Title

Understanding through Pláticas Why They Left and How to Get Them Back: A Covid-Related Study of Latina/e/o/x Students' First to Second Year Attrition at a Public Four-Year Hispanic Serving Institution

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Monica Ruth Rivas

2024

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Understanding through *Pláticas* Why They Left and How to Get Them Back: A COVID-Related Study of Latina/e/o/x Students' First to Second Year Attrition at a Public Four-Year Hispanic Serving Institution

by

Monica Ruth Rivas

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Mark Kevin Eagan Jr., Chair

This study explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Latina/e/o/x first-year students' experiences at a public California State University and their decision to leave college between their first and second year, and how student support services professionals interpreted the role of the pandemic on their work with students and their retention. Additionally, this study sought to identify recommendations to support students better and strategies to rematriculate students who stopped out. This qualitative narrative inquiry with a *pláticas* approach centered Latina/e/o/x students' voices who stopped out between the end of the spring 2020 and spring 2023 semesters. There were 18 one-on-one *pláticas* with three participant groups: Latina/e/o/x students who do not plan to return to the institution, those who have already returned or will return, and student services professionals who serve these student groups. Analysis of qualitative data revealed

several findings within three overarching themes. First, personal challenges and struggles contributed to students' initial stop-out decisions. Most participants perceived the COVID-19 pandemic as amplifying systemic inequities in academic preparation and finances, undermining their self-efficacy, socio-emotional intelligence, mental health capacity, and resiliency to persevere. Second, institutional challenges also contributed to students' decision to stop out. The multifaceted effects of the pandemic have not been understood fully, and faculty and staff were seemingly unprepared for students' increased range of needs and challenges, leading to burnout, turnover, service interruptions, financial aid frustrations, and navigational challenges for students. Lack of validation in students' experiences and instances of microaggressions also discouraged students, impacting their sense of belonging and mental health. Third, the findings identified participants' recommendations and strategies for rematriculating and retaining students. Participants recommended that institutions develop a strategic plan for support and outreach to students, facilitate and normalize students stopping out, and emphasize servingness by creating a student-ready campus that validates students' individual experiences and involves families more through cultural, familial experiences. This dissertation uncovered new data on an emerging field in the research on COVID-19, providing a more nuanced understanding of how the pandemic impacted students and the experiences of a population of students that is often overlooked and challenging to study.

The dissertation of Monica Ruth Rivas is approved.

Sylvia Hurtado

Daniel Gilbert Solórzano

Mark Kevin Eagan Jr., Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

DEDICATION PAGE

I dedicate this dissertation to my loving parents, Everardo and Elva Rivas – *gracias por todos los sacrificios que han hecho para darnos una mejor vida en este país. Mil gracias por siempre apoyarme y mostrarme cómo trabajar duro para salir adelante. Estoy muy orgullosa de ser su hija. Aprecio que aunque no siempre entendieron mi trayectoria universitaria, siempre me han apoyado incondicionalmente. Este logro no es solo mío, es de toda la familia. Todos los rezos, esperanzas, sueños y resistencia de ustedes, mis abuelos, y nuestros antepasados han ayudado para darme la fuerza y la perseverancia para hacer este sueño una realidad. Estoy tan orgullosa de ser la primera doctora de la familia. Les agradezco por inculcarme buenos valores y ayudarme a hacer la persona que soy. ¡Los quiero mucho!*

I also dedícate this work to all the Latina/e/o/x students who had to interrupt their educational journeys due to systemic inequities and personal challenges. You inspire me to be a better educator and social justice advocate and to reimagine institutions that intentionally support and validate Latina/e/o/x students' assets and cultivate their aspirational goals.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have dreamed of becoming a *doctora* for fifteen years. It has been a long professional and educational journey, and I have many people in my community to thank and acknowledge for helping me achieve this goal. I am thankful for all my CSUCI colleagues who encouraged me to pursue a doctoral journey. This three-year journey has not been easy, and it was a tremendous support every time a colleague and friend asked about my program and dissertation and offered encouragement and sage advice to survive and thrive in my doctoral journey.

To my participants, thank you for sharing your stories, time, and recommendations with me. I am indebted to you and will use your shared knowledge to advocate for and improve support structures and processes for students.

I am incredibly grateful to my dream team dissertation committee for providing their collective wisdom and expertise to assist me in becoming an academic scholar. Thank you, Dr. Kevin Eagan, for being my unfailing chair and providing invaluable support with copious, insightful feedback and validation to improve my writing, research, and scholarship. I am grateful for your suggestion of incorporating a *pláticas* approach to my methodology, which was the best-suited method for my study. To Dr. Daniel Solórzano – it was an honor and privilege to get your *consejos*, utilize your theoretical framework, and receive your critical feedback, questions, and *porras.* Thank you, Dr. Sylvia Hurtado, for challenging me with your critical questions, validating my research and contribution to the literature, and offering sage advice to improve my study and methodology. I could not have asked for a better dream team!

I am also thankful to the UCLA ELP program – Dr. Lynn-John Kim, Judy Miyoshi, and Crystal Tijerina for always supporting our cohort and listening to our feedback. Dr. Diane Durkin – thank you for challenging me and helping me to become a better writer. Dr. Cindy

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I am thankful for my daughters, Alexis and Allison, who have been my greatest motivation and inspiration in my educational pursuits and in striving to become the best version of myself. To my parents, *muchas gracias por la educación y valores que me han inculcado.* I am grateful for the unconditional love and support of my daughters, parents, siblings, nieces, extended family, and friends, who have supported me through this doctoral journey and understood when I could not be present.

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VITA

EDUCATION

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

A college degree correlates with lifelong social mobility, financial success, health, and family stability (Griffin et al., 2022; Haktanir et al., 2021). As such, higher education professionals working in student support services strive to address institutional barriers that students may experience and develop better support systems to help students successfully graduate. Higher education policymakers and administrators measure student success by retention and graduation rates, which are used as metrics for assessing progress and likelihood for success (Reyna, 2010), particularly the first- to second-year retention rate, as most students who stop out[1] leave in the first year (Millea et al., 2018). Data shows that the first- to second-year retention rate predicts persistence and completion rates as college attrition is higher after the first to second year (Azzam et al., 2022; Berzenski, 2021). COVID-19 has affected these rates.

Since 2015, national persistence rates for first-time, full-time students have hovered between 82.4 and 83%, but with the COVID-19 global pandemic, persistence rates dipped to 80.7%, and retention rates slipped from 73.4% to 72.4% (Persistence and Retention: Fall 2020 Cohort, 2022) causing higher education professionals and administrators to reexamine their practices and supports (Brown et al., 2022; Byrd & Lopez, 2020). Persistence is defined as students continuing in college, even if not at the same institution, while retention is defined as returning to the same institution (Howell et al., 2021). For the 2021 cohort, gains occurred, with persistence increasing to 82% and retention increasing to 73.4% (Persistence and Retention: Fall 2021 Cohort, 2023), but the overall stop out — some college, no credential population[2] —

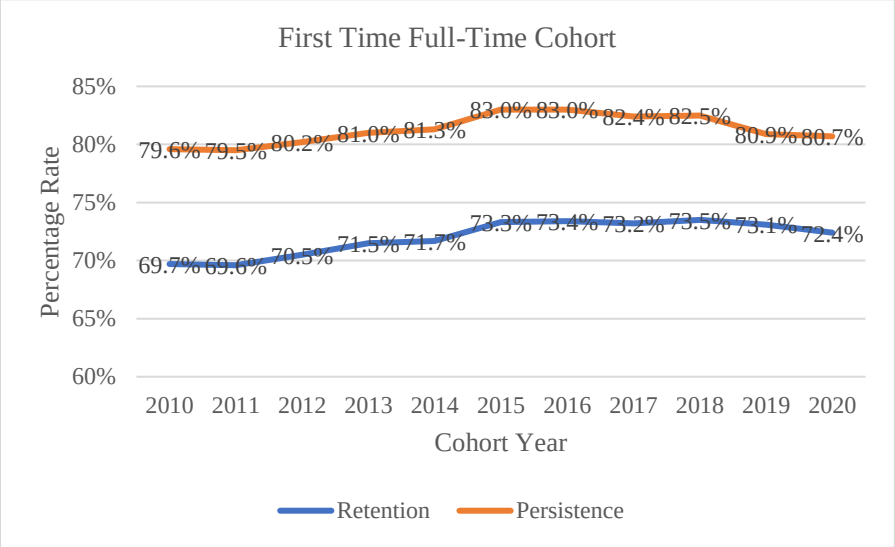
[1] A stop out refers to a student who interrupts their college enrollment for one semester to up to four years (Horn & Carroll, 1998)

[2] Some college, no credential (SCNC) refers to former students who stopped out and did not earn a credential (Causey et al., 2023)

increased by 3.6% to 40.4 million (Causey et al., 2023). The pandemic disproportionately affected Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC)[3] (*The Triple Pandemic: Implications for Racial Equity and Public Policy*, 2021), leading to a higher decline in college persistence and retention rates for Latina/e/o/x[4] students in particular. The pre-pandemic 2018 student cohort persistence rate for White students across all institutions was 80.6%, 71.8% for Latina/e/o/x, and 66.3% for African American students (Persistence and Retention: 2018 Cohort, 2020). For the fall 2020 student cohort, persistence rates for White students dropped by 1.1 percentage points to 79.5%, while the persistence rates for Latina/e/o/x students fell by 2.6 percentage points to 69.2%, and to 65.5%, a 0.8 percentage-point decline for Black students (Persistence and Retention: Fall 2020 Cohort, 2022).

Figure 1.1

Retention & Persistence Rates by Starting Enrollment: All Institutions



Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, June 2022

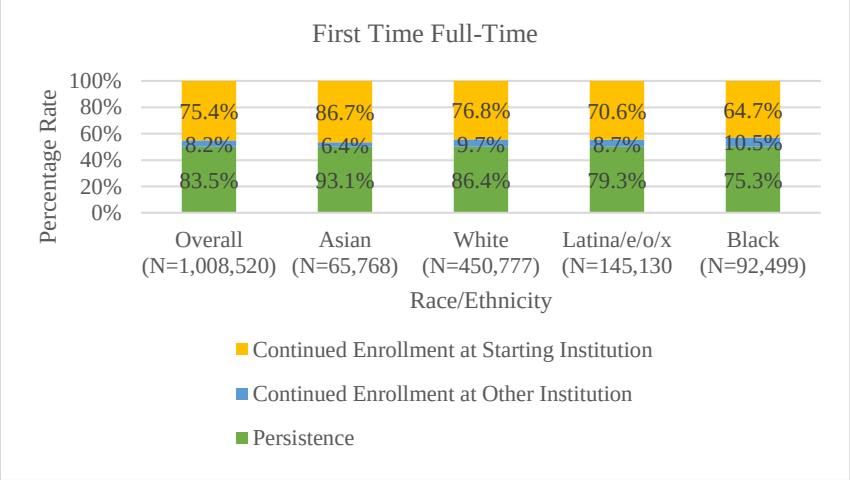
[3] The term BIPOC will be used to describe groups historically identified as underrepresented groups (non-White) or underrepresented minorities.

