

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN MARCOS

**Latinx Pandemic Melt:
A Phenomenological Study of Summer Melt during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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

in

Educational Leadership

by

Jessica Resendez

Committee in charge:

California State University, San Marcos

Brooke Soles, Chair
Erika Daniels

University of California, San Diego

Carolyn Huie Hofstetter
Shana R Cohen

2022

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University of California San Diego
California State University, San Marcos

2022

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my two children,
Gemma Margarita Orozco-Resendez
and
Gabino Heriberto Orozco-Resendez.

EPIGRAPH

They say I gotta learn, but nobody's here to teach me
If they can't understand it, how can they reach me?

- Coolio / Kylian Mash

I've seen it all a thousand times
Falling down I'm still alive, am I? Am I?
So hard to breathe when the water's high
No need to swim I'll learn to fly, so high, so high
You find the truth in a child's eyes
When the only limit is the sky
Living proof I see myself in you

- Aj Mclean / Kevin Richardson / Mika Guillory / Morgan Taylor Reid

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the entire faculty of the Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership, who connected me with opportunities to learn more about myself, my profession, and leadership within the educational system. Specifically, I would like to acknowledge my committee chair, Dr. Brooke Soles for mentoring me through my dissertation journey and supporting me every step of the way! I would also like to acknowledge Cohort 15 for their never-ending encouragement and support. We are THAT cohort!

I want to especially acknowledge someone who went on this journey with me and was a great source of support and strength: Ernesto Feliciano Orozco Jr., my husband, partner, and friend. Finally, to my family, friends and students who were my source of inspiration for pursuing college access research and my doctoral degree. I love you all and proud to share this accomplishment as it “takes a village”. ¡Sí se puede! **¡Lo hice!**

VITA

EDUCATION

- 2022 Doctor of Education, Educational Leadership, Joint Doctoral Program of University of California San Diego and California State University, San Marcos
- 2016 Master of Arts in Education School Counseling, Concordia University Irvine
- 2007 Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, University of California San Diego

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- 2018 Educational Talent Search Program Coordinator, UCSD TRIO Outreach Programs
- 2011 External Reader, Office of Admissions and Relations with Schools UC San Diego
- 2008 College Advisor, The Preuss School UCSD
- 2007 Admissions Coordinator, The Preuss School UCSD

AWARDS

- CESCal Supporting Access to Higher Education for Immigrant and Undocumented Students: School Counselor Advocate Award 2017
- San Diego Union Tribune Latino Champions: Educator Award 2016
- Rotary Club of La Jolla Community Service Award for Outstanding Educator 2012

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

Jessica Resendez

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

University of California San Diego, 2022
California State University, San Marcos, 2022

Brooke Soles, Chair

Latinx students are becoming the majority population in K-12 public schools in the United States. Despite higher education institutions, K-12 schools, and non-profit organizations working to increase Latinx college admission rates, these students continue to be underrepresented in four-year colleges/universities. Latinx students who successfully overcome the multiple barriers to become eligible, apply, and admitted into a university may find their post-secondary plans disintegrate during the summer months between high school graduation and college matriculation (Rall, 2016; Tichavakunda & Galan, 2020). This is a time period

where traditionally neither the high school nor the intended college take responsibility for these students or support their transition, resulting in the failure of some students to matriculate at their intended post-secondary institution. *Summer melt* is a term applied to students that apply to college, are accepted to college, but melt away from the enrollment cycle in the summer months prior to the fall term for various reasons (Castleman & Page, 2014). This phenomenological study collected data from semi-structured interviews with California Latinx students who planned to attend university immediately after high school graduation in 2020 but did not actually matriculate at a four-year institution. The goal was to better understand the lived experiences of Latinx summer melt students as well as explore factors that influenced their final college decision during the COVID-19 pandemic. Study participants discussed the challenges they encountered during their college application and enrollment process and how they navigated these obstacles utilizing different supports and forms of community cultural wealth. The challenges students faced during their journey to college were COVID-19 pandemic, college cost and family finances, difficulty completing college enrollment tasks, and personal challenges. Students received support during their college transition process from family, near-age peers, high school staff, college access program staff, and community college staff. The major forms of CCW students utilized in the pursuit of their college goals were aspirational, familial, social and navigational while the least forms of capital used were resistant and linguistic.

Keywords: summer melt, Latinx, college transition, community cultural wealth

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Context and Nature of the Study

In 2014, President Obama announced his goal for the United States to have the highest proportion of college graduates by 2020 (Lederman & Fain, 2017). Former First Lady, Michelle Obama continues to promote her Reach Higher initiative, which inspires all students, especially first-generation and low-income students, to pursue post-secondary education (Whistle, 2020). Attaining higher education leads to increased social mobility and economic stability for many Americans. Latinx students are becoming the majority population in K-12 public schools in the United States. There are state and local school district policies and initiatives that attempt to “level the playing field” for students by encouraging a “college for all” model at every high school (Kurlaender et al., 2018; Roderick et al., 2009).

Gains have been made in increasing Latinx college enrollment, but these students are still underrepresented in selective institutions of higher education such as four-year universities. There is substantial college access research on this group of students, including increasing college application and admission rates and decreasing college attrition (Crisp et al., 2015; Flink, 2018; Salis Reyes & Nora, 2012). However, this work tends to focus on students while they are enrolled in K-12 schools or once they have already matriculated in college and started courses. There is a need to support students during the crucial time between graduating high school and starting college. This is a time period where students who already demonstrated their college readiness by applying and being accepted to a post-secondary institution, “slip through the cracks” during the summer months and don’t actually start at their intended college at the start of the fall term, resulting in “summer melt” (Castleman & Page, 2014a).

Summer melt is the term used to describe the phenomenon of when college intending

high school students fail to matriculate at their intended college starting the fall term after high school graduation (Castleman & Page, 2014a). College-intending students will “melt” at rates ranging from 8% to 40% (Castleman et al., 2012; Castleman & Page, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a; Daugherty, 2012). The national summer melt rate average is 15% but is much higher for first-generation students, low-income students, and students of color (Castleman et al., 2012; Castleman & Page, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a; Daugherty, 2012). Some studies show that Latinx students experience the highest rates of summer melt (Castleman et al., 2015b; Daugherty, 2012). Considering how important the Latinx population is to California’s “cultural fabric and are central to the state’s future economic prosperity”, it is crucial to examine how Latinx students are navigating the public educational system (Buenrostro, 2018, p. 1).

It is imperative to address the issue of summer melt as a critical leak in the Latinx college-going pipeline. The first step is to learn how Latinx students experience summer melt. Once we hear from these students directly about their experiences, then we can design and implement effective summer melt intervention programs for this student population. Research has shown that students who enroll in four-year colleges immediately after graduating from high school are more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree than those who first attend a community college or take a gap year (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Brock, 2010; Horn et al., 2005). Thus, reducing summer melt rates among Latinx students can contribute to the work of decreasing college attrition and increasing the rate of Latinx students earning bachelor's and other advanced college degrees.

Statement of the Problem

Overall, Latinx high school graduation and college acceptance rates have improved yet a gap in college enrollment rates persists between Latinx students and their peers (Ward, 2006).

One area of focus which can make a significant impact is in supporting Latinx students' transition from college admission to college matriculation and avoiding summer melt (Castleman & Page, 2014a). The wide range in summer melt rates can be attributed to the specific geographic location, school districts, and student populations included in recent studies. Summer melt affects low-income, first-generation, and students of color at higher rates than traditional college-bound students (Castleman & Page, 2014a). There are many factors, which can influence a student's path from high school graduation to college matriculation (Castleman & Page, 2014a; Manzano-Sanchez et al., 2019).

Many summer melt intervention studies suggest the largest barrier to immediate college enrollment for high school graduates include issues with financial aid and family finances (Arnold et al., 2009, 2015; Castleman et al., 2012, 2014a; Daugherty, 2012; Rall, 2016). First-generation, low-income students also find the complexities of tasks and requirements in the college enrollment process challenging to understand and complete in a timely manner (Rall, 2016). First-generation, low-income students of color may face social or emotional difficulties in transitioning to college. For many low-income, first-generation, Latinx students, these factors are not mutually exclusive and often intersect with one another producing complex barriers to their college aspirations.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

Though progress has been made in educational policy and interventions to support Latinx students to gain more access to higher education, a gap in four-year college enrollment rates continues to persist between Latinx students and their peers (Perez Huber et al., 2015; Ward, 2006). In order to increase Latinx four-year college enrollment rates by combating summer melt, it is essential to first understand how Latinx students experience this educational phenomenon.

My study allowed four-year college-bound Latinx students to share their story of their college application, decision making, and transition process during the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal was to better understand the lived experiences of Latinx students who are considered to have “melted” during summer 2020 and explore factors that influenced their thinking and decision-making about college during this time period. I wanted to learn how these students experience the summer months after high school graduation including challenges encountered, support received, and forms of community cultural wealth utilized to navigate their transition from high school to their intended college enrollment. Study findings did inform the development of proactive and personalized interventions to strategically support college bound Latinx students to immediately enroll and stay in college. To this end, the following research questions were investigated in this study:

- 1) What challenges did these students report experiencing, if any?
- 2) What sources of support did these students report utilizing, if any?
- 3) What forms of community cultural wealth did students utilize during this time period, if any?

Methodology

Current summer melt literature lacks qualitative empirical studies that spotlight the Latinx student voice and explore the phenomenon from a critical theoretical perspective. Therefore, I used qualitative methods to explore the ways in which Latinx students experience summer melt. This phenomenological study collected data from semi-structured interviews of California Latinx students who planned to attend a four-year university immediately after high school graduation but did not actually matriculate at a four-year university in fall 2020. In this study, I utilized a Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) and community cultural wealth (CCW) lens to

analyze qualitative data in order to provide an alternative perspective to the summer melt phenomenon (Solórzano & Bernal; 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, 2005).

Scholarly Significance

My study contributes to the burgeoning qualitative research on summer melt as well as to Latinx college transition research, which previously did not include summer melt student experiences but rather the transition experiences of students who did enroll in a university. Considering that most summer melt research has not specifically focused on the Latinx student population, it was unclear what factors are more influential in Latinx students' thinking and decision making about college once they submit their intention to register at their chosen post-secondary institution. The findings from this study can inform educational researchers and practitioners as to how to better understand Latinx student summer transition to college and promote policies that are aimed to increase on-time college enrollment among this population.

Definition of Terms

While the majority of literature uses terms such as Hispanic or Latina/o, this dissertation will exclusively utilize the population descriptor *Latinx* which is considered a gender-inclusive word for people of Latin American descent that live in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center, Latinx is a term used to describe people who are of or relate to Latin American origin or descent (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020). It is a nonbinary alternative to Latino or Latina. Although the Latinx term is used in academia to be more gender-inclusive of people who do not identify with binary gender norms, the term has yet to gain familiarity and widespread use in the general Hispanic/Latina/Latino population (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020). As the researcher of this study, I chose to utilize the Latinx term as a means to be inclusive of potential participants who do not identify with a gendered racial/ethnic term. However, I did respect individual

participants' choice in how they identified and utilized their choice of racial/ethnic terms when including interview quotes and/or excerpts of their narratives in the results of the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Latinx students make up the fastest-growing population in the United States K-12 public education system (Durán, 2020; Rennie, 2015, U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Gains have been made in increasing Latinx college access however, inequities still exist with regards to their enrollment at selective institutions and with comparative college completion rates (Carnevale & Fasules, 2017; Durán, 2020; Fry & Taylor, 2013; Langenkamp & Hoyt, 2019; Ortiz et al., 2012; Pérez Huber et al., 2015; Rodriguez et al., 2015). For example, Latinx students have become a large proportion of the California community college system, yet most of these students will not end up earning a degree (Pérez Huber et al., 2015). Students who start college “on time” (fall term after high school graduation) and at a selective four-year college/university are more likely to graduate and obtain a bachelor’s degree (Fry, 2004).

There are reports of Latinx students who, despite overcoming systemic barriers in the education system, are accepted into a selective four-year university but do not matriculate (Daugherty, 2012; Rall, 2016; Tichavakunda & Galan, 2020). Research has found that as many as one in five high school graduates who have been accepted to and intend to enroll in college fail to matriculate anywhere in the fall semester as a result of unforeseen challenges they encounter during the summer (Castleman & Page, 2014b). This phenomenon is referred to as “summer melt” (Castleman & Page, 2014a). The majority of summer melt research are quantitative intervention studies that do not focus specifically on the Latinx population (Castleman & Page, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2015b, 2017; Castleman et al., 2014, 2015). However, the few studies that do focus on low-income students, students of color, and first-generation students show that they experience summer melt at higher rates than affluent students, white students, and students whose parents attended college (Daugherty, 2012; Rall, 2016). Since

Latinx students experience the college transition process differently than other student populations and are at higher risk of attrition, it is imperative to develop targeted interventions for this population (Daugherty, 2012, Langenkamp & Hoyt, 2019). One way to increase “on-time” Latinx college enrollment rates at four-year post-secondary institutions is to design and implement culturally targeted summer melt intervention programs. The first step toward this goal is to better understand how Latinx students experience summer melt because the literature does not address this population directly. Thus, my study contributes to the field of summer melt research by including these student experiences.

This literature review provides a synthesis of research related to the summer melt phenomenon. Reasons for summer melt, which include an overall lack of college knowledge, the complexities in the financial aid and college enrollment process, and social/emotional challenges are discussed. From there, efforts to mitigate summer melt via several summer intervention programs, and new college communication technologies are explored. Finally, I identify gaps in the literature and discuss how my study is theoretically grounded on Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) and community cultural wealth (CCW) frameworks. Considering this study occurred during the Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, I will discuss the impacts of this pandemic on the summer melt phenomenon in Chapters 4 and 5.

The Discovery of Summer Melt

Most college access and retention research focus on the educational system before high school graduation or once students begin their freshman year in college. The critical period between high school graduation and starting fall college classes has gained attention from researchers within the past ten years (Arnold et al., 2009; Castleman et al., 2012; Castleman & Page, 2013a, 2014b). College admission and enrollment management are aware of the drop

between the numbers of high school seniors who initially submitted their intent to register and paid an enrollment deposit as of May 1st and those who actually matriculate the following fall term (Hoover, 2009; Vedantam, 2018). While some students change their minds and decide to attend a different institution, there are students who do not enroll at any college or university and experience the phenomenon known as summer melt. From a practical standpoint, high school counselors and college admission and enrollment professionals have long been aware of summer melt but until recently there has been little empirical research on the subject.

The Big Picture Longitudinal Study appears to be the first research project to explore summer melt, then referred to as *the summer flood* (Arnold et al., 2009, 2015). This mixed-methods study followed 500 graduates from 26 Big Picture Learning Network Schools (BPL) for six years with the goal of understanding how this small school model prepared low-income, first-generation students for college and career success (Arnold et al., 2015). Educational leaders at the Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center (*The Met*), a BPL school, had anecdotal evidence that their school model was successful in preparing their graduates for college but wanted a better understanding of what was effective and what could be improved. They were astonished to discover how many graduates claimed to be enjoying their college courses when they were not enrolled at all (Castleman & Page, 2014a).

Although 95% to 100% of *Met* graduates are accepted to college, one-third reconsider their college plans and one in five graduates fail to matriculate (Washor et al., 2008). In 2007, the first cohort of graduates included in the study had near 100% college acceptance rate with 90% of students intending to attend college but only 70% started college in the fall term (Arnold et al., 2009; Washor et al., 2008). Despite this small school model providing personalized college preparatory support to a student population of majority low-income, first-generation, students of

color, 30% of the graduating class succumbed to summer melt (Arnold et al., 2009; Washor et al., 2008).

The Met is a small school and graduates do not receive the typical public-school educational experience that most urban, low-income, students of color receive throughout the United States. This question of whether summer melt is a national phenomenon was first explored by researchers utilizing data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS: 2002). Students from low-income backgrounds were found to be more susceptible to summer melt than their high socioeconomic peers. This study revealed the national summer melt rate for high-income students is about 10% whereas students from low-income backgrounds melt at around 15%. Some limitations of the study are the ELS: 2002 data included information on student college applications, acceptances, and final matriculation but not on the originally intended college destination. The students in this sample were more likely to be White, female, and higher-income which may be characteristic of the traditional college-bound population in the United States, but not representative of the total student population (Castleman & Page, 2014a).

When looking at individual schools or districts, there are much higher rates of summer melt and greater disparities between the summer melt rates of affluent, White, and “traditional” college-bound students and those of underrepresented student populations. Quantitative studies have shown this phenomenon to affect anywhere between 8% and 40% of college intending students, with low-income, first-generation, and students of color having higher rates of summer melt than their peers (Arnold et al., 2009, Castleman et al., 2012, Castleman & Page, 2014a; Christian et al., 2020; Daugherty, 2012; Roderick et al., 2011). For example, in Boston Public Schools, lower-income students had a summer melt rate of 22% compared to 18% among higher-income students (Castleman & Page, 2014b). A 2020 quantitative study investigating the

accuracy of graduating high school senior's self-report found that higher-income students were 2.17 times more likely than those with lower SES (eligible for free/reduced school lunch) to have matriculated at the college they originally intended (Cristian et al., 2020).

Once broken down by race/ethnicity, researchers discovered different student populations have varying degrees of summer melt. In one large southwest school district, Latinx students "melted" at 50% where it was 35% for African Americans and 17% for Whites (Daugherty, 2012). Even a student's college plans and tasks completed by graduation can impact summer melt rates. Within one school community, students who planned to attend community college "melted" at rates up to 75% compared to 19% of students who planned to attend a 4-year college (Daugherty, 2012). Once summer melt was found to be a wide-reaching phenomenon in education, researchers began exploring the reasons why students melt (Castleman & Page, 2014a).

Factors Contributing to Summer Melt

There are many factors that can impact a student's path from high school graduation to college matriculation. The rate of summer melt among student populations varies based on socioeconomic status, first-generation college status, race/ethnicity, gender, and amount of college preparation received throughout high school. A major theme in the literature with why first-generation, low-income, and students of color succumb to summer melt at higher rates than their peers is their limited college knowledge. Hooker and Brand (2010) describe this knowledge as an "understanding of the complex college admission and selection processes, the options available to help pay for postsecondary education, the academic requirements for college-level work, and the cultural differences between secondary and postsecondary education" (p. 77). Students from lower-resourced schools have been found to have lower amounts of college

knowledge compared to their peers attending more affluent schools (Bell et al., 2009). This limited college knowledge can even extend into a student's college years. In one mixed-methods study, first-generation Latinx students had considered their experience as a transfer student or undocumented student contributed to their lack of educational institutional knowledge and academic skills while attending university (Kouyoumdjian et al., 2017).

Financial Factors

A majority of summer melt intervention studies assert the largest barrier to immediate college enrollment for high school graduates are issues related to financial aid and family finances (Arnold et al., 2009, 2015; Castleman et al., 2012, 2014a; Daugherty, 2012; Rall, 2016; Tackett et al., 2018). Student financial aid has a larger impact on college enrollment for Latinx students than White students (John & Noell, 1989). Thus, in order to increase Latinx four-year college enrollment rates, these families need more personalized attention with the financial aid process. Despite receiving individual support to complete financial aid applications during their senior year in high school, students may continue to face challenges completing the process and dealing with their first tuition bill the following summer (Arnold et al., 2009).

College Financial Aid Application Process

Completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is a critical step for low-income, first-generation college-bound students in order to matriculate in a post-secondary institution. Urban public schools with high FAFSA completion rates have a positive correlation with more students applying, being accepted, and enrolling in four-year colleges (Roderick et al., 2011). There are various reasons why students do not complete the FAFSA. These can include avoiding student debt, the difficulty and complexity of the application process, and believing the family would not qualify for financial aid (Davidson, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2015).

Latinx students and parents often perceive the college financial aid process as a barrier to college enrollment due to their immigration status, being English language learners, low-income, and/or first-generation (Gonzalez et al., 2015). Latinx families who speak primarily Spanish find it difficult to get the personalized financial aid assistance they need from public schools due to language barriers (Martinez et al., 2019; Smith-Adcock et al., 2006). The FAFSA is a barrier for low-income Latinx students because they may not have access to a computer or internet at home and would need to complete their FAFSA at school, a public library, or another public place with open internet access. These families may be reluctant to allow their students to bring sensitive personal and financial documents such as social security numbers and income tax returns to school in order to complete the FAFSA and other financial aid applications on public computers (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2006). The task of locating these documents has the potential to be its own challenge due to frequent moving of residences, divorce or separation of parents, not living with parents, or little contact with parents who work long hours (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2006).

