schensul et al., 1999; Flick, 2009). In this case, initial participants encouraged their roommates to participate.

When potential participants contacted me in response to a referral, recruitment email, and/or class visit, I conducted a screening to confirm with the individual the inclusion criteria for participation (listed below), provided an overview of the study, and addressed any questions about the study and/or time commitment. All eligible participants received and signed a consent form before participating (Appendix B). In sum, I used a purposeful sample to recruit seven women who:

- Self-identified as students of Mexican heritage;<sup>7</sup>
- Were from low-income families (determined by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid or FAFSA);
- Were first-generation college students;
- Were American-born children of immigrants;
- Were incoming first-year students; and
- Were living in university housing.

Although the participants shared these traits, we cannot assume that they encountered the same experiences. As noted earlier, Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003) encouraged “attention on variations in individuals’ and groups’ histories of engagement in cultural practices.” (p. 19).

---

<sup>7</sup> In the recruitment flier, the term “Mexican-descent students” was used. However, after participants shared their own self-identification in a focus group as: Chicana, Hispanic, Mexican American, and/or Mexican-decent, I use Mexican-heritage to better describe these women’s ancestry or line of descent.

With this in mind, the unit of analysis in this study was the individual's experience with familial-cultural practices and pedagogical tools. I honed in on the first-year experience because little research has focused on this group without merging them with other women of Latin American heritage, males of Mexican heritage, or other racialized groups (Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005).

### **Study Participants**

In this section, I briefly introduce the seven participants from this study, as seen in Table 3.1. Participants were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym.

**Elia.** Raised by a single-mother about 40 miles from WCU, Elia and her mom have no close family and, thus, rely on each other for support. Although Elia's father has never played an active role in her life, Elia has tried to keep in touch with him, when possible. Elia is an only child, but has two younger half-brothers who reside with their father in the American Midwest, and a younger half-sister who lives in Mexico. Elia is an undeclared social science major.

**Karina.** Although raised by both parents, in middle school Karina was informed that the man she came to know as her father was not her biological father. Regardless, she identifies him as her "real" father. Karina is the second eldest child; she has a younger sister and brother. Her older brother had been deported to Mexico a few years before the study. Karina entered WCU as a neuroscience major, but eventually changed her major to pre-psychology before the end of her first year. She is married and has a two-year old son. Her hometown is about 20 miles east of WCU.

**Jessica.** Raised about 60 miles southeast of WCU, Jessica is the eldest of four siblings. Her family has been separated due to her parents' deportation to Mexico. Her two youngest siblings reside with her parents in Mexico, close to the border. Her second oldest sibling, a

younger sister, lives with their maternal aunt, who is also her sister's *nina* or godmother. Jessica is a physiological science major.

**Única.** A child of migrant field workers, Única is the youngest of five siblings. Her older two brothers are high school graduates and her two older sisters have completed or are in the process of completing a college degree. Única's hometown is about 160 miles southeast from WCU, the farthest of all the participants. She is a pre-political science major and is a Gates Millennium Scholar.

**Victoria.** Raised about 20 miles south of WCU, Victoria has a younger brother. Although Victoria's parents are not legally married, they identify as a committed couple. Victoria is majoring in global studies and double-minoring in film and theater. She is a Gates Millennium Scholar.

**Rosie.** Rosie's hometown is about 20 miles east of WCU. She is the eldest child in her family and has two younger sisters. She attended a college preparatory high school, which offered a Chicana/o club and courses relating to Chicana/o studies. Rosie is a political science major and a Chicana/o Studies minor. She is the recipient of WCU's Alumni Scholarship.

**Elizabeth.** Raised about 20 miles east of WCU, Elizabeth is an undeclared life sciences major. She has two younger sisters. One is 16 years old and in high school, and the other is six months old. She also has a close relationship with her extended family (e.g., cousins). Elizabeth won a scholarship from the Boys and Girls Club Foundation

Table 3.1

*Overview of Participants' Personal and Family Information*

Participant Pseudonym	Self-identification	Distance from home to WCU	Parents' marital status	Parents' immigration status	Parents' age when arrived in U.S.	Parents' occupation	Birth order and siblings	Major
Elia	Mexican American	40 miles southeast	Single mother Father is absent, but has some communication	All parents migrated without official documents to the United States;	Mother, 16	Mother, office technician Father, meat packer	Eldest, only child. Has 2 half-brothers, father remarried and resides in Iowa. Father has another 15-year-old daughter in Mexico.	Undeclared, social science
Karina	Chicana, Mexican American	20 miles east	Parents are together	At the time of the study, 4 of the 7 parents have gained citizenship.	Mother, 21 Father, 25	Mother, unemployed Father, unemployed	Second eldest, older brother has been deported to Mexico; has younger sister and brother.	Entered as neuroscience, but changed to pre-psychology
Jessica	Hispanic	60 miles southeast	Parents are together		Mother, 23 Father, 24	Mother, unemployed Father, unemployed	Eldest. Has two younger sisters, and younger brother.	Physiological sciences
Única	Chicana	140 miles slightly southeast	Parents are together		Mother, 17 Father, 20	Mother, field worker Father, field worker	Youngest of 5 siblings. 2 older brothers have H.S. degrees; of 2 older sisters, 3 <sup>rd</sup> eldest has obtained college degree, 4 <sup>th</sup> eldest, currently in college.	Pre-political science
Elizabeth	Mexican American	20 miles east	Parents are together		Mother, 17 Father, 16	Mother, unemployed Father, mechanic	Eldest. Has two younger sisters.	Undeclared, life science major
Victoria	Chicana, Mexican American	20 miles south	Parents—domestic partnership, not officially married		Mother, 16½ Father, 19	Mother, cosmetologist Father, mechanic	Eldest. Has a younger brother.	Global studies major, double minor in film and theater
Rosie	Chicana	20 miles east	Parents are together		Mother, 8 Father, ~18	Mother, unemployed Father, carpenter	Eldest. Has two younger sisters.	Political science major and minor in Chicana/o Studies

## Research Design

This phenomenological study seeks to explore the meaning of individual lived experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). More specifically, it seeks to understand the deep meaning of seven Mexican American women's lived experiences and how each articulates her experiences at a top tier research institution. The significant variability among the women in the sample emphasizes the importance of employing tools that capture both the regularity and variance in students from immigrant communities and other diasporas. The dissertation consisted of a collaborative research design that examined the college-going experiences of a marginalized and underrepresented group of students of Mexican heritage in higher education. A collaborative study involves participants throughout the research process—i.e., beyond data collection—in order to ensure that the collected information is conceptualized correctly. Later, I describe how I ensured a collaborative study by drawing upon Paulo Freire's (1970) problem-posing method and Lindsay Perez Huber's (2009) three-phase data analysis approach, both of which promote collaboration between the researcher and participants.

Various data sources were employed to address this study's research questions. As seen in Table 3.2, I conducted 56 interviews (7 semi-structured, 28 open-ended, and 21 photo-elicitation); seven dorm room visits to document inventory of meaningful artifacts; seven self-led campus tours; and four focus groups were conducted. The first two focus groups helped uncover the candid, rich and varied accounts of these women's experiences and their perspectives on college life, while the third and fourth focus groups engaged the participants in the process of analysis.



Table 3.2

*Overview of Data Sources*

Data Source	Number of Sources
Semi-structured Interviews	7
Open-ended Interviews	28
Photo-elicitation Interviews	21
University Housing Visit	7
Self-led Tour	7
Focus Groups	4
	Total: 74

**Benefits and Drawbacks of Employed Methods**

As discussed earlier, the use of multiple-interpretive methods can help gain more textured accounts than otherwise would have been obtained with a single method. Semi-structured interviews helped address pre-determined questions pertaining to students' college experiences among all participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Although valuable information was gained, unwittingly, such a framework places the researcher in a position of power (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2005). For this reason, the incorporation of the open-ended interviews allowed me to engage the participants in conversations rather than a more traditional question and answer structure (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Participants were typically asked to talk about their experiences and then I used probes to discuss topics/issues that arose. An open-ended question allowed each woman to take initiative in the interview process by deciding the particular topics she would like to share with me, which created a more neutral atmosphere.

The opened-ended interviews gave the participant the opportunity to discuss information she felt comfortable sharing, gave her control over the interview, and she was able to discuss important information that might have been forgotten in the semi-structured interviews. One limitation of these one-time sitting interviewing techniques, though, is that the dialogue is based on what the participants can recall during that given time about their knowledge, perceptions,

and experiences. Therefore, photo-elicitation interviews were also incorporated to help participants capture snapshots of important aspects of their first-year experiences, when they were away from the traditional researcher-participant setting. This approach allowed participants to be creative when sharing their perspective as first-generation college students, which contributed to gathering richer data because it offered a closer look at what and whom participants consider important via photographs (Harper, 2002). Research has shown that the incorporation of photographs in social research is an effective tool to engage the participant more fully in the analysis (e.g. Collier, 1967).

As shared earlier, as a result of the pilot study, a hunch emerged about how family attachment may play a crucial role during these women's college transition as students who are the first in their family to negotiate and navigate their first-year experiences in higher education. The photographs helped better illuminate how first-year college women of Mexican heritage applied meaning to artifacts, activities, and spaces to help them sustain their pre-college relationships and connections with individuals they identified as important. A limitation with the incorporation of participant-generated photographs, however, is that sometimes the subject chosen for a photograph may not include artifacts taken for granted in their lives. Taking into account the complexity of human lived experiences, people do not see their everyday actions as significant. Therefore, in the present study, the incorporation of university housing visits and participant-led campus tours allowed me to document an inventory of meaningful artifacts and spaces for each participant and account for those "taken for granted" instances. Table 3.3 lays the chronology of the study.

Table 3.3

*Each Stage of the Study Chronology*

Phase of Study	Timing	Participants	Methods	Goal(s)
Phase 1	Fall Quarter	August	(7) Semi-structured interviews	Discussion about college perspectives
		September -October	(14) Open-ended interviews	Discussion about life and educational experiences
		November -January	(14) Photo-elicitation interviews	-Discussion about life and educational experiences -Visual representation of narratives from interviews
Phase 2	Winter Quarter	February	(7) Open-ended interviews	Discussions about family
		March	(7) Photo-elicitation interviews	-Discussion about life and educational experiences -Visual representation of narratives from interviews
		March	(7) Dorm room inventory of meaningful artifacts	-Discussion of meaningful artifacts -Symbolic representation -Discussion of students' new on-campus "homes"
		March	(7) Self-led campus tours	-Identify welcoming/not welcoming spaces on campus -Symbolic representation -Discussion of students' new on-campus "homes"
Phase 3	Spring Quarter	April	(7) Open-ended interviews	Discussions about meaning-making relating family and college
		May	(2) Focus groups	-Discussion about family ties and commitments -Discussion about process of negotiation between multiple worlds
		May	(2) Focus groups	Engage participants in the analysis process

## Data Sources by Research Question

### Research Questions 1 and 2

To answer Research Questions 1 and 2, the students' life experiences and educational perspectives were the units of focus. The first two questions were:

1. What types of familial-cultural practices do first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage engage in with their families, and how do they apply symbolic value to such practices?
2. In what ways do the familial interactions and practices of first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage contribute to their educational persistence?

Open-ended interviews and semi-structured interviews were employed to elicit critical discussion on participants' life and educational experiences and perspectives, as well as their meaning-making processes relating to family and education. The purpose was to understand how notions of family influence educational persistence among women of Mexican-heritage. A more layered understanding of such phenomenon provides college administrators and educators interested in the issue of college retention within underrepresented communities information about the candid, rich, and varied accounts of these women's experiences with and perspectives on college life.

These data sources yielded interview audio and content logs (Table 3.4).

Table 3.4

#### *Overview of Data Sources for Research Questions 1 and 2*

Data Source	Products	Frequency
Open-ended Interviews	-Interview audio -Interview content log	-At least 4 times, 1–1.5 hours -After the interview
Semi-structured Interviews	-Interview audio -Interview content log	-At least once, 1–1.5 hours -After the interview

**Semi-structured interviews.** I used semi-structured interviews to explore participants' expectations and perceptions about college in general, and college life at WCU in particular, via specific pre-determined questions. Each woman in the sample participated in at least one semi-

structured interview. This type of traditional interviewing technique ensures that all participants address some of the same general questions or topics (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Our conversations were guided by broad categories relating to college expectations, perceived challenges, and academic resources discussed in literature relating to students of color in higher education. The questions included: “How did you hear about WCU?” “Have you talked to any current college students about their college experiences? If so, what have they shared with you?” and “What are your expectations about college life?” (See Appendix E) I used probes (e.g., “Can you elaborate more on...?” and “What do you mean by...?”) to encourage the women to think more deeply, clearly, or broadly about particular issues (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999).

**Open-ended interviews.** I used open-ended interviews to document her perspectives about her family, life, and educational aspirations. Each woman in the sample participated in at least four open-ended interviews. This approach engaged the participants in conversations without a predetermined list of questions or set of topics, rather than in traditional question/answer-style semi-structured interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I asked general questions—such as “Tell me about who you are”—followed by probing questions to discuss topics/issues that arose. Examples of probing questions include: “In what ways do you feel that your parents have influenced your educational aspirations?” and “What type of *consejos* have they shared with you?” (See Appendix D)

The open-ended questions allowed participants to take initiative in the interview process. It also created a more neutral atmosphere where they could decide what particular topics to share. These topics may have included (but were not limited to) primary school to high school experiences and family interactions. The pilot study indicated that open-ended interviews could build rapport with the research informants, particularly after two or more interviews, and could

switch the power dynamics between researcher and participant. The *participants* determined the direction of the conversation. Each of the open-ended interviews following the first began with topics that had emerged from the previous interview. A total of 28 open-ended interviews were conducted, each lasting about 60 to 90 minutes. All were audio recorded, and the recordings were transcribed.

### **Research Question 3**

To answer research Question 3, the women's college experiences and their new on-campus "homes" that included their university housing and the campus was the units of focus to better understand how students develop meaning in these places. Research Question 3 was:

3. In what ways do first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage deploy their asset-based resources during their first-year experiences?

Data sources for this question were photo-elicitation interviews, university housing visits, and self-led campus tours. The discussion of photographs in photo-elicitation interviews provided a visual representation of the narratives from the interviews. The images prompted discussion of symbolic representation of what was captured. Visits to university housing led to discussions of meaningful artifacts. This component of the research allowed students to discuss how their notions of familial-cultural assets may or may not have been reflected in their campus environment. The purpose was to understand how women of Mexican heritage utilize their assets to help better facilitate their college transitions. A more layered understanding of such phenomenon will provide college administrators and educators working with underrepresented communities gain valuable information about how these students acknowledged and honored their assets, and whether their perceived connections influenced their sense of school attachment or sense of belonging at the institution. This information will shed light to the need of specific individualized first-year experience programming for first-generation college students to better

nurture their growth and development. All organizational data products and frequencies for each data source can be seen in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5

*Overview of Data Sources for Research Question 3*

Data Source	Products	Frequency
Photo-elicitation Interviews	-Photographs	- # of images depends on the participants satisfaction with exercise
	-Interview audio	-Depends on the participant, but at least twice, 1–1.5 hours
	-Interview content log	-After interview
Dorm Room Visit	-Meaningful artifacts in room	-1 visit, # of artifacts depends on the participants
	-Interview audio	-1.5–2 hours long
	-Record sheet	-During visit
	-Interview content log	-After inventory
Campus Tour	-Interview audio	-1 tour, 1–1.5 hours
	-Tour content log	-After inventory
	-Fieldnotes	-After inventory

**Photo-elicitation interviews.** As noted by Douglas Harper (1988), photographs, when used appropriately, can serve as visual tools to portray, describe, or analyze social phenomena (along with film and video). Moreover, photographs can serve as tools to help individuals expound on images, spaces, and meanings in specific and productive ways, and to enhance our understanding of people’s social worlds and meanings (Meo, 2010). Visual methodologies can provide valuable insights into participants’ worlds. As John Collier (1967) argued, photo-elicitation interviewing has the “ability to prod latent memory, to stimulate and release emotional statements about the informant’s life” (p. 858), and it contributes to gathering richer data; it also offers a closer look at what and whom participants consider important (Harper, 2002).

With all of this in mind, each participant was given a digital camera and asked to capture her college experiences via photographs. If needed, the informants received a capturing script or a list of questions to help guide their picture-taking process (see Appendix D). Similar to what

Roy E. Stryker's Farm Security Administration photo documentary project called the *shooting script*, a capturing script consists of a series of topics or questions that allows for a strategic approach to collecting photographic data (Suchar, 1997). The capturing script included questions such as "If you had to choose one place on campus as your home away from home, where would it be?" and "Is there something in your room that reminds you of home?" Although informants were encouraged to keep notes to help organize their reasons for taking each photograph, none of the women documented their reasons in writing. The participants' images were used to guide the photo-elicitation interviews, as they described reasons for capturing what they did and the meaning of each scene. During photo-elicitation interviews, the participants did not demonstrate difficulty recalling their reasons for capturing particular photos.

I employed the underlying concepts of photovoice to compensate for the limitations of photo-elicitation interviews. Photovoice goes beyond photo-elicitation by handing research participants a camera to subjectively document their lives and involving them in the analysis to identify the social justice agenda and effect change (Wang et al., 1998; Wang, 1999).

Photovoice has been used often in participatory action research in the field of public health. This type of visual methodology is defined as "a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique...involv[ing] community members to take pictures, tell stories, and inform policy makers about issues of concern at the grassroots level" (Wang, Cash, & Powers, 2000, p. 81). Freire's critical consciousness,<sup>8</sup> feminist inquiry,<sup>9</sup> and documentary photography,<sup>10</sup> form the foundation of photovoice toward three main

---

<sup>8</sup> Paulo Freire's (1970) theory of critical consciousness seeks to engage participants in the *questioning* of their historical-social situation that contributes to personal and community problems.

<sup>9</sup> Feminist theory highlights male biases and power in academic research. It specifically sees women as creators of knowledge and centralizes them in a way that empowers them, honors their intelligence, and values their experiences (Wang & Burris, 1994).



goals: to enable individuals to record and reflect upon their personal and community assets and concerns; to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community issues through group discussions of photographs; and to influence policy-makers (Wang & Burris, 1997).

Photovoice can be used as a tool to analyze social relations and conditions within a particular community, providing “the possibility of perceiving the world from the viewpoint of the people who lead lives that are different from those traditionally in control of the means for imagining the world” (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 384). Traditionally, group discussion is limited to two to three images, although I incorporated all of the participant-captured images in individual interviews to prevent losing valuable information.

**Dorm room visits.** During the pilot study, participants displayed meaningful artifacts such as family portraits or other significant items to help them remain motivated when higher education proved challenging. Such information was elicited via the photo-elicitation interviews. As such, it was important during the current phase of research for me to physically visit participants’ dorm rooms (among other locations) to identify artifacts or off-camera spaces that they may have failed to capture in their photographs. The visits allowed me to further map participants’ significant spaces and possessions on campus while gaining insights into their material worlds.

During my visits to the dorm rooms, I asked participants to share the items in their rooms that were brought from home and had played a role as they dealt with first-year experiences.

Similar to Anthony Graesch’s (2009) mapping technique, I mapped the participants’ individual

---

<sup>10</sup> Documentary photography has documented the subjective lives of those who are usually invisible in the society that they live in. For example, Jacob Riis (1890) documented tenement life in New York City and Lewis Hine (1904–1940) exposed child labor in America.

dorm rooms to methodically document their possessions in and around their on-campus homes. When a participant shared such an item via photograph, they also documented its location in the room and the reason for bringing it to campus. They also explained how the items helped them in their college transitions (see Appendix E). Our conversations during these visits were audiorecorded and transcribed.

**Self-led campus tour.** To help create narration about participants' *public* spaces (i.e., everywhere besides their dorm rooms), I asked participants to provide me with self-led campus tours and share their insights on meaningful spaces. They were given the opportunity to provide information about the activities that occurred in their surroundings and to highlight the significance of the objects and spaces found there. This approach helped reveal how they perceived their sense of belonging at the university. Our dialogue was audiorecorded and transcribed. I also completed detailed fieldnotes after each tour.

#### **Research Question 4**

In my exploration of Research Question 4, the students' multiple worlds, including their families and school were the unit of focus. The primary data source was the series of focus groups (see Table 3.6). Research Question 4 was:

4. What challenges do first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage face in their first-year in college and how do they overcome these challenges?

Table 3.6

*Overview of Data Sources for Research Question 4*

<b>Data Source</b>	<b>Organizational Data Products</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
<b>Focus Groups</b>	-Focus groups audio -Family activity` -Content logs	-4 focus groups, 1–1.5 hours -2 focus groups to address research question -2 focus groups to engage participants in the process of analysis  -1 activity  -After discussion

**Focus groups.** In the first two focus groups, all participants completed a family meaning-making activity to initiate a more critical discussion regarding what family means to them and how they negotiate their multiple worlds (see Appendix E). This activity helped facilitate discussion on how they negotiate family and school obligations. The purpose was to better understand how women of Mexican heritage deal with and negotiate multiple worlds such as school and family. This information will enable administrators and educators working with underrepresented communities to help them better facilitate this negotiation through specific programming. Existing literature suggests that Latina students may feel obligated to fulfill family commitments, which hinders their educational outcomes. In the third and fourth focus groups, I shared some preliminary findings and asked participants to provide feedback on my analysis as well as their own analysis. In the next section, I discuss how I incorporated Perez Huber’s (2009) three-phase data analysis, which allowed me and the participants to immerse ourselves in critical discussion about the collected data.

**Data Reduction and Analysis**

Data analysis was ongoing throughout the duration of the study. I utilized Perez Huber’s (2009) three-phase data analysis model, which consists of a preliminary, collaborative, and final

analysis phase. This approach allows the researcher and participants to immerse themselves in a critical discussion about the collected data. The remainder of this section delineates how I employed this model in the current study.

### **Preliminary Analysis Phase**

Before each interview was transcribed, I made a content log to catalog the information contained and to provide a guide for later information searches. The content log itself is not a direct data resource, but rather its purpose is to orient the researcher to the precise part of an interview that should be reviewed. For every two minutes of interview I provided a paraphrase or description of the talk and actions that occurred. I used subtitles and inserted comments, and began each interval description with a time reference indicating its location within the recording. This procedure helped ease into the massive amount of information and helped identify emerging patterns.

Once patterns began to emerge, I listened to the relevant segments repeatedly and completed verbatim transcriptions. I reviewed the transcribed interviews using a bottom-up or grounded theory approach to identify thematic categories related to students' perceptions and experiences regarding familial-cultural assets. Grounded theory is developed inductively from a corpus of data and its purpose is to develop a set of explanatory concepts that provides a theoretical explanation of social processes within their natural environments (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To help reduce the data, I focused on repetitive themes and interpretation of students' experiences and perceptions related to the phenomena in question.

First, the entire corpus of data was analyzed for evidence that might come to bear on the working assertions of the study's inquiries (Erickson, 1998). After several in-depth readings of the transcripts, I identified major themes that commonly occurred across all data. For instance,

part of the analysis entailed an in-depth, line-by-line reading of the entire dataset to identify, name, categorize, and describe the phenomena found in the text (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). I identified codes and gathered key points of the data that emerged from the text. These codes then led to more specific concepts or to the collection of codes of similar content that allowed the data to be grouped. For the current study, categories related to family were analyzed in greater depth. For illustration purposes, Table 3.7 shows an example of a set of codes that emerged from the dialogue in the open-ended interviews.

Table 3.7

*Example of a Set of Codes for Open-Ended Interviews*

<b>Example Codes</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Hardship</b>	Reference to economic hardships confronted throughout <i>their parents'</i> lifetime, both in Mexico and the U.S.	[My dad] would tell us that [life] was really hard [in Guatemala]. Over there [Guatemala], there's no cement [and] you have to walk on rocks. He said that they had to share like one egg for like the three, four siblings. One tortilla [and] they would eat it with sal [salt], if they had to. [IN2. L123-140.Karina]
<b>Sacrifice</b>	Reference to <i>their parents'</i> giving up something of value to achieve something else.	I remember she [my mom] was so ahead of her game. You are supposed to graduate when you are 18 and she was like 15 or 16 and she was almost going to graduate. But she ended up having to work in the ER in a hospital over there [in Mexico]. So yeah, she was always ahead of her game but she had to work [to help her family]. [IN2.L450-4.Karina]

To compile the codes, I read the transcripts multiple times. As I began to note recurring themes and themes related to the research questions, I sorted the data into categories. See Table 3.8 for an example of themes and categories addressing the first research question that emerged from the codes.

Table 3.8

*Example of Themes, Sub-Themes, Categories, and Sub-Categories Addressing Research*

*Question 1*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-Theme</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Example Codes</b>
<b>Familial-Cultural Pedagogical Tool</b>	<i>Cuentos</i>	Hardships	-Hardship_Economic
		Sacrifices	-Sacrifice_Education

Furthermore, the collected data were triangulated with the various types of data sources. As Frederick Erickson (1998) has suggested, when assertions about patterns are developed, researchers should cross-check and confirm those patterns with all collected sources. As a result, one has a stronger evidentiary claim than if evidence had come from only one source. This approach improved the study’s reliability and aimed to confirm and/or disconfirm any claims.

Moreover, I kept a separate journal to record my own inferences and personal observations, reflections, hunches, and emotional reactions throughout the duration of the study. Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte (1999) would argue that my thoughts are equally as important as my interviews. Thus, it was important to record things that I might not have immediately understood because they might turn out to be important later on. Thus, I created numerous analytic memos and a glossary of codes. I also began to make initial assertions about the findings in order to incorporate them in the collaborative analysis stage. The assertions that emerged from the first and second research questions can be seen in Table 3.9. These assertions were then used to initiate critical dialogue among the participants, promoting collaboration between the researcher (myself) and the researched (the study participants), thereby involving the participants throughout the research process. I discuss the stage of collaborative analysis in a later section.

Table 3.9

*Example of Major Assertions*

Research Question 1	Research Question 2
What types of familial-cultural practices do first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage engage in with their families, and how do they apply symbolic value to such practices?	In what ways do the familial interactions and practices of first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage contribute to their educational persistence?
<b>Assertion:</b> Parents use <i>cuentos/consejos</i> as familial-cultural pedagogical tools to raise their children’s consciousness of oppressed experiences, which helped them develop resilient behavior and positive attitudes.	<b>Assertion:</b> Students attach meaning to the <i>cuentos/consejos</i> and develop asset-based resources that strengthen educational resilience

Figure 3.10 provides an overview of the women’s meaning-making of *cuentos* and *consejos* that were coded into asset-based resources, explicitly showing that these assets are interconnected.

Table 3.10

*Example of How Resources Interconnect*


<b>An Overview of the Women’s Meaning-Making of <i>Cuentos</i> and <i>Consejos</i></b>		
<b>Participants</b>	<b>Meaning-Making of Information</b>	<b>Knowledge Transformed into Asset-based Resources</b>
Elia	[My education was] my way of giving back to her [my mom]. Also, it's a way of giving back to my entire family, even if they [have] passed away. They’ve worked so hard in the fields like physical labor...They were never lazy. They were always working hard. So I feel that I have to work hard too. I am not going to work hard physically, but I'll work hard mentally.	Aspiration/ Familial, Ethnic, and Cultural Pride/ Work Ethic
Única	They [my parents] shared these stories to make us see the hardships of life and encourage us [me and my siblings] to take advantage of school. And also take advantage of the way we are living here [in the U.S.] compared to Mexico—all the struggles that they had to go through...influences me to become independent, to study and come to college, and have my own job, and be a strong Chicana.	Motivation/ Aspiration/ Familial, Ethnic, and Cultural Pride

Table 3.11 illustrates how students’ asset-based resources were transformed into strategies during their first year in higher education. In this illustration, the women deployed asset-based resources through the display of various meaningful artifacts in their dorm rooms.



Table 3.11

*Example of How Asset-based Resources are Converted into Strategies*

<p>Photograph</p>	
<p>Quote</p>	<p>And here [points to the top portion of her desk] I have more [photos] of my brother, my <i>quinceañera</i>, graduation, and my family. And I have more down here [points to the bottom portion of her desk]—I am here with my dad, my brother, my brother again, [and] my mom. I am working here all the time [at my desk] and I just look [at the photos] and it’s just like, “Oh, my family is what I work for.” So I put it [this particular photos] here.</p>
<p>Code (Deployment of Asset- based Resource)</p>	<p>Motivation</p>

**Collaborative Analysis Phase**

In a collaborative study it is important and necessary to involve participants beyond data collection in order to ensure that collected information is conceptualized correctly. In the current study, four focus group were conducted, two of which related to data analysis, and each lasted

about 90 minutes (see Table 3.6). During these discussions, I shared the study's preliminary findings and the group provided feedback on my analysis and shared their own analyses. Participants became involved in group dialogue framed around the thematic categories and assertions that arose from the data itself. The group provided feedback on my preliminary findings and shared their own analysis. For the most part, participants agreed with the shared findings.

I incorporated Freire's (1970) problem-posing method, which promotes researcher-participant cooperation, and helps students "develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves" (p. 83, italics in original). The focus groups were designed to "empower" participants by creating critical dialogue regarding the social and political factors that have influenced their educational aspirations and persistence. Photographs serve as one kind of "code" that can capture valuable realities within a community and convey the sociopolitical circumstances that influence people's lives within particular communities (Freire, 1970). Since the photographs were participant-captured, visual images enabled the participants to identify common themes and/or preliminary findings through critical group dialogue. Participants also read a draft of each findings chapter and were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the portrayal of their stories. I asked if there was specific information they would prefer be edited or omitted. Because my research is rooted within an advocacy and social justice agenda, it was important that the participants decide how they wanted me to share the assets that they brought with them to their first-year experiences.

### **Final Analysis Phase**

In the final analysis phase, I combined the findings that emerged from the first phase of the research (i.e., the researcher's preliminary findings) with the collaboration between the participants and researcher (i.e., the collaborative phase). In all, I modified the initial

preliminary findings in order to better document the lives of those studied. This three-phase data analysis technique helped to (a) adequately document the lived experiences of marginalized communities; (b) ensure a social justice agenda; and (c) involve the participants in the research process through a collaborative research design. Please see Table 3.12 for an overview of the study's course of action.

Table 3.12

*Overview of the Study's Course of Action Example of Themes*

	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Organizational Data Products</b>
<b>Data Collection</b>	Semi-structured and open-ended interviews	-Summary protocol -Content logs -Separate journal to record hunches, thoughts, or other inferences
	Photo-elicitation interviews	-Summary protocol -Document what was captured in each image -Content logs -Separate journal to record hunches, thoughts, or other inferences
	Dorm room inventory and campus tour	-Summary protocol -Content logs -Separate journal to record hunches, thoughts, or other inferences
<b>Data Reduction and Analysis</b>	Preliminary Analysis Stage: Code all content logs and fieldnotes	-Thesaurus and glossary of code -Analytic memos -Various forms of representation -Preliminary analytic memo to make initial assertions about findings to incorporate in collaborative analysis stage
	Collaborative Analysis Stage: Multiple focus groups	-Summary protocol -Content logs -Write analytic memos -Revise preliminary hunches -Collaborative analytic memo to incorporate in final analysis phase
	Final Analysis Stage: Continue to analyze data	-Synthesis of analyses from preliminary and collaborative phases -Final analytic memo

**Positionality of the Researcher**

As principal investigator of this study, I drew upon my personal, academic, and professional experiences to provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of first-generation college students. Although positivist scholarship oftentimes looks down upon inserting our own experiences into a study, it is crucial that we understand our own role as both insider and outsider in order to truly understand our participants. In fact, I draw upon Bernal's

(1998) work on Chicana feminist epistemology in education, which highlights the importance of inserting one's experiences into one's research and the value of cultural intuition.

Cultural intuition (Bernal, 1998) is an extension of what Strauss and Corbin (1990) called “‘theoretical sensitivity’—a personal quality of the researcher based on the attribute of having the ability to give meaning to data” (p. 563). These scholars agree that such intuition comes from four distinct areas: personal experience; existing literature; professional experience; and the analytical research process.<sup>11</sup> Bernal (1998), however, made a key distinction between cultural intuition and theoretical sensitivity by “extend[ing] one’s personal experience to include collective experience and community memory” (p. 563), and further described cultural intuition as “a complex process that is experiential, intuitive, historical, personal, collective, and dynamic” (pp. 567–568). Thus, I acknowledge and honor the four sources of my cultural intuition, all of which become part of the theory-building process. I recognize that cultural intuition has played a crucial role in my research agenda in the following ways:

- My personal experiences are the source of knowledge that I bring to my line of work with first-generation college students of Mexican heritage. My background and personal history shape the ways I understand, interpret, and make sense of events, circumstances, and data during the research process.
- My academic experiences—or what Bernal (1998) would refer to as how I make sense of the related literature in my study—help improve my understanding of the emerging patterns in the study.

---

<sup>11</sup> Bernal (1998) made a key distinction between cultural intuition and theoretical sensitivity by “extend[ing] one’s personal experience to include collective experience and community memory” (p. 563). She further described cultural intuition as “a complex process that is experiential, intuitive, historical, personal, collective, and dynamic” (pp. 567–568)

- My professional (or community) experiences provide insight into the research process.
- In all, these experiences are crucial to how I engage in the analytical research process.

Chicana feminist epistemology welcomes the researcher's cultural intuition, from the development of the research questions, to the design of the study and methods employed, to analysis and conclusions. During the analytical research process described in this dissertation, my membership in an underrepresented population in higher education has helped me identify taken-for-granted practices that first-generation college students of Mexican heritage may employ throughout their college transitions.

For example, common practices performed by the women in both the pilot study and the dissertation research involved purposefully placing meaningful artifacts in dorm rooms and identifying places on campus to help maintain a spiritual connection with their families and communities. These artifacts were associated with their familial connections, including family history, familial-cultural assets, and problems and obligations. These patterns might have been missed if I had not honored my cultural intuition. Thus, this process allowed me to analyze emerging family-related patterns in the study more deeply. Furthermore, due to the massive amount of information that was collected from participants, my cultural intuition helped narrow the unit of observation and focus when analyzing the corpus of data. Interchangeably, my personal, academic, and professional backgrounds provided valuable insights that informed the design of the study and the analytical research process.

## CHAPTER 4

### FAMILIAL-CULTURAL PEDAGOGICAL TOOLS: *CUENTOS* (NARRATIVES) AND *CONSEJOS* (ADVICE)

Cultural deficit perspectives have historically dominated traditional education research examining Mexican-heritage students' experiences in the educational pipeline (for examples, see Andrade, 1982; Escobedo, 1980). More recently, scholars have challenged deficit thinking by documenting the rich knowledge, beliefs, and worldviews of Mexican-heritage communities (see Bernal, 2002; Delgado-Gaitan, 2001; González et al., 1995) and the active involvement of parents of Mexican heritage in their children's education (Valencia & Black, 2002). These scholars highlight positive parental involvement that is often seen as non-traditional in educational settings. But this involvement, such as telling family stories about school experiences and making sure children arrive at school on time, must be acknowledged as significant investments in children's education.

This chapter examines two familial-cultural practices—*cuentos* (narratives) and *consejos* (advice)—used by families to raise their children's consciousness of oppressed experiences and open up the possibility for transformative behavior by encouraging educational aspirations and attainment (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). These practices serve as non-traditional teachings of important life lessons and values that students learn from daily engagements with their families' cultural practices.

This chapter addresses the first research question of this study: *What types of familial-cultural practices do first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage engage in with their families, and how do they apply symbolic value to such practices?* I provide an in-depth examination of the first engagement in the developmental engagement model introduced in

Chapter 1—recognition of important life lessons and values. By exploring this first engagement, we can come to better understand how students extract life lessons and values from *cuentos* and *consejos*, and how the information gained from these familial-cultural practices helps develop resilient attitudes and behaviors in educational settings (examined more thoroughly in Chapter 5).

The current chapter is divided into two main sections. The first examines what types of familial-cultural practices first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage engage in with their families. Here, I specifically examine familial *cuentos* and *consejos*. The second section explores how women apply symbolic value to such practices. Specifically, I examine how the participants extrapolated important life lessons and values from the *cuentos* and *consejos* that they found significant, and how they have applied such information to their educational aspirations and attainment to make the most of educational opportunities. I conclude with an analytical summary of the chapter.

### ***Cuentos and Consejos: Examples of Familial-Cultural Pedagogical Tools***

In this section, I first provide an overview of the types of familial-cultural practices that the seven women in my sample described engaging in with their families (Table 4.1). *Cuentos* were often central to parents' life trajectories—for example, all of the women discussed *cuentos* describing their parents' migration journeys—and the advice offered through *consejos* generally encouraged positive lifelong behavior and attitudes that particularly stressed valuing an education.



Table 4.1

*Overview of Cuentos and Consejos Shared by Study Participants by Theme*

	<i>Cuentos by Theme</i>			<i>Consejos by Theme</i>		
	Economic Hardships and Sacrifices	Migration Journey and Sacrifices	Social Inequality	Be Positive	Value Education	Work Hard
Karina	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Elia	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Jessica	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Única	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Rosie		✓	✓		✓	
Victoria	✓	✓	✓		✓	
Elizabeth		✓		✓	✓	

As will be discussed, the various *cuentos* and *consejos* built upon one another to serve as a powerful source of motivation that helped sustain educational resilience among these seven women. Krauss (2005) argued, “Human beings have a natural inclination to understand and make meaning out of their lives and experiences” (p. 762). These women were constantly creating meaning out of their subjective experiences, specifically “draw[ing] meanings from, or [giving] meanings to, events and experiences” (p. 762). As the women translated their familial engagements and experiences into important life lessons and values, and applied the gained information to their educational aspirations and attainment, they made meaning from their families’ *cuentos* and *consejos*.

Figure 4.1 introduces a basic epistemological understanding of meaning-making as a process of identification, attribution, and application that the students went through in order to assign significance to practices, artifacts, physical spaces, and educational organizations, and to garner the motivational strength necessary to persist academically.

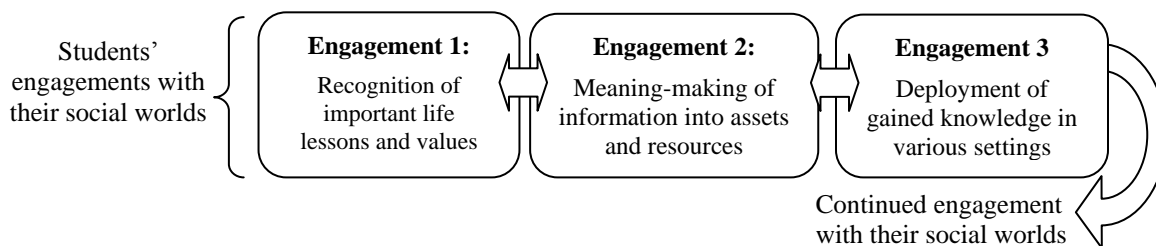


Figure 4.1. Basic epistemological understanding of meaning-making process.

As Chen (2001) argued, “the more awareness that grows toward the significance of meaning in our lives, the more proactive we may become to create meaning in our living experiences, and in turn, the more meaningful our lives will become” (p. 321). The various types of *cuentos* and *consejos* described by the women allowed them to value their familial and cultural experiences as children of immigrants, and to recognize how their educational pursuits validated the hardships and sacrifices endured by their parents. Their parents’ life experiences served as evidence for the value of and need for an education. In other words, as I describe throughout the chapter, these women drew upon their parents’ and families’ lived experiences to fuel their educational motivation, aspirations, and attainment. Before turning to that discussion, it is useful to revisit the definitions of familial *cuentos* and *consejos*, in part to highlight the relationship between the two, particularly in the context of this research.

### **Connections Between Familial *Cuentos* and *Consejos***

Often shared with children from an early age, familial *cuentos* serve as creatively packaged implicit strategies that help pass on important life values and experiential knowledge to younger generations. *Cuentos* are typically narratives about lived experiences that include an implied or explicit message from which the recipient extrapolates significant and/or symbolic life lessons and values and applies such information to her life—in this case, her educational aspirations and attainment. Sometimes *cuentos* begin with lived experiences and provide explicit

advice, while the narrative (which may describe the storyteller's experiential knowledge) supports the validity of the shared advice.

*Cuentos* informed the seven women in this study about a wide range of social injustices encountered by their families and communities on a daily basis and placed value and emphasis on powerful modes of navigation in a society that has historically blocked communities of color from access and equity. Although *cuentos* can expose individuals to social injustices, the recipient must attribute meaning to the gained information if it is to be useful in her life. This involves engaging in the process of value identification, attribution, and application to induce resilient behavior and attitudes. This chapter therefore examines this meaning-making process. Table 4.2 illustrates two types of *cuentos*, and this typology developed out of the data in this study. The first describes an individual's lived experiences and has an *implied* message for the recipient—an underlying lesson that the recipient must first identify as significant and then attribute personal value to after extracting the life lesson. The second type has an additional component that includes an *explicit* message. The recipient does not have to identify the underlying message because it is given in the form of a *consejo*. However, the recipient still needs to engage in the meaning-making process, as discussed earlier in Figure 4.1. The *consejo* is acknowledged as authentic because of the storyteller's role in the recipient's life and his or her experiential knowledge. In this study, storytellers typically provided information about their lives in the form of *cuentos* to set up the given *consejos*. The most common *cuentos* consisted of implied messages.

Table 4.2

*Two Types of Familial Cuentos*

Types of <i>Cuentos</i>	Description	Example
<b>Familial <i>cuentos</i> + <u>implied message</u></b>	A <i>cuento</i> about a lived experience with an underlying message for the recipient to identify and attribute personal value to after extracting the life lesson(s).	They [my parents] would also tell us that they couldn't go to the stores during the day because the Border Patrol was at every corner. Instead, they would go to the stores during the night so the Border Patrol wouldn't see them. And they would tell us about the stories how they felt incarcerated because they really couldn't go out. They would only go to work. And even when they would go to work, they had to wake two hours earlier to be at the field and wait for the time to start work. So, for example, if work started at six a.m., they had to be there like at four a.m. so the Border Patrol wouldn't see them in the morning.
<b>Familial <i>cuentos</i> + <u>explicit message</u></b>	A <i>cuento</i> about a lived experience with an explicit <i>consejo</i> . The recipient acknowledges the <i>consejo</i> as genuine due to the storyteller's experiential knowledge expressed in the form of a <i>cuento</i> .	He [my dad] shared this with us—since we were little—that he literally had no money. He had no shoes. No nothing. He would always talk about how he got his first pair of shoes when he was 14 [years old]. He was like, "You guys want shoes every month." <u>And when he would give us like our pair of shoes, he was like, "Cuídenlos [take care of them] cause how many kids wouldn't want a pair of shoes like you guys?"</u>

Three interrelated themes emerged from familial *cuentos*: economic hardships, migration journeys, and social inequality in both their parents' home country and the United States.

Participant *cuentos*—those that convey events experienced by participants firsthand—were also examined, and these illuminate how the women have imparted the struggles that they have experienced as children of immigrant parents in the United States. Some participant *cuentos* highlighted the hardships their families have continued to experience once in the United States.

The women in this study also reported that their parents specifically provided them with direct words of wisdom in the form of *consejos*. Although *consejos* were typically part of familial *cuentos*—explicit messages in the narratives—there were occasions where the

participants in this study shared receiving direct *consejos* from their parents without the narrative context of the *cuentos*. Nonetheless, these *consejos* were identified as authentic due to their parents' life experiences and knowledge—learned from the familial *cuentos*. The array of *cuentos* and *consejos* built on one another to facilitate important life values, including the pursuit of an education. The three most popular *consejos* given to participants are discussed in this section: “Be Positive,” “Value Education,” and “Work Hard.”

Collectively, these various types of *cuentos* and *consejos* compelled the women in this study to appreciate and value the often taken-for-granted aspects of life: family history, familial and cultural assets, and familial resilience to overcome problems and fulfill obligations. The next section examines these *cuentos* and *consejos* more in-depth.

### **Transformation of Life Lessons to Educational Aspirations and Attainment**

This section explores the latter portion of the first research question, which explores how seven women of Mexican heritage applied meaning to their familial-cultural practices. I examine how these women extracted important life lessons and values from the *cuentos* and *consejos* that they found significant, and how they transferred such information to their educational aspirations and attainment. In retelling these familial *cuentos* and *consejos*, the women in this study have identified these familial-cultural practices as significant. These women recognized the following themes in *cuentos* and *consejos* as significant:

- Their families' economic hardships and sacrifices in both their parents' home country and the United States;
- Their families' immigration journeys and sacrifices;
- Their families' interactions with social inequality in both their parents' home country and the United States; and
- Their families' words of wisdom that involved maintaining positivity/optimism, valuing an education, and working hard.

From the *cuentos* and *consejos* they recalled, the participants identified important life lessons and values that allowed them to draw upon familial advice, wisdom, and experiential knowledge in their pursuit of educational achievements and persistence. In particular, they became aware that: a) an education can provide the opportunities and resources necessary to escape poverty; b) an education is a privilege that many people around the world do not have access to; c) an education would allow them to value their familial and cultural experiences as children of immigrants; and d) their pursuit of education validates the hardships and sacrifices endured by their parents.

The remainder of this section is divided by theme, to provide examples of *cuentos* and *consejos* that these participants identified as significant while also examining how they transformed such important life lessons and values to their own educational aspirations and attainment.

### **Familial Economic Hardships and Sacrifices**

Through *cuentos* of economic hardships and sacrifices, five of the seven women were made aware of the dire circumstances that dictated their parents' daily lives as youth, as seen in Table 4.1. More specifically, they learned of their parents' childhood experiences with poverty, which often exposed the participants to their parents' needs for basic amenities that included food, shoes, and shelter. Additionally, these *cuentos* also informed the women about the lack of educational resources and opportunities available to their parents as a result of their familial experiences with poverty. Participants in this study also drew upon their parents' educational sacrifices that included forgoing their education to financially help their families escape poverty. The women identified poverty as part of their parents' childhood experiences and attributed symbolic value to *cuentos* of poverty.

The following illustrations examine how participants transformed information into symbolic value, including: a) appreciation of the resources and opportunities available to them and which mediate better life experiences; b) recognition of their parents' obligation to suspend their own educational aspirations to financially support their families; and c) admiration of the persistence that their parents showed, regardless of their daily struggles with poverty. In all, these women applied this transformed knowledge to their daily lives and, as a result, developed strong educational aspirations and attainment.

**Karina.** Karina profoundly recalled her father's childhood hardships that exposed her to his experiences growing up in poverty:

[My dad] would tell us that [life] was really hard [in Guatemala].<sup>12</sup> Over there [in Guatemala], there's no cement [and] you have to walk on rocks. He said that they had to share like one egg for like the three, four siblings. One *tortilla* [and] they would eat it with *sal* [salt], if they had to. He shared this with us since we were little—*that he literally had no money. He had no shoes. No nothing.* He would always talk about how *he got his first pair of shoes when he was 14 [years old]*. He was like, “You guys want shoes every month.” And when he would give us like our pair of shoes, he was like, “*Cúidenlos* [take care of them] 'cause how many kids wouldn't want a pair of shoes like you guys?”

Her father drew upon his lived experiences—like owning his first pair of shoes at age 14—as a tool to help Karina and her siblings learn to appreciate the basic necessities provided to them.

Karina understood that her father “literally had no money, no shoes, no nothing” and translated the *cuento* into important life lessons and values—appreciation of basic amenities. Her father's experiential knowledge was salient throughout this *cuento* when he advised his children to “take care of their shoes.” Karina understood that “life was really hard” for her father and realized that owning a pair of shoes was a privilege that many children, like her father, did not have because

---

<sup>12</sup> As noted in Chapter 3, in middle school Karina was informed that the man she came to know as her father was not her biological father. Regardless, she identifies him as her “real” father.

of their impoverished circumstances. Therefore, Karina understood that she must appreciate the amenities and resources her parents were able to provide.

Educational sacrifices that resulted from poverty were another significant theme among the women in this study. Karina shared that her parents had to forego an education to help their respective families in times of financial difficulty. Through these *cuentos* of familial experiences with poverty, Karina continued to become mindful of her privileges as an American-born individual, entitled to invaluable opportunities like an education that her father and mother did not have access to in their home country.

Karina shared the *cuento* above, about her father's childhood experiences with poverty, as a set-up to illustrate the external factors that led her father to sacrifice his education. She continued to share how her father always emphasized the value of an education:

By the third grade, he [my dad] had to quit school because he had to go pick on the *caña* [sugar cane]. That was his job. He made a few cents out of it. So he started working when he was seven [years old], full-time. He couldn't go to school because he needed to support his family. So he always shared that a lot. So no matter what, he was always like "Education is the key." That was his thing.