[4] The term Latina/e/o/x will be used to describe student groups identified as Hispanic, Latino, Latinx, or Mexican-American, as a more inclusive term to define all individuals (Catalina (Kathleen) M. de Onís, 2017; Slemp, 2020).

At four-year institutions, persistence and retention numbers are higher than the overall national rates, but persistence and retention rates for the fall 2020 cohort declined for most students compared to the pre-pandemic 2018 cohort (Persistence and Retention: 2018 Cohort, 2020; Persistence and Retention: Fall 2020 Cohort, 2022). At public four-year institutions, Asian students' persistence rates remained at 93.1%, but retention increased by 0.4 percentage points. In contrast, for Latina/e/o/x enrolled at public four-year institutions, persistence dropped by 2.7 percentage points to 79.3%, with a 1.7 percentage points drop in retention to 70.6%. While persistence and retention rates increased overall from the fall 2019 cohort, the rates for Latina/e/o/x students remained below pre-pandemic numbers. The opportunity gap[5] in college persistence and retention is particularly significant for Latina/e/o/x students because they are the largest underrepresented group (URG)[6] attending public four-year universities.

Figure 1.2

Persistence & Retention by Race/Ethnicity: Public Four-Year Institutions



Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, June 2022

[5] The term opportunity gap will be used to describe achievement and equity gaps between racialized ethnic groups to contextualize the systemic disparities in access to educational resources (Californians for Justice, n.d.)

[6] The term underreprented groups (URGs) will be used to describe student groups historically labeled as underrepresented minorities in data, which include: Latina/e/o/x, Black, and Indigenous (Native American) students.

Despite data showing increases in enrollment for the fall 2021 cohort at four-year institutions, retention rates declined, particularly for students from underrepresented groups URGs (Howell et al., 2021). Retention rates for the 2020 cohort increased at selective private four-year universities but declined significantly at less selective colleges such as public four-year universities, particularly in the Southwest; declines were even more significant for students from URGs. Retention rates for Asian and White students at public four-year universities declined by about 2.5 percentage points, but for URGs, the retention decline was between 4.1 and 8 points.

The COVID-19 pandemic, a global event affecting all populations, caused a period effect. A historical event can create a period effect, causing behavioral changes across all populations and ages (Rosenberg & Letrero, 2006). It is not yet known fully how the pandemic's period effect has affected students in particular, who had an interruption in their learning and experienced social isolation, but what is known is that there were disparities in economic security, educational outcomes, and justice for low-income students of color (Cornelissen & Hermann, 2020; Goldberg, 2021; Soria et al., 2023). Additionally, during this time, George Floyd was murdered, contributing further to a period effect of social uprising and campus conversations about advancing racial justice and talking openly about racialized experiences (Dunlap et al., 2023).

This study targeted the timely problem of Latina/e/o/x student attrition at four-year, non-selective state institutions since the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative narrative inquiry approach was used to understand the attrition factors and post-pandemic adjustment experiences of Latina/e/o/x students and how these students described their post-COVID-19 experiences as part of their decision to stop out of school. We know that the pandemic impacted undocumented students' mental health and retention at state universities in California, but this group is a unique

population that is not generalizable and covers less than two percent of the overall college student population (Enriquez et al., 2021). Little research exists capturing the post-COVID-19 first-year experiences of Latina/e/o/x students. Collecting this new data provided an opportunity to serve current Latina/e/o/x students better and woo back some students who have stopped out.

This study captured the perspectives of three defined participant population groups: Latina/e/o/x students from fall 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 cohorts who were not retained to the second year, Latina/e/o/x students from these cohorts who were not retained to the second year but have since returned or will be returning fall 2024, and student support services professionals who served these students. This data helped us understand why Latina/e/o/x students at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) public university stopped out and identified institutional barriers and additional support structures needed to support first-year Latina/e/o/x students better in a specific institution type.

Statement of the Problem

More than 7.7 million of the 19.2 million students enrolled in U.S. higher education in the fall of 2019 were enrolled at public four-year institutions (*Fall 2022 Enrollment Overview*, 2023). However, by fall 2022, overall enrollment declined to 18.1 million, with public four-year institutions dropping to just under 7.6 million students. The largest number of stop-out SCNC students reside in California (Causey et al., 2023). Of the Latina/e/o/x students who attend postsecondary education, 81.2% attend public institutions (Hanson, 2022).

California has two public four-year state systems: the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU). The UC serves about 230,529 students and is a more selective college system, counting 33% of the fall 2021 cohort and 35% of the fall 2022 cohort as Pell-

eligible[7], 38% of the fall 2021 cohort and 35% of the fall 2022 cohort are first generation, with only 38% of first-year students from URGs compared to 59% of California's public high school graduates who are URGs (Undergraduate Students: Admissions and Enrollment, 2023; Undergraduate Students: Admissions and Enrollment, 2022). The UC system increased enrollment by 11% for fall 2021 and an additional 4% for fall 2022, with a retention rate of 92% for both the fall 2020 and 2021 cohorts but only 88% (Fall 2020) and 87.4% (Fall 2021) for URGs (Undergraduate Success, 2023; Undergraduate Student Success, 2022). For fall 2022, the CSU system, by contrast, has not had the same growth in enrollment or retention metrics.

Since the pandemic, the CSU has experienced a decline in enrollment and retention rates despite being the nation's largest, most affordable, and most diverse four-year university system (*10 Reasons to Choose the CSU*, 2022). The CSU has 23 campuses and, in 2021-2022, served 477,000 students, 32% of which identified as first-generation and 50% URGs, with the largest group being Latina/e/o/x students at 45.4% (The California State University Fact Book 2022, 2022). For the 2022-2023 academic year, enrollment dropped to 457,992, but URGs increased by two percentage points, with Latina/e/o/x students increasing by 2.3 percentage points (The California State University Fact Book 2023, 2023). For over a decade, persistence rates for full-time, first-time freshmen had remained above 83.5% (*Graduation and Continuation Rates: First-Time Full-Time Freshmen*, 2022), but since the pandemic (fall 2020), the rate has ranged between a low of 81.7% and a high of 83.4% (*Graduation and Continuation Rates: First-Time Full-Time Freshmen*, 2023). Additionally, undergraduate enrollment has dropped by 6.4 percentage points since the pandemic (*The CSU Trend Systemwide*, 2023).

[7] Pell-eligible refers to students who receive federal Pell grants and is a marker for low-income (*Time to Finish Fixing FAFSA*, 2020)

CSU students from underrepresented groups (URGs) have suffered the greatest loss in enrollment and persistence, with Latina/e/o/x students having the most loss in numbers (*Graduation and Continuation Rates: First-Time Full-Time Freshmen*, 2023). Even with 21 of the 23 campuses recognized as Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) by the Department of Education, there continues to be a retention gap of 9.6 percentage points after the first year for Latina/e/o/x students compared to Asian and White students – 78.7% for Fall 2022. When considering Pell Eligibility for financial aid, the fall 2021 retention rate for Pell-eligible Latina/e/o/x students decreases to 76.4%, significantly lower than the 88% retention rate of Non-Pell-eligible White and Asian students. Despite the CSU's commitment to eliminating opportunity gaps and providing support structures, interventions have not been successful across all CSUs since the pandemic. It is alarming because persistence and retention are significant indicators of student success and college completion (Hope, 2021).

CSU Graduation Initiative 2025

In 2015, the CSU implemented Graduation Initiative (GI) 2025, which aims to increase four-year graduation rates to 40% systemwide by 2025 and eliminate equity gaps in degree completion (*What Is Graduation Initiative 2025?*, 2023). Each campus has a specific completion rate target. The CSU identified several priorities impacting student success and completion in achieving Graduation Initiative efforts across the CSU, resulting in measures, an examination of policies and processes creating administrative barriers, and funding commitments to better support student success.

While GI 2025 has contributed to significant gains in four-year graduation rates in the CSU since 2015, from 27.3% graduation rates to 35.8% system-wide, some CSU campuses have made limited progress in completion rates — one CSU Channel Islands (CSUCI) and another

northern campus (Sonoma) experienced a decrease in completion rates and an increase in opportunity gaps during the COVID-19 pandemic (*Are We on Track to Meet Our Goals?*, 2023; *Equity Gaps Dashboard*, 2023). During the pandemic, CSUCI had a three-percentage-point drop in the four-year completion rate for the 2017 cohort and a 10.3% URG opportunity gap for the 2016 cohort. While they had minor gains for the 2019 cohort with a 32.8% graduation rate and 4.2 percentage points in opportunity gap, they are still below the CSU system rate and target goal of 36.4%. Similarly, Sonoma's four-year completion rate of 41% dropped by two percentage points during the pandemic for the 2016 cohort. For the 2019 cohort, it is at 35.1%, 13.5 percentage points below its targeted rate. Sonoma's opportunity gap for the 2019 cohort was 8.7 percentage points. As a result, in the summer of 2021, the CSU identified equity goals and priorities to address the opportunity gap. One of those goals is to re-engage and re-enroll underserved URGs, particularly Pell-eligible and first-generation students. Since 2017, CSUCI has administered stop-out surveys to first-year students who left after the first year to identify student attrition patterns and demographic factors to inform student interventions and communication (*Stop out Dashboard*, 2023). While the average response rate is only 23.2%, the data helped inform this research with further exploration through qualitative interviews.

Research Questions

Given these challenges, this study aimed to address the following questions:

1. How do Latina/e/o/x students at a predominantly Latina/e/o/x/ HSI four-year public university who left on good academic standing describe their post-COVID-19 pandemic experiences as part of their decision-making to stop out between their first and second year?

2. How do student support services professionals interpret the role of the COVID-19 pandemic on their own work with students and on students' likelihood of being retained?
3. What strategies can be implemented to rematriculate students who depart with good academic standing?

Background

Research shows academic preparedness, self-efficacy, a sense of belonging, and the first year experience are some of the most salient factors for college persistence and success (Bolkan et al., 2021; Cole et al., 2020; Haktanir et al., 2021; Pickenpaugh et al., 2022). Opportunity gaps persist in college access, readiness, persistence, and retention rates for BIPOC students, contributing to further social disparities in college completion rates and social mobility (Californians for Justice, n.d.; Jackson & Kurlaender, 2014; Patrick et al., 2020; J. Rogers & Freelon, 2012). With the rising cost of tuition and decline in government and state support in funding, BIPOC and low-income students struggle to afford college, accruing significant student loan debt (Freudenberg et al., 2019; Santos & Haycock, 2016; The State of Higher Education 2023, 2023; *Time to Finish Fixing FAFSA*, 2020). Furthermore, they take longer to graduate, increasing their likelihood of stopping out (Bolkan et al., 2021; Duser et al., 2020).