Merely providing information about the financial aid application process is not enough. Students and families who receive personal assistance and information about financial aid are more likely to submit a FAFSA, which suggests the need for increased one-on-one support given to families in applying for college financial aid (Davidson, 2013). The results of one intervention study showed that when low-income families received personalized one-on-one assistance from a tax-preparation center in completing and submitting the FAFSA, 24% of high school seniors from the treatment group were more likely to matriculate in college. This intervention increased immediate college entry rates by 8 percentage points (Bettinger et al., 2012).

First-generation students do not always know the process of applying and receiving

financial aid does not stop at submitting a FAFSA. They must review and accept financial aid awards online via their college student portal. The process to accept student loans includes loan entrance counseling and submitting a signed promissory note. Students applying for financial aid may get selected for verification and are required to submit copies of income tax return transcripts and additional financial aid paperwork prior to receiving a financial aid award estimate. Students can be accepted to a university, apply for financial aid, submit an enrollment deposit, secure campus housing, register for classes, and then still fail to matriculate due to last-minute financial aid issues such as missing a deadline to submit an income tax return transcript (Rall, 2016; Tichavakunda & Galan, 2020).

A family's immigration situation can negatively impact a student's prospects for financial aid and/or complicate their financial aid application process. Undocumented Latinx immigrant students may experience a lack of financial aid completely or have a gap in their financial aid which is too much of a burden on their families (Naranjo et al., 2015). Therefore, these students decide to work after high school graduation in order to save money for tuition, which results in their summer melt (Irizarry, 2012). Latinx students who are United States citizens but have immigrant parents may also encounter challenges meeting financial aid requirements. For example, students selected for verification have difficulty submitting an IRS income tax return transcript due to their parents' undocumented immigration status. Individuals who do not have a social security number are required to obtain an individual taxpayer identification number in order to file income taxes. Undocumented parents may be reluctant to apply for such a number or file income tax returns for fear of deportation (Rall, 2016).

College Financial Literacy

One key phase of the college-going process is utilizing college financial literacy to

navigate the financial aid application process. Introducing a college financial literacy curriculum to low-income middle school students has been correlated to increased motivation and the development of education-dependent career goals (Destin, 2017). However, public schools do not typically include this type of education in their curriculum and many school counselors report not being trained to provide college financial aid advising for their students (Castleman et al., 2014). An ethnographic study of 12th grade students of color attending a public New York high school found that students had incomplete and inaccurate initial perceptions of college finance, students acquired college financial literacy midway senior year, the school provided uneven support in the college financial aid process, and some students faced challenges with the financial aid process due to required parent involvement (Greenfield, 2015).

First-generation students do not receive college financial literacy education at home since they would be the first in their families to pursue a college degree. Several studies have shown how first-generation students and families struggle to understand the net cost of college and sometimes overestimate tuition expenses which sway them away from college enrollment (Avery & Kane, 2004; Grodsky & Jones, 2007; Horn et al., 2003). Thus, educators providing summer support to college intending high school graduates report a large amount of their time spent on helping students understand their financial aid award package and complete financial aid tasks such as accepting loans and submitting verification paperwork (Arnold et al., 2015; Castleman et al., 2012, 2014a; Tackett et al., 2018).

Personal/Family Financial Resources

After applying for financial aid, Latinx students and their families may still not have the necessary financial resources to cover their college net cost. Some students may submit an intent to enroll at an institution but then later realize they do not qualify for enough financial aid and

switch to a more affordable option like a community college (Tichavakunda & Galan, 2020). Latinx families are highly sensitive to tuition and financial aid information (Heller, 1999). In fact, they are positively influenced to enroll in college if they receive grants in their financial aid package and are discouraged by loans and increases in tuition rates (John & Noell, 1989; McPherson & Shapiro, 1999). Since the educational loan process is finalized in the summer prior to the fall term, many first-generation, low-income students and their families are overwhelmed with the idea of accumulating debt, unaware of the process to accept loans, and may not qualify for parent plus loans due to poor credit or immigration status (Arnold et al., 2009).

Low-income, first-generation students spend their summer navigating financial aid obstacles instead of preparing for the academic and social transition to college (Scott-Clayton, 2015). Although lack of financial aid and family finances are the most common factors college-intending students face during the summer months after high school graduation, Latinx students also are influenced by other factors in their decision to enroll in college (Sanchez Gonzalez et al., 2019). Understanding the college enrollment process and receiving personalized support in navigating this are also important contributors to college enrollment among the Latinx student population (Sanchez Gonzalez et al., 2019).

Complexity of College Enrollment Process

Once a student submits their intent to register at a specific college, they start the enrollment process. This college enrollment process may involve any and all of the following tasks: paying a registration deposit, applying for student housing, paying a student housing deposit, submitting final high school transcript, registering for new student orientation, attending new student orientation, taking course placement exams, and registering for fall classes. Arnold et al. (2009) describe students receiving “mixed, confusing, or unfriendly signals” about these

different tasks during the summer from their intended school (p. 27). Colleges and universities have transitioned from mailing admission packets to emailing students information on how to create an online student portal. This student portal centralizes communication from different college/university departments into one place for students to complete necessary tasks and view their progress towards college matriculation. Although this shift in college communications is designed to be a “one-stop-shop” for information, students have reported trouble navigating these sites, finding the information they are looking for, and submitting required documents and forms requested by the college. High school students encounter difficulty in understanding college enrollment requirements and tasks as well as navigating different college communication tools such as these student portals. School counselors and college access advisors report students’ tendency to not check their email which results in missed deadlines and important college communications regarding financial aid, housing, course registration, and other enrollment steps (Arnold et. al., 2015). Something as trivial as a \$20 residence-hall down payment getting lost in the mail over the summer can cause a student to change their college plans from attending a four-year university to now living at home and attending the local community college (Tichavakunda & Galan, 2020). Some students’ inability to navigate college enrollment tasks leads them to miss class registration deadlines. These students are then unable to get the necessary classes to be full time students for fall semester, resulting in them melting or delaying enrollment to the following spring term. (Rall, 2016).

Failing to Meet Admission Requirements

Another reason for summer melt is failing to meet admission requirements such as graduating high school with a minimum GPA or passing all senior year classes with grades of C or higher. Some students lack the knowledge that their admission is provisional, pending meeting

final academic requirements, and are surprised during late summer when their admission is revoked. By the time they are notified of their revoked admission, it is too late to apply and matriculate to another college to start classes in the fall.

Social/Emotional and Relationship Factors

First-generation, low-income students of color may face social or emotional difficulties in transitioning to college. When students experience social and emotional difficulties in high school, they are more susceptible to summer melt, especially if they do not have access to support (Poynton & Lapan, 2017; Rall, 2016). School counselors have reported students having second thoughts about whether they are academically prepared for college, despite already being admitted (Castleman et al., 2012). Some low-income, first-generation students experience pressure from parents and/or friends to stay home in lieu of going away to college (Castleman et al., 2012).

Some first-generation Latinx college students who are the eldest sibling in their family have described their responsibility of taking care of their younger siblings due to their parents' work schedules (Kouyoumdjian et al., 2017). First-generation Latinx students' health and that of those around them have been reported to create limitations and challenges in their college persistence, especially deaths, family tragedies, and long-term illnesses (Kouyoumdjian et al., 2017).

Mitigating Summer Melt

Although my study was not a targeted intervention, a review of summer melt interventions is included below organized by sources of support. This research helps illuminate the types of supports college-going students utilize during their summer transition and the effectiveness of these supports. The findings from these empirical studies also reinforce the

summer challenges and obstacles described in the section above.

The majority of students who received summer support needed it specifically to address financial issues such as completing financial aid applications, understanding financial aid award letters, lobbying for additional aid, and completing student loan requirements (Daugherty, 2012; Castleman et al., 2012, 2014; Castleman & Page, 2013a). School counselors and non-profit college access advisors reported assisting students in setting up tuition payment plans and requesting waivers of unnecessary fees such as college health insurance (Castleman & Page, 2013a; Castleman et al., 2014). Due to financial issues, students may need counseling to change their plans from attending a four-year to a two-year college (Arnold et al. 2009; Castleman & Page, 2013a).

Most of the intervention programs found in the literature provided a personalized checklist of tasks with deadlines for students based on their intended college (Castleman & Page, 2013a; Castleman et al., 2014; Daugherty, 2012). These college enrollment tasks include sending final transcripts, applying for housing, registering for classes, and planning for academic placement testing. Providing timely reminders to complete tasks nudges students to complete them by the deadline (Castleman & Page, 2013a; Castleman et al., 2014).

Students were assisted in navigating college websites such as student portals where the colleges disseminate information over the summer (Castleman & Page, 2013a; Castleman et al., 2014). In some instances, counselors helped students make direct contact with their college or university. Students were coached on how to successfully make phone calls or send email messages to their college in order to resolve matriculation issues (Castleman et al., 2012). Once financial aid and enrollment tasks were handled, a few counselors were able to provide emotional support to graduates and their families (Castleman et al., 2012; Daugherty, 2012).

Since most of the time was spent dealing with financial aid and enrollment tasks, little time was left to provide social/emotional counseling. Students were unlikely to receive advising on topics related to their cultural transition to college such as culture shock, imposter syndrome, and feelings about leaving home.

High School Support

Although first-generation college-bound students may get emotional support from their parents and family members, they may not have access to information about college. These students' "path to college depends almost exclusively on the public school system" (Gonzalez et al., 2003, p. 155). In many public high schools, the school counselors are the staff members primarily responsible for providing college access information to students and parents.

School counselors can make a bigger impact if they provide early college information to students and parents, collaborate with school stakeholders to build a college-going culture, and advocate for college preparation resources (McKillip et al., 2012). Individualized student meetings with school counselors are a very important positive indicator in students enrolling in college, especially for low-income students and students of color (Belasco, 2013; Bryan et al., 2017; Bryan et al., 2011; Poynton & Lapan, 2017). Many Latinx students who matriculated to four-year universities listed their school counselor and Honors/AP course teachers as sources of support and guidance navigating the college application process (Gonzalez et al., 2003).

Considering school counselors' role in the college application process, it makes sense to include them as the primary provider of summer outreach to recent high school graduates. In fact, counselor-led summer melt intervention programs have yielded positive results for low-income, first-generation, students of color (Arnold, et al., 2009; Castleman et al., 2012, 2014 2015; Castleman & Page, 2013a; Daugherty, 2012). In a 2008 pilot intervention study, college

transition counselors in Rhode Island were able to increase on-time college enrollment by 15 percentage points overall while making significant gains in the rate of students enrolling full time, at a four-year institution and at their original intended college (Arnold, et al., 2009; Castleman et al., 2012).

While these school counselors were highly trained to provide college transition support and established meaningful relationships with their students prior to high school graduation, any school counselor support has shown to be effective in reducing summer melt rates across larger public school districts (Castleman et al., 2015, 2014; Castleman & Page, 2013a; Tackett et al., 2018). The *Summer Link* intervention in Fort Worth Independent School District, Texas, managed to increase on-time college enrollment for those planning to attend a four-year college and had the biggest impact on low-income students by increasing their likelihood of enrolling immediately after high school graduation by 9 to 11 percentage points (Daugherty, 2012; Castleman & Page, 2014a). The *Summer PACE* intervention in Fulton County Schools, Georgia, succeeded in increasing on-time college enrollment by 8 percentage points despite counselors only contacting 35% of the treatment group (Castleman & Page, 2013a, 2014b; Castleman et al., 2014).

Intervention effectiveness appears to decline when counselors focus on increasing college enrollment to just one or two specific colleges. The Kalamazoo County summer melt intervention focused on supporting students who planned to enroll at Kalamazoo Community College or West Michigan University and produced moderate results (Tackett et al., 2018). Another example is a 2012 intervention study in New Mexico which focused on increasing college enrollment rates among Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) students admitted to the University of New Mexico (UNM) (Castleman et al., 2015). This population mainly consisted of

higher performing, higher income, White students compared to the overall APS student population. Although 52% of the treatment group had contact with a school counselor, the intervention had no overall impact on increasing enrollment rates except for a particular subgroup, male Latinx students. The intervention increased the likelihood of APS Latinx male graduates to enroll at UNM by an overall 10 percentage points, highlighting the importance of conducting summer melt interventions within the Latinx population (Castleman et al., 2015).

There are challenges to designing summer outreach programs led by public school counselors. These challenges include conflict with school year contracts, school counselor burnout, and lack of college/financial aid advising expertise (Avery et al., 2014). School counselors already face many challenges in meeting the individual needs of their students during the regular academic year. These challenges include high student caseloads, time spent doing non-counseling job duties, and lack of training resulting in inequitable college admission advising (Gilfillan, 2018; Greenfield, 2015). Thus, most counselor-led summer interventions required additional staff training and capped caseloads to 100 students (Castleman et al., 2012, 2014, 2015; Castleman & Page, 2014a; Daugherty, 2012).

Although schools with a strong college-going culture may be effective in conducting personal summer outreach, large school districts may not have the capacity to provide such services due to lack of personal relationships, low level of college advising expertise, and/or insufficient staffing. One district-wide intervention had to rely on more faculty and office staff than high school counselors to do summer outreach with recent graduates (Arnold et al., 2009). The costs of counselor-led summer interventions range from \$100-\$200 per student (Castleman et al., 2012, 2015; Castleman & Page, 2013a). This is where partnering with non-profit college access organizations may be beneficial in reaching college-intending students as these

organizations are privately funded or operate on federal and state grants. College access organizations employ individuals who are trained in college and financial aid advising and can provide services to students year-round.

Community Support

Individuals who work for college access programs such as UAspire, TRIO, and Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Program (GEAR UP), are not traditionally employed by secondary school districts and, therefore, have more flexible work schedules and contracts. These employees are specifically trained to support traditionally underrepresented student populations, such as low-income, first-generation, and students of color, through the college application and enrollment process. They typically work with high school students prior to senior year so they have established a relationship with college intending students who are more likely to respond to outreach efforts over the summer months. Summer melt intervention studies where the outreach was conducted by college access program employees yielded similar results to those led by high school counselors and school staff (Arnold et al., 2015; Castleman & Page, 2013a; Castleman et al., 2014a). Although college access program full-time staff have been trained to provide college application and enrollment counseling, high school students can tend to gravitate towards mentors who are currently enrolled in college since they can share relatable experiences and advice.

Near-Age Peer Mentor Support

High schools with a strong college-going culture and staff who maintain positive relationships with their alumni could conduct near-age peer mentor outreach programs to mitigate summer melt. High school counselors have connected their students with alumni currently attending their intended college in order to get social support from someone they can

relate to on a personal level (Castleman & Page, 2013a, 2013b). College access programs such as TRIO, Upward Bound, CalSOAP, EAOP, and UAspire train college students to serve as peer mentors and assist high school seniors with the college-going process. A 2013 multi-site randomized controlled trial found students in the peer mentor treatment group were 4.5 percentage points more likely to enroll in a four-year college compared to the control group (Castleman & Page, 2013b, 2015b). The college students were able to provide the recent high school graduates with college enrollment information, encouragement, first-hand experience with the transition to college, and connection to a professional college advisor when needed (Castleman & Page, 2013b, 2015b). The positive impact on college enrollment was concentrated among males, students with less access to college advising during the academic year, and students with less defined college plans. Although less costly than school counselor and college access program advisor interventions, these peer mentor programs can still cost up to \$80 per student (Castleman & Page, 2013b, 2015b).

There has yet to be found in the literature, information about Latinx peer mentoring programs that are designed specifically to support Latinx students to successfully transition from high school graduation and starting college in the Fall. The Promotores de Educación program at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) is a promising program that connects Latinx peer mentors to incoming Latinx students and its development is based on cultural capital and critical race theory (Rios-Ellis et al., 2015). However, this program serves students once they are already enrolled at CSULB and does not focus specifically on reducing summer melt but on increasing college persistence and graduation rates among CSULB Latinx college students.

Post-Secondary Institution Support

Universities have begun to take note of the benefits of these different intervention

programs and have made changes to their admitted student outreach. One example is Saint Joseph's University (SJU) who had a 20% summer melt rate in 2007 and reduced it to an average of 8% over the course of six years by creating a more personalized admitted student day that included parent workshops, information about summer enrollment tasks and one-one-one meetings with university staff to address any questions and concerns. SJU also started a *University Connectors Program* that matches employee volunteers with a group of incoming first-year students. These 100 staff members served in a mentor capacity and would email reminders to their caseload of 20-25 students about enrollment tasks about once a week over the course of the summer. The university followed the trend of centralizing student admission and enrollment information to an online student portal and notified student applicants of their portal information via email message or mailed letter. Saint Joseph's admission staff implemented two rounds of contacting students who had missed enrollment task deadlines. Staff claimed that 91% of students completed requirements by the final deadline after calling and emailing them as well as mailing a postcard to their home address (Allen-Stuck & McDevitt, 2014).

Integrating Technology in Summer Melt Interventions

Summer melt text messaging interventions inform students of college enrollment tasks and empower students to complete these tasks independently while providing an avenue to connect to counseling support when needed. Counselors from prior summer melt intervention studies cited text messages or social media as the most effective means of contacting students (Arnold et al., 2015; Castleman et al., 2012, 2014; Castleman & Page, 2014a). Text messaging has been shown to be the most efficient intervention in terms of cost and time spent contacting students. Counselors can personally support more students who need help with college enrollment over the summer instead of spending time attempting to make initial contact with all

students on their caseload, without knowing who truly needs assistance. Using a text messaging platform to deliver automated and personalized messages to students can be more effective in nudging students to complete necessary financial aid and college enrollment tasks (Castleman et al., 2017; Castleman & Page, 2014a, 2017; Page & Gehlbach, 2017). Students who lack college admission advising throughout their high school experience have been shown to be positively impacted by text message intervention by up to 10 percentage points (Castleman & Page, 2015a, 2015b). Although there are mixed results on the benefits of including both students and parents in text messaging campaigns, all studies show there is greater success in increasing on-time enrollment among students that receive text message reminders than control groups (Castleman & Page, 2015b, 2017).

This success has inspired larger educational organizations to implement text messaging campaigns in order to increase college enrollment rates in their respective states. West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission implemented a text campaign with all high schools that participated in GEAR UP, a federal college access program. The text messages were sent out starting in January of senior year with college planning and financial aid information. Students had the opportunity to reply to the messages and receive follow-up assistance from the GEAR UP coordinator at their high school. Once students submitted their intent to enroll, they started to receive personalized text messages about their future college, and requests for help were routed to their intended college (Castleman & Page, 2015a). The Delaware Department of Education is implementing a state-level college transition initiative by sending personalized text message reminders to high school seniors and their parents throughout the state along with offers of individual college and financial aid advising. Using regularly updated FAFSA submission data, the state can send customized texts to students who still need to submit their FAFSA and

additional financial aid task reminders to students who have already submitted their FAFSA (Page et al., 2018). A key component of some of these collaborative text messaging campaigns is the student being “successfully handed off” to their respective post-secondary institution. Text messaging, peer mentoring, and counselor interventions are successful in mitigating summer melt but still require considerable human capital. Personalized outreach allows counselors to manage caseloads of 40-60 students whereas text messaging campaigns allow for counselor caseloads of up to 200 (Castleman & Page, 2014a). In order to expand interventions to a greater student population, some researchers are investigating the use of artificial intelligence (AI) communication technology that personalizes text messages based on verifiable student-level data from their intended college of attendance. Georgia State University (GSU) piloted a virtual assistant to support admitted students' complete enrollment requirements in order to matriculate the following fall term. The intervention had positive results for students who had already committed to GCU (submitted their intent to register at the onset of the study) resulting in a 21% reduction in summer melt. Because the AI software was linked with university student information and customer service systems, personalized messages were sent to students based on their progress in the enrollment process. Students received these text messages starting in April, which is an earlier timeline than previous intervention studies. The AI communication intervention had an overall positive impact on students completing enrollment tasks but had a larger positive impact on first-generation students completing financial aid tasks (Page & Gelbach, 2017).

The lack of large scale and national summer melt studies continues to hide a more accurate rate of summer melt among non-White students compared to their peers. Empirical summer melt intervention studies do not focus specifically on the Latinx population so it is

unclear if these methods would be successful in decreasing the rate of summer melt among these students. The few qualitative studies on this topic highlight practitioner and researcher biases instead of amplifying the voices of marginalized communities, such as students of color, first-generation, low-income, and immigrants. As Rall (2016) states, "It is important that the stories of the students are shared so that it can be determined if the students' perspectives of what helps/hinders them to enroll in college aligns with that of the reports of the researchers" (pg. 475). There is a need to hear directly from Latinx students who experienced summer melt about their challenges and supports during the summer in order to better understand how to develop and implement culturally proficient summer melt interventions (Lindsey et al., 2018). A culturally relevant lens which can be applied to better understand the problem of Latinx summer melt is Latinx Critical Theory (LatCrit), specifically Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework.