In sharing these familial *cuentos* of poverty, it was evident that Karina saw a connection between her father's unfortunate childhood experiences and the circumstances that caused him to forgo his education. Karina recognized that her father had to work full-time, as early as age seven, to support his family by picking *caña* at ridiculous pay. She drew upon her father's *consejo* that "education is the key," precisely because learning about her father's childhood economic struggles helped her identify education as the key to escaping poverty.

Karina's mother also had to sacrifice her education at age 15 to work and help her family financially:

I remember [my mom telling us how] she was so ahead of her game. You are supposed to graduate when you are 18 and she was like 15 or 16 and she was almost going to graduate. But she ended up having to work in the ER in a hospital over there [in



Mexico]. So yeah, she was always ahead of her game but she had to work [to help her family with the household income].

Karina understood that due to her parents' impoverished upbringing they had to work instead of going to school. Karina learned from the *cuentos* that her parents did not have the same opportunities that she did, and that everything that her parents endured—and oftentimes continued to endure—was for the betterment of her life:

I have been to Mexico a lot. All my life [we visit during our school breaks] I know how hard it is for them [my cousins] to get through an education. Over here [in the United States], we have so many resources. Over here, they give us the books. We don't have to pay for them. Well, am talking about high school and middle school. They [the United States] have all these resources for us to do good. And over there [in Mexico] you have to pay to go to school—elementary, middle school, high school—you have to pay for your books....So [my mom], she's like, "Use that knowledge. Like seeing how your cousins are doing in Mexico. Use it as your own knowledge and just do good. Everything is there for you. We are going to buy your materials and stuff like that." And it's always been, "Do good. Do good." And I always did good.

As she compared the differences between her country and her mother's home country, Karina realized how important it was to "do good" through her own experiences. In addition to her mother's encouragement, she drew upon her cousins' experiences in Mexico. Karina's mother reminded her children how they supported them to "do well" by buying the materials needed to perform well academically. Karina valued her education because her parents and cousins did not have the same opportunities as she did.

When Karina became a young mother in the 10th grade, her familial *cuentos* took on an even more significant role, as she remained connected to lessons she learned about the possibilities and opportunities available to her compared to her parents. Unlike her parents, she benefitted from the opportunity to pursue her education and was able to successfully see her high school education through while also gaining admission into a prestigious university. Karina said she aspires to transfer the same values to her son: "I want him to know that to get what he wants, he needs to work hard. That was the main thing my mom would always tell me: 'You just can't

get there like flying.” Regarding exposing her son to their family history, Karina added, “[Our son] has to remember that my parents had to migrate, they had to work in these kinds of jobs but we—[I] also had to struggle to get here [to attend a university].” Karina said she finds it important to pass these *cuentos* on to the next generation and to seed notions of educational aspirations and attainment.

**Victoria.** Victoria also shared her father’s childhood *cuentos*, which involved providing financial assistance to his family at a young age:

What makes me really sad is that my dad had a really rough childhood. My dad is the oldest in his family. He always had to work for his family because his dad left him. He was like, “I had to sell bubble gum at the corners of the streets.” So he had a rough childhood too.

In recounting this familial *cuento* of poverty, Victoria identified her father’s “rough childhood” experiences as significant. She was exposed to the vicious cycle of poverty that influenced her father’s childhood experiences, and she viewed her father “sell[ing] bubble gum at the corners of the streets” as the result of her grandfather’s abandonment. Victoria valued how her father took on the responsibility of caring for his siblings and working for his family, and she translated the *cuento* into important life lessons and values—appreciation of her own childhood. Victoria recognized the privileges she had as a child who was not expected to forgo her youth or education to assist her family financially.

As a result of her parents’ childhood experiences with poverty, Victoria—similar to Karina—also identified her father’s educational sacrifices. She was aware of her father’s intelligence but understood that his circumstances did not allow him to pursue an education.

My dad told me that he didn’t know what he wanted to do so he took that test that tells you what career options you have. He said he had mechanic and another one—I don’t remember what the other one was, but it was something fancy. But he got to that point where he couldn’t go on with his studies because he had to work for his family—he had to sell food on the streets. That was unfortunate. That was something that stood out to me, you know, because I see that my dad is so smart. He’s really smart and it’s so sad that he has the potential to [succeed]—he would have made it because he has the brains

to do it and all that, but his circumstances didn't allow it. So I feel really privileged that I can make it happen here in the United States. There are so many opportunities and so much aid out there that makes it possible [for me to continue with my education].

To this day, Victoria's grandmother emphasizes her father's intelligence: "My grandma was telling me that my dad was really, really, smart. So [I']m always like, 'Oh, I got it [my intelligence] from him.'" Her awareness of her father's academic potential and realization that her father had to forgo his education to support his family led Victoria to extract from the *cuentos* the value of an education. Victoria acknowledged her privileged circumstances as a child who had access to educational opportunities and resources, unlike her father.

**Elia.** Elia recalled details about her mother's childhood experiences with poverty, which included starvation and forgoing educational aspirations, in addition to homelessness:

One of my other uncles was trying to move more north in Mexico to find a job picking cotton or something. So my mom was telling me how they were moving [migrating within Mexico] and how they were homeless for a long time. They had to sleep outside with a lot more migrant families. They took hard boiled eggs like a bunch of them to eat and it was so hot that they got spoiled right away. So they didn't have any food. They had *tortillas* but they were also spoiled. They were homeless without any food for a while. They were experiencing the migrant lifestyle in Mexico.

In recounting this familial *cuento* of poverty, Elia identified her family's "migrant lifestyle in Mexico" as significant. Through the *cuento*, Elia discovered her family's experiences with homelessness and malnourishment. Similar to the other women, Elia valued her mother's experiences with poverty and transformed the *cuento* into important life lessons and values—appreciation of basic amenities like food and shelter.

Elia was also told of other personal circumstances that impacted her mother's daily life. At a young age, her mother lived with older siblings after becoming an orphan at an early age, after which familial tensions emerged among her mother's siblings:

My grandma passed away when my mom was three or four [years old]. She died giving birth to my *tía* [aunt], who died a few weeks later. I think my mom mentioned that she [the midwife] was drunk or something [and] didn't come in time....Shortly [thereafter] my grandpa died [a year or two later]. She [my mother] really didn't have a stable home.

She was always moving around from uncle to uncle, and I have one aunt. It was difficult to stay too long [with one uncle/aunt] because each uncle and aunt had their own family to take care [of]. It wasn't like they were flowing with money. So the fact that they had to feed another mouth, it always created tension in the house. And the wives were usually the one who [asked], "Why do we need to take care of your sister and this and that." They weren't really that sensitive.

Although looked after by her siblings, Elia recognized that her mother never had the love, support, and attention that came with having a unified family. Elia understood the financial difficulties that might come with supporting an additional member in a household. This financial circumstance, however, also prevented her mother from experiencing a supportive family. Elia understood that her mother's sisters-in-law saw Elia's mother as a burden because "they had to feed another mouth."

For Elia, *cuentos* conveyed harsh life lessons that helped her mother raise her without the support of Elia's father or other family members. *Cuentos* about her mother's childhood proved the most vivid and powerful in Elia's retelling. The simple fact that her mother had endured these types of experiences truly had a strong influence on Elia's educational aspirations:

You would think it would be easy to put [my mom] down [after everything she has experienced]...But she doesn't—*No se da por vencida*—she doesn't give up. That kind of spirit has helped me [excel in school].

Passing on experiential knowledge in fact empowered Elia to value her education. Through this type of *cuento*, Elia transformed her mother's everyday persistence into her own educational aspirations and attainment. Elia valued her mother's personal qualities that arose out of her need to cope with her circumstances. She understood the experiences her mother lived (and continues to live) in order for Elia to be able to have a better life, and she drew upon her mother's work ethic—"she doesn't give up"—for personal fortitude. Learning of her mother's sacrifices and hardships has empowered Elia to value her education and tap into the persistence and fortitude she learned from her mother to persist academically.

## Participants' *Cuentos*

Through participant *cuentos*, three women in this study recounted the hardships their families continued to experience once in the United States, especially their direct experiences with poverty. More importantly, participants told of their families' persistence in difficult situations, including overcoming homelessness in the United States. Overall, Jessica, Única, and Victoria explicitly described their families continued hardships in the United States, witnessing their familial resilience.

**Jessica.** Jessica's family's financial situation became apparent to her as a result of her parents' decision to rent out a room in their home in order to generate additional income, nothing that "we never had our privacy." She elaborated on their situation and acknowledged a period in her family's life when they experienced homelessness:

Our family went through a lot. There was a time that we didn't have a place to live. We would be living at a friend's living room. It was really bad. The situation was really bad. My dad used to work in construction. But then after a while he got laid off. And then it was getting a little bit harder for us, for our whole family. I started working my junior year to help out my family. My mom was making tamales and taking care of kids, and my dad was doing minor construction jobs. But it was still not enough.

Although Jessica experienced poverty and described her family situation as "really bad," she had also witnessed her parents' resiliency and persistence when they drew upon abilities like culinary skills to contribute to their household income. Her parents drew upon their wealth of knowledge to provide for their children even in the most severe times.

Although Jessica perceived having a limited knowledge about her parents' childhood experiences, her experiences with household financial hardships and sacrifices played an important role in developing important life values:

I cherish [my education]. I really appreciate the struggles that my parents went through [for us], and just [for us] to be here [in the United States] and to continue [with our education], and to still be here and be here at [WCU] and have my own dreams [come true]. I really appreciate that and cherish that, to be here [in the United States].

Jessica acknowledged her appreciation of her parents' endurance through struggles so that she and her siblings could pursue their education, and ultimately, make their dreams a reality.

**Única.** Única also shared her own *cuentos* regarding her family's economic hardships. She explained that she, together with her siblings and cousins, "worked in the fields with our parents and we saw the need of money." She described witnessing her mother's work ethic:

We would work together, my mom and me. We would cut the grape. We would take it out in the wheel barrel. And I would try to help my mom because she wouldn't get her breaks in order for us to make more boxes. They [the bosses] have a number of boxes each person should be making. And if you pass that they pay you like a quarter more each box. It's really not that much. But my mom would try to get that dollar or two. That was some type of encouragement that she gave me—just seeing her that she would not stop so we can get more money. That showed me how [much of] a hard working person she is.

Única admired her mother's work ethic, and drew from that strength and motivation, applying it to her own educational aspirations. Única witnessed firsthand what many immigrants like her parents endure as field workers:

I was able to really see how my parents worked. I admire them not only for providing us with food but also admiring them for their work. For who they are. For how hard they worked. Working with them allowed me to have a closer relationship with them.

Única identified these interactions with her parents as significant: "These [experiences] influence me to become independent, to study and come to college, and have my own job, and be a strong Chicana." Overall, witnessing her mother's experiences in the fields rather than hearing about them through *cuentos* had the same vital influence on Única's deep value of education, seeding aspirations to pursue "a law career to fight for field workers' rights."

**Victoria.** Victoria also explicitly spoke about her family's continued hardships in the United States:

[W]orking all day, just being at work [is another sacrifice]. We were always struggling—I never had the necessity for anything—but it was like, "Okay, we barely were able to pay everything and we just have 20 bucks left over" kind of thing.

Victoria identified her parents' financial situation as significant. Although she admitted never having the "necessity for anything," Victoria realized that her parents were barely making it through financially, and she respected her parents' work ethic. She understood that this reduced the likelihood of more severe circumstances like homelessness, even if it meant they sacrificed physically. Victoria gained a better understanding of the unique insights of being a child of immigrant parents, and this allowed her to apply her own form of persistence and strength to her own daily life. As we learned earlier, Victoria felt "really privileged" that her status as American-born allowed her a higher standard of living compared to her parents growing up.

Overall, through exposure to these *cuentos*, these participants identified the information as significant and transformed it into symbolic value. They understood that they had a wider range of resources and opportunities than their parents did, and they recognized the educational sacrifices their parents made as a result of poverty. They embraced their parents' work ethic and recognized that they had made sacrifices so that their children would not have to do the same and could instead focus on pursuing an education. As a result of their engagements with their familial *cuentos* and *consejos*, these women developed strong educational aspirations and milestones.

### **Immigration Journeys and Sacrifices**

Through *cuentos* of migration, all the women in the sample were made aware of their parents' migration journey and sacrifices, as seen in Table 4.1. More specifically, they learned about their parents' aspiration to achieve financial stability. Additionally, these *cuentos* alerted the women to their parents' perilous journeys to the United States. As a result, they associated two sacrifices with their parents' migration stories: their parents permanently left their families in their home country, and lived in constant fear once in the United States. These sacrifices resulted from their parents' "illegal" status in the United States. All of the women had some

knowledge about their parents' migration stories, which included reasons for migrating, the actual journeys, and associated sacrifices.

**Reasons for migrating—achieve financial stability.** Through *cuentos* of migration, the study participants were exposed to their parents' aspirations to achieve financial stability. Six out of the seven women said their parents migrated because they aspired to achieve a better standard of living. Moreover, all of the parents ultimately shared their desire to achieve financial stability for their children. Karina's father communicated, "he really wanted to come here [to the United States] to get a good job and [to] have money." Similarly, Elia's mother's family sought employment opportunities: "My mom was telling me how they were migrating in Mexico in order to try to get money but that wasn't working out. It wasn't enough money. So my uncle was just like, 'Let us go north [to the United States].'" Jessica also retold her parents' aspiration to obtain better standard of living: "They wanted a better life than Mexico....My mom came because my dad came over here [to the United States], and they wanted a better life than Mexico." Rosie also recounted her parents' need for a better standard of living: "They [my dad and mom] came because they were having problems at home with their families." Rosie shared her parents' desire to live a better life, not directly related to financial stability but through personal well-being, away from existing problems. Victoria's father, on the other hand, migrated more spontaneously, telling her that it "wasn't even a planned thing. Some friends said, 'We're going over to the other side. Do you want to come?'" As the women learned about their parents' reasons for migrating, they also embraced their parents' actual journeys.

**The "perilous journeys."** Through these *cuentos* of migration, the seven women were exposed to, as Victoria put it, the "perilous journeys" their parents' lived to pursue a better standard of living by achieving financial stability. Six out of the seven participants had some knowledge about their parents' actual migration journeys. These women utilized *cuentos* to



serve a *purpose* in their own lives by acknowledging and honoring the extraordinary experiences their families faced when crossing the border. Through these *cuentos* of migration, the women arrived at a candid awareness of the unique experiences encountered by their parents. The following examples illustrate how they transformed the *cuentos* into symbolic values and how they applied the shared information to their educational aspirations and attainment.

*Única.* Única's familial *cuento* about her parents' migration journey provided a clear picture of when her mother and father crossed "*la frontera* [the border] from Mexicali to California." Única valued her parents' immigration journey:

My mom was pregnant with my brother when she crossed. I think she was six or seven months. *Pero casi no se le miraba* [but it was hardly noticeable]. The coyote [human smuggler] left them for a while because they had to run from one place to another. My mom was really thirsty and she had no water, no fruits, no nothing. And my dad decided to leave the crowd they were with behind. They found a house but my mom said they couldn't get water because where the *llave* [faucet] was, there was a dog tied. So they couldn't get water because the dog was going to bite them. So they went onto the freeway, which was somewhat near, but my mom couldn't. She was about to faint. My dad told her, "If you don't come with me to the street, they won't stop because it's me, a man, and you're a woman. They are going to stop for you." So my mom went with him. And a car did stop and they had water and oranges. That was kind of their lucky moment because my mom was about to faint. She was pregnant, running, and it was hot.

Única remembered vivid details of the day her parents crossed the border because "would share [such stories] as [she] was growing up," and in fact still do. Única said she admires her parents' border crossing experience because it exemplifies a near death encountering.

As I argue in this chapter, the various types of *cuentos*, taken together, improve these women's understanding of what it means to be children of immigrants, and how the pursuit of an education validates familial hardships and sacrifices. The various *cuentos* build on one another to serve as a powerful source of motivation that helps sustain educational resilience. In the previous section, we learned that Única admired her mother's work ethic in the field. In this section, we can see that she is also deeply impacted by her mother's persistence in the desert. Única shared that her mother's experiences have "influenced [Única] to become independent, to

study and [go] to college and have [her] own job, and be a strong Chicana.” In this way, Única transformed the *cuentos* into motivation that now fuels her educational aspirations.

Única reported how she, to this day, “enjoys them [the stories] about [her] parents’ experiences” and that she understands the messages the narratives convey:

They [my parents] shared these stories to make us see the hardships of life and encourage us [her and her siblings] to take advantage of school. And also take advantage of the way we are living here [in the United States] compared to Mexico—all the struggles that they had to go through.

Similarly to the other parents, Única’s parents consciously used their experiential knowledge as a familial-cultural pedagogical tool to help facilitate positive lifelong behaviors and attitudes in their children. Única’s parents emphasized the importance of an education through *cuentos*, and they have allowed Única to appreciate her familial and cultural experiences as a child of immigrants, and how her pursuit of education will validate the hardships and sacrifices suffered by her parents.

***Elizabeth.*** Elizabeth remembered an experience her father disclosed to her about his border crossing:

[My dad] he said that he rode in a truck, but the air was going out. There was no more air. There was like 30, 40 people in this truck and the air was running out. He couldn’t breathe. So there were people passing out. And when he got out [of the truck], he was lightheaded. He fell on the floor. He had to take several minutes to get air, like the oxygen intake, to liven him up again. He felt that that was it. That he was going to pass out because there was little oxygen in the truck.

Elizabeth’s body language conveyed the feeling of suffocation as she retold his *cuento*. She gasped for air, as her father did, and she bobbed her head and blinked her eyes to convey her father’s light-headedness. Her eyes reflected the admiration she held for her father and the strength he showed in surviving a dangerous migration journey. Elizabeth understood that her father came close to death: “He felt that that was it.”

Elizabeth acknowledged the value of familial and cultural experiences as a child of immigrants. She understood that these *cuentos* were more than just stories; they involved her parents' retelling of real life experiences—life lessons:

I mean [my parents' stories] makes things real. It's just not in the movies. It's real. I mean, yeah, it was years ago, like 30 years—I don't know [exactly] how many years ago, but it's real. Some people think it's just in the movies but it's not though. I think that's something that people fail to see.

Elizabeth has candidly recognized how many people lack the knowledge about the actual experiences lived by immigrants. Conversely, she expressed that she does not take for granted these types of human experiences, but values the strength necessary to endure the unimaginable experiences immigrants undergo.

**Jessica.** Through *cuentos* of migration, Jessica also reported her admiration of the perilous journey her parents had to tolerate. She appreciated the array of privileges available to her as a U.S. citizen, which resulted from her parents' decision to migrate to a country with more opportunities:

I can't imagine risking your own life. I know it's much harder to cross to the United States [now], but risking your own life and how many people died from crossing. That symbolizes the American dream here in the United States. Why people come here. [When] I went back to [city in Mexico], I have seen the bad education [system]. I feel that there are more opportunities here in many different ways, and I feel that that's why they [my parents and people] came here. I think it's very admirable. I have papers but my parents don't. They crossed [even though] they may go to jail just to follow their dreams or create a new life here for us [Jessica and her siblings].

Jessica reported that seeing firsthand the lack of opportunities in Mexico, especially relating to education, contributed to her understanding of why many people in general—and her parents, specifically—have migrated to the United States. Jessica has been exposed to her parents' dangerous migration story and the risks they took to pursue what she described as the “American dream.” Jessica expressed her admiration for her parents, the pursuit of their dreams, and their commitment to seeking a new life for their children.

**Victoria.** Even though Victoria reported not completely knowing her parents' migration stories in detail, she reported being aware of the "perilous journey" they made in crossing without documentation:

I mean, I've heard a lot about the way that people cross the border. All it does is sadden me. It's influenced me in a way that I just want to help other people who are going through that perilous journey. My parents' particular experiences are part of being an undocumented immigrant in America, I see it as a package; their undocumented status has, of course, had an impact on me, lifestyle-wise and goal-wise.

Victoria expressed how she is touched by the dangerous journey people experience when crossing the border and she aspires to help these individuals. She has identified her parents' undocumented status in America as significant precisely because she understands what it means to be an undocumented person in the United States. Victoria associates her parents' struggles with their undocumented statuses. Because Victoria recognized her parents' lived experiences as significant, she has applied this information to her own life.

Victoria aspires to help her family's lifestyle by escaping poverty through the pursuit of a college education, increasing her likelihood to obtain a career and helping her family financially. Unlike her parents, who needed to withdraw from education to help their own families' household income, Victoria will be able to support her family financially with a college education. The need to improve her family's lifestyle developed after witnessing their living conditions, influenced by their socioeconomic status. Victoria also said she aspires to become the first university graduate in her family. Similar to the other women, her goals will only help overcome her parents' experiences as immigrants of color.

**Two sacrifices associated with migration.** The participants identified two sacrifices associated with migration that they found significant: their parents' permanently leaving their families, and living in constant fear, both resulting from their parents' "illegal" status in the United States. Four of the participants—Victoria, Karina, Única, and Jessica—were most

inspired by the sacrifices and realities that accompanied their parents' decisions to cross the border. Due to their parents' initial—and, in some cases, ongoing—"illegal" status in the United States, the women acknowledged the particular sacrifices involved in their parents' situations that required them to permanently separate from their families and the fear of getting caught by authorities.

**Victoria.** Victoria embraced her parents' migration sacrifices. Her parents had to permanently separate from their families to start a new life in the United States for themselves and for their children. Victoria described her mother's sacrifices:

My mom hasn't seen her parents in sixteen years. My grandpa is really sick and he has diabetes. He's had it for a long time and it's only getting worse. He can't see that well anymore. My grandma, she's getting tired of taking care of him—I mean not tired of, but you can tell that she is very tired, it's draining her. So there have been incidences where my grandpa has been really, really sick, and my mom sort of contemplates like, "Is my dad going to die? Should I go see him?" She hasn't because of us, because she can't leave us. She could go to Mexico, but she can't come back. She has told us before, "I kind of have come to terms with the fact that I am not going to see my dad alive anymore because he is so sick now." And that's really sad that she has to sacrifice her family for this family here [referring to Victoria's dad, her brother, and herself]. I feel that's the biggest sacrifice.

Victoria internalized her mother's permanent separation from her parents because her mother does not have the proper legal status to migrate between countries. Victoria sympathized with her mother, who is unable to care for Victoria's grandparents as they are growing older and experiencing more health concerns. Furthermore, Victoria's father has also gone without seeing his parents for almost two decades: "My dad hasn't seen his mom, even longer. Probably nineteen years that he hasn't seen his parents."

Victoria explicitly drew upon her parents' wide-range of experiences, exposed through familial *cuentos*, to fuel motivation to excel academically:

I want to make them feel that they are not wasting—that their sacrifices weren't for nothing. Like through my [educational] achievements, "Look here, this is what I have done so your sacrifice wasn't for anything. Now I have taken full advantage of

everything that you guys have worked for. How hard you guys have worked to place me in the United States.”

Victoria understood what it means to be a child of immigrants—her parents had to suffer various hardships and sacrifices to migrate to the United States and to allow Victoria and her brother to benefit from the opportunities available to them as U.S. citizens, and she aspired to overcome her parents’ sacrifices through her educational achievements.

**Karina.** Karina also appreciated the array of privileges available to her as a U.S. citizen. Her educational achievements and attainment will only overshadow the sacrifices her parents have tolerated to achieve financial stability. Karina noted that her parents’ story had a great influence on her:

It was really hard for them to actually come to the idea of migrating over here [to the United States] because they were scared of leaving their families. Then, when they actually came, they were really scared to get caught. So as a citizen [of the United States], I felt safe to be anywhere, but when my parents weren’t citizens yet—especially my mom—they were scared of being seen by cops or even going to the stores. The news would show how many immigrants were being deported.

Karina internalized her parents’ multiple sacrifices that involved leaving their families behind and fearing an encounter with authorities. For these reasons, Karina expressed appreciation of her freedom. She was aware of her parents’ fear to go to the stores. These *cuentos* reminded her to value—rather than take for granted—her status as an American.

**Única.** Única also told of her parents’ fear of running into the Border Patrol. These fears resulted in her parents altering their lifestyle to avoid cross paths with authorities. Her parents also shared *cuentos* about their feelings of incarceration:

They would also tell us that they couldn’t go to the stores during the day because the Border Patrol was at every corner. Instead, they would go to the stores during the night so the Border Patrol wouldn’t see them. And they would tell us about the stories, how they felt incarcerated because they really couldn’t go out. They would only go to work. And even when they would go to work, they had to wake two hours earlier to be at the field and wait for the time to start work. So, for example, if work started at six am, they had to be there like at four am so the Border Patrol wouldn’t see them in the morning.

Única embodied her parents' everyday experiences as undocumented immigrants. She recounted her parents' fear that led them to adjust their everyday life to limit the possibility of an encounter with law enforcement. She also witnessed their altered work schedule, arriving two hours early to prevent an encounter with the Border Patrol. These *cuentos* of migration, combined with those discussed in the previous section, allowed Única to understand what it means to be a child of immigrant parents.

**Jessica.** For Jessica and her family, fears of deportation and familial separation became a reality when her parents were deported to Mexico during her junior year in high school. Jessica whispered her heartbreaking situation:

It was a really hard thing for me. I had to take care of my siblings....I had to take care of my siblings, and I had to continue working and going to school. It was really hard. I had people, my teacher and other people, telling me that I can do it, to keep working hard. A lot of people were really impressed with what I was doing because my grades continue to be really high. Two of my youngest siblings went back to [Mexico] with my mom when she got out of jail. She left to [city close to the border] to be closer to us [my sister and I] and, when my dad got out of jail, he ended up staying in [city] as well. So I was taking care of my sister, who is two years younger than me. It was really hard at times. And to this day, I go visit them during our vacations. It's really hard because when you go over there [to Mexico], you wish that they can be over here [in the United States], seeing you graduate, seeing you go to college. It's really hard.

Jessica's family was living the dreadful fear many families experience as a result of their "illegal" status in the United States. Ironically, Jessica's *cuento* reflects her determination and persistence in her education even after she became responsible for the care of her three siblings. Jessica continued to acknowledge the importance of "stay[ing] strong," not only for herself but also for her younger sister who resided with her in the United States. Similar to the other women, Jessica realized the importance of her education as a result of witnessing and experiencing familial struggles, sacrifices, and obligations. She explained:

I feel blessed to be here [in the United States]. One of the biggest reasons why I stayed here—because I could have went back to [city in Mexico] with my parents—but one of the reasons why [I didn't] is because I value a lot my education.

Jessica sacrificed her physical connection with her family when she decided not to reside in Mexico with her family. Because she identified her parents' struggles as the price paid to fulfill her dreams of becoming a doctor, suspending or discontinuing her education would have invalidated her parents' sacrifices. As I will discuss later in the familial *consejos*, Jessica's mother has always emphasized the importance of an education to her children. Like the other women, persisting academically helped justify Jessica's parents' lived experiences. Although her family was separated due to deportation, Jessica realized the need to pursue the "American dream" her parents precisely migrated to achieve in the United States.

### **Interactions with Inequality**

Through *cuentos* of inequality, six of the seven participants in this study were exposed to their parents' suffering in their home country and the United States. These women shared *cuentos* that acknowledged the everyday challenges and injustices people of color encounter, as seen in Table 4.1. These *cuentos* alerted them to social, labor, and/or gender inequalities experienced by their parents. Some involved racial stereotypes about a community with which a participant identified. Others included discriminatory interactions experienced by their parents and/or witnessed by the participants firsthand. Participants were also told *cuentos* of inequality that implied gender differences and expectations. These inspired the women to excel academically because they viewed their educational attainment as a means to precisely challenge stereotypical ideologies and to acknowledge the continued hardships and sacrifices lived by their families. Here I examine these *cuentos* of inequality in depth.

**Elia.** Elia recalled *cuentos* shared by her mother that highlighted her mother's experiences with society's perceptions of *indigenas* [indigenous women] in Mexico:

[My mom] would tell me there's a lot of discrimination in Mexico, especially towards short, more dark-skinned people. And my mom is one of those people and I am too. There's a lot of discrimination. She told me how she'd work in houses as a maid—that's an honorable job—and the [owners] were nice to her. But not other people, randomly on



the streets, the rich person looking down on *indigenas*, or looking down on people who are not rich nor are Eurocentric.

Although Elia's mother was describing the treatment of indigenous peoples in Mexico, similar perceptions exist among communities of color in the United States, both in general and with respect to people of Mexican heritage specifically (for examples, see Andrade, 1982; Escobedo, 1980; García & Guerra, 2004; Valencia & Black, 2002; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997).

Through *cuentos* of inequality, Elia was informed about her mother's everyday treatment, and she identified as being part of an ethnic community that has historically been targeted by society's negative perceptions. But Elia transformed this information into empowerment:

All that has given me fire in my stomach; to try to go out and do something about it [change these perceptions]. Like try to change that [how people see *indigenas*] and try to change that through changing the image that people have of us [people of color]. Of being ignorant or not going to school, not valuing education—I don't know where they got that from—or being lazy. I don't know where that comes from. All of that! All of that serves as my motivation—changing one person at a time [through an education]. How can you say that we are lazy? How can you say that we're ignorant that we don't value education, when many of us are going to college? Our parents are working so we can get into college.

Elia challenged this deficit perspective about her community because these beliefs did not coincide with her own experiences. She conveyed how becoming aware of her family history led to academic resiliency and motivation at an early age. She also expressed how knowledge about her family history challenged stereotypical ideologies:

They've [my family] worked so hard in the fields like physical labor.... They were never lazy. They were always working hard. So I feel that I have to work hard too. I'm not going to work hard physically, but I'll work hard mentally.

Instead of Elia associating the stereotype as factual and developing self-defeating behavior<sup>13</sup> in educational settings, exposure to her family history allowed her to challenge the stereotype. Elia also drew upon her math class to demystify stereotypes about Mexican-heritage individuals:

When I was doing my math in middle school, I was so close in giving up and saying, “You know what? I’m not going to do it anymore and [I’m] going to flunk out of the class so they can place me in a lower level class.”...But then I thought of my ancestors and my mom [who] are working so hard physically. I know that they didn't stop working, plowing the fields. [And for me] just [to] do that [give up]—...That would be like an insult to my ancestors and to my mom, if I don't work hard and I just push myself. I cannot give up. I am going to mentally work hard and push myself.

These familial *cuentos* have fueled Elia’s motivation on her educational pathway. She recognized the importance of educational resilience because she was aware of the physical labor her mother and ancestors experienced. She acknowledged her determination to work hard mentally, referring to her education, rather than physically, as her family experienced in the fields. In short, Elia has developed an aspiration to challenge existing beliefs about her community through her educational attainment. She explicitly shared:

My roots are humble, but that doesn’t mean that I am any less equipped to succeed. Because a person’s education, it is important, but it does not necessarily indicate how they should be treated...[My education was] my way of giving back to her [my mom]. Also, it’s a way of giving back to my entire family, even if they [have] passed away.

Elia identified her educational aspirations and attainment as a means to acknowledge and honor her family history, which has been comprised of hardships and struggles. Similar to the other participants, she expressed confidence that her familial roots would not impede her academic success. On the contrary, learning about her family experiences through various types of *cuentos* has only motivated Elia to achieve academic excellence.

---

<sup>13</sup> Self-defeating behavior occurs when students’ actions (e.g., dropping out of school), regardless of their critique of the schooling system (e.g., underprepared teachers and lack of resources), harm their likelihood to combat their oppressive status (for examples, see Fine, 1991; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001).

Elia also shared *cuentos* about her mother's continued experiences with injustices in the United States. Elia narrated her mother's *cuento*:

When she [my mom] got here [to the United States], she was working in a sweat factory. There were these Chinese owners and it was just Hispanics working. She would tell me that sometimes there would be certain days they [the owners] were like, "*La Migra! La Migra!* They are coming! They are coming!" And everybody would just take off. And she said, "They probably weren't immigration officers but probably those people that go around to make sure that—to inspect the job...to check that everything was good. That they [the workers] had good working conditions." And to avoid having to pay minimum wage, they [the owners] were like, "*La Migra. Run!*" So that really is another example of how people are always trying to keep another group down.

This *cuento* complements the already existing depiction of what it means to be a child of an immigrant parent. Elia found her mother's experiences to be significant because her mother had to encounter various experiences, struggles, and hardships in order for Elia to have educational opportunities in the United States. Through her mother's *cuentos*, Elia was exposed to oppressive experiences of various inequalities that her mother had endured, and these experiences strongly influenced Elia's desire for social justice. She believed that education would ultimately provide the resources necessary for her to respond.

As Elia noted, "I am starting to see *more the importance of getting an education* in order to *represent peoples' voices* that aren't going to be heard...*That's another motivation*" [emphasis added by the participant]. Thus, Elia's academic achievements honor her ancestors by challenging society's negative perceptions of "short, more dark skinned people." Obtaining a college education means much more than living a better lifestyle. It means acknowledging the hardships and sacrifices Elia's ancestors and mother lived and continue to live in order for her to be able to have better life outcomes. Elia honors her mother's and ancestors' work ethic as she persists through her educational trajectory.

**Única.** Through Única's own *cuentos* about her experiences with her mother in the agricultural field, she shared that field workers were expected to meet impractical quotas: "And

I've learned that it's a hard job with a low pay. I have seen the injustices that happened in the field, like how the bosses treat their workers and expecting more than what they can really do.”

Única spoke of how those experiences influenced her educational aspirations:

I think that's also another factor that has let me see education with a different perspective, something to value and continue to pursue. I think that has shaped my way to college and to go into something with law and try to help my people back in my community or just the people that work in the fields, immigrants. I think that has been my main aspiration.

Familial *cuentos* and experiences she has witnessed firsthand have both had a vital influence on Única's deep value of education. She said she aspires to pursue a law career to fight for field workers' rights. Similar to Elia, who has dedicated her educational achievements to her ancestors and mother, Única attributes her educational and career aspirations to her family and community—agricultural field workers.

**Karina.** Through Karina's mother's *cuentos* of gender inequality, Karina has learned about specific gender expectations in Mexico that influenced her mother's decision to discontinue her education. Karina retold her mother's *cuento*:

My mom would always brag about how, in Mexico, she wanted to go to school. How she always enjoyed [school]. And how she always wanted to do more but her parents were like, “No, you belong in the house. You don't belong doing this.” My mom wanted to succeed so much but that didn't matter. She tells us, “With you, we give you the chance.”

This type of information helped Karina value the opportunities available in the United States, and as she reported earlier in this chapter, she always performed well in school. As we now see, Karina has done well in school precisely because she was given the chance to take advantage of her education. More specifically, she knew she had to “do good” because her mother had the ability but not the opportunity. Similar to the other participants, these various *cuentos* of inequality, together with *cuentos* of economic hardships and migration journeys, inspired Karina

to identify her education as a means to acknowledge the hardships and sacrifices experienced by her parents so she could have better life outcomes.

In the earlier section on economic hardships and sacrifices, I discussed other participants' engagements with gender expectations. For example, in relation to expectations of men, Victoria's father and Karina's father each gave up his education to contribute to his family's income. Here, Karina's mother exemplifies the overall expectations for women in Mexico—she wanted to get educated, but was specifically told by her parents that she either had to stay at home or work. Regardless of the gender inequality in Mexico, which is mediated by poverty, these *cuentos* helped the women recognize important life values and attribute symbolic value to such familial experiences to facilitate educational resilience. Collectively, these *cuentos* have empowered the women to break the vicious cycle of poverty, honor their families' migration stories, and combat social inequality. In the next section, I examine the words of wisdom these women's parents also shared in the form of familial *consejos*.

### **Families' Words of Wisdom**

The parents of the women in this study provided direct words of wisdom in the form of *consejos*. Unlike the implicit messages of the *cuentos*, the *consejos* served as a more explicit approach to achieve the same outcome. The participants acknowledged the *consejos* as authentic due to their parents' life experiences and knowledge. The array of *cuentos* and *consejos* built on one another to facilitate important life values, including the pursuit of an education. The three most popular *consejos* given to participants are discussed in this section: “Be Positive,” “Value Education,” and “Work Hard,” as seen in Table 4.1.

**“Be positive.”** Three of the women—Elizabeth, Jessica, and Única—were explicitly encouraged by their parents to maintain a positive mindset even during times of hardship. Their parents encouraged these three women to “be positive,” and they explicitly advised them to

maintain this mindset and their resiliency through their connection with God. In most situations, maintaining positivity involved exercising religious and/or spiritual practices. All of the participants said they believed in God, although their level of commitment to organized religion varied. These women learned from their parents that through faith/spirituality, they could sustain positivity and resilience.

**Elizabeth.** Elizabeth asserted her strong commitment to God as a result of her parents' own upbringing. She explained that her family participates in religious practices that include attending church on Sundays regularly:

My parents emphasized a lot of religion. We're Catholic so we would go to church every week before we do anything. And we still do. I go home every weekend just to go to church at least on Sundays...I think that when they die, the place where I will feel their presence is at church because they strongly believe in God, his good will, and love for everyone.

This upbringing helped Elizabeth appreciate her parents' efforts to pass on important values such as living a positive life through religion. Elizabeth elaborated:

They [my parents] don't like to look at life on the negative side, even though there is so much negativity going on...So I just guess it's the positivity, I really grew up with that. I also learned to see life through their positivity...To neglect other people's comments, you need to learn to take it in, not in a negative way but a positive—"turn that venom to motivational honey"—I learned [that] at a young age.

Elizabeth has embraced her parents' words of wisdom; she appreciated the *consejo* because her knowledge of familial hardships and struggles (through *cuentos*) helped validate her parents' words of wisdom in the form of *consejos*. Her parents have taught her from a young age how to see life through positivity, so when she encountered negative comments, she could dismiss them and cultivate resilience in her everyday life.

**Jessica.** Jessica's mother also provided words of wisdom related to her connection with God. Jessica detailed:

I have always believed in God. And my mom has always taught us like it doesn't matter what religion you end up believing in, as long as you believe in God [everything will turn

out well]. I really feel that—after my parents left [deported to Mexico], I got more into—I got more involved in my church. I really feel that it's important—my relationship with God is really important.

Jessica identified her mother's encouragement to exercise religious practices. Jessica's faith/spirituality helped her maintain a positive mindset, especially when coping with their familial separation. Her religious commitment facilitated her negotiation between separation from her family and the pursuit of a college education.

Overall, when necessary, these women drew upon their parents' *consejos* to exercise their religion/spirituality. Their parents encouraged them to "be positive," and they explicitly advised them to maintain this mindset and their resiliency through their connection with God.

**“Value education.”** As discussed earlier in the context of the familial *cuentos*, an education is a life accomplishment that many of these women's parents aspired to achieve, but their personal and social circumstances prevented them from doing so. Thus, many participants were living their parents' educational aspirations. All shared their parents' direct *consejos* about the importance of an education and the endless opportunities it could provide.

Única repeated how her parents would advise her and her siblings: “*Ustedes no tienen los mismos obstáculos que nosotros. Así que tomen ventaja de eso.* [You all don't have the same obstacles that we did. So you must take advantage of that.]” Elia also reiterated her mother's words of wisdom about financial constraints: “You don't want to live like this when you are older. You don't want your kids to live like this. You want to have a better life, so go to college.” Victoria also relayed her mother's words: “Oh my God, I was so dumb. I didn't go to school. I don't want you to be like me.” Similarly, Karina restated her father's *consejo*: “My dad was always like ‘Education is the key.’ That was his thing. When I came out pregnant, he was like, ‘You know, it happens.’ He was like, ‘Just keep going with your education.’” Rosie, Jessica, and Elizabeth also explicitly restated their parents' words of wisdom in the form of *consejos*.

**Rosie.** Although Rosie had limited exposure to her parents' life experiences, including their migration journeys, *consejos* like “not to take [an education] for granted” had the same influence on her as a familial *cuentos* would:

[My mom] always wanted to continue school but she couldn't. Whenever she comes on campus [at WCU], she's like, “Wow, this is what I wanted to do.”...She always tells me this is for my benefit [getting an education], and not to take it for granted because she wishes she could do this. And she can't anymore.

Rosie embraced her family history, which included her mother becoming pregnant with her during high school and therefore not being able to continue with her education. She valued her mother's dream to pursue an education, a dream not reached due to her personal circumstances, but that was currently being lived by her.

**Jessica.** Although Jessica's parents were residing in Mexico, close to the U.S. border, her mother continued to share *consejos* when they communicated, both over the phone and in person. Jessica recounted:

Right now when I talked to her [my mom], she always reminds me, “You are here [in the United States] for a reason. You are not here to fool around. You are here to get an education—to become someone in life.” And I feel like every time she tells me that, it's a reality check in itself, just to motivate me.

This example demonstrates how Jessica's mother strategically used their separation as a powerful teaching tool, in a form of a *consejo*, to influence her daughter's educational attainment. These periodic words of wisdom motivated Jessica “to get an education” and “to become someone.” The reminders enabled Jessica to keep her eyes on the prize—to achieve a college education—regardless of continued familial hardships. In combination with familial *cuentos* and experiences with her family, including homelessness, her mother's *consejos* helped Jessica sustain her motivation and educational aspirations during their familial separation.

**Elizabeth.** According to Elizabeth, her parents projected the value of an education, but they were less direct about it:



For me, it wasn't expected. My parents really didn't tell me, "You have to go" [to college], but they kind of implied that's the way to go so you can have a better future, not only to help yourself but the community. [My parents would say], "Show them proof [referring to the Latina/o community] that an education does get you to better places."

Elizabeth's parents identified their daughter as a leader in her community who would pave the road for the future generations. Her knowledge about familial hardships and sacrifices, learned through familial *cuentos*, helped Elizabeth understand how education could provide a better future. Her parents indirectly suggested college as the route to pursuit. These *consejos*, in combination with *cuentos*, served as critical teaching tools to help Elizabeth value her education. She identified her education as a means to set similar expectations among her community and demonstrate to them that achieving a college education can only open opportunities in the United States. Thus, Elizabeth was living her parents' aspirations for her to have better life outcomes.

It is evident that the parents of the women in this sample used *consejos* as a familial-cultural pedagogical tool to explicitly instill the value of an education. These types of interactions helped develop a foundation of educational resilience, and their application of important life values only facilitated positive attitudes about education. The notion of valuing an education was also evident in familial *cuentos*, but all participants' parents supplemented their narratives with *consejos* in order to instill the determination to complete an education.

**"Work hard."** Besides advising them to pursue an education, these women's parents also explicitly advised them to "work hard." Although many of the participants witnessed their families' work ethic through *cuentos* and firsthand experiences with their families, Karina and Elia, in particular, provided distinct examples of the familial *consejo* to "work hard."

**Karina.** Karina shared her mother's *consejo* to work hard, and she echoed her mother's words of wisdom:

[My mom] was always like, "If I did it [did well in school], you guys can too. You guys need to work hard because you guys have everything... Over there [in Mexico], my mom

[referring to Karina's grandmother] had to sew my uniforms for me because we didn't have any money to go buy it."

By repeating her mother's story, Karina showed that she understood that she needed to take advantage of her education because her mother had been unable to. As discussed earlier, her mother had the *ganas* (desire) to excel academically—and her mother did well when she was enrolled in school—but family circumstances prevented her from achieving her educational aspirations. Karina valued her mother's *consejos* because she was exposed to her mother's experiential knowledge through various familial *cuentos*. Similar to the other women, Karina was living her mother's dream to become college educated.

**Elia.** Although Elia had limited contact with her father, he had shared *consejos* that advised her to work hard. Elia repeated her father's words of wisdom:

[My dad] is also giving me advice like, "*Echale ganas* [give it your all]. Try hard. You are doing well right now. You are doing it step-by-step, that's good. Don't leave college because once you leave, it's going to be much harder to come back." I think he's saying that [it's harder to return to college] because my younger sister, back in Mexico, she was in high school but she dropped out. And now she is working in a factory. And she keeps saying that she's going to go back like to get like a GED, but from Mexico. But it's harder now. So I guess my dad sees that. He sees a difference, like, "Elia was right. She's right in being so in your face about education. She's taking it step-by-step. Maybe I should motivate her. If not, she might end up dropping out like my other daughter." I don't know, but I feel that he is trying to motivate me a little more, like, "focus, do your work."

Her father's words of wisdom enabled Elia to maintain the energy needed to persist with her college education. Elia speculated that her father's *consejo* to inspire her to give it her all was in response to his experiences with his other child's limited educational attainment. He was drawing upon his experiential knowledge to encourage Elia to "try hard" in order to prevent a similar educational outcome to occur. Elia valued his advice and understood the need to work hard on her academics.

In all of these seven cases, parents used both explicit and implicit *consejos*, often paired with *cuentos*, to help influence their children's educational resilience. They used their own

shattered aspirations to instill such resilience. The participants viewed the messages of such *consejos* as valid and reliable guidance because the source—their parents—obtained a wide range of experiential knowledge that the participants discovered through familial *cuentos* and their own experiences with their families.

### **Analytical Summary of Chapter**

This chapter examined the first of three engagements from the typology of the developmental engagement model—the recognition of important life lessons and values. As such, I described: a) how parents of Mexican heritage socialize their children to an education by drawing upon familial-cultural pedagogical tools—*cuentos* (narratives) and *consejos* (advice)—and b) how students have identified important life values, like becoming college educated, as significant through these pedagogical tools.

The women in the study sample recognized important life lessons and values from their engagements with familial-cultural practices. Specifically, they identified their families' use of *cuentos* and *consejos* as significant to the promotion of important life lessons and values that helped them develop resilient behaviors and positive attitudes, including making the most of educational opportunities. Figure 4.2 provides an overview of *Engagement 1* with supporting evidence from the participants' experiences.

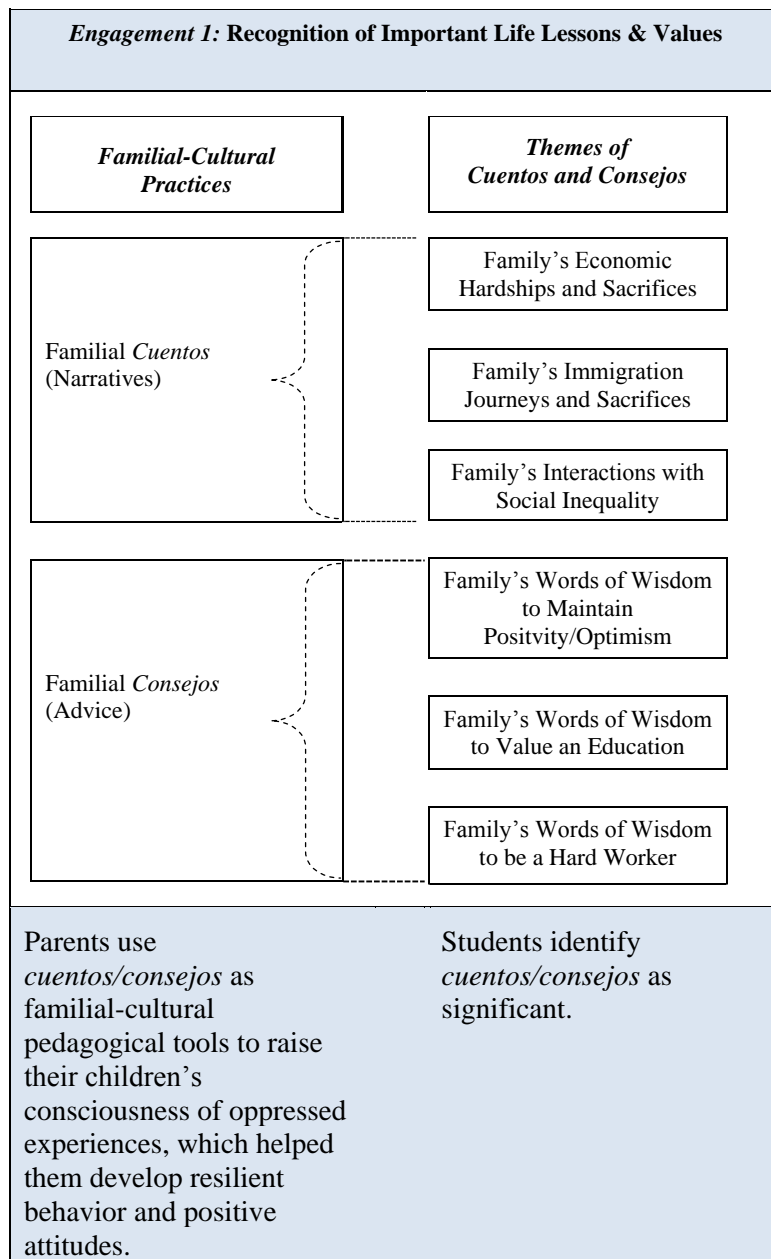


Figure 4.2. Engagement 1: Recognition of important life lessons and values.