Since COVID-19, a triple pandemic of ongoing threats to public health, economic livelihoods, and access to justice, has disproportionately affected BIPOC households, further contributing to inequities (Cornelissen & Hermann, 2020; *The Triple Pandemic: Implications for Racial Equity and Public Policy*, 2021) and a decline in college persistence, retention, and completion rates (Hope, 2021), prompting educators to respond. Educators continue to use empirical studies and best practices to create supportive structures for students in their first year.

The CSU created and implemented GI 2025 priorities to better support students (*What Is Graduation Initiative 2025?,* 2023). Campuses redesigned academic and student support programs to prepare students for first-year math and English courses. Students have more access to academic advisors and advising tools such as academic roadmaps and degree planners to align course availability with student needs. Basic needs funding has been allocated to address student engagement and well-being better. Students have been provided financial literacy and support of microgrants or emergency funds to encourage persistence. The CSU has built data dashboards on student success, courses with high failure rates, retention, and opportunity gaps to make data-informed choices and monitor progress. Lastly, the CSU is committed to removing administrative barriers, processes, or policies that impact persistence and graduation. Despite these efforts, CSU first-year persistence and retention rates have declined, mirroring national persistence rates declines and equity gaps for Latina/e/o/x students.

Existing Research

Over the past four decades, there has been vast literature on the persistence and retention of college students to support educator efforts in improving student success and retention. Student involvement theory, which explains the significance of student engagement on their college campus (Astin, 1984), and the longitudinal model of drop-out, which looks at how academic preparedness, individual attributes, and family background predict student retention, have both long been used as models for why students stay or leave (Tinto, 1975). However, scholars have critiqued the two models for being based on White male participants and for not conceptualizing how institutionalized racism affects BIPOC students (Berzenski, 2021; Burciaga & Cruz Navarro, 2015; Duser et al., 2020). In a nationally representative survey of college students, Gopalan and Brady (2020) measured belonging (whether students felt they belonged at

their school) through descriptive analysis. They found that at four-year schools, belonging predicts persistence, engagement, and mental health and that URGs and first-generation students report lower belonging than their peers.

Other scholars have identified additional factors contributing to persistence and attrition. Curricular factors significantly affect student persistence, including student-faculty interactions (Griffin et al., 2022; Hurtado et al., 2011; Schademan & Thompson, 2016), learning communities (Azzam et al., 2022; Love, 2012), and first-year seminars (Pickenpaugh et al., 2022). Additionally, co-curricular experiences such as peer mentoring (Delgado-Guerrero & Gloria, 2023; Yomtov et al., 2017) and psychosocial traits such as resilience (Haktanir et al., 2021; Kornbluh et al., 2022; Yosso, 2005), self-efficacy (Bolkan et al., 2021) and social capital (Almeida et al., 2021; Holcombe & Kezar, 2020; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Yosso, 2005), also affect students' decisions of whether to continue pursuing their degrees. Research also shows the critical role that institutional agents have in facilitating student's social capital and sense of belonging (Schademan & Thompson, 2016; Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Increased financial costs in both tuition and the cost of living also contribute to college attrition (Cherney, 2020; Freudenberg et al., 2019; Perez & Farruggia, 2022; The State of Higher Education 2023, 2023; *Time to Finish Fixing FAFSA*, 2020). Federal Pell grants, on average, cover less than one-third of tuition costs, sometimes resulting in increased food or housing insecurity among college students (Freudenberg et al., 2019). Financial and food insecurity has been exacerbated since the COVID-19 pandemic, disproportionately affecting low-income BIPOC communities and decreasing college enrollment (Black & Taylor, 2021; Cherney, 2020; Soria et al., 2023). A qualitative case study at a research university in Hawaii investigated the influence of increased tuition costs on first-year persistence rates, finding that better finances

contributed to student retention and graduation (Duser et al., 2020). While the study has limitations due to the location and high tuition for non-resident students, it still raises important questions about the role that finances and decreased funding play in college student retention. In another quantitative survey study by the Lumina Foundation-Gallup State of Education (2023), their findings also noted financial barriers, inflation, and the need to work as significant factors for not being enrolled.

Study Overview

Study Design

This study was best served by a narrative inquiry design with a *pláticas*[8] approach to understand the post-pandemic adjustments experienced by students who left in good academic standing and what they said about their decision to stay in school or stop out. A narrative inquiry approach helped to take an in-depth analysis to make sense of and understand the phenomenon of an event and life experiences by focusing on a few individuals to identify themes within narratives (Clandinin, 2006). In this case, the phenomenon was Latina/e/o/x students' first-year experiences, contributing to a decision to stop out since the pandemic at non-selective public four-year universities. *Pláticas* is an emerging methodology that is a collaborative, relational process honoring participants as co-constructors of the meaning-making process, drawing from Chicana/Latina feminist frameworks that center the experiences of marginalized groups to examine systemic oppression in everyday lived experiences (Fierros & Bernal, 2016; Morales et al., 2023; Puente, 2022; Valencia & Campos, 2023).

A narrative inquiry with a *pláticas* approach helped to understand more in-depth the attrition factors Latina/e/o/x students described as having affected their decision to stop out while

[8] The term *pláticas* is a Spanish word, which translates to talks and conversations.

also exploring the role of the COVID-19 pandemic on student support services and retention. The study also explored what a university could do to re-matriculate Latina/e/o/x students. Given the uniqueness of the CSU's goal of re-enrolling and re-engaging historically underserved students, focusing on a CSU HSI campus with an increase in stop-out rates and a decline in retention rates served the study better. These data will inform best practices to support Latina/e/o/x students better in their first year, increase persistence rates, and bring back students who stopped out.

This study was informed by three conceptual frameworks committed to viewing Latina/o/e/x students through a holistic, asset-based lens – Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001) – an extension of Critical Race Theory to address systemic oppression, and Servingness (G. A. Garcia et al., 2019). A qualitative narrative inquiry approach with these frameworks allowed for a more complete understanding of attrition after the first year, especially following the heightened challenges of the pandemic and the changes needed to support Latina/e/o/x students better.

Because this study's research questions addressed the understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on Latina/e/o/x students' first-year experiences from multiple perspectives, necessitating participants to feel safe and open to share their experiences (Clandinin, 2006) — I engaged in *pláticas* with three defined participant population groups: Latina/e/o/x students from fall 2019, fall 2020, fall 2021 and fall 2022 cohorts who did not return to their second year and have not returned to the institution; Latina/o/e/x students from the fall 2019 to fall 2021 cohorts who did not return their second year but have now returned or plan to return to the institution in fall 2024; and student support services professionals, who met with first-year students from these cohorts, to explore how they interpreted the role of the pandemic on student support services and

retention, both of which aided in helping us understand why Latina/e/o/x students in good academic standing at an HSI broad-access public four-year university persist or stop out. Additionally, employing a narrative inquiry design with *pláticas* allowed for a holistic exploration of opportunity gaps for Latina/e/o/x students and an understanding of attrition factors and the changes needed to increase retention and completion.

Site Selection

We have limited information about the lived experiences of first-year students and their reasons for stopping out of an HSI CSU campus since the pandemic. The CSU has comprehensive data dashboards to identify student characteristics such as Pell eligibility, first-generation, race/ethnicity, and college readiness to inform targeted outreach and support to students and eliminate administrative barriers in the first year. Yet, opportunity gaps in retention continue for Latina/e/o/x students. Before, at CSUCI, academic probation or disqualification standing affected the percentage of students stopping out significantly, with typically less than 42% of students in good academic standing (*Stop out Dashboard*, 2023). However, for the 2020-2021 academic year, 83% of the students who stopped out were in good academic standing, raising the question of what other factors might be contributing to students' attrition.

Given CSUCI's student demographics and their significant drop in enrollment, retention, and completion rates, they were the best CSU choice to explore the phenomenon of increased first-year student attrition and a decline in retention and completion rates since the pandemic for Latina/e/o/x students at a public non-selective four-year university. CSUCI has 60.7% Latina/e/o/x, 49.5% Pell-eligible, and 59.4% first-generation students (*CSUCI Enrollment Snapshot*, 2023). While some CSU campuses are more selective, CSUCI admits all eligible students and, for the past five years, has been ranked in the top 20 list of CollegeNet's Social

Mobility Index (SMI) national rankings (*Social Mobility Index*, 2022). CSUCI is one of four CSU campuses certified with the Seal of *Excelencia*, an independent national certification for institutions intentionally serving Latina/e/o/x students (*Seal of Excelencia Certified Institutions*, 2022). As a broad-access HSI, CSUCI has the potential to continue transforming its students' lifelong social mobility. However, since COVID-19, CSUCI has experienced an enrollment crisis with an FTE (full-time equivalents) Fall 2022 target of 6135 and a resident FTE of 4694 (*FA22 Enrollment Report*, 2022).

CSUCI's first-year retention rates have dropped 10.8 percentage points to 72.3% for the fall 2022 cohort compared to the fall 2019 cohort (*CSU Channel Islands Retention FTFT*, 2023), which is 10.1% lower than the CSU's overall persistence rate (*Graduation and Continuation Rates: First-Time Full-Time Freshmen*, 2023) and 7.3 percentage points lower than the national average for public four-year universities (Persistence and Retention: Fall 2021 Cohort, 2023). More than ever, the persistence and retention of CSUCI students and broad-access institutions with similar demographics are paramount. However, researchers need to understand better why students are leaving. While there is tremendous literature on first-year attrition, it does not serve educators well in addressing students' needs and experiences since the pandemic. CSUCI is a newer university with a unique geography and student population with a significant Latina/e/o/x student population and a recognized exemplar of HSI institutions, which can contribute to identifying new data in closing opportunity gaps in retention.

Study Significance

The proposed study filled a gap left by this extensive body of research. Current empirical studies target college persistence, retention, and completion, but very few have studied the effects of COVID-19 beyond measuring mental health and wellness (Copeland et al., 2021; Liu

et al., 2022; Mitchell, 2023; Stressed out and Stopping out: Mental Health Crisis, 2023) and online instruction effectiveness (Brown et al., 2022; Ensmann et al., 2021). However, researchers have identified declines in college enrollments and persistence since COVID-19 (Black & Taylor, 2021; Soria et al., 2023) with disproportionate declines for BIPOC students and recommend continued analysis of this decline (Howell et al., 2021). Limited data exists examining students' lived experiences and adjustments since COVID-19, especially virtual to in-person adjustments. This study added to the literature by providing a more nuanced understanding of Latina/e/o/x students' experiences at a public four-year university, the multifaceted factors affecting their persistence and rematriculation since COVID-19, and their perceptions of institutional efforts to promote retention.

Summary

This chapter presented the problem statement and background information about the educational inequities of Latina/e/o/x students' first year at a public four-year university, which has been exasperated since the pandemic. It was essential to center Latina/e/o/x students' lived experiences to understand better why students leave college and the institutional supports needed to retain and re-matriculate students.