Theoretical Frameworks

The overarching theoretical frameworks for this study are Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) and community cultural wealth (CCW), which are both extensions of Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT in educational research centers the ways in which race, class, gender, sexuality and other forms of oppression manifest in the educational experiences of People of Color (Lynn et al., 2002; Perez Huber, 2010). CRT in education was developed from Critical Race Theory in the legal field, Freirean critical pedagogy, as well as race, ethnic, and women's studies (Lynn & Dixson, 2013). Solórzano defines CRT as "the work of scholars who are attempting to develop an explanatory framework that accounts for the role of race and racism in education and that works towards identifying and challenging racism as part of a larger goal of identifying and challenging all forms of subordination" (Lynn & Dixson, 2013, p. 56). Yosso

(2013) describes the five tenets of CRT as they apply to education being: (1) the intercentricity of race and racism (2) the challenge to dominant ideology (3) the commitment to social justice (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge and (5) the interdisciplinary perspective.

LatCrit

Lynn & Dixson (2013) describe the emergence of Latcrit because of CRT's inability to incorporate issues of language, immigration status, and citizenship into the race discourse. "LatCrit draws on the strengths outlined in CRT, and emphasizes the intersectionality of experience with oppression, and the need to extend conversations about race and racism beyond the Black/White binary" (Solórzano, 2013, p. 64). LatCrit brought a Latinx consciousness to CRT in "examining racialized layers of subordination based on immigration status, sexuality, culture, language, phenotype, accent, and surname" (Yosso, 2013, p. 6-7). The LatCrit movement is grounded in the use of narrative storytelling as a tool to examine how aspects of race, ethnicity, language, and national origin intersect to oppress Latinx people in the United States. For example, Haney-Lopez (1996) argued for using a critical race lens to understand the experiences of Latinx people in the U.S. even though they represent different ethnicities and nationalities. He further points out that under the legal construction of race and citizenship law, "White" has historically stood not only for members of the White race but for a set of concepts and privileges associated with it, while Black has been defined by the legal denial of those privileges (Haney-Lopez, 1996). Latinx people as a group do not neatly identify into one of these two racial categories but rather represent a wide spectrum of intersectionality between race, ethnicity, and national origin (Trucios-Haynes, 2000). This has been reflected in the constantly changing terminology in the literature (Hispanic, Chicana/o/x, Latina/o/x, etc.) and racial/ethnic classifications on the U.S. census and other demographic surveys (Demby, 2014). Because of

this intersectionality, Latinx people are a racialized group subject to different types of racial discrimination such as racist nativism, “English-only movements”, and the current anti-immigration climate in the United States (Lynn & Parker, 2006; Macedo, 2000; Pérez Huber, 2010; Shelton, 2018).

Community Cultural Wealth

Community cultural wealth (CCW) is a theoretical framework rooted in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and challenges the assumption that students of color have cultural deficiencies to be remedied by educators in order to achieve academic success (Yosso, 2005; Zamudio et al., 2011). This framework describes the six types of capital students of color possess which requires educators to utilize an asset-based lens in how they view, teach, and serve students of color and their families. The six types of capital are aspirational, familial, linguistic, navigational, social, and resistant (Yosso, 2005). Scholars have noted the intersectionality of these different forms of capital while exploring how the Latinx population navigates the educational system (Guzman et al., 2018; Means et al., 2019; Yosso, 2005). Latinx college students have described utilizing different forms of CCW to navigate the transition from high school to college (Means et al., 2019). Qualitative researchers studying the Latinx population within education have discovered additional strengths outside the original framework such as spiritual capital (Means et al., 2019) and emotional intelligence capital (Guzman et al., 2018).

Aspirational Capital

Aspirational capital is the capacity to develop and sustain hopes for the future, even when facing challenges (Yosso, 2005). Latinx parents aspire to provide their children with a better life than the one they had (Gonzalez et al., 2015; Guzman et al., 2018). Latinx parents hold high expectations of their children and want them to succeed academically and pursue higher

education (Chavira et al., 2016; Gonzalez et al. 2015; Torrez, 2004). Chavira et al.'s (2016) quantitative study of Latinx adolescents and their parents found an intergenerational congruence for career and educational aspirations as both groups had aspirations for the student that exceeded their respective expectations. Most of the parents in the study aspired for their children to pursue careers requiring a four-year college degree or higher. Students that had congruent career and educational aspirations had higher grades and half of those who did not have congruent career and educational aspirations expected to pursue more education needed than their chosen career goal (Chavira et al., 2016). This aspirational capital fueled by family support has been reported to continue well into a Latinx student's college career (Saenz et al., 2018).

Familial Capital

Yosso (2005) describes familial capital as the knowledge formed from the awareness of, respect for, and connection to one's family, community, and culture. The concept of family is expanded beyond the traditional nuclear family to include extended family members and friends. There is an overall commitment to the well-being of the family (Yosso, 2005). The biggest influence on students' thinking about attending higher education are their parents and other family members (Cholewa et al., 2016). Latinx parents feel individually responsible for their students' attainment of post-secondary educational goals (Yamamura et al., 2010). Although the majority of Latinx parents do not know the requirements for college admission, they believe in the importance of their children attending college (Torrez, 2004). Latinx parents recognize the importance of familial capital as they motivate their oldest children to be role models to their younger siblings (Gonzalez et al., 2015). Latinx students take this role seriously as they are providing a pathway to higher education through their first-hand experiences. This is key for their younger siblings to have access to better educational opportunities. While Latinx parents

support their children's pursuit of higher education, cultural traditions and their own worry about the well-being of their children may limit the opportunities students have for attending colleges far from home (Gonzalez et al., 2015). Latinx students have described receiving parental support during their summer transition to college in the forms of finance, transportation, and time allowances (Tichavakunda & Galan, 2020). First-generation Latinx college students have reported their family as the biggest supportive factor in their college persistence towards graduation (Kouyoumdjian et al., 2017). In particular, first-generation Latinx males rely heavily on familial capital as they matriculate and navigate the community college environment (Saenz et al., 2018).

Schools that practice cultural proficiency recognize that families are the primary systems of support for students (Flores & Dominguez, 2017; Lindsey, 2017). In developing interventions for Latinx students, it is imperative to include parent engagement in the process. One school counselor noted, "I realized we were missing the critical voice of Latino parents in our meetings. Without the parent voice, we would not know if the efforts we wished to implement would be well received, considered valid, or utilized" (Bettters-Bubon & Shultz, 2018, p. 4).

Linguistic Capital

Linguistic Capital is the strength that comes with the ability to communicate in multiple languages or styles (Yosso, 2005). Latinx students recognize communication barriers in their schools by the inability of school administrators and teachers to communicate with their Spanish-speaking parents. Despite these communication barriers, Latinx parents' use of the Spanish language when communicating with their children has been viewed as an example of linguistic capital (Aragon, 2018). School districts have started to address the need to break down language barriers between educators and the Latinx community. For example, district administrators in

Florida have advocated for more Spanish-speaking school counselors in order to provide Latinx students and families better student services (Smith-Adcock et al., 2006).

Navigational Capital

Yosso (2005) describes navigational capital as the ability to negotiate and maneuver through oppressive systems and spaces that privilege the dominant group. This is often seen as practicing resilience. Latinx parents support their children's pursuit of higher education but also expect them to be self-advocates. Their perceived structural barriers to college access for their children include immigration status, language barriers, and lack of access to information (Gonzalez et al., 2015). First-generation Latinx students are expected to navigate the college application process on their own or seek out resources to help them with the process (Gonzalez, et al., 2015; Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009). O'Connor et al. (2010) found that parental and student action in finding out college financial aid information had a significant and positive effect for Latinx students (twice that of white students). Latinx students who have successfully navigated the college application process did so through a combination of navigational and social capital (Means et al., 2019). First-generation Latinx college students have reported difficulties in navigating their college environment and hesitation to ask for help from their respective institutions due to negative prior experiences (Saenz et al., 2018). First-generation Latinx peers have even reported discomfort in seeking help from their college peers for fear of peer rejection (Saenz et al., 2018).

Social Capital

Yosso (2005) describes social capital as possessing a network of people that provide information, access, resources, and support in negotiating societal institutions such as the educational system. Latinx parents create vast support networks to aid their children's

educational goals. These networks include family members, friends, school staff, community members, and college access programs (Gonzalez et al., 2015). Quantitative and qualitative studies have shown that Latinx students rely on family members, peers, and high school contacts to obtain college planning information (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009; Perez & McDonough, 2008; Rivera, 2014; Tichavakunda & Galan, 2020). First-generation Latinx college students have reported their family, college instructors, student support programs, romantic partners, and friends as sources of support towards their college persistence and graduation (Kouyoumdjian et al., 2017).

Bryan et al.'s (2017) quantitative study of social capital and its impact on college enrollment found that students who experienced college expectations from school staff in 10th grade increased their probability of college enrollment by 7% and in 12th grade that probability rose to 18%. Engaging in "college talk" (defined as speaking with a counselor, teacher, or coach about college) in 12th grade increased the probability of a student enrolling in college by 34%. Researchers concluded that college expectations are important but not as significant as concrete actions such as "college talk". Descriptive data show that many of the students get "college talk" from only one school staff member (Bryan et al., 2017).

Bryan et al.'s (2011) quantitative study of school counselors serving as social capital and their effect on college enrollment found that students who had contact with a school counselor in 10th grade were 3.5 times more likely to apply to college than those who did not see a school counselor at all. However, the researchers suggest that school counselors may have lower social capital influence on Black and Latinx students since Black and Latinx students who did not see their counselor had higher odds of applying to two or more colleges than Latinx students who saw their counselor after 10th grade.

School counselors are key in establishing school-family-community partnerships which have been shown to improve student outcomes (Better-Bubon & Schultz, 2018; Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Kim et al., 2018). Community-school-university partnerships such as TRIO and GEAR UP outreach programs have demonstrated success in meeting the needs of Latinx students pursuing post-secondary education (Rodriguez et al., 2015; Ward, 2006; Tichavakunda & Galan, 2020). Even with these resources, Latinx students and parents still feel the need for individualized college and financial aid advising (Kimura-Walsh et al., 2009; Martinez et al., 2019).

Resistant Capital

Yosso (2005) describes resistant capital as having the awareness of systemic racism and the ability to challenge systems of oppression. Aragon (2018), utilized a CRT and CCW framework to highlight six Latinx students' perception of the aspirational academic support from their parents which taught them to "challenge and disrupt the systemic nature of their education by honestly voicing the oppression, as shown in their counterstories" (p. 383). Means et al. (2019) utilized photography and semi-structured interviews to provide a counter-narrative of marginalized student achievement. By utilizing a CCW framework, the researchers were able to focus on student strengths and explore underserved students' pathways towards college.

Theoretical Applications to Research Study

My study was grounded on CRT/LatCrit and CCW theoretical frameworks to examine the educational experience of Latinx students who experienced the summer melt phenomenon in 2020. In my research design, I focused on the following 3 tenets in CRT as they apply to education (Yosso, 2013): *Tenet 2: Challenging dominant ideology*: My study challenges the claim that the U.S. public education system offers students objectivity, meritocracy, color-

blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity especially when it comes to pursuing higher education. *Tenet 3: Commitment to social justice:* I am dedicated to advancing a social justice agenda in schools and society. My study highlights the importance for Latinx students who experienced summer melt to be heard and their stories be told. We should hear from these students about what support they needed and how they would have wanted to receive it. This is a first step to address the summer melt phenomenon in order to increase Latinx enrollment in four-year universities. *Tenet 4: Centrality of experiential knowledge:* My study finds the experiential knowledge of Latinx students legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about summer melt. I viewed this knowledge as a strength and drew explicitly on the lived experiences of Latinx students by analyzing data and presenting research findings in a narrative format.

These frameworks guided my research questions and methodology, specifically participant selection and semi-structured interviews. Since LatCrit places the marginalized participant at the center of analysis, I interviewed only Latinx students who experienced summer melt as opposed to other qualitative studies that interviewed high school educators, college access program staff, and post-secondary education professionals (Arnold et al., 2015; Tackett et al., 2018; Tichavakunda & Galan, 2020). The interview guide was aligned with my review of the literature to include possible follow-up questions that explored summer melt factors, sources of college transition support, and six forms of CCW.

Summary

Most summer melt empirical research include quantitative studies that explored melt rates and the effectiveness of intervention programs. A few qualitative studies highlighted the perspectives of educators who provided their insight into possible causes of summer melt.

Studies that attempted to explore summer melt as a national phenomenon included “traditional college-going” student samples that were predominantly White, middle to upper class, female students. Case studies that included “urban” students from college prep high schools did not focus on one race/ethnic group and instead labeled their population sample as first-generation, low-income, and/or students of color.

The few studies that did include results disaggregated by race show that summer melt affected Latinx students at the highest rate within their sample and Latinx students responded to certain interventions differently than other groups (Castleman et al., 2015b; Daugherty, 2012). This led me to wonder how exactly do Latinx students experience summer melt? What do they find to be challenges or obstacles in the summer months after high school graduation? What sources of support do they utilize during the summer months before starting college? How can we design summer melt interventions specifically for Latinx students in order to reduce their melt and increase on-time college enrollment? The first step is to listen to Latinx students who have experienced this phenomenon and allow them to explain in their own words what happened over the summer and why they did not attend college in the fall term (as originally intended).

The majority of summer melt research utilizes college transition theory and social capital theory as a lens to understand the reasons why students melt. These frameworks tend to focus on student deficits and ignore the role that systemic racism and other forms of oppression play in a Latinx student’s educational experience and college trajectory. Therefore, my study utilized Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) and community cultural wealth (CCW) as frameworks to understand Latinx student summer melt experiences which will be further explained in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

I utilized a phenomenological design to explore the summer melt of Latinx students who graduated from high school in spring 2020. Fraenkel et al. (1993) define phenomenological research as a form of qualitative research in which the researcher attempts to identify commonalities in the perceptions of several individuals regarding a particular phenomenon. Phenomenological studies engage the researcher in a process of lengthy individual interviews in attempt to fully understand a particular phenomenon from the participant's perspective (Mertler, 2018). This methodological design aligned with my overarching research question and my use of a Latino critical theory (LatCrit) and community cultural wealth (CCW) theoretical lens because it allowed me to (1) value experiential knowledge, (2) center the Latinx student voice, (3) challenge dominant ideology and (4) provide an alternative perspective of the summer melt experience (Yosso, 2013).

First, this chapter will revisit the purpose of my study and how the theoretical frameworks and research questions guided the methodology. Next, I will provide an overview of the qualitative study research design. This section will also describe the context of my study and how participants were selected. Additionally, this section will review how data was collected via semi-structured interviews. Then, I will discuss the study limitations, including the positionality of the researcher, and methods to maintain the validity of the research. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a review of the study's significance.

Purpose of the Study

Gains have been made in increasing Latinx college enrollment, but these students are still underrepresented in selective institutions of higher education such as four-year universities. There is substantial college access research on this group of students, including increasing

college application and admission rates and decreasing college attrition (Crisp et al., 2015; Flink, 2018; Salis Reyes & Nora, 2012). However, this work tends to focus on students while they are enrolled in K-12 schools or once they have already matriculated in college and started courses. There is a need to support students during the crucial time between graduating high school and starting college. This is a time period where students who already demonstrated their college readiness by applying and being accepted to a post-secondary institution, “slip through the cracks” during the summer months and do not actually start at their intended college at the start of the fall term, resulting in “summer melt” (Castleman & Page, 2014a). Some studies show that Latinx students experience the highest rates of summer melt (Castleman et al., 2015b; Daugherty, 2012). Thus, it is imperative to address the issue of summer melt as a critical leak in the Latinx college-going pipeline.

The first step is to learn how Latinx students experience summer melt. This phenomenological study allowed four-year college bound Latinx students to share the story of their summer experiences after graduating from high school in spring 2020. The goal was to better understand their lived experience and explore factors that influenced their thinking and decision- making about college during summer 2020.

This qualitative inquiry into summer melt was designed to highlight the Latinx perspective and student voice which has been lacking in previous summer melt research. Scholars have utilized asset-based critical frameworks to study the Latinx student educational experience (Campa, 2010; Carales & López, 2020; Moll et al., 1992; Perez et al., 2018; Solórzano, 1998; Yosso, 2015). My study incorporated two of these theoretical approaches as described below.

Theoretical Frameworks

Education researchers have increasingly begun to use critical race theory (CRT) and Latino critical theory (LatCrit) in their qualitative studies (Fernández, 2002). As Solórzano and Yosso (2002) state: “Critical race methodology in education offers a way to understand the experiences of people of color along the educational pipeline” (p. 36). Such a methodology generates knowledge by looking to those who have been epistemologically marginalized, silenced, and disempowered (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Critical race methodology in education focuses research on how students of color experience and respond to the U.S. educational system. My study drew on these methodological and theoretical frameworks to examine the educational experience of Latinx students who have experienced the summer melt phenomenon.

CRT and LatCrit place the marginalized participant at the center of analysis (Valdes, 1998). These frameworks direct researchers to capture the stories, counter-stories, and narratives of marginalized people. Gathering knowledge about Latinx summer melt from students who went through the experience is invaluable. It not only provides first-hand testimony but also serves as an alternative perspective to the deficient-based narrative of the summer melt phenomenon dominantly found in previous research. In addition to LatCrit theory, I also used Yosso’s (2005) CCW framework as a lens to conduct my study because this framework has been utilized to provide an asset-based perspective of the Latinx educational experience in the United States. A phenomenological study of Latinx students who experienced summer melt aligns with the goal of critical race methodology since the study’s findings provide much needed context of how these students’ make meaning of their past, perceive their present, and foresee their future (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Research Questions

To review, the goal of this research study was to better understand the lived experience of

summer melt Latinx students who graduated from high school in 2020 and explore factors that influenced their thinking and decision-making about college during this time period.

The following research questions served to guide this study:

- 1) What challenges did these students report experiencing, if any?
- 2) What sources of support did these students report utilizing, if any?
- 3) What forms of community cultural wealth did students utilize during this time period, if any?

Research Design

Since the purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the summer melt experience from the Latinx student perspective, a phenomenological methodology was utilized by means of in-depth interviews with nine individuals (Mertler, 2018). The goal of phenomenological research is to understand the lived experiences from participants' perspectives (Mertler, 2018). I was interested in studying the summer melt phenomenon as it is experienced and perceived by Latinx students. By conducting individual semi-structured interviews with nine Latinx students, I was able to capture their stories of how they made sense and meaning out of their college transition experience after graduating from high school in spring 2020.

Setting and Context

California has one of the highest Latinx populations in the United States with close to 55% of the K-12 public school student population composed of Latinx students (California Department of Education, n.d.). In 2019, 417,496 California high school students earned a regular high school diploma (CSAC, 2019). Later that year, the California Student Aid Commission (CSAC) released a report which indicated that potentially up to 15,066 California high school graduates who submitted their financial aid application and qualified for a Cal Grant

Award experienced summer melt, which is at a rate of almost 50% of those who were on track to attend a college or university (CSAC, 2019). There is a growing awareness of the high rate of summer melt among low-income, first-generation California students and interest to decrease these rates via interventions. However, there is still a lack of qualitative research that focuses on the highest student population in the state who often fall into the low-income, first-generation summer melt category: Latinx students.

Pandemic Melt

An increase in summer melt rates across all student demographics was expected for Fall 2020 first-time freshman college enrollment due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gordon, 2020). College enrollment professionals started speculating “pandemic melt” as early as March 2020 when high schools closed, resulting in students having limited contact with school counselors and other college matriculation supports (Daugherty, 2020). The anticipation of Fall 2020 college academic term consisting of remote online courses, millions of Americans becoming unemployed and having a significant loss of income, and the multitude of health impacts from the virus contributed to the “pandemic melt” prediction (Hartocollis, 2020). Specifically, there was an expected decrease in four-year university enrollment among first-time freshmen who would decide to attend a more affordable local community college or postpone college enrollment altogether (Burke, 2020). However, recent college enrollment research has found that overall four-year university enrollment stayed steady, whereas public two-year colleges saw the sharpest declines (Ma et al. 2020).

Participant Recruitment and Selection

The focus of my study was on the lived experience of Latinx students who intended to start at a four-year college/university but ultimately did not matriculate on time and characterized

as “summer melters”. I selected particular people that help best explain and describe the phenomenon being studied (Mertler, 2018). This is also known as purposeful criterion-based sampling which involves the intentional selection of individuals and sites to learn about or understand the topic at hand (Creswell, 2005). Although I use Latinx when describing this population, it is imperative to note that some members of this community may not individually identify as Latinx but rather as Latina/o, Chicana/o, Hispanic, or another term (Salinas Jr., 2020). Therefore, when recruiting participants, I asked if they identify with any of the following racial/ethnic terms: Latinx, Latina, Latino, Hispanic, and/or people of Latin American descent.