As seen in the first column in Figure 4.2, I found two examples of familial-cultural practices, *cuentos* and *consejos*, that all seven participants received from their families. As seen in the second column, three types of *cuentos* and three types of *consejos* emerged in the participants' interviews. The *cuentos* involved narratives about familial economic hardships, migration journeys and sacrifices, and social inequality, both in the parents' home country and

the United States. *Consejos* included families' words of wisdom to maintain positivity/optimism, value an education, and be a hard worker. Students identified those *cuentos* and *consejos* as significant and therefore applied symbolic value. They drew upon these familial-cultural practices to develop positive lifelong behaviors and attitudes that included taking advantage of educational opportunities. Every participant shared familial *cuentos* and *consejos* in their interviews and to some degree had drawn upon both in their daily lives.

These findings challenge deficit perspectives that include the myth that Mexican Americans do not value education (for examples, see García & Guerra, 2004; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). Their parents' lived experiences—various hardships and sacrifices—were central to the *cuentos* that the women shared in their interviews. The various types of *cuentos* and *consejos* improved these women's meaning-making processes about what it meant to them to be children of immigrants and how they overcame familial hardships and sacrifices in their educational pursuits. Because they identified particular *cuentos* and *consejos* as significant, they served as familial-cultural pedagogical tools. More specifically, their parents were able to transfer important life values and lessons through these teaching tools. However, participants had to first identify significance in *cuentos* and *consejos*, attribute symbolic value to them, and apply the information to their educational aspirations and attainment.

Studies have found that students with non-college educated parents are less likely to pursue a college education (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; Pascarella et al., 2004). In this study, these women's parents had little to no formal education in their home country or in the United States, yet they used various *cuentos* and *consejos* as familial-cultural pedagogical tools to promote resilient attitudes and behavior. In fact, the *cuentos* and *consejos* built on one another to strengthen educational resilience.

As these women shared their families' *cuentos* and *consejos*, they also shared their personal narratives to help communicate their family histories, familial-cultural assets, and family problems and obligations—in effect creating their own *cuentos*. Singer (2004) argued, “Each addition to the ongoing life narrative offers another opportunity for individuals to understand where they belong in the world and to determine what takes them closer or further away from the goals to which they aspire” (pp. 445–456). In other words, when these women acknowledged their familial *cuentos* and *consejos*, they were in unity with their past, present, and future. Furthermore, Singer distinguished the process “from story making to meaning making to wisdom accumulation that provides individuals with a surer and more graceful footing on life’s path” (pp. 445–456). The participants understood that they must persist through the American educational pipeline. This understanding came from their wealth of knowledge about their family history, familial-cultural assets, and family problems and obligations, learned through their parents’ utilization of familial-cultural pedagogical tools—*cuentos* and *consejos*—that helped socialize them to an education. Although all the themes may not have emerged in each woman’s interviews, as seen in Table 4.1, the various *cuentos* and *consejos* build on one another to serve as a powerful source that contributes to their educational resilience.

As will be seen in the next chapter (Chapter 5), these women have gone through a process of meaning-making that involves identifying and giving meaning to familial *cuentos* and *consejos* that resulted in the development of asset-based resources, as listed above. Thus, the next chapter examines in-depth the second engagement from the typology of the developmental engagement model—meaning-making of information.

## CHAPTER 5

### STUDENTS' MEANING-MAKING OF *CUENTOS* AND *CONSEJOS*

Resilience literature often acknowledges students' resilience as coming into play *after* stressful events, as they draw upon "a set of inner resources, social competencies, and cultural strategies" that allow them to "survive, recover, and thrive" in various settings, and "draw from the experience to enhance subsequent functioning" to persist through the American educational pipeline (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000, p. 229). The current study recognizes the continuity of familial-cultural assets and resources that women of Mexican heritage draw upon to "survive, recover, and thrive" in educational settings, even *before* the occurrence of "stressful events" (p. 229).

In Chapter 4, I examined *cuENTOS* and *consejos* as explicit examples of familial-cultural practices that led the seven women in this study to recognize important information and extrapolate life-lessons and values from them, such as making the most of educational opportunities. The various types of *cuENTOS* and *consejos* allowed the women to value their familial and cultural experiences as children of immigrants, and to understand how their pursuit of education could validate the hardships and sacrifices endured by their families. This chapter addresses the second research question: *In what ways do the familial interactions and practices of first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage contribute to their educational persistence?* I provide an in-depth examination of the second engagement in the developmental engagement model: meaning-making of information. In doing so, I shed light on how the students transformed their attitudes toward education after extrapolating important life-lessons and values from their engagements with *cuENTOS* and *consejos*.

## **Development of Asset-Based Resources**

This chapter validates how students' educational resilience can be achieved through familial capital (Yosso, 2005, 2006), or what I refer to as *educational familismo*. Students' *educational familismo* involves their interactions with their families that expose them to familial advice, wisdom, and experiential knowledge. As they recognize the significance of information transferred through pedagogical tools like *cuentos* and *consejos*, and attribute symbolic value to the information and apply such values to their daily lives, students develop positive attitudes and behaviors, including the motivation to excel academically. Students' *educational familismo* challenges cultural deficit perspectives that argue that Mexican-heritage persons are at fault for their limited educational attainment due to limited English proficiency or other cultural factors (e.g., Heller, 1966; Holtzman, Diaz-Guerrero, & Swartz, 1975).

The vital role that family plays in the facilitation of children's educational resilience is not a new avenue of research. Yet, there is still limited research on the process students undergo when transforming their family histories, familial-cultural assets, and obligations and problems into the development of what I refer to as asset-based resources. Thus, I used a multi-method, qualitative approach to better assess how familial-cultural wealth and *educational familismo* influenced seven women of Mexican heritage to develop a wide-range of assets.

### **Transforming Meaningful Information Into Asset-based Resources**

All of the participants in the study transformed their attitudes toward education and developed asset-based resources as a result of engagement with *cuentos* and *consejos*. Similar to *conocimiento*<sup>14</sup> (Anzaldúa, 2002), a path of self-discovery and change, their engagement with familial-cultural practices provided a journey of recognition—namely of their family histories,

---

<sup>14</sup> Similar to the philosophy of epistemology, *conocimiento* is a Spanish word that means “knowledge and understanding.”



familial assets, and problems and obligations. This recognition, according to Anzaldúa (2002), “[is] that aspect of consciousness urging you to act on the knowledge gained” (p. 577).

So far, the developmental engagement model has provided a more in-depth analysis of this phenomenon when students realized the need for immediate change. In the second engagement, they underwent meaning-making, as defined earlier, and became critically conscious of their families’ life circumstances. They began to understand that such circumstances were not “right” and that they had the responsibility to validate their family histories through educational aspirations and attainment, by developing a set of asset-based resources. Before investigating each asset-based resource, it is important to further define and contextualize this term.

### **Defining and Contextualizing Asset-based Resources**

In my working definition, I drew upon Tara Yosso’s (2005) community cultural wealth model as an underlying framework to define assets and resources. Asset-based resources can be defined as a set of assets based in a person’s interactions with her family’s cultural practices to socialize her to an education. Through *cuentos* and *consejos*, families transfer important life values, like “be a hard worker,” and these serve as internal sources to be drawn upon in various settings to sustain educational resilience. As illustrated in Figure 5.1, asset-based resources are not like other general resources, which are drawn from external sources and only if there is a need. Instead, they are “internal” sources, within the individual—better described as asset-based resources—and are always active.

Asset-based resources helped the women in this study in several key ways: a) to maintain motivation to excel academically and, through their achievements, challenge stereotypes about communities of color; b) to develop a set of aspirations that includes becoming college educated; c) to preserve their familial, ethnic, and cultural pride; d) to sustain a positive outlook on life;

and e) to exercise an excellent work ethic. These women then leveraged their asset-based resources to persist through the American educational system in general, and in their first year in college specifically.

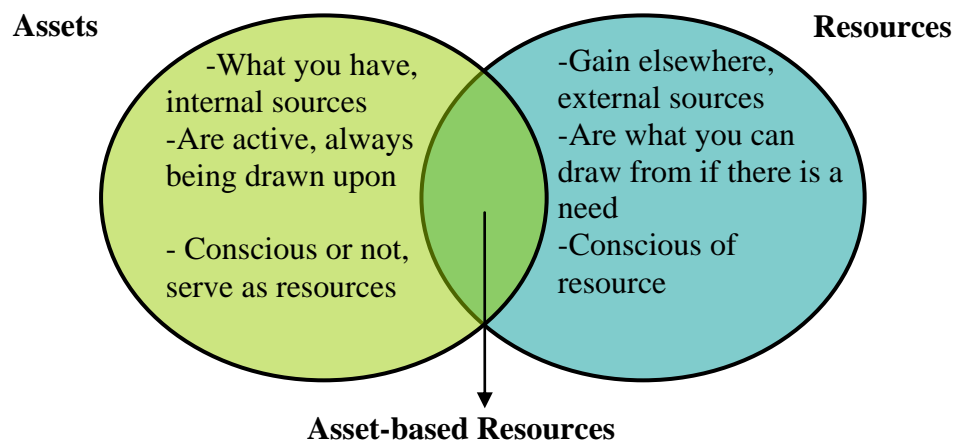


Figure 5.1. Conceptualization of asset-based resources.

The relationship between familial-cultural pedagogical tools (e.g., *cuentos* and *consejos*) and asset-based resources varied by participant. Some women discussed in more detail their familial migration journeys compared their economic hardships, or vice versa. Although a shared set of asset-based resources developed, each participant may have placed more emphasis on one type of *cuento* and/or *consejo* over the others, based on her own meaning-making process. For example, one woman may have identified her parents' migration journeys as the *cuento* most influential to her academic excellence or aspirations, whereas another identified her parents' sacrifices. The purpose of this study was not to identify which *cuentos* and *consejos* outweighed others, but instead to examine how the seven women from this study leveraged their cultural resources to transition and persist during their first-year in higher education.

The women in this study acknowledged their own motivation to excel academically and challenge stereotypes about communities of color, their aspirations to validate familial hardships

and sacrifices through academic achievements and attainment, and their admiration of their parents for their persistence. The asset-based resource of motivation, initiated primarily by *cuentos* and *consejos*, served as the foundation for other asset-based resources and for the women's resilience in the American educational pipeline. In short, when motivation was instilled, aspirations developed, along with pride, positivity, and a work ethic. These all served as interconnected asset-based resources that could be drawn upon simultaneously (see Figure 5.2).

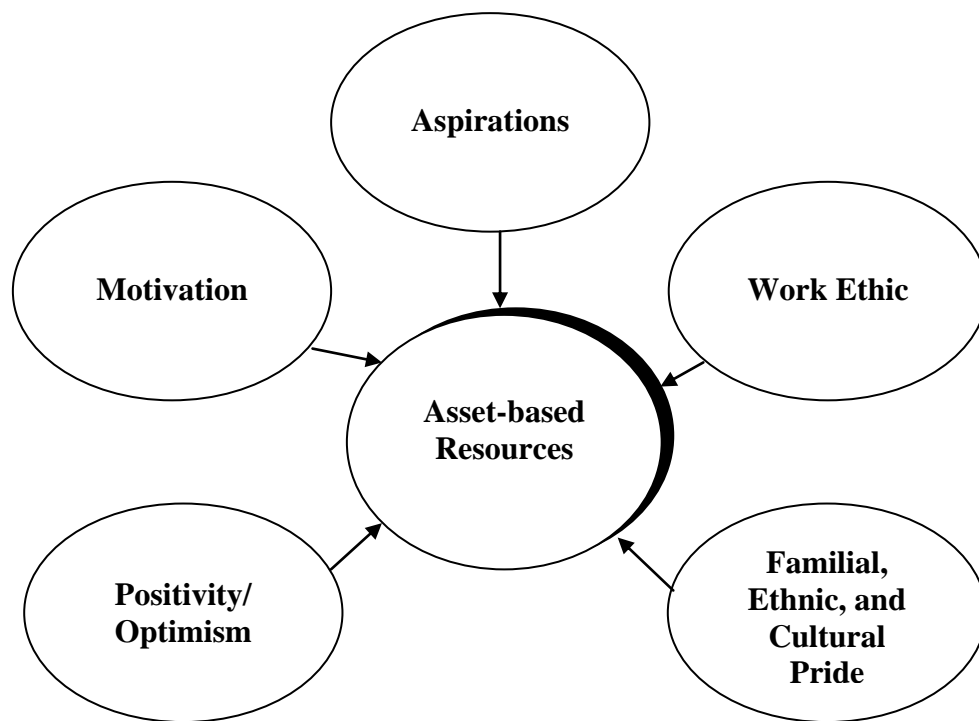


Figure 5.2. Asset-based resources are interconnected and can be drawn upon simultaneously.

*Motivation*, primarily, served as a resource that drove the women in this study to excel academically and challenge social inequalities in the educational setting. This ongoing desire and willingness to exercise positive behaviors and attitudes led these women to the lifelong ambition for education. They also acknowledged the role of *aspirations* in their discussions to attend a university and become the first in their families to obtain a college education. They developed explicit aspirations to achieve other personal life-goals, including financial stability for themselves and their families, making their parents proud, becoming role models to others, and giving back to their communities.

A third resource was *familial, ethnic, and cultural pride*. Participants referenced their desire to acknowledge and honor their Mexican heritage as well as their familial-cultural histories and assets. They recognized that the values possessed by their parents and the Mexican and Latina/o communities had been unappreciated by society (Bernal, 2002). A fourth resource, *positivity/optimism*, supplemented these women's asset-based resources, and helped them maintain psychological well-being through hope as well as confidence in and dedication to their everyday activities. Lastly, as implied by the familial *consejo* to work hard, these women applied meaning to the importance of a work ethic and thus, they have worked diligently toward their various aspirations as listed above—*si se puede* (it can be done). Collectively, the development of these assets played a crucial role in these women's educational resilience.

In the sections that follow I examine each of these asset-based resources individually. They should not, however, be seen as mutually exclusive, but rather as interconnected in helping these women persist through secondary education and beyond.

### **Maintaining Motivation**

In this study, motivation is defined as an individual's ongoing desire or willingness to exercise positive behaviors and attitudes that lead to lifelong outcomes, including the pursuit of a

college education. Past family knowledge and experiences revealed by familial *cuentos* and *consejos* served as the stimuli that inspired and sustained motivation in various educational settings. As a result of identifying these *cuentos* and *consejos* as significant in their educational aspirations and attainment, during their interviews the women explicitly recognized an ongoing desire to achieve academic excellence. In fact, motivation served as the foundation of their pathway to educational resilience. The women reported how their motivation fueled their desire to excel academically and how they used their academic achievements to challenge the social inequalities they encountered, including stereotypes and prejudices that society and people have about Latina/o communities in general, and the Mexican-heritage population specifically. As a result of their motivation to excel academically, these women developed additional asset-based resources, which will be further examined in this chapter.

### **Motivation to Excel Academically**

Students' engagement with familial-cultural practices inspired positive educational behaviors and attitudes. The seven women in this study developed motivation to achieve academically, not only through college, but also toward advanced degrees. Collectively, familial *cuentos* and *consejos* served as significant pedagogical tools to help apply meaning to the importance of an education for these children of immigrants.

Victoria, Única, and Karina's motivation to achieve academic excellence was inspired by the distinct sacrifices experienced by their parents, including sacrificing their own education to provide financial assistance to their families, and separating permanently from their families due to their "illegal" migration status in the United States. Jessica, Elizabeth, and Rosie's motivation to attain academic success stemmed from familial *consejos* about valuing an education that "no one can take...away from you" and that "can provide a better future." Elia's motivation to excel

academically was fueled by her mother's childhood circumstances and experiences, which included becoming an orphan at an early age.

The complexity of social phenomena, especially among members of cultural communities, requires accounting for both regularity and variance (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). There was some variance between the themes each woman identified as significant, but for all of them, the *cuentos* and *consejos* were collectively drawn upon to create some form of meaning and to inspire an ongoing desire or willingness to exercise positive life behaviors and attitudes about their education.

### **Motivation to Challenge Social Inequality**

The women's engagement with their familial-cultural practices motivated them to excel academically, and this motivation also helped them overcome various other challenges, including stereotypes and prejudices placed upon Latina/o communities. Furthermore, their motivation came into play early in their educational careers. Elia, Jessica, and Karina exemplified how they were motivated to excel academically, regardless of their experiences with social inequalities (e.g., stereotypes and prejudices). For these women, such experiences fueled their motivation to persist through the educational pipeline, as a result of their engagement with their parents' use of familial-cultural pedagogical tools. Thus, they entered educational settings with a solid foundation of motivation. In Chapter 4, I examined *cuentos* related to stereotypes about certain groups of people, often including indigenous people in Mexico. Here, Elia and Jessica challenged existing stereotypes and prejudices placed upon Mexican-heritage individuals in the United States.

Elia shared a *cuento* relating her experiences with and reactions to Mexican-related stereotypes in the American educational setting:

Changing the image of the Hispanic woman, that has really been one of my "it" things...And in elementary school, 4<sup>th</sup> grade, that's when I got into [the Gifted and

Talented Education program]—it was mainly Vietnamese [students] in there and a few White people—that’s really when I encountered the stereotype that Asians are good at math. “Asians are really good students. Asians are this and that.” And me being there, I was like, “Hey, I am here too and am not Asian. What are you trying to say that am here by default? That I am just a fixture and another chair? I am a student and am here and am competing—advancing, going beyond what other students here do—even if they’re Asian.” So I came to think that every student has their own merits because of who they are and what they do, and not because of their race. Every student is not going to automatically be successful because they are Asian. Every student is going to be successful based on the hard work they put into it, dedication and [self-] discipline, determination and actually how much they study.... That’s another thing, the whole stereotype. The whole image that, “Oh, you are Hispanic, you can’t really compete.” That’s ridiculous. That makes me want to change that perception.

Elia was motivated to challenge existing stereotypes about communities of color. She alluded to the model-minority stereotype, derived from society’s perceptions of Asian Americans as “academic super-stars,” in contrast the underachievement of other minority groups (i.e., Latina/o and Black students) in the United States (Lee, 1994, p. 413; 1996). Elia called attention to students’ individual traits and not their racial/ethnic backgrounds as the factor driving hard work, dedication, self-discipline, and determination in school. She was a “holder and creator of knowledge,” as she was able to challenge such stereotypes because they conflicted with her own ideologies (see Bernal, 2002). Through her mother’s social injustice *cuentos*, examined in Chapter 4, we learned how Elia applied meaning to her mother’s and ancestors’ work ethic, regardless of society’s negative perceptions about indigenous people. Her mother’s *cuentos* helped Elia develop motivation to achieve academic excellence as a mechanism to challenge societal perceptions about her community. Instead of experiencing discouragement as a result of such interactions in the classroom, Elia was motivated to excel.

In addition to encountering assumptions based on stereotypes made about them by their classmates, the women were also exposed to prejudice from educators. Jessica experienced prejudice from high school teachers who questioned her enrollment in honors classes:

Every time I walked in the class, I think teachers have perspectives of you or an image [when you are Latina/o]. Freshman year in my [high] school there were no Latinos in my

classes. So I feel that they were like, “Oh, you are in our class?” I remember one time they checked my schedule because they didn’t think I belong[ed] there [in an honors class]. And then after, I think they looked at my whole schedule, it had all honors. Then their whole perspective changes of you—just proving other people wrong—after making judgments of you, and saying, “No, you can’t do this.” Or, “You can’t go to college [if you’re Latino].” I think just the stereotype [continues to motivate me]. None of my friends went to college. None of their family went to college. I think that’s the reason why I wanted to go to college.

Instead of being discouraged or humiliated after her schedule was reviewed for a possible system error, Jessica used the stereotypes that Latinas/os can’t perform well academically to “prov[e] other people wrong,” and she persevered in high-achieving classes. Similar to Elia, Jessica was able to combat deficit perspectives and expectations because she came into the classroom with the motivation to excel academically. Through *cuentos* and *consejos*, we learned how Jessica values her education because her parents emphasized that “her being here, in the United States, was for a reason: to get educated,” regardless of their separation.<sup>15</sup>

These women became “holders and creators of knowledge” (Bernal, 2002) as they challenged stereotype-based assumptions. Their own ideologies challenged dominant perspectives because their lived experiences involved working hard on their academics, and because they came from a culture that believes in the value of education. Karina’s parents’ emphasis on “doing good in school”<sup>16</sup> fueled her motivation to excel academically. This motivation especially helped Karina when people became aware of her pregnancy and, thus, questioned her ability to graduate high school and pursue a college education:

When I got pregnant, there were a lot of people who looked down on me. They were like, “Why? You had so much ahead of you.” I was like, “I still have it ahead of me. It doesn’t mean it’s going to stop.” I did not regret what I did. It might have been something that could have come later, but it happened, and there’s nothing to do about it. I am not going to abort just because. So when I got pregnant I was like, “No. You know

---

<sup>15</sup> As described in Chapter 3, Jessica’s family has been divided due to her parents’ deportation to Mexico. Also, Jessica’s father’s aspiration for her was that she become a doctor.

<sup>16</sup> As described in Chapter 3, Karina became a mother during her tenth grade in high school.



what? I can't get no, Bs or Cs. I need to bomb with As." I stayed in school two days before I gave birth. I never stopped. I went to school every day. If I had to get up and throw up I would go outside and come back. I just had to do it. And people would be like, "How can you have those grades!" I was like, "My stomach is not bothering me. It's just there. My baby is growing and I am seeing him grow, but it's not stopping me. It's more motivating me."

Although people questioned Karina's persistence in the educational pipeline due to her impending motherhood, the value she placed on education nevertheless helped fuel her motivation to persist. Instead of being discouraged or losing interest, Karina acknowledged being even more motivated to excel academically.

In sum, these women's familial *cuentos* and *consejos* served as a foundation to facilitate the value of an education once they underwent a process of meaning-making. In this case, the development of motivation is better described as an asset-based resource. The participants' motivation to become college educated remained salient throughout their educational trajectories. Thus, when they experienced situations that challenged them, their motivation reinforced the significance of their presence in spaces that had not traditionally welcomed students of color. In addition, their motivation also helped them develop a series of aspirations to embrace their set of asset-based resources.

### **Development of Aspirations**

In this study, aspirations are defined as a person's explicit desire to achieve personal life goals. All seven women aspired to be the first in their families to obtain a college education. This aspiration helped develop other types of aspirations—specifically: a) to become college educated; b) to acquire financial stability for themselves and their families; c) to make their parent(s) proud; and d) to become a role models and give back to their communities.

These particular aspirations were not separate, but were interconnected. For example, Victoria shared her aspiration to become college educated, which could make her family proud, carry a positive image among her community, and allow her to be a role model to others. She

explained: “My college education means making my mom and dad proud, representing my culture at [WCU], and setting the example for my little brother, which helps empower me [as I pursue my college degree].” In spite of this interconnectivity, the next four subsections are presented as separate themes for clarity. These asset-based resources—motivation and aspirations—should be understood as assets that nurture each other to cultivate educational resilience.

### **Aspiration to Obtain a College Degree**

For the women in this study, being a first-generation college student meant more than the traditional reasons for pursuing a college education, which they identified as being able to obtain social and financial mobility. For them, a college degree meant they would make their parents proud, contribute to familial, ethnic, and cultural pride, and become role models within their communities. Thus, these types of assets within an asset-based resource model should be thought of as overlapping, as they nurture each other to cultivate students’ educational resilience. Collectively, these assets helped the women persist, even when faced with hardship.

Elia explicitly associated her aspiration to earn a college degree with challenging individuals who questioned her mother’s ability to raise her because she was a single parent. Karina, on the other hand, has a son who inspires her aspiration for pursuing and completing a college education. On the other hand, Victoria, Jessica, Única, Elizabeth, and Rosie all expressed that their aspirations to become college educated stemmed from a desire to set high expectations for their siblings, their extended family members, their hometowns, and the Mexican-heritage and Latina/o population. I draw upon Elia, Jessica, Única, Rosie, and Elizabeth to further examine this aspiration.

As a result of Elia's unique family circumstances, obtaining a college education meant challenging individuals who shared low expectations for Elia's educational attainment because she was raised in single-parent household:

[My desire to pursue a college education] also has to do with my mom being a single mother. A lot of people have doubted her ability to raise me. It has amazed me how so many people can have so low expectations for us. We had neighbors who told [my mom], "Just let her drop out of school so she can be a banking cashier, they get good money." I was like, "Wow, you really expect that from somebody?" It doesn't matter how much you haven't had because that can be that extra thing that pushes you and keeps you going.

Elia realized that people generally did not expect educational success from individuals from "broken" families like her own. Instead of Elia being discouraged by such negative perceptions and expectations, these deficit expectations inspired her to be the first in her family to obtain a college education:

I guess what I am trying to say is that being a first-year, first-generation college student, it's not just for me but [for] my family. I am doing it [getting college educated] for them, for my grandparents, who are not here anymore but who would have liked to see me go through it.

As we learned in Chapter 4, Elia applied symbolic value to her family history, familial-cultural assets, and obligations and problems via familial *cuentos* and *consejos*, which helped develop her motivation. Moreover, becoming college educated also honored her grandparents, who were no longer alive, but who would have liked her to achieve such an accomplishment. These aspirations fueled her motivation to excel academically, and her motivation helped her persist through the American educational pipeline.

Jessica identified her pursuit of a college education as a life goal, and she saw her education as a strategy to set the expectations of her siblings and extended family:

I feel really proud [of myself] because I am the oldest of three siblings—I think of them—to know that I am the first to go to college. And I have family—like my mom's sister—they have kids, and I also think of that. It gives my aunts and uncles a different perspective for their kids, to be like, "If she went to college, my kids can do it too." It broadens up their minds [to see college as a reality]. And not just that, it feels good to be

like, “Wow I made it regardless of anything.” There are a lot of people saying that you won’t make it or you won’t do it. But, at the end of the day, there’s people cheering for you and telling you, “Go far and you can do this.” And I think just getting accepted to [WCU] is a great accomplishment and just thinking back to your family, your siblings, and being a role model to them, that’s what the big plus is about.

Becoming college educated meant hope for Jessica’s immediate and extended family. She believed her persistence would help open opportunities, not only for her siblings, but also for her cousins. Jessica’s aspiration to become college educated challenged those individuals she highlighted as having low expectations for students of color. In fact, her aspiration serves as a testimony to encourage other students from similar backgrounds to pursue a college education.

Única shared her reasons for pursuing a college education: “I think it’s a big step [to become college educated], not only in my family but my community—mainly my school, because it’s really considered to be a high school where students are [seen as] not capable of enrolling into a higher education.” She referred to a particular population in her community, her high school classmates, for whom she wanted to instill the notion of college as a reality. Similar to Jessica’s comment about the negative perceptions and low expectations for students of color, Única acknowledged the negative perception of students in her high school who were not seen as college aspirants.

Única continued: “Rather, they stay in the community and that’s all they do with their lives. And [I am pursuing a college education] just to show other students from my school that it is possible and to believe in yourself and your dreams—It’s not impossible, you can go for it and strive.” Única believed that her aspiration to become college educated would serve as a testimony to challenge notions that Mexican-heritage people do not value education. She understood that the majority of youth in her community encounter these deficit cycles and that they play a role in their educational attainment for generations. Likewise, she believed her own college education could disrupt this cycle.

Rosie identified the younger students in her high school as a major factor in her aspiration toward a college degree:

Because I was involved a lot, most of the students [from my high school] looked up to me, and I feel that it's my responsibility to make high expectations and standards so the younger ones who will be coming in the future [to college]... That really motivates me, like I just can't stop school or just decide, "Well, I'll do this [attend college] next quarter, next year." Because they are following me and it's just—it's pressure but I have to see it as something positive because if I do well than they're more likely to do well.

Rosie acknowledged a sense of pressure as a role model. Instead of allowing this to hinder her academic achievements, she transformed the pressure into motivation, because she was setting high expectations for future generations at her high school. Like the other participants, Rosie's aspiration to become college educated placed the same expectations of academic achievement on other youth from similar backgrounds. These women realized the need for more role models in urban communities.

Elizabeth explicitly acknowledged her aspiration to become college educated to help carry a more positive image among a variety of stakeholders, including her family, hometown community, and the Mexican-heritage population:

[Pursuing a college education] means the world because how I said, I live strong by the idea that I am not only representing myself [in educational settings]. I am representing my community and what they stand for. Have you heard of the saying, "One step for man and one jump for humanity?" I kind of relate to that, too. For us as [first-generation college] students, maybe it's a small step to our future, career, and life development, but for our community, it's a big jump because we are putting ourselves out there. In college, I want to make sure I leave a statement that we are here [laughs], that we are capable too. And as a student, I'm not here only representing myself, but my community, my parents, and cousins.

Elizabeth believed she was representing her family, community, and ethnicity in higher education. For all of the women, the pursuit of a college education not only involved hope for their own futures, but for their parents, siblings, family members, high schools, and/or the larger Mexican-heritage and Latina/o communities. The hope that these women aspired to gain through their education can challenge dominant ideologies about their communities. As expressed by the

participants, students from under-resourced communities often hear deficit remarks, including (as Única put it), “you are not capable of enrolling into a higher education.” Their motivation to excel academically and their aspirations to become college educated can help challenge these notions.

### **Aspiration to Help Parents Acquire Financial Stability**

Besides becoming college educated, these women also aspired to help their parent(s) achieve financial stability. After obtaining a college education, they all aspired to achieve financial stability for themselves and their families. Although they saw the financial benefits of a postsecondary education, they foremost aspired to help their parents by buying them homes, contributing to daily expenses, and/or helping them obtain citizenship. Elia, for example, aspired to be financially independent, but also to buy her mother a home:

I don't want to be in a position where I need to rely on others. I want to be able to be independent and, at the same time, be able to help my mom....I thought that if I could pursue an education—higher education—it would make my mom happy and maybe [I would be able to] buy her a house.

As I described in Chapter 4, Elia's mother had to rely on her older siblings to care for her after Elia's grandparents passed away. Elia's mother also never had an official home growing up, as she moved from one sibling's house to the next. In the excerpt above, Elia's goal is explicitly to buy her mother a house. This aspiration is connected with her exposure to her familial history via her mother's *cuentos*. Besides her own financial independence, Elia understood the various benefits that a college degree could bring, including the opportunity to give back to her mother.

Similarly, Victoria aspired to improve her mother's living conditions by sharing an apartment with her:

I also found myself asking my mom if she wanted to share an apartment with me in the future. Just because I hate—I don't like where we live. 'Cause it's really tiny. It's

really, not cute. It's not a nice place. I would be okay splitting an apartment with my mom, because I want her to live somewhere better.

As described in Chapter 4, Victoria understood that her family migrated to the United States to provide opportunities for her and her brother, in addition to living a better life than Mexico. She witnessed firsthand her parents' financial hardships and was aware that at times they barely made ends meet. To this day, her parents' aspiration to live a better life is yet to be accomplished. Victoria believed her college education would contribute to helping her parents achieve their aspirations—not only to live a better life themselves, but also for her to obtain a better life through a college education.

All the women found it important to improve their families' living conditions.

Furthermore, a few highlighted their aspiration to help their parents obtain citizenship. One woman shared:

My mom is waiting for me to turn 21 so I can fix her papers. I think you can once your kid turns 21. So she's just keeping her record clean, and she's like, "I don't ask for welfare or anything, so it's super easy for you." And my dad, his record is messed up. He has had previous deportations but he stayed here....But it's definitely going to be hard for him to try to get papers when I turn 21.<sup>17</sup>

As described earlier, all of the women's parents had migrated to the United States "illegally." However, some had attained legal status, while others had not. Helping their parents achieve residency or citizenship was important to those women because their parents would be freed from the fear of encountering authorities and be able to visit family in their home country.

In all, participants' long-term aspirations to financially help their families were vital to them. They had developed a set of aspirations that included a strong desire to help their families reach financial stability. Because the women attributed symbolic value to their parents' wide-

---

<sup>17</sup> One participant shared a concern about explicitly indicating that her parents were "illegal" immigrants. Although this excerpt is not from this participant, in an effort to protect the anonymity of all of the women around this topic, I have not named the source of this comment.

ranging hardships in their home country and the United States, aiding them in this regard became a fundamental life goal.

### **Aspiration to Make Parents Proud**

This third aspiration, to make their parent(s) proud, was vital for all the women in this study. The participants aspired to acknowledge and honor familial hardships and sacrifices through their own educational achievements and attainment, specifically through the completion of a college education. Elizabeth, for example, shared that her academic success provided her parents with stories they could use to defend themselves against those who may want to “put them down.” She explained:

My dad and mom cultivated in us that an education is important. And I feel that I should respond to that by succeeding academically and socially too, but more on the academically side. I give them the tools that not all kids give their parents. [For example,] some parents can say [to my parents], “My daughter [graduated] from high school.” Okay, well [my parents can respond], “Mine graduated from college.” That says something about the parents they are. I don’t want anyone to ever put them down or make them feel less of a person for being a minority. Just because you are a minority doesn’t mean that other people can look down on you. I am giving them [my parents] the tools that other people are trying to put them down with. If someone says, “My daughter graduated from college,” well, they [my parents] can say, “My daughter graduated from college too.” Or, like, “My daughter got a scholarship.” They [my parents] can say, “Okay, my daughter got a scholarship too,” or something like that. I only want them to have those tools.

Similar to Elizabeth’s parents, who used familial-cultural pedagogical tools (*cuentos* and *consejos*) to facilitate vital life values in their daughter, Elizabeth identified her academic endeavors as “tools” to help her parents challenge people’s negative perceptions (or intentions) about people of color. These women’s parents helped socialize their children to an education through the *cuentos* and *consejos* examined in Chapter 4. In the excerpt above, Elizabeth acknowledged how people of color are often “put down” or made to “feel less of a person for being a minority.” She was conscious of how her academic achievements can challenge those oppressive notions about minorities; she recognized her achievements as “tools” that help



combat various forms of oppression—in this case, whenever her parents encounter a situation where others try to “put them down.”

The data suggest that all of these women aspired to make their parents proud because of the distinct struggles and sacrifices that their families experienced and continue to face within the United States. Victoria explained:

Knowing all their sacrifice—my parents—that they made and [are] still making for me and my brother, knowing that they put so much on the line for me to be able to be here in the United States and have an education, I feel that I owe them so much, my mom and my dad, definitely their sacrifice. I feel that I have the duty to do well [academically] because that’s what they want for me. Along the way, I’ve learned that it’s beneficial for me because they are always telling me, “If you do it [go to college], it’s going to be for you.”...Even though they would tell me, “Oh, it’s for you,” I knew or it still felt an obligation to do well and succeed [because of their sacrifices].

Although Victoria acknowledged an obligation to academically achieve, she transformed this obligation into positive life values and aspirations to be the first in her family to become college educated, help her family become financially stable, and make her parents proud of her achievements as validation of the lifelong sacrifices they endured for her to be in the United States. As discussed in Chapter 4, Victoria’s parents permanently left their home country and families in their pursuit of a better life for themselves and their children. This knowledge was then transformed into Victoria’s aspiration to make her family proud through a college education.

For these women, fulfilling their aspirations meant that their parents’ struggles and sacrifices were for something better, in this case, their children’s future. As argued earlier, the motivation to achieve academic excellence helped facilitate a set of aspirations. Hence, their various aspirations help preserve their motivation to persist in the American educational pipeline.

### **Aspiration to Become Role Models and Give Back to the Community**

Besides setting high expectations among other Latina/o youth, these seven women aspired not only to serve as role models for their siblings and other family members (e.g.,

cousins), but also other youth in their communities, particularly Mexican, Mexican American, Chicana/o, and Latina/o youth. The women extended their college experiences to include what Bernal (1998) would describe as their “collective experience and community memory” (p. 563) by including the community that exists outside of the university as part of their past, present, and future. The seven women of this study aspired to “give back” to their communities as a result of their experiential knowledge as low-income, first-generation college students. Here, I draw upon Única, Victoria, and Elizabeth to further examine this particular aspiration.

Victoria aspired to encourage her younger brother and others to believe in themselves and their ability to pursue a college education:

I like to tell my brother, people in general, believe that they can do these things [go to college]...to just believe that you can do it. And even though people tell you, “Oh no, you can’t,” or, “That’s too farfetched,” like, who cares? [laughs]. If you don’t dream of doing something, some amazing things, you’re never going to get there. A lot of people from my town, they just stay [there]. They don’t really go away to school. They don’t do big things, or what I would consider big things [like going to college]. They just stay in my little city. I am like, “No, people. Empower yourselves. You can do things. And it’s so readily available to us. You have all these opportunities that our parents did not have.”

Victoria has purposefully drawn upon the various opportunities that immigrant parents often do not have access to, like an education, as a means to encourage others to take advantage of the opportunities available to them. She aspired to serve as a role model for her younger brother and demonstrate that a college education can be achieved when you believe in yourself.

In a similar way, Elizabeth shared her aspiration to serve as a role model to her cousins:

When they look at you, I don’t want them to think, “Oh yeah, she dropped out. That’s what all Mexicans are, dropped-outs.” No, [instead, they’ll be] like, “She’s a Ph.D. She’s a doctor.” Mexicans have the potential, but that’s how people look at it [see Mexicans negatively], unfortunately, and sometimes [people] just assume. So I want to make sure that it’s clear that maybe we don’t have the right resources or money, but we are certainly capable of achieving higher education and mak[ing] change in this world.

Through educational attainment, Elizabeth aspired to challenge deficit notions that suggest Mexican-heritage students are “drop-outs.” She implicitly shared her aspiration to continue her

education beyond a bachelor's degree and to obtain a doctorate, as a means to continue to fuel her aspiration to serve as a role model to her cousins and show them that Mexicans have the potential to excel academically. She drew attention to the limited resources and lower economic status that often serve as barriers to higher education within communities of color. Through her own achievements, Elizabeth aspired to set the record straight about Mexican-heritage people: "we are certainly capable of achieving higher education and mak[ing] change in this world."

Única aspired to pursue a career in law because she was seeking to achieve social justice for immigrants and migrant workers:

All those stories [shared by my parents] with the same fact of working in the fields [and] living in a community where people of color lived has really impacted what I really want to do in life, overall. Because sometimes people tell me, "Oh yeah, go for law because you're going to win more money." I am not [in it for the money]—I am really looking forward to helping the people, not really how much money I am going to earn, but more of how many lives I am going to change and impact.

She hoped to help individuals whose experiences and aspirations were similar to those of her parents. In Chapter 4, I discussed the various experiences Única and her parents endured as field workers. Here, Única explicitly identified her future career as a means to help her community, which has been historically oppressed in the United States. She aspired to a career that would help this vulnerable population.

Overall, all the women in this study aspired to serve as role models for younger generations in their families and hometown communities. To them, this meant more than setting an example, but confirming that others see college as an option. They saw the vital need for more role models, and they aspired to meet that need through their own achievements.

### **Preservation of Familial, Ethnic, and Cultural Pride**

In this study, pride is defined as a sense of psychological satisfaction that acknowledges and honors important aspects of one's identity, including family history, ethnic background, and cultural practices. As highlighted in various sections in this chapter, these seven participants

nurtured their familial, ethnic, and cultural pride. Their pride supplemented their set of asset-based resources by acknowledging and honoring their Mexican-heritage because they recognized the assets and values that their parents and their Mexican and Latina/o communities symbolized.

According to Bernal (2002), “for too long, the histories, experiences, cultures, and languages of students of color have been devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal educational settings” (p. 105). The participants felt honored to be children of immigrant parents. Familial *cuentos* and *consejos* helped them recognize their familial, ethnic, and cultural pride in order to challenge deficit perceptions and expectations about communities of color. This chapter focuses more on familial pride, while Chapter 6 will provide more concrete examples of ethnic and cultural pride.

The women’s exposure to family history challenged deficit perspectives about Mexican-heritage people being lazy, not valuing education, and experiencing a lack of success as a result of poor English proficiency. On the contrary, their parents unconsciously (or consciously) set an example for how to deal with the everyday demands of life. Their parents served as these women’s inspiration to become successful individuals through the achievement of a college education. Because their parents’ life experiences were characterized by various sacrifices and hardships, the women used familial *cuentos* to refute deficit notions like “Mexicans can’t do it” by cultivating familial pride. This also helped strengthen their ethnic and cultural pride, because they knew that “Mexicans *can* do it.”

All of the participants referred to their parents with respect and admiration. Elia, Jessica, Victoria, Karina, and Roise each explicitly identified her mother as the individual who most influenced her educational aspirations. Única acknowledged both parents, and Elizabeth explicitly identified her father as the most influential. Because the women respected and admired their parents, who also represented their ethnic and cultural backgrounds, it is

reasonable to conclude that they were proud to be of Mexican heritage, children of immigrants, and first-generation college students. Thus, they developed strong familial, ethnic, and cultural pride as contributions to asset-based resources. Rosie and Elizabeth, in particular, illustrated this asset-based resource.

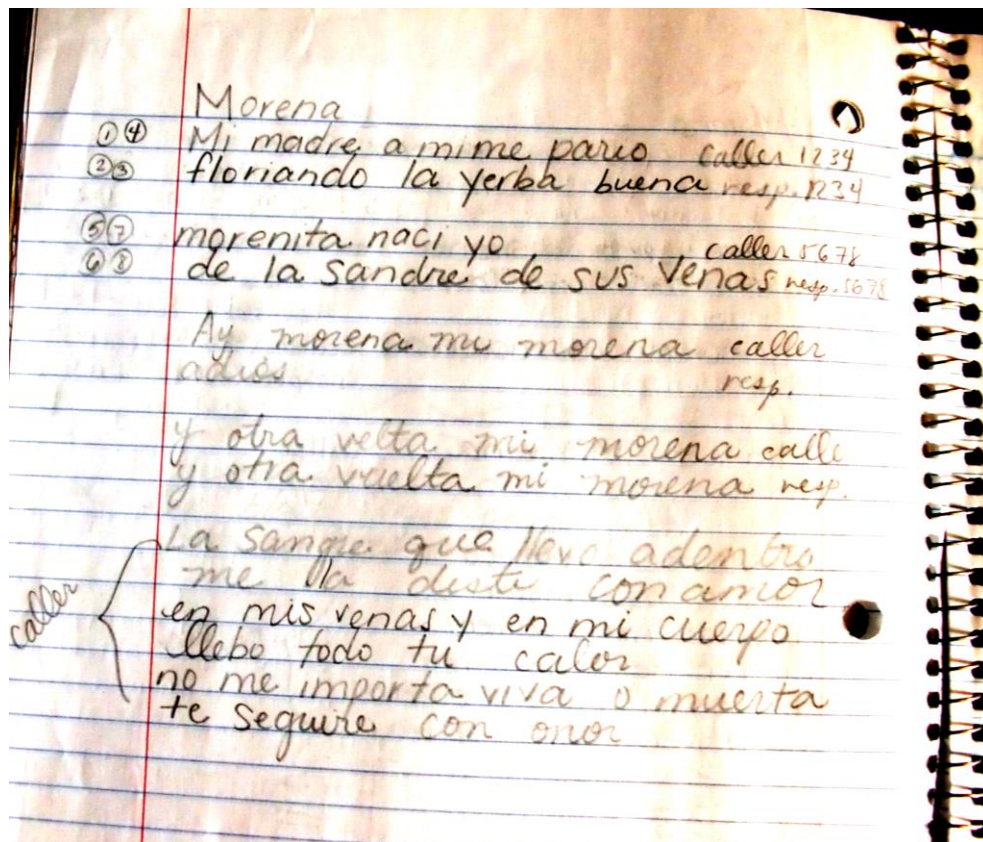


Figure 5.3. A Poem for Rosie's Mother.

### Morena

*Mi Madre a mí me pario  
 Floreando la yerba buena  
 Morenita nací yo  
 De la sangre de sus venas  
 Ay morena mi morena adiós  
 Y otra vuelta mi morena  
 Y otra vuelta mi morena  
 La sangre que llevo adentro  
 Me la diste con amor  
 En mis venas y en mi cuerpo  
 Llevo todo tu calor  
 No me importa viva o muerta  
 Te seguiré con honor*

Rosie had a passion for music and shared a poem to express how she was a reflection of her mother (Figure 5.3). Rosie and her younger sister sang the poem to her mother to express love and admiration. Because her mother had to forgo her own education when she had Rosie at a young age, she always emphasized the importance of education to her children. Rosie developed familial pride because she was living the educational aspirations of her mother; she identified familial pride as an important factor in her life, because she has understood that her persistence in the American educational pipeline would fulfill her mother's aspiration. Instead of feeling disappointed for her mother's limited educational achievement, Rosie's familial pride contributed to her ethnic and cultural pride. She understood that her family experienced various hardships and sacrifices so she could have better life opportunities. Her family history helped combat negative notions about Mexican-heritage people.

Unlike the other women, Elizabeth identified her father as the individual she looked up to. She shared a photograph of him (Figure 5.4) and explained:



Figure 5.4. Photo of Elizabeth's father.

I am proud of him [my dad]...[Elizabeth pointed to the photo. See circle 1] This is my dad getting his certificate for—he became a floor leader. And it's interesting because the owners, they are White, and he is representing [Mexicans]. And that's me too [representing Mexicans in higher education]. In some places, I am the only Mexican or the other colored person. And I just think that's, "Wow." And this is my dad getting another certificate [points to another photo], when he was younger for—I think it was for work ethic and good job before he got bumped up to lead man.

In the excerpt above, Elizabeth was conscious about representing her ethnicity in educational settings, specifically higher education, similar to her father in the workforce. Both Elizabeth and her father were positively representing Mexicans and challenging historical deficit notions about this population (for examples, see Andrade, 1982; Escobedo, 1980; García & Guerra, 2004; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). Elizabeth understood the underrepresentation of Mexicans in higher education and higher-level positions. Her familial pride contributed to her ethnic and cultural pride because she recognized that more people of Mexican heritage are needed in leadership positions and her father was representing an underrepresented population in his position.

These participants were proud to be of Mexican heritage, as highlighted in various sections in this chapter. They acknowledged the assets and values that their Mexican communities symbolized through their parents lived experiences. All described their parents with admiration. As noted in Chapter 4, their parents ultimately wanted to provide their children with a better life and set of opportunities than their own. The women identified their parents as role models, and exposure to their experiential knowledge allowed them to understand the importance of persistence in the face of varying forms of hardship. They described the Mexican community as "hard working" and "seeking the American dream." Their connections with their families, ethnicity, and culture have been influenced by familial *cuentos* and their own life experiences. Similar to their set of aspirations, familial, ethnic, and cultural pride has motivated

them to excel academically, because they felt that they were representing their families, ethnicity, and culture in various educational settings.

### **Sustainment of Positivity/Optimism Through Faith**

These women transformed their parents' *consejos* to “be positive” into an asset-based resource that helped them maintain positivity or optimism. This positivity/optimism helped them maintain psychological well-being, as well as hope and confidence in and dedication to their everyday activities.

Often, religion or spirituality played a crucial role in sustaining their positivity/optimism. For instance, Única shared that her faith “helps me continue to be here [at WCU] and not give up.... And I feel that it helps me spiritually and makes me want to continue [with my college education].” Furthermore, even though Elia admitted not going to church, “[she] still believe[s] in God.” For Elia, believing in God meant “believing that there is a larger power out there that created us and is taking care of us.” And Elizabeth described her relationship with God as playing a vital role in her life trajectories: “And through God, I can form a connection that would help me get through tough times.” Rosie also expressed sustaining positivity/optimism: “I always know that I am being guided and protected by God. I really believe everything that happens, it happens for a reason, and I know that everything will be okay because he is watching over me.” Finally, Karina clearly exemplified how important it is for her to pass on this life value to her son:

Most of all, faith. Keep the faith going [is important for me to pass on to my son]. That's a big thing—faith. [For example] when a bad situation is going on, you have to believe in faith. That everything is going to go on well. Let's say somebody is at the doctor and something bad is going on, let's have faith that everything is going to go on well—that positive thinking again. I do it [use faith during this college transition]. Again, I tend to turn everything negative into positive [energy]. So when something negative occurs, I am like let's turn it into positive [energy] with my faith. I know everything is going to go well with my faith.