Chapter two reviews the vast literature on student retention and attrition, focusing on interventions that improve student success and persistence for URGs and first-generation Latina/e/o/x students. The following areas are addressed: disparities in national trends for Latina/e/o/x students, the long history of college retention and departure theories, addressing the needs of students of color, critical race theories, deficit-based approaches for attrition factors, racial trauma from K-12 schooling, college affordability and financial assistance, closing the gap on high impact practices, the role of institutional agents and coordinating support, Hispanic

Serving Institutions, the conceptual frameworks of Latino Critical Theory, Community Cultural Wealth and Servingness, and emerging research on COVID-19 effects.

Chapters three through five describe the data collection and analysis methods used for this narrative inquiry with a *pláticas* approach, which honored participants as collaborators in the meaning-making process and centered Latina/e/o/x students' voices. Eighteen one-on-one *pláticas* were held with three participant groups: Latina/e/o/x students who do not plan to return to the institution, those who have already returned or will return by fall 2024, and student services professionals who serve these student groups. I conducted multiple rounds of deductive and inductive coding of participants' narratives based on LatCrit, Community Cultural Wealth, and Servingness frameworks to uncover the findings for the research questions. I conclude the last chapter with a discussion of findings, recommendations, and implications for practitioners and further research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Given college enrollment declines since the pandemic, universities are feeling the pressure not only to promote college access but also to retain students and increase graduation rates (Howell et al., 2021; Smith, 2022). However, with so many barriers to Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC), these students often do not make it to college (Patrick et al., 2020; The Campaign for College Opportunity, 2021). A college degree increases the likelihood of social mobility, financial success, health, and family stability (Griffin et al., 2022; Haktanir et al., 2021). Consequently, higher education professionals investigate the institutional barriers BIPOC students experience, looking for ways to create better support systems to help students not only persist but successfully graduate (Franco & Hernández, 2018; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Griffin et al., 2022; O'Donnell et al., 2015; Schademan & Thompson, 2016). Relevant to this study, researchers view California State University (CSU) public four-year universities – those that admit most students – as institutions responsible for creating a more accessible, humane, and supportive student experience (Stevens, 2020) that should be committed to becoming "student ready" universities that intentionally serve students and provide holistic, responsive support catered to their students' needs and aspirations (G. A. Garcia et al., 2019; McNair et al., 2022).

Scope of Challenges

Over the past four decades, scholars have extensively researched the challenges and successes contributing to student attrition and retention and offered frameworks and interventions for improving student success and persistence, including for BIPOC and first-generation students (G. A. Garcia et al., 2019; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Millea et al., 2018; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Tinto, 1988; Yosso, 2005). In light of national enrollment trend

declines in non-selective four-year universities since the pandemic and a decrease in retention from the first to second year (Persistence and Retention: Fall 2020 Cohort, 2022), this literature review synthesizes empirical studies' findings on effective practices at public four-year, broad access institutions. It asks what higher education professionals can do to eliminate administrative barriers and provide better support structures for Latina/e/o/x students to persist and succeed.

To understand how much the pandemic has impacted retention and completion rates, I first review the enrollment trends for Latina/e/o/x students. Next, I explore the persistence and departure theories to provide scholarly context for higher education policies and practices related to college retention and persistence. Because systemic barriers perpetuate Latina/e/o/x students' equity gaps in college attendance and completion rates, I utilize a LatCrit theory lens (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Villalpando, 2004); this lens motivates an examination of oppressive systemic systems that reduce Latina/e/o/x students' opportunities for support. Afterward, through the Community Cultural Wealth theory lens, I look at culturally validated models of student success services (Franco & Hernández, 2018; Romero et al., 2020) that provide Latina/e/o/x students with culturally responsive support. These models lead to a review of campus academic and student support structures that assist Latina/e/o/x students in persistence and completion (Contreras Aguirre et al., 2020). I then define "servingness" at HSI campuses with practical implications for HSI higher education leaders to consider asset-based programs that use culturally validated models of student success services (G. A. Garcia, 2019). I conclude by reviewing emerging research on the COVID-19 effects on students' attrition.

Disparities in National Trends for Latina/e/o/x Students

Enrollment Trends

In the last decade, college enrollment has been increasing for Latina/e/o/x students, primarily at public institutions, but since the pandemic, enrollment has decreased (*FactSheets: Latino Students in Higher Education*, 2022; Persistence and Retention: Fall 2020 Cohort, 2022). The enrollment gap between Latina/e/o/x students and Whites decreased from 11 percentage points to five percentage points, with many enrolling in public institutions. However, for the 2020 cohort during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, overall Latina/e/o/x enrollment decreased by almost 2.54%, with Latina/e/o/x students accounting for 21.3% of all college students enrolled in postsecondary education. Compared to other racial/ethnic groups, Latina/e/o/x students are more likely to be enrolled in public institutions, with 54% enrolling in Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), which include two-year institutions, and 28% attending public four-year institutions. The trend in decreased enrollment is alarming because Latina/e/o/x students were already underrepresented in college, particularly at four-year universities (*FactSheets: Latino Students in Higher Education*, 2022).

Enrollments and data show that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated college educational gaps for Latina/e/o/x students. The 2020 cohort saw a decline in the enrollment and retention of Latina/e/o/x students by 4.7% nationwide compared to the 2019 cohort. While the fall 2021 cohort had an enrollment increase of 5.2% for Latina/e/o/x students at public four-year universities (Howell et al., 2021), Latina/e/o/x students were also more likely to cancel their college enrollment plans compared to other student groups (Ahn & Domínguez-Villegas, 2022). Scholars analyzed the US Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey and found that 10.6% of Latina/e/o/x students planned to disenroll from fall 2021 courses compared to 5.4% of White

students. While the 2021 cohort public four-year persistence and retention rates for White and Asian students have returned to the 2018 cohort rates, persistence and retention for Latina/e/o/x students remain significantly below 2018 rates (Persistence and Retention: Fall 2021 Cohort, 2023).

In the State of Higher Education study in 2022, Gallup surveyed 6,008 enrolled students and found that Latina/e/o/x students struggled more than other students, with 50% reporting it was challenging to stay enrolled compared to 40% of Black or 37% of White students (The State of Higher Education 2023, 2023). Across the board, more students (41%) were likelier to report that they considered stopping out of school in the past six months compared to 2020 (34%) and 2021 (37%), and Latina/e/o/x students continue to be most likely to have considered stopping out at 52%, increasing by eight percentage points compared to 2021. At this time, the long-term effects of the pandemic on the persistence, retention, and completion rates of Latina/e/o/x students are unknown.

Completion Trends

College equity gaps in completion rates also exist for Latina/e/o/x students (*Completing College National and State Reports*, 2023; Persistence and Retention: Fall 2020 Cohort, 2022). As of 2021, only 23% of Latina/e/o/x had a bachelor's degree, and the six-year graduation rate for Latina/e/o/x students was only 59% compared to 67% for Whites (*FactSheets: Latino Students in Higher Education*, 2022). The completion rate for public four-year universities is 56.1% compared to 73.2% for White students (*Completing College National and State Reports*, 2023). Latina/e/o/x students are also more likely to be first-generation college students and receive financial aid, with 60% receiving a federal Pell Grant (*FactSheets: Latino Students in Higher Education*, 2022). Additionally, a significant percentage of Latina/e/o/x students worked

more than 30 hours a week due to financial challenges, identified as a significant reason Latina/e/o/x students do not complete their degree (Mora, 2022). While other reasons may negatively impact Latina/e/o/x students' completion rates, there is limited information about attrition factors since that pandemic. What is known is that delaying college enrollment or attrition after the first year negatively impacts college completion rates and lifetime earnings. As a result, higher education educators devote extensive efforts to creating a welcoming, supportive campus culture to promote student retention and completion.

Acknowledging the Long History of College Retention and Departure Theories

Numerous theories of college student retention have been developed from Tinto's (1975) groundbreaking theoretical model of student persistence and departure, but they are inadequate in addressing the needs of BIPOC students as they use a deficit lens when examining students of color's college persistence and retention. Tinto asserts that college students are more likely to stay enrolled at their institution if they are fully integrated academically and socially by engaging in academic activities and interacting with faculty and peers inside and outside the classroom. According to Tinto, student integration is also influenced by pre-college factors and characteristics such as family background, individual attributes, and pre-college schooling. Another widely cited, similar theory on student involvement is Astin's (1984) student development theory on student involvement. He uses psychological and behavioral constructs – the amount of psychological and physical energy students commit to their academic experience to focus institutions on retention activities. These include institutional policies and practices such as the design of recreational living facilities, on-campus job opportunities, faculty office hours, and campus events.

Tinto (1988) asserts that the first year of college, particularly the first semester, is the most impactful period in determining persistence or departure. Influenced by Durkeim's theory of suicide, Tinto created "stages of passage" in students' college journey consisting of separation, transition, and incorporation. The stages require that students disassociate themselves from their prior communities to adopt the norms and behaviors of the college to be fully integrated. A successful transition entails developing coping and problem-solving skills to incorporate into the college culture effectively. Students who fail to integrate into the college community are more likely to withdraw and depart from higher education. Tinto and Astin (1984) paved the way for educators to create engaging academic and social experiences for their students and for other scholars to utilize, consider, and adapt their theoretical frameworks, and more recent theorists strive to integrate the two models.

Analyzing the relationship between Astin's behavioral measures of the theory of involvement and Tinto's theory of student departure, Milem and Berger (1997) examined quantitative survey data from a longitudinal study of student persistence at a highly selective private residential university of 718 first-time freshmen. They sought to understand first-year persistence further by using behavioral measures regarding the extent to which students form their judgments and perceptions of how they fit into their institution's academic and social systems. Milem and Berger's findings support using an integrated model where student behaviors and perceptions interact to affect the development of social and academic integration. This model helps us better understand how students successfully transition and are incorporated into the campus culture. Further, they found that early involvement in the fall semester, particularly with faculty, predicts involvement in the spring semester and persistence at the institution. There were limitations with the research, as the retention measure was based on

students' assessments and not on institutional data of subsequent enrollment in the second year. Additionally, the student sample of this private, selective university, with 84% White, 98% residential, and predominantly affluent students, is not generalizable.

Using a revised version of Tinto's interactionalist theory of individual student departure, other scholars found that communication, fairness, and participation in campus decision-making influenced students' social and academic involvement (Berger & Braxton, 1998). Berger & Braxton (1998) utilized the same data sets as Milem and Berger, conducting a path analysis, a multivariate statistical procedure to study the effects of organizational attributes on student withdrawal incorporating concepts from organizational theory. If policies and social regulations are communicated and enforced fairly, and students are involved in decision-making about said regulations, students are more likely to engage and be retained. They also found that race was a characteristic that affected participation, with White students being more likely to report participating in decision-making compared to non-White students. While Berger and Braxton's (1998) research has limitations due to the majority of the student population being White, the study still highlighted the vital role a student's racial identity could play in student integration and retention.