Student populations which are highlighted in summer melt intervention studies tend to be from college prep schools and/or participate in college access programs. There is a need to hear from students who have different educational experiences. It is important to learn about the lived experiences of Latinx students from a variety of contexts (school type, school location, socioeconomic status, immigration status, first-generation college student status, etc.). This aligns with the LatCrit theory principle of intersectionality and how these different identity factors along with race/ethnicity impact Latinx students’ educational experiences. Therefore, I utilized viral networking sampling (VNS) to build a potential participant pool from which I then used purposeful, criteria-based sampling to select interview participants (Salinas Jr., 2020).

I utilized VNS to recruit potential participants since this method allowed me to reach potential participants beyond my own personal network, location, education level, social, economic, and cultural capital (Salinas Jr., 2020). This was critical considering the specificity of my interview criteria and desire to explore Latinx student experiences from a variety of contexts. I sent out a call for potential participants via email and social media posts (Appendix A) that included a link to a researcher developed interest survey (Appendix B). Potential participants

who completed the interest survey were screened using the following criteria: (1) identify as Latinx, Latina, Latino, Hispanic, and/or people of Latin American descent, (2) are at least 18 years old, (3) graduated from a California high school in spring 2020, (4) and originally planned to attend a four-year college/university but did not actually matriculate at a four-year institution starting the fall term after high school graduation. Between December 12, 2020 and April 5, 2021, I received 177 completed interest survey submissions that met participant criteria. I emailed each of the interested students an invitation to participate in my study and nine students replied with interest to move forward with scheduling an interview. These participants were purposefully selected since they could provide information that was relevant to my research question and could not be obtained from other choices such as students who matriculated immediately to a four-year university or students who were not eligible for admission to a four-year university (Maxwell, 2013).

Informed Consent

The first page of the participant interest survey included an information sheet that highlighted the study expectations as well as their rights as a research participant. Those who agreed to be contacted to schedule an interview provided their email address. Those who did not agree to be contacted exited the survey without including their contact information. Participants had as much time as they needed to review the information sheet prior to scheduling their individual interview. Only those who provided their email address on the participant interest survey were contacted to schedule an individual interview at their convenience. I reviewed participant interest survey results and selected interview participants. Then, those selected to be interviewed were contacted and provided with follow-up instructions along with a copy of the information sheet (Appendix C) that highlighted the study expectations and their rights as

research participants. Prior to starting their interview, I verbally reviewed the information sheet with the participant and obtained verbal consent for recording the interview. Interview participants received a \$15 Amazon gift card as a “thank you” for their time spent participating in the study.

Data Collection

The primary data collection method for phenomenological studies are lengthy, in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews where the participant does most of the talking and the researcher does most of the listening (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Prior to their scheduled interview, the researcher sent the interview questions (in order to allow participants some time to think about their responses (Patton, 2015). Considering that the participants were going to be asked to recount life experiences over the previous year, they could require a significant amount of time and reflection to gather their thoughts. Allowing them the time to think about the stories they want to tell ahead of the interview benefits both the interviewee and the interviewer (Gubrium et al., 2012). All interviews were conducted over Zoom and participants were provided with instructions on how to access the free platform for video and audio conferencing. The reason for this medium was due to current public health social distancing guidelines in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Conducting online interviews via video conferencing software also allowed a greater opportunity to interview participants who live throughout the state of California instead of just those who live within driving distance of the researcher. With the participants’ consent, interviews were audio-recorded for later transcription (Glesne, 2006). The transcribed audio- recordings were saved on my computer in an electronic file labeled by participant pseudonyms.

Interviews

Data was gathered through interviews with Latinx high school graduates to gain an understanding of their lived experience going through the summer transition process and ultimately not enrolling at a four-year college on time. Interviews occurred during winter 2021 once I obtained IRB approval and participant consent. I conducted a total of nine individual semi-structured interviews. The goal of conducting semi-structured interviews was to obtain insight on the summer melt experience from Latinx student perspectives. I used a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix D) where I asked several standard questions but also had the opportunity to ask follow-up questions to probe further into the participant's responses in order to gain richer data (Mertler, 2018). Each of the semi-structured interviews lasted between 45 minutes to an hour and was audio-recorded and transcribed by the Zoom transcription service. I cleaned up the interview transcripts by reading them while listening to the audio-recordings and made any necessary corrections. I wrote observational notes during the interviews and wrote a post-interview memo within 24 hours of conducting each interview.

Confidentiality

The online participant interest survey (which includes consent to be contacted for an interview) was created using online software (Qualtrics) and only I had access to the results via a password protected account. Data used for the study was not identifiable to specific participants. All data was contained on my password-protected computer in a password-protected file. All hard copies of data were contained in a locked cabinet in my home. Research records will be kept confidential up to three years after the project is finished. I will dispose of research data by shredding paper records and erasing digital files.

Safeguards

There were minimal risks and inconveniences to participating in this study. These

included the potential to experience boredom, fatigue, or emotional distress while being interviewed. Also, the amount of time spent doing the interview may have been inconvenient. To minimize these risks and inconveniences, the following measures were taken: participants were allowed to skip any questions that they felt uncomfortable answering during the interview, participants were directed to counseling or social support services if needed, and the interview was scheduled at a time that was convenient to the participant and at a place that was private.

Instruments

The human interviewer is the instrument in in-depth interviewing (Seidman, 2019). Lichtman (2012) explains, in qualitative research, each idea, interpretation, and plan is filtered through the eyes, mind, and point of view of the researcher. Since I used a LatCrit and CCW theoretical framework, I recognized that my own lens is critical and I accepted that I, as the researcher, served as the filter through which information was gathered, processed, and organized. (Lichtman, 2012). In the tradition of LatCrit counter storytelling “data cannot ‘speak’ without interpretation, so I attempted to bring theoretical sensitivity to this research process while I drew upon my cultural intuition to interpret and analyze findings” (Yosso, 2016, p. 11).

Validity and Trustworthiness

I engaged in one round of peer debriefing with interview transcript data in order to mitigate bias in theme interpretation and increase evaluative validity (Mertler, 2018). Those engaged in peer debriefing were members of my doctoral program cohort and had completed the necessary CITI training for IRB approval. I also increased credibility, descriptive validity, and interpretative validity by conducting member checks. I provided the research participants a copy of their individual interview transcript and my preliminary findings for their review if I represented their voice accurately (Glesne, 2006). In order to further establish the trustworthiness

of my data and evaluative validity of findings, I wrote a memo after each semi-structured interview. The memo allowed me to explore my subjectivity and make sure I was consistently putting forth the participant's ideas and not my own (Peshkin, 1988).

Positionality and Limitations

Role of Researcher

As a high school counselor and college access professional, I examined this topic to learn how to better support Latinx students through the public educational system towards college graduation. I have thirteen years of experience guiding students through the college application and enrollment process. I worked as a college advisor for a college preparatory charter school that served a predominate population of low-income, first-generation Latinx students. I currently work as a program coordinator for a Federal TRIO outreach program that serves primarily first-generation, low-income high school students. I had no professional or personal contact with the nine research participants prior to the onset of my study. However, I am like my participants in that I am both a product of the public California K-16 education system and identify as a member of the Latinx community. Specifically, I identify as a first-generation Chicana/Latina college graduate who grew up in a low-income, immigrant family. Despite the potential similarities with my study participants, I was aware of my privileged status as a researcher and the need to reflect on the research process as it related to my own identity and the identities of my participants (Milner, 2007). Thus, I engaged in reflexivity during this research project by writing detailed notes throughout the periods of data collection and analysis which will also include my own preliminary thoughts, assumptions, interpretations, and biases (Mertler, 2018).

Limitations of the Study

Previous summer melt studies have utilized senior exit survey data and National

Clearinghouse data as a means for capturing the rate of summer melt and identifying individual students who “melted” (Castleman & Page, 2014a, 2014b). I did not have access to National Clearinghouse student tracker reports to confirm the participants’ college enrollment start date. Therefore, the research data I collected is in the form of self-reported information by participants given via interviews. Although in-person interviews were preferred, they were conducted virtually using Zoom video conferencing software due to social distancing guidelines to ensure researcher and participant safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the small size and unique characteristics of the sample for this study, the results may not be generalizable to all Latinx students. Nonetheless, my study provides relevant insights and considerations that can be used to develop programming and practices to support first-generation Latinx college students in successfully pursuing a college degree.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This phenomenological study explored the lived summer melt experiences of high school seniors to better understand their college transition during the COVID-19 pandemic. I gathered firsthand knowledge from the lens of young people living through their college transition to inform school communities of the challenges Latinx students face in the year leading up to high school graduation and their subsequent first steps into college life. I investigated the participants' experiences with navigating the college application and admission process, focusing on their thinking around college choice that led to their final decision about college enrollment for Fall 2020. Study participants provided rich descriptions of their experiences with preparing for college, the types of challenges they encountered during senior year, and supports they utilized to navigate their transition to post-secondary life. This study provided an opportunity for students to reflect on their experiences and provide advice for future students embarking on their journey to college as well as recommendations for educators who are working to improve college access for all students.

Based on the literature, students experience summer melt for a variety of reasons which include lack of college knowledge, financial challenges, personal issues, and difficulty completing necessary college matriculation tasks (Castleman & Page, 2014a). Summer melt intervention studies have identified several sources of support that students utilize during their college application and enrollment process which can extend into the summer months after high school graduation (Castleman et al., 2012; Castleman & Page, 2013a, 2015). What remains unclear is the student perspective of summer melt and summer melt interventions. My study contributes to the current body of summer melt research since it highlights student voice by learning directly from students to better understand their summer transition and reasons why they

“melted”.

In order to increase Latinx four-year college enrollment rates by combating summer melt, it is essential to first understand how Latinx students experience this educational phenomenon. The goal of my study was to better understand the lived experiences of Latinx students who experienced summer melt in 2020 and explore factors that influenced their thinking and decision-making about college during this time. To this end, the following research questions were investigated in this study:

- 1) What challenges did these students report experiencing, if any?
- 2) What sources of support did these students report utilizing, if any?
- 3) What forms of community cultural wealth did students utilize during this time period, if any?

This chapter continues with an overview of my data analysis process, then provides research participant profiles followed by a discussion of thematic results that answer the research questions, including how these themes emerged. Finally, I conclude with a summary of the main reasons why the research participants changed their college decision and did not matriculate in a four-year university.

Approach to Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis requires an inductive approach and results in a narrative summary that synthesizes all the information collected from the various data sources into common themes (Mertler, 2018). This study’s methodology utilized in-depth, individual semi-structured interviews, which resulted in a significant amount of qualitative data (Hatch, 2002). After conducting all nine interviews via Zoom, the audio was transcribed using the Zoom transcription service. I then set about the task of “cleaning up” the data by reading the interview

transcripts while listening to the audio-recordings to ensure accuracy. I made all necessary corrections to the transcript text, removed disfluencies, and replaced names of persons and places with pseudonyms. Once I “cleaned up” all the interview transcripts, I began to code the data by hand (Given, 2008).

In qualitative data analysis, researchers may begin with open coding which is coding the data for its major categories of information (Creswell, 2005). I first developed a coding scheme by reading a printed copy of all the interview transcripts once to document by hand all possible themes and categories in a codebook. I also included possible codes derived from my research questions and theoretical framework. Then I uploaded all the interview transcript documents to Dedoose, a data analysis software program, and continued to code the data using the newly developed codebook. I engaged in a cyclical qualitative analytic process where my first rounds of coding methods included a combination of in vivo, process, emotion, and values coding as a “method of attuning myself to participant perspectives and actions” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 73).

My provisional list of codes was a deductive data analysis strategy in order to keep with my research goals and conceptual framework (Saldaña, 2016). These codes included various challenges or obstacles with transitioning to college, sources of support the student identified, and the different forms of CCW that showed up in the student’s narrative. Yosso’s (2005) CCW framework was used as a guide to analyze and interpret if and how students utilized different forms of capital to navigate the summer months after high school graduation towards their college goals. The six forms of capital in the CCW framework (aspirational, familial, social, navigational, linguistic, and resistant) were included in the focused coding scheme to identify etic themes (Means et al., 2019; Yosso, 2005). Additional themes emerged from the data collected and included in-vivo codes such as “stressed-out”, “self-doubt”, and “community

college stigma” (Saldaña, 2016). As I continued analyzing data, I subsumed codes into broader codes or categories as I continued to code the interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2016).

After five rounds of coding, I used inductive analysis to describe the main features or characteristics of the categories resulting from the coding of data (Parsons & Brown, 2002). This is where I began making connections between the data and the original research questions. I also looked for discrepant information that conflicts with the patterns and themes that have emerged during the analysis. Finally, I interpreted the data by looking for how the patterns, themes, and categories connected to my research questions and provided implications to practice, leadership, and social justice.

Outlined in Table 1 is the approach that this chapter takes in answering the research questions using the related themes, which connect back to the conceptual framework.

Table 1:

Research Questions and Themes from the Findings

Research Question	Themes
What challenges did these students report experiencing, if any?	COVID-19 Global Pandemic College Costs & Family Finances University Enrollment Tasks Personal Challenges
What sources of support did these students report utilizing, if any?	Family Near-Age Peers High School College Access Programs Community College
What forms of community cultural wealth did students utilize during this time period, if any?	Aspirational Familial Social Navigational Resistant Linguistic

What follows is an overall profile of the research participants along with a summary of each student’s college transition story.

Research Participant Profiles

By utilizing a viral network sampling method, I was able to recruit research participants that lived throughout the state of California and from a variety of school settings (Salinas Jr., 2020). I interviewed nine participants who identified as Latinx, graduated from a California high school in spring 2020, and had originally planned to attend a four-year university but ultimately did not matriculate at a four-year university in Fall 2020. Seven participants were first-generation students with a majority self-identifying as coming from a low-income, immigrant family. At the time of their interview, eight participants were enrolled at their local community college with

plans to transfer to a university and the ninth participant was taking a gap year with plans to start at a UC campus in Fall 2021. Table 2 provides an overview of the research participant demographics followed by a brief narrative of each student’s summer melt experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2:

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	First Gen Status	High School Type	Location
Mario	Male	Yes	Public Magnet: College Prep	San Diego County
Christina	Female	No	Public Magnet: Visual & Performing Arts	Santa Clara County
Blanca	Female	Yes	Public	Los Angeles County
Carolina	Female	Yes	Public	Santa Clara County
Alicia	Female	Yes	Public	Santa Clara County
Sarah	Female	Yes	Public	Los Angeles County
Anna	Female	Yes	Public	San Diego County
Woo	Female	Yes	Public Charter: College Prep	San Diego County
Jennifer	Female	No	Private Catholic	Los Angeles County

Research Participant 1: Mario

Mario grew up in San Diego County and graduated from a public magnet school. His goal of attending a university was not even an idea until he was in middle school when his seventh-grade teacher asked him where he wanted to go to college. "In my head, college wasn't an option. I wasn't sure at the time because I was a Latino or if I always judged myself based on my physical disability", he explained. Mario lives with Mucopolysaccharidosis (MPS) which is a genetic condition that affects appearance, physical abilities, cognitive development, and organ and system functioning. Mario developed a passion for athletics but due to his disability, he

knew that he would never be able to play sports. He discovered journalism as a path to combine his college goal and his passion for sports; he wanted to become a great sports journalist.

At the start of senior year, he joined an informal college club composed of twelve students and two teacher advisors. Through this club, he received weekly hands-on support with completing college applications and applying for financial aid. Mario applied to nine schools and was accepted to four California State Universities. He wanted to attend a California State University (CSU) campus in northern California, about 500 miles away from home. He was discouraged once he reviewed his financial aid packages as he explained, "I was short, almost \$8,000 to \$12,000 short". He reached out to the Department of Rehabilitation to request assistance but was told that they could help him with about half of what he needed. They then suggested he attend community college instead since they would pay for those two years of community college and then help him transition to a four-year university.

Over the summer, he had several phone calls with his counselor at the Department of Rehabilitation discussing his options and helping him decide what was right for him. He really wanted to go to a CSU campus, but the college cost and the pandemic influenced his decision to stay home.

I really wanted to go up there [CSU campus], but in the end, when I sat down and looked at the financial plan...and then I saw that I was going to be home, due to the pandemic...

I'm just gonna stay home since I'm already going to be home, Mario rationalized.

He assumed that colleges were not going to allow students on campus because they were still navigating how to keep everyone safe and he thought to himself "Well, I don't want to go and waste or owe money if I wasn't even going to be there to experience [the college campus]".

Another detail that Mario did not anticipate was transitioning his health care plan to his new

college campus. He takes medication once a week and receives weekly home visits from a health care provider along with regular doctor appointments. He had not researched how to continue his health care routine and receive services while attending college in another city.

It was mid-July when Mario decided to change his plans of starting at a four-year university and instead enrolled at his local community college. He reflected, "The hardest thing for me was probably accepting that I wasn't going to go to school, that everything was going to be through Zoom". Mario did get help from his best friend and his high school counselor to enroll at the community college. Mario spent the remaining weeks of his summer interning for the informal college club he was a member of during senior year. His tasks included creating and curating a club website and speaking with current high school students about his experience navigating the college-going process. Motivated by his passion for public speaking and storytelling, he also started his own podcast.

Research Participant 2: Christina

Christina grew up in northern California in Santa Clara County. She attended a public high school that focused on visual and performing arts. Although her father never attended college, Christina considers herself a "second-generation Latina" since her mother has a master's degree in social work. She started her college preparation early by joining two college access programs in 9th grade and taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses in 10th grade. Her three main sources of support in the college application process were a TRIO program, a University of California (UC) college outreach program, and her mother. She applied and was accepted to several universities and had planned to attend a UC campus located 100 miles away from home. She described her experience navigating the college enrollment process as being "stressful" and "lonely". The challenges she encountered were not receiving enough financial aid, college costs

during a pandemic, and lack of communication and personalization from her selected university campus. In May 2020, she changed her decision from attending a UC campus to enrolling at a local community college. Her social network connected her to a community college transition program, and she participated in a summer bridge program following high school graduation.

Research Participant 3: Blanca

Blanca is a first-generation, Latina from a low-income family living in Los Angeles County. Her parents immigrated to the United States from Mexico and she is the oldest of three children. In 9th grade, Blanca joined a TRIO outreach program at her high school that provided college prep support such as college campus field trips and college application assistance. She applied to four CSU campuses and one community college as her “backup plan”. She was accepted to three CSUs and was waitlisted to the fourth campus. All four CSUs were in southern California and the furthest she applied to attend school was about 72 miles away from her home. She describes the process of deciding where to attend college as being “very stressful”. Adults in her life were urging her to attend a four-year university and college students she knew were advising her to start at a community college because it was “cheaper” and would be a good fit for a student who “doesn’t have everything figured out or doesn’t feel ready to go to a four-year college”. The challenges she described included having anxiety and depression, not receiving enough financial aid, and “not feeling ready” to attend a four-year university. She did cite the TRIO outreach program, a high school staff member, near-age peers, and community college student transition programs as sources of support. She ultimately changed her decision from attending a four-year university to enrolling at a community college because 1) she did not feel ready, 2) insufficient financial aid and university distance from her home, and 3) benefits of attending a community college.

Research Participant 4: Carolina

Carolina is a first-generation Latina whose parents immigrated to the United States from Mexico. She grew up in northern California and lives in the downtown area of a major city in Santa Clara County. She attended a public high school which she viewed as a source of support in her college journey. She described receiving substantial college application assistance from her school counselors and her advisors from two college outreach programs. One of the first immediate factors in her college decision-making process was her family situation, specifically her younger sister's health condition. In November 2019, her sister was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. This was during the time that Carolina was working on her college applications. Her mother quit her job in order to stay home to take care of her sister, which reduced their family income significantly during the 2019-2020 school year. This had an unintended impact on Carolina's financial aid application process since she was required to list her family's 2018 income information despite the drastic change in her family's circumstances. She described how most of her universities offered her student loans instead of grants and scholarships. Carolina's parents were supportive of her attending her first-choice school, regardless of the cost. Her father would encourage, "Just pick the school, we'll make it work somehow, we'll make it work". She did not want to burden her parents with the cost so she stopped talking to them about the details of her financial aid offers during this time and instead would speak to her TRIO counselor. "It's just a lot of money, it's not going to work. So, I had to kind of not talk to them about it for a little bit just so I can try to figure it out on my own", Carolina explained.

She decided to attend a CSU and her plan was to live near the campus and work a full-time job while being a full-time student. When she learned that the fall term was going to be remote due to the pandemic, she started rethinking her decision to attend the university. She met

with her TRIO counselor to discuss her options. She briefly considered taking a gap year in order to work and save money for college. Another option was to attend community college, which she ultimately ended up deciding. The reason why she chose to attend the community college was because she would receive the California College Promise Grant, which waives tuition for the first two years, and the fall term was going to consist of online virtual learning (California Community Colleges, n.d.).