Karina purposefully turned negative situations into positive outlooks—an asset-based resource that she aspired to hand over to her son. Her positivity/optimism has contributed to her persistence in educational settings. As described in Chapter 4, Karina learned from her parents the importance of religious/spiritual practices: “I use everything as a motivation. I don’t use it as a negative. Having [seen] my parents go through everything.” Similar to the other women, Karina witnessed firsthand her parents’ persistence with their faith in God. She wanted to pass on the same values to her son because she believed that these types of religious/spiritual practices have played a major role in her own life.

### **Exercise of a Strong Work Ethic**

A strong work ethic supplemented the women’s asset-based resources, allowing them to be proactive and carry out appropriate behaviors to achieve their aspirations. Motivation is the desire, and work ethic is the implementation of behaviors and attitudes that directly lead to the completion of a college education. As implied by the familial *consejo* to “be a hard worker,” the women applied meaning to the importance of an excellent work ethic, seeing it as vital to the realization of various aspirations. They learned this via familial *cuentos* and witnessing their parents’ daily experiences with social injustices like poverty.

Although the women’s lives had not been easy, they recognized and valued the various opportunities available to them in the United States compared to those afforded to their parents in their home country. They believed that they must take advantage of educational opportunities, regardless of challenges faced along the way. They were aware that their lived experiences did not come close to hardships their parents’ endured, but they drew strength from witnessing their parents’ persistence first-hand and learning from familial *cuentos* and *consejos*. Elia, for example, specifically identified her mother’s determination as a positive characteristic:

I always knew to take it one step at a time—an education—to follow it as far as I can go and I can't give up. Apart from telling me her life stories, her determination serves as my example.

Her mother's determination and work ethic has helped Elia learn to take her education one step at a time, and not to give up. Her mother's life-experiences also challenged deficit perceptions about Mexican-heritage people as lackadaisical and devoid of determination. Elia exemplified the importance of working hard in her everyday activities when she shared a postcard that inspired her (Figure 5.5):



Figure 5.5. Tattoo of *Hechale ganas* [Don't give up].

The girl has a tattoo on her back. The tattoo reads, “*Hechale ganas*” (see circle 1). During high school I received [this postcard] telling us to go to that college. And I kept it because I thought it was really inspiring. *Hechale ganas* means don't give up. It's not going to be easy [to get through college], but every day you have to try hard. You have to give it your all, every single day, just keep on going.

The display of the photograph relates to her mother and father's *consejo*, shared in Chapter 4, to be a hard worker. Elia understood that she needed to exercise an excellent work ethic every day, giving it her all—she must *hecharle ganas* to achieve her aspirations, which included achieving a

college education and financial stability, in addition to making her mother proud and becoming a role model to her community.

Karina's mother also encouraged her to exercise an excellent work ethic. Karina shared a photo of herself with her mother (Figure 5.6<sup>18</sup>) to illuminate the type of characteristics her mother had instilled on her:



*Figure 5.6.* Photograph of Karina and her mother.

She [my mom] is like my everything. She is always there for me, no matter what. She has always showed me to be strong, to work hard, that nothing is impossible if you put your heart to it. She always tells me that... She motivates me for everything.

Karina's mother's character helped her develop an excellent work ethic by encouraging her to be strong and to work hard. Like the parents of the other women, her mother problematized the

---

<sup>18</sup> Faces have been obscured in the images to maintain the participants' anonymity.

deficit perceptions of Mexican-heritage parents as possessing inadequate parenting skills (see Andrade, 1982; Escobedo, 1980; García & Guerra, 2004; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997). In fact, she motivated Karina to persist toward her aspirations by emphasizing that nothing is impossible if Karina put her heart towards it.

As stated before, these asset-based resources are interconnected. For instance, the students exercised a good work ethic to achieve their aspirations, including a college education. Furthermore, their motivation to excel academically helped them develop a set of aspirations. In addition to acknowledging their aspirations, these women simultaneously drew upon their positivity/optimism and familial, ethnic, and cultural pride to enhance their persistence in educational settings.

### **Analytical Summary of Chapter**

This chapter examined the second of three engagements from the developmental engagement model: meaning-making of information. I described how the seven women in the sample created meaning of *cuentos* and *consejos* by translating the messages to support specific life lessons and values in the form of asset-based resources. I also described how these resources helped them persist through the educational pipeline. Once we understand the particular role that students' families play in the development of asset-based resources and the influences that their assets have on educational resilience, we can explore how schools can build upon students' assets to better help them validate their experiences in the classroom and attain their educational goals.

Figure 5.7 provides an overview of the first two engagements that comprise the developmental engagement model with supporting evidence from the seven participants' experiences.

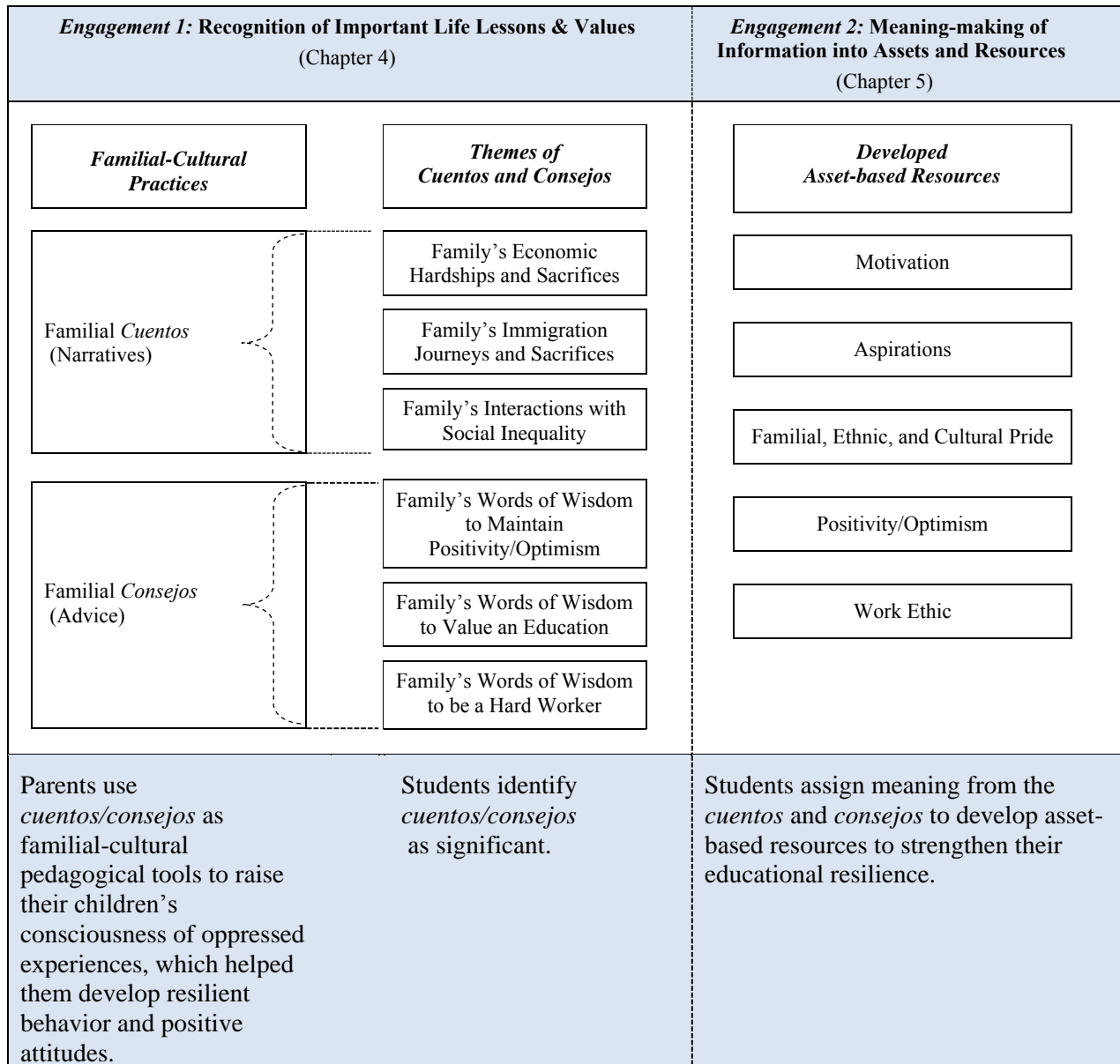


Figure 5.7. Engagement 1 and Engagement 2 from the developmental engagement model.

As a reminder, Chapter 4 examined *Engagement 1*, recognition of important life lessons and values (see column 1 of Figure 5.7). The current chapter examined *Engagement 2*, meaning-making of information. As seen in the third column in Figure 5.7, the meaningful information that was gained from the first engagement with the *cuentos* and *consejos* was transformed into important life lessons and values that ultimately functioned to sustain educational resilience. The

seven women brought motivation, aspirations, pride, positivity/optimism, and a strong work ethic: what I refer to as asset-based resources in educational settings.

This chapter acknowledged the continuity of cultural assets and resources utilized among women of Mexican heritage in their educational trajectories, what has been referred to as *funds of knowledge* (Moll et al., 1992), *pedagogies of the home* (Bernal, 2001), and *community cultural wealth* (Yosso, 2005, 2006). Evidence from this study contributes to a rich understanding of the particular assets these seven women brought to an educational setting. They applied meaning to the familial-cultural pedagogical tools—*cuentos* and *consejos*—used by their families to develop asset-based resources that helped sustain their educational resilience. Specifically, I explored how participant engagement with *cuentos* and *consejos* transformed their attitudes toward education. We learned how each woman created meaning from the information, and how their application of that meaning helped translate the knowledge into asset-based resources. When motivation was instilled, aspirations developed, along with pride, positivity/optimism, and a strong work ethic—all serving as these women’s assets.

These students’ asset-based resources contributed to the notion of familism (see, for example, Zinn, 1975, 1982), as discussed in Chapter 2, with what I call *educational familismo*, a process of building educational resilience through parents use of *cuentos* and *consejos* to raise their children’s consciousness of oppressed experiences, which helps them develop resilient behavior and positive attitudes. The gained knowledge contributed to the development of the students’ asset-based resources, which were transformed by these familial-cultural pedagogical tools (e.g., *cuentos* and *consejos*). The participants’ parents used these teaching tools to encourage generally important life values that influenced positive lifelong behaviors and attitudes towards education. The applied meaning of the *cuentos* and *consejos* helped influence more positive than negative behaviors and attitudes throughout the students’ educational

trajectories. Their engagement with familial-cultural practices involved recognition of important life values, meaning-making of information, and the deployment of this knowledge in various educational settings. Chapter 4 addressed the first of these engagements, the current chapter examined the second, and the forthcoming chapters will explore the third engagement in this model.

*Educational familismo* comprises the interactions students have with their families that expose them to familial advice, wisdom, and experiential knowledge, and that result in positive attitudes and behaviors towards education, including the motivation to excel academically. Therefore, these familial-cultural practices shed light on the authentic experiences of the women's familial histories, assets, problems and obligations. As Delgado & Stefancic (2001) suggested, "Well-told stories describing the reality of black and brown lives can help [the recipient] bridge the gap between their worlds and those of others. Engaging stories can help us understand what life is like for others, and invite the [recipient] into a new and unfamiliar world" (p. 41). The women's parents helped counter the majoritarian story by sharing the stories of those on the margins of society (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

Counter-storytelling helps to examine different forms of racial and gender discrimination experienced by communities of color (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Thus, these women's exposure to their family histories, familial-cultural assets, and obligations and problems through *cuentos* and *consejos* has allowed them to better understand the experiences endured by their parents and ancestors "through deliberative and mindful listening techniques" (Taylor, 2009, p. 10). Furthermore, these pedagogical tools ultimately contributed to their educational resilience when they were transformed into asset-based resources. With the development of a set of asset-based resources—motivation, aspirations, pride,

positivity/optimism and work ethic—these women coped with their family ties and commitments, the demands of school, and individual challenges.

This study provides empirical evidence for Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth (CCW) model. As discussed in length in Chapter 1, Tara Yosso (2005, 2006) theorized about the cultural wealth that communities of color possess and bring to educational settings. I have specifically placed familial capital at the forefront of my study to challenge cultural deficit perspectives that have historically been used to explain the lack of academic achievement of students of color in general, and students of Mexican heritage in particular, in the K–16 educational system (for examples, see García & Guerra, 2004; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997; Valencia & Black, 2002).

Although familial capital was the unit of analysis in this study, the various capitals introduced by Yosso (2005, 2006) should not be seen as mutually exclusive. Their intersectionality can be seen within these women's asset-based resources. For example, their familial-cultural practices reflect their familial capital via their parents' use of *cuentos* and *consejos*. Their parents engaged with their children through cultural teaching tools to instill important life values. Once these women applied meaning to the *cuentos* and *consejos*, they developed what I refer to as asset-based resources. Yet, how they created meaning from the *cuentos* and *consejos* has helped them draw upon their forms of capital, or what Yosso (2005, 2006) referred to as community cultural wealth.

According to Yosso (2006), Chicana/o youth often experienced “community traditions of storytelling...they have listened to and probably retold some *cuentos*, *dichos*, and oral histories of their family” (p. 42). The participants' utilization of linguistic capital gave them the ability to communicate in more than one language and engage with familial *cuentos* and *consejos*, which then resulted in the development of a set of life values that included aspirations. Drawing upon



aspirational capital, the women developed a set of aspirations that included being the first in their families to pursue and graduate from college. Their various asset-based resources helped them navigate their educational trajectories, and this is what Yosso (2005, 2006) termed “navigational capital.”

The women also identified their education as a means to “prove them wrong,” an example of resistant capital (Yosso, 2005, 2006). Moreover, they were part of important high-achieving programs—GATE or honors-tracked curriculum—which enhanced their social capital. Their involvement with such programs, however, also allowed them to become resilient during encounters with inequality. For example, Elia challenged the stereotype of Asians as the “model minority” in her participation in the GATE program. Regardless of the form of capital in use, multiple forms of capital may be in action. Thus, acknowledging and honoring students’ assets can optimize the educational and social benefits of diversity by validating their experiences in educational settings. Also, this can be achieved by humanizing students’ experiences in the classroom, creating a more inclusive and respectful teaching and learning environment.

The next chapter examines the third engagement in the developmental engagement model: asset-based resources. It describes the strategies these women identified to help deploy their asset-based resources during their first-year experiences in higher education. The women utilized a series of strategies, from the display of meaningful artifacts in their university housing to the identification of spaces on campus that allowed them to put their assets into practice within an educational setting.

## CHAPTER 6

### SEVEN WOMEN'S FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCES: FINDING STRATEGIES TO DEPLOY ASSET-BASED RESOURCES

This chapter examines successful strategies that first-generation college women of Mexican heritage develop and deploy to persist in higher education. Because college student attrition usually occurs during or immediately after students' initial year of study (see, for examples, Feldman & Newcomb, 1969/1994; Tinto, 1993), I studied women of Mexican heritage as they successfully navigated their first-year experiences. I focused on women because research suggests that the responsibility to carry family commitments (e.g., help take care of siblings) usually falls on females (Espinoza, 2010; Sy & Romero, 2008; Sy, 2006). This chapter builds upon Chapter 5, in which I examined the development of asset-based resources by analyzing the strategies these women used to deploy them at the university level.

Chapter 1 introduced the developmental engagement model, which guided my analyses of the students' involvements with their familial-cultural practices. Chapters 2 and 3 introduced the related literature and the study methodology, respectively. Chapter 4 introduced *cuentos* and *consejos* as two familial-cultural practices that the seven women in this study engaged in with their families, examining in depth the first engagement in the model, recognition of important life lessons and values. Chapter 5 examined the second engagement in the model, the creation of meaning from the information, more specifically, how these women applied meaning to *cuentos* and *consejos*, which resulted in the development of what I refer to as asset-based resources—motivation, aspirations, pride, positivity/optimism, and work ethic. The present chapter examines the third engagement in the model: deployment of the gained knowledge in various educational settings. In particular, this chapter identifies various strategies that these women

utilized to deploy their asset-based resources. The next chapter will provide a case study of how these women drew upon these strategies when dealing with four specific challenges that they identified during their first year in college.

This chapter addresses the following research question: *In what ways do first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage deploy their asset-based resources during their first-year experiences?* Using methods detailed in Chapter 3—specifically, through analysis of the photo-elicitation interviews, dorm room inventories of meaningful artifacts, and participant-led campus tours—I coded the data for the ways the participants put their asset-based resources into practice in higher education. Each student’s asset-based resources had to be converted into strategies in order to help her successfully persist during her first-year experience. In the absence of such strategies, the women would have experienced discord among their multiple worlds, making the transition into college even more challenging.

I begin this chapter by delineating the different strategies employed by the seven women in this study. Table 6.1 provides an overview of the six strategies deployed by participants: (a) displaying various types of meaningful artifacts (e.g., family photographs, collages, religious figures); (b) connecting with family (e.g., visits, phone calls, texts, social media); (c) joining student organizations (e.g., ballet *folklórico*, MEChA, sororities); (d) connecting with academic departments and student service programs (e.g., Chicana/o Studies and WCU’s resource centers); (e) locating meaningful spaces on campus (e.g., artwork and other unofficial spaces on campus); and (f) sustaining religious/spiritual practices (e.g., praying/attending mass).

Table 6.1

*Strategies used by Participants to Deploy Asset-based Resources*

Strategies Used (column) by Participant (row)						
	Displaying Meaningful Artifacts	Connecting with Family	Joining Student Organizations	Connecting with Academic Departments and Student Service Programs	Locating Meaningful Spaces on Campus	Sustaining Religious/Spiritual Practices
Karina	✓	✓		✓	<i>Off campus</i>	✓
Elia	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Jessica	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Única	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rosie	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Victoria	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Elizabeth	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

As described in the previous chapter, the women entered higher education with asset-based resources that included motivation, aspirations, pride, positivity/optimism, and work ethic. Table 6.2 below presents the strategies that they drew upon to help deploy each of these resources to negotiate their first year of college. These strategies varied for each participant based on individual circumstances. For illustration purposes, I only examine the strategies and asset-based resources highlighted in the table below, since they were the most prevalent among the women in this study.

Table 6.2

*Deployment of Asset-based Resources by Strategy*

Deployment of Asset-based Resources (row) by Strategy (column)						
	Displaying Meaningful Artifacts	Connecting with Family	Joining Student Organizations	Connecting with Academic Departments and Student Service Programs	Locating Meaningful Spaces on Campus	Sustaining Religious/Spiritual Practices
Motivation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Aspirations	✓			✓	✓	
Familial, Ethnic, and Cultural Pride	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Positivity/Optimism	✓	✓			✓	✓
Work Ethic	✓			✓	✓	

The prevalence of these strategies clearly demonstrates their value to the seven women, because they allowed them to acknowledge and honor pre-college resources in a higher education setting. Because some of the women found certain strategies to be more useful than others, how and when they used these seven strategies varied. Different women deployed some or all of their resources in each strategy depending upon their individual circumstances. A row analysis of Table 6.2 provides a clearer illustration of the most deployed asset-based resources: motivation; familial, ethnic, and cultural pride; and positivity/optimism. Motivation was used in all six strategies; familial, ethnic, and cultural pride was utilized in five out of the six strategies; and positivity/optimism was implemented in four of the strategies. Collectively, as will be discussed later in this chapter, participants' asset-based resources contributed to their educational resilience and persistence through their identified strategies.

A column analysis of Table 6.2 demonstrates the range of resources deployed by each of the six strategies. Specifically, the display of meaningful artifacts and the identification of spaces on campus helped the women deploy the full range of asset-based resources. Connections

with academic departments and student service programs helped them implement four of these resources, compared to three particular asset-based resources that were deployed through family connections. On the other hand, involvement with student organizations and pre-college religious/spiritual practices helped exercise two of these five asset-based resources. Some of these strategies—including meaningful artifacts and spaces on campus—were self-produced by the participants once they started their first year in college; connections to family and religious/spiritual practices were resources that they brought with them to the university; and academic departments, student service programs, and student organizations were identified at their institution.

As noted, these students entered higher education with asset-based resources, but if they had been unable to convert them into strategies, they might have experienced discord among their multiple worlds, making the transition into college more challenging. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to examine how these women created strategies to deploy their asset-based resources. The next few sections are divided by strategy; each section illustrates the asset-based resources that were deployed using that particular strategy.

### **Display Various Types of Meaningful Artifacts**

The display of various meaningful artifacts served as a manifestation of what family means to these women. All seven women had family photographs, collages, or both, as well as other artifacts (e.g., stuffed animals) in their university housing. These objects deployed aspects of their asset-based resources. Their display emphasized the women's desire to remain connected to important parts of their lives and families, and to fuel their motivation, aspirations, pride, positivity/optimism, and work ethic while in college. The resources deployed through this strategy included motivation, aspirations, pride, positivity/optimism, and work ethic (see Table 6.2). For the participants in this study, these artifacts were associated with meaning-making of

familial *cuentos* and *consejos*. There is a dearth of literature in higher education research that acknowledges and understands the significance of the display of meaningful artifacts in relation to educational resilience and persistence. The remainder of this section illustrates the strong impact that the artifacts had on participants' first-year experience and educational resilience.

### **Motivation**

All seven women deployed self-motivation through meaningful artifacts. As defined in Chapter 5, motivation is an individual's *ongoing* desire or willingness to exercise positive behaviors and attitudes that lead to lifelong outcomes, including obtaining a college degree. Artifacts that highlighted the participants' families, in particular, served as motivation for all seven women in this study. As illustrated in Chapters 4 and 5, the participants' motivation to excel academically was fueled largely by both their understanding of and applied meaning to their family histories, familial-cultural assets, and familial resilience to overcome problems and fulfill obligations. Past knowledge and experiences retrieved through familial *cuentos* and *consejos* served as stimuli that inspired and strengthened an ongoing desire to excel academically.

Upon entering college, the artifacts displayed in the women's rooms served as reminders of the various types of hardships and sacrifices their families had endured. As we learned in Chapter 5, these women were pursuing a college degree for their families and communities, and to represent a positive image among the Mexican-heritage population: *Si se puede* (yes, it can be done). Previous chapters examined how they recognized important life-lessons and values from engagement with familial *cuentos* and *consejos* (Chapter 4), and then applied meaning to them to develop asset-based resources (Chapter 5). As a result, we have learned how these women's pursuit of a college education fostered a wide range of opportunities for their families, for their communities, and ultimately for themselves. The illustrations in this section are exemplars of

how motivation served as an asset-based resource for all seven women, and how it contributed to their educational resilience. Jessica and Victoria serve as strong examples in this context.

**Jessica.** For a scholarship interview, Jessica created a collage to highlight what she cherished the most. This collage was displayed in her dorm room, on the wall above her desk, as seen in Figure 6.1.



*Figure 6.1.* Jessica's collage.

I did bring a photograph of my [parents]—it's up there, in the middle (see circle 1). They are in the middle, where the collage is divided [Jessica points to the picture]. There are two sides. This side is where my parents are and this side is where I'm at, right now. And the middle is this division between us [Jessica points to the specific photo circled in red]... So I did that [the collage] a while back [for a scholarship interview]. [The photos] always remind me of my parents and, even though we are separated, it keeps me going when I look up. But it's just bringing back memories. It reminds me a lot of my family and why I'm here [at WCU].

For Jessica, these artifacts triggered familial memories associated with family history, familial-cultural assets, and familial resilience. Like the other women, Jessica's parents used



*cuentos* and *consejos* to raise their children's consciousness of oppressed experiences, which helped them develop resilient behavior and positive attitudes (see Chapter 4). Jessica was reminded of her family as her source of motivation through the photo of her family (circled above). Her remarks demonstrate how she converted familial memories into meaningful artifacts through this collage. Although Jessica was not awarded the scholarship, she decided to keep the collage and display it in her room. Instead of reminding her of "rejection," the collage helped her stay motivated because it reminded her of her family; more specifically, "it kept her going," regardless of their separation.

As a reminder, Jessica did not have regular communication with her parents due to their deportation to Mexico and their limited access to telephone service. While Jessica's family was physically taken away from her, she brought them to campus through photographs. These images served as a reminder of her family history, which included overcoming homelessness. Instead of these life circumstances influencing Jessica to postpone her education to obtain full-time employment, which would contribute to her family's financial wellbeing, Jessica identified her education as an opportunity to escape poverty. She understood that her parents migrated from Mexico to the United States with the aspiration for Jessica and her siblings to take advantage of educational opportunities. As we learned in Chapter 4, when she spoke with her mother, her mother always reminded her why she was at WCU: "to get an education"; she stressed that "no one can take an education away from you." Thus, this type of artifact reminded Jessica about the array of hardships, struggles, and sacrifices her family had endured, and continues to experience, for her to be at WCU, but they also motivated her to stay connected to her ultimate goal, to achieve a college degree, which was encouraged by her parents.

**Victoria.** Victoria also displayed photos of her family at her desk. She pointed to the photographs in Figure 6.2, and explained why it was important to display her family at her desk.

Victoria acknowledged how her family was what she was working for; she purposefully placed the highlighted photos at her desk because she worked there often and could be constantly reminded of her family as her source of motivation.



Figure 6.2. Victoria's desk with family photos.

And here [points to the top portion of her desk] I have more [photos] of my brother, my *quinceañera*,<sup>19</sup> graduation, and my family. And I have more down here [points to the bottom portion of her desk]—I am here with my dad, my brother, my brother again, [and] my mom. I'm working here all the time and I just look [at the photos], and it's just like, "Oh, my family is what I work for." So I put [these particular photos] here.

As described in Chapter 4, Victoria's father experienced poverty during his childhood, forcing him to sell bubble gum on the streets of Mexico at a young age instead of pursuing an education. These types of experiences were transferred through familial *cuentos*. Victoria converted her familial history through meaningful artifacts such as her photographs, which served as constant reminders of her parents' sacrifices and hardships. Without these familial

<sup>19</sup> A *quinceañera* is a fifteen-year-old's birthday celebration in Mexican heritage families, similar to a sweet sixteen birthday celebration in American families.

experiences, she understood that her current achievements would not have been possible. As we also learned in Chapter 4, Victoria's parents had not seen their own parents for almost two decades. Sacrifices like these were made to provide Victoria and her younger brother educational opportunities. Familiar to the other women in this study, Victoria will be the first in her family to break through the cycle of poverty. She was doing this through a college degree, an achievement strongly encouraged by her parents.

Jessica and Victoria serve as excellent examples of how symbolic value plays an important role in the first-year experience. Their understanding of what it means to be children of immigrant parents has been influenced by their engagement with familial-cultural practices—*cuentos* and *consejos*. In Chapter 4, we learned that these women acknowledged and valued various familial hardships and sacrifices that ultimately facilitated their academic pursuits. For example, Jessica drew meaning and life lessons from her family's experience of homelessness, and Victoria converted symbolic value from her father's childhood poverty that forced him to forgo an education, regardless of his intelligence.

When these women acknowledged that the photos reminded them of their families, they were demonstrating appreciation for and value of familial *cuentos* and *consejos*. They converted familial-cultural practices into asset-based resources (e.g., motivation), which were then deployed through strategies like the display of meaningful artifacts in their university housing. All seven participants possessed and displayed such treasured artifacts and in so doing deployed motivation as an asset-based resource to nurture their pursuit of a college degree. Among all the participants, the artifacts mirrored their *cuentos* and *consejos*.

### **Aspirations**

As defined in Chapter 5, aspirations are a person's explicit desire to achieve personal life-goals. The seven women in the study developed four specific aspirations: (a) to become college

educated; (b) to help their parents acquire financial stability; (c) to make their parents proud; (d) and to become role models and give back to their communities. These life goals helped fuel their motivation, as they understood that they must persist in college in order for their aspirations to become reality. The display of meaningful artifacts helped the women achieve their various life goals. For example, Única's display of family photos in her room enabled her to maintain a connection to her aspiration to become college educated.

**Única.** Única drew attention to a framed photo of her family and elaborated on why it was important to have photos of her cousins in her room (Figure 6.3). The framed photo of her and her cousins was laden with meaning and symbolized her family's achievements and struggles.



*Figure 6.3.* Única's bi-fold picture frame.

My pictures [Única reaches to a bi-fold picture frame located at the top shelf of her desk]. [On the left bi-fold side], it's me and my two cousins (see circle 1)...[The photo with my cousins]...is important because we were in the same

grade throughout middle school and high school—we graduated the same year and our parents celebrated our accomplishments together. So I think it's significant because we all went through the same thing together. [Same things referring to]—our parents, they worked in the fields, so those kinds of things—struggles that we experienced in the fields, too. We worked in the fields with our parents and we saw the need of money, and everything [the specific experiences in the field]. And then, my cousin, unfortunately, two to three years ago, both of his parents died. So that really impacted our family and him. So it's like a struggle we all went through, a difficulty. And just bringing the picture reminds me of those good times and hard times, and how even though not everybody was able to come to college, they still had to face the same struggles or they are still facing those struggles back in [hometown name].

To someone unfamiliar with Unica's familial experiences, her photos and collages might project simply loving memories created with family. These artifacts, however, transmitted a host of complex meanings and memories. They were a representation of her family history, familial-cultural assets, and familial resilience to overcome problems and fulfill obligations. Única's narrative about the photo acknowledged and honored her family's accomplishments, struggles, and difficulties. Through this artifact, she highlighted their experiences working in the agricultural fields. In Chapter 4, I described Única's experiences when she worked with her mother in the field. She witnessed her mother's work ethic when her mother tried to produce extra boxes of grapes to earn an additional 25 cents per box. Their collective experiences are manifested in this meaningful artifact. Única applied meaning to her family history, and she understood and valued what her family endured in order for her to be attending WCU.

At the end of her narrative, Única acknowledged, “not everybody was able to come to college,” alluding to her cousins. She recognized that attending college was a privilege that not everyone could enjoy. If Única obtained a college degree, this accomplishment could help overcome the struggles and difficulties endured by her family. For example, similar to the other participants' parents, Única's parents migrated to the United States with the aspiration to give their children educational opportunities, which then would lead to better career opportunities, diverging Única from the cycle of poverty in her family. Única's persistence through the

American educational pipeline honored her family history, familial-cultural assets, and familial resilience. Without the meaning-making of the aforementioned factors, Única understood that she would not have accomplished her admittance to WCU. In addition to acquiring a college degree, Única will also be able to fulfill the aspiration of making her parents proud.

### **Familial, Ethic, and Cultural Pride**

As defined in Chapter 5, pride is as a sense of psychological satisfaction to acknowledge and honor important aspects of one's identity that include family, ethnicity, and culture.

Acknowledging and honoring their Mexican-heritage, through engagement with familial *cuentos* and their own experiences, was important to the women's persistence in college. They recognized the assets and values that their families and the Mexican and Latina/o communities symbolized: resilience. Thus, they identified various meaningful artifacts to represent their families, ethnic backgrounds, and culture on campus. Where photos and collages often literally revealed family members, other important artifacts did not. The participants also found artifacts that possessed meaningful symbolic value.

**Victoria.** Victoria discussed the significance of a few of her stuffed animals (Figure 6.4). She explained how they were given to her as gifts by her mother and brother to mark special events (e.g., birthday, graduation), thus reminding her of home.



Figure 6.4. Victoria's stuffed animals.

My brother gave me this one for my birthday [Victoria picks up the stuffed animal]. My mom gave me this one, and this one, and this one (laughs), and this one (laughs). And she gave me this one for graduation. They [the stuffed animals] remind me of home because people who love me gave them to me. They are cute and I like sleeping with them.

Instead of placing the stuffed animals to the side when she went to sleep, Victoria liked to sleep with them. This strategy helped her feel a sense of love and comfort in a place unlike her home. These artifacts facilitated an emotional connection with her family and created a feeling that they were there with her at WCU. They provided Victoria a physical reminder of the love and comfort of having her loved ones with her and they supported her emotional wellbeing.

Because Victoria acknowledged a sense of home from these stuffed animals, she, in fact, deployed her familial pride. In Chapter 4, Victoria retold her familial *cuentos* that often involved coping with hardships and sacrifices. Knowing that her family had surpassed these types of experiences, Victoria was proud to be a child of immigrants. Regardless of financial hardships, her parents emphasized the importance of an education and sacrificed so much for Victoria and her brother to be able to take advantage of educational opportunities. Thus, she decided to bring

her family to campus through these artifacts. They served as a constant reminder of her familial resilience to overcome problems and fulfill obligations, which helped Victoria gain familial pride and maintain emotional wellbeing.

**Única.** Única also brought a few stuffed animals that reminded her of her older sisters (Figure 6.5).





*Figure 6.5.* Única's stuffed animals.

My bunnies [laying against the headboard], these my sisters gave them to me when they were in college. They were also away from home. And I think that's significant because [they had these stuffed animals] when I was in high school, and I missed them. It's just bringing them [my sisters] with me [to college]. It also helps me feel connected to them [Única's voice is a little emotional].

Única associated these stuffed bunnies with prior memories that included her sisters' pursuit of college when she was in high school. But the roles had changed, as Única was now in her sisters' footsteps. The bunnies allowed Única to maintain an emotional connection with her sisters, who had successfully navigated through their own college experiences. These artifacts also represented hopefulness—if Única's sisters did it, she will too.

Regardless of the familial hardships that would prevent Única and her siblings from making college a reality, these artifacts represented Única's familial pride. As children of immigrants, Única and her siblings were achieving their parents' aspirations for their children to pursue a college education, regardless of their impoverished circumstances. Única, as the

youngest, however, was the first in her family to be admitted to a competitive university. Bringing her sisters to college through these stuffed animals facilitated her familial pride.

Like Victoria, Única brought another artifact that her mother had given her—a pillow. And, like Victoria, Única also slept with this pillow (Figure 6.6).



Figure 6.6. Única’s pillow.

This pillow, my mom gave it to me [she picks up a purple and pink flower printed pillow from her bed. See circle 1]. I sleep with it, and I guess whenever I’m feeling sad or when I go to sleep, I hug it tight. [My mom gave it to me] because I told her that I did not have any pillows. That was fall quarter. Then she said, “Take this one.” Now, whenever I see my pillow, it reminds me of her [my mom]. This pillow has a meaning—it makes me feel like if she were here with me. I miss my mother so much.

Unlike photos and collages, these three-dimensional artifacts can imitate giving a family member a hug. Única gained a sense of love and comfort from the pillow that her mother had given her, and her familial pride was projected in this pillow. She admired her mother for enduring difficult border-crossing and discriminatory experiences, which she learned about through her mother’s *cuentos*. She also witnessed her mother’s work ethic in the grape field.

The pillow connected Única to her mother, and through it she gained her mother’s strength to overcome sadness. These artifacts allowed the women to be reminded of their familial pride and to gain a sense of love and comfort by, in a sense, bringing family members to campus.

**Elizabeth.** Elizabeth highlighted three specific artifacts in her room that reflected her ethnic/cultural pride (Figure 6.7). These artifacts illuminated important aspects of her life: her ethnicity/culture through a Mexican flag; her spirituality through a figure of the Virgin Mary; and her community through the *piñata* that was bought at a store back home. By displaying these artifacts in her room, Elizabeth nurtured her sense of familial, ethnic, and cultural pride while in college.



*Figure 6.7.* Elizabeth’s Mexican flag, Virgin Mary portrait, and a *Chavo del Ocho piñata*.

[I have the Mexican flag (see circle 1), a Virgin Mary portrait (see circle 2), and a *Chavo del Ocho piñata* (see circle 3)] because [it] reminds me of home. It makes it more homey-ish [in my room]....[All of these items] remind me of where I come from—of who I am. I think it’s going to change, as I change—[I’m going to] put different pictures, different images—add on to it. I’ll find different images that come to represent me and I’ll put it [on display].

**Victoria.** Victoria also created a collage with meaningful artifacts that spanned the entire wall on her side of the room (Figure 6.8). These artifacts included things like family photos, posters and tickets from premieres she attended, drawings made by her brother, and birthday cards she received.



Figure 6.8. Victoria's wall collage.

I have a ton of things on it [my wall]. I like to display everything (laughs). Everything is on display because it represents this artsy side or this side of me. It shows personality. It would be boring [without them], and I wouldn't want to be in here, if it was just plain. I would just be, like, depressed. There's like life on the wall [reflects my life]. And I like that.... Then, here [points to a pillow with a printed Chihuahua-breed dog (see circle 2)], I have *Paco* (laughs). I just thought he was the cutest thing. And again, it shows my Mexican culture. And this just shows my American culture [Victoria points to a poster pinned on her wall that shows the history of American rock, where the tree is composed of names of bands and artists with a backdrop of the American flag (see circle 1)]. And I just thought it was a cool fusion of portrayals of who I am.

Like Elizabeth—who decided to display artifacts that reflected important aspects of her life, in this case, her ethnicity/culture (e.g., Mexican flag)—Victoria found these strategies important. Her display of ethnic/cultural pride through meaningful artifacts projected a positive atmosphere in her room. She also highlighted another item in her room that reflected her “Mexican side” (Figure 6.9).



*Figure 6.9. Victoria's Virgen de Guadalupe drawing.*

And this one is hand drawn by my uncle (see circle 1). It has my name up here [points towards the top of the drawing]. It's really nice and it really looks Mexican. So I added that so you can tell that I'm Mexican. It brings culture, too [to my room]. So I like that.

Victoria associated this religious figure with her culture and purposefully displayed it in her room so guests would become aware of her ethnicity. For these women, the display of meaningful artifacts in their rooms enabled them to embrace their ethnic/cultural pride. They transformed a foreign space into their own by decorating it with meaningful artifacts. In so doing, they identified their university housing as a space in which they could deploy aspects of their asset-based resources.

## Positivity/Optimism

Positivity/optimism, as defined in Chapter 5, was an asset-based resource that allowed the participants to maintain psychological well-being through hopefulness. It often involved their spirituality, in addition to confidence and dedication in their everyday activities. The display of religious artifacts helped them maintain psychological well-being.

Four of the seven participants, Única, Karina, Victoria, and Elizabeth, chose to bring and display religious symbols like drawings, statues, frames, and/or portraits, in their university housing. Jessica, on the other hand, did not have religious artifacts in her room: “I’m Christian [Evangelical], and Christians do not possess religious figures because it says in the bible, ‘Praise but don’t have any symbols, idols.’ And that’s generally why [I don’t have such symbols in my room].” For the other women, however, the display of religious figures helped deploy their positivity/optimism to persist through their first year in college.

**Única.** Like many of the other women, Única made a conscious decision to bring spiritual artifacts to campus. She shed light on two particular religious figures in her room (Figure 6.10). The statue of *El Cristo*, on the left side of the photo, was given to her by her father. About the statue, she stated, “I was only going to bring the Virgin Mary [portrait, located on the right side of the photo] but then, I told my mom I wanted *también* [also] a *Cristo*. That one was my dad’s.”<sup>20</sup> Única spoke of these meaningful artifacts because they allowed her to maintain positivity/optimism while in college.

---

<sup>20</sup> The religious figure, in particular, has been in her family for a decade: “We’ve always had it [El Cristo] since we were young. It has always been in our room where my sisters and I slept.” Unfortunately, the figure fell down when her father was hanging it on the wall. Although the legs broke off, he father taped them back on. Única thought it was ironic that he broke it, since he explicitly told her to “take care of it.”



Figure 6.10. Única's *El Cristo* statue and *Virgen de Guadalupe* portrait.

I have Jesus Christ (see circle 1) and the Virgin Mary (see circle 2) and that's the symbol of my religion, my faith that helps me continue to be here [at WCU] and not give up. They are someone I look up to, and whenever I'm sad, lonely, or need any help, I pray. And I feel that it helps me spiritually and makes me want to continue [with my college education].

These artifacts explicitly allowed Única to maintain hope, confidence, and dedication in her everyday life during college. Moreover, they did not solely represent a religion, but a practice that Única learned from her parents: to turn to hope, love, and a higher being for resilience when faced with hardship. The display of these meaningful artifacts allowed Única to deploy positivity/optimism when she experienced feelings of loneliness and depression. As discussed in Chapter 4, the women in this study had witnessed this practice from an early age, by watching their parents' approaches to coping and surviving difficulties. As a result, they

developed an asset-based resource and utilized this positivity/optimism throughout their educational careers in general, and during their first-year experiences specifically.

**Karina.** Like Única, Karina also made a conscious decision to bring a religious symbol to college, as captured in Figure 6.11. Next to the dining table, Karina drew attention to a religious frame and a quote situated underneath it.



Figure 6.11. Karina's *La Cena* frame.

That *cuadro* [framed picture], I recently took it from my mom. It's *La Cena* [The Last Supper]. She had it for a long time. She brought it from Mexico. It means a lot to me. I told her I wanted *La Cena* [The Last Supper] right by where we eat—*nos presionamos* [we bless ourselves]—we eat and thank God for the food [on the table]. My mom didn't mind giving it to me. The quote we also recently got it, "As for me and my house, we serve the Lord." So that's like us. For us three [referring to her husband, son, and herself], we serve the Lord. It [the frame] represents unity and family.

In earlier chapters I described how Karina expressed her faith as an important resource in her life. In her narrative above, she acknowledged that the frame meant a lot to her. She purposefully placed it in her eating area to represent not only how Karina gained fortitude



through her spirituality, but also how she was thankful for everything she had been able to accomplish. Her accomplishments strengthened her faith and reinforced the hope and trust she placed in God. The *La Cena* frame reminded Karina about the importance of deploying her positivity/optimism.

As discussed in Chapter 5, Karina consciously maintained a positive mindset after seeing what her parents went through. Similar to the other women in this study, Karina's familial roots came from struggles, hardships, and sacrifices, and with the help of her faith, she was able to better deal with challenging situations. These religious artifacts reminded her to deploy her positivity/optimism—an asset-based resource—that enabled her exercise her faith during her first year in college.

### **Work Ethic**

Work ethic refers to the act of acknowledging the need to work hard to persist in the American educational pipeline. For all seven participants, artifacts associated with their families served to exercise their work ethic in educational settings. For these women, drawing upon meaningful artifacts like photos and collages provided the basis for proactive behavior when they experienced negative stimuli like exhaustion, loneliness, or another type of psychological barrier. By affording them the emotional fortitude to work harder in the face of adversity, meaningful artifacts helped them persist through their first year in college.

**Elia.** Similar to Victoria, Elia's photos were located on her desk (Figure 6.12). These photographs reminded Elia that she must also work hard, not through physical labor like her family had, but through academic persistence and achievement.

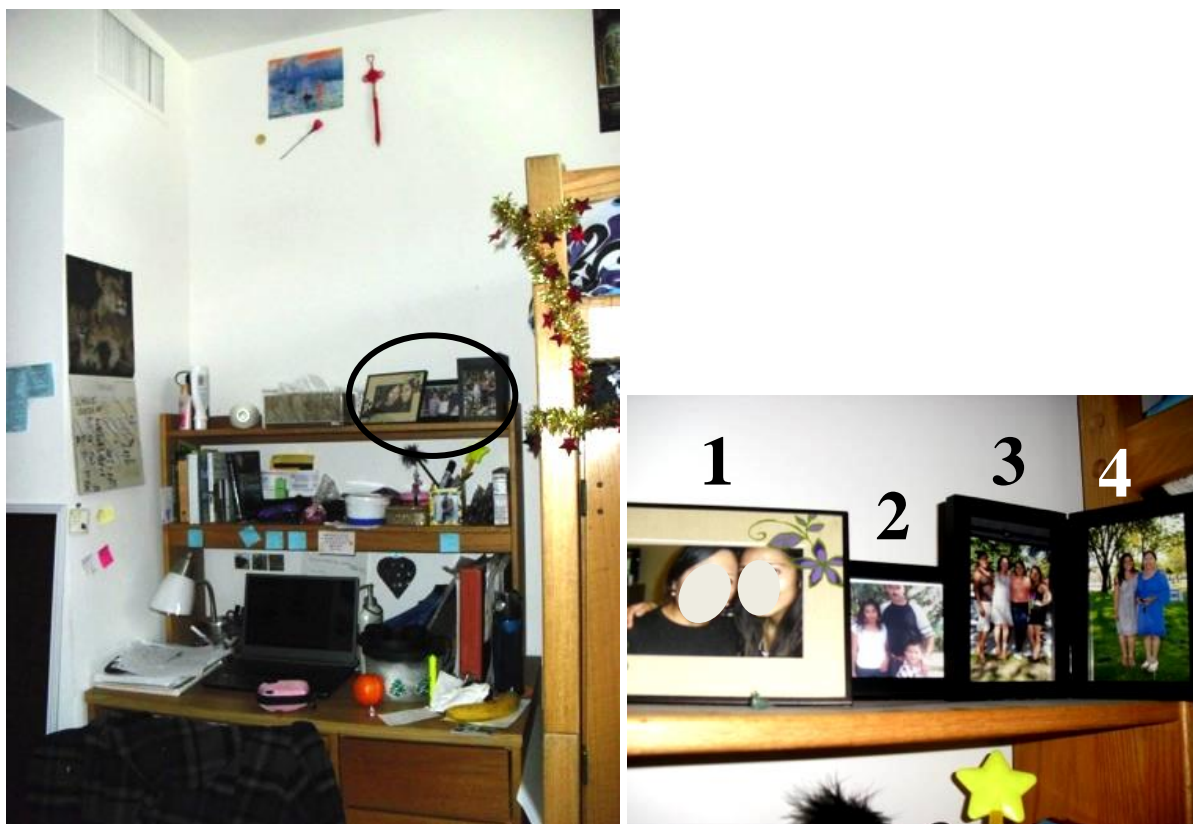


Figure 6.12. Elia's desk with framed family photographs.

That's me and my mom (see frame 1). That's my dad and half siblings (see frame 2). I have my little brothers and my little sister there. That's my friends (see frame 3), and then me and my mom [again] (see frame 4). This is my high school celebration.<sup>21</sup> ...Their faces help me go on when I feel tired. I know they've worked hard their entire lives, now it is my turn [to work hard in my academics].

The above excerpt is an excellent illustration of how asset-based resources are not separate entities. As I discussed in Chapter 4, Elia consciously acknowledged her family's work ethic and understood that she too needed to work hard. Through the display of her family photographs, Elia deployed her motivation, which enabled her to "go on" when she felt "tired." She clearly acknowledged that her family's faces served as a source of energy in her everyday

<sup>21</sup> "[My mom] made me [this celebration] for [graduating] high school and for mostly getting into [WCU], but we just said it was a high school celebration. [The celebration] was at the park. We had tacos. And my friends bought me a piñata, so that was a nice surprise. We really don't talk to our family members, but a few uncles and aunts from my mother and father's side were there, but mostly [there] were my mom's co-workers and my friends. But that day it was really special for me. We never really celebrated my birthdays, and that was one of the first times that we actually had a celebration where we invited people, and that was pretty fun. And I'm really thankful that she [my mom] did that, she worked hard for that [to make the celebration happen]."

life. Her knowledge of her ancestors' work ethic in the fields functioned as motivation, enabling her to persist in educational settings.

Artifacts in Elia's and the other women's rooms helped them cope with the demands of college life. They not only represented past knowledge and experiences that inspired motivation, but also provided them with energy to work hard and counteract the negative stimuli occurring in their daily lives at WCU.

### **Connect with Family**

Several scholars have documented that students of color report a need to remain connected to important aspects of their lives, like family and culture, to successfully adjust to college life (e.g., Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2006) and to persist to a degree (e.g., Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). In this study, the women found it imperative to find strategies to maintain their connections with their families, whether in person, by visiting family back home, or by having family visit them on campus. They also remained connected by drawing on technology to make phone calls/texts, interact on Facebook, or speak via Skype. Strategies to remain connected with their families further bolstered the ability of these women to deploy their asset-based resources of motivation, pride, and positivity/optimism.

For the women in this study, maintaining strong family relationships while in college helped them successfully adjust to college life (for examples, see Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2006). Students' verbal and physical connections are important to examine, as these actions help call into question those of previous scholars (e.g., Tinto, 1993) who have suggested that undergraduates must separate themselves both physically and emotionally from their families and pre-college communities in order to fully immerse themselves in college life and take the first steps toward independence. Claims in favor of this separation argue that students must adopt the institution's dominant cultural norms in order to

succeed, be satisfied, and persist academically. However, for these seven women, this was not the case. Their pre-college relationships and familial experiences provided emotional support for their persistence in a new educational and social setting.

Other scholars have documented that students of color report a need to remain connected to parents and other familial, cultural, and social support networks to persist in college (see, for example, Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2005, 2006). All seven women drew on familial connections to deploy asset-based resources, however, how they maintained these connections varied. The resources deployed through this strategy included motivation, pride, and positivity/optimism. For illustration purposes, the following subsections are divided by theme to highlight each asset-based resource that was deployed when maintaining a connection with family. Regardless of the strategy, however, all women acknowledged the importance of verbally and physically maintaining that connection with their families, when possible.