Addressing the Needs of Students of Color

While Tinto influenced college student persistence policies and practices, scholars have critiqued Tinto's integration model due to the lack of applicability to and consideration for students from diverse backgrounds (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Mitra & Zhang, 2022). With an increase of college students of color and nontraditional students (e.g., part-time students, commuters, student parents, adults with multiple responsibilities, etc.), Tinto's ideas of students disassociating from their community to fully integrate into the campus culture to be successful

are incongruent (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). For Latina/e/o/x students, maintaining family relationships and support is critical to their transition and adjustment to college (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Kuh & Love, 2004; Yosso, 2005).

Using a conceptual model of sense of belonging, Hurtado and Carter (1997) examined the extent to which Latina/e/o/x students' background characteristics and first and second-year experiences contributed to their sense of belonging, adjustment, and integration into college in the third year. Through a mixed-methods, longitudinal cohort study of 272 Latina/e/o/x students from 127 colleges, they found students who engaged in course discussions with other peers outside of class and participated in religious and community organizations strongly associated with Latina/e/o/x students' sense of belonging in their third year. However, they also found that Latina/e/o/x students' perception of a hostile racial climate negatively affected their sense of belonging.

Other scholars have also challenged Tinto's view of student departure by reconceptualizing the transition and integration process from a predominantly individual to a more group-oriented process (Kuh & Love, 2004). Kuh and Love highlighted a cultural perspective where individuals of a group interact with others and influence one another and the campus community, using a cultural lens to examine student departure as a sociocultural phenomenon instead of an individual experience. Kuh and Love challenge the separation and integration view to adapt to the campus culture and persist successfully. They found that students who join and connect socially with cultural or affinity groups reflective of their culture of origin are more likely to persist; consequently, institutions must create spaces and opportunities for students to connect to promote a sense of belonging.

Critical Race Theories

Similarly to other scholars who examined student integration as a sociocultural process, Yosso (2005) challenged cultural and social capital, conceptualizing community cultural wealth as an asset for Latina/e/o/x students and part of critical race theory. Critical race theory (CRT) examines and challenges the multifaceted ways race and racism are historically embedded in educational systems, processes, and practices, further marginalizing students of color at university institutions (Solórzano, 1997; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Villalpando, 2004; Yosso, 2005; Yosso et al., 2009).

Latina/e/o/x scholars extend critical race discourse by conceptualizing Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) to address issues of immigration, culture, sexuality, language, ethnicity, and identity to analyze better Latina/e/o/x's intersecting identities related to race, sexuality, gender, class, and immigrant status (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). Solórzano and Bernal extend five CRT themes, which other scholars have applied as conceptual frameworks in education (Contreras Aguirre et al., 2020; Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021; Villalpando, 2004; Yosso, 2005; Yosso et al., 2009). LatCrit examines (1) the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism with other forms of subordination such as gender, sexuality, social class, language, culture, surname, accent, and immigrant status. (2) It challenges the dominant ideology or meritocracy and equal opportunity, exposing deficit research that ignores and silences Latina/e/o/x students. (3) CRT commits to social justice and transformative responsive practices to race, gender, and class oppression; and (4) challenges ahistorical, unidisciplinary higher education research and practices, utilizing an interdisciplinary, historical lens to examine how Latina/e/o/x students have received unequal educational opportunities. (5) CRT also centers students of color's lived experiences and experiential knowledge, finding community memory and counter-storytelling

methods such as *consejos* [recommendations], *cuentos* [stories], and *testimonios* [testimonials] as an asset and source of empowerment.

LatCrit provides a socially just lens for this narrative inquiry with a *pláticas* approach in framing Latina/e/o/x students' first-year experiences since the pandemic. Their voice is empowered, placing them at the center of this research to examine and reduce oppressive practices that hinder their persistence. It is also vital to contextualize the educational and economic disparities contributing to Latina/e/o/x students' college persistence inequities and exasperated by the pandemic (Cornelissen & Hermann, 2020; Mitchell, 2023; Soria et al., 2023). Through the LatCrit lens, this research study addresses and explores how systemic oppression (e.g., policies and practices) continues to perpetuate inequities in opportunities and support for Latina/e/o/x students, resulting in attrition after the first year. When examining attrition rates and factors, it is essential to be aware of disparities faced by some Latina/e/o/x students stemming from family members losing their jobs, resulting in them working or having to take care of family members (Esquivel & Lee, 2021; Flores, 2021; Green, 2023; Montanari et al., 2023).

Community Cultural Wealth

Using the tenets of LatCrit, Yosso (2005) challenged cultural and social capital and reconceptualized community cultural wealth. The scholar counters Bourdieu's widely accepted cultural wealth theory used to explain racial inequity in college completion, which proclaims social (i.e., connections, social networks), cultural (i.e., language, education), and economic (i.e., finances and property) capital as either acquired through family or formal education. Other scholars have utilized cultural capital to explain how some people are culturally wealthy while others are culturally poor, highlighting White middle-class culture as the norm (as cited in Yosso, 2005).

Yosso (2005) designed a six-part community cultural wealth model. (1) Aspirational capital is the ability to dream and be hopeful for the future despite barriers and current circumstances. (2) Linguistic capital recognizes the social, intellectual, and communication skills bilingual students attain, engaging in a storytelling tradition of listening and recounting stories and proverbs. These are transferrable to the memorization, attentiveness, and cross-cultural awareness needed in college. (3) Familial capital includes a sense of kinship and commitment to family and community - both blood and non-blood family, learning the importance of connecting to community resources. (4) Social capital refers to an individual's social and peer network and resources from these relationships. (5) Navigational capital recognizes the historical resiliency students of color have in navigating racially hostile and unsupportive educational institutions. (6) Similarly, resistance capital recognizes the historical legacy of communities of color in advocating for and challenging inequality and oppressive structures. This community cultural wealth model highlights students of color's assets and abilities rather than focusing on skills that may not be as developed.

A community cultural wealth model guides this study in viewing Latina/e/o/x students through a holistic, asset-based lens. An asset-based approach allows for a more complete understanding of Latina/e/o/x students' successes and challenges in pursuing college. In a narrative inquiry qualitative study of first-generation Latina/e/o/x students at an HSI in South Texas, scholars found that while students experienced mental health and financial challenges adapting to the pandemic and online courses, they also found ways to cope, persist, and thrive (Green, 2023). Students with community cultural wealth (e.g., more sympathetic, supportive professors, peer study groups, and family support and inspiration) were likelier to persist and thrive. A community cultural wealth lens allows for a more complete understanding of

Latina/e/o/x students' attrition after the first year and the changes needed to support Latina/e/o/x students better to increase retention and completion rates.

Yosso, Solórzano, and other CRT scholars have provided frameworks for educational leaders to operationalize asset-based perspectives when interacting with students of color. Yet, despite these efforts, other scholars continue a narrow focus on academic preparedness as the principal predictor of college persistence and retention, examining students of color through a deficit mindset.

Deficit-Based Approaches for Attrition Factors

The literature on college retention and persistence shows the importance of continuing to investigate the first-year student experience, and student supports that aim to promote student retention and college completion (Berzenski, 2021; Griffin et al., 2022). Some of the current literature on college completion centers on quantitative structural analysis methods to predict and identify direct and indirect effects on college students' four-year completion rates and persistence (Berzenski, 2021; Bolkan et al., 2021; Griffin et al., 2022; Haktanir et al., 2021). Several studies have found high school Grade Point Average (GPA), race, standardized test scores, and placement into first-year developmental courses (Bolkan et al., 2021; Daniel, 2022; Jackson & Kurlaender, 2014) are strong predictors for attrition after the first year.

Viewing first-generation, low-income students needing developmental courses through a "high-risk" approach can lead to a deficit approach to interventions. For example, a researcher studied a small public four-year university in rural Appalachia, with 62% Pell-eligible, 79% of incoming students not meeting the college readiness standards of the ACT, and a 55% retention rate to the second year (Daniel, 2022) to identify "high risk" students. Using risk indicators such as first-generation, low-income, rural, and developmental status, the researcher analyzed whether

developmental placement impacted student success as measured by first-semester GPA and retention. With a sample size of 3,679 first-time, full-time (FTFT) incoming students, a two-predictor logistical model found that developmental math status significantly predicted attrition. Additionally, students who take non-skill-appropriate courses (i.e., First-Year Experience, Introduction to Computer Science, Introduction to Public Speaking, etc.) had a higher risk of attrition. The findings recommend that academic advisors identify high-risk students and only recommend skill-appropriate courses. This research uses a deficit-minded approach that does not consider students' lived experiences in the classroom or at the college and how those factors contribute to students' success. Instead of focusing on the support that academic advisors, other support staff, and faculty can offer, they recommend not advising students to take classes they are allegedly unprepared to handle, some of which are first-year courses.

Similarly, another scholar focused on measuring demographic characteristics to predict and identify attrition factors, although they acknowledged that other factors could interact with students' experiences. Berzenski (2021) conducted a longitudinal 10-year study to identify predictors of increased non-graduation risk and dropping out at a west coast regional university in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences; the 1200 FTFT first-year students from fall 2007 to fall 2010 cohorts had a majority URGs demographic with 50.4% Latina/e/o/x and 19% Black. The predictors for dropping out analyzed through independent regression models included: gender, URGs status, Pell eligibility, remediation, first-generation status, high school GPA, SAT score, total units per term, term and cumulative GPA, and total units earned per term. Findings showed a 24.92% drop-out risk after the first year, with Latinx students being 1.44 times more likely to stop out than White students. First-generation, Pell-eligibility, and math remediation were significant predictors of attrition in the first year. Total units enrolled and

cumulative campus GPA were the most significant predictors for dropping out and graduation. There are limitations with the findings as they can only be generalized to the specific university and do not consider students' experiences at the college.

Berzenski's (2021) focus on measuring background characteristics to predict and identify factors affecting attrition and graduation is inadequate in addressing the needs of URGs. However, the scholar acknowledges the importance of considering how other factors interact with students' experiences, such as hours students work, childcare needs, and commuter distance. The longitudinal study focused on a quantitative outcomes approach and failed to consider students' experiences and opportunities at the university. Did the university provide support to students identified as being at higher risk of attrition? Were there opportunities for social engagement and connection with faculty? Given its quantitative focus, this study falls short of understanding first-year students' lived experiences and how they navigated and interacted with structured opportunities at the university, which my study addresses by centering student voices.

In a quantitative study focusing on demographic characteristics and outcome measures at a four-year, public CSU HSI university, Mitra and Zhang (2022) examined a logistic regression model of the retention of first-year business majors at a CSU HSI with 55% first-generation, 40% URGs, and the majority nontraditional students. With a sample of 1,051 FTFT students from fall 2013 to fall 2017 cohorts, the researchers analyzed demographic factors of sex, age, race/ethnicity, URGs, Pell grant, and academic background and performance related to GPA, average enrolled units, course repeats, number of D, F, W grades, first-year math, and English remediation, and academic standing to identify factors contributing to attrition. The data showed a significantly higher percentage of males, URGs, Pell grant recipients, students taking remedial

English and math courses, lower GPAs, and repeated courses not retained. In contrast, Asians, students with higher GPAs, higher semester unit loads, and students placed in college-level math were more likely to be retained and graduate on time. Most of the students, almost 95%, were identified as Latina/e/o/x, with 75% Pell grant recipients.