Research Participant 5: Alicia

Alicia describes herself as a first-generation, low-income Latina. She grew up in Santa Clara County and attended a public high school that had a majority Latinx student population. She described the school as having a support system for minorities and people of color. Alicia participated in two college outreach programs and cited her teachers as additional sources of support. Her dream was to attend a private university in San Diego County, which she was accepted to. Her college plans shifted drastically once the COVID-19 pandemic impacted California. Like many undocumented, low-income, and people of color, Alicia's parents were among those most negatively impacted by the pandemic. Her parents were exposed to the virus at their workplace and ended up losing income due to becoming ill and unable to work. Her mother stocked produce at a grocery store and her father worked at a restaurant. Alicia's older sister was working but then got laid off too, becoming the only member of her family eligible for unemployment and government stimulus checks. Alicia experienced feelings of fear and isolation during those early months of the pandemic when her mother was ill from the virus. Thankfully the rest of her family were asymptomatic, and her mother recovered a few months later. During the last three months of high school, Alicia took responsibility for her younger sister while her father took care of her ailing mother. Since many universities had extended their

intent to register deadlines to June 1, she had time to figure out a new plan, since she could not afford to attend the private university in San Diego. She decided that she would attend her local CSU campus and submitted her enrollment deposit. Although she had committed to attend the CSU, she still had doubts if it was the best fit for her and had concerns about college costs. She spoke to her TRIO counselor who suggested that she consider community college. Alicia was then connected with another college access program counselor who had personal experience with the transfer student process. She learned about the benefits of attending a community college and the support programs offered, which influenced her decision to enroll at her local community college in June 2020.

Research Participant 6: Sarah

Sarah is a first-generation, Latina student who grew up in a south bay city in Los Angeles County. She attended K-12 within the same school district, graduating from a public title 1 high school. Her college dreams started in middle school when she joined AVID and later joined a TRIO outreach program. Her AVID teacher became her mentor that continued to support her goal of going to university. She took her first AP course in 11th grade and signed up for a career pathways program that allowed her to take community college courses in a neighboring city, a program often known as dual enrollment. She took the initiative to challenge herself by enrolling in additional community college courses the following summer. During her senior year, she applied to thirteen different universities and was accepted to several of them, including four CSU campuses, two UC campuses, and several private colleges. Her first-choice college was to attend a UC campus in northern California, which would cost her family approximately \$13,000 out of pocket for her to live in the residential dorms. Her next choice was a local CSU campus where she mentioned that she would have to pay \$2,000 out of pocket plus additional funds for books

and supplies. Although her parents were willing to take out loans to cover the college costs, Sarah did not want to burden them or herself by going into debt, especially during a pandemic where the future was uncertain. She decided to attend the local community college, the same one she took dual enrollment courses in 11th and 12th grade. Sarah spoke about the emotions she was going through during those summer months after high school graduation... “I felt underwhelmed because I’ve already got the experience from community college and I’m gonna stay there for two years and I just wanted something different”. Sarah sums up the top two reasons why she changed her decision to matriculate to a four-year university to a community college as being 1) lack of financial aid and college costs and 2) lack of support navigating the college enrollment process after submitting college and financial aid applications.

Research Participant 7: Anna

Anna is a first-generation, Latina, from a low-income family. She grew up in San Diego County and attended a Creative and Performing Arts magnet school from 6th through 12th grade. Anna’s older sister attending college was the spark that ignited her post-secondary educational goals. In 10th grade, Anna joined College Destiny (pseudonym), a community-based organization that supports first-generation, low-income students to pursue higher education. Anna described how this community-based college outreach program provided her with academic, emotional, and physical support. It became a place where she would grow to become a student leader, volunteer, and overcome fears of public speaking. “It was just a safe place for me...I also found a sense of home there...they were very kind...they helped me with school, and they helped me become a different person”, she elaborated. She applied to four CSU campuses and two out-of-state universities. In late February 2020, her family moved to a different neighborhood in the county, further away from her high school. On March 13, 2020,

California public schools closed in response to the coronavirus pandemic. This was around the same time that Anna was receiving college acceptances and financial aid estimates. She really wanted to attend college outside of San Diego County and was leaning towards a public university in Arizona or a CSU campus in northern California. In April 2020, Ana had surgery due to a health condition which required a lengthy recovery. Some of the emotional challenges she described experiencing were feelings of uncertainty and disconnection due to the pandemic. She had difficulty accepting the fact that she did not get the senior year experience and transition to college she had wanted. During the pandemic quarantine and her medical recovery, she had a lot of time to reflect on her college plans and consulted different people regarding her choices. Her College Destiny program advisor connected her with a community college counselor who had her apply to a freshman transition program. Anna received personalized support from a variety of community college personnel: counselors, student support staff, a professor, and a soccer coach. She further explained, “these people were willing to help me figure out what I want to do... and I think that’s when I really decided that I was going to go there”. One of the biggest factors in her changing her decision from attending a four-year university to a community college was college cost since she was a low-income student and her family would not be able to help support her financially. She learned that she could attend community college for free for the first two years, so she pursued that path with plans to transfer to a university.

Research Participant 8: Woo

Woo was three years old when she and her family moved to the United States from Mexico. Woo’s parents worked long hours, so she managed a lot of family responsibilities at home such as caring for her younger sister, cooking, cleaning, and being the English interpreter for her parents. Her two older siblings were attending college, but she was going to be the first to

go straight to university after high school graduation. She attended a public college prep charter high school in southeast San Diego County that served a majority of first-generation, low-income, students of color. Her support system included her family, her part-time job supervisor, and a community-based college outreach program she joined in 12th grade. She described getting a lot of support from her school counselors and teachers who constantly encouraged their students to pursue a college education, even requiring seniors to apply to four CSU and four UC campuses in order to graduate. She was accepted into every college she applied, including private universities. She wanted to attend college in San Francisco, but her parents wanted her to attend school closer to home. Regardless of which campus, all her financial aid packages were similar in that they did not include enough grants to cover the cost of attendance. Since her parents were already helping her two older siblings with their college expenses, Woo did not want to rely on them to help with her college costs. Although she had saved money from the part-time job, she did not have enough to cover the gap between the estimated cost of attendance and what was being offered in financial aid and she did not want to take out student loans. “It felt worse just seeing that [financial aid] gap... my mind went two ways...it was either you get the money, or you need to change your plans,” Woo explained. She applied for scholarships, contacted her top choice university to request additional financial aid, and reached out to her counselors for assistance. Ultimately, she did not receive enough grants and scholarships to cover the cost of her first year of college. Then the COVID-19 pandemic reached California, and everyone was forced into quarantine. As summer approached, it became clear to Woo that the start of her college semester was going to be remote online learning which solidified her decision to attend a local community college instead of a four-year university. She sums up the top three reasons why she changed her decision from going to a four-year university to community college

as 1) money, 2) her parents, and 3) the pandemic.

Research Participant 9: Jennifer

Jennifer is the only child of a Brazilian mother and Colombian father. Jennifer grew up in Brazil and came to the United States with her parents when she was 14 years old. In 9th grade, she attended a public high school in Santa Barbara County. Her parents divorced and she moved down to Los Angeles County with her mother who enrolled her at a private catholic school for the remainder of her high school years. She always knew she was going to attend a university since both her parents and several extended family members are university graduates. Jennifer applied to two public universities in California and two out-of-state private universities but was also considering taking a gap year to spend time with family in Brazil. Once the pandemic hit, going to Brazil was no longer an option and since it was unlikely that she would get a “full college experience” in Fall 2020, she decided to stay home and take a gap year. With the help of her mother and university advisor, she completed the necessary forms to save her spot at her local UC campus for Fall 2021 and spent the summer relaxing, spending time with friends, taking French classes, and working part-time at her mother’s company.

While these Latinx students have shared their individual story of their college application and decision-making process, they all share the unique experience of summer melt during the COVID-19 pandemic. What follows is a discussion of thematic results that answer my study’s research questions including how these themes emerged. While the first section of the findings focuses on challenges these students encountered in the college transition process, the second section focuses on supports utilized. The third concluding section describes the different forms of CCW these Latinx students utilized in their transition to college.

Thematic Findings

My findings are organized in sections that relate to my research questions: 1) challenges and obstacles, 2) sources of support, and 3) forms of community cultural wealth utilized. Each section is then further organized into themes which are discussed and accompanied by quotes to highlight student voices and provide descriptions of their lived experience. When exploring student challenges and obstacles during their college transition process, the following themes were found: COVID-19 pandemic, college cost and family finances, difficulty completing college enrollment tasks, and personal challenges. Students discussed various supports they received during their college transition process which are organized by the following sources of support: family, near-age peers, high school, college access programs, and community college. Finally, I describe the ways in which CCW was found across all the interviews, specifically how each form of CCW capital (aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, and linguistic) was utilized by students.

Thematic Finding 1: Challenges & Obstacles

Latinx students in my study revealed the complexities of pursuing their goals of higher education, identified the obstacles faced as they navigated the college application process, and described several challenges to college enrollment during a global pandemic. While many of the participants share similar experiences, each one has a unique story and perspective grounding their interview into a larger narrative. Table 3 demonstrates the four main types of challenges and obstacles students faced during this time period and the prevalence of these themes found throughout the nine interviews.

Table 3:*Participant Challenges and Obstacles*

Participant	COVID-19 Pandemic	College Costs & Family Finances	College Enrollment Tasks	Personal Challenges
Mario	X	X		X
Christina	X	X	X	X
Blanca	X	X		X
Carolina	X	X		X
Alicia	X	X	X	X
Sarah	X	X	X	X
Anna	X	X		X
Woo	X	X		X
Jennifer	X			X

COVID-19 Global Pandemic Impact on College Enrollment Process

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in mandatory quarantines and social distancing guidelines issued by the Center for Disease Control and public health officials. This resulted in California public schools closing their campuses and transitioning to online distance learning in March 2020. Study participants described this transition to distance learning as challenging and commented on their dissatisfaction with online classes, the decline in communication with school personnel, and feelings of any previous support being suddenly severed. Alicia recalled,

Before March 13, I had this different mindset. I was going to attend a four-year university...however post March 13 that support that we once had for students...that transition from high school to college was gone. And it was gone because nobody knew what was going on. Nobody knew how to navigate online learning, online meetings, stuff like that, and most of the people I spoke to, we felt really isolated, we felt very lonely during that time.

The pandemic presented itself as the context in which students experienced their college decision-making process since it impacted family health and finances, personal mental health,

academic experience, and the ability to complete college enrollment tasks.

All students in the study spoke to the impacts of the COVID-19 global pandemic on their college transition experience. During her interview, Anna recalled...

So, I was applying to scholarships in February, and then I think during the first week of March is when I had to look at the school's [financial aid] estimate...How much I was going to get from FAFSA and all that stuff. So, I was looking at financial aid and everything around this time...and then the pandemic hit that second week of March and that's when we were told "You're going to go home and you're gonna stay there for a little bit." And I was at first really, really scared. I had people in my class that were excited. They were like "Oh yeah, no school!", but I was frightened. I was feeling like it was not going to go very well. I had gotten so sick through that whole senior year, stress and everything, that I was really scared.

When California schools closed in March 2020, many seniors were in the middle of receiving college application decisions. Some of the students felt anxious and lonely, reading each acceptance and rejection letter during quarantine. For many of my research participants, it felt like they went from having a village of support in the college application process to now being isolated through the college decision process. Sarah describes,

I just felt anxious just because I felt like I'm still in high school. I have to make this big decision on my own, and I wasn't sure where I wanted to go...what I wanted to major...what my career choice was going to be...it felt like a lot, it was overwhelming...

One aspect of the college decision process that contributed to student stress was the cost of attending a university and the state of family finances, especially during an unprecedented global pandemic.

College Costs and Family Finances

All but one participant discussed college costs and their family's financial situation as a challenge. The students I interviewed represented diversity in family socioeconomic status ranging from undocumented, to low-income on government assistance, to middle-class families

that owned their own home, to one student whose parents were prepared to cover the entire cost of college themselves. When most students discussed their financial aid offers from the universities, they described not getting enough financial aid and having to pay a substantial amount out-of-pocket towards their first year of college. For example, Woo was admitted to all the universities she applied to and was excited to pursue her dream of moving to the San Francisco Bay area, then she reviewed the financial aid estimates... “Damn, I don’t even have the money to go. I don’t want to ask my parents, because my mom’s already paying for my brother’s and sister’s study. I don’t want to be added to that plate”, she further added... “I just felt responsible for my own, so I was kind of like ‘I’m not going to be able to go’. Mario described his reaction to his financial aid packages, “... they offered me a fair amount but some of the money was those where you have to give back. And so obviously, I don’t work, and my mom hasn’t worked in years. I receive government support and that wouldn’t be enough, because it’s between school or having a meal on the table for that week”. It became clear that they did not consider student loans as financial aid although this is a standard part of a student’s financial aid package, even for those families who the federal government deems not able to financially afford to contribute any amount towards their child’s college education. In fact, many of the students expressed an aversion to taking out student loans. Alicia recalled,

I remember April was when financial aid really hit for my four-year college and it was a lot and I didn’t want to burden myself with student loans so early on, because I’m only 18 [years old] and didn’t want to burden myself with that and having to pay it off in the future.

They were cognizant of the future and did not want to graduate college with debt, especially those who were already planning to pursue graduate studies beyond their bachelor’s degree. Some parents expressed their support for their students’ first-choice college and their willingness to “do whatever it takes” and “figure something out” to make it financially work for their family,

even if it meant taking out educational loans. However, students did not want to “burden” their parents or themselves with student loan debt.

Challenges Completing College Enrollment Tasks

A few of the participants described challenges they had with navigating the college enrollment process. Alicia explained,

I didn't even know how to enroll in the college myself. I don't have nobody in my immediate family that has attended college, I'm a first gen, I'm low-income, I'm a minority, I'm Latina. So, it was very hard even facing these obstacles along the way and even at times today. I feel isolated just because I don't have that support from someone to reach out to.

Students found it difficult to complete college enrollment tasks since all the college communications were sent via email and/or an online website known as a student portal.

Christina described her experience with the college student portals,

Our university had three portals for us, one for student life, one was for academics and...I forgot what the other one was for, but it was a lot of portals. I had no idea how to navigate through and they didn't really say “Oh go to this portal to sign up for class” it was just a lot of broad information that they would say, kind of just assuming that we knew what to do already, but I was like, “I don't really know what I'm doing”.

Sarah describes helping her friends navigate the college enrollment process for their local community college...

Whenever they had problems or I had problems, I would have to contact admissions asking for help and sometimes they wouldn't reply, or it would take a really long time for a response. It was just difficult going back and forth through email.

Students expressed their need for guidance in their college decision-making process during the pandemic quarantine as they had concerns regarding college cost and affordability, their housing options, and establishing a sense of community at their chosen four-year college campus. Once students started looking into the option of attending their local community college, they found

they received more personalized support in transitioning to the college versus their first-choice university.

Personal Challenges

All nine participants discussed at least one challenge or obstacle that related to their personal lives. Two students discussed their own personal physical health as a challenge and two participants described a close family member's physical health as an influence on their college decision-making process. Many of the students discussed personal mental health challenges such as stress, anxiety, and depression. Some students described feelings of self-doubt, loneliness, and lack of connection. Sarah disclosed,

During the summer I just felt really unmotivated as well just because of my decision... I felt like I let some people down. And then, because of that, I felt alone. I didn't really know if I should reach out and talk about this and ask for help.

Many of the students talked about how their college application process was stressful, even with receiving step-by-step support. Jennifer recalls,

Some days I get home after school and I'll be having dinner with my family and I will start crying because I was so stressed, and it was my way to put everything out. And my mom was like, "Why are you crying? Everything is fine. Don't worry". I know everything will be fine, but I just couldn't handle this stress.

Some students expressed feelings of self-doubt when describing their experience applying to universities and deciding on which college to attend. Blanca described,

It was a bit stressful because I wasn't so sure what college to go to and then later on, towards the end of senior year, I was pretty much stressing out [with] not figuring out what college to go to. I kind of thought maybe I shouldn't attend a four-year [university]. Maybe I wasn't prepared yet to go to a four-year...I felt like doing the right thing would have been going to a four-year but then there's community colleges as an option. A little closer and closer to deadlines to choose the school, I got more and more stressed and, I felt anxious, I felt anxiety trying to figure out whether to go to a four-year or start at a community college. I felt like I wasn't ready, because I still hadn't figured out what major...I wasn't so sure about that which also made it challenging for me to choose whether to attend a

four-year or not, and then I felt like I wasn't ready to become an adult yet. Honestly it was another thing that I wasn't ready to become an adult, so I think maybe community college would be a right fit for me.

Like Blanca, a few others equated attending university as transitioning to adulthood, which felt overwhelming. They viewed attending community college as an easier transition to adulthood and to college-level academics.

Several students experienced mental health challenges during their senior year and transition to college. Carolina disclosed,

I have a history of anxiety, but at the beginning of all of this, I started experiencing or showing signs of early depression as well and this had a lot to do with the fact that I wasn't really having a good time in high school in my last months. I was having trouble with friends and even just keeping my studies together. I had always been super studious, on top of my work, but I was just finding it hard to even just pay attention in class. I was just struggling.

Several of the students talked about the difficulty accepting that they were no longer going to be attending the four-year university. Since it was their goal for so many years, and what they had worked so hard to achieve, it was devastating to realize that their dreams were going to be delayed due to something out of their control (such as lack of financial aid or the pandemic). Carolina recalls,

It was just really, really, hard because after getting accepted to all these schools, I felt like it was just closing in on me. I had done everything right and I had put so much of my time and effort to make sure that I got into good schools so that when it came time- I would end up at a good school. I had to say no to them because I just couldn't afford it.

Thematic Finding 2: Sources of Support

Despite the many challenges and obstacles that these students faced during their college transition process, they all reported receiving support from at least three different sources. Table 4 demonstrates the five main sources of support students received during this time and the prevalence of these themes found throughout the nine interviews.

Table 4:*Participant Sources of Support Utilized during College Transition*

Participant	Family	Peers	High School	College Outreach Program	Community College
Mario	X	X	X	X	X
Christina	X	X	X	X	X
Blanca		X	X	X	X
Carolina	X		X	X	X
Alicia	X	X	X	X	X
Sarah	X	X	X	X	X
Anna	X		X	X	X
Woo	X	X	X	X	
Jennifer	X	X	X		

Family Support

Family support was a strong theme found throughout the interviews as Jennifer affirmed, “I think, having my family support was the most important thing”. All the participants’ parents were supportive of their goals of attending college, and a couple were able to get their parents to help with navigating the college application and enrollment process. Jennifer’s mother helped her complete the paperwork to take a gap year and Christina’s mother helped her brainstorm her college personal statement essays. While most students did not receive hands-on support from their families with the college application process, the majority described getting moral and emotional support from family members. Students talked about how their parents supported their college decision without pressure to pick a specific school. Several commented on how their parents were so supportive that they were willing to take out loans to cover the college costs and they were assuring the students to “not worry about the money”. Carolina describes how her parents’ support helped her feel more confident in her college decision-making process, “They

were okay with whatever decision I was going to make. They were going to support me no matter what”. Anna discussed how the pandemic resulted in the improvement of her relationship with her parents as their communication increased during quarantine. She explained,

Having their support was never really hard... I think if the pandemic did not happen, it would have been a little bit harder to talk to them. But since we were all here at home, they kind of knew what I was doing. When I had decided something, it was usually me deciding, and then I would let them know, and then they were okay with it.

Peer Support

Outside of family members, participants found moral support from their high school peers as well as current college students. Seven of the participants discussed support received from at least one near-age peer during their college transition process. Many described the type of emotional support received from high school peers that were also going through the college transition process. Woo’s close-knit circle of five friends supported her in the college application process such as providing advice for admission essays. Mario talked about his best friend telling him that “everything is going to be alright”. Although Mario’s best friend was going to be attending a local CSU campus, they still spoke every day on Zoom and his friend was encouraging him to continue pursuing his education at the community college so that he could transfer to his university. Jennifer confided in her best friend about the idea to take a gap year. Sarah and Christina found comfort in talking with their friends who also decided to enroll at a community college instead of a four-year university. Christina describes,

I had a lot of friends who also were going through the same thing, where they're kind of really upset that they couldn't go to the school that they really wanted, so just creating that support group with my friends (because I had about three or four, maybe even five), it was a lot of us that were going through the same thing.