### **Motivation**

Technology—including phone calls, texting, and social media—helped the women in this study maintain strong familial relationships. Furthermore, they acknowledged the importance of staying physically connected to their families. Motivation was deployed regardless of the specific strategy for connecting. Única served as a great example, since she lived the furthest from WCU, and she found social media and a webcam useful in staying connected with family.

**Única.** Única used Facebook not only to have conversations, but also for the opportunity to see her family online:

When I talk to them on the phone or we webcam, they bring joy into me, happiness. Since I knew I was far [from home]—I knew I wouldn't be able to go every weekend like my other peers—I would webcam with them [my family] so that's something cool about technology. I would see them and we would talk, and feel their encouragements, and I will feel better.

Única shared that her family positively influenced her emotional well-being when she connected with them through Facebook and or videoconferencing. She used a social networking website as a strategy to stay connected with her family, and this allowed her to strengthen her motivation to persist.

### **Familial, Ethnic, and Cultural Pride**

Staying physically connected with their families throughout their first year also served as a strategy to deploy familial, ethnic, and cultural pride. The extent to which the women visited their homes or had family visit them on campus varied. Victoria, Rosie, and Karina acknowledged going home regularly and whenever possible. Elizabeth and Victoria reported visiting their families almost every weekend. Elia, on the other hand, preferred that her mother visit her on campus, but she visited her mother at home on special holidays like Mother's Day. Jessica reported that financial constraints prevented her from visiting her family often, but she did so when possible. Nonetheless, all women reported the importance of remaining physically connected with their families while in college. Victoria and Elizabeth serve as two strong examples.

**Victoria.** Victoria vividly described ways in which her physical connections with family enabled her to deploy familial, ethnic, and cultural pride:

Going home gives me my culture back. Everything here [at WCU]—the places, the food, the people—are all so whitewashed. And when I go home, I get that Mexican-ness, through the feelings of my Mexican-styled parents, our home, our customs, our language, and all that, which seems to be lost here in [WCU]. Of course there are exceptions, but I go back home to be Mexican and remember that I'm Mexican and love being so.

Victoria stressed that important aspects of her life—her ethnicity, language, and food—would often get lost at her university. Indeed, scholars have suggested that the higher education pipeline was not historically designed with communities of color in mind (see Chapter 2). Victoria identified her university as being “whitewashed,” and she became conscious of losing

her identity as a student of Mexican heritage. As a result, she reported needing to maintain a physical connection with her family in order to maintain her “Mexican-ness,” which involved, according to Victoria, speaking Spanish, eating authentic Mexican food, and being around other Mexican people. Similar to the other women in this study, Victoria’s deployment of this asset-based resource—pride—through a connection to her family, ethnicity, and culture, enabled her to strengthen her educational resilience during her first year in college.

**Elizabeth.** Elizabeth offers another strong case that helps reveal how maintaining strong familial connections served as a strategy to deploy familial, ethnic, and cultural pride while in college:

I have a strong connection with my family and I feel that it’s very important that I’m there [present in my family’s life]. [When I visit], some of my cousins are like, “I would have stayed over there [at WCU].” [But] I preferred to spend time with them [my family] and not lose connection with the roots that made me. So I don’t want to lose contact with that [my roots], and I want to make sure that I’m updated, and I want to spend time with them [my family] too....So I think that’s unique [spending time with my family while in college].

Elizabeth referred to her family as “the roots that made” her, and said she has found it critical to stay connected to them. In other words, like the other participants in this study, Elizabeth was staying connected with her family history, familial-cultural assets, and familial resilience in college.

Some scholars (e.g., Tinto, 1993) might identify Elizabeth as *too* dependent on her family, defeating the purpose of college and limiting her college experiences by returning back to her prior college community. In reality, Elizabeth’s and the other women’s decisions to maintain connections to their communities, when possible, actually helped their persistence in college. As is evident in the cases presented thus far, maintaining strong family relationships while attending college can help students successfully adjust to college life (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2006).

## Positivity/Optimism

The women in this study also deployed positivity/optimism in order to persist. Throughout the academic year, all of the women called and/or texted back home, most often with their mothers. Rosie and Jessica provide concrete illustrations.

**Rosie.** Along with social networking websites, women like Rosie used texting to maintain their connections to family. Rosie often received motivational text messages, particularly from her mother. She explained:

I always get like these random—every other day, I’ll get a text [from my mom]—“Oh, love you *mija*.<sup>22</sup> Hope your day goes good”—things like that. Before I would be, “Okay, thanks” (laughs). But now I would be, “Okay, thanks” and I will carry out a [written] conversation. And when [I am] at my lowest, those [texts] help—or before a midterm or after a midterm, those [texts] are just nice.

Rosie appreciated her mother’s motivational texts since, as described in Chapter 4, her mother often told Rosie not to take her education for granted. For the women in this study, texting was a convenient and manageable strategy to maintain communication with their families as they simultaneously dealt with the demands of college.

**Jessica.** Even Jessica, whose family had been separated, acknowledged the importance of visiting her family in Mexico whenever possible. Figure 6.13 shows her together with family members during one of those visits.

---

<sup>22</sup> *Mija* is short for “*mi hija*” and an endearing way of saying “my daughter.”



*Figure 6.13.* Jessica visits family in Mexico.

This was a time that I went to go visit them [my family in Mexico]. Going home, it's a constant reminder that—if you stay here at [WCU] for too long, without going home, it does affect you. You start forgetting about your families and why you are here....My mom would pay for me [to visit them in Mexico], and I feel that it has helped me a lot just to go back home, regardless of how much it costs, because I see them struggling and it reminds me of why I'm doing everything I'm doing. Why I study so hard to do well in my classes.

Similar to Victoria, Jessica had become conscious of losing important aspects of her life at WCU. Staying connected with her family served as a strategy to remind her of why she was there. When Jessica communicated with her mother, she was reminded of why she was residing in the United States and living without those closest to her: “to get an education.” When she visited her family in Mexico, she experienced the struggles that they were living every day of their lives. Jessica was honest about the fact that being in a privileged space like WCU had influenced her to forget, both about her family and why she was pursuing a college education. For this reason, she found it important to see her family whenever possible.



Furthermore, Jessica felt that being physically close to her family allowed her to garner strength from her mother's positivity: "She [my mom] is just so positive and I feel that's a reason why I'm so positive, like even in the most negative, worst scenario, I always find something positive about it." For the women in this study, familial connections such as these have facilitated successful adjustment to college life and persistence in the educational pipeline (see also Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Melendez & Melendez, 2010; Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2006; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

### **Join Student Organizations**

In addition to displaying meaningful artifacts and maintaining connections with their families, these women also found strategies to deploy asset-based resources through participation in student organizations. Education scholars have highlighted student organizations that include Latina/o-based sororities (e.g., Moreno & Banuelos, 2013) and cultural dance groups (e.g., McClain, 2004) as vital to the retention and academic success of students of color in higher education. Six of the seven participants in this study joined a student organization during the first year of college. The resources deployed through this strategy included motivation and pride. Joining a student organization (or not) was based upon their respective circumstances. For example, Karina entered college with existing responsibilities as a mother and wife, and decided to minimize additional commitments that included joining student organizations during her first year in college.

For many of the women in this study, joining student organizations helped relieve some of the emptiness they felt because they did not have family on campus. Creating familial connections on campus was more important to those who reported having limited connections with their families while in college than it was to those who perceived having more extensive connections with their families. These women cultivated *chosen* families on campus—persons

who were not biologically or legally related, but with whom they developed close meaningful connections (e.g., friends and mentors). These chosen families complemented the notion of family and what it represented in the lives of these women. The following subsections are divided by theme to highlight the asset-based resources that were deployed when the women joined student organizations.

### **Motivation**

Six of the seven women deployed their motivation or desire to excel academically by building relationships through participation in student organizations.

**Jessica.** Jessica identified an organization that had allowed her to deploy her asset-based resource of motivation. Taking into account that Jessica's family was separated due to deportation, she sought sisterhood offered through a sorority to acquire a sense of family and support on campus. She felt that joining a Latina sorority would afford her the strongest sense of family in higher education. Thus, this became Jessica's chosen family to help fuel her motivation during her first year in college.

Jessica explained that her affiliation with the sorority was not planned: "It wasn't something that I was, 'Oh, I'm going to be in a sorority [once I start college].' It just happened to be that [I became interested]. I just heard about it. I was wondering, 'What if?' or 'Should I?'"

She explained further:

I really wanted to have somewhere to go to—to have a group of friends, a group of girls. I never had an older sister and I wanted an older sister. I always wanted an older brother or an older sister to take care of me, or to tell me—just a mentor, in general. But I also want to be an individual and learn more, as a leader. That's another reason why, [I chose] sisterhood. As of now, it's been good.

Greek life, in general, has served as an official space in higher education that has been inclusive toward Jessica and promoted a sense of family and support.

There is an emerging body of literature that discusses how sororities help students from different backgrounds transition to college (e.g., Sanchez, 2011). Moreno and Banuelos (2013) explored how Latina/o Greek sorority and fraternity involvement influenced Latina/o college student college transition and success: “[S]tudents gained peer support and motivation upon joining Latina/o-based sororities and fraternities and these factors were essential to the retention and success of the participants” (p. 113). They suggested the need for institutional support for Latina/o college students and more research on Latina/o college students involved in Latina/o sororities and fraternities. Although these scholars suggested that Latina/o sororities and fraternities provided a sense of belonging on campus, I argue that Jessica used her participation in a sorority as a strategy to deploy aspects of her asset-based resources, most notably motivation. Her engagement with her chosen family on campus allowed her to supplement important aspects of her life that had been ripped away by politics and policies that separated her from her parents and younger siblings.

### **Familial, Ethnic, and Cultural Pride**

Besides deploying their motivation, the women’s decisions to join student groups also helped them deploy familial, ethnic, and cultural pride. Rosie and Única specifically identified ballet *Folklórico*, a student organization that performs Mexican folkloric dances, as a meaningful entity on campus.

**Rosie.** Rosie identified ballet *Folklórico* as an opportunity to stay connected with her roots, fulfill her personal passion for dance, and reduce her level of stress while in college (Figure 6.14).



*Figure 6.14.* Rosie before her ballet *Folklórico* dance performance.

[Participating in *Folklórico*], it's a way where I can connect to my roots, where dancing always helps me—it's like a stress reliever and dancing is a part of me. I love to dance. I love to learn new dances. It's a way of fulfilling myself. And now that I can be in a group, I feel it's staying [true] to what I'm passionate about. And when I go to practice, you relieve yourself from all the stress from the week. That's something I look forward to.

Rosie joined ballet *Folklórico* to stay connected to her culture through musical and dance traditions, and deploy her familial, ethnic, and cultural pride. And, as she highlighted, joining this group and participating in their practice sessions allowed her to relieve stress.

A small body of literature has examined the influence of cultural dance in college student retention. McClain (2004) argued for folklore dance groups as learning environments for those who participate in them, and “make [their] community knowledge visible, providing a way for students to see themselves as legitimate members of the school community” (p. 39).

Furthermore, cultural dance has also been shown to improve health (see, for example, Olvera, 2008).

### **Connect with Academic Departments and Student Service Programs**

All seven participants in this study connected with at least one academic department or student service programs as a strategy to deploy various aspects of their asset-based resources. The resources deployed through this strategy included motivation, aspirations, pride, and work ethic.

All seven participants acknowledged WCU's retention center, referred to here as the Committed to Achievement Program (CAP),<sup>23</sup> as providing the most meaningful student services for them on campus. CAP hosted an academically intensive summer program in which all seven women participated prior to starting the official academic year. Universities commonly implement summer bridge programs to help increase student retention rates by providing students the opportunity for academic and social acclimation to the institution (Maggio, White, Molstad, & Kher, 2005). According to Strayhorn (2011), summer bridge programs are often designed to help retain underrepresented students in university settings, including students of color and first-generation college students. A significant body of literature on these programs addresses best practices (for example, Michael, Dickson, Ryan, & Koefer, 2010) and the influences of summer programming on student achievement and retention (Maggio, White, Molstad, & Kher, 2005).

Two of the seven women also acknowledged the Chicana/o Studies academic department as an important formal entity on campus. Scholars have suggested the benefits of enrolling in Chicana/o studies courses on students' retention and graduation rates (e.g., Hurtado, 2005).

---

<sup>23</sup> Committed to Achievement Program (CAP) is a university-based student diversity program that caters to the academic success of underrepresented undergraduates through resources and programming.

The women in this study drew upon these on campus resources because involvement enabled them to deploy asset-based resources. The following sections are divided by theme to highlight the range of specific resources that the women deployed.

### **Motivation**

All of the women acknowledged their experiences with CAP and the relationships they made during the rigorous seven-week academic residential summer program. Elia serves as a strong exemplar.

**Elia.** Elia’s engagement with CAP allowed her to deploy motivation during her first-year experiences. She shared a photo to acknowledge memories that emerged from her engagement with the program, which was located at Heritage Hall (Figure 6.15).



*Figure 6.15.* Committed to Achievement Program (CAP) located at Heritage Hall.

Since I was in the Summer Program (SP), and since the people were so amazing, and I made so many friends, the memories that I have from SP helped me make this [Heritage Hall] a home. Every time I walked by Heritage Hall, I’m like “that’s where this and that [happened].” Or even when I pass the stairs, I’m like, “Oh, I remember when we were going up those stairs and my friends were there and I was waving up to them.” A lot of [memorable] things [happened] here on

campus that really stood out to me during SP. I still see it [mentally] and am like, “Oh, yeah” [when I recall those memories]. So it makes it feel like a home.

Heritage Hall is home to CAP and it is where many resources are offered to help students like Elia excel academically. As a result of her positive experiences with the program, Elia identified Heritage Hall as a “home” on campus and this space has come to represent resilience to her. The relationships she cultivated there have given her the support she has needed to persist. Moreover, she gained comfort knowing that the program was there to help and support her. Ultimately, CAP allowed Elia to build a sense of belonging at the university because she understood that it served as a resource, referral, and information center for students like herself at WCU. Moreover, her engagement helped create memorable connections at Heritage Hall, and these have accumulated throughout the year, allowing her to deploy motivation.

### **Aspirations**

The women also used their connections with academic departments and/or student service programs to deploy aspirations. At the time of this study, Rosie and Única were the only participants enrolled in Chicana/o Studies courses. Rosie is a good example of why ethnic studies departments are valuable within university settings.

**Rosie.** Rosie described a bulletin board that she passes in the hallway of the Chicana/o Studies Department, which has allowed her to deploy her aspirations as she thinks of the possibilities of graduate education:

When I get there [to the Chicana/o Studies floor], you see the red sign that reads the Chicano Studies Department way over there [down the hall]—it’s just makes you feel good. You feel good as you pass a bulletin with pictures, the [heading] says something like Ph.D. candidates, and you see the Ph.D. candidates for the Chicano Studies major, and I’m like, “Aw, that might be me someday.” Then you cross and you see the professors’ names or the TAs, *siento* [I feel] like welcoming, like good [inspiring] people [are in this department].

As Rosie described the profiles of Ph.D. candidates, professors, and TAs, she also described her aspiration to pursue a doctoral degree. This aspiration to continue with her education was

motivated by exposure to by these other individuals. She had come to know this space as a “welcoming” place because it conveyed the possibility and realness of academic success for people who share her cultural heritage and/or academic interests. As I discuss in the following section, the “good people” that Rosie referred to include a student affairs officer named Eileen, who provided both Rosie and Única with exceptional guidance, not only with Chicana/o Studies major/minor decisions but also with other academic decisions.

### **Familial, Ethnic, and Cultural Pride**

The women’s connections with academic departments and student service programs allowed them to deploy familial, ethnic, and cultural pride. Rosie and Única both described a woman named Eileen, a representative of the Chicana/o Studies Department, who has provided excellent academic guidance. They both also found the Chicana/o Studies Department to be an asset in itself. Both found the content of class offerings empowering, and Rosie valued visiting the Chicana/o Library, which was filled with literature on Chicana/o history. These various aspects of the department—Eileen, their classes, and the library—helped the women deploy familial, ethnic, and cultural pride during their first-year experiences. I continue with Rosie as an example.

**Rosie.** Rosie clearly shared her admiration of the large amount of Chicana/o literature available (Figure 6.16). Her exposure to extensive Chicana/o literature complemented her existing pride and curiosity. She shared her passion for Chicana/o/Latina/o issues and that she aspires to learn more about her history.





Figure 6.16. Rosie works at the Chicano library.

I work in the Chicano Library as a helper. I really like it. I'm archiving, so I see magazines of *mujeres* [women] or Chicanos from the 80s, or whatever, and it's just "WOW" you know [empowering]. I sometimes wish it would be the Chicana/o Studies library [instead of the Chicano Library] to acknowledge the empowering women who also deserve credit...[Rosie points to some books.] Women in politics, immigration, politics. The books are really interesting. [This library] It's like my history and what I really want to continue to look into [learning more about my history]. I'm really connected to the library.... This is my favorite space to be in between [the aisles]... because the books in these shelves nurturally hold my passions; topics about females, politics, education, and the arts among Chicanos and the greater Latino population.

There is a growing body of literature examining the unique influence of Chicana/o Studies on student retention and graduation rates (see, for examples, Hurtado, 2005; Nuñez, 2011; Sleeter, 2011; Salcedo, 2013). Some of these findings reveal a transformation of students' identities and political consciousness when they are exposed to Chicana/o studies courses

(Hurtado, 2005). More specifically, three overlapping effects on students have been identified as a result of enrolling in ethnic-related courses: academic engagement, academic achievement, and personal empowerment (Sleeter, 2011).

Salcedo's (2013) dissertation found that majoring in Chicana/o Studies helped participants stay in college and graduate from a California State University. Nuñez (2011) examined first-generation Latina/o students' perspectives on Chicana/o studies, and found that participants identified this specific academic department as part of their college transition. Finally, Chicana/o studies have been identified by scholars as academic counterspaces that allow underrepresented students in higher education to foster their own learning in a nurturing and supportive environment where their experiences are validated and viewed as important knowledge (Nuñez, 2011; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998).

Rosie and Única came to think of Eileen as an asset and resource for her extraordinary guidance. In fact, Rosie drew attention to Eileen's office because she perceived it as filled with spirit (Figure 6.17).



Figure 6.17. Eileen's office, Chicana/o Studies Department.

[Eileen's office is another space on campus that I like]...just the environment of being in that office, it lifts your spirit, seeing all the little *detallitos* [details displayed in Eileen's office]. That day she had *borrachitos* [Mexican candy] on *la mesa* [the table] (see circle 1). They're these little candies from Mexico. *Ese dia* [that day] I went in and she's like, "*Quieres un borrachitos?*" [Would you like a *borrachitos*, a Mexican candy?] And I am like, "*Que es eso?*" [What's that?], because I never tried one before. And then she's like, "Oh, *no-no-no. Tiene alcohol*" [They have alcohol] "*Poquito* [A little]. *Mejor no* [Maybe not]" (laughs). Or, like the posters—I think there's some of *Che Guevara*. And sometimes it's messy like back at home. Even the color, not just white walls, it's green [makes her office feel like a home].

Rosie's engagement with the Chicana/o Studies Department helped her recognize a student affairs officer who clearly acknowledged and honored her familial, ethnic, and cultural pride through the display of various cultural artifacts in the office. Rosie reported visiting Eileen frequently to discuss both academic and non-academic concerns. She drew attention to the presence of Mexican candy, posters of activist leaders, and the paint on the walls, which she felt

“lifts your spirit.” In Rosie’s assessment, Eileen and her office resonated with important familial, ethnic, and cultural aspects of Rosie’s life. Ultimately, the office represented a home-like environment.

### **Work Ethic**

Retention and resource centers on campus also allowed these women to deploy their work ethic during their first-year experiences. Specifically, Karina and Jessica connected with WCU’s Resource Center (WRC), which was designed to help student populations in need of resources and support, including students with dependents and foster youth. Karina utilized the WRC to help deal with financial hardships. Furthermore, resources like the school’s Committed to Achievement Program (CAP), aside from hosting the summer bridge program, offered tutoring sessions for selected courses throughout the academic year. All seven women acknowledged their connection with CAP’s tutoring. CAP honored the students’ various backgrounds and encouraged them to take advantage of their tutoring services, regardless of their circumstances. I draw upon Karina as an example of how work ethic as an asset-based resource was deployed through involvement with CAP.

**Karina.** Because CAP sought to support the academic success of underrepresented undergraduates through resources and programming, Karina, a student-parent, was able to deploy her work ethic while fulfilling parental obligations and dealing with time constraints. She felt comfortable bringing her son with her when childcare was not available, as seen in Figure 6.18: “This one [photo], this was during finals week. I had to bring him for one of my [tutoring sessions]. And that’s at [Heritage Hall].”



*Figure 6.18.* Karina and son before a tutoring session.

As noted, CAP respected students' diverse backgrounds and served as a supportive environment. Karina acknowledged that the tutor was sensitive to her circumstances and supportive of her decisions. Instead of ignoring Karina's son when he randomly ran off, the tutor also cared for him: "I was in the session and the tutor had to run after him at one point, because I was typing and then he ran." Karina was able to participate in her tutoring session and to prepare for her final exam, even when childcare was not secure. Her participation in the summer program helped identify CAP as a space on campus that supported students with dependents. Thus, she connected with the WRC as a strategy to deploy her work ethic, regardless of

unexpected day-to-day circumstances. Overall, the women's connections with various departments were crucial to their personal, academic, and professional development. These connections served as a strategy to deploy their set of asset-based resources—motivation, aspiration, pride and work ethic.

### **Locate Meaningful Unofficial Spaces**

Besides official resource centers on campus, study participants also identified unofficial spaces on and off campus to help deploy asset-based resources. Unlike official spaces, which were designed to influence students' personal, academic, and/or professional development, unofficial spaces were arguably not designed with this intention. Nevertheless, they have played a meaningful role in students' personal development. Similar to the display of meaningful artifacts, higher education research rarely examines the significance of the unofficial spaces students identify as meaningful, nor does it examine how these spaces foster educational resilience and persistence.

Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora (2000) encouraged us to “conduct culturally and racially based studies [to] uncover new variables...that can offer insightful and meaningful findings to transform institutional structures that preclude academic success [and college life satisfaction] for minority students” (p. 143). Thus, in this section, I examine the women's strategies to locate meaningful *unofficial* spaces. Six of the seven participants explicitly identified such spaces, both on and off campus, as a strategy to deploy various aspects of their asset-based resources. The resources deployed through this strategy included motivation, aspirations, pride, positivity/optimism and work ethic. The following subsections are divided by theme to highlight the asset-based resources that were deployed in this way.

## Motivation

Elia and Rosie serve as strong exemplars of the deployment of motivation through unofficial spaces. More specifically, they both found specific artwork on campus, and although each applied meaning differently to the work, they both deployed motivation as a result of their connection with it.

**Elia.** Elia identified a standing woman statue and shared her own interpretation (Figure 6.19).



*Figure 6.19.* Standing woman statue.

One day, I noticed one of the sculptures, of this woman. She is naked and she is standing. She seems really strong and I'm like, "Oh, that's a statement. That's called an artistic statement." For one thing, she was defiant enough to be naked. And another, she seemed to resemble a strong woman from the past because of her body type. She wasn't thin. She wasn't a model. She wasn't exactly beautiful from the face. That to me kind of tells a tale of a woman maybe from the past, from ancient times, when they had to be strong. You couldn't worry about how you look like because you had to fight off animals or build a house.

Using the standing woman statue, Elia shielded herself from stereotypes regarding modern day perceptions of women—prioritizing physical beauty—and deployed her motivation by remembering her priorities at WCU:

In a way, I felt a connection with her [the standing woman statue]. The statue made me feel less obligated to fix my hair up or wear really nice clothes. As I mentioned in another interview, I feel like I look really burned out. I don't always fix my hair in the mornings or wear the nicest outfits, but that is okay. The statue helped me realize that my appearance is not worth as much as my [positive] attitude, confidence, and way of carrying myself [with respect]. In essence, my priority at [WCU] is to study. Elia used the standing woman statue to deploy motivation. She consciously

acknowledged that it helped her realize that she possessed valuable characteristics, including her positive attitude. Her strategy to connect with unofficial spaces on campus helped her eliminate negative perceptions about her appearance, which may not have mirrored society's expectations for women. Hence, Elia remembered that she was at WCU to study, and, as we learned in Chapter 4, to ultimately help her mother and herself overcome financial hardship hardships and sacrifices.

**Rosie.** Rosie also shared how artwork helped her deploy motivation. Unlike Elia, who identified a human-like statue, Rosie drew attention to a sculpture with nested spiral circles, as seen in Figure 6.20. This artifact enabled Rosie to undergo self-reflection.





*Figure 6.20.* Spiral circles sculpture.

That's just my favorite sculpture. It's behind [a well-known building at WCU]. It's not next to the rest of the sculptures, but I like it because it's a spiral and it reminds me of the universe—coming back to the center—just reflection [about myself] when I see it. [I reflect about] just the way I am as a person. Maybe I'll be too carried away with studying and I forget about friends. Or maybe I haven't talked to my family in a while. [The sculpture] make[s] me think about my day when I pass [by it].

Here, Rosie described getting so carried away with her studies that she forgot about important individuals in her life. She consciously identified the sculpture as a friendly reminder to bring her back to what was ultimately most important. This self-reflection allowed her to acknowledge important people in her life, especially her family. Applying this meaning to the sculpture enabled Rosie to deploy her desire to maintain a connection with her family. The thought of family and the undying support she received from those who care for her contributed to her motivation to excel academically. As noted earlier in this chapter, her mother provided

motivational texts that Rosie found encouraging. Rosie recognized the value of these types of connections when dealing with the demands of college.

### **Aspirations**

Each woman found ways to deploy aspirations through meaningful unofficial spaces. Elia serves as a useful exemplar of how aspirations can be deployed through the identification of meaningful unofficial spaces. She shared a space that enabled her to persist through her first year in college.

**Elia.** Although a sunset is not a “space,” per se, Elia expressed that a snapshot of a sunset reminded her of the importance of not taking her good fortune for granted as she journeyed through her college education (Figure 6.21).



*Figure 6.21.* Sunset in multiple social contexts.

So, as I have mentioned before, I really like sunsets. [And I took this picture] because, when I was younger, we didn't have a car until I was like seven, which is pretty good. So we would walk everywhere, and I just remember that we would be walking in the evening and the sun would be setting. In contrast to this, like

I'm experiencing a beautiful sunset, but in such a different context. And it kind of reminds me that I just can't take everything for granted. I mean I'm here [in college], but I have not met my goal yet [to earn a college degree and be the first in my family to obtain a college degree]. So I can't or shouldn't slack off. Not to get too comfortable because I might think that I don't have to work as hard.

Elia was clearly aware that, although she had entered higher education, she had not yet achieved her aspiration to be the first in her family to obtain a college degree. She understood that entering college was only the first step. Elia also deployed her work ethic, because she understood that she must continue to work hard throughout her time at WCU.

The sunset captured above, which helped Elia recall experiencing many sunsets with her mother when she was younger, also reminded her of her aspirations that included obtaining a college degree. Elia's aspirations were further strengthened when she witnessed her mother's excitement when she began her college career (Figure 6.22): “[This is my mom and] she is excited and she is jumping up and down. [This] picture made me feel like if my mom is excited then I [should be too]—it feels like home—I can actually live here [at WCU].”



*Figure.6.22.* Elia's mother excited about her daughter's college career.

Elia understood the importance of her persistence in the American educational pipeline because her educational attainment illuminates her appreciation of all the sacrifices, hardships, and struggles her ancestors and mother have endured for her to be at WCU (see Chapter 4). Similar to the other women in this study, Elia's pursuit of a college degree helped acknowledge her family history, familial-cultural assets, and familial resilience to overcome problems and fulfill obligations through these meaningful unofficial spaces, reinforcing her unity with her past, present, and future.

### **Familial, Ethnic, and Cultural Pride**

In these meaningful unofficial spaces, familial, ethnic, and cultural pride was also deployed by each woman in this study. Única demonstrated how she deployed her familial, ethnic, and cultural pride through the identification of meaningful unofficial spaces. Indeed, doing so enabled her to persist through her first year in college.

**Única.** Única lived the farthest from her hometown as compared to the other women. As a result of her limited geographical connection with family, she may have become more open and receptive to spaces on campus that allowed her to deploy familial, ethnic, and cultural pride. Thus, she identified more than one unofficial space that allowed her to deploy her familial, ethnic, and cultural pride (Figure 6.23).



Figure 6.23. *Frutero*.

This *frutero* [Fruit man] reminded me of Mexico (laughs). This is in [name of city where WCU is located] and they had a *frutero* selling fruit [salads] so it reminded me of *Mexicali*. Usually, when I was back home, we would go to *Mexicali* often to the doctor for different things, and we would eat *fruta* [fruit], so it reminded me when I would go to *Mexicali* and eat *fruta* [with my family]. In [city name], it was my first time seeing it. It just reminded me that I will soon be in Mexico this December. I'm going to visit family.

This was not the only unofficial space to which Única found a connection. She also looked to the landscape to be reminded of her hometown, as seen in Figure 6.24.



*Figure 6.24.* Palm trees, similar to date trees back home.

These remind me of [name of hometown] because it's primarily known for dates. I know that these are just palm trees and not dates, but we have them in our valley, a lot. [Date trees are similar to]...palm tree[s], but they give fruit. So [the palm trees] reminded me—even though it's not with the fruit—it reminds me of the valley, back home.

As described in Chapter 5, Única developed a strong connection with her community, which is home to a large population of undocumented immigrants and the demanding business of agriculture. As such, she aspired to be a social justice advocate for immigrant field workers and demand justice against deplorable work conditions that she and her parents experienced firsthand.

## Positivity/Optimism

Elizabeth, Única, and Karina offer valuable examples of how the women deployed their positivity/optimism through the identification of meaningful unofficial spaces, both on and off campus.

**Elizabeth.** Before college, Elizabeth regularly climbed onto the rooftop of her house to conduct self-reflection, which helped deploy her positivity/optimism. Once in college, she found it necessary to continue this practice. A friend introduced her to a specific place on campus where she could look out to the distance and relax. As shown in Figures 6.25, 6.26, and 6.27, the spot was located outside a building with extraordinary views of nature and the city. Elizabeth utilized this unofficial space on campus to specifically deploy positivity/optimism through self-reflections during her first-year experience. As she described it, “My friend took me [to the west side stairs of the Vista Center] after a [student] club brought her there. Sometimes, I just like to sit here and think to myself. It’s just doing more self-reflection.”



*Figure 6.25.*  
Stress-free zone.



*Figure 6.26.*  
View of the nature.



*Figure 6.27.*  
View of the city.

You feel how the breeze is kind of hitting you? It’s just so calming [for me]. And it [the breeze] tells me how everything is going to be okay. Everything is going to be fine, with everything there is [going on in my life], I’ll be fine (laughs). It calms me down. This is like a no stress zone (laughs). No reading, no [academics]—it’s just, relax (laughs). Sometimes, I start playing music and I just

start singing because—I like singing out loud because it’s so liberating. No one is going to judge me [here]. It’s only me and God. No one is going to judge me. No one is going to throw something at me (laughs) because “you suck.” [I listen to] whatever I feel for [or what I’m in] the mood for, or I feel that the lyrics are saying what I’m feeling. Usually it’s Catholic music, sometimes.... But [I like songs that] have double meaning or implied meanings. I like clean lyrics. I don’t only listen to Catholic music but also rock bands or alternative rock, or Spanish tune. I just tend to hear the lyrics [based on my mood]. So no one is here. It’s cool. [I usually come here] 15 [minutes] to half an hour. I used to do this at home [take the time to calm down and self-reflect]. I used to climb onto my roof, just to sit there, and lay there [admiring the stars].

Elizabeth found ways to keep in touch with her spiritual side that included taking the time to relax in a non-academic setting, connecting with God outside the traditional setting (e.g., church), and reflecting on her current situation with positivity/optimism. Thus, this unofficial space enabled Elizabeth to deploy positivity/optimism in college. Importantly, self-reflection has been found to have a positive effect on religious commitment (see, for example, Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011) and, as noted in Chapter 4, the parents of the women in this study have emphasized to their children the importance of maintaining their faith in both fortunate and challenging moments.

The women’s parents provided words of wisdom in the form of *consejos* that included to “be positive.” Elizabeth’s parents, in fact, encouraged religious practices and, as reported by Elizabeth, religion has played an important role in her life in general, and particularly during her first-year experiences. This strategy enabled Elizabeth to maintain a connection with God at this exclusive space on campus. In addition, this space enabled Elizabeth to reconnect with important aspects of her life—music, singing, and self-reflection. She reported the need to reconnect with herself, to get away from the stress of college, even if for just a short period of time. Sustaining her spiritual practices enabled Elizabeth to strengthen her well-being.

As a reminder, Elizabeth aspired to find a career in science, technology, engineering or mathematics (STEM) field. She described the competitiveness in her STEM-related courses.



Elizabeth learned to draw upon her asset-based resources. Furthermore, in a visit to Elizabeth's dorm room to inventory meaningful artifacts, she shared a few nature-related artifacts.

Elizabeth's connection with Mother Nature was therapeutic for her. Before college, Elizabeth implemented self-reflections on the rooftop of her house while admiring the stars. Elizabeth also shared gratefulness to the friend who shared this exclusive space on campus, enabling her to deploy her positivity/optimism, when needed.

**Única.** Única identified three unofficial spaces that enabled her to deploy her positivity/optimism. She drew attention to a recent rain storm as symbolic of the problems and difficulties in her life (Figure 6.28).



*Figure 6.28.* Calmness arrives after the rainstorm.

I took this picture when I got out of my gender studies class. I took it because I really don't like the rain but I like it afterwards. [I like it] because it's not the storm anymore—it's not the problem—[afterwards] it's more like a relief, the solution to the problem. So by having the dark clouds go away and brightening up the sky, it makes me feel good, like, "Okay, you can breathe now." There's this saying that goes, "Despues de la tormenta, viene la calma [After the storm,

comes calm].” So it’s kind of that allusion into [my life here at WCU] that there’s a problem, but there’s always a way out, even if it’s as hard as it can be.

Única related the storm to her life—it symbolized a problem. She understood that with persistence, there was “always a way out.” As examined in Chapter 4, Única learned about her parents’ resilient behavior when crossing the border and also witnessed firsthand the inhumane conditions under which they worked as fieldworkers. Única saw herself reflected in the weather, and just as the sun shines after a storm, she knew that calm would follow stormy moments in her own life. By connecting with nature, Única was able to deploy positivity/optimism as a means to help her overcome difficulties while at WCU.

Furthermore, Única also found it important to illustrate her appreciation for being a Gates Millennium Scholar, which allowed her to pursue a college education without the financial burden often incurred by first-generation college students. For example, she decided to capture a rainbow that emerged from the rainstorm and explained that it symbolized the good fortune she has had (Figure 6.29). In other words, regardless of the difficulties she had encountered in higher education, she trusted that solutions and better days would come her way.



*Figure 6.29.* Rainbow after the rain.

This is a rainbow at [well-known building at WCU] (laughs). It's beautiful and I took [the photo] because this rainbow represents my life—the opportunities—and, like I was saying, after the storm, there's opportunities. There's other ways that you can do in life to change whatever problem is going on. I'm a Millenium Gates Scholar, so those kind of opportunities that have helped me in my education. To know that I'm not alone in this journey. [The scholarship is] paying almost everything, so it's another support, like [I'm] not always worrying about money.

As a result of the prestigious scholarship, Única's college concerns did not involve financial hardships. Her scholarship made college more feasible and attainable. As a reminder, Única came from a low-income household and neither parent had a college degree. Although her older sisters earned college degrees, Única was the first in her family to pursue a college education at a competitive university. She was humble about her accomplishments and, in previous interviews, recognized God as blessing her with good fortune.

Although Única acknowledged her journey through higher education would not be easy, Figure 6.30 captures her resilience. She captured the image below to illustrate her strategy to “take one step at a time” during her college career.

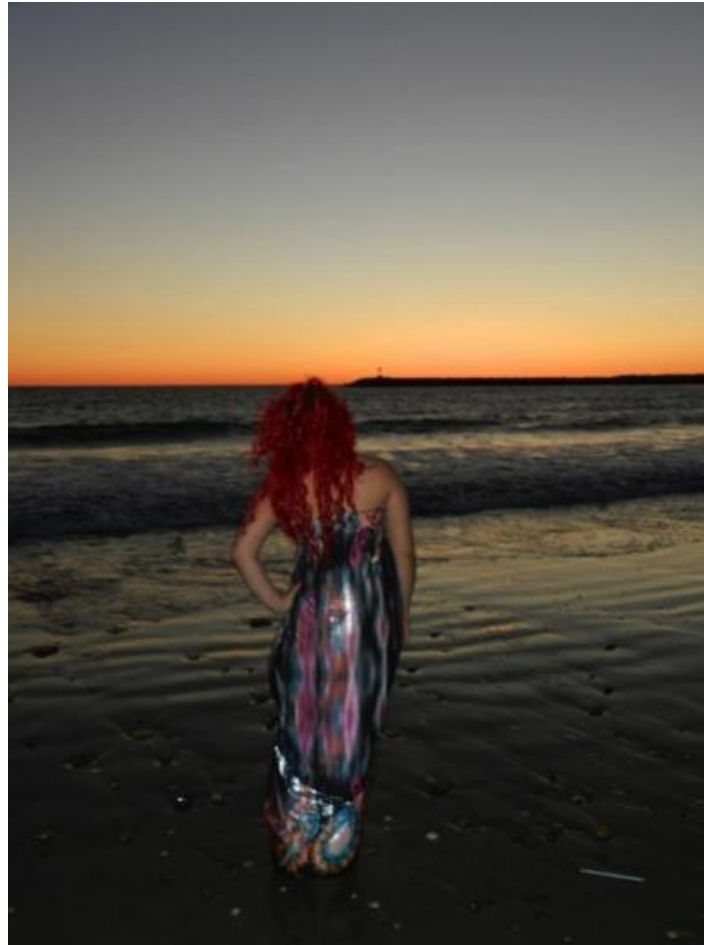


*Figure 6.30.* One step at a time.

This picture I took because I also liked how the sun looks after the rain, and the same thing that I have been talking about, especially with the steps. You reach the top, not with big steps, but with short steps. In my case, I'm not trying to get at the top [obtain a college degree] by jumping or running, but more so by taking short steps. It's going to be hard but it's going to...ensure that I get there.

The short steps that Única was referring to can be interpreted as including the various strategies discussed in this study (e.g., display of meaningful artifacts). These are significant steps she has taken to help deploy her asset-based resources. As a first-generation college student, Única often encountered doubtful thoughts about her ability to succeed in college. However, the three images she shared provide a glimpse into how she kept a positive perspective on her college experiences, regardless of the demands. (Chapter 7 will examine in greater depth the major challenges these women experienced during their first college year and how they dealt with them.)

**Karina.** Although not on campus, Karina also drew attention to a space that allowed her to deploy positivity/optimism. Karina was a student-parent, and her non-academic responsibilities may have limited her from successfully identifying spaces on campus that would otherwise have allowed her to deploy aspects of her asset-based resources. Thus, she identified the beach as a space where she could relax (Figure 6.31).



*Figure 6.31.* Karina at the beach.

That's me at the beach, a day that I just got away: me, my husband, and my son. We just went to walk at the beach and came back home (laughs). I was like, "Let's go to the beach." Yeah, just get away. I like the beach—it's relaxing [for me]. We went to [name of beach]....And I told [my husband] to take a picture of me, like if I'm going into the sea (laughs). [I wanted to take this picture because] the beach is just relaxing. It's like a never-ending thing. Sometimes I start thinking about life [and how it] may be hard, but there's all this nature. The

ocean amazes me, and even though I'm scared to swim in the ocean—I'm scared but it's all-amazing, the creation God did. And it's also a getaway [from college life] too, the ocean and going to the beach, and taking a walk, and putting my feet in the water.

Karina viewed her family trip to the beach as a getaway from college life, enabling her to relax. Although the beach was off campus, it was significant to her experience because she deployed positivity/optimism deliberately in this space. Although the trip lasted about two hours, this getaway helped Karina gain the energy she needed to deal with the demands of college by relaxing at the beach, while simultaneously spending quality time with her son and husband. In a previous interview, Karina shared how important it was for her to learn to balance her academics and family during college. In high school, Karina explained, one never outweighed the other. She acknowledged and thanked her supportive husband who postponed his own education to help care for their son, while she graduated from high school and continued with postsecondary education.

Similar to Rosie and Elizabeth, who also identified spaces that enabled them to carry out self-reflection, Karina found it important to reflect on her current situation. As a married student-parent whose dedication and determination enabled her to enroll at a competitive university, regardless of her teen-mother status in high school, Karina understood that to graduate from high school as well as enroll in college would have been more challenging without the support of her husband and family. She acknowledged her fortunate situation and also identified her blessings as a result of God's destiny for her to pave the path for other teen mothers to follow.

### **Work Ethic**

These women's various on and off campus spaces enabled them to deploy the asset-based resources they found appropriate and necessary in educational settings. Victoria serves as a great example of how connections with meaningful spaces can enable the deployment of work ethic as

an asset-based resource. In Victoria's case, her connection with campus sculptures proved incredibly inspiring and ultimately encouraged a strong work ethic.

**Victoria.** Within a campus garden adorned with various sculptures, Victoria identified a particular statue of a woman, which she interpreted in a way that helped her deploy her asset-based resource of work ethic. Unlike the statue of a strong standing women identified by Elia, Victoria spoke of a woman squatted low to the ground (Figure 6.32), and explained, "The statue here really stood out to me. It's a struggle for her, but she's going to push through [that struggle]." For Victoria, the statue of the squatting woman symbolized her underrepresented status and experiences in higher education.



*Figure 6.32.* Squatting woman statue.

I feel like there's this aura of empowerment. She's rising [from struggle] and I feel like that's something that I have to do especially in a school where I noticed there's really not a lot of Hispanics in my classes, maybe there's sometimes one. I'm just like, "That's sad." I feel like I'm really proud to be here [at WCU], to be Hispanic, but I know that it's going to [be hard]. I have to excel, but I have to do a little more than most people, because we are so underrepresented here. I always walk by [the statue], so I kind of have to look at it (laughs), but when I do it's kind of nice [to see this woman], like, there she is [pushing through her struggles].

Victoria alluded to the struggle against racism, sexism, and other combined oppressive factors that students of color often experience in college, and that White students may not have to confront. Victoria felt that the statue projected the empowerment of a woman incessantly pushing against oppression to rise from struggle. It is within this interpretation that Victoria saw herself reflected as an underrepresented student of color on campus, and often the only student of color in her classes. She witnessed her parents' struggle against their own hardships and was aware of their sacrifices. Her experiences with obstacles influenced her interpretation of this art piece and converted it into a meaningful artifact that, through its "aura of empowerment," inspired her to deploy a strong work ethic. Identifying the strategies that help deploy students' asset-based resources is important to the women in this study because these resources helped them navigate their first-year experiences.

### **Sustain Religious/Spiritual Practices**

The women in this study deployed asset-based resources through religious/spiritual practices, which included prayer and attending mass. All seven women, to some extent, exercised some sort of religious/spiritual practice to help deploy aspects of their asset-based resources. Taking into account the varied levels of religious attachment and affiliation among participants, in this section I discuss the role that spirituality played in their lives to help deploy asset-based resources during their first year. The resources deployed through this strategy include motivation and positivity/optimism.

In this study, spirituality is defined as "a source of connection that brings faith, hope, peace, and empowerment, [serving as] a dynamic expression of ourselves that gives shape to, and is shaped by, who we really are" (Astin et al., 2011, pp. 4-5). For these women, exercising spirituality consisted of three beneficial outcomes: (a) maintaining positivity and clarity to ensure a sense of peace in their higher education; (b) receiving direction and strength to help them move



towards graduation once clarity was achieved; and (c) connecting spiritually with celestial beings or late relatives to help them make sense of fortunate and challenging situations.

Universities as organizations have devoted limited attention to students' spiritual development, despite the fact that we have learned that during their careers in higher education "students are searching for deeper meaning in their lives, looking for ways to cultivate their inner selves, seeking to be compassionate and charitable, and clarifying how they feel about the many issues confronting their society and the global community" (Astin et al., 2011, pp. 3–4). Often, scholars associate spirituality with religion and assume that spirituality has no place in the academic environment. Astin et al. (2011) found, however, that "while students' level of religious engagement declines somewhat during college, their spirituality shows substantial growth" (p 10). They highlighted a few college outcomes of increased spirituality among college students: "academic performance, psychological well-being, leadership, development, and satisfaction with college" (p. 10). In this study, by connecting with their spirituality, the women drew upon prayers and church attendance to preserve their spirituality and emotional and psychological health during their first-year experiences.

The women engaged in pre-college religious/spiritual practices learned from their parents. By consciously continuing familial spiritual practices at the university, their persistence to overcome new challenges in their college transition was fortified. All of the participants expressed a belief that life is filled with obstacles that God ascribed to them with the purpose of making them stronger beings. In general, they framed their experiences of personal struggle and academic difficulty as spiritual tests from which they were meant to draw strength and resilience. They believed that as long as they exercised spirituality, challenging situations would make way for new possibilities. Although they all brought spiritual practices with them to campus, it is important to note that each exercised their spirituality in different ways.

Some participants viewed religious practices (e.g., prayer and attending mass) as the primary means for expressing spirituality; for others, formal religion played little or no part in their spiritual life. Única, Jessica, Karina, and Elizabeth discussed their spirituality in reference to particular religions and practices. Única, Karina, Elizabeth, and Rosie identified as Catholic, and Jessica identified as Christian. Victoria identified herself as “culturally religious.” Victoria and Elia did not mention a specific religious affiliation. Nonetheless, all of the participants indicated engaging in some type of spiritual practice, and this helped them develop meaning, purpose, and direction in their lives.

Furthermore, the seven women felt that despite not always attending church, praying every day, or performing traditional religious practices, their spirituality was ever present. As Karina explained, “I don’t go to church every Sunday, but religion is a big part of us,” referring to herself, her husband, and son. The women’s faith was not defined by the number of times they attended church or engaged in other religious practices, but whether their faith/spirituality was exercised on an everyday basis.

All seven women deployed prayers during their first-year experiences, whether institutional (e.g., reciting prayers such as “Hail Mary”) or personal (e.g., “God please guide me”). For the purposes of this study, prayers are discussed more generally as an intimate connection with a spiritual entity (e.g., God, a relative who has passed on, etc.) through verbal communication, regardless of prayer type. For these participants, prayer was exercised in their university housing and/or church. Table 6.3 provides an overview of the women’s spiritual practices over time.

Table 6.3

*Participants' Spiritual Practices Over Time*

	Prayer	Church Before College: Hometown	Church During College: Near Campus	Church During College: Hometown
Karina	✓	✓	<i>Off campus</i>	✓
Jessica	✓	✓	<i>Online</i>	✓
Única	✓	✓	✓	✓
Rosie	✓	✓	✓	✓
Elizabeth	✓	✓	✓	✓
Elia	✓			
Victoria	✓	✓		

Six of the seven women acknowledged going to mass with family or friends before college. Victoria attended church “once in a while, [but] very rarely.” She stated, “I’m more culturally religious. I believe in God but I don’t like to follow organized religion. I did my first communion and confirmation more for the cultural factor.” Jessica, on the other hand, said she attended church every Sunday. Elia was the only participant who reported never going to church, because she “was not raised with a strong religious presence.” She has, however, adapted certain aspects of religion: “I’m interested in the values religion teaches—[although] I don’t always agree [with some values]—but [I do believe] in the message of love they spread.” Like Victoria, who saw herself as culturally religious, Elia noted, “I also tend to participate in some religious activities that are strongly embedded in my culture—for example, on *Día de Los Muertos* [a cultural holiday among Mexican families when the lives and memories of the departed are remembered and celebrated], my mother and I set up an altar for the dead.”

All of the women adapted religious practices they felt would benefit them while negotiating and navigating their first year in college. Elia exemplifies how the women drew strength connecting with their spirituality to overcome the struggles associated with their first-year experiences in college. She expressed:

Although I do not go to church, I still believe in God [which means] believing that there is a larger power out there that created us and is taking care of us. I believe that he made us as souls and placed us here [on this world] to be good to one another, not simply out of fear of punishment, but out of compassion for each other.