The researchers found that Latina/e/o/x students and socioeconomically "disadvantaged" students were likelier to stop out after their first year (Mitra & Zhang, 2022). They also cited that Latina/e/o/x and other URGs of students are less likely to be successful because of their first-generation status, the financial burden of needing to work, and lack of family support. Lastly, they found that URGs of students were less academically prepared and more likely to enroll in remedial courses, with only 30% of URGs passing foundational math courses with a grade of B or higher.

Like Daniel and Berzenski, Mitra and Zhang (2022) analyzed the sample population through a deficit mindset, identifying equity gaps without exploring or contextualizing contributing factors and finding demographic characteristics as a disadvantage to retention and success and failing to see the cultural, navigational, and familial capital students of color, particularly Latina/e/o/x students have (Yosso, 2005). These scholars do not consider the varying ways in which Latina/e/o/x and other students of color use their capital to connect with and navigate opportunities in college. They also do not consider how students' experiences and opportunities have been reduced by institutionalized racist and discriminatory practices embedded within higher education institutions (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). However, they provide practical implications for education administrators to offer academic tutoring, supplemental instruction, first-year experience courses, learning communities, and opportunities for campus engagement to create a sense of belonging (Berzenski, 2021; Daniel, 2022; Mitra &

Zhang, 2022). What is also missing is the acknowledgment and understanding that if students enter college underprepared, it is because the educational K-12 public system has failed students.

Racial Trauma From K-12 Schooling

Utilizing a LatCrit lens can help educators challenge higher education practices and policies that view Latina/e/o/x and other BIPOC students through a deficit mindset (Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2021; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Villalpando, 2004; Yosso, 2005). Acknowledging how educational, historical structures and practices have affected Latina/e/o/x students' college access and have created racial trauma is essential. There is a long history of tracking Latina/e/o/x students into lower-level classes and non-college-bound courses that promote racial subordination and marginalization (D. G. Garcia, 2018; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Villalpando, 2004).

Research shows academic preparedness is one of the most salient factors for college persistence and success. However, there are opportunity gaps in access to high school advanced courses, resulting in equity gaps in college readiness, persistence, and completion rates for BIPOC and low-income students (Jackson & Kurlaender, 2014; Patrick et al., 2020). Evidence shows that as schools diversified racially, the per-pupil spending decreased (Californians for Justice, n.d.) - particularly in metropolitan areas where the demographic landscape has become a majority URGs country that is primarily segregated and impoverished with fewer resources, inexperienced teachers, and high rates of teacher turnover (Mordechay & Orfield, 2017). Black and Latina/e/o/x students are more likely to attend underfunded schools with disproportionate access to meaningful advanced coursework opportunities, hindering their college access and success (J. Rogers & Freelon, 2012).

Even when Black and Latina/e/o/x students are at racially and socioeconomically diverse schools, they do not have equal advanced course opportunities. Black and Latina/e/o/x students are not given equal access to enroll in gifted and talented programs (GATE) in elementary school, have limited opportunities to enroll in 8th grade Algebra 1, and are less likely to be afforded the opportunity to take Advanced Placement (AP) courses in high school, despite evidence supporting they are successful when given the opportunity (Patrick et al., 2020). Students with these opportunities are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college. Yet, the data shows opportunity gaps ranging from three to ten percent for Black and Latinx students in the K-12 system. Research also indicates teachers have unequal expectations of students of color due to implicit biases, having higher expectations for White students from specific zip codes (Californians for Justice, n.d.). Additionally, teachers and counselors with implicit biases in selecting who gets placed in courses can be a significant barrier to the opportunity gap. This belief gap contributes to a less supportive school climate, contributing to BIPOC students' behavioral, academic, and mental health outcomes (Californians for Justice, n.d.; Howard, 2016).

College Affordability and Financial Assistance

Despite these systemic racist barriers in K-12 education, some students persevere to the college path with the support of parents, teachers, and mentors, only to be discouraged during the daunting college admissions process and uncertainty about affordability (Santos & Haycock, 2016; *Time to Finish Fixing FAFSA*, 2020). It is also critical to examine the role that finances and decreased funding play in college student retention. As college tuition and fees have risen, state support has declined, and federal financial student aid has not increased, creating a high debt burden on students and families (Duser et al., 2020; Santos & Haycock, 2016; Stevens,

2020). Particularly for low-income students, the complexity of the financial aid application form and inadequate information on the application process deter them from completing the form despite being eligible for assistance (*Time to Finish Fixing FAFSA*, 2020). Data shows that four in 10 students who would have been eligible for financial aid did not complete the necessary forms due to misinformation about completing timely forms and additional documentation. Those who matriculate may be unaware of required yearly financial renewals, affecting their persistence and likelihood of graduating.

Some Latina/e/o/x students leave colleges and even higher education altogether due to challenges related to finances (Montanari et al., 2023; Mora, 2022; Perez & Farruggia, 2022; The State of Higher Education 2023, 2023). About 60% of Latina/e/o/x students receive federal Pell Grants (*FactSheets: Latino Students in Higher Education*, 2022), but they cover less than one-third of tuition costs, resulting in increased food insecurity among college students, ranging from 20-50%, compared to 12% food insecurity for the general United States (U.S.) population (Freudenberg et al., 2019). While the general population can apply for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), restrictive rules omit college students unless they work 20 weekly hours. Additionally, despite having a lower expected family contribution for federal financial aid, they receive less financial aid than White and Asian peers, partly due to financial aid policies that award based on academic achievement and timeliness to degree and not on financial need (Venegas, 2015). Recent efforts aimed to provide more Pell Grant aid to lower-income students and to simplify the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) for the 2024-2025 year through the FAFSA Simplification Act (Levine & Desjean, 2023) appear to be complicating and adding to the ongoing challenges with FAFSA and may instead undermine institutional efforts to re-enroll students who rely on federal financial aid. Compared to last year,

there has been a 13.5 percent drop in completed FAFSA and a 15.5 percent drop for BIPOC students from public high schools with a majority Black and Latina/e/o/x student population (*NCAN's FAFSA Tracker*, 2024). Additionally, a significant percentage of Latina/e/o/x students worked more than 30 hours a week due to financial challenges (*FactSheets: Latino Students in Higher Education*, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has exasperated financial and food insecurity, disproportionately affecting low-income communities from URGs and decreasing college enrollment (Black & Taylor, 2021; Cherney, 2020; Soria et al., 2023; The State of Higher Education 2023, 2023).

Before the pandemic, scholars explored how financial barriers disproportionately affected Latina/e/o/x and Black students from the fall 2013 cohort of a large public urban four-year university in the Midwest, who stopped out and did not re-enroll their second year (Perez & Farruggia, 2022). The scholars interviewed 50 participants – 62% Pell-eligible, 60% first generation, 12% Black, and 52% Latina/e/o/x. They identified five major themes of participants having limited financial family resources, financial barriers and constraints related to time and money, hidden college costs, limited financial knowledge/logistics, and institutional financial responsibility. For example, some students indicated limited time for school and working long hours to afford school, while others noted not receiving financial aid due to a lack of awareness of proper documents and deadlines. The findings have important implications for higher education policies and practices. Some students who stopped out were related to losing financial aid due to their academic standing or missing documents. The study recommends that financial aid staff coordinate financial aid communication better, connecting with administrators and advisors who could do early outreach for academic support and ensure they submit financial aid documents promptly. It is also suggested that institutions provide additional financial support

through scholarship efforts, emergency funds, food pantries, and housing and food assistance to minimize financial barriers.

In a more recent study, scholars administered a student experience survey during the COVID-19 pandemic to examine disparities in financial hardships for undergraduate students, analyzing questions about financial hardships, food and housing insecurity, mental health, safety, and demographics (Soria et al., 2023). They received responses from 28,601 students at nine large public research institutions, analyzing demographic measures of self-identified gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and international status with questions related to financial hardships during the pandemic through multivariate logistic regression. Their findings show that while many students experienced financial hardships, including those with privileged identities, compared to other students, BIPOC students were more likely to experience financial hardships. In particular, low-income, first-generation student caregivers and those with disabilities were more likely to experience all the financial hardships studied. Latina/e/o/x students were more likely to have a loss of family members' income. Based on the findings, the scholars recommend that higher education practitioners do targeted outreach to the identified groups of students. Additionally, they recommend that career development staff provide Latina/e/o/x students and their families with career planning services.

Evaluating the Role of "High-Impact Practices"

The data shows Latina/e/o/x students are more likely to work while attending college and are at higher risk for attrition when they experience financial hardship (Mora, 2022; Perez & Farruggia, 2022; Venegas, 2015). If colleges provide students with campus employment opportunities that provide mentorship, it has the potential to serve as a high-impact practice (HIP) that positively impacts student persistence (McClellan et al., 2018; Savoca, 2016).

Research finds that BIPOC students may be less likely to experience HIPs and may have unequal access to HIPs (Bowers et al., 2022; Greenman et al., 2022), but this study's identified site uses HIPs with intentional outreach to URGs of students. HIPs aim to foster undergraduate student success by promoting activities that stimulate academic achievement, engagement in educational activities and facilitate learning outcomes, preparing students to be civically responsible, economically self-sufficient, and have a more rewarding life (Kuh, 2012; Kuh et al., 2017). While campus employment has not been recognized as a HIP, some scholars have promoted the concept of campus employment having the potential to be a high-impact, promising practice (McClellan et al., 2018; Savoca, 2016).

Kuh (2009) acknowledged campus employment could be considered a HIP if student affairs professionals created HIP conditions under the supervision of students. HIP activities promote meaningful interactions with faculty and peers, involve spending significant time and energy in educationally purposeful activities, have structured opportunities for group problem-solving, provide diversity experience opportunities, and consistent performance feedback. If colleges cultivate a campus-wide student employment culture that creates meaningful work experiences for students, students are more likely to be connected to student support structures, have an increased likelihood of persistence, and develop career readiness skills (McClellan et al., 2018; Peck & Callahan, 2019; Savoca, 2016).

Research shows that students who participate in multiple high-impact practices have higher retention and graduation rates (Azzam et al., 2022; Cole et al., 2020; Greenman et al., 2022; Kuh, 2012; O'Donnell et al., 2015), but historically underrepresented groups like Latina/e/o/x students are less likely to experience HIPs and have unequal access and barriers that hinder their participation in HIPs (Bowers et al., 2022; Greenman et al., 2022). While time and

financial constraints might limit their participation, a LatCrit lens (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001) helps us understand the disproportionate access and inadequate guidance and support perpetuating inequity in HIPs and postbaccalaureate opportunities (Greenman et al., 2022).