Blanca found support from people she knew that were already attending the local community college as they provided her with advice on the benefits of pursuing a transfer path. She

described, "... it helped me out with lowering my anxiety, having that support". Woo was the only student to mention a romantic partner as a source of support in her college transition process as her boyfriend supported her career goals and paid for some of her courses that first semester in community college.

High School Support

Participants found their high school to be a foundation for their college preparation and pathway to college. These students had the academic preparation to excel at the university as they all fulfilled the a-g requirements, a pattern of college prep academic courses required for admission to California public universities (University of California, n.d.). Many of the students took honors and AP courses and a couple even had the opportunity to take community college courses through a dual enrollment program. Students cited specific teachers and school counselors with helping them with their college applications. Five students discussed their school counselors as sources of support since they organized large college application and FAFSA workshops at their high school. For example, when describing her experience with the college application process, Woo explained,

I was stressed at first, I'm not gonna lie. It felt like it was a lot, but like I said, the counselors and teachers were helpful. They were there...we literally had a whole week...introduce it this day, we're going to do this part the next week, and then we're to do this part...so it was kind of broken down, so it was simple.

The four students who discussed their teachers as sources of support described them to be mentors and cheerleaders in their college application process. These teachers tended to be from AVID classes and college prep charter or magnet schools. A common theme across interviews was how this high school support that students once received was largely cut off during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was when college access program support became critical.

College Access Program Support

An interesting finding from this participant pool is that eight of the nine students had participated in at least one college access program or college application support group during their senior year of high school. Five students had joined a federally funded TRIO program early in their high school career. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2022), this program

identifies and assists individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds who have the potential to succeed in higher education. The program provides academic, career, and financial counseling to its participants and encourages them to graduate from high school and continue on to complete their post-secondary education.

Three of these students also received services from DCAC, a national college advising corps chapter. According to DCAC, this non-profit organization “increases college access for low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented high school students by placing highly-trained, recent college graduates in schools as full-time College Adviser Fellows” (University of California, Berkeley, 2021). While a many of the students participated in national college access programs, two were served by College Destiny (pseudonym), a community-based non-profit organization in San Diego County. These three different college access programs have in common their mission to support first-generation, low-income, underserved students and guide their path towards higher education. These programs assisted students with their college application process, maintained communication with students during the quarantine, and some even provided guidance during students’ summer transition after high school graduation. Carolina described the support she received from TRIO,

There's this lady, Lisa, from TRIO and she's honestly the sweetest person I have ever met. She helped me out so much in applying to college and I love her so much. She was amazing. The crunching the numbers and everything [figuring out the financial aid packages] happened while I was no longer in school. When we stopped going to school everything turned virtual, so all of this was happening through zoom calls and stuff like that, where I would explain to her that I was really stressed out because I was getting no money from my schools and that I had

to figure something out. I had to see what I can do in order to maybe still attend the schools. It came down to my top three choices. I was getting the same thing [financial aid estimate] for all of my schools, so you know at this point, it was like ‘okay just pick the top three [schools]’. From there, she made a spreadsheet and she told me all of these expenses that I actually had to make and what could have been saved if I did things differently. So, she was the one that really set it out and helped me with that.

There were a few students like Alicia, who had access to both school-based college prep programs such as AVID and community-based programs such as TRIO.

I was a part of different programs; I was a part of AVID and TRIO Educational Talent Search, so they were like the main support I got for applying to college, but my school also offered seminars with college representatives to help us apply to Cal States and UCs. I believe we also got support from EAOP which is Early Academic Outreach program from UCLA, so we always had a representative on campus for two days out of the week and students can go in and ask for help. I didn’t really take advantage of that just because I mostly used Educational Talent Search, Alicia explained.

Several of the students described how a college access program advisor connected them with community college counselors and college student support programs, essentially serving as the bridge between high school and college.

Community College Support

Eight of the nine students ultimately enrolled at their local community college. Seven of these students reported receiving support from community college staff with their enrollment process as well as transitioning to college life. Several of the students joined college transition programs offered at their community college such as summer bridge and First Year Experience (FYE). Students also joined college support programs such as Educational Opportunity Programs (EOPS), which serve predominantly low-income, first-generation, college students of color with the goal of supporting these students through graduation. Sarah elaborates,

Once I made the decision to go to community college, I made sure to apply to different support programs. So, I applied to First year Experience, which is a program aimed at high schoolers transitioning to college...then I also applied to

be in this honors transfer program which is just aimed at students who want to challenge themselves academically and I got accepted into both.

A theme that emerged while describing this support is how students felt about the process of enrolling at the community college compared to their experience trying to navigate the university earlier that year. Mario affirmed,

It was so much easier than applying to a four-year obviously...because our school has a connection with the community college...My sophomore year, I was in this art class and they're connected with the community college. I was able to get credit through the community college and so I already had a community college ID and everything. All I had to do was enroll.

Christina recalls,

When I transitioned into community college, I literally felt a weight come off my shoulders because I wasn't there alone, I actually had counselors that were there from the start and they talked me through everything. It was a lot of counselors that I could relate to, especially with experiences, which I thought was really cool since I know the counselor that I did meet at the UC kind of didn't really understand [my] background...When I went to community college they're like "What sort of things are you interested in?" [They were] kind of actually getting to know me, whereas at the UC, it was like "We're just here to do the appointment like that's it. I don't really want to make personal conversations or anything". With community colleges, [it is] like they actually want me there, they actually want me to feel like I belong in this institution.

It became clear that these students wanted to continue to receive the type of support in college like the type of support they received from their high school counselors, teachers, and college access programs.

During their interview, students were able to provide their own recommendations for how educators could better support students in the college-going process. A theme that emerged was their desire for college-access professionals to initiate contact and continue to provide regular contact throughout the student's college enrollment process. Angelica recommended for college access practitioners to proactively contact students,

Always be there for the students. Always reach out to them, I don't know, two

times, three times a week or every week. Reach out to them, because a lot can change during those days in the week and just for them, knowing that you're there for them, I think it's very important.

Anna underscored the importance of college access practitioners being accessible to students,

It's just about reaching out, I know that it seems like such a simple thing...I think many times you [college access practitioner] have to give them [students] information, but I feel like there's also a part that could be like "I'll hold these specific office hours" or just sending out emails and being like "if you guys need help or support or just questions in general...". To reach out because I think we have trouble reaching out to certain people sometimes, and I think especially for [high school] seniors, it could be really hard for them to reach out because they're probably really confused.

Sarah had specific recommendations for college/university staff,

There should be outreach. You asked me whether any colleges had contacted me and I said "No." There wasn't really anyone checking in... "Did you do this? Did you do that? How did you hear about this program? You should apply for it" or "Did you submit it? The deadlines are coming soon" or "You're first generation, you could apply for this program and get in" or "I recommend that you check out this major" or something like that. Just having someone you can talk to. But again, I feel like that's hard because some students, I feel like they can get shy sometimes. They are not sure whether they should be the one reaching out or if someone else should be reaching out.

Christina also wished her universities would have created a student friendly college enrollment roadmap, she described,

like a website, or something that just tells me what I need to do instead of sending like multiple emails like trying to figure out... I don't know just creating something ..like steps cuz I'm a visual person so I need to see it...just creating a little checklist for me... and just more help in general ...like emotionally, it was a lot of overwhelmingness that students feel [following college enrollment steps].

Woo had the shortest recommendation but one that is key in utilizing a critical framework in educational policies and practices, "Just listen, like really listen to students".

Ultimately, these students utilized their different sources of cultural capital to navigate their college decision and transition process and enrolled at the institution that they ultimately felt was the best choice for them and their families at this time. Six months later, many of these

students felt they made the right decision and would recommend community college for current high school students going through the college decision-making process.

Thematic Finding 3: Use of Community Cultural Wealth

Participants in the study discussed the challenges they encountered during their college application and enrollment process and how they navigated these obstacles utilizing different supports and forms of cultural capital. The findings are presented within a framework of the following forms of CCW capital: aspirational, familial, social, navigational, resistant, and linguistic. Table 5 demonstrates the prevalence of these forms of CCW capital found throughout the nine interviews.

Table 5:

Forms of Community Cultural Wealth Utilized by Each Participant

Participant	Aspirational	Familial	Social	Navigational	Resistant	Linguistic
Mario	X	X	X	X	X	X
Christina	X	X	X	X	X	X
Blanca	X	X	X	X		
Carolina	X	X	X	X	X	X
Alicia	X	X	X	X	X	
Sarah	X	X	X	X	X	
Anna	X	X	X	X		
Woo	X	X	X	X		
Jennifer	X	X	X	X		X

The data analysis process revealed that the students utilized various forms of personal, familial, and community resources to navigate the college admissions and enrollment process during a global pandemic and these resources were particularly significant in pursuing higher education. It was in describing these resources throughout their interviews that a CCW framework emerged as a powerful way to understand how the students were able to survive,

persist, and often thrive with their choice to no longer attend a four-year university immediately after graduating from high school. The most salient forms of CCW found in the study are aspirational capital, familial capital, social capital, and navigational capital. Resistant capital and linguistic capital were less pivotal in the college transition of this study's sample population, however, these two forms of CCW were evident in a few student stories.

Aspirational Capital

Aspirational capital is the capacity to develop and sustain hopes for the future, even when facing challenges (Yosso, 2005). All nine students expressed their desire to pursue higher education. Each student planned to attend a four-year university in Fall 2020 yet did not ultimately enroll at a four-year university at the time of their interview. Although each experienced their own set of challenges and obstacles during their college transition process, they are continuing to work towards obtaining a four-year college degree. Eight participants are taking the transfer route by starting at a California community college while the ninth participant completed the necessary steps to take a gap year and start at her chosen university in fall 2021.

Despite the initial disappointment of not being able to immediately attend their university of choice, many students interviewed discussed how they felt it was the best decision for them at the time. Mario reflected,

Now that I'm looking at it... It's kind of a relief and I'm glad I made the decision that I made because I look at friends that went to four-years [universities] and they're stressing out about how to get money and pay off the rest of the tuition. And then I'm here relaxing, and they started their back from break and I'm on break for another two weeks. So, I'm just relaxing right now... Since I'm in community [college], I get to explore my major and I can change it anytime I want. And basically, right now, I have friends that are at four years [universities]. They're paying for their general ed and I'm over here not paying for that.

Jennifer described her initial thoughts of taking a gap year and how she felt now about her decision...

Before I made my decision, I was thinking “Oh you're going to lose one year, I'm going to be one year behind my friends” ... but then I realized, with my mom and my dad also telling me, that I'm still young. I'm too young. One year won't make that big of difference and I'll be more mature when I start college than I was last year. Now I'm happy with my decision.

These students have overcome great odds to apply and be admitted to selective universities and that experience in and of itself provided a sense of accomplishment and pride, evident by Christina's attitude, “I would always tell myself ‘you got yourself into those [four-year] institutions already, you can get yourself back into [them]. It's just two years, it's nothing”.

Several factors and sources of support contributed to students' aspirational capital. All the students expressed their families as contributors to their college aspirations. This was most evident for the first-generation and low-income students. Blanca explained,

I want to make my parents proud by going to college, besides graduating from high school. I just want to make them even more proud of me by gaining a degree...I'm the first in my family to go to college which is kind of exciting but also nerve wracking too, to be the first in the family.

Carolina added,

Growing up, I always knew that I wanted to go to college because my parents always told me that I had to, but I genuinely did want to. I saw how much they struggled to make ends meet. So, college was a way for me to do better. I mean, they came here to give that to me, give those opportunities to me, so I always knew that I wanted to go to college.

Parents were supportive of their child pursuing a college education and older siblings that were attending college also served as inspiration. Anna noticed,

...sophomore year, that's when I kind of really decided to push and try a little bit more, because my sister had graduated. I have an older sister and older brother. My older brother did not go to college. And so, when I saw my older sister go into college, that's when I decided I wanted to try a little bit harder. I joined the program College Destiny. My sister was there as well, and so that really helped me get back on track and that's kind of when I decided that I wanted to attend college in the future.

Career goals also served as inspiration for students to pursue a college education. Students who

already knew what career path they wanted to pursue learned that a four-year college degree was necessary. For many students, there was a combination of aspirational and familial capital found as students aspired to set a positive example for their younger siblings by being the first to pursue a college education as well as earn the means to give back to their parents and community. Towards the end of his interview, Mario stated,

Now one thing I can say is that it's nice and relieving [to be attending community college] because I'm a first-generation student. So, it does feel good that I am going towards a transfer route and setting an example for my three younger siblings. I always tell my sister, because she's a freshman in high school, I always tell her, "If you want to do something just chase it, whether it's a four-year or community college".

Familial Capital

Familial capital is the knowledge formed from the awareness of, respect for, and connection to one's family, community, and culture (Yosso, 2005). Familial capital was a major source of CCW for all nine students as they each described the support they received from their families during their college-going process. Students' cultural heritage was considered a source of strength as Blanca described, "I'm a Mexican-American. I was born here in the United States, but you know my parents were originally from Mexico...I'm proud of who I am. Being Hispanic and sharing those roots with others, my culture, my traditions." The desire to do what is in the best interest of the family was evident for many of these students as the distance from home was a factor in their college decision, especially during a pandemic. Woo stated,

I feel the responsibility to "pay my parents back" [air quotes] ... especially the situation where right now my parents don't have really good health and it makes me rethink...imagine if I would have been over there [college in the San Francisco Bay area], I wouldn't be here to help them or I wouldn't be here to do the little things I'm doing for them right now.

The "little things" that Woo was talking about are cooking, cleaning, taking care of her younger sister, and working a part-time job while attending school full time. Students demonstrated other

ways in which they put family first. For example, Alicia took over caring for her younger sister when her parents were infected with the COVID-19 virus and a majority of students did not want their parents to take on the burden of debt by taking out educational loans in order for their children to attend university. For these Latinx students, their families were a crucial part of their social network which aided in their transition to college.

Social Capital

Social capital is having a network of people that provide information, access, resources and support in negotiating societal institutions such as the educational system (Yosso, 2005). All nine students utilized their social capital in navigating the college application and enrollment process. Students' social networks included family, friends, near-age peers, school counselors and teachers, college access programs, and college faculty/staff. Students were able to turn to family members and peers that had personal experience with the college-going process for logistical support with college applications and enrollment tasks as well as moral support by giving advice and encouragement.

Students attending high schools with strong college-going cultures received support from teachers and counselors. Carolina describes,

I'm first-generation so I had no idea what I needed to do in order to even just apply to college... I attended my school and school counselors there hosted lots of workshops in order to apply to college. So, they would host workshops after school, during lunch, and sometimes even on Saturdays where they would even provide breakfast for us. We could go there and fill out applications and if we had any questions they would be there. They also helped with FAFSA. They also had workshops for that [FAFSA] which was good, because I had no idea what a lot of the stuff they were asking for on the application. I had no idea what a lot of that meant so being there and having that support was nice.

Other students were able to obtain critical college application information from their school counselors through more informal ways as Christina explained,

I used to TA [be a teaching assistant] within our school library, which is where our school counselors were, so that's how I became good friends with a lot of the school counselors. So, if I wouldn't have done that, I wouldn't have learned a lot of information...If I didn't start making those connections with them, a lot of the stuff that I know now I wouldn't have known ever... I didn't find out that I was able to get four free applications to UCs until I talked to one of my counselors, but that was because it was just small talk that I was having with her.

Students participating in college access programs were initially connected to these programs through their high school, a community member, a family member, or a near-age peer. These college access programs also served as a link between students and community college student support staff who then connected students with college transition programs such as summer bridge and FYE. Once the pandemic reached California and forced schools to pivot to online distance learning, students had to rely more on their own navigational capital and lean on members of their social network that were still accessible such as their near-age peers and college access program staff.

Navigational Capital

Navigational capital is the ability to negotiate and maneuver through oppressive systems and spaces that privilege the dominant group (Yosso, 2005). Most of research participants are first-generation and many are the first in their family to pursue a college education. College prep programs such as AVID and TRIO assisted students to build navigational capital. Students utilized this form of cultural capital to successfully navigate their high school system and become eligible for university admission. They also received support to successfully navigate the college and financial aid application process as every research participant was admitted to a university and received a financial aid estimate. However, students experienced a decline in support once schools shifted to online remote learning and were unable to meet with school counselors, teachers, and college access program staff in person. Although students had built up

navigational capital to continue with their college decision-making process during the pandemic, the path towards the four-year university seemed too cumbersome. Christina described how she had to navigate the college enrollment process on her own...

It was just really confusing, as well as just sort of knowing what they [the universities] had to offer, like programs. Because I participated in TRIO and the UCB Program since freshman year, so [I'm] trying to figure out what programs that they offer at the UC was just...it was hard to navigate through all the websites and trying to figure out what I could do to help me get through the next four years of my life...I was really stressed out for about a month just trying to figure out all the financial aid, the housing, and even the food too. Just everything in general. I'm trying to find roommates and it was sort of just like you were on your own between the summer. So, it was just kind of hard having to figure out how to create an appointment with my academic advisor that I've never met... Students were able to tap into their reserve of navigational capital to figure out their

financial aid estimates, college enrollment tasks, and compare their college options to ultimately making a final decision of which college to attend for Fall 2020. Some of the students had enough navigational capital that they were assisting their friends with the college transition process during quarantine and summer months after high school graduation. Sarah explained,

Because I had the support programs, I feel like I kind of knew what to do before other students. For example, my friends, they would have to come asking me for help and not the college itself. With the community college, you'd have to be eligible to get free tuition, you'd have to do a survey and workshop-like orientation and all these other things. But a student who's new to college wouldn't know where to go or who to ask. This was during the beginning of the pandemic so there wasn't really anyone or a system where to go to talk for help. So, whenever they (friends) had problems or I had problems, I would have to contact admissions at the college asking for help and sometimes they wouldn't reply, or it would take a really long time for a response...

For the eight students who ultimately enrolled at a community college, their overall positive transition experience resulted in a reexamination of their previous views about attending community college. Where it was once considered a personal failure to prepare and pursue enrollment at a university to "only end up at a CC [community college]", these high school graduates were now promoting the transfer path to other students; ultimately resisting and

combating the stigma of attending a community college.

Resistant Capital

Resistant Capital is having the awareness of systemic racism and the ability to challenge systems of oppression (Yosso, 2005). Students demonstrated their use of resistant capital through their awareness of social justice issues, joining college-prep programs for underserved student populations both during high school and in college, and calling for specific support tailored for Latinx students. Some of the participants showed their resistant capital by refusing to take loans in order to attend college. Finally, students resisted the idea that you must immediately attend a four-year university in order to be successful by currently thriving at their community college.

Specific students talked about social justice issues as a reason for their aspirations to attend college while others commented on the "injustices" they witnessed during their own educational experience. For some of these Latinx students, applying to university was in and of itself an action that challenged the status quo. Sarah talked about how she applied to thirteen different colleges and universities during her senior year of high school, "I made sure I didn't set a limit. So, I applied to schools you wouldn't think a low-income student would apply to like Stanford, LMU, and UCLA". She mentioned how she received college application fee waivers and wanted to take advantage of her opportunities. Christina connected her college and career goals with supporting her community, "just seeing how my community is just affected within this nation persuades me to want to help out...This scene with police brutality, just all the social justice issues, made me want to become a catalyst for change." Alicia also spoke to her desire to help her community,

I'm a strong advocate. I'm first-gen and I know firsthand what it's like and I know how hard it is. So, I'm that person to always push others and try to be that leader, be a role model...I feel like we need to have more people like that in our communities.

A major factor in students not enrolling at a four-year university was college costs and family finances. There was a clear aversion to student loans as Alicia explained,

I'm low-income, I'm first-gen, and I'm also going to be going to schools with people who, I want to say are predominantly White and Asian. They have the resources. They're not working. They're able to look at student loans and they're like, "Oh, this is nothing, we could pay it off". But, for me, it's everything. I don't want to burden myself with that and be pressured to have to pay it off in four years' time when that number just doubles or increases more. So, I think it's cray [crazy] and I don't like them [student loans].

Students also expressed their desire for their community to have greater access to higher education as Alicia continues, "I think our government and the system should be more supportive towards students and people from my community because we want to excel and attend these amazing schools that people always talk about. But we never get that chance..."

College cost and value was a theme that emerged as students compared their options of a four-year university with community college, and how the pandemic with online learning factored into this choice. Christina expressed her feelings about college costs and what students like her were receiving from four-year universities, "I'm just sort of angry too because we're paying so much money to be able to attend this school [university] but there isn't that much attention being paid to these students." During spring and summer 2020, several of the students had the personal challenge of accepting the reality that they were not going to be able to immediately attend a four-year university. Carolina recalls,

I was letting myself adjust...it was kind of hard mentally. Adjusting from "I need to go to the four-year" to "okay, I'm not going to go to a four-year, I'm going to stay here at community college" and that was very hard to take in because I had worked hard to make sure I ended up "better" at a four-year, so I felt that it was "not enough" for the goals I had at the time.