Elia's connection to God has played a significant role in her life, translating into academic motivation and positivity. Her spirituality gave her hope for and faith in the future, as she trusted that God was looking over her as she navigated through the difficulties of her first year in college.

When they visited family, and when their schedules permitted, Elizabeth, Rosie, Jessica, Karina, and Única, attend their hometown churches. Moreover, Elizabeth and Jessica explicitly shared missing their connection with their hometown church as part of their daily routine with their families. For these women, such connection to the church served as another strategy to preserve their spirituality while in college, because it allowed them to utilize their asset-based resources—motivation and positivity/optimism.

### **Motivation**

**Única.** Única drew upon her positivity/optimism to deal with college life through the practice of prayers:

Even though I did not go to mass often [while in college], I would still pray every night because praying made me feel confident, and made me feel that God and *Maria de Guadalupe* were there next to me, as well as my *abuelito* [grandpa] who is not alive anymore. But I also pray to him because I know they have a mission for me to do here [at WCU], and I ask them all for guidance.

Única exercised her spirituality to find meaning, purpose, and direction in her life by connecting with spiritual forces through prayer. Through these prayers, Única asked for guidance when she was in doubt; she was able to deploy motivation through nightly prayer because it allowed her to obtain confidence, maintain a connection with spiritual entities, and receive direction to help her when needed.

**Elizabeth.** Elizabeth identified her hometown church as an important aspect of her life to which she remained connected, not only to attend mass, but to also participate in weekend retreats (see Figure 6.33). Her church welcomed *encuentristas*<sup>24</sup> who had returned from a church retreat. She described a recent retreat as inspirational.



*Figure 6.33.* One of Elizabeth’s many church retreats.

I went to a church retreat, last week. And it was very inspirational because I spent time with moms that had gone through a lot. And just to see it and know about it, it’s motivational for me to pursue my [college] education. It was only me and four other young girls, and everyone else was over thirty. They had kids, they were married. They were talking about marriage issues...and we were like, “Wow” (laughs in disbelief).

Elizabeth became inspired after interacting with mothers who had gone through a lot in their marriages, including domestic violence, and this motivated her to continue with her college education because she had been blessed with another pathway from God. She elaborated on how she was able to maintain a connection with God through her involvement with her hometown church, which guided her through what she described as “tough times,” including the difficult demands of higher education:

---

<sup>24</sup> Translated as “encounterers,” the term refers to people who are looking to encounter God or looking for God’s presence at a retreat.

I think I connected more with God there [at the retreat]. Seeing the pain that a lot of women held inside, and they just let go. Hearing their stories—hearing how certain actions that they did or certain ways that they thought when they were younger, influences when you are older. So it kind of made me realize that I need to stay focused and more focused, and not lose sight of my goal [to complete my college education]. And through God, I can form a connection that would help me get through tough times [in college].

Elizabeth's participation with WCU's Catholic Center allowed her to maintain a connection with her community, but her involvement with her hometown church helped her "connect more with God." As mentioned earlier in this section, all of the women drew on their spirituality, believing that God would guide them through hardships and their college trajectories. Since they had witnessed their parents overcome various hardships with their own spirituality, the women aspired to do the same.

### **Positivity/Optimism**

In addition to motivation, this strategy to bring their spirituality to campus also enabled these women to implement positivity/optimism. They believed that they would be able to overcome any challenge through spirituality, and were thankful for God's interventions on their behalf. For example, as mentioned previously, four of the women—Elizabeth, Rosie, Única, and Victoria—were recipients of a major scholarship that allowed them to pursue a college education at a top-tier research institution like WCU.

**Victoria.** Similar to the other women in this study, Victoria expressed her sincere thankfulness to God for her good fortune. She talked specifically about a depiction of the Virgin Mary that her uncle drew for her (see Figure 6.9):

I'm not really super religious, but it was just a nice thing. I always felt like I could look to it when I feel like, "Thank you [God] for everything...that I have [referring specifically to her Millennium Gates Scholarship]."

Although these women perceived their level of religious attachment differently, they all felt fortunate to be at college. They recognized that many of their peers from their home

communities had not entered postsecondary education, and they identified God as the entity that helped them achieve this.

As discussed in Chapter 5, participants identified their parents as role models for facing various types of hardships. Specifically, they drew upon their parents' *consejo* to "be positive." These women maintained positivity/optimism through their spirituality to derive meaning, purpose, and direction in their lives, specifically when overcoming everyday hardships in their first-year experiences.

**Elia.** Elia, in particular, drew on her spiritual consciousness to obtain a sense of direction and strength:

Sometimes when I'm scared or in need of support, I pray to *La Virgen de Guadalupe*. I sometimes say a quick prayer to God during the day or night when I become aware of his love, or my good fortune. I also ask for strength in the case that I were to lose this good fortune and take my share of grief.

Elia utilized her spirituality to ensure a sense of peace by asking for guidance and strength when she needed it, and help her endure the demands of life. *La Virgen de Guadalupe* and God were two spiritual entities she specifically prayed to, deploying positivity/optimism to her own benefit.

**Rosie.** Rosie was able to cultivate positivity/optimism by attending church. There, she was able to nurture her morals and obtain a sense of peace while in college:

I go to [WCU's] church because it reminded me of my morals taught to me by my parents and it reminded me of who I am and what I stand for. I guess in a way it served as my re-boost when I couldn't go back home, to help me get through the week. After church, I always felt at peace.

Rosie highlighted how going to church enabled her to sustain the morals instilled by her parents. Participants' parents had shared words of wisdom in the form of *consejos* that included maintaining a positive mindset. These *consejos* reminded the women to maintain positivity, which can be achieved with faith to God, and this helped them maintain a positive mindset in all types of situations.

Above, Rosie reported that attending church enabled her to sustain a sense of peace, especially when going home was not possible. It was evident that she felt that regardless of the frequency and location of her church visits, God would always guide and protect her:

I'm a Catholic and I haven't been going to church as often anymore [after starting college], but I always know that I'm being guided and protected by God. I really believe everything... happens for a reason, and I know that everything will be okay because He is watching over me. I think religion is more internal to me, more for reflecting as an individual.

As the women in this study encountered hardships, they believed God would ultimately guide them down the correct path, as long as spirituality was preserved. Their spirituality facilitated the belief that all life circumstances had a meaningful purpose.

**Jessica.** When financial problems made it difficult for Jessica to travel home for church, she found another way to maintain important spiritual connections—by watching the church service online. For Jessica, staying connected with her church meant maintaining her relationship with God:

[Since I started college], I have not gone to church. I miss it tremendously because I love my church. I miss going back home because I would go to church every Sunday. I love my pastor. I love—it's just so beautiful how he speaks—and I fall every single time, more and more with God. I feel it's really important—your relationship with him [God].

As examined in Chapter 4, Jessica's mother encouraged her children to believe in God. And after her parents' deportation, maintaining a relationship with God was very important to Jessica. In particular, she used her relationship with God to help deal with her transition into college and her separation from family. By watching her church's service online, Jessica maintained her spirituality, and this allowed her to deploy her asset-based resource of positivity/optimism.

As first-year college students, these women drew upon their parents' practice of positivity/optimism—maintaining a positive mindset through spirituality. Regardless of the particular strategy the participants decided to utilize (e.g., prayer, attending mass), all of the



women found it important to preserve their spirituality. Astin et al. (2011) suggested that students who cultivate their spirituality while in college can enhance their “spiritual qualities.” These scholars found that students who frequently engaged in prayer, read sacred texts, and participated in religious singing/chanting were inclined to raise their level of spirituality during the college years, because such activities have, by far, the most powerful effect on religious commitment. Likewise, for the women in this study, prayer and attending mass were the activities that most influenced their spirituality in college.

### **Analytical Summary of Chapter**

This chapter examined the third engagement of the developmental engagement model—deployment of gained knowledge in various educational settings. As such, I have discussed: (a) how seven women identified a wide range of strategies to deploy asset-based resources, including motivation, aspirations, pride, positivity/optimism, and work ethic; and (b) how study participants underwent a process of meaning-making that involved identifying and attributing significance to artifacts, spaces, organizations, and practices that complemented asset-based resources to overcome obligations and problems relayed in familial *cuentos* and *consejos*.

Ochs (1990) argued, “socialization is a process whereby children or other novices, together with members, come to understand and participate meaningfully in society” (p. 304). In this study, seven women identified an array of artifacts, spaces, organizations, and practices because “these features may *index* [point to] something about the social identities of the participants, for example, or about the activities taking place, or about the feelings or knowledge of the [participants]” (p. 288). In other words, these features indexed these students’ family histories, familial-cultural assets, and familial resilience to overcome problems and fulfill obligations.

In this study, participant-generated photographs helped identify artifacts, spaces, organizations and practices that enhance our understanding of their social worlds and meaning. This study found that first-generation college students entered college with asset-based resources, and they had to find strategies to deploy such resources. In other words, each student's asset-based resources needed to be converted into strategies because these strategies, as outlined in this chapter, enabled them to persist and complete their first-year. Several scholars have documented that students of color report a need to remain connected to important aspects of their lives, like family and culture, to successfully adjust to college life (e.g., Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2006) and to persist to a degree (e.g., Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Furthermore, education scholars have highlighted student organizations that include Latina/o-based sororities (e.g., Moreno & Banuelos, 2013) and cultural dance groups (e.g., McClain, 2004) as vital to the retention and academic success of students of color in higher education. In addition, scholarship has documented how summer bridge programs help increase student retention rates by providing students the opportunity for academic and social acclimation to the institution (for example, Maggio et al, 2005). Finally, scholars (e.g., Astin et al., 2011) suggest that students' spirituality shows substantial growth during their college careers.

Yet, literature in higher education research has rarely acknowledged the significance of the display of meaningful artifacts in relation to educational resilience and persistence. Similar to the case of displaying meaningful artifacts, higher education research rarely examines the significance of the unofficial spaces students identify as meaningful, nor does it examine how these spaces foster educational resilience and persistence. Nonetheless, more research is needed on students' meaning-making of artifacts, spaces, organizations, and practices to better understand how they draw upon strategies to deploy asset-based resources. This type of

information can encode institutional structures that in fact acknowledge and honor students' pre-college assets and resources in a higher education setting.

Figure 6.34 builds upon Figure 5.7, revealing the third engagement that comprises the developmental engagement model with supporting evidence from the experiences of all seven participants.

Students' Developmental Engagement with Familial-Cultural Practices			
<i>Engagement 1: Recognition of Important Life Lessons &amp; Values</i> (Chapter 4)		<i>Engagement 2: Meaning-making of Information into Assets and Resources</i> (Chapter 5)	<i>Engagement 3: Deployment of the Gained Knowledge in Various Educational Settings</i> (Chapter 6)
<i>Familial-Cultural Practices</i>	<i>Themes of Cuentos and Consejos</i>	<i>Developed Asset-based Resources</i>	<i>Strategies to Deploy Their Asset-based Resources</i>
Familial <i>Cuentos</i> (Narratives)	Family's Economic Hardships and Sacrifices	Motivation	Displaying Various Meaningful Artifacts (e.g., family photographs)
	Family's Immigration Journeys and Sacrifices	Aspirations	Connecting with Family (e.g., visits)
	Family's Interactions with Social Inequality	Familial, Ethnic, and Cultural Pride	Joining Student Organizations (e.g., ballet <i>Folklorico</i> )
Familial <i>Consejos</i> (Advice)	Family's Words of Wisdom to Maintain Positivity/Optimism	Positivity/Optimism	Connecting with Academic Departments and Student Service Programs (e.g., Chicana/o Studies)
	Family's Words of Wisdom to Value an Education	Work Ethic	Locating Meaningful Spaces on Campus (e.g., displayed artwork and unofficial spaces)
	Family's Words of Wisdom to be a Hard Worker		Sustaining Religious/Spiritual Practices (e.g., praying/attending mass)
Parents use <i>cuentos/consejos</i> as familial-cultural pedagogical tools to raise their children's consciousness of oppressed experiences, which helped them develop resilient behavior and positive attitudes.	Students identify <i>cuentos/consejos</i> as significant.	Students assign meaning to the <i>cuentos</i> and <i>consejos</i> to develop asset-based resources to strengthen their educational resilience.	Students find strategies to deploy their asset-based resources at the university.

Figure 6.34. Engagement 1, Engagement 2, and Engagement 3 from the developmental engagement model.

As a reminder, Chapter 4 examined *Engagement 1*—recognition of important life lessons and values (see column 1 of Figure 6.34), where Chapter 5 examined *Engagement 2*—meaning-making of information (see column 2 of Figure 6.34).

The third column in Figure 6.34 relates to the current chapter concerning *Engagement 3*—the deployment of gained knowledge in various educational settings. More specifically, this chapter has examined how these women entered higher education with asset-based resources and then identified strategies to deploy these resources at the university. In this chapter, I acknowledged the array of strategies that participants employed in their first-year experiences: (a) displaying various types of meaningful artifacts (e.g., family photographs and collages); (b) connecting with family (e.g., visits and phone calls); (c) joining student organizations (e.g., ballet *folklórico*, MEChA, sororities); (d) connecting with academic departments and student service programs (e.g., Chicana/o Studies and WCU’s resource centers); (e) locating meaningful spaces on campus (e.g., artwork and other unofficial spaces on campus); and (f) sustaining religious/spiritual practices (e.g., praying/attending mass).

Where many scholars (e.g., Moreno & Banuelos, 2013) view these strategies (e.g., fraternities/sororities) as on-campus resources, building upon students’ on-campus social supports and networks, I view them as strategies derived from these women’s asset-based resources. The women developed strategies to implement aspects of their pre-college assets and resources during their college transitions. In Chapter 5, I examined how these various resources developed as a result of their engagement with and meaning-making of familial-cultural practices—i.e., *cuentos* and *consejos*. As discussed in the current chapter, the women identified an array of strategies to deploy different asset-based resources. Some helped deploy a single resource, while others deployed multiple resources. Also, depending on each woman’s personal circumstances, they may have deployed certain resources more frequently than others. For

clarity, I have presented the strategies separately, but the women viewed them more holistically, and not as mutually exclusive. It was crucial for the women to identify and utilize these various strategies in order to acknowledge and honor the array of asset-based resources they had developed in their lives before college.

Next, in Chapter 7, I will continue to examine the third engagement in the developmental engagement model. Specifically, I will explore how these women used the strategies they created to help overcome four specific challenges and persist through their first year in college.

## CHAPTER 7

### THE WOMEN'S USE OF STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME FIRST-YEAR CHALLENGES

A great deal of the higher education literature examines the challenges that underrepresented minority students experience in college, including dealing with financial issues (Rodriguez et al., 2000), having difficulty adjusting to college life (Phinney & Haas, 2003), overcoming academic struggles (Pascarella et al., 2004), and achieving a sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). While the present study recognizes some of these common challenges, particularly financial hardship and a sense of belonging, it also identifies two additional challenges that require closer examination. Specifically, participants in this study also described feeling a sense of guilt and pressure as a result of enrolling in higher education.

The developmental engagement model introduced in earlier chapters identifies three engagements that are necessary in helping students develop resilient behavior and positive attitudes in higher education: recognition of important life lessons and values, meaning-making of information; and deployment of the gained knowledge in various educational settings. These three engagements were explored in Chapters 4–6 of this dissertation:

- Chapter 4 examined the first engagement, which identified two familial-cultural practices—*cuentos* and *consejos*—that all seven participants engaged in with their families. The women described the significance of these *cuentos* and *consejos* as important life lessons and values, and applied them to their educational aspirations and attainment.
- Chapter 5 examined the second engagement and the ways that participants converted the knowledge they gained from *cuentos* and *consejos* into asset-based resources such

as motivation, aspiration, pride, positivity/optimism, and work ethic. These women entered college with asset-based resources, but had to identify ways to deploy such assets.

- Chapter 6 explored the third engagement and how the women identified six strategies to deploy asset-based resources during their first year in college.

While Chapter 6 highlighted the women's self-identified strategies used to deploy asset-based resources, the current chapter offers specific examples of how these women put these strategies into practice. Specifically, the chapter addresses the following research question: *What challenges do first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage face in their first year in college, and how do they overcome these challenges?* The participants identified four challenges in particular: They experienced financial hardships that included concerns about paying for housing, transportation, and other expenses; they felt a sense of guilt relating to changes in their family dynamics; they felt pressure associated with being the first in their family to attend college; and they expressed a lack of a sense of belonging because they often felt isolated and out of place (see Table 7.1). As described in this chapter, they used strategies that they created (e.g., display of meaningful artifacts) to deploy their asset-based resources (e.g., motivation) to overcome the challenges they encountered at the university.



Table 7.1

*Four Major Challenges During First Year in College*

Challenges Reported by the Participants				
	Financial Hardships	Sense of Guilt	Pressure	Sense of Belonging
Karina	✓	✓	✓	✓
Elia		✓	✓	✓
Jessica	✓		✓	✓
Única		✓	✓	✓
Rosie	✓		✓	✓
Victoria		✓	✓	✓
Elizabeth	✓	✓	✓	✓

Higher education is a time for personal, academic, and professional development (Astin, 1993). Scholars have found that the majority of U.S. students who leave institutions of higher education do so during or immediately after their first year of study (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969/1994; Levitz & Noel, 1989; Tinto, 1993). In fact, “student success is largely determined by experiences during the freshman year” (Upcraft, Gardner, & Associates, 1989, p. 1). Yet, students of color in general, and women of color specifically, often experience the typical college challenges—dealing with financial issues (Rodriguez et al., 2000), difficulty adjusting to college life (Phinney & Haas, 2003), overcoming academic struggles (Pascarella et al., 2004), and achieving a sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997)—in addition to other obstacles, which include sense of pressure and guilt, as highlighted in this study. As a result of this extensive list of challenges, the first year of college can be particularly stressful for women of color.

Research shows that women of Mexican heritage experience significantly more stress in college than their counterparts—i.e., White women, White men, and men of Mexican heritage (Chacon, Cohen, & Strover, 1986; Muñoz, 1986). Rodriguez et al. (2000) identified four main sources of stress for women of Mexican heritage and other Latinas: a lack of financial resources, academic issues, family obligations and expectations, and gender-role stereotyping. There is a

wide-range of challenges experienced by women of color, of which financial constraints (e.g., Rodriguez et al., 2000) and a sense of belonging (e.g., Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005) are often the most discussed.

Illustrating the particular scenarios in which the women deployed the strategies discussed in Chapter 6 can assist higher education administrators and others to better understand how students of similar backgrounds negotiate their first year in college. Thus, the goal of this chapter is twofold: (a) to show how the typology of the developmental engagement model functions in the first-year college experiences of seven women of Mexican heritage; and (b) to bring attention to the efficacy of this developmental process in these women's first-year persistence and academic success. Thus, in the sections that follow, I examine how my study is consistent with the literature discussed above and also examine two challenges that are less often discussed in this body of literature: sense of guilt and feelings of pressure. In so doing, I provide an in-depth examination of complex psychological barriers that Latinas of Mexican heritage experience during their first-year in college.

### **Financial Hardships**

Funding a higher education is a burden for college students in general. However, first-generation college students are typically less aware of the various financial opportunities available to them. According to Rodriguez et al. (2000), financial concerns are the primary source of stress for Chicanas or women of Mexican heritage who are enrolled in higher education. These concerns include debt incurred by loans, lack of money for bills and personal expenses, hours spent on outside employment, and uncertainty of receiving financial aid.

While scholarships provided some financial assistance to the participants in this study, some expressed difficulty making ends meet. Four of the women—Karina, Jessica, Rosie, and Elizabeth—reported experiencing some financial difficulties. However, the level of intensity of

the stress brought on by funding their college education varied among the participants based on individual circumstances. Karina and Jessica, for example, described more financial difficulties compared to the others. Elia, Única, Victoria, Elizabeth, and Rosie reported earning scholarships that covered their first-year finances, which may explain their minimal discussion of this issue. Their scholarships did not continue beyond their first year, however, so it was possible that their circumstances would change. Única and Victoria were the only participants who reported receiving full financial assistance (e.g., tuition and room and board) throughout their undergraduate careers as a result of being Gates Millennium Scholars. Here, I draw upon Jessica and Karina's experiences with financial hardships to better examine how they coped with these challenges.

### **Jessica**

Jessica was a foster youth whose parents were deported to Mexico during her junior year of high school. She financed her education entirely through grants and student loans. These monies covered her tuition and room and board. She also had an on-campus part-time job, which helped her cover other expenses such as books, school supplies, and necessities for personal care. After she used this money to cover her needs, she had very little left over to travel home to visit family, whether in California or Mexico. Jessica acknowledged the need to visit her younger sister who lived with her godmother (also their maternal aunt) about an hour south of campus, and her two youngest siblings who resided with her parents in Mexico, close to the U.S. border.

To get around campus, Jessica used the free campus shuttle. To travel home to visit her sister, Jessica took a bus to the subway, to the train station, to yet another bus. After all of that, she was finally able to walk the distance from the bus stop to her house. The trip took over two hours each time, with a one-way trip costing up to \$10. When she was able to visit her family in

Mexico, usually during winter and spring break, a one-way trip on the Greyhound bus cost her about \$20 and lasted about five hours.

Visiting family was extremely important for all of the women because they relied heavily on the visits to nourish and replenish their asset-based resources. In Chapter 6, we learned how staying connected with their families allowed the women to deploy various aspects of their asset-based resources: motivation, pride, and positivity/optimism. Jessica remained connected with her family in California through phone calls, Facebook, and visits. Although she maintained contact with her family in Mexico through phone calls, the calls were extremely limited and brief, due to her parents' limited access to a phone.

When Jessica visited her family in California, she depended on her younger sister to provide her with financial assistance for the trip. Jessica explained how her financial difficulties influenced her physical connection with her California family:

So I usually go back home on the weekends, but recently I haven't because I haven't had money [for transportation]. It depends [on whether I have money to go home]. Like last quarter I had more money [so I went home more often]. And this quarter, I have less money, so it all depends if my [younger] sister sends me money to go back home.

Due to Jessica's financial situation, she was limited in her ability to deploy certain strategies (e.g., maintaining familial connections) that could contribute to her educational resilience. She was conscious of the importance of maintaining these types of connections with her family whenever possible:

I think it is important [to maintain a connection with your family]. I don't think that I am really dependent [on my family] where I get homesick. I don't get like that. I just think that I just got so accustomed to being on my own that I'm just more laid back. But then I do get sometimes where I am like, I do miss my sister, or I miss my mom or my dad. Honestly, I do get bored here [at WCU]. And I just want to go back home, not just because I need to, but I just want to go back.

Theorists who draw on cultural deficit explanations for challenges students face during the first year in college would arguably misinterpret Jessica's need to visit her family as the

primary cause of her difficult transition. According to these theorists, as discussed in Chapter 2, these types of connections can interfere with students' college transitions and, ultimately, their academic performance. As described in Chapter 6, however, these women gained important benefits from their familial connections while in college—namely, exercising asset-based resources such as motivation, pride, and positivity/optimism.

Jessica wanted to stay connected with her family because they motivated her to obtain a college degree. This aspiration was gained through her engagement with familial *cuentos* and *consejos*, which informed Jessica about her family's hardships and sacrifices. Her financial situation prevented her from maintaining close relationships with her family, both in California and in Mexico. Moreover, although Jessica's financial constraints prevented her from visiting her family in Mexico more regularly than her California family, she maintained a different type of connection with her deported family, as she expressed when she shared Figure 7.1.



Figure 7.1. Screen shot of Jessica's parents from her laptop.

Basically, I feel that I always [need to motivate myself]—because I don't have my parents to be here pushing me or telling me: "*O, si se puede,*" like this or that [because they have been deported to Mexico]. But just like a picture of them reminds me of the struggles that they are going through over there [in Mexico]. So just being with them [spiritually], I really cherish that, so even if it's just having a picture of them on my laptop, it reminds me of them.

Because Jessica's family had been deported to Mexico, and because of her financial difficulties, she was limited in her ability to physically connect with them. However, Jessica found other meaningful strategies to sustain empowering connections with her family. The display of her parents' photograph on her desktop served as a reminder of her family's continuous hardships, struggles, and sacrifices. This helped her to maintain a spiritual connection with them. As a child of immigrants, Jessica was taking advantage of educational opportunities that included achieving a college education. As described in Chapter 4, she

believed this achievement would help her get closer to overcoming financial hardships, struggles, and sacrifices.

### **Karina**

Unlike Jessica, whose financial difficulties stemmed from becoming primarily independent after her parents were deported to Mexico, Karina faced financial difficulties because she had a dependent of her own. Being a parent places a significant and unique financial burden on a student (see van Rhijn, Quosai, & Lero, 2011). In this study, necessities such as housing, food, childcare, transportation, and healthcare in particular quickly became overwhelming. To pay for school, Karina relied on grants and student loans. These funds covered her tuition, as well as room and board for her and her family. When she enrolled at WCU, her son was a few months shy of three years old. Even though there was a great deal of support on campus for students with dependents, because of her marital status, Karina felt that the amount of help available to her was limited.

Karina's spouse was periodically unemployed due to epilepsy and, as a result of her family's financial constraints, he did not have the proper healthcare coverage to treat and control it. Karina described constant worrying about her husband's unpredictable seizures. Moreover, his unemployment status undermined her eligibility for the government's Child Care Assistance Program because, according to social workers with whom Karina had spoken, he should have been able to care for their son. The state's decision to reject Karina's request for childcare assistance prevented her husband from actively searching for employment. This was a constant battle for Karina.

Karina shared that her status as a married student with a dependent influenced her financial aid assistance. She heard from other student parents that they received more financial assistance because of their single-parent status. In order to cover her other expenses, such as

books, food, and childcare, she applied for other government programs such as the income-based Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. As noted in Chapter 6, connecting with student services on campus helped the women deploy aspects of their asset-based resources, including motivation, aspirations, pride, and work ethic. Although Karina reached out to on-campus entities that served vulnerable populations like student parents, these resources had limitations.

Karina drew upon WCU's Resource Center (WRC), which was designed to help students with dependents. She found, however, that available services were too limited. Additionally, she spoke of her disappointment over the elimination of a program that provided convenient drop-in social worker consultations once a month, including for guidance on applying for nourishment assistance from the government. Although this service was provided only on a limited monthly basis, it helped students avoid less convenient visits to off campus facilities. This type of programming was sensitive to students' restricted schedules and sought to expose them to the resources available.

Furthermore, the WRC was generally open 9:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m., but the staff designated to address the questions and concerns of these students only worked part time, and thus, their availability was generally limited. Moreover, Karina reported, their availability often conflicted with her own obligations (e.g., class time and/or other responsibilities). Thus, the Resource Center's traditional hours of operation did not reflect these students' typical life schedules, and this limited their ability to utilize such services. To complicate matters, staff members were not sufficiently knowledgeable about the appropriate financial information and the resources available for student parents. Karina revealed instances where she was given the wrong information and the incorrect paperwork to complete, which delayed receipt of financial assistance and created more financial hardships.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Ironically, Karina herself gave the staff the correct information.



For example, because Karina did not have access to funds, she was unable to make her university housing payments on time, which often led to late notices and fees, as well as eviction letters. In fact, after speaking with a few other student parents who were juniors and seniors, Karina discovered that these types of experiences with the Resource Center were common. Karina was not the first to struggle to attain the appropriate knowledge, resources, and guidance to minimize her financial burden. She had yet to achieve financial stability through exposure to relevant information and resources through WCU's Resource Center:

They need a lot of improvement. Or at least, before actually coming here, I think they should help parenting students know what they are coming into and who can they go to even before they start school. Like zero week, I need to go to the financial office. I needed this and that. What if you get help from the government or if you are low income? I am pretty sure a lot of parenting students have financial problems. Like [WRC should] tell [parenting students what they need to do] before they start [the academic year], so when they start, they don't have to go through that [what I went through]. I think it's unfair because students who don't have kids get their money. I am not saying like everybody, but I know that they get their money when they have to. They don't have to go through all of that that I have to do [to get reimbursed].

Clearly, Karina was aware of the contrast between the tedious process that students with dependents needed to go through to receive financial assistance and the process that students without dependents underwent. She acknowledged that the WRC would be a more valuable recourse if the center would provide better guidance to students with dependents.

Although Karina had not achieved financial stability through campus resources, her excellent work ethic allowed her to better deal with her financial situation, because she was motivated to seek help off-campus.<sup>26</sup> In fact, she initiated the application for government

---

<sup>26</sup> Navigating and negotiating a system on her own was a common pattern in Karina's life. She did not have the luxury of depending on others to figure out short- and long-term solutions. In particular, she had to navigate the college process due to the lack of guidance in her high school. She completed her college application on her own, initiated volunteerism to enhance her application, and enrolled in community college courses to gain college credits. Based on her high school student status, however, she did not get priority registration and, as a result, courses that qualified for transferable college credits were filled. Karina was not discouraged and enrolled in a child development and time management course (non-transferable), which helped gain exposure to relevant information as a new mom and prospective college student.

assistance for nourishment, college expenses, childcare, and spouse employment and/or school assistance. The process was not linear, however. Karina had to resubmit the previously mentioned assistance after her existing case in her hometown was terminated due to *their* claim of late paperwork submission, which then delayed the assistance even more. Instead of preparing for finals at the end of the first quarter, five months into her college career, Karina was busy starting a new case at a nearby office. This caused her to miss class. Assistance with food was the quickest approval; the other requested assistance (e.g., for childcare) was a continuous battle.

Karina reported reaching out to her mother and mother-in-law to help with childcare since she did not have sufficient income to pay someone. She also encountered financial constraints that made it difficult for her to have money for gas or to maintain her unreliable car, which she needed in order to drop off her son about 11 miles east of her university housing. Although 11 miles may not seem far, navigating through the dense traffic of this metropolitan area can take anywhere from 45 to 90 minutes one-way during rush hour. With these constraints, Karina reported missing class at times. Moreover, there were a few times when Karina had to take her son to class and/or to her tutoring sessions:

[I had to take my son with me to campus] during finals week. I had to bring him for one of my [tutoring sessions]...It was really hard [that day]. That day my husband, I don't know what happened but he couldn't take care of him. And I had to go to office hours and a [tutoring session]. So it was hard. I had to come in a bus. It was raining. I didn't know what bus to get. I had him with the *carriola* [baby carriage] with everything, so it was so hard that day. I was like, "Oh my god."

Karina continued to describe how difficult it was to maneuver the *carriola* while she paid her bus fare, all while her son hugged her leg and she tried to maintain her balance on the overcrowded, moving bus. In order to engage in academic activities, she had to bring her son to campus, regardless of her situation. Since Karina did not have the funds to pay for daycare services, her connections with her family became an invaluable resource.

Eventually, Karina was granted three days of childcare each week. This happened during the end of winter quarter, about three months after the submission of the application, and six months after the start of the academic year. As mentioned earlier, Karina reported her husband's unemployment status as the primary factor in the denial of her full-time childcare assistance request. Yet, she expressed appreciation for being granted three-day weekly childcare through the government assistance program because she could focus more on her academics knowing that her son was at a respected daycare.

Even with this part-time day care, Karina had to learn to manage both school and family—identifying them both as her priorities. A typical day of studying involved her son climbing on her back to see what “his mommy is doing,” as depicted in Figure 7.2.

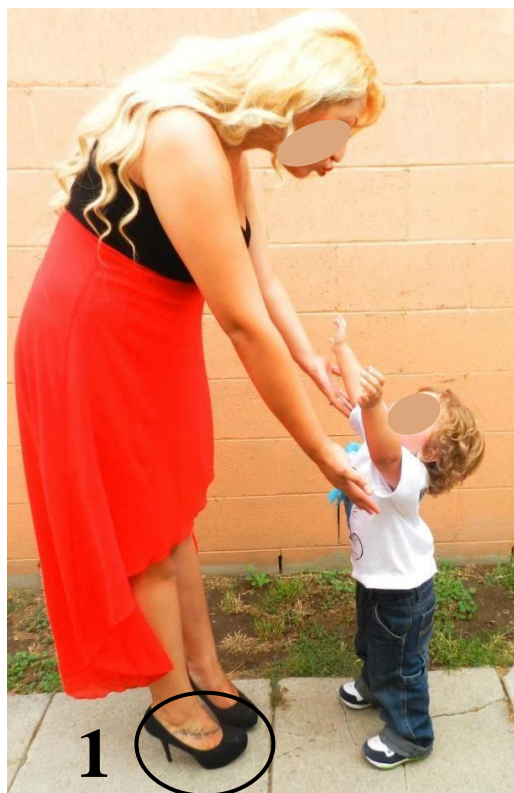


*Figure 7.2.* Karina is studying and being a mommy.

The photograph above provides a snapshot of the realities of being a parenting student. Karina reported “doing it all.” She learned to be a parent and student simultaneously, and her work ethic was evident in her multi-tasking approach. As she noted, her multiple roles “cannot be separated.” Karina expressed, “I think it’s really important being a student. As a student you have your priorities. To me, my family is always going to be my priority, but school is another priority—main priority. I put both together to balance. I don’t know how to explain it. I just do it.”

Even though Karina reported frustration at her financial situation, which contributed to other challenges (e.g., childcare), she exercised positivity/optimism, helping her to counter those particular challenges. As Karina herself noted, she tends to “turn everything negative into [a] positive.” She continued: “So when something negative occurs, I’m like, ‘Let’s turn it into positive and with my faith, I know everything is going to go well, with my faith.’” In this manner, Karina was able to deploy aspects of her asset-based resources to achieve educational resilience. When she continued to receive numerous emails reporting outstanding balances and eviction notices, her only recourse was to maintain a positive mindset and continue to find resources to help her deal with the financial hardship.

These coping mechanisms are important to acknowledge because with Jessica, finances had a negative effect on one of her coping mechanisms (i.e., maintaining a connection with her family). Karina’s asset of faith helped her navigate through the stress of finances, even when resources were not available at the university. She shared her perceived blessings through Figure 7.3.



*Figure 7.3.* Karina’s “I am not lucky, I’m just blessed” tattoo.

This was a picture that—I just like it. I have a tattoo on my foot and it says, “I am not lucky, I’m just blessed” (see circle 1). I just feel that despite all the things I went through, I’ve been blessed for the life I have, because there’s people that go through worse things. I feel blessed with who I am around and where I am at.

Here, Karina is executing positivity/optimism, one of the five asset-based resources. The photograph above acknowledges the role this asset-based resource has played in her everyday experiences as a student, mother, and wife. Regardless of various difficulties, Karina has been proactive with her financial status by maintaining a positive mindset and exercising her work ethic to seek the appropriate resources and minimize financial burdens during her first-year experience in college.

### **Sense of Guilt**

These women also learned to negotiate the cultural value of family closeness and loyalty while in college. Scholars have described Latina/o students’ cultural value of family closeness

and loyalty as *familismo* (see Chapter 2). *Familismo* often contributes to Latinas, more so than their male counterparts, feeling obligated to spend time with family and stay close to home (Espinoza, 2010), take care of siblings (Gándara, 1995, 1999), and make financial contributions to the family (Fuligni & Peterson, 2002).

González, Jovel, and Stoner (2004) examined the issue of Latinas leaving home for college. Study participants reported “awkwardness of feeling both happy and guilty” with their decisions to leave home to attend a prestigious university (p. 20). Unlike existing scholarship that has found first-generation Latina students’ families question their decisions to leave home and family to attend college (e.g., González, Jovel, & Stoner, 2004; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012), the women in this study reported their parents to be supportive with their decisions to live in university housing.

As a result of their aspirations to be college educated and their decisions to live on campus, however, Victoria, Elizabeth, Única, Elia, and Karina blamed themselves for changing their families’ dynamics in ways that limited family quality time, stemming a sense of guilt. Victoria and Elizabeth highlighted how they were unable to help siblings and cousins with their academic struggles and aspirations. In an emotional voice, Única acknowledged simply being absent in her nieces’ everyday lives, “They are important part of my life—since I am away, I can’t really be part of their childhood.” The women’s decisions to pursue a college education and reside at the university had implications for their families, and they were acutely aware of them. In this section, I present Elizabeth, Elia, and Victoria’s experiences to further examine how these decisions contributed to their sense of guilt and how they dealt with it.

### **Elizabeth**

Elizabeth has two younger sisters, ages 16 and six months, and acknowledged having younger cousins who she had developed sibling-like relationships with. She explained the

responsibility she felt for her siblings and cousins: “Being the eldest of two sisters, it’s very important to me, to set the example. I also need to set an example to ten cousins who are younger than me. I realized that at a very young age.” Elizabeth reported having “a strong connection with [her] family.” Thus, she felt that “it’s very important that I be there” for family while in college. Elizabeth said her cousins teased her for her frequent visits throughout the academic school year, but she explained her reason for maintaining those familial connections: “I preferred to spend time with them and not lose connection with the roots that made me.”

Because Elizabeth was having a difficult time dealing with her multiple worlds, she developed a sense of guilt for changing her family dynamics and limiting her family’s quality time:

It’s hard to explain. I feel that I am the reason why my family isn’t the way it used to be [in relation to spending quality time together] because I separated out [left to college]. So I think that affected my parents, but then my sister too, because we are not able to go out as a family anymore. Especially during winter quarter...I feel like I left and we started not going out as a family because we are all not there. I feel bad for that—they don’t do that anymore because I am not there. And if they do, it’s not the same. Like during spring break, we can’t all go out as family because I have to work or I have to do this internship. Or my dad took time off, during winter quarter, Christmas vacation, but we didn’t do much because I was always studying—it’s not the same. I thought it wouldn’t change it, but it did.

Moreover, Elizabeth recognized her high school-aged sister as the primary stakeholder affected by the family’s limited quality time:

I go home a lot because I feel that I have to be there in order for [my sister] to experience [family quality time] the same way I did, which helped me a lot, so I want her to learn from it too. My sister is not able to get our complete family portrait, and it’s my fault for her not getting those experiences because I am gone.

It is evident that Elizabeth identified herself as the main source for influencing her family’s limited quality time because she decided to “leave” to college. Elizabeth was learning to negotiate her multiple worlds—home and school. Although she valued her education and understood that her achievements would serve as an exemplar to her Latina/o community (as

discussed in Chapter 4), her decision to reside at the university contributed to self-blame in relation to changing her family structure and dynamics.

In discussing this issue further in her interview, she reported how these two aspects of her life were equally important to acknowledge as part of her first-year experience. She continued to elaborate on the challenge of minimizing or eliminating her frustrations about her physical separation from her family: “That’s the problem, it doesn’t minimize. It’s there. It’s not gone. But I am learning to manage both [family and school], but it’s hard.” For Elizabeth to manage both, she consciously chose to maintain a strong connection with her family in college by visiting frequently. By spring quarter, she reported going home more regularly, regardless of her academic demands, although she reported working hard during the week to limit her workload during the weekend.

Dealing with this sense of guilt undoubtedly contributed to Elizabeth’s first-year experience. Her attempts to remain connected with her family somewhat assuaged her feelings of guilt. Maintaining physical connections served as a strategy to acknowledge and honor her asset-based resources (e.g., motivation) while simultaneously overcoming her guilt about changing her family’s dynamics resulting from her pursuit of a college education.

### **Elia**

Elia also developed a sense of guilt for changing her family dynamics. She was an only child, and she and her mother had limited support from extended family. She revealed that her mother was mistreated by her family during childhood: “Recently, I have been realizing that she wasn’t treated really well [by her family].” Taking into account Elia’s family circumstances (e.g., overcoming poverty), Elia’s departure to college could have contributed to her mother’s feelings of abandonment. Elia elaborated: “I guess I just forget that here [at WCU], I’m



surrounded by so many people. And my mom is at home, by herself.” Because Elia’s mother found herself alone more regularly, this occasionally created tension between the two:

I don’t know if it’s because of menopause, but she’s becoming more emotional...[There was one incident] where I was like, “Oh, mom, I’m going to call you tomorrow,” because I try to call her every day...And I ended up not calling her because I forgot, or something...So I tried calling her...I asked if she was okay and her voice broke, and she was like, “Don’t lie at me and tell me that you’re going to call me, when you’re not.” And she sounded really hurt and she sounded mad. I know she understands that I am working and studying here at college. And that kind of made me feel bad.

In Chapter 4, we learned about the hardships Elia’s mother endured during her childhood as an orphan. Because of this, Elia saw herself as the only family her mother was able to rely on. This contributed to her development of a sense of guilt when she inadvertently failed to maintain that connection with her mother in college. Unlike in the previous case with Elizabeth, Elia’s connection to family was more detrimental because it added to her guilt rather than helped to assuage it. At the same time, however, Elia found a way to accommodate her mother. She reported not taking these types of interactions personally, citing her mother’s menopause and childhood experiences. She believed that both helped explain her mother’s sensitivity to their separation.

Although these mother-daughter tensions were not intentional, Elia learned to draw upon strategies that allowed her to balance college and home. Unlike the majority of the women who visited their families, Elia found it most convenient to have her mother visit her more frequently. She explained Figure 7.4, saying, “This was one day when my mom came to visit me and she was the one who took the picture. She would sometimes come visit me on the weekends. That wasn’t the first time.”



Figure 7.4. Elia's mother frequently visits.

Elia further explained in her interviews that she took advantage of the time she saved by not traveling home to participate in college activities, like social gatherings or studying. She visited her mother at home on special occasions like Mother's Day, but she was strategic about remaining connected with her mother while maximizing her time at school. This approach worked well and enabled her to negotiate both family and college without feeling that she neglected one or the other.

### **Victoria**

Victoria also developed feelings of guilt, largely as a result of her being unavailable to help her family members, specifically her younger brother, who was failing English. She wanted to help her brother get better grades, but in a frustrated tone she explained that she could not because she had moved away: "He's doing bad right now in school. And I just try to talk to him [about working harder to improve his grades] but *I don't know what else to do, because I am not there to help him with his work.*" Victoria saw herself as a resource to her brother, someone who

could tutor him as she used to do before leaving to college. But because she was no longer living at home, she was no longer able to oversee his academic performance by, for example, checking his work before he turned it in. Victoria felt that she could help improve her brother's academic performance if she lived at home. Similar to the other women, she was learning to negotiate her roles in her family and in college.

Although Victoria shared that she did not know how to help her brother with his academics since she left for college, she said she had drawn upon familial-cultural practices utilized by her parents. For example, she used advice similar to that shared by her parents to help her brother develop academic resilience:

I gave him a lot of talks that my parents gave me, a lot of the advice. I still do it. He's in that middle school stage where he's like, "Oh my god, why are you talking about this again? You already told me." And I was like, "You just listen." [laughs]...My mom would always stress the importance of an education as a way to get a better job. I stressed that too, but I also combined it with the joy of knowledge of learning things and expanding your mind. Because for me [my parents emphasized] college as more that you can get a better job, and not necessarily that college is a way to expand your mind and experiences. So I try to combine that with my brother.

Victoria modified her parents' advice to help her brother build momentum in his academics, a strategy similar to that which helped Victoria's own educational trajectory. She drew upon her familial-cultural practices (e.g., *consejos*) to help her brother, regardless of their distance, while she pursued a college education. Victoria aspired to achieve the same outcome with her brother through these pedagogical tools.

In sum, the participants' absence had great implications for family members who benefited from the guidance and motivation to excel academically that the women provided. These women saw themselves as gatekeepers whose role was to help maintain the educational momentum when family members needed it. Providing such educational momentum, however, was harder to facilitate when they moved away to college. They tried to manage their guilt by drawing from asset-based resources. Regardless of the intensity of the guilt that these women

internalized, their interactions with family enabled them to find ways to deal with this challenge. They drew upon pedagogical tools similar to those that their parents had employed when advising them.

These findings are consistent with the literature, suggesting that students' connections with families during college can assuage their guilt and lead to more positive than negative outcomes. For instance, family and institutional attachment is one of these important assets. Students of color report a need to remain connected to parents and other salient familial, cultural, and community support networks to persist in college (e.g., Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2005/2006). Other studies suggest that maintaining strong family relationships while attending college is a major factor that helps students successfully adjust to college life (e.g., Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2006).

For these seven women, maintaining strong familial ties allowed them to deploy their asset-based resources. Some preferred to invite family to campus, while others found it extremely important to visit family at home. Other strategies included staying connected through technology (e.g., Facebook, webcam, phone calls, and texting) and the display of meaningful artifacts, both of which helped them maintain emotional connections with their pre-college relationships. The women were able to deal with their guilt precisely because they identified strategies that helped them interact with their families in new ways.

### **Feelings of Pressure and Self-doubt**

Feelings of pressure and self-doubt presented another challenge that these women dealt with during their first year in college. In this study, "pressure" refers to a psychological force that causes stress, anxiety, and/or self-doubt as a result of a person's self-perceptions—for example, as a first-generation college student. Experiencing pressure to academically excel is a typical experience for college students. There is a huge experiential difference between the

dominant college student population and underrepresented women in higher education. Latina/o first-year students experience an additional source of pressure during the transition to college because of their status as minority students in predominately White institutions (Lopez, 2005).

Studies have found that first-generation college students question their success more often than their counterparts (Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011). In fact, first-generation college students are more likely to pursue a college education to help their families, and to have a greater fear of failing (Bui, 2002). All seven women in my study reported their concerns about persisting through their college careers as a result of their perceptions as first-generation college students. They experienced mixed feelings of excitement about being the first in their families to attend college, but also reported feeling pressured to persist. They viewed their role as first-generation college students as paving the way for future generations to achieve the same. If they failed, they felt they were not only failing themselves but their families and communities, and ultimately contributing to the stereotype that Mexicans do not value education. As we learned in Chapter 5, these women were motivated to challenge these types of stereotypes and aspire to serve as role models to their families and communities.

Gloria and Castellanos (2012) would suggest that Latinas have strong individual initiatives and motivation to achieve on behalf of their family. These mixed emotions are precisely what helped the study participants persist through their first-year experiences. Their positive affirmations outweighed their negative perceptions precisely because they utilized their asset-based resources when needed. They identified strategies that allowed them to deploy their motivation, aspirations, pride, positivity/optimism, and work ethic, all developed through their engagement with their families' cultural practices. More specifically, the women created meaning of *cuentos* and *consejos* to develop asset-based resources that contributed to their educational resilience. Victoria and Rosie's experiences illustrate the effects of anxious thoughts

about academic performance in college; Única and Elizabeth's stories reflect the role of feelings of self-doubt.

### **Victoria**

Victoria identified her parents as the individuals she could not fail: “[Because of] my parents’ sacrifices—[I] fear of failing them....I guess that’s what pushed me and continues to push me because I still need to get through college, which is a whole other deal.” As discussed in Chapter 6, Victoria’s family indirectly helped her overcome academic failure by being present in the form of family photographs on her desk (Figure 6.2). These photographs transmitted motivation when she looked at them. Her room in the residence hall (Figure 6.8), then as a transformed space, enabled Victoria to gain the strength necessary to persist through her college education.

The women in this study were learning to leverage their pre-college assets and resources to contribute to their educational resilience through the six strategies described in Chapter 6—strategies that allowed them to deploy their asset-based resources during their first year in college. Although Victoria was experiencing mixed emotions about her academic performance, ultimately she was conscious of the positive influences her familial-cultural assets gave her. For this reason, she decided to display an array of meaningful artifacts throughout her room in the residence hall.

### **Rosie**

Rosie specifically acknowledged the pressure she felt to perform well, and she identified an entire community of individuals as the stakeholders in her life who would be affected if she failed:

It’s very overwhelming, I think [to be the first in my family to go to college]. It was great at first because it was like, “Yes, I got admitted.” But once I am here [at WCU], it’s a tremendous pressure...to succeed. I cannot fail. It’s not an option. It’s not just my

parents that I will be letting down. It's my sisters, my peers, students, my teachers, everyone.

At first, Rosie shared excitement about being admitted to WCU. She then realized, however, that being a first-generation college student largely contributed to her fear of failure and excessive pressure to excel academically. As we learned in Chapter 5, similar to the other women, Rosie felt that her presence in higher education and her eventual attainment of a college degree would represent access to future generations of students with backgrounds similar to hers.

Moreover, Rosie acknowledged her first-generation college status as a challenge: "I feel different. I feel that most of these students [here at WCU], their parents came to [WCU] or another university, and they know what's going on." Although Rosie's family may not have been able to provide specific college guidance, her family played an important role in her college persistence. For example, they created a photo album as a present for Rosie when she began her college career. Rosie reported utilizing these meaningful photos when she felt melancholy: "When I am stressed or when I am sad—usually when I am sad—I'll pull them out." Figure 7.5 illuminates a few photos that Rosie eventually decided to display on her wall.