Some guidelines and practices can be taken to combat the disproportionate equitable access and inadequate guidance into HIPs. Faculty and administrators can be educated about barriers that minimize HIP participation and provided solutions to create more equitable policies and practices through curriculum restructures, modified HIPs, and more resources (Greenman et al., 2022). For example, year-long study abroad programs can be shortened with more accessible lengths of a few weeks or months and subsidized travel costs. Additionally, collaborative research projects can be shortened, and learning communities can be converted online for individuals unable to attend in-person courses. Institutions can address participation disparities by systemically building HIPs into core first-year general education requirements, targeting URGs more vulnerable to attrition to participate, requiring faculty to incorporate HIP teaching practices, or providing release time to advance equity-minded approaches to HIPs. Lastly, scholars recommend a call to action for more systemic research and evaluation that uses an equity framework for creating spaces and support for BIPOC students.

The Role of Institutional Agents and Coordinated Support

The literature also identifies the critical role that institutional agents have in students' successfully adjusting and navigating the university culture and developing a sense of belonging and social capital, particularly for first-generation low-income BIPOC students (Holcombe & Kezar, 2020; Hurtado et al., 2015; Schademan & Thompson, 2016; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Institutional agents are individuals in key positions providing institutional support and resources and empowering students to cultivate their social capital. At a university, an institutional agent

can be a faculty, staff, or administrator. Staff in student support services, in particular, serve as informational agents providing multiple functions in advocacy, knowledge sharing, advising, coaching, bridging, and integrating students into the university culture (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). The data also supports the need to coordinate and integrate siloed student support services and academic programs to cultivate social capital and create a more seamless onboarding first-year experience among first-generation low-income BIPOC students (Holcombe & Kezar, 2020; Romero et al., 2020).

Before the pandemic, scholars explored the college and coping experiences of seven Latina first-generation and second-generation students from four-year research institutions, finding that connections with institutional agents, peers, and family are critical for Latina students' coping and persistence (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Through qualitative *pláticas*, Gloria and Castellanos interviewed undergraduate and graduate students and three institutional agents. They identified a few major themes. First, the family can be a complex factor in first-generation Latina students' persistence as, on the one hand, they resented them for leaving the family, did not visit them at school, and expected them to go home or call often and help with family responsibilities. On the other hand, the family was proud of them, and the students were inspired to persevere for the betterment of their family and to serve as role models for other family members. The scholars also found that families need timely and consistent college information in a language they can understand from trusted individuals so that they can understand what life at college will entail for their daughters and sons. They also noted the importance of students connecting with university programs such as tutoring and cultural centers and with university staff, faculty, and peers from similar backgrounds to adjust, persist, and cope by creating a university family, *comunidad* [community] with cultural interaction and validation.

This finding is consistent with other literature on interpersonal validation and the critical role institutional agents play in students' adjustment, navigation, and sense of belonging to the university, which can have a mitigating effect against Latina/e/o/x students' challenging or oppressive experiences (Hurtado et al., 2015; Romero et al., 2020). While the number of participants was small, and the study's findings are not generalizable, they offered direction for future studies. They informed this study of the importance of a multiperspective approach in exploring first-year students' college experience.

Hispanic Serving Institutions

As institutions serving a significant number of Latina/e/o/x students, Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI) have the potential to create equitable and supportive spaces for BIPOC students. As of fall 2021, the federal government recognizes 516 institutions as Hispanic-serving, with at least 25% Latina/e/o/x students (*White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity*, 2023). While HSIs have successfully provided access to Latina/e/o/x students, they have been less successful at serving students (Franco & Hernández, 2018; G. A. Garcia, 2019; G. A. Garcia et al., 2019). HSIs currently enroll over two million Latina/e/o/x students across 28 U.S. states, the District of Colombia, and Puerto Rico (*White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity*, 2023). Latina/e/o/x students continue to interrupt their college education, and HSIs have not historically created assessment measures that truly assess how their practices foster or may impede their ability to serve Latina/e/o/x students adequately (Franco & Hernández, 2018). As shown throughout this chapter, institutions traditionally utilize performance measures such as retention, progress toward degree, and graduation rates to measure the success of students, but do not adequately assess how institutions are serving students.

“Servingness”

In contrast to focusing on assessment measures of access and progress, Garcia et al. (2019) have provided indicators to define “servingness” and recommendations for implementing practices that better engage and support students to persist, thrive, and graduate. The scholars note the importance of considering nonacademic outcomes such as developing academic self-concept, racial and leadership identity, critical consciousness, civic engagement, and graduate school aspirations, which align with community cultural wealth concepts. Institutions must also create welcoming, affirming spaces that celebrate their racial identities and provide interaction with Spanish-speaking peers, staff, and faculty. As data finds that Latina/e/o/x students continue to experience discrimination and racial microaggressions (G. A. Garcia et al., 2019; G. A. Garcia & Cuellar, 2023; Hurtado et al., 2015), it is essential students be provided with mentoring opportunities by peers (Delgado-Guerrero & Gloria, 2023; Yomtov et al., 2017) and faculty of color (Burciaga & Cruz Navarro, 2015; G. A. Garcia, 2019; Romero et al., 2020; Schademan & Thompson, 2016). Yet, faculty of color mentoring is limited by the disproportionate percentages of faculty of color, presenting yet another systemic inequity. As of fall 2022, 72% of postsecondary faculty are White, with only six percent of Latina/e/o/x faculty (*Fast Facts*, 2023). The faculty representation of this study’s identified site is better, with 19.2% Latina/e/o/x, compared to 60.3% White; however, only 10.1% are tenured or tenure-track faculty (*CSUCI Employee Snapshot*, 2023). Garcia et al. (2019) also address the importance of creating structures for servingness by having an intentional mission, purpose statements, and strategic goals that foster a commitment to serving Latina/e/o/x students.

Moreover, institutions intentionally serve Latina/e/o/x students by incorporating ethnic studies curricula and culturally validating support programs (G. A. Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015;

Romero et al., 2020). The literature supports institutionalizing culturally relevant ethnic studies curricula and the mitigating effects ethnic studies courses have on students' sense of belonging and validation of systemic oppressive experiences (Acevedo & Solórzano, 2023; G. A. Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015). Educators successfully advocated for Assembly Bill 1460 (2020), prompting the CSU to incorporate an ethnic studies requirement as a general education requirement (CSU: Graduation Requirement: Ethnic Studies, 2020). The data also shows that culturally responsive programs like the Educational Opportunity Program, The Federal TRIO programs, and other state or federal grant-funded programs intentionally serve Latina/e/o/x and other BIPOC students by incorporating culturally responsive practices and asset-based approaches, and scholars recommend the critical need to institutionalize these programs to operating budgets (G. A. Garcia et al., 2019; G. A. Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015; Romero et al., 2020).

Practical Implications for HSI Leaders to Disrupt Racist Practices

In addition to creating structures for servingness, Garcia et al. (2019) also provide recommendations for higher education leaders to enact servingness using race-conscious theoretical frameworks to fully embrace an HSI identity, such as LatCrit, which examines institutional structures and student experiences through historical racist practices. Recognizing and disrupting the racialized experiences perpetuated through systemic barriers and practices is essential to providing ongoing anti-racist training for staff and faculty. Institutions can seek HSI grant opportunities to reenvision programming that fully supports Latina/e/o/x students, recognizing their assets and community cultural wealth, coupled with institutional support and cultural validation to help them succeed academically and developmentally. Asset-based programs using culturally validated models of student success services instead of deficit-based approaches are likelier to increase the persistence and retention of Latina/e/o/x students (Franco

& Hernández, 2018; G. A. Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Romero et al., 2020).

Emerging Research on COVID-19 Effects

During this study's data collection process, new emerging research surfaced on the pandemic's effects on student learning and persistence. Quantitative studies have found opportunity gaps in educational outcomes for BIPOC low-income students from high-poverty schools, experiencing a disproportionate loss in reading and math achievement (Gee et al., 2023; Goldberg, 2021; Schnieders, 2023) due to the interrupted learning during the COVID-19 emergency shift to remote instruction lasting 15 months in California. BIPOC students were less likely to have access to academic support and technology compared to White students or BIPOC students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, and there continues to be a learning lag for these students, according to available data. Scholars recommend continued assessment and exploration of the long-term effects of the pandemic on students' learning.

Research has also emerged finding a reduction in students' socio-emotional development during COVID-19, with most research emerging internationally (Albani et al., 2023; Boccaccio et al., 2023; Martín-Requejo & Santiago-Ramajo, 2021; Schnieders, 2023). Research shows that typically, during childhood and adolescence, students learn to express themselves and regulate their and others' feelings and emotions by acquiring emotional competence (Denham, 2019). Emerging data shows social isolation during the pandemic reduced emotional intelligence in children (Martín-Requejo & Santiago-Ramajo, 2021) and that university students with high emotional intelligence were likelier to engage in self-regulated learning and remain resilient to COVID-related challenges (Albani et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023); however, these studies do not account for students' socioeconomic status. Schnieders (2023) found that the shifts to virtual

instruction hindered high school students' skill-building and socio-emotional development, such as self-management, resiliency, social skills, and college/career exploration. Students with parents without college experience were likelier to report negative effects of the pandemic. Most available studies are on K-12 academic outcomes and experiences and do not consider students' intersecting identities of race/ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status. Consequently, this study fills a gap by providing a more nuanced understanding of students' intersecting identities and experiences transitioning from virtual to in-person learning.

Conclusion

Given that the pandemic has impacted retention and completion rates for Latina/e/o/x students, this literature synthesis explored scholarly research on underrepresented student groups' college retention, departure, and student success. The synthesis aimed to explore theories and practices to help Latina/e/o/x students persist and succeed. To understand Latina/e/o/x students' trends, I also reviewed enrollment and completion data for Latina/e/o/x students. While research has explored the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the transition to online instruction and on mental health, and there is emerging research on the impact on academic outcomes and socio-emotional development, there is a gap in the research in understanding Latina/e/o/x students' attrition after the first year since the pandemic.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

To reiterate, the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected underrepresented groups of students (URGs) (Black & Taylor, 2021; Soria et al., 2023; The State of Higher Education 2023, 2023), leading to a decline in college persistence and retention rates for first-year students at non-selective universities and causing higher education administrators to reexamine their practices and supports (Brown et al., 2022; Byrd & Lopez, 2020). The 2020 cohort saw a decline in the enrollment and retention of Latina/e/o/x students by 4.7% nationwide compared to the 2019 cohort. While the fall 2021 cohort had an enrollment increase of 5.2% for Latina/e/o/x students at public four-year universities (Howell et al., 2021), the retention of the 2021 cohort remained below 2018 retention rates (Persistence and Retention: Fall 2021 Cohort, 2023), The long-term effects of the pandemic on persistence, retention and completion rates of Latina/e/o/x students are unknown. Culturally validated models of student success services (Delgado-Guerrero & Gloria, 2023; Franco & Hernández, 2018; G. A. Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015; Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Romero et al., 2020) that provide Latina/e/o/x students with culturally responsive support and disrupt systemic barriers offer a promising potential. Although quantitative and qualitative data have been gathered to assess and explore the persistence and retention of Latina/e/o/x students at public four-year universities, we lack data on student experiences since the pandemic.