Other students found that the support they received from the community college was a major factor in their college decision and desired college experience. Alicia recalls, "I remember that

influenced my decision, having that support system that our communities and people of color, they don't usually get from large institutions or from other schools, private schools especially".

Fast forward to today, most of the students felt positive about their decision to attend community college. Carolina commented, "I'm definitely happy with my decision because I've had a really good experience. This METAS program really helped me and the counselors helped me when I was going to change my major...". This realization transferred into resistant capital for the students since they were breaking that narrative that they had to attend a four-year university in order to be successful. Carolina elaborates,

Honestly, I think that me finding it to be okay to change from going to a four-year [university] to community college and then to transfer, it just kind of clicked. I don't need "the best" [air quotes] in order to still be good because there's a stigma around community college, but there was also a stigma around being a teacher [her chosen career path], so I think I just kind of learned that it was okay to just do whatever as long as it's good for me.

An interesting finding is that seven out of the nine students mentioned community college stigma in their stories and how they initially never pictured themselves attending a community college or considered it a "back-up plan". When discussing their thoughts and feelings about where they were at the time of the interview, there was an overwhelmingly positive review of their decision to attend the community college as they felt it was the right decision for them. Alicia explained,

I never saw myself attending a community [college] if I'm being honest. There's always that stereotype that community college wasn't real college. I used to believe that stereotype but after I attended community [college], I can see how wrong it is and I feel very welcomed and I ended up joining programs, becoming more aware of myself and ended up regaining that sort of help and community support that I ended up losing halfway through senior year. And that's where I'm at right now, like the mindset that I had prior March 13 and then today, like a year later. It's really crazy but I'm very happy where I'm at right now.

In fact, several of these students recommend future graduating high school seniors to consider

attending a community college and pursue a transfer path to university. Carolina affirmed,

Honestly, because I think I've had such a good experience with community college, I think I would recommend anybody to go through community college first. It's just a lot cheaper, you get to learn the same things and for me, one of the big pluses about it is that they're smaller. It's harder to reach for people when there's a lot more people reaching at the same time, so in terms of the support, I think that it's better.

Mario commented,

If you have the support or the resources to go to a four- year [university], I would take that chance. But if you don't and you still want to go to a four-year [university]. I highly recommend the transfer route that I'm taking right now.

In fact, Mario had the opportunity to directly provide his advice to other college bound students during the summer months after high school graduation by interning for his former college club advisors. He worked on creating a club website and utilized his linguistic capital to communicate with high school students via online college prep workshops and speaker panels.

Linguistic Capital

Linguistic capital is the strength that comes with the ability to communicate in multiple languages or styles (Yosso, 2005). Linguistic capital was the least prevalent form of CCW found in these students' interviews. However, the ability to communicate in different languages and styles was considered a strength for the four students who displayed utilizing their linguistic capital during this time period. For example, Christina's linguistic capital of being bilingual with Spanish and English contributed to her college prep experience. She participated in a bilingual Spanish program starting from elementary school and so by the time she started high school, she was able to take AP Spanish Language and AP Spanish Literature, two courses/AP exams she passed. This led to her taking additional AP courses, contributing to her college academic preparation and competitive university applicant profile. Her bilingual skills did not come up otherwise in the interview as having a role in her college transition process. Another example

shows the intersection of familial capital and linguistic capital as Carolina described,

My parents, they speak a little bit of English but not to the point where they can help me with this stuff [college-going process]. I'm the one that helps them with regards to translating documents or scheduling appointments anywhere. So, I'm the one that helps them and the one that kind of does that at home.

For a couple of students, their ability to communicate in Spanish assisted in their college preparation, and/or involving their parents in their college transition. Otherwise, students' use of linguistic capital was found when they described their summer activities after high school graduation. Mario started a podcast and Jennifer (who was already trilingual in English, Spanish and Portuguese) wanted to learn a new language and enrolled in online French courses.

The COVID-19 pandemic established the context in which these students experienced their college application, college decision making, and college transition processes. It is within this context that students experienced challenges and obstacles, utilized different supports, and displayed various forms of community cultural wealth to pursue their post-secondary goals. The following conclusion will summarize the findings and reasons why these nine Latinx students experienced summer melt.

Conclusion

This research produced several significant findings with regards to Latinx student college transition experience and factors that influenced their college enrollment plans leading to summer melt. Participants in the study discussed the challenges they encountered during their college application and enrollment process and how they navigated these obstacles utilizing different supports and forms of cultural capital. The challenges students faced during their journey to college were 1) COVID-19 pandemic, 2) college cost and family finances, 3) difficulty completing college enrollment tasks, and 4) personal challenges. Students received support during their college transition process from family, near-age peers, high school staff,

college access program staff, and community college staff. The major forms of CCW students utilized in the pursuit of their college goals were aspirational and familial capital. They utilized their social capital to navigate the college application process and in their college decision-making. During spring and summer 2020, when they had less access to their social capital, students utilized their navigational capital to complete college enrollment tasks and transition to community college or in one case, take a gap year. Resistant capital was seen from a few students whose passion for social justice helped fuel their drive to continue their education and desired career paths as well as battling the perceived stigma of attending a community college in lieu of university. Linguistic capital was the least evident form of CCW found as only four students revealed their ability to communicate in different languages or styles as a personal strength during their college transition process.

All nine students in the study experienced summer melt as evidenced by these findings and this research highlights their voice as to the reasons why they changed their decision from immediately attending a four-year university to ultimately enrolling at a community college or taking a gap year. During the interviews, each student was asked to list the top three reasons why they changed their initial college plans and did not ultimately enroll at a four-year university for Fall 2020. The number one reason students gave for changing their decision was financial as students did not receive enough financial aid to cover the cost of the university, they were resistant to taking out student loans, and the California Promise Grant provided them with the opportunity to attend community college tuition-free for the first two years. The second most prevalent reason given as to why students did not enroll at the four-year university was the COVID-19 pandemic since students overwhelmingly were not in favor of paying college tuition and/or taking out students loans in order to participate in university online college courses in

addition to wanting to stay close to family. Finally, two students discussed the lack of support in successfully transitioning to the university, and two other students mentioned not feeling ready to attend a four-year university. Each of these themes is discussed in Chapter 5 and what the implications/recommendations are for college access stakeholders.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The widespread phenomenon of summer melt is a growing concern among college access professionals and undergraduate admissions staff at institutions of higher education (Castleman & Page, 2014a). While there are numerous articles dedicated to the identification of summer melt as an actual phenomenon in the field of education and review results of pilot intervention studies, research centering on summer melt student voice is lacking in the literature (Rall, 2016). Latinx students are one of the fastest-growing populations in the United States; however, they are also disproportionately more likely to not attend four-year universities compared to their peers (Durán, 2020; Langenkamp & Hoyt, 2019). Considering Latinx students have been known to experience summer melt at higher rates than their peers, it is imperative college access stakeholders invest in addressing the problem of summer melt, especially for this underserved student population (Daugherty, 2012). My study focused on an initial, crucial step in better understanding Latinx summer melt, hearing directly from students who have personally experienced this educational phenomenon. Using an asset-based approach, my study highlighted students' voices to uncover factors that contributed to participants' experience with the college decision-making process during the COVID-19 pandemic, ultimately resulting in summer melt, or specifically in this case, "pandemic melt".

Applying LatCrit Theory and Yosso's community cultural wealth model as the conceptual framework, my study examined factors that contributed to Latinx students' experience with the college application process, college decision-making process, and summer melt. Study participants shared their story of what it was like being a high school senior going through the college decision process during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. They described challenges and sources of support utilized during this time period. This study aimed to

1) provide college access stakeholders with the Latinx student perspective of summer melt, 2) identify challenges and barriers this student population faces during the college-enrollment process, 3) highlight forms of cultural capital this student population utilizes to persevere towards achieving their college goals, and 4) encourage college access educators to consider specific summer melt intervention strategies suggested by the researcher and the participants.

This final chapter begins with a summary that includes a review of the study purpose, research questions, and methodology within the context of the theoretical framework. What follows is a discussion of the findings from Chapter 4 within the context of the literature. The discussion of findings will be in the form of three assertions with implications relevant to each assertion discussed. Lastly, this chapter concludes with recommendations for future research, and a conclusion.

Purpose of the Study, Research Questions, and Methodology

The purpose of my study was to better understand Latinx students' lived experience of summer melt during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results highlighted the factors that influence Latinx students' college thinking and decision-making during their senior year of high school as well as the summer months leading up to what would be their first year in college. My study is significant because it focused on Latinx students, which is an underserved student population that is disproportionately affected by summer melt. Moreover, I utilized an asset-based lens to center student voice which is lacking in current summer melt research. The major research questions addressed in the study and answered in Chapter 4 were:

- 1) What challenges did these students report experiencing, if any?
- 2) What sources of support did these students report utilizing, if any?
- 3) What forms of community cultural wealth did students utilize during this time period,

if any?

The participant pool included nine Latinx students who graduated from a California high school in Spring 2020 and originally planned to attend a four-year university but did not actually matriculate at a four-year institution starting the fall term after high school graduation. These students represented a variety of demographics ranging from the type of high school attended, socioeconomic status, first-generation status, and geographic location; eight were female and one was male. Viral network sampling followed by criterion-based sampling was utilized in order to recruit a diverse pool of California Latinx students who experienced summer melt (Salinas Jr., 2020). The methodology used a phenomenological approach involving qualitative data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Creswell, 2005). Interviews were conducted between January 21, 2021, through March 2, 2021. Each participant was individually interviewed for approximately one hour on Zoom utilizing a semi-structured interview guide. These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the Zoom video conferencing software. I hand-coded the interview transcripts and used Dedoose, a data analysis software program, to further code and analyze the data. I used an open coding technique in my initial round of coding followed by several rounds of focused coding based on emerging themes from the open coding sessions along with my conceptual framework and research questions. What follows is a discussion of major research findings that resulted from my data analysis.

Major Research Findings

All nine students in the study experienced summer melt and this research highlights their voice as to the reasons why they changed their decision from immediately attending a four-year university to ultimately enrolling at a community college or taking a gap year. The most prevalent reason students gave for changing their decision was financial; students did not receive

enough financial aid to cover the cost of attending university, they were resistant to taking out student loans, and the California Promise Grant provided them with the opportunity to attend community college by waiving tuition fees for the first two years. The second most prevalent reason given as to why students did not enroll at the four-year university was the COVID-19 pandemic; students overwhelmingly were not in favor of paying college tuition and/or taking out students loans in order to participate in university online college courses and some had a desire to stay close to family during these unprecedented times. Finally, two students discussed the lack of support in successfully transitioning to the university, and two other students mentioned not feeling personally ready to attend a four-year university. I will be discussing these reasons for summer melt in the form of three assertions: pandemic melt and the need for interventions, financial barriers for freshman Latinx student university enrollment, and Latinx summer melt as a result of an inequitable educational system.

Assertion #1: Pandemic Melt and the Need for Interventions

Castleman and Page (2014a) define “summer melt” as the phenomenon of when college intending high school students fail to matriculate at their intended college starting the fall term after high school graduation. Other researchers consider summer melt to occur when a student submits their intent to register at a particular college but ultimately does not enroll at any post-secondary institution starting the proceeding fall academic term (Rall, 2016). While most summer melt researchers focus on the summer months prior to the start of college, some scholars have noted the fact that summer melt does indeed begin even before a student graduates from high school (Castleman et al., 2015). My research findings align with this assertion while noting the unique setting of the COVID-19 pandemic as the context in which the Class of 2020 experienced summer melt. Thus, I use the term “pandemic melt” to describe the phenomenon of

eligible students who did not enroll at their intended college for Fall 2020 due to reasons tied to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the term “pandemic melt” was used to describe anticipated and actual declines in college enrollment during the COVID-19 pandemic, my research does not focus on overall enrollment changes but rather on how these nine Latinx students experienced their college transition process during this specific time period (Burke, 2020; Hartocollis, 2020)

Students experienced different challenges and obstacles during their senior year in high school that align with several of the cited factors contributing to summer melt. My study allowed the students to personally describe these factors discussed previously by researchers, educators, and college access professionals. These obstacles included completing college enrollment tasks, personal challenges involving relationships and mental health, and issues with college costs and financial aid (Castleman & Page, 2014a; Castleman et al., 2014; Manzano-Sanchez et al., 2019). These are all challenges that my study participants encountered well before graduating from high school. Many signs of potential “pandemic melt” started to appear in March 2020 when these students were starting to receive college acceptances and financial aid offers. Where previous summer melt studies considered students' initial college choice as solidified on May 1 (National College Intent Day), many colleges extended this deadline into June due to the COVID-19 crisis (Hartocollis, 2020). Essentially, there was no set “start” and “end” date to capture all students' intended college choice and point of melting. Students “melted” throughout Spring 2020 and into Summer 2020. As one participant described her experience with the March 2020 school closures, “... eventually I didn't go back to school and that's kind of when I started my summer early”.

My study results suggest the need for early summer melt interventions with sustained summer transition support for Latinx high school graduates pursuing their first year in college, regardless of their college preparation or participation in college access programs. Based on the

results of her College Link intervention program, Daugherty (2012) states, “College decision-making may be somewhat different for Hispanic students and their families, and interventions to affect these decisions may therefore need to be carefully tailored” (pg. 3). Previous summer melt intervention studies focused on supporting students’ access to financial aid and completing college enrollment tasks, leaving little time to address social or emotional concerns with their college transition (Arnold et al., 2015; Castleman et al., 2012, Daugherty, 2012). These interventions were provided by high school counselors and staff, college access program staff, college admissions staff and near-age peer mentors. All the college-bound Latinx students in my study cited receiving at least one source of support from their high school or college access program during their senior year that was then cut off at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although a few students experienced challenges with college enrollment tasks, all students discussed personal challenges during their senior year and transition to college. Similar to what other researchers have found, these personal challenges ranged from physical health, mental health, family crisis, and impostor syndrome (Castleman et al., 2012; Poynton & Lapan, 2017; Rall, 2016). Students described feelings of stress, anxiety, depression, isolation, and fear. They discussed receiving some moral and emotional support from family and peers, however high school and college prep support was focused more on practical tasks such as college and financial aid applications. Based on these findings, I offer the following implications and recommendations for college access leaders, including such stakeholders as college advising professionals in high schools, college access programs, and post-secondary institutions.

Implications and Recommendations for Leadership

Considering that traditional summer melt intervention programs focus on serving college bound students after high school graduation, during the summer months prior to starting college

classes, it is imperative to shift the timeline to early senior year, even before students decide on which college to enroll (Castleman et al., 2015). I recommend college access professionals to provide personalized summer melt intervention services as early as fall of senior year, when students submit college applications. These supports should then continue throughout the college and financial aid application process, into the summer months, concluding with the student being successfully “handed off” to a support program or liaison at their intended college, essentially assisting the student to transition between utilizing high school supports to college supports. Non-profit college access programs may also consider adopting program models that provide support services beyond high school graduation through a student’s first year in college or beyond. In addition to utilizing virtual, online summer melt interventions (i.e.: online student portals, emails, text messages, and social media), college access professionals should continue to provide proactive personalized one-on-one support in person, via phone calls and video conferencing.

Although students struggled with personal challenges during this time period and wanted sustained proactive and personalized support navigating their college-going process; it became clear that college costs and family finances became one of the major barriers in their attempts at enrolling at a four-year university. This leads to my next assertion which discusses the impacts of college affordability on Latinx four-year college access and the appeal of pursuing the transfer path via community college.

Assertion #2 Financial Barriers for Latinx University Enrollment

Although previous summer melt studies focused on first-generation or low-income students, Latinx students from all socioeconomic backgrounds can experience this phenomenon. While the results of my study highlight the experiences of first-generation Latinx students, it also

conveys the “pandemic melt” experience of students whose parents have a college degree and students from middle to upper socioeconomic families. Aligning with results of previous summer melt research, the main barrier in the majority of these cases was the financial costs of college and lack of gift financial aid (Arnold et al., 2009, 2015; Castleman et al., 2012, 2014a; Daugherty, 2012; Rall, 2016; Tackett et al., 2018).

Prominent summer melt researchers cite challenges with the financial aid application process as a factor for summer melt (Arnold et al., 2015; Castleman et al., 2012, 2014a; Tackett et al., 2018). Several studies have shown how first-generation students and families struggle to understand the net cost of college and sometimes overestimate tuition expenses which sway them away from college enrollment (Avery & Kane, 2004; Grodsky & Jones, 2007; Horn et al., 2003). However, this was not mentioned as a barrier in my study when participants described completing the financial aid application process and receiving assistance in interpreting financial aid award letters; the issue was a lack of gift financial aid and their personal reluctance to take out student loans. While I did not see sample financial aid letters to be able to interpret what students were really being offered, nor copies of FAFSA Student Aid Reports providing an expected family contribution (EFC) amount, participants claimed they could not afford the net cost of attending a university immediately after high school. This college enrollment challenge is not a new barrier nor comes as a surprise for Latinx college-bound students. For example, in Arnold et al. (2009) Summer Link intervention study that included 62% Latinx students, over half of the participants had indicated anticipated barriers to immediate college enrollment on their senior exit survey; nearly two-thirds of these students reported that their biggest issue would be a lack of money and financial aid to cover college costs.

College costs and family finances played a highly influential role in these specific

“pandemic melt” Latinx students. Heller (1999) states Latinx families are highly sensitive to tuition and financial aid information. Additional researchers add that Latinx students are positively influenced to enroll in college if they receive grants in their financial aid package and are discouraged by loans and increases in tuition rates (John & Noell, 1989; McPherson & Shapiro, 1998). Nunez and Kim (2012) describe how Latinx students worry about the impact of college costs on family resources and about their ability to repay loans. My study findings echo these claims as a majority of research participants were averse to taking out student loans and conveyed a fear of crippling student loan debt. The students from low-income families considered student loans as a step backward towards their goal of improving their socioeconomic situation since they would be accumulating financial debt. Rodriguez, Rhodes, and Aguirre (2015) explain, “Cultural and social attitudes toward loans discourage whether to pursue a college degree is directly related to rising tuition costs and increased loan debt” (p. 209). Over thirty years of empirical research has established that lowering college costs can increase college enrollments, especially when the net price is lowered (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). This can help explain why qualifying for the California Community College Promise Grant was a positive factor in my participants enrolling at their local community college since the financial aid program would waive their enrollment fees for the first two years.

After applying for financial aid, Latinx students and their families may still not have the necessary financial resources to cover their college net cost. Some students may submit an intent to enroll at an institution but then later realize they do not qualify for enough financial aid and switch to a more affordable option like a community college (Tichavakunda & Galan, 2020). Students in my study viewed community college as a “backup plan” and started to consider that option once they reviewed their university financial aid estimates. Some students were counseled

to attend their local community college after reviewing financial aid award letters with their counselors, college advisors, and mentors. Students also placed value on the “college experience” meaning that they considered the cost of attendance to include the capacity to physically engage on campus in both academic and social experiences. Taking into account their experience of online learning during the last semester of high school, students expressed a preference for in-person instruction in lieu of online courses. Considering the likelihood of the 2020-2021 academic year consisting of online learning, students compared college costs with their perceived first-year college experience. They viewed living at home while taking online community college courses and living at home while taking online university courses as being the same experience. So, when given the option of paying out of pocket or taking out loans to enroll at the university versus receiving a grant to cover the first two years of community college, it felt like a “no-brainer”. Most students opted for the “free” two years of community college with plans to then transfer to a university of their choice. More concerned with her anticipated college experience than college affordability, one student decided to take a gap year and took the necessary steps to secure her spot at a four-year university for Fall 2021. Based on these findings, I offer the following implications and recommendations for college access leaders, including such stakeholders as college advising practitioners and state policy makers.

Implications and Recommendations for Leadership

A few of the students in my study did mention receiving financial aid counseling from high school counselors and college access professionals during the spring and summer months of 2020, however these sessions were only between the student and the educator. Seeing how Latinx students heavily utilize familial capital and cite their families as major sources of support during the college going process, it behooves college access professionals and summer melt

intervention providers to include parents/guardians in the process. Financial aid workshops should be geared towards students and parents with information provided in their preferred language. Many high schools and non-profit college access programs already provide free financial aid workshops that provide general information and support completing and submitting FAFSA, California Dream Application, and other financial aid forms.