*Figure 7.5.* The wall of Rosie’s room.

Rosie consciously drew upon these artifacts on her wall; she acknowledged that the display—including her family photos—helped her maintain a positive atmosphere: “They make everything better, everything brighter.” Although, as a first-generation college student, Rosie was learning to negotiate feelings of fear and pressure, she did so by honoring important aspects in her life. These aspects included family members, friends, and a high school teacher who served as her mentor, along with other significant artifacts like *lotería* (lottery) cards showing images that represented her character (e.g., a passion for music). As we learned in Chapter 4, Rosie viewed her education as a privilege that her mother was never afforded and always desired. Rosie was living her mother’s educational aspirations, long abandoned as a result of familial circumstances.



## Única

Única was learning how to navigate and negotiate her everyday experiences in higher education to achieve her aspiration of obtaining a college degree, even though she admitted that persisting was “something more challenging.” In discussing her first-year challenges, Única reported being most influenced by feelings of self-doubt:

And I guess, also the self-doubt about myself. That was another major [issue] and I think it still is. This [winter] quarter, I still feel self-doubt about myself and I wish I could handle that [better]—not feel that self-doubt [and believe] that I can do it [because] I was able to finish the [fall] quarter with—I think I got okay grades. I think I’m still in the process of learning about how not to be too—doubt about myself. It’s easy to say, but it’s hard to put it in me—not doubt about myself and to believe in me that I can do it [emotional voice].

As discussed in Chapter 3, all of the women participated in a rigorous seven-week academic summer bridge residential program, designed specifically for underrepresented students in higher education. They described the summer program as a fairly different but positive experience compared to their first-year experiences beginning in the fall. During the summer program, they were part of a cohort comprising students of color with similar life experiences. Their instructors were people of color too, and they described the campus environment as more welcoming. Even though I did not specifically evaluate the summer program, I did examine the women’s experiences in and perceptions of the program.

Única provided her view of the difference between the summer program (which she refers to as “SP”) and academic life during the academic year: “I guess after finishing [the summer program] I was really pumped up. I was really expecting fall and the school year to be how it was in SP. And I guess my bubble [laughs] *se explotó* [it popped] when I started fall quarter.” Única had the confidence and maintained the momentum to perform well at the start of the academic year. However, she noticed a shift in her academic performance during the official academic year.

During the summer, these women gained confidence but, just after the start of the academic year, their confidence slowly disappeared. These women reported being the only or one of the few students of colors in their classes, which may have contributed to Única and the other women's internalization of blame for struggling academically (e.g., not studying enough), instead of an acknowledgment of the institution's failure to offer additional transitional programs throughout the academic year to maximize their college satisfaction and well-being. Única developed negative feelings because she identified the problem as herself, instead of campus climate-related issues, which have been found to influence the college transition among underrepresented students in higher education (see Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005).

Única attributed her persistence to her community and family, who served as supporting agents: "Now you have your community, your family behind you." She recognized that college persistence was necessary to maintain her position as a role model and to fulfill her aspiration to combat social injustices experienced by migrant farm workers. Única's display of religious artifacts and the practice of prayer helped her cope through feelings of sadness. Her faith enabled her to gather the energy she needed to overcome these types of negative feelings and obstacles in her first-year experiences.

### **Elizabeth**

Elizabeth also spoke of her perception of self-doubt when she shared, "You just question yourself. You question whether you are smart enough for this school, and the competitiveness." As a reminder, Elizabeth was a STEM aspirant, and the percentage of students of color who enter STEM-related majors and actually graduate is much lower than their white counterparts (Peña, Camacho, & Silva, 2014). Elizabeth was learning how to negotiate her position in STEM courses where women and students of color are often absent, and as a result she might have felt more isolated in the university setting. This may explain her predisposition to question herself

and whether she was smart enough to compete in academic spaces where women and students of color have been historically underrepresented.

Elizabeth countered these negative perceptions and experiences by drawing upon an array of strategies, discussed in Chapter 6, and deploying her asset-based resources. She drew upon familial connections to help deploy her motivation, positivity/optimism, and work ethic to persist in the STEM pipeline:

But then I think of my family and my mom [because they motivate me to succeed], or I would call my mom [when I'm in doubt]. [laughs] And then, she was like, "It's going to be okay." And I'm like, "Yeah, I know it's going to be okay, but still." [laughs] I don't know, but I have always—I have faith that things are going to work out, and that I am here for a reason. That everything happens for a reason. So I just have to trust myself to an extent and put hard work into my classes, and get good grades, and becoming also a well-rounded person.

Although Elizabeth was experiencing self-doubt, the excerpt above illustrates how she drew upon her connections with family and her faith as strategies to survive college. Furthermore, as we learned in Chapter 6, attending mass and praying enabled these women to deploy asset-based resources (e.g., positivity/optimism). Elizabeth understood that through her faith she would get through these types of challenges that included overcoming psychological forces that caused stress, anxiety, and/or self-doubt. Hence, her faith played a central role in her first-year experience.

### **Sense of Belonging**

In their study, Hurtado and Ponjuan (2005) found that students who maintain strong cultural ties are more likely to perceive their campus as hostile and express more difficulty adjusting academically, socially, and emotionally, as well as experience difficulty developing a sense of attachment or belonging to the college. Evidence from the current study further supports these scholars' claim, since these seven women reported a low sense of belonging to WCU in general, but also to their university housing, specifically. Due to these aforementioned

perceptions, they filled their university housing with symbols and artifacts that bolstered their emotional-psychological well-being—something the campus in general did not do.

Understanding these seven women’s experiences in their residential environment is critical, because they often serve as indicators to their feelings of belonging (or not).

Astin (1993) found students’ experiences in their residential environments (e.g., dormitories)—one of many types of living-learning communities—can assist in determining, influencing, and engaging their involvement with the institution and the likelihood of their success. According to Astin, the quality and quantity of student interactions with peers and faculty around both social and academic activities are the most important factors in encouraging students’ active engagement in the institution. Developing and implementing learning communities, in both social and academic settings, improves the quality of the undergraduate experience at institutions of higher learning (Stassen, 2003).

A wide range of studies has found that living-learning communities have a significant positive effect on a number of student outcomes (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). According to Pascarella & Terenzini (1991), students afford “autonomy and independence, intellectual dispositions and orientations, and generalized personal development” (p. 261). Moreover, Lenning and Ebbers (1999) identified positive effects of living-learning communities on student outcomes that include academic performance (measured by GPA), retention, and institutional satisfaction, as well as greater engagement in learning and increased quality and quantity of learning. In Chapter 6, we learn about the role of spirituality in college experiences, specifically among the seven women in this study. Astin et al. (2011) highlighted a few college outcomes of increased spirituality among college students: “academic performance, psychological well-being, leadership, development, and satisfaction with college” (p. 10). In this study, by connecting with their spirituality, the women drew upon prayers and church attendance

to preserve their spirituality and emotional and psychological health in reaction to the challenges during their first-year experiences. Overall, the findings in this chapter indicate that the women in this study used these types of strategies, as listed above that enabled them to deploy their asset-based resources to overcome various challenges and persist through their first-year.

The next section explores how the women in this study navigated what was ultimately a hostile campus climate—specifically, the residential environment—and experienced disconnect from their religion/spirituality as they practiced it at home. These issues contributed to the challenges they faced in making WCU a “home-away-from-home.”

### **Negotiating Hostile Interactions in a Residential Environment**

Hurtado and Ponjuan (2005) suggested that the campus environment is influenced by a historical legacy of inclusion or exclusion of groups, by the structural diversity or numerical representation of diverse people, the nature of interactions among diverse groups, and the individual perceptions of the environment. Furthermore, members of different racial and ethnic groups experience these domains of campus diversity differently, depending on a group’s representation and relative status on campus. As such, this section examines how the women in this study negotiated microaggressions in the campus residential environment.

Karina and Jessica serve as excellent cases to examine the effects of unconscious and subtle forms of racism in an educational setting. Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) referred to these instances of subtle insults—verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual—directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously, as microaggressions (p. 60). Although the term microaggression was first coined by Harvard Medical School psychiatrist Chester Pierce in the 1970s (Pierce, 1970; Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Wills, 1978), Solórzano et al. gave us the language to better describe and understand the everyday experiences of communities of color within educational settings.

**Karina.** Karina had been placed in off-campus family housing, about four miles south of the general campus. This short distance in a metropolitan area can entail a 20- to 40-minute commute, however, depending on traffic. Moreover, this distance meant that Karina was excluded from the undergraduate residential life in the freshman dormitories. Family housing at WCU comprises primarily graduate students with spouses and/or dependents. As a first-year undergraduate student and for academic persistence, Karina would have benefitted from being housed with undergraduate students, and not only with other parents. Furthermore, Karina reported various occasions of discrimination in her family housing.

Karina described her housing experiences as unwelcoming. One incident involved receiving what she called “the look” from neighbors while she was enjoying the onsite playground with her son or simply walking to her apartment. Although Karina came from roots of resilience that enabled her to tolerate “the look,” she interpreted this non-verbal interaction as a “you-do-not-belong-here” expression. As such, Karina began to question her presence at the university.

In addition, Karina recalled her downstairs neighbor “threatening to call the police” if her son did not stop jumping and making noise. The hostility regarding the noise may have been partly due to the fact that graduate students are under a great deal of stress. In fact, maintaining a respectful noise-level is expected of all residents living in family housing. However, Karina reported feeling threatened by this neighbor who used the police as a means to control and instill fear. She felt the neighbor could have shared her complaint in a more diplomatic and neighborly way. Taking into account that undergraduates tend to be more tolerant of noise than graduate students are, Karina would have benefitted in many ways from being housed with other freshmen.

Another incident involved Karina and her husband being stopped by the police one morning when her husband was driving her to campus. The officer explained that the driver met

the description of “a male with a [WCU] beanie who was stealing cars.” Karina shared how earlier that week, in the family housing parking lot, her husband was working on his own car, and the neighbors perceived that activity as him “stealing cars.” On another occasion, Karina and her family were enjoying the common pool available at family housing. When they were ready to head home, her husband asked the security guard for permission to drive his car close to the pool area. It was a chilly night and they did not want their son to get sick, since it was a long walk to their apartment. Instead of expressing sympathy, the security guard interrogated her husband about his residence at WCU’s family housing.

Karina and her husband tried to counter these negative interactions in their new home by staying connected with their family and friends, when possible, through frequent visits, phone calls, and social media like Facebook. Karina’s strong connections with her family helped facilitate a sense of “home” and “*familia*” in their lives at college. She dedicated an area in her university family housing to display framed photos of her family, as seen in Figure 7.6. She also provided a snapshot of a family reunion she had recently attended (Figure 7.7). As she explained, “These photographs make it a home and the sense that my family is with me here [at WCU].”



*Figure 7.6.* Karina’s framed photos.

The various incidents of discrimination at their university family housing made this display of meaningful artifacts even more important. Maintaining a strong connection with family was vital for Karina because, as we learned in Chapter 4, she appreciated and valued her family’s various hardships and sacrifices, learned through the familial *cuentos*. By maintaining familial ties, Karina was constantly reminded of her aspiration to be the first college graduate in her family—an achievement that would pay respect to familial hardships and sacrifices.





*Figure 7.7.* Karina’s family reunion.

There’s my husband doing *carne asada* [Mexican-style grilled steak]. It was at a family reunion with his family and mine....I think it’s important [to stay connected with family] because they are all family—his family and my family. They call us a lot asking, “When are you going to come visit us?” I feel like they care about us, so why not take a day to be able to go visit them and follow all the traditions that we do with the *carne asada, la comida* [the food] to unite us.

Maintaining familial connections has helped Karina counter feelings of discrimination and a lack of belonging in family housing—a place that should feel like home. These various connections—phone calls, social media, and/or home visits—have helped her to cope with negative experiences and persist in living in an isolated environment.

**Jessica.** Jessica experienced difficulties developing an attachment with the institution as a result of cultural differences with her roommates and receiving “the look” from classmates. Similar to Karina, Jessica interpreted “the look” as a “you-do-not-belong-here” expression, specifically in her STEM courses. As she described it. “Sometimes, at times, people look at you

weird....They question why are you here [at WCU].” Jessica found a great discrepancy between the large presence of people of color during the summer program and their relative absence during the academic year. She described the cultural differences she encountered with her roommates during the academic year:

My [academic year] roommates when we are inside [our room], it is kind of awkward. I feel that they relate more towards themselves. They are both White. I don't have anything against White people—I just feel like culturally-wise, we're different. Before, in [the summer program], everyone [living] on the same floor were people of color....My summer roommates—which will always be my roommates at heart because I love them to death—we got along like this [snaps fingers]. We clicked.

Jessica described her quick attachment with her summer roommates compared to her academic year roommates because she experienced feelings of rejection. Her academic-year roommates made little effort to make Jessica feel part of a communal space. For example, Jessica described instances where she was excluded from conversations, making her feel invisible in their room in residential hall. She also remembered being excluded from a breakfast and dinner gathering her roommates occasionally had together. She recalled her high school teacher's words about the underrepresentation of people of color in higher education:

My [high school] teacher told me that's just how college is: “You just need to find your own support group but, at the same time, you need to get used to that. That's in every place. Even in your own science classes [in college], you are NOT going to find a lot of people of color.”

As a reminder, Jessica was a STEM aspirant. Her teacher tried to inform her about the few students of color in college in general, and in Jessica's science courses in particular. Her teacher advised her to identify a support group to counter moments of isolation. As we learned in Chapter 6, Jessica drew upon the support of a Latina sorority to help counter college-related challenges. These resources helped Jessica negotiate her position in spaces where she felt rejected, such as in her room in the residential hall. She understood that she should not be

discouraged, and she recognized her presence and persistence in the STEM pipeline as a major accomplishment:

Honestly, now that I am moving up levels, in the sciences and in math, I see less and less [Latinas/os in my classes]. And it's sad because I was in pre-cal [pre-calculus], and I saw a lot of Latinos, I mean, not a lot, but more people of color. And right now that I moved up levels, you see less [Latinas/os]. It just surprises you. You realize that you should be proud to be here [at WCU].

In the excerpt above, Jessica identified her summer program cohort as her support group as she dealt with college life. Additionally, her support group continued to expand with her membership in a Latina sorority. These various strategies enabled Jessica to maintain her motivation, along with other asset-based resources, because she was able to seek out a type of family in college. Furthermore, she drew attention to a quote written on a Post-It note located at the base of her laptop:

I always look back to that [Post-It]—it says, “Life isn’t measured by how hard it is to succeed, but how hard we worked to succeed.” So it just reminds me, like, “don’t give up.” I don’t have my parents to be here [in the U.S.] pushing me or telling me [in person], “*Oh, Si Se Puede!*” like this or that. I wish I could get a call or at least to see them every weekend. So little things like that just remind me to keep going.

When Jessica needed motivation to persist, the strategy highlighted above enabled her to endure her first-year in college. Similar to the desktop photo on her laptop, displaying various types of visual motivation played a critical role in her academic persistence. These strategies helped balance negative interactions with resilient behaviors and positive attitudes. Jessica understood that her presence in higher education was needed not only to pave the path for future generations, but also to show that familial hardships and sacrifices were not in vain.

### **Negotiating Religious/Spiritual Practices in College**

The women also encountered challenges when exercising their religion and/or spirituality in college. Some experienced an unfamiliar way of practicing their religion/spirituality in college—attending English-only mass. As we learned from Chapter 6, the study participants

drew upon religious/spiritual practices, including prayer and mass, as a strategy to deploy their asset-based resources of motivation and positivity/optimism. This provided three benefits: (a) maintaining positivity to ensure a sense of peace in their higher education; (b) receiving direction and strength to help them move towards graduation once clarity was achieved; and (c) connecting with spiritual entities such as God or deceased relatives to help them nurture both fortunate and challenging situations. With the exception of Jessica, those who attended mass had always attended Spanish-language mass with their families.

The women's limited sense of belonging emerged as a result of their struggle to exercise their religion/faith in their native language, Spanish. With the exception of Victoria and Elia, the women continued to exercise their religion/spirituality by either physically or virtually attending church in their hometown, near their university housing, and/or near the WCU campus. Those who chose to continue attending mass reported that they were not satisfied with their utilization of their religious/spiritual practices at college because they did not necessarily resonate with the religious experiences they shared with their families.

Única, Rosie, and Elizabeth attended the nearby Catholic Center, which was walking distance from campus. Due to its close proximity to the campus, the women viewed it as part of the university. The Catholic Center, however, was not officially a part of WCU, but was part of the Paulist order, which served WCU. The Catholic Center was a private organization; WCU did not officially sponsor any religious organizations because the university is a public institution. WCU did, however, let religious organizations rent space on campus.

The Catholic Center did not offer a Spanish mass. Because the women viewed the center as part of the university, they saw this as the institution's failure to celebrate and honor their native language. Rosie, Única, and Elizabeth explicitly expressed that the language of mass at the Catholic Center prevented them from practicing their religion/spirituality in a manner that

resonated with their upbringing. Although Karina did not attend the Catholic Center, but a church near her university housing (off campus), she too experienced the same language barrier. In this section, I primarily examine how this language barrier prevented the women from fully utilizing their religious/spiritual practices during their first-year experiences in college. Specifically, I examine Rosie and Única's language barrier experiences in college in greater detail.

**Rosie.** Rosie reported her discomfort when she attended her first English mass at the Catholic Center:

I would go to mass here at [the] Catholic Center, but I felt very uncomfortable the first time I went. The Catholic Center only had English masses and was held by a White Caucasian man. Back at home, we have Latin and African descent priests. But I guess [because] the environment [here] was so different that it took time before I accepted that this was going to be my new church.

Rosie felt uncomfortable in a space that was supposed to be welcoming to all. She perceived the other attendees as majority White students. In fact, the majority of the congregation at the Catholic Center was Asian, with many Latina/o, African, and White attendees as well. Many of the White students were also immigrants or international students. Rosie did not see the diversity of the congregants, which can be explained by her mixed emotions about modifying her religious/spiritual practices.

The language barrier also contributed to this discomfort, as Rosie resisted praying and singing in English. Her language preference for mass may have contributed to her refusal to sing: "When it came to singing in church, I would purposely refuse to sing along." Rosie struggled in her negotiation of religious/spiritual practices in college because to her, "English [felt] fake." Because Rosie was not satisfied with her mass experiences during college, she visited her home church whenever possible, for example, during her family visits on the weekends.

**Única.** Única also found the English mass disappointing. She felt that Spanish mass offered a more enriching message. She explained that the Catholic Center “only had English mass, and I did not really understand it—it was not as deep as when it’s in Spanish. When I go with my parents [to our hometown church], I go to the Spanish ones.”

In spite of these challenges, having the option to attend mass allowed these women to maintain certain aspects of their spiritual lives that they found important while at WCU. Única attributed her need to satisfy her spirituality to the spiritual fortitude she gained by communication with God and deceased relatives. She shared the importance of her decision to continue to attend mass regardless of the language barrier:

I would go to mass even though I did not like the fact it was in English, because I felt that going to mass fulfilled my spirit. I felt that praying in Spanish—in my mind—and being at mass, I was able to talk to God, to *Maria de Guadalupe*, and to really pray and connect [with them], to talk to them. To ask them for guidance in my schooling, to ask them for help, strength, and confidence. I would also pray [on behalf of] my family, friends, and everyone.

Única gained spiritual satisfaction by attending mass. Thus, maintaining a strong connection with her faith during college was vital for her persistence because it allowed her to exercise her asset-based resources.

As discussed in Chapter 6, the women drew upon their religion/spirituality, and this allowed them to sustain a sense of peace, find direction, obtain the strength to overcome everyday challenges; and maintain connections with spiritual figures. Although all of the participants were fluent in English, they consciously chose to pray and/or sing in Spanish because that was how they had practiced their religious/spiritual practices before college and with their families. The Catholic Center served as an alternative when they were not able to attend mass in their hometowns.

Together, these findings provide a candid and rich examination of first-generation college students’ sense of belonging. Thus far, we have seen how Mexican American women’s sense of

belonging was dependent upon how they negotiated hostile interactions in a residential environment and how they negotiated a practice that did not reflect their familial-cultural practices—attending English-only mass.

### **Analytical Summary of Chapter**

The transition to college is a challenging period for students, and it is marked by complex emotional, social, and academic adjustments (Lopez, 2005). Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, retaining students of color in predominately White colleges and universities has been an enduring problem (Laden, 1999). Thus, the goal of this chapter was twofold: (a) to show how the developmental typology of engagement model functions in the first-year college experiences of seven Chicanas; and (b) to bring attention to the efficacy of this developmental process on their first-year persistence and success.

These women's engagements with their familial-cultural practices, in the form of *cuentos* and *consejos*, played a critical role in their first year in college. In this chapter, I demonstrated how the developmental engagement model played out in the lives of seven women at a competitive institution. Specifically, I examined the challenges these women experienced during their first year in college and how they drew upon particular strategies when dealing with financial hardship, a sense of guilt, feeling pressured, and achieving a sense of belonging.

Scholars like Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) have advocated for a positive campus racial climate that can foster all students' academic achievement and bolster graduation rates through: "(a) the inclusion of students, faculty, and administrators of color; (b) a curriculum that reflects the historical and contemporary experiences of people of color; (c) programs to support the recruitment, retention and graduation of students of color; and (d) a college/university mission that reinforces the institution's commitment to pluralism" (p. 662). When these elements are absent on a college campus, Solórzano et al. argued, the campus projects a negative

racial climate, which contributes “to poor academic performance and high drop-out rates for Students of Color” (p. 664). For this reason, it was crucial to examine the specific challenges women of Mexican heritage experience and how they cope with such instances during their first-year experiences.

Scholars have acknowledged various coping processes that help students overcome stressful challenges in educational settings. Drawing from the work of Folkman and Lazarus (1980), coping processes refer to “what the person actually thinks and does in a particular [stressful] encounter...that unfolds during a single episode or across episodes” (p. 224). In other words, it is important to understand how students react to stressful situations. Coping responses can vary from student to student based on individual circumstances and personalities, as well as external factors that include societal influences (e.g., type of community). The current study draws attention to coping processes that acknowledge and honor students’ familial-cultural backgrounds, which help them deal with stressful situations.

Phinney and Haas (2003) identified five specific coping responses: (a) positive reframing, (b) acceptance; (c) distancing/avoidance; (d) seeking support; and (e) proactivity.<sup>27</sup> The participants from the present study specifically utilized three out of the five coping responses listed above when they faced their challenges: positive reframing, proactivity, and seeking support. The women used *positive reframing* to maintain an optimistic mentality and self-belief in their ability to overcome obstacles. Their spirituality and religious beliefs were especially helpful here. Each woman acted *proactively* by taking positive action and developing strategies to deploy their asset-based resources to solve the problems they encountered. Their decisions to display empowering artifacts and motivational pictures in their rooms are an example of this.

---

<sup>27</sup> In the *acceptance* approach, a student deals with the fact that the problem is part of life and beyond his/her control. The *distancing/avoidance* approach involves neglecting the problem either to relax or to forget about it.



The women also *sought support*, particularly when they connected with academic departments and student service programs such as Chicana/o Studies and WCU's resource centers. They ultimately utilized a wide range of strategies that served as highly effective and personally enriching coping responses and allowed them to navigate through their first year in college.

Research on higher education has begun to shed light on the diverse coping processes students use to help manage stressful situations. However, familial-cultural practice like *cuentos* and *consejos* have yet to be associated with students' coping processes in higher education. More specifically, little attention has been given to the process students engage in as they convert these cultural practices into strategies that support life values in the form of asset-based resources. This chapter has examined how the asset-based resources of seven female college students served as coping strategies in response to particular educational challenges and obstacles.

Figure 7.8 provides a complete overview of the developmental engagement model with supporting evidence from the participants' experiences.

<b>Engagement 1: Recognition of Important Life Lessons &amp; Values (Chapter 4)</b>		<b>Engagement 2: Meaning-making of Information into Assets and Resources (Chapter 5)</b>	<b>Engagement 3: Deployment of the Gained Knowledge in Various Educational Settings</b>	
			(Chapter 6)	(Chapter 7)
<b>Familial-Cultural Practices</b>	<b>Themes of Cuentos and Consejos</b>	<b>Developed Asset-based Resources</b>	<b>Strategies to Deploy Their Asset-based Resources</b>	<b>Use Strategies When Confronted with Challenges</b>
Familial <i>Cuentos</i> (Narratives)	Family's Economic Hardships and Sacrifices	Motivation	Displaying Various Meaningful Artifacts (e.g., family photographs)	Financial Hardships (e.g., student with a dependent and a foster youth)
	Family's Immigration Journeys and Sacrifices	Aspirations	Connecting with Family (e.g., visits)	Sense of Guilt (e.g., change the family dynamics)
	Family's Interactions with Social Inequality	Familial, Ethnic, and Cultural Pride	Joining Student Organizations (e.g., ballet <i>Folklorico</i> )	Feeling Pressure (e.g., be the first to go to college)
Familial <i>Consejos</i> (Advice)	Family's Words of Wisdom to Maintain Positivity/Optimism	Positivity/Optimism	Connecting with Academic Departments and Student Service Programs (e.g., Chicana/o Studies)	Sense of Belonging (e.g., encounter rejection/micro-aggressions)
	Family's Words of Wisdom to Value an Education	Work Ethic	Locating Meaningful Spaces on Campus (e.g., displayed artwork and unofficial spaces)	
	Family's Words of Wisdom to be a Hard Worker		Sustaining Religious/Spiritual Practices (e.g., pray and attend mass)	
Parents use <i>cuentos/consejos</i> as a cultural tool to help raise their children's consciousness of oppressed experiences and open up the possibility for transformative behavior by encouraging educational aspirations and attainment.	Students identify <i>cuentos/consejos</i> as significant.	Students assign meaning to the <i>cuentos</i> and <i>consejos</i> to develop asset-based resources to strengthen their educational resilience.	Students find strategies to deploy their asset-based resources at the university.	Students draw upon these strategies to negotiate encountered challenges during their first-year in college.

Figure 7.8. Students' developmental engagement process with their familial-cultural practices.

As a reminder, *Engagement 1* involves recognition of important life lessons and values (see Chapter 4), where *Engagement 2* involves meaning-making of information (see Chapter 5), and *Engagement 3* involves the deployment of knowledge gained from familial-cultural practices in various educational settings (see Chapter 6).

This chapter put the developmental engagement model into practice by examining how the seven women successfully negotiated challenges in their first-year experience. The women encountered four challenges in particular: financial hardship, sense of guilt, feeling pressure, and achieving a sense of belonging (see fourth column of Figure 7.8). By using the strategies that enabled them to deploy their asset-based resources—motivation, aspirations, pride, positivity/optimism, and work ethic—they were able to navigate through and around these obstacles during their first year in a higher educational setting.

This chapter examined how the women dealt with self-identified challenges by undergoing the third engagement process—deployment of the strategies—which allowed them to negotiate the challenges listed above. This model should be implemented in a larger study and with other student populations to evaluate its reliability and generalizability. Nevertheless, the findings presented in this chapter indicate that the women in this study used strategies that enabled them to deploy their asset-based resources to overcome various challenges and persist through their first-year.

The next chapter concludes the dissertation. In Chapter 8, I offer a concise summary of findings from each of the preceding chapters. I also discuss the study's contribution to theory, practice, and methodology, and end with suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER 8

### SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The vision of *la familia* continues to be a form of discourse that provides Mexican Americans with identity, support, and comfort in an often hostile environment.

--Margarita Gangotena, 1994 (cited in Rodríguez, 2009, p. 19)

In Chapter 1, I used Margarita Gangotena's statement above to exemplify the lives of the seven participants from this study, which was examined in great detail in the previous chapters. As Mexican-heritage, first-generation college students, their families played a pivotal role in helping them persist during their first-year in college in what was oftentimes a hostile environment. This study brings attention to how marginalized students, those who are subordinated because of their race, gender, and/or class (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998), strengthen their educational resilience despite adversity. I explored how seven women drew upon their educational *familismo* to foster "identity, support, and comfort in an often hostile environment," at a selective public research institution, as children of immigrants (cited in Rodríguez, 2009, p. 19). As children, their parents encouraged them to make the most of educational opportunities because they understood that an education could prove to be an escape from poverty. The sense of *familia* exhibited by these seven women cultivated their resilience in educational settings. They converted familial hardships, often caused by marginalization, into educational aspirations and attainment.

While postsecondary institutions do not typically recognize or utilize students' cultural wealth, cultural practices can significantly affect college persistence. Indeed, as I argued in Chapter 2, *educational familismo* is absent from the existing literature on *familismo* (Arce, 1978; Baca Zinn, 1975, 1982; Miller 1980). The existing literature does not acknowledge how students learn valuable familial-cultural practices, nor does it account for the crucial role family plays in

students' educational resilience. Thus, I coined and defined *educational familismo* to refer to the interactions students have with their families through *cuentos* (narratives) and *consejos* (advice) that expose them to wisdom and experiential knowledge. As pedagogical tools, *cuentos* and *consejos* help raise children's consciousness of oppressed experiences and ultimately lead to the development of resilient behaviors and positive attitudes.

Drawing upon the findings from a pilot study, I designed a developmental engagement model, which guided my analyses of seven women's engagement in familial-cultural practices (i.e., *cuentos* and *consejos*). The women underwent a developmental engagement process that included: (a) recognizing the significance of information gained from their engagements with familial-cultural practices; (b) attributing symbolic value to the information; (c) applying such values to their daily lives in ways that resulted in positive attitudes and behaviors towards their education (e.g., the motivation to excel academically); and (d) deploying the resources in educational settings.

For the women in this study, engagement with familial-cultural practices provided opportunities to honor, value, and appreciate their family histories, familial-cultural assets, and familial resilience to overcome problems and fulfill obligations. They identified familial and cultural experiences as valuable and converted this value into educational aspirations and attainment.

This final chapter provides an opportunity to summarize the findings of the research and to describe how they may influence practitioners and scholars. The remainder of the chapter is divided into three sections. The first section specifically addresses the research questions and discusses the contribution of the study findings to our understanding of the college transitions of Latinas of Mexican heritage. In the second section, I discuss the study's contribution to theory,

practice, and methodology. In the third and final section, I conclude with suggestions for future research.

### **Summary of Findings**

As outlined earlier, the research questions guiding this study were informed by the extant literature as well as the pilot study. My study focused solely on women because Latinas face particular challenges that tie them back to their families. Namely, Latinas—including the women in this study—often feel the responsibility to carry on family commitments while in college including: (a) spending time with family and staying close to home (e.g., Espinoza, 2010); (b) taking care of siblings (e.g., Gándara, 1995, 1999); and (c) making financial contributions to the family (e.g., Fuligni & Peterson, 2002). Thus, with this context in mind, the four questions that guided the study were:

1. What types of familial-cultural practices do first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage engage in with their families, and how do they apply symbolic value to such practices?
2. In what ways do the familial interactions and practices of first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage contribute to their educational persistence?
3. In what ways do first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage deploy their asset-based resources during their first-year experiences?
4. What challenges do first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage face in their first-year in college and how do they overcome these challenges?

The first two research questions broaden our understanding of how a sense of *familia* can improve the educational persistence of first-generation Latina college students. The third research question enables us to see how students can utilize their assets to help better facilitate their college transitions. The final question examines how women of Mexican heritage negotiate

their roles in school and in their families. Hence, through candid, rich, and varied accounts, this study allows us to gain a more layered understanding of the first-year college transition of first-generation college women of Mexican heritage and the strategies they use to persist in college.

Before we move into a more detailed summary of the findings, it is important to acknowledge, as discussed in Chapter 3, that there is regularity and variance (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003) among Latinas' college transitions. In other words, we cannot assume that all members from a specific group will encounter the same experiences. Although members from a specific group may have similar experiences, they will still vary from individual to individual. As such, the women in this study engaged in familial-cultural practices, but the knowledge they received from the *cuentos* and *consejos* varied. Additionally, the information that was converted into asset-based resources varied as well. Ultimately, however, they all developed asset-based resources from their engagement with *cuentos* and *consejos*. With this important point in mind, in the remainder of this section I provide a concise overview, including implications, of the four findings chapters.

**Chapter 4** examined the first engagement in the developmental engagement model—recognition of important life lessons and values—and addressed the first research question: *What types of familial-cultural practices do first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage engage in with their families, and how do they apply symbolic value to such practices?* The chapter examined the process that students undergo when applying symbolic value to their engagements with familial *cuentos* and *consejos*.

These explicit examples of familial-cultural practices led the seven women to recognize important information and extrapolate life-lessons from them, such as making the most of educational opportunities. Students' engagement with *cuentos* informed them of familial economic hardships, migration journeys, and social inequality experienced both in their parents'

home country and in the United States. Additionally, these women remembered familial *consejos* as vital to their development of important life-values, which included three themes and mantras: “be positive,” “value education,” and “work hard.”

Important life-lessons and values that these students learned from familial-cultural practices resulted in pedagogies of sacrifice. The various types of *cuentos* and *consejos* allowed them to value their familial and cultural experiences as children of immigrants, and to view their educational pursuits as vindication for the hardships and sacrifices endured by their families. By doing so, the women in this study actively countered claims made through the lens of cultural deficiency, which suggest that Mexican families do not value education (see Andrade, 1982; Escobedo, 1980; García & Guerra, 2004; Valencia & Black, 2002; Valencia & Solórzano, 1997).

**Chapter 5** investigated the second engagement in the developmental engagement model—meaning-making of information—and addressed my second research question: *In what ways do the familial interactions and practices of first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage contribute to their educational persistence?* These seven women developed what I refer to as asset-based resources after recognizing important information and extrapolating life lessons and values from their engagement with *cuentos* and *consejos*. More specifically, the participants transformed their attitudes toward education by acquiring asset-based resources to strengthen their educational resilience. These resources included motivation, aspirations, pride, positivity/optimism, and work ethic.

This chapter validated understandings of how students’ educational resilience can be achieved by leveraging familial capital (Yosso, 2005, 2006)—what I refer to as *educational familismo*. These findings contribute to the literature that documents the vital role Mexican-heritage parents play in the development of their children’s educational attainment, aspirations, and success (e.g., Ceja, 2004; Delgado-Gaitán, 1992; Gándara, 1995; Perez, 1999). Chapter 5



examined the wealth of knowledge the participants drew from *cuentos* and *consejos*, and how they converted their familial advice, wisdom, and experiential knowledge into asset-based resources, as listed above.

**Chapter 6** examined the third engagement in the developmental engagement model—deployment of such knowledge in various educational settings—and addressed my third research question: *In what ways do first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage deploy their asset-based resources during their first-year experiences?* Although these seven women entered college with asset-based resources, they had to identify strategies to deploy such resources. Employable strategies enabled them to persist and complete their first year by equipping them with spiritual fortitude to overcome school-related stress. Identification and implementation of strategies was essential in helping the women negotiate their roles in and importance of their multiple worlds, allowing them to thrive academically and emotionally.

The findings in Chapter 6 contribute to existing literature that examines how students leverage cultural assets and resources, or what have been referred to as *funds of knowledge* (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), *pedagogies of the home* (Delgado-Bernal, 2001), *community cultural wealth* (Yosso, 2005), *pedagogies of migration* (Benavides Lopez, 2010), and *pedagogies of poverty* (Hernández, 2012). Specifically, the six strategies deployed by the participants included: (a) displaying various types of meaningful artifacts (e.g., family photographs, collages, religious figures); (b) connecting with family (e.g., visits, phone calls, texts, social media); (c) joining student organizations (e.g., *folklórico*, MEChA, sororities); (d) connecting with academic departments and student service programs (e.g., Chicana/o Studies and WCU's resource centers); (e) locating meaningful spaces on and off campus (e.g., the students gave symbolic value to artwork and other unofficial spaces on campus); and (f) sustaining religious/spiritual practices (e.g., praying or attending mass). The women identified

artifacts, spaces, organizations, and practices that symbolized their family histories, familial-cultural assets, and familial resilience as shared through *cuentos* and *consejos*.

Finally, **Chapter 7** addressed my fourth research question: *What challenges do first-generation female college students of Mexican heritage face in their first year in college and how do they overcome these challenges?* I presented a case study to examine how these women used the strategies they created to deal with self-identified challenges during their first year in college. These strategies allowed them to directly apply their asset-based resources to cope with and navigate through particular educational challenges and obstacles. Four major challenges emerged, including experiencing financial hardship; feeling a sense of guilt; undergoing pressure and/or self-doubt; and enduring a lack of sense of belonging. This chapter demonstrated how the developmental engagement model functioned in the first-year college experiences of seven women of Mexican heritage, and examined the role of this developmental process on their first-year persistence and success.

The findings in Chapter 7 indicate that the women in this study used strategies that enabled them to deploy their asset-based resources to overcome various challenges and persist through their first-year. This chapter is consistent with the literature that examines how students of color in general, and women of color specifically, often experience the typical college challenges—dealing with financial issues (Rodriguez et al., 2000), difficulty adjusting to college life (Phinney & Haas, 2003), overcoming academic struggles (Pascarella et al., 2004), and achieving a sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997)—in addition to other obstacles that are less often discussed in this body of literature, which include sense of guilt and feelings of pressure, as highlighted in this study. As a result of this extensive list of challenges, the first year of college can be particularly stressful for women of color. This chapter provided a better

understanding of complex psychological barriers that Latinas of Mexican heritage experience during their first-year in college.

### **Implications of the Findings**

#### **Validation of Storytelling in Higher Education Research**

Historically, sharing family stories has not been seen as a pedagogical tool that can help children negotiate the American educational pipeline. Although the literature in this area continues to grow, narratives, storytelling, and counter-stories can serve as pedagogical tools to help better understand the experiences of people's lives "through deliberative and mindful listening techniques" (Taylor, 2009, p. 10). Delgado (1989) initially introduced counter-storytelling as a tool to analyze and challenge the stories of those in power and those whose stories are a natural part of the dominant discourse. This dominant discourse is referred to as the majoritarian story, which is challenged by documenting the stories of those whose experiences are not often told, especially those on the margins of society (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

In this study, I drew upon the women's narratives to counter the dominant simplistic and deficit views of students of Mexican heritage, and to provide a more nuanced and descriptive account of how students' engagements with their families can result in positive schooling experiences. Parallel to Fernandez (2002),<sup>28</sup> my study supports the four important methodological functions and benefits of employing storytelling or narratives. Specifically, my research approach:

- Encouraged participants to reflect on their lived experiences;

---

<sup>28</sup> Through the use of personal narratives, Fernandez (2002) provided a richer understanding of one Latino student's educational high school experiences and perspectives from his urban public schooling.

- Empowered participants who have been historically marginalized by providing them the opportunity to speak or make public their stories;
- Challenged the dominant story (socially constructed by Whites) and offered an alternative to the majoritarian narrative, thus placing the truthfulness and “objectivity” of that narrative into question; and
- Promoted transformative behaviors when participants shared stories with others, which can often raise individuals’ consciousness of common experiences and open up the possibility for social action.

As critical race theorists, we specifically use storytelling to provide a venue for marginalized populations to voice their experiential knowledge and to make their lived experiences visible (see Rodriguez, 2010).

Numerous scholars have documented the benefits of storytelling for *young students*. For instance, storytelling has been found to foster oral language skills, which in turn facilitates literacy development (Cooper, 2005; Coskie, Trudel, & Vohs, 2010; Dyson & Genishi, 1994; Heath & Branscombe, 1986; Michaels & Cazden, 1986; Miller & Mehler, 1994; Olmedo, 2005; Snow & Goldfield, 1982). There is a paucity of research, however, on the influences of storytelling on students’ educational trajectories in general, and on higher education experiences more specifically. Thus, my research makes an important contribution by shedding light on the benefits of familial *cuentos* and *consejos* in higher education. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 provided in-depth analyses of the long-term benefits of students’ engagements with their families’ *cuentos* and *consejos* in their educational trajectories.

These findings are vital to consider in efforts to control college attrition, promote college retention, and advance college satisfaction among underrepresented populations in higher education. Hence, I aimed to advance theoretical understandings of how students’ familial-

cultural practices serve as pedagogical tools and influence first-generation college women of Mexican heritage in their negotiation of higher education experiences. The findings challenge cultural deficit approaches, which have been used historically to explain the lack of academic success of students of color in the K–16 school system (see Valencia & Solórzano, 1997).

### **Contribution to Theory**

The contribution of this study to theory is two-fold: (a) it provides a new model of developmental (Figure 1.2), and (b) it accounts for how all of Yosso's (2005) forms of capital interconnect in the processes by which students leverage cultural assets in order to persist in higher education. Figure 7.7 shows the functions of all three engagements within the comprehensive model. The most significant finding includes an understanding of the significance of familial-cultural assets, and how students attribute symbolic value and transform these values into educational aspirations and attainment. The women in this study chose to deploy the strategies they had acquired via their assets in educational settings.

This study built on previous research on persistence among underrepresented racial minorities in higher education and challenged the majoritarian view of a “normal” college transition—i.e., a three-phase process of separation, transition, and incorporation (see Chapter 2). The findings illustrate how students apply assets and resources to real life scenarios, and how these assets contribute to college persistence. Scholars like Tara Yosso (2005, 2006)—whose research challenges normative views and majoritarian narratives that fail to capture how non-dominant students navigate college life—inspired the developmental engagement model. To date, however, scholars who have examined cultural assets as tools for academic success have not explained how they are developed and deployed in order to help students effectively overcome hurdles in college. This is what the current study aimed to do.

The dominant model, discussed in Chapter 2, suggests that students must separate from their pre-college relationships in order to achieve effective college transitions and ultimately incorporate themselves into college life (Tinto, 1993). The model argues that this particular process is necessary to excel in higher education. A useful critique can be seen in Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth model, which defines six forms of capital: aspirational, social, familial, navigational, linguistic and resistant. Yosso argued that students from communities of color possess and use these forms of capital to navigate educational settings.

While Yosso (2005) provided a critical explication of community cultural wealth and the assets students of color bring to educational settings, a more thorough explanation of how these assets are developed and deployed in real life scenarios is needed to better understand how they serve as college resources, contributing to persistence. Hence, the current study built on Yosso's (2005) model to examine how these forms of capital are developed, how they function, and how they interconnect. The developmental engagement model revealed the process through which youth from communities of color, particularly Latinas/os, employ the community-based assets that Yosso identified in her community cultural wealth model.

The developmental engagement process explains what students experience when navigating within their social worlds (including academic and familial relationships). In this study, the model was applied to students' engagements with familial-cultural practices. I examined how seven women identified familial *cuentos* and *consejos* as significant and attributed symbolic value to them, in order to transform them into tools such as asset-based resources. The connections among these three engagements are not linear, per se. Students move in and out of them at various times and in different settings; they continue to engage with their social worlds using their families' cultural practices as they build resilience and persistence in various social contexts.

This developmental engagement model deepens our understanding of the six forms of capital in Yosso's (2005) model and the manner in which they intersect and build on each other. By drawing upon empirical data from these seven women's college transition experiences, I was able to elaborate on how they used community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). In particular, the findings illuminate the developmental process, function, and linkage between Yosso's six forms of capital.

First, I applied the concept of familial capital to understand the role family plays in the educational aspirations, attainment, and experiences of the seven women in this study. I expanded on this form of familial capital by further examining the women's engagement with *cuentos* and *consejos* as familial-cultural practices, wherein histories, wisdom, and experiences are codified and relayed. Additionally, my study shows how familial capital is related to linguistic capital. The participants' utilization of linguistic capital gave them the ability to communicate in more than one language and engage with familial *cuentos* and *consejos* in Spanish, which then enabled them to convert learned life values into asset-based resources.

Asset-based resources as articulated in this study (see Chapter 5) are an extension of Yosso's (2005) "aspirational capital," and include a broader set of aspects: motivation, positivity/optimism, and work ethic, in addition to familial, cultural, and ethnic pride. As Yosso (2005) began to indicate, aspirational capital is developed in familial and social contexts and is not static; aspirations in this sense have complementary components, which I identify as asset-based resources.

One particular aspiration of these women was to obtain a college degree to vindicate familial hardships and sacrifices. This aspiration served as the motivational fuel needed to persist in educational settings. These women had worked diligently toward their various aspirations. A strong work ethic enabled them to be proactive and carry out appropriate

behaviors to achieve their aspirations. Moreover, their ability to sustain positivity/optimism through faith allowed them to maintain psychological well-being, as well as hope, confidence, and dedication to their everyday activities in educational settings. Finally, they preserved important aspects of their identities, including family history, ethnic background, and cultural origins. They nurtured familial, ethnic, and cultural pride by acknowledging and honoring their Mexican-heritage, because they recognized the assets and values that their parents and their Mexican and Latina/o communities symbolized. These asset-based resources (as listed above), were then deployed by students to help them navigate through school successfully.

**Finally**, asset-based resources, developed from familial capital, were deployed as instances of social and navigational capital. Once the women entered higher education, they had to learn how to exercise the assets and resources they brought with them. Hence, they employed six strategies, as discussed in Chapter 6, allowing them to deploy asset-based resources, putting into practice what Yosso (2005) called “navigational capital.” They enhanced their social capital through involvement with student organizations (e.g., ballet *folklórico* and sororities) and campus resources (e.g., academic offices and resource centers), and these connections complemented their existing assets and resources (e.g., familial, ethnic, and cultural pride).

The women in this study drew upon these strategies to negotiate challenges encountered during their first year in college. The third engagement in the model illustrates how students have the ability to revisit the process in order to develop new strategies. As students interact with their social worlds, they redefine their asset-based resources. For example, they may develop the motivation not only to excel academically, but also to challenge social inequality through attainment of higher education—what Yosso (2005) termed “resistant capital.” In all, the developmental engagement model helps us see the interconnected relationships between the



forms of capital that helped these women through their first-year experiences and enabled them to persist in higher education.

In sum, this study focused on one of many interactions students engage in in their social worlds—familial-cultural practices. These women’s engagement in these practices facilitated the development of five asset-based resources, as examined in Chapter 5. They learned to deploy such asset-based resources by identifying a wide range of strategies, as examined in Chapter 6, and they drew upon such strategies to deal with their first-year challenges, as examined in Chapter 7. Their developmental engagement process involved recognition of important life lessons and values, meaning-making of information, and deployment in educational settings.

### **Contribution to Practice**

Through this study, we gain a rich understanding of the complexity of students’ family attachments in college, the assets that underrepresented minority students bring to the university setting, and students’ expectations that universities acknowledge and honor what they bring to their institutions. The findings are important to college administrators and educators interested in college persistence among underrepresented populations in higher education. They contribute to our understanding of how low-income women of Mexican heritage successfully transition into college life and deal with their college-going experiences. It is vital for practitioners and scholars who teach about and research this vulnerable population to consider these students’ strengths and assets when trying to understand issues related to their persistence in the American educational pipeline, especially in the higher education pipeline, where women of Mexican heritage are underrepresented.

In this section, I discuss how universities can address a limited sense of belonging experienced by students from backgrounds similar to those of the women in the study.

Recommendations gleaned from this study include specific programming suggestions designed to help college administrators interested in college persistence among students of color gain a better understanding of their first-year experiences. What follows are four specific recommendations for programming that universities can make to facilitate the persistence and college-going experiences of first-generation college Latina/o students.

**Asset-based approaches.** First, administrators must move away from deficit perspectives to a more nuanced understanding of how best to support Latina/o students' college-going experiences. This study provided concrete examples of how women of color utilize cultural wealth in their college-going experiences to survive and resist macro- and micro-level forms of oppression (Yosso, 2005).

Administrators must become aware of the different types of assets students of Mexican heritage bring with them to college. They must find ways to incorporate these assets into university programming and the overall campus environment. Furthermore, given that students' familial-cultural practices factor so heavily into how students transition into, adapt to, and cope with college, administrators must also incorporate programming that promotes these interactions, such as on-campus family involvement opportunities.

In discussing the types of interventions that colleges can make to better meet the needs of students like the women in this study, the women themselves recommended that on-campus family events (such as "welcome day" and "parents weekend") also include programming that targets underrepresented minority students' parents and family members who may have limited formal education or English language proficiency. The women further suggested that during these events, parents of first-generation college students be offered exclusive programming that would demonstrate and familiarize them with the culture of college (see, for example, Cabrera & Padilla, 2004). For instance, each woman suggested creating a YouTube video to illustrate to her

immigrant parents what a typical day looks like in a college student's life—specifically a first-generation college student. As one participant shared, the video should be “honest about the level of sleep, stress, and workload” their children will be experiencing, as well as provide recommendations to parents about how they can continue to emotionally support their children in college.