This study fills a gap in the research. Many current empirical studies have examined college persistence and retention, but not many studies have looked at the effects of COVID-19 beyond measuring mental health (Copeland et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022; Stressed out and Stopping out: Mental Health Crisis, 2023). However, current scholarly research is examining how college enrollments and persistence have declined since COVID-19 (Black & Taylor, 2021;

Soria et al., 2023), and scholars underscore the importance of continued research to analyze this decline (Howell et al., 2021). Lowered enrollment, retention, and completion rates since COVID-19 have led the California State University (CSU) system to create equity goals and priorities to address these gaps. This study adds to the literature by understanding Latina/e/o/x students' experiences at a public four-year Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) at a CSU, affecting their persistence since COVID-19 and their perceptions of the institutional efforts to promote retention. Given the uniqueness of CSU's goal of re-enrolling and re-engaging historically underserved students, the study will also explore what the university can do to re-matriculate students. These data will help us understand why Latina/e/o/x students on good academic standing at an HSI public university stop out, identify institutional barriers and additional support structures needed to bring back students who left, and support first-year Latina/e/o/x students better in a specific type of institution.

Research Questions

1. How do Latina/e/o/x students at CSUCI, a predominantly Latina/e/o/x/ HSI four-year public university who left on good academic standing describe their post-COVID-19 experiences as part of their decision-making to stop out between their first to second year?
2. How do student support services professionals interpret the role of the COVID-19 pandemic on their own work with students and on students' likelihood of being retained?
3. What strategies can be implemented to rematriculate students who depart with good academic standing?

Study Design and Rationale

A qualitative narrative inquiry with a *pláticas* approach was most appropriate for this study, which sought to explore the experiences contributing to attrition factors conducive to Latina/e/o/x students from the fall 2019, fall 2020, fall 2021, and fall 2022 cohorts leaving a public four-year, non-selective university, CSUCI. While the institution has data dashboards that capture survey results of why some students leave, the responses are limited to predetermined factors with limited student comments. Because my research questions address the understanding of multiple perspectives and identify various aspects of perceived attrition factors that influenced students' experiences, a qualitative approach was best suited to provide a holistic narrative of why students left (Clandinin, 2006). Using the LatCrit theory lens to address systemic oppression (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001), community cultural wealth to focus on the assets students have, and a servingness model to inform supports that intentionally serve Latina/e/o/x students, with a *pláticas* approach, that recognizes students as "co-constructors of knowledge" in a collaborative meaning-making process (Fierros & Bernal, 2016), this study utilized qualitative narrative inquiry approach. allowed for a more complete understanding of attrition after the first year and the changes needed to support Latina/e/o/x students better to increase retention and completion rates.

Within Latina/e/o/x communities, *pláticas* are a known cultural practice to engage in conversation, connect and learn (Morales et al., 2023). As a methodology, *pláticas* are a collaborative, relational process honoring participants as co-constructors of the meaning-making process, which draw from Chicana/Latina feminist frameworks that center the experiences of marginalized groups to examine systemic oppression in everyday lived experiences (Fierros & Bernal, 2016; Morales et al., 2023; Puente, 2022; Valencia & Campos, 2023). They resist

traditional “White” qualitative research approaches that require interviewer detachment and a question-and-answer approach. Instead, in *pláticas,* the interviewer and participant engage in conversation to share experiential knowledge, which enhances a narrative inquiry. Additionally, *pláticas* provide a potential space for healing to address trauma and ways to heal and rely on mutual reciprocity, vulnerability, and researcher reflexivity of sharing similar experiences to create a trusting environment. *Pláticas* are viewed as a methodological disruption that also provides a disruptive linguistic space, allowing collaborators to express themselves authentically in the language or languages they feel most comfortable with, such as English, Spanish, or a mix of Spanglish (Morales et al., 2023).

Moreover, a narrative inquiry design with *pláticas* allowed for a holistic and critical exploration of opportunity gaps in persistence rates for Latina/e/o/x students by exploring and contextualizing the cultural, social, and institutional narratives within multiple perspectives and experiences (Clandinin, 2006). CSUCI’s enrollment, retention, and persistence rates have been more affected since the pandemic than other CSUs. It is a unique institution geographically and demographically as an HSI majority-minority, with a significant percentage of first-generation and Pell-eligible students. I explored the post-COVID-19 experiences and perceptions of Latina/e/o/x students’ who did not persist to identify the primary reasons Latina/e/o/x students stopped out after the first year, their experiences with first-year programming and what they recommend institutions do to re-matriculate them.

Site Selection

The chosen institution, CSUCI, is a non-selective HSI university with a large Latina/e/o/x student population of 60.7%, 59.4% first generation, and 49.5% Pell-eligible (*CSUCI Enrollment Snapshot*, 2023). The school was selected because it has a significant percentage of Latina/e/o/x

students and a higher percentage of Latina/e/o/x faculty – 19.2% compared to 6% nationally (*Fast Facts*, 2023). However, only 10.1% are tenured or tenure-track faculty (*CSUCI Employee Snapshot*, 2023). CSUCI also shows a recent discrepancy between its retention and persistence rates; its fall 2022 cohort had a 72.3% retention rate and 71.1% retention for Pell-Eligible underrepresented groups of students (*CSU Channel Islands Retention FTFT*, 2023). The 72.3% retention rate is a 9.3 percentage points drop from CSUCI's 2020 cohort, 10.1 percentage points lower than the CSU's overall retention rate (*Graduation and Continuation Rates: First-Time Full-Time Freshmen*, 2023), and 7.3 percentage points lower than the national average for public four-year universities (Persistence and Retention: Fall 2021 Cohort, 2023). Retention rates for non-Pell-eligible URGs are 75.2% compared to Pell-Eligible students' 71.1% retention rates. Therefore, this site was appropriate for this study to understand why Latina/e/o/x students, in particular, have stopped out and why public four-year non-selective universities such as this California university are experiencing a drop in the retention of Latina/e/o/x students.

Data Sample and Participant Recruitment

The narrative inquiry explored the phenomenon of increased attrition of Latina/e/o/x students from three distinct participant groups. Because I was interested in exploring the Latina/e/o/x students' lived experiences since COVID-19 and attrition factors that influenced their decision to leave after their first year, I interviewed nine students from fall 2019, fall 2020, fall 2021, and fall 2022 cohorts who left on good academic standing, identify as Latina/e/o/x and are first generation. I interviewed students who left and did not plan to return and those who left and returned or plan to return to CSUCI for the fall 2024 semester. Overall, 84 stop-out students from the fall 2019-2022 cohorts met the criteria. I also interviewed nine student support

professionals, which included individuals from eight academic support and Student Affairs offices.

I used purposeful sampling to identify Latina/e/o/x students from fall 2019 to fall 2022 cohorts who left on good academic standing and have not returned to the campus. I received authorization from the Assistant Vice President of Student Success and Retention to recruit students directly. I initially sent email invitations and received minimal responses; consequently, I followed up with text messages. I also utilized snowball sampling to recruit more participants. To incentivize student participants, I provided a $25 gift card to show appreciation for their help in my research study.

The student services professionals participants, who met the criteria of working with first-year students and at the institution for at least five years, were selected via convenience sampling. Twelve staff members who had been at the university for five years and worked in student support services and clinician roles were invited to participate in interviews via initial email. Recruitment was not a problem, and most participants agreed to participate. Most members were willing to participate, given established collegial relationships at the site and the fact that student support professionals are generally invested in the support and retention of students. Additionally, some individuals had expressed concerns about student attrition and persistence since the pandemic.

Data Collection

My primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews with Latina/e/o/x students who stopped out (left) after their first year utilizing a *pláticas* approach. *Pláticas* are a collaborative process of sharing stories, building community, and meaning-making that is a two-way conversation (Fierros & Bernal, 2016; Morales et al., 2023; Valencia & Campos, 2023). I

first administered a screening questionnaire (Appendix A) to capture demographics and students' current status (e.g., working, attending another school, etc.). CSUCI data shows that students leaving in good academic standing have increased post-pandemic (*Stop out Dashboard*, 2023); consequently, all students interviewed left in good standing. While some documented survey data note reasons for leaving due to COVID-19 or not being happy with the campus, student experiences are not specific. The identified data points of affordability, campus fit, and personal reasons, informed some of the interview questions and protocols (Appendix B & C).

Semi-structured open-ended questions with a *pláticas* approach allowed for an in-depth analysis of Latina/e/o/x students' lived experiences, including their interactions with student support services and the factors influencing their decision to leave. Moreover, the interviews allowed for exploring what students recommend to retain students better or what they would need to re-matriculate. Most interviews were conducted over Zoom, with two in-person interviews with the students who had returned to the campus lasting an average of 54 minutes. I used the audio and video recording feature in Zoom and the Microsoft Word recording as a backup when meeting via Zoom. I used my phone's Rev app recording feature during the in-person interviews. After the *pláticas*, I wrote analytic memos and notes of participants' responses, observed body language, and my initial reactions.

In addition to *pláticas* with Latina/e/o/x students, I also interviewed and collected data from student support services professionals. Individual *pláticas* allowed for a more in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and knowledge of post-pandemic Latina/e/o/x students' experiences that impacted student support services offices and student retention. I administered a screening questionnaire (Appendix D) to capture demographic information. Given the experience these individuals have working with first-year students, they were able to contextualize patterns

across student groups of factors that influence students' decisions to leave, as well as student supports that retain students. Almost all *pláticas* were held in person, with one via Zoom, lasting an average of 66 minutes with predetermined semi-structured questions and interview protocol (Appendix E). I used my phone's Rev app recording feature to record the data for in-person interviews and Microsoft Word dictation as a backup. I used the Zoom recording feature for the Zoom interview. I wrote analytic notes following the *pláticas* to capture observations, body language and gestures the recordings could not capture, and my initial reactions.

Recording & Transcription

I used a third-party online transcription service, Rev.com's Artificial Intelligence, to transcribe the *pláticas* and an online coding software, Dedoose, to code. Once recordings were transcribed, I made some edits for minor errors and added observer comments. Then, I reviewed the data thoroughly to do a preliminary thematic analysis of participants' narratives to identify themes and begin coding. I used Dedoose to create themes and categories related to attrition, student support services, post-pandemic impacts, and strategies to assist students in re-matriculating, making connections to my conceptual frameworks and deductive codes. I began the coding process by creating themes and categories related to why students left, how COVID-19 exacerbated students' reasons for leaving, their sense of belonging to the campus, other systemic oppressive experiences that contributed to their attrition, and themes of recommendations for re-matriculation and retention.

Finally, I triangulated the data collected from each group: stop-out students who will not return, students who returned or will return, and student support services professionals to identify themes across all groups. The criteria I used to identify themes across groups related to attrition, student services impact, and re-matriculation were contingent on the number of participants who

discussed the theme, the amount of time they spent discussing the factor, and the level of significance placed on the theme. Lastly, throughout each *plática,* I did member checks with the participants, paraphrasing their responses to