In addition to these large-scale events, Latinx families also need individual and personalized support in not only submitting all necessary forms and documents but also interpreting financial aid award estimates from colleges. During these sessions, I recommend summer melt intervention providers to help families understand the true net cost of their college options (after financial aid is applied to the cost of attendance) as well as direct cost (items that are directly billed by the college such as tuition and student fees, and room/board if students are to live on campus). Then provide guidance and referrals on how to lower other college expenses that colleges include in the estimated budget (i.e. books, supplies, miscellaneous, and housing/food for commuting students). These referrals should include programs and services that the student would already have access to at their college such as libraries, computer labs, food pantries, book lending programs, work-study, student organizations, and student support programs such as EOP and TRIO.

If a student's gift aid does not cover the direct cost of enrolling at the university, summer melt intervention providers should explain how federal work-study and student loans work (if the student qualifies for these forms of financial aid). In terms of student loans, it's important that students and parents fully understand the terms and conditions of the loans, how repayment works, and provide an estimate of a student's monthly payment once repayment is expected to begin. There should be an honest discussion about loan debt and what the family would deem a

reasonable investment in higher education versus an unrealistic expectation on the student and family to repay. It's crucial for summer melt intervention providers to be sensitive to the family's feelings about college costs and student loan debt, to listen to their concerns, and not impart judgment or pressure about their ultimate decision on college choice.

A proactive approach to college admission counseling is to encourage students to apply to local public four-year universities and community colleges as financially sustainable options that they may consider in the spring once they receive financial aid estimates. Students who are accepted to local colleges and universities may be able to afford enrolling without accruing college debt if they live at home with family and commute to school. These recommendations require change in policy and practice as current public high school counseling models and some non-profit college access programs do not include serving students beyond graduation nor have the necessary staffing to provide such individualized summer melt intervention recommendations.

Findings from a recent systematic review and meta-analysis on post-secondary grant programs demonstrate that institutional and state gift aid have strong positive effects on college enrollment, credit accumulation, persistence, and completion (LaSota et al., 2022). Considering that college costs, family finances, and adversity to student loans was a major barrier for the college-bound Latinx students in my study to immediately enroll at a university, increased gift aid provided by the state and federal government could see a major impact in future Latinx first-time freshman four-year university enrollment. The California Promise Grant was a positive factor in my study participants enrolling at their local community college in lieu of not attending any post-secondary institution. Perhaps these students would have enrolled at a CSU or UC campus if this grant could be used at a public four-year university. A recommendation for state

policy makers and the CSU and UC systems is to increase the amount of gift financial aid, such as grants and scholarships, for California domestic first-time freshman students. Expanding the California Promise Grant to include CSU and UC campuses would positively impact middle class families who do not qualify for the Federal Pell Grant, UC Blue and Gold Plan, or Cal Grant (all of which would normally help cover the cost of tuition and mandatory student fees).

Despite the many personal challenges and financial barriers these Latinx students faced during their college transition process, they persevered and are continuing their journey towards earning a college degree, albeit via a community college pathway or taking a gap year. This leads to my final assertion that discusses Latinx “pandemic melt” as a result of systemic inequities ranging from the myth of meritocracy, socioeconomic inequality and unaddressed potholes in the public educational system.

Assertion #3: Latinx Pandemic Melt as a Result of Systemic Inequities

Latinx “pandemic melt” is clearly a result of systemic inequities in our public education system and greater society. While analyzing 2020 national post-secondary enrollment rates, Ma et al. (2020) found that among undergraduates who are Black, Hispanic, or Native, larger shares attended public two-year than public four-year institutions. White and Asian students were more likely to be enrolled at public four-year than at public two-year institutions. In Fall 2020, 53% of enrolled undergraduate students in the United States were White compared to 22% Latinx students (Ma et al. 2020). One of the first summer melt intervention studies where Latinx students made up a majority of the participant pool (62%) was Lindsay Daugherty’s Summer Link program (2012). This intervention program was conducted in a school district where the overall summer melt rate was greater than 50% for Latinx students and 35% for African American students, compared to only 17% for White students. Low-income students were more

than twice as likely as their higher-income peers to succumb to summer melt. “Previous studies argue that rates of summer melt are higher for low-income minority graduates because these students face additional obstacles in the transition to college enrollment and often lack the networks to overcome these barriers” (Daugherty, 2012, pg.7). What has yet to be discussed is how these additional obstacles connect to systemic inequities in public education and greater society.

A key feature of American schooling is utilizing master narratives and the myth of meritocracy to perpetuate the opportunity gap. “Failure to critically challenge the lens with which we see the world makes the myth of meritocracy predominant in our understanding of the workings of social institutions” (Zamudio et al., 2011, p.12). In the “traditional” college-going process, my study participants did “everything they were supposed to” in order to attend a four-year university. These students were academically prepared for college, even exceeding admission requirements by taking honors level, advanced placement, and dual enrollment community college courses. All these students utilized at least one source of college prep support, with many participating in college prep programs specifically geared to serve first-generation, low-income students. They had the necessary college knowledge and social capital to successfully navigate the college and financial aid application process. All nine students were admitted to at least three universities, many of which are considered selective universities in California. Carolina’s story conveys how she had worked hard to reach her goal of being admitted to a selective university:

Growing up, I always knew that I wanted to go to college, because my parents always told me that I had to, but I genuinely did want to. I saw how much they struggled to make ends meet. So, college was a way for me to do better, and I mean they came here to give that to me, give those opportunities to me, so I always knew that I wanted to go to college... I always knew that I wanted to attend a four-year [college] too. That was always what I had thought of because

growing up there's the stigma around community college, and I had worked so hard that I didn't want to end up there. I really did want to go to a four- year university throughout high school, I took AP courses, I did honors courses, I took dual enrollment as well. I had some community college courses while I was in high school. I always strive to go to these four-year colleges. I ended up applying to a lot of schools. I applied to seven CSUs and four UCs and I got accepted to every single college that I applied to.

Unfortunately, major barriers to her intended university enrollment were tied to issues of socioeconomic inequality and systemic inequities in K-12 public education, higher education admission and financial aid policies, employment, healthcare and immigration in the United States.

A majority of previous summer research is quantitative and experimental in nature. Researchers tended to utilize one or more of the following frameworks in their studies: Social Capital Theory, Traditional and Behavioral Economic Theory, Social Cognitive Career Theory and college readiness frameworks. As Tichavakunda and Galan (2020) state, “traditional readiness frameworks can implicitly place the burden of college success on the student” (pg.7). When these frameworks are placed on summer melt research, there is an automatic deficit lens that essentially puts the onus on the student and parents, making them responsible for “melting”. With community cultural wealth in mind, however, I critique the systemic conditions that shape Latinx students’ “pandemic melt” experiences as opposed to critiquing the behaviors of the students and their families.

A strategy to challenge the deficit lens with which many public-school educators have of their students of color is to utilize different narratives in the curriculum as well as allow students to share their own stories, experiences, and perspectives (Zamudio et al., 2011). Counter-narratives, in contrast to master-narratives, challenge the dominant ideology, have a commitment to social justice, and highlight the centrality of experiential knowledge (Zamudio et al., 2011).

My study findings highlight how utilizing an asset-based lens, such as community cultural wealth, in college access work can be used to disrupt systems of oppression in public education. Community cultural wealth is a theoretical framework rooted in Critical Race Theory (Zamudio, Russell, Rios & Bridgeman, 2011) and challenges the assumption that students of color have cultural deficiencies that must be remedied by educators in order to achieve academic success (Yosso, 2005). This framework describes the six types of capital students of color possess which requires educators to utilize a strengths-based lens in how they view, teach, and serve students of color and their families. The six types of capital are: aspirational, familial, linguistic, navigational, social, and resistant (Yosso, 2005). Qualitative researchers studying the Latinx population within education have discovered additional strengths outside the original framework such as spiritual capital (Means et al., 2019) and emotional intelligence capital (Guzman et al., 2018). As Rios-Ellis et al. (2015) state,

Without a clear understanding of what cultural capital can mean to a unique population within an institutional context, student assets will continue to be underexploited and not fully utilized. Furthermore, programs will continue to focus on individualized student deficits without incorporating population-specific designs that could utilize cultural strengths to facilitate academic success (pg. 37).

A step in working to disrupt barriers to educational equity is to learn about systemic oppression and our role within that construct, whether we are subjects of oppression or beneficiaries of white privilege (McIntosh, 1988; Leonardo, 2004; DiAngelo, 2011). Secondary and post-secondary education professionals, especially college access and retention stakeholders, must recognize their impact in students' transition from high school to college and their role in the summer melt phenomenon. As Arnold et al. (2009) state,

The summer flood [summer melt] is not about academic preparation or higher education goals, but about aligning aspirations, knowledge, relationships, and resources so that students receive a necessary escort into the opportunity they

have prepared for, sought, and won. Separately and in partnership, high schools and colleges must attend explicitly to the summer transition of new high school graduates. Researchers and policy makers need to understand the dynamics that lead to the summer flood and take action to reduce it. Aligning the complex hand-off of students from high school to college requires the consistent presence of all parties to make sure admitted students follow the higher education pathway for which they are prepared (pg. 32).

Key drivers in the educational system can change student trajectories, potentially avoiding summer melt, but the system itself must be changed. According to my study, I recommend the following changes to take place within the system to address this educational failure.

Implications and Recommendations for Leadership

In order for college access professionals and researchers to begin addressing the systemic inequities that contribute to summer melt, there is a need for additional federal and state funding for future summer melt research, professional development for educators and college access practitioners, and pilot additional intervention programs. There is a need for comprehensive and transparent summer melt data collection and analysis across the K-14 educational pipeline. High school districts as well as post-secondary school institutions should actively track their yearly summer melt rates, including metrics that allow them to analyze trends and inequities between different student populations. High school counselors, college access program staff, college admission and financial aid staff, and other college access stakeholders should then be provided with additional professional development that focuses on cultural proficiency and providing asset-based student services (Lindsey, 2018). From here, high schools and colleges can begin to pilot summer melt interventions targeting different student populations, in addition to improving their general, large-scale outreach efforts.

While my qualitative study contributes the student perspective of summer melt to college

access literature, there is still more to the Latinx summer melt story we have yet to discover, which leads to the following recommendations for future research.

Areas for Future Research

Additional empirical studies that examine and expand on our knowledge and understanding of Latinx summer melt are needed to help college access stakeholders become more adept with supporting these college-bound students. My study was conducted within a three-month period and therefore it may be beneficial to take a longitudinal approach to future studies and examine the ways Latinx summer melt students experience their college-going process during senior year and their transition post high school graduation into what would be their first year in college or university. Perhaps researchers can follow “melters” at least one year after their intended college enrollment to uncover their transition experiences and if they end up enrolling in college at a later date. Although I had an equal distribution of California geographic locations and a variety of school types represented in my study, most participants identified as first-generation, low-income, and female. Future Latinx summer melt research could focus solely on the male Latinx perspective in order to support this specific student population. In addition, expanding the scope of the study would also include participants that live throughout the United States in order to have more voices heard. One area that may be worthwhile to research is Latinx summer melt in other states/geographic areas that have high Latinx populations such as Texas, New York, Florida, Arizona, and New Mexico. How will summer melt factors and student experiences in these areas differ from the ones presented in my study and, how can college access professionals use this to inform their policies and practices to increase on-time Latinx college enrollment? A question that remains unanswered relates to the scope of summer melt rates among Latinx students and how this rate compares to their peers and national average. A

second question relates to the role Latinx parents and family members have in summer melt and how they can be included in summer melt intervention programs. Future quantitative and qualitative studies can help answer these questions which may lead to improved summer melt intervention programs and decreased summer melt rates across all student populations.

Conclusion

In sum, while the summer melt student perspective represents a largely unexamined area of college access, researchers have documented the phenomenon based on practitioner experience. Educational researchers and practitioners have piloted promising summer melt intervention programs however have not taken into consideration student voice or culture. I take a small first step in documenting the voices of nine Latinx four-year college bound students who experienced “pandemic melt” (summer melt in 2020). My findings point to the importance of providing proactive and personalized wrap-around support to college-bound Latinx students starting prior to high school graduation and continuing through successful college attendance. The goal of increasing on-time Latinx four-year college enrollment necessitates increased partnerships between high schools, college access programs, and institutions of higher education to seal the cracks in the educational pipeline. A further examination of intervention programs targeting this specific student demographic may also lead to an increase in on-time college enrollment rates among other marginalized student populations, improving equity in college access and retention.

APPENDIX A: EMAIL INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN SURVEY

Dear Participant,

My name is Jessica Resendez Orozco and I'm currently a student in the UCSD/CSUSM Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership. I wanted to reach out to ask for your assistance with my dissertation study!

I'm interested in learning what Latinx students experience during the summer months after high school graduation and how this impacts their college plans. I'm specifically planning to conduct 45-60 min. individual interviews with students who meet the following criteria:

- (1) Identify as Latinx, Latina, Latino, Hispanic, and/or people of Latin American descent
- (2) Are at least 18 years old
- (3) Graduated from a California high school in Spring 2020
- (4) And submitted your Statement of Intent to Register (SIR) to attend a four-year college/university but you did not actually start at a four-year institution in Fall 2020.

All responses are confidential, and no real names will be used in the publication of my dissertation study.

If you are interested in participating please fill out this interest form and I will contact you personally to provide more information and next steps: https://ucsd.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6rit2GzoATjmgJL

As a token of gratitude, interview participants for this study will be gifted a \$15 Amazon gift card. I appreciate your support!

Thank you,
Ms. Jessica Resendez, M.Ed., PPS
Email: jresendez@ucsd.edu
Work Cell: 858-524-9997

Doctoral Student - Cohort 15
Joint Doctoral Program - Educational Leadership
University of California, San Diego
California State University, San Marcos

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT INTEREST SURVEY

"Latinx Pandemic Melt": A Phenomenological Study of Summer Melt during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Participant Interest Survey

Jessica Resendez Orozco is currently a student in the UCSD/CSUSM Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership. She is interested in learning what students experience during the summer months after high school graduation and is requesting California Latina/o/x Class of 2020 high school graduates to voluntarily complete this survey. All responses are confidential.

By clicking NEXT, you are acknowledging that you are 18 years or older and consenting to participate in this survey.

1. Do you identify as Latina, Latino, Latinx, and/or Hispanic?
 - Yes
 - No

2. Did you graduate from a California High School in Spring 2020?
 - Yes
 - No

At the time of your high school graduation (before summer break)

3. Did you **PLAN** to go to college in Fall 2020?
 - Yes
 - No

4. What type of college did you **PLAN** to attend in Fall 2020?
 - Community College/Trade School (technical/certificate program)
 - Community College (Associates Degree, no plans to transfer to a university)
 - Community College (with plans to transfer to a university)
 - Community College (enrolled in a Bachelor's degree program)
 - Public University (Bachelor's degree program)
 - Private University (Bachelor's degree program)

At the end of summer 2020...

5. Did you **ATTEND** college?
 - Yes
 - No

6. What type of college did you **attend**?
 - I did not attend college in the Fall 2020
 - Community College/Trade School (technical/certificate program)

- Community College (Associates Degree, no plans to transfer to a university)
- Community College (with plans to transfer to a university)
- Community College (enrolled in a Bachelor's degree program)
- Public University (Bachelor's degree program)
- Private University (Bachelor's degree program)

7. Did you change or delay your college enrollment plans?
- Yes
 - No

Please complete the following questions if you would like to participate in a 45 min- 60 min. interview via Zoom scheduled at your convenience. The researcher will be contacting all potential participants to inform them if they were selected for an interview.

Your personal information will be confidential. All data will be contained on the researcher's password-protected laptop in a password-protected file. All hard copies of data will be contained in a locked cabinet in my home or will be in my immediate possession. Research records will be kept confidential up to three years after the project is finished. The researcher will dispose of research data by shredding paper records and erasing digital files.

As a token of appreciation for your time, interview participants will receive a \$15 Amazon gift card at the conclusion of their interview.

8. What is your email address? _____

APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET



California State University
SAN MARCOS

"Latinx Pandemic Melt": A Phenomenological Study of Summer Melt during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Information Sheet

Dear Participant,

My name is Jessica Resendez Orozco and I am a student in the Joint Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at California State University San Marcos. I am conducting a research study to better understand the lived experiences of Latinx high school graduates who submitted their intent to enroll at a four-year college but didn't attend that college starting Fall 2020. The purpose of this form is to inform you about the study.

Why am I being invited to take part in this study?

You are invited to take part in this study because you

- 1) identify as Latinx, Latina, Latino, Hispanic, and/or people of Latin American descent
- (2) are at least 18 years old
- (3) graduated from a California high school in spring 2020
- (4) and originally planned to attend a four-year college/university but did not actually matriculate at a four-year institution starting the fall term after high school graduation.

What will I do if I agree to participate?

If you agree to participate in the study, you will participate in an individual interview with the researcher via Zoom (a free, online, video conferencing application). The interview will last approximately 45min-60min and will be recorded. You will receive a list of potential interview questions to review prior to your scheduled interview date so that you may reflect and consider your responses ahead of time.

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to participate at any time, even after the study has started. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study, there will be no penalty, and you will be able to keep any incentives you have earned up to the point at which you withdraw.

What are the benefits to me for being in this study?

There are no direct benefits to participation in this study, however, your participation will help the investigator learn more about high school graduate summer transition experiences and impacts on college enrollment, and society may benefit from this knowledge.

What happens to the information collected for the study?

Your responses will be confidential.

The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used. All data will be contained on the researcher's password-protected computer in a password-protected file. All hard copies of data will be contained in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home. Research records will be kept confidential up to three years after the project is finished. The researcher will dispose of research data by shredding paper records and erasing digital files.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me? Is there any risk to me by being in this study? If so, how will these risks be minimized?

There are minimal risks and inconveniences to participating in this study. These include:

- A potential to experience boredom, fatigue, or emotional distress while being interviewed.
- The amount of time spent doing the interview may be inconvenient.

To minimize these risks and inconveniences, the following measures will be taken:

- Participants can skip any questions that they feel uncomfortable answering during the interview.
- Participants may be directed to counseling or social support services.
- The interview may be scheduled at a time that is convenient to the participant and at a place that is private.

Who should I contact for questions?

If you have questions about the study, please call me at 858-524-9997 or e-mail me at resen01@cougars.csusm.edu. You may also contact my research advisor, Brooke Soles at bsoles@csusm.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the IRB Office at irb@csusm.edu or (760) 750-4029.

PLEASE KEEP THIS INFORMATION SHEET FOR YOUR RECORDS

APPENDIX D: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

"Latinx Pandemic Melt" A Phenomenological Study of Summer Melt during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Date: _____ Time: _____ Interviewee: _____

Pre-Interview Information & Procedures (review info sheet)

Info sheet and interview questions were emailed to participant on: _____

*Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?
What name would you like to go by for the purposes of this interview/study?
Do you give permission for me to record this interview?*

Opening the Interview Session

Ok NAME Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview for my research study. Do you give permission for me to record this interview?

Introductory Questions:

Can you tell me a little about where you are from and the type of high school you attended?

Can you tell me about how you decided you wanted to attend college?

Key Questions	<i>Notes</i>
1. Please describe your college plans as of your high school graduation date. 2. How did your plans turn out? Where were you starting the following fall term?	
3. Please describe your experience during the summer months after high school graduation and how these experiences influenced your thinking about college.	
4. Please describe any challenges or obstacles you faced during your summer transition to college? <i>Possible Probing Questions:</i> How did financial aid influence your thinking about college during this time? How did your personal/family financial situation influence your thinking about college during this time? How did the college enrollment process (completing enrollment tasks) influence your thinking about college during this time? How did personal relationships (family, friends, peers, partners, etc.) influence your thinking about college during this time? How did your mental, emotional and/or physical health influence your thinking about college during this time?	

<p>Did you have any other personal factors that influenced your thinking about college during this time?</p>	
<p>5. Please describe any type of support you received during your summer transition to college.</p> <p><i>Possible Probing Questions:</i> What role did your high school have in your summer transition experience, if any?</p> <p>What role did your community have in your summer transition experience, if any? (could also include a college access program such as TRIO, Upward Bound, EAOP, etc.)</p> <p>What role did near-age peers and/or mentors have in your summer transition experience, if any?</p> <p>What role did your intended college/university have in your summer transition experience, if any?</p> <p>What kind of communications did you receive during your summer transition experience, if any? (i.e.: text messages, phone calls, emails, college portal, postal mail, etc.)</p> <p>What impact did these communications have in your summer transition experience, if any?</p>	
<p>6. What role, if any, did the Pandemic have on your transition to college?</p>	
<p>What are the top three reasons why you changed your decision from attending a four-year to _____?</p> <p>1.</p> <p>2.</p> <p>3.</p>	

Concluding Question:

To obtain your final thoughts, is there anything else you would like to tell me or share with me regarding today's topic?

Thank you for your time and your insights on your summer 2020 experience. I will follow-up with you in a few days to complete a member-checking exercise to verify my notes of our session. You will be receiving a \$15 Amazon Gift Card emailed to you within 24 hours.

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