**Celebration of students' familial-cultural traditions.** Second, universities should offer more of what the women described as “family-outing events” that celebrate students' familial, cultural, and ethnic traditions. Often, these types of events are organized by student-led organizations rather than by institutions.<sup>29</sup> While it is important that student organizations help to plan and organize these events, it is crucial that the institutions extend direct invitations to families of underrepresented minority students to attend. Prominent institutional leaders should also play a more active role in organizing these types of programming initiatives, not only to honor students' pre-college assets and resources, but also to allow students to focus more on their academic responsibilities and opportunities like research-based programs. In other words, the students are spending time organizing and implementing these types of initiatives, when they could be studying.

**Accessible written materials.** Third, universities should provide informational pamphlets or other materials that are accessible to parents of incoming first-generation college Latina/o students. These pamphlets should include explicit examples of how parents, who play a tremendous role in their children's educational aspirations and attainment, can provide their

---

<sup>29</sup> WCU does support targeted graduation ceremonies for underrepresented students like Raza, Black, and LGBT students. This is a great example of how the institution has acknowledged and honored underrepresented students on campus. Students are not restricted to a limited amount of ceremony tickets, which is especially helpful because when often come from larger households. More of this type of targeted programming is needed for these students during their first-year experience, however, in order to maximize their college satisfaction and persistence.

children with the types of asset-based resources described in this dissertation. The participants in this study reported that, as a result of this dissertation, they have become more conscious about the assets and resources that they initially brought with them to college. They believe that such insights from their own first-year experiences can help others navigate the transition to college while embracing pre-college relationships and resources. This can, in turn, help combat a sense of guilt and feelings of pressure and self-doubt that are associated with being the first in a family to go to college.

**Sense of belonging.** Fourth, universities should implement and support a wide range of programs aimed at encouraging a sense of belonging among first-generation Latina/o students. In this study, the participants described two major factors that either contributed to or obstructed their sense of belonging: religion/spirituality and subtle forms of discrimination. First, in discussing the importance of positivity and optimism in their persistence in college, the women discussed the role religion and spirituality played in this process. Their parents often reminded them to believe in themselves, have faith in God, and pray whenever they felt stressed or discouraged. However, whenever the women sought spiritual support or a space within the university where they could practice their religion/spirituality, they felt rejected because the appropriate spaces or resources were not available. Hence, I recommend that universities offer these resources on campus or find ways to connect students with organizations that can offer these services.

Furthermore, because the transition from home to college can be a significant one in terms of maintaining religion and/or spirituality, it is important that universities provide information about these resources during freshmen orientation as well as throughout the year. During orientation, students should be able to (a) connect with students from other cultures and develop new relationships; (b) learn about resources and master techniques that can help them

navigate their religious/spiritual transitions in college; and (c) develop cultural competencies that can dispel their fears about college in general and get them excited about their involvement as college students and the achievements that lie ahead.<sup>30</sup>

Another way that universities can help foster students' sense of belonging on campus is to provide them the resources necessary to report incidents of racial discrimination and to provide support when they are experiencing stress or other psychological effects due to racial micro-aggressions. The participants in this study described incidents of racial discrimination that included being questioned by university security about their presence on campus. They discussed the need for social support in such instances to help them cope with these hostile interactions. This social support can come from counselors or institutions that can provide multicultural diversity training to their employees which would help avoid racial micro-aggressions in particular. These key players should serve as a resource and advocate for underrepresented students, especially for students whose ethnic, gender, and sexual orientation identities play a primary role in their university experience.

### **Contribution to Methodology**

As a trained social research methodologist, I am both theorizing and developing new and robust methodologies for studying college access from a cultural perspective. While the multiple-interpretative approach is certainly not new, such studies, particularly in higher education, have rarely been conducted. For example, studies of first-generation students' college-going experiences tend to rely on surveys in order to understand retention, persistence, engagement, and satisfaction (e.g., Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler 1996; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008). While there are benefits to collecting data in these

---

<sup>30</sup> More research is needed in general to better understand how students use religion/spirituality to support their college retention.

ways, I argue that there is an urgent need to produce textured accounts of students' lives in order to gain greater insight into how to better support transitions to and persistence in college.

By "textured accounts," I am referring to feelings, thoughts, and first-hand experiences of everyday life from the point of view of those who live it. These accounts can be obtained through a broad range of practices in a researcher's methodological toolbox. Employing a multiple-qualitative method provides a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. A multiple-interpretive method design adds greater rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to a study (Flick, 2002, 2007), thereby capturing as much of the socially-constructed nature of reality as possible.

Visual methodologies for social science research merge visual methods with a social change and social justice agenda. For example, participant-generated photos can help uncover the candid, rich, and varied accounts of people's experiences and perceptions in their everyday moments. Employing visual methods enabled me to document these women's experiences via photographs and provide snapshots of the ways they chose to deploy their asset-based resources through the display of family photographs, collages, religious statues, and so forth. The use of photography as a research tool and the incorporation of a Latina/o critical race (LatCrit) framework enabled me to gain insight into the everyday moments of their lives. The photographs, combined with students' narratives, challenged normative frameworks and majoritarian stories that fail to capture how students of color navigate college life.

Scholars interested in learning this approach to data collection must understand the history of photography as a research method, and learn the concepts, principles, and values that are important in incorporating visual methodologies into a research agenda. When done well, this methodological approach can make a significant contribution to higher education research on underrepresented minorities and students from communities of color in higher education.

## Suggestions for Future Research

An important next step is to expand on this dissertation research to gain a fuller picture of the issues at hand. Specifically, during the 2015–2016 academic year, I plan to follow up with participants from my dissertation study, who by then will be completing their final year of college. I plan to conduct an additional set of interviews and focus groups with these seven women as upperclassmen. At this point, the women can provide critical insights into their navigation and negotiation processes in higher education, identity formation, and overall university experiences. I will ask them to reflect on their undergraduate trajectories, highlight major defining moments, and provide recommendations for maximizing the first-year experiences and beyond for underrepresented students at top-tier research universities.

As a new dimension of the research, I will use their academic transcripts as artifacts to elicit critical discussions about their trajectories. Additionally, I will once again ask the participants to reflect on the shared meaningful artifacts and spaces that they described during their first year in college. This will give them an opportunity to compare and contrast new artifacts and spaces as upperclassmen. My goal is to turn this longitudinal study into a book-length manuscript that can serve to guide first-generation college students to maximize their college satisfaction and persistence. In so doing, I will learn from the experiential knowledge and experiences of the seven participants in this study and acknowledge and honor the *testimonios* (testimonies) of these *mujeres* (women) of Mexican heritage in higher education.

I also plan to expand my research by interviewing the women's parents to better understand how they, as immigrant parents, interpret their children's experiences in higher education. Ultimately, I hope to contribute to equity and asset-based research on the role of immigrant parents in education and produce a guide to navigating the higher education landscape. The guide will be designed for parents who have not experienced the American

educational system themselves. I also seek to conduct further studies expanding my study population to other groups, including, but not limited to, Latino males.

My research agenda will contribute to the literature on how universities, as organizations, can better support students who have been historically underserved in higher education. Within the next three years, I plan to examine the drop-off in STEM majors (three of the participants in my dissertation study were STEM aspirants who experienced different educational outcomes). Better understanding how first-generation college student navigate the STEM pipeline was important to explore, but this was beyond the scope of this particular study. More specifically, examine how the types of information, educational experiences, resources and mentoring received (or not), in high school, influence first-generation college students' STEM-identity and experience during the first-year in college.

While I used the developmental engagement model in this study to examine the lives of seven undergraduate Latinas of Mexican heritage, it should also be implemented in studies that examine students who are diverse in terms of gender and other social, cultural, and economic differences. I found that this process contributed to the abilities of these seven women to persist academically, but the ways in which they brought these understandings into their daily lives warrants further examination. Specifically, we need to understand how a more diverse population of students draws upon their engagements with their social worlds, including their families, to navigate school successfully.

Finally, we need additional studies that combine traditional interpretive methods with visual methodologies. This approach provided me with the tools essential to exploring the gendered, social, cultural, and economic differences among students. The approach effectively captured how one group of underrepresented students navigated college life. In order to shape policy, we need to do this type of grounded work that identifies these problems. In the



meantime, my micro-level research can inform educational policy implications relating to first-generation college students, critical educational transitions (e.g., secondary to post-secondary), retention, and campus climate.

### **Conclusion**

Higher education scholarship should continue to contribute to improving access and outcomes for historically underrepresented students in college. More research is needed on the narratives of marginalized students to make the invisible visible by allowing those who are typically silenced to share their subjective experiences and provide snapshots of daily realities experienced during their college careers. Education is policy-driven. Policy influences the programs institutions offer students. If institutions of higher education wish to facilitate and maintain higher retention, satisfaction, and graduation rates among underrepresented students, including Latinas/os, it is imperative to understand and document their university experiences. Research like this current study provides insight into the need for more funding for students to offer more programs that affect student success.

While family ties may be both an advantage (e.g., Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Sanchez, Reyes, & Singh, 2006) and a challenge (e.g., Fuligni & Peterson, 2002; Espinoza, 2010; Tinto, 1993) for students of color, the use of visual methods, including photo-elicitation interviews, under a LatCrit framework can help make sense of the racialized layers of subordination based on culture, language, phenotype, accent, immigration status, and surname, and to highlight various forms of resilience and agency. This approach has helped to shed light on the complexity of these relationships for first-generation college Chicanas/os (e.g., What is a student to do when there is a family gathering the weekend before a paper is due?). This issue directly connects to developing a multicultural college-going identity, in that the university must

acknowledge and honor students' families and community assets when developing programming and agenda objectives.

I conclude with the following quote shared by a participant in this study, as she reflected on what brought her to the university in the first place:

I remember when my parents were bringing me over [to WCU], you could see [the campus] from the distance, from the road, and my dad said, "I wish I could go to college, to a university." That stuck with me forever. It just brings those feeling of, "I am just not here for me. I am here for my family because of all the sacrifices they've done for me. And everything they wished that they can do. I can do it." And if I just think of that, it's why I'm here in the first place. Not just to act crazy—party. I am here to learn and make the most of it—of this amazing experience.

Drawing on Margarita Gangotena's refrain that "The vision of *la familia* continues to be a form of discourse that provides Mexican Americans with identity, support, and comfort in an often hostile environment" (cited in Rodríguez, 2009, p. 19), it is apparent that this young woman is drawing her strength from her immigrant parents' life challenges and obstacles as well as her experiences as a child of immigrants. Thus, she too will endure.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Concepts and Definitions

Term	Definition
<b>Educational Resilience</b>	As defined by Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2000), educational resilience refers to “inner resources, social competencies, and cultural strategies that permit individuals [from marginalized backgrounds] to not only <i>survive, recover, or even thrive</i> after stressful events [specifically in educational settings], but also to draw from the experience to enhance subsequent functioning [to persist through the American educational pipeline]” (p. 229, emphasis added).
<b>Familial-Cultural Practices</b>	Interactions students have with their families that expose them to familial advice, wisdom, and experiential knowledge.
<b>Familial-Cultural Pedagogical Tools</b>	Families use cultural-pedagogical tools like <i>cuentos</i> and <i>consejos</i> to transfer important life-lessons and values. These are vehicles through which familial-cultural practices are imparted.
<b>Developmental Engagement Model</b>	This model describes three developmental engagements that are profoundly necessary to help students develop positive life-long behaviors and attitudes towards education: recognition of important life lessons and values; meaning-making of information; and deployment of such knowledge in various educational settings.
<b>Pedagogies of Sacrifices</b>	These are teachings of important life lessons and values that students learn from engagement in their families’ cultural practices, transferred via pedagogical tools like <i>cuentos</i> and <i>consejos</i> . The various types of <i>cuentos</i> and <i>consejos</i> allow students to value their familial and cultural experiences as children of marginalized families, and how their pursuit of education overcomes the hardships and sacrifices endured by their families. These types of teachings are often seen as non-traditional in educational settings.
<b>Asset-Based Resources</b>	These assets are based in the development of students’ interactions with their families’ cultural practices to socialize them to educational aspirations. Families draw upon familial-cultural pedagogical tools to transfer important life values. These values serve as internal resources to be drawn upon in various settings to sustain educational resilience. Examples of asset-based resources include: motivation; aspirations; familial, ethnic, and cultural pride; positivity/optimism; and a strong work ethic.
<b>Meaning-Making</b>	Meaning-making is a process of identification, attribution, and application that students go through in order to assign significance to practices, artifacts, physical spaces, and educational organizations, and to garner the motivational strength necessary to persist academically.
<b>Educational <i>Familismo</i></b>	Students have interactions with their families that expose them to familial advice, wisdom, and experiential knowledge, transferred through familial-cultural pedagogical tools like <i>cuentos</i> and <i>consejos</i> . These result in positive attitudes and behaviors towards education.

## Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

### Research Participants Needed

Latina graduate student is RECRUITING **FEMALE** students for her *dissertation research*, which explores the college transition and college-going experiences of Mexican-descent students.

#### Participation Criteria:

- (1) Mexican-descent;
- (2) low-income family;
- (3) first-generation college student;
- (4) first-U.S. born generation (born to immigrant parents);
- (5) freshman; and
- (6) live on campus.

The purpose of this research study is to better understand the particular role that family plays during students' college transition and college-going experiences during their first-year in college.

If you meet the participation criteria, are interested, and want to learn more about the study, please **contact Janet Rocha** at [jro383@-----.edu](mailto:jro383@-----.edu).

Thank you for your time,

Janet Rocha, M.A.  
[removed information]

## **Appendix C: Consent Form**

[removed information]

Visual Counter-Storytelling: In what ways do first generation students of Mexican descent draw on their cultural wealth to negotiate the challenges they experience during their freshman year?

You are being asked to participate in this research project conducted by doctoral student, Janet Rocha, and her faculty sponsor, [removed information] at the [removed information]. You were selected as possible participants in this study because you fit the participation criteria: (1) of Mexican-descent; (2) from a low-income family (which will be determined by FAFSA); (3) first-generation college student; (4) first-U.S. born generation; (5) freshmen, and; (6) live on campus. Your participation in this research study is voluntary.

### **Why is this study being done?**

This study will explore the college transition and college-going experiences of students of Mexican-descent. The purpose of this research study is to better understand the particular role family and culture assets play during your college transition and college-going experiences during your first-year in college.

### **What will happen if I take part in this research study?**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will do the following:

Your participation in this study will begin in August 2012 where you will participate up to four open-ended interviews, which will begin with a general question such as, “Tell me about who you are?” and may each last approximately for an hour. Thereafter, you will be given a digital camera and asked to capture your college experiences via photographs. After the images are captured, the next step will be to use your images to guide your individual interviews in your photo-elicitation interviews to help me understand your reasoning for capturing such images. The commitment for this activity may vary among participants. However, I encourage you to fulfill the task within a month. To better organize the collected information, the photo-elicitation interviews will be conducted bi-weekly and may last about one hour. I will also request access to your dorm room and will ask you to share all the personal items that you have decided to bring to campus from home that have played a significant role when dealing with your first year in college. During winter quarter, I will conduct up to four focus groups (i.e., among female freshmen, male freshmen, and a combination of both groups) which may last about an hour, where I will share the study’s preliminary findings and the group will provide feedback on my analysis and you will share your own analysis.

### **How long will I be in the research study?**

You will be asked to participate in the study from August 2012 to June 2013. I will work around your schedule to prevent this study from intervening in your academic, social, and personal life.

### **Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?**

There is no physical risk to you as a participant in this study. However, there may be potential discomfort at being videotaped, audiotaped or interviewed. In order to minimize risks or discomfort, I will constantly keep you informed of the purpose of the research. Moreover, audio or videotaping, will be done to help organize the collected information and will be reviewed later in the study. You have the right to review the tapes made as part of the study to determine whether they should be edited or erased in whole or in part. During interviews, you may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. At the end of this Consent form, you will have the option of allowing me to audiotape/video record your interviews. You have the option to decline this request.

**Are there any potential benefits if we participate?**

There may be no direct benefit to you by your participation in this research study. However, as a graduate student, I will offer guidance and mentoring as you experience college-life. On the other hand, the results of the research may benefit the field of education as a whole because there is oftentimes a disconnect between family and school resources utilized during the college transition. This research seeks to move away from deficit perspectives and will provide specific programming recommendations to help college administrators interested in the issue of college persistence among students from non-dominant communities to gain a richer understanding of the first-year experience among students of Mexican-descent.

**Will I have to pay or receive any payment if I participate in this study?**

Your participation in this study will involve no cost to you. Unfortunately, there will be no compensation for your participation.

**Will information about my participation be kept confidential?**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential. It will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of using pseudonyms and not participants' real names. All data will be kept in a locked file cabinet and only the researcher will have access to the master key. After the researcher writes up her findings for her dissertation, all data files will be erased.

**What are my rights if I take part in this study?**

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time during the duration of the study. If you withdraw no more information will be collected from you. If you withdraw from the study, I will ask if the information already collected from you may be used in the study. Also, you are free to choose not to answer particular question(s) if you do not want to. You may ask that the tape recorder be turned off at any point during the interview if there is something that you do not want to have recorded.

**Who can answer question I might have about this study?**

If you have any questions about this study you may email Janet Rocha at [jro383@---.edu](mailto:jro383@---.edu) and/or you may call her cell at [removed information]. Her advisor, [removed information], is also available at [removed information].

If you wish to ask questions about your rights as a research participant or if you wish to voice any problems or concerns you may have about the study to someone other than the researchers, please call the Office of the Human Research Protection Program at [removed information] or write to Office of the Human Research Protection Program, [removed information].

**Consent:**

Please initial one of the following to indicate whether you agree to allow audiotapes and video-recording to be made of your interview:

- “I agree to allow audiotapes and video-recording to be made of my interview.”
- “I do not agree to allow audiotapes and video-recording to be made of my interview.”

“I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form. I will receive a copy of this consent form after I sign it.”

_____	_____
Participant’s Name (printed)	Date
_____	_____
Participant’s Signature	Date
_____	_____
Investigator’s Signature	Date

## Appendix D: Initial Open-Ended Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about who you are?"

Possible probes to discuss topics/issues that arise that are relevant to the focus of the proposed study:

Family:

- What does family mean to you as a first-generation college student?
  - How do you define family?
- You mentioned that your parents migrated from Mexico. What type of stories did your parents share with you about their home country?
  - Did they share their reasoning for migrating to the United States?
  - How have *their* life experiences impact you, in general?
- What type of *cuentos* (stories) have your parents shared about life, in general?
- What type of *consejos* (advice) have your parents shared about life, in general?
- What are your educational and career aspirations?
  - How has your family influence these aspirations?
- What role did your family have in your decision to attend the participating university?
  - Were there any objections about your decision to live on campus?
- When starting college, how did you negotiate family and school while on campus?
  - Do you talk to your parents during the week? How often? Why?
- Do you go home on the weekends? What are your reasons for going home?
  - How often do you go home? When you are home, describe how you balance homework and family.
- You mentioned that your parents are hard working. Can you provide examples?
  - How does their hardship reflect who you are?
- What does it mean to you to be an individual with Mexican ancestry?
- How do you feel being the first in your family to pursue a college education?
  - How has this influenced your siblings?
  - What's your relationship with your siblings?
- Did the university invite your parents to attend some type of information session regarding how to continue to support and become involved in their child's education while in college?
  - If no, do you think it is necessary for the university to do so? How would this help you with the college transition and college experiences?
- Have you encountered any challenges since starting college? Can you provide specific examples of those challenging moments?
  - How do you balance family and school?
  - What do you do to maintain motivated?



## Appendix E: Initial Photo-Elicitation Interview Protocol

Thank you again for taking the time to participate in this study.

There are two phases in this exercise. First, you will be asked to use the digital camera as a tool to capture your college-going experiences as a first generation college student at a Research I university. Please take the time to reflect on your experiences as a first generation college student of color and decide how you want to tell your story via photographs. Take as many pictures you think are necessary.

After the images are captured, the second phase will be to use your images to guide your individual interviews in your photo-elicitation interviews in order to share your reasoning with me for capturing such images. I will provide a small notepad where you can record your reasoning for capturing such image or other thoughts that may come to mind at any moment during the duration of this study. The commitment for this activity may vary among participants. However, I will encourage you to fulfill the task within a one-month time frame, (i.e., late September to late October 2012). To better organize the collected information, the photo-elicitation interviews will be conducted bi-weekly and may last for about one hour. Below you will find what I call a capturing script or an overarching question with sub-question that may help you with your picture-taking-process.

Please take as many pictures as you want for each of the following questions:

***“What does it mean to you to be a first generation college student at a Research I university?”***

- *What does family mean to you?*
- *How has your family influence your college, career and life aspirations?*
- *How does your family reflect who you are?*
- *How do you balance school and family?*
- *What motivated you to pursue a college education?*
- *What motivates you to go to class?*
- *Where do you live on campus?*
- *Is there something in your room that reminds you of home?*
- *What does dorm-life look like? How’s the roommate situation?*
- *If you had to choose one place on campus as your home-away-from-home, where would it be? Do you have a second place?*
- *Where on campus makes you feel the most welcome?*
- *What places on campus do you avoid?*
- *Where do you study? Do you have a favorite place?*
- *What do you enjoy the most about campus? About college life?*
- *What does an “average” day look like?*
- *What does social life look like?*
- *Who are your friends?*
- *Where is your hangout place on campus?*
- *If there is anything else you want to share that these questions did not address, please include it.*

### Appendix F: Dorm Room Inventory Record Sheet

**Participant:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

What is it?	Take Photo	Record Location	Reason for Bringing to Campus	How has it Helped Their College Experiences	Other Comments
<i>Example:</i> Photos and Frames: Family and Friends	✓	On closet door and on desk	Displayed to look at her family	When school gets stressful, she can look at them and then call them	7 family photos on closet door 3 frames: 1 family and 2 of friends

*Possible artifacts:*

- Photographs: Family, friends, other significant people, etc.
- Posters: Role models, artists, singers, events attended, etc.
- Latino-genre music/movies/books: CDs, DVDs, ipod, etc.
- Items given to participant by someone significant: Stuffed animal, hand-made quilt, religious artifact, etc.
- Items purchased by the participant before attending college: A Paris painting frame, religious artifact.

## REFERENCES

- ACT. (2011). Trends and tracking charts 1983–2010. Retrieved from [http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/10retain\\_trends.pdf](http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/10retain_trends.pdf)
- Andrade, S. J. (1982). Social science stereotypes of the Mexican American woman: Policy implications for research. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 4, 223-244.
- Anzaldúa, G. (2002). Now let us shift... the path of *conocimiento*... inner work, public acts. *This bridge we call home: Radical visions for transformation*, 540-578.
- Astin, A. (1993). What matters in college: Four critical years revisited. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Attinasi, Jr., L. 1989. Getting in: Mexican Americans' perceptions of university attendance and the implications for freshman year persistence. *Journal of Higher Education* 60 (3): 247-277
- Astin, A. W., Astin, H. S., & Lindholm, J. A. (2011). *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students' Inner Lives*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bernal, D. D. (1998). Using a Chicana feminist epistemology in educational research. *Harvard Educational Review*, 68(4), 555-583.
- Bernal, D. (2001). Learning and living pedagogies of the home: The Mestiza consciousness of Chicana students. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 14(5), 623-639.
- Bernal, D. D. (2002). Critical race theory, Latino critical theory, and critical raced-gendered epistemologies: Recognizing students of color as holders and creators of knowledge. *Qualitative inquiry*, 8(1), 105-126.
- Benavides Lopez, C. (2010). *Las fronteras de nuestra educacion: Documenting the pedagogies of migration of mexican and Chicana/o undocumented immigrant households* (Order No. 3450975). Available from Dissertations & Theses @ University of California; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses A&I; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (861924223). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/861924223?accountid=14512>
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Research for education: An introduction to theories and methods*. New York: Pearson.
- Braxton, J. M., Milem, J. F., & Sullivan, A. S. (2000). The influence of active learning on the college student departure process: Toward a revision of Tinto's theory. *Journal of higher education*, 569-590.
- Brougham, R. R., Zail, C. M., Mendoza, C. M., & Miller, J. R. (2009). Stress, sex differences, and coping strategies among college students. *Current Psychology*, 28(2), 85-97.

- Brower, A. (1992). The “second half” of student integration. *Journal of Higher Education*, 63(4), 441-462.
- Bui, K. V. T. (2002). First-generation college students at a four-year university: Background characteristics, reasons for pursuing higher education, and first-year experiences. *College Student Journal*, 36(1), 3–11.
- Cabrera, N. L. & Padilla, A. M. (2004). Entering and succeeding in the “culture of college”: The story of two Mexican heritage students. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*. 26(2), 152-170.
- Carger, C. L. (1996). *Of Borders and Dreams: A Mexican-American Experience of Urban Education*: Teachers College Press.
- Ceja, M. (2004). Chicana college aspirations and the role of parents: Developing educational resiliency. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 3(4), 338-362.
- César Chávez. (n.d.). “Si Se Puede! Cesar E. Chavez and His Legacy” at UCLA. Retrieved from <http://clnet.ucla.edu/research/chavez/quotes/commit.htm>
- Chen, C. P. (2001). On exploring meanings: Combining humanistic and career psychology theories in counselling. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 14(4), 317-330.
- Children Now. (2010). California report card 2010: Setting the agenda for children. Oakland, CA.
- Chacon, M. A., Cohen, E. G., and Strover, S. (1986). Chicanas and chicanos: Barriers to Progress in Higher Education. In M. A. Olivas (ed.), *Latino College Students* (pp. 296-324). New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Collier, J. 1967. *Visual anthropology: Photography as a research meethod*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.
- Cooper, P. M. (2005). Literacy learning and pedagogical purpose in Vivian Paley’s ‘storytelling curriculum’. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 5(3), 229-251.
- Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative sociology*, 13(1), 3-21.
- Coskie, T., Trudel, H., & Vohs, R. (2010). Creating community through storytelling. *Talking Points*, 22(1), 2-9.
- Covarrubias, A. (2011). Quantitative intersectionality: A critical race analysis of the Chicana/o educational pipeline, *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 10(2), 86-105.
- Crenshaw, K. 1989. Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, : 139–166.

- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 1241-1299.
- DeAngelo, L. (2014). Programs and Practices That Retain Students From the First to Second Year: Results From a National Study. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2013(160), 53-75.
- Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1996). *Protean literacy: Extending the discourse on empowerment*: Falmer Press London.
- Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1994). Consejos: The power of cultural narratives. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 25(3), 298-316
- Delgado-Gaitan, C. (2001). *The power of community: Mobilizing for family and schooling*: Rowman & Littlefield Pub Inc.
- Delgado-Gaitan, C. (1992). School matters in the Mexican-American home: Socializing children to education. *American Educational Research Journal*, 29(3), 495-513.
- Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J. (2001). *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Pennsylvania: Temple University Press.
- Delgado, R. (1989). Storytelling for oppositionist and others: Alea for narrative. *Michigan Law Review*, pp. 2411-2441.
- Dougherty, C., Mellor, L., & Jian, S. (2005). The relationship between Advanced Placement and college graduation. *National Center for Educational Accountability. NCEA Study Series Report, 1*.
- Dyson, R., & Renk, K. (2006). Freshmen adaptation to university life: Depressive symptoms, stress, and coping. *Journal of clinical psychology*, 62(10), 1231-1244.
- Erickson, F. (1986). Qualitative Methods in Research on Teaching. In M. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (pp. 119-161). New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Erickson, F. (2011). A history of qualitative inquiry in social and educational research. In N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed., pp. 43-59). Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.
- Erickson, F. (1998). Qualitative research methods for science education. *International Handbook of Science Education* (pp. 1133-1173). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer.
- Escobedo, T.H., (1980). Are Hispanic Women in Higher Education the Nonexistent Minority? *Educational Researcher*, 9, 7-12.
- Espinoza, R. (2010). The good daughter dilemma: Latinas managing family and school demand, *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 9, 317-330.

- Feldman, K. A., & Newcomb, T. M. (1994). *The impact of college on students*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Feldman, K. A., & Newcomb, T. M. (1969). *The impact of college on students: An analysis of four decades of research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Fernández, L. (2002). Telling stories about school: Using critical race and Latino critical theories to document Latina/Latino education and resistance. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 45-65.
- Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban public high school*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press
- Flick, U. (2009). *An introduction to qualitative research*. Sage.
- Folkman, S., & Lazarus, R. S. (1980). An analysis of coping in a middle-aged community sample. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 21, 219-239.
- Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Seabury, 1970.
- Fuligni, A.J., & Pedersen, S. (2002). Family obligation and the transition to young adulthood. *Developmental Psychology*, 38, 856-868.
- Gándara, P. (1999). Telling stories of success: Cultural capital and the educational mobility of Chicano students. *Latino Studies Journal*, 10(3), 8-54.
- Gándara, P. (1995). *Over the ivy walls: The educational mobility of low-income Chicanos*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Garcia, E. E. (2001). *Hispanic education in the United States: Raices y alas*: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- García, S. B., & Guerra, P. L. (2004). Deconstructing deficit thinking: Working with educators to create more equitable learning environments. *Education and Urban Society*, 36(2), 150-168.
- Glaser, B.G., and Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Gloria, A. M., & Castellanos, J. (2012). Desafíos y bendiciones: A multi-perspective examination of the educational experiences and coping responses of first-generation college Latina students. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 11 (1), 81-98.
- González, N., Moll, L. C., Tenery, M. F., Rivera, A., Rendon, P., Gonzales, R., & Amanti, C. (1995). Funds of knowledge for teaching in Latino households. *Urban Education*, 29(4), 443-470.
- González, K. P., Jovel, J. E., & Stoner, C. (2004). Latinas: The new Latino majority in college. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2004(105), 17-27.

- Graesch, A. P. (2009). Material indicators of family busyness. *Social indicators research*, 93(1), 85-94.
- Gutiérrez, K. D., & Rogoff, B. (2003). Cultural ways of learning: Individual traits and repertoires of practice. *Educational Researcher*, 32(5), 19-25.
- Hammersley, M. and P. Atkinson (2005). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*, Taylor & Francis.
- Harper, D. (2002). Talking about pictures: a case for photo elicitation. *Visual Studies*. 19: 1. pp.13-26.
- Harper, D. (1988). Visual sociology: expanding sociological vision, *American Sociologist*, 19:1, pp. 54-70.
- Havighurst, R. J. (1966). Who are the socially disadvantaged? In J. F. Frost & G. T. Hawkes (Eds), *The disadvantaged child: Issues and innovations* (pp. 15-23). New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Heller, C. A. *Mexican-American youth: Forgotten youth at the crossroads*. New York: Random House, 1966.
- Hernandez, J. C. (2002). A qualitative exploration of the first-year experience of Latino college students. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 40(1), 69-84.
- Hernandez, A. V. (2012). *Crawling through the educational pipeline: Latinas, poverty y educacion* (Order No. 3511336). Available from Dissertations & Theses @ University of California; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses A&I; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1022504298). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1022504298?accountid=14512>
- Hine, L. W. (1977). *America and Lewis Hine: Photographs 1904-1940*. Millerton, N.Y: Aperture.
- Holtzman, W. H., Díaz-Guerrero, R., & Swartz, J. D. (1975). *Personality development in two cultures: A cross-cultural longitudinal study of school children in Mexico and the United States*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Hurtado, A. (2005). The transformative power of Chicana/o Studies: Social justice and education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 18(2), 185-197.
- Hurtado, S., Carter, D.F. (1997). Effects of college transition and perceptions of the campus racial climate on Latino college students' sense of belonging. *Sociology of Education*, 324-345.
- Hurtado, S., Carter, D.F., & Spuler, A. (1996). Latino student transition to college: Assessing difficulties and factors in successful college adjustment. *Research in Higher Education*, 37(2), 135-157.

- Hurtado, S., & Ponjuan, L. (2005). Latino educational outcomes and the campus climate. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 4(3), 235-251.
- Johnson, S. E., Richeson, J. A., & Finkel, E. J. (2011). Middle class and marginal? Socioeconomic status, stigma, and self-regulation at an elite university. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 100(5), 838.
- Kraemer, B. A. 1997. The academic and social integration of Hispanic students into college. *Review of Higher Education*, 20: 163-179.
- Krauss, S. E. (2005). Research paradigms and meaning making: A primer. *The qualitative report*, 10(4), 758-770.
- Kuh, G.D., Cruce, T.M., Shoup, R., Kinzie., & Gonyea, R.M. (2008). Unmasking the effects of student engagement on first-year college grades and persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(5), 540-563
- Laden, B. V. (1999). Socializing and mentoring college students of color: The Puente Project as an exemplary celebratory socialization model. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 74(2), 55-74.
- Landson-Billings, G. (1998). Preparing teachers for diverse student populations: A critical race theory perspective. *Review of Research in Education*, 24, 211-247.
- Lee, S. J. (1994). Behind the model-minority stereotype: Voices of high-and low-achieving Asian American students. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 25(4), 413-429.
- Lee, S. J. (1996). *Unraveling the "model minority" stereotype: Listening to Asian American youth*. Teachers College Press.
- Lenning, O. T., & Ebbers, L. H. (1999). *The Powerful Potential of Learning Communities: Improving Education for the Future*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, Vol. 26, No. 6. ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, One Dupont Circle, NW, Suite 630, Washington, DC 20036-1183.
- Levitz, R., & Noel, L. (1989). Connecting students to institutions: Keys to retention and success. In M. L. Upcraft & J. N. Gardner (Eds.), *The freshman year experience: Helping students survive and succeed in college* (pp. 65-81). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Lopez, J. D. (2005). Race-related stress and sociocultural orientation among Latino students during their transition into a predominately White, highly selective institution. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*. 4(4): pp. 354-365.
- Maggio, J. C., White Jr, W. G., Molstad, S., & Kher, N. (2005). Prefreshman summer programs' impact on student achievement and retention. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 2-33.



- Mattern, K.D., Shaw, E.J., & Xiong, X. (2009). *The relationship between AP exam performance and college outcomes*. The College Board. Retrieved from <http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/pdf/RR2009-4.pdf>.
- Maxwell, J. A. (1996). *Qualitative research design*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- McClain, M. (2004). Folklore Dance Groups as Learning Environments: A Mexican American Folklorico Example. *Arts and Learning Research*, 20(1), 39.
- McCormick, A.C. & Zhao, C.M. (2005). Rethinking and Reframing the Carnegie Classification. pp.51-57.
- McDonough, P. M. and Fann, A. J. (2007). *The study of inequality*. In Patricia J. Gumport (Ed.), *Sociology of higher education: Contributions and their contexts* (pp. 53-93). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Melendez, M. C. & Melendez, N. B. (2010). The influence of parental attachment on the college adjustment of White, Black, and Latina/Hispanic women: A cross-cultural investigation. *Journal of College Student Development*, 51(4), 419-435.
- Meo, A. I. (2010). Picturing Students' Habitus: The Advantages and Limitation of Photo-elicitation Interviewing in a Qualitative Study in the City of Buenos Aires. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 2: 2, pp. 149-171
- Michael, A. E., Dickson, J., Ryan, B., & Koefer, A. (2010). College prep blueprint for bridging and scaffolding incoming freshmen: Practices that work. *College Student Journal*, 44(4), 969.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory into practice*, 31(2), 132-141.
- Moreno, J. F. (1999). *The elusive quest for equality: 150 years of Chicano/Chicana education*: Harvard Educational Review Reprint Series.
- Moreno, D. R., & Banuelos, S. M. S. (2013). The Influence of Latina/o Greek Sorority and Fraternity Involvement on Latina/o College Student Transition and Success. *The Journal of Latino-Latin American Studies*, 5(2), 113-12
- Muñoz, D. G. (1986). Identifying areas of stress for Chicano undergraduates. *Latino college students*, 131-156.
- National Council of La Raza. (n.d.). Twenty of the most frequently asked questions about Hispanics in the U.S. Retrieved from [http://www.nclr.org/index.php/about\\_us/faqs/most\\_frequently\\_asked\\_questions\\_about\\_hispanics\\_in\\_the\\_us/](http://www.nclr.org/index.php/about_us/faqs/most_frequently_asked_questions_about_hispanics_in_the_us/)

- Nora, A., & Cabrera, A. F. (1996). The role of perceptions of prejudice and discrimination on the adjustment of minority students to college, *Journal of Higher Education*, 67(2), 119-148.
- Núñez, A. M. (2011). Counterspaces and connections in college transitions: First-generation Latino students' perspectives on Chicano studies. *Journal of College Student Development*, 52(6), 639-655.
- Ochs, E. (1990). Indexicality and socialization. In J. W. Stigler, R. Shweder, & G. Herdt (Eds.), *Cultural psychology: Essays on comparative human development* (pp. 287-308). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Olmedo, I. M. (2005). Storytelling and Latino elders: What can children learn. In E. Gregory, S. Long & D. Volk (Eds.), *Many pathways to literacy: Young children learning with siblings, grandparents, peers, and community* (pp. 77-88). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Olvera, A. E. (2008). Cultural dance and health: A review of the literature. *American Journal of Health Education*, 39(6), 353-359.
- Pascarella, E. T., Pierson, C. T., Wolniak, G. C., & Terenzini, P. T. (2004). First-generation college students: Additional evidence on college experiences and outcomes. *Journal of Higher Education*, 249-284.
- Pascarella, E. T., Duby, P. & Iverson, B. (1983). A test and reconceptualization of a theoretical model of college withdrawal in a commuter institution setting. *Sociology of Education*, 56, 88-100.
- Pascarella, E.T., and Terenzini, P.T. (1991). *How College Affects Students*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Peña, C., Camacho, K., & Silva, P. (2014). A Bridge for Latinos to Opportunity and Success. Retrieved on May 1, 2015 from [http://twcresearchprogram.net/pdf/TWC\\_RP\\_LULAC.pdf](http://twcresearchprogram.net/pdf/TWC_RP_LULAC.pdf)
- Perez Huber, L. (2009). Disrupting apartheid of knowledge: testimonio as methodology in Latina/o critical race research in education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22(6), 639-654.
- Pierce, C. (1970). Offensive mechanisms. In F. Barbour (Ed.), *The Black seventies* (pp. 265-282). Boston: Porter Sargent.
- Pierce, C., Carew, J., Pierce-Gonzalez, D., & Wills, D. (1978). An experiment in racism: TV commercials. In C. Pierce (Ed.), *Television and education* (pp. 62-88). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Phinney, J. S., & Haas, K. (2003). The process of coping among ethnic minority first-generation college freshmen: A narrative approach. *The Journal of social psychology*, 143(6), 707-726.
- Richardson, R. C., & Skinner, E. F. (1992). Helping first-generation minority students achieve degrees. *New directions for community colleges*, 1992(80), 29-43.

- Riis, J.A. (1890) *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*. New York, NY: Charles Schribner's Sons.
- Rendón, L. I., Jalomo, R. E., & Nora, A. (2000). Theoretical considerations in the study of minority student retention in higher education. In J. M. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (pp. 127-156). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Rodríguez, R. T. (2009). *Next of kin: the family in Chicano/a cultural politics*: Duke University Press Books.
- Rodriguez, A. L., Guido-DiBrito, F., Torres, V., & Talbot, D. (2000). Latina college students: Issues and challenges for the 21st century. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 37(3), 167-183.
- Rogoff, B. (1995). Observing sociocultural activity on three planes: Participatory appropriation, guided participation, and apprenticeship. In J. V. Wertsch, P. del Rio, & A. Alvarez (Eds.), *Sociocultural studies of mind* (pp. 139-164). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Rogoff, B., Baker-Sennett, J., Lacasa, P., & Goldsmith, D. (1995). Development through participation in sociocultural activity. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 1995(67), 45-65.
- Rogoff, B. (1997). Evaluating development in the process of participation: Theory, methods, and practice building on each other. *Change and development: Issues of theory, method, and application*, 265-285.
- Romo, H., & Falbo, T. (1996). *Latino high school graduation: Defying the odds*: University of Texas Press.
- Rossman, G. R., & Rallis, B. SF (2003). *Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research*. Sage.
- Salcedo, C. (2013). *Chicana/o student retention: Why Chicana/o Studies at CSUN matters* (Doctoral dissertation, California State University, Northridge).
- Sanchez, S. M. (2011). *First-Generation Latino Males in Latino Fraternities at a Predominately White Institution: Psychological, Social, and Cultural College Experiences*. ProQuest LLC. 789 East Eisenhower Parkway, PO Box 1346, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.
- Sánchez, S., Reyes, O., & Singh, J. (2006). Makin' it in college: The value of significant individuals in the lives of Mexican American adolescents. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 5, 48-67
- Schensul, S.T., Schensul, J.J., and LeCompte, M.D. (1999). *Exploratory or open-ended observation*. In J.J Schensul & M.D LeCompte (Eds.), *Essential Ethnographic Methods: Observations, Interviews, and Questionnaires (Ethnographer's Toolkit)* (pp. 91-120). Walnut Creek, California: Altamira Press.

- Singer, J. A. (2004). Narrative identity and meaning making across the adult lifespan: An introduction. *Journal of personality*, 72(3), 437-460.
- Sleeter, C. E. (2011). The academic and social value of ethnic studies: A research review. Washington, DC: National Education Association.
- Snow, C. E., & Goldfield, B. (1982). Building stories: The emergence of information structures from conversation. *Analyzing discourse: Text and talk*, 127-141.
- Solórzano, D. G., & Bernal, D. D. (2001). Examining transformational resistance through a critical race and LatCrit theory framework Chicana and Chicano students in an urban context. *Urban Education*, 36(3), 308-342.
- Solórzano, D.G., & Yosso, T.J. (2006). *Leaks in the Chicana and Chicano educational pipeline (Policy Rep. No. 13)*. Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, Chicano Studies Research Center.
- Solórzano, D., & Yosso, T. (2001). Critical race and LatCrit theory and method: counter-storytelling. *Qualitative Studies in Education* , 471-495.
- Solórzano, D., & Yosso, T. (2002). Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*. 8: 1, pp. 23-44.
- Solórzano, D., Ceja, M. & Yosso, T.J. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *The Journal of Negro Education*.69: 1/2, pp 60.
- Solórzano, D., Villalpando, O., & Oseguera, L. (2005). Educational inequalities and Latina/o undergraduate students in the United States: A critical race analysis of their educational progress. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 4, 272-294
- Solórzano, D. G., & Villalpando, O. (1998). Critical race theory, marginality, and the experience of students of color in higher education. *Sociology of education: Emerging perspectives*, 211-224.
- Solórzano, D., Ledesma, M., Pérez, J., Burciaga, R., & Ornelas, A. (2003). Latina equity in education project: Gaining access to academic enrichment programs: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, Latino Policy & Issues Brief.
- Soria, K. M., & Stubblefield, R. (2014). First-Year College Students' Strengths Awareness: Building a Foundation for Student Engagement and Academic Excellence. *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*,26(2), 69-88.
- Stanton-Salazar, R. D., & Spina, S. U. (2000). The network orientations of highly resilient urban minority youth: A network-analytic account of minority socialization and its educational implications. *The Urban Review*, 32(3), 227-261.

- Stassen, M. L. (2003). Student outcomes: The impact of varying living-learning community models. *Research in higher education*, 44(5), 581-613.
- Strauss, A & Corbin, J., M. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2011). Bridging the pipeline: Increasing underrepresented students' preparation for college through a summer bridge program. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 55(2), 142-159.
- Suarez-Orozco, C., & Suárez-Orozco, M. M. (1995). *Transformations: Immigration, family life, and achievement motivation among Latino adolescents*: Stanford University Press.
- Suchar, C.S. (1997). Grounding visual sociology research In shooting script. *Qualitative Sociology*, 20, 33-48
- Sy, S. R., & Romero, J. (2008). Family responsibilities among Latina college students from immigrant families. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 7(3), 212-227.
- Sy, S. (2006). Family and work influences on the transition to college among Latina adolescents. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 28, 368-368.
- Taylor, M. C. (1927). *Retardation of Mexican children in thte Albuquerque schools*. Unpublished master's thesis, Leland Stanford Junior University, Stanford, CA.
- Taylor, E. (2009). The Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education: An Introduction. In E. Taylor, D. Gillborn, and G. Ladson-Billings (Ed.), *Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education*. pp. 1-13, New York and London: Routledge.
- Thayer, P. B. (2000). Retaining First Generation and Low Income Students. *Opportunity Outlook*, 2, 8.
- Tierney, W. G. (1992). An anthropological analysis of student participation in college. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 603-618.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of educational research*, 89-125.
- Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*: University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (2006). Research and practice of student retention: What next? *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 8, 1-19.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Chicago, IL, The University of Chicago Press.

- Towbes, L. C., & Cohen, L. H. (1996). Chronic stress in the lives of college students: Scale development and prospective prediction of distress. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, 25(2), 199-217.
- Trueba, H., Rodriguez, C., Zou, Y., & Cintron, J. (1993). *Healing multicultural America*: New York: The Falmer Press.
- Upcraft, M. L., Gardner, J. N., & Associates (Eds.). (1989). *The freshman year experience: Helping students survive and succeed in college*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- U.S. Census (2010). The Hispanic Population: Census Briefs. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-04.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2011). *Digest of Education Statistics, 2010* (NCES 2011-015), Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov>
- Valdés, G. (1996). *Con respeto: Bridging the distances between culturally diverse families and schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Valencia, R. R. (2002). *Chicano school failure and success: Past, present, and future*: Routledge Falmer.
- Valencia, R. R., & Black, M. S. (2002). "Mexican Americans Don't Value Education!" On the Basis of the Myth, Mythmaking, and Debunking. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 1(2), 81-103.
- Valencia, R. R., & Solórzano, D. G. (1997). Contemporary deficit thinking. *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*, 160-210.
- Gennep, A. V. (2004). *The rites of passage* (Vol. 44): Psychology Press.
- van Rhijn, T., Quosai, T. S., & Lero, D. S. (2011). A profile of undergraduate student parents in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 41(3), 80.
- Varma, R & Hahn, H. (2008). Gender and the pipeline metaphor in computing. *European Journal of Engineering Education*, 33, 3-11.
- Vasquez, O. A., Pease-Alvarez, L., Shannon, S. M., & Moll, L. (1994). *Pushing boundaries: Language and culture in a Mexicano community*: Cambridge University Press.
- Villenas, S., & Deyhle, D. (1999). Critical race theory and ethnographies challenging the stereotypes: Latino families, schooling, resilience and resistance. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 29(4), 413-445.
- Walpole, M., Simmerman, H., Mack, C., Mills, J., Scales, M., & Albano, D. (2008). Bridge to success: Insight into summer bridge program students' college transition. *Journal of the first-year experience & students in transition*, 20(1), 11-30.

- Wang, C. (1999). Photovoice: a participatory action research strategy applied to women's health. *Journal of Women's Health* , pp. 185-192.
- Wang, C.C., Cash, J.L., & Powers, L.S. (2000). Who Knows the Streets as Well as the Homeless? Promoting Personal and Community Action through Photovoice. *Health Promotion Practice*. 1:1, pp. 81-89.
- Wang, C., Kun Yi, W., Wen Tao, Z., & Carovano, K. (1998). Photovoice as a participatory health promotion strategy . *Health Promotion International* , pp. 75-86.
- Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, Methodology, and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment. *Health Education & Behavior* , pp. 369-386.
- Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1994). Empowerment through photo novella: Portraits of participation. *Health Education & Behavior* , 171-186.
- Watford, T. & Park, V. (2011). *Journal content analysis: Literature review on research methods utilized*. A Project at UC/ACCORD, Pathways to Postsecondary Success. Retrieved from powerpoint presentation by Solórzano, D. in ED 204: Minority Education in Cross-Culture Perspective.
- Yosso, T. J., Smith, W. A., Ceja, M., & Solórzano, D. G. (2009). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate for Latina/o undergraduates. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(4), 659-691.
- Yosso, T., J. (2006). *Critical race counterstories along the Chicana/o educational pipeline*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Yosso, T., J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8, 69-84.
- Zambrana, R. E. 1988. Toward understanding the educational trajectory and socialization of Latina women. In T. McKenna and F.I. Ortiz (eds.), *the broken web: The educational experience of Hispanic American women*, pp.61-77. Claremont, California: The Romas Rivera Center.
- Zarate, M.E. & Gallimore, R.G. (2005). Gender Differences in Factors Leading to College Enrollment: A longitudinal Analysis of Latina and Latino Students. *Harvard Educational Review*, Cambridge, MA.
- Zinn, M. B. (1982). Familism among Chicanos: A theoretical review. *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, 224-238.
- Zinn, M. B. (1975). Political familism: Toward sex role equality in Chicano families. *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 6(1), 13-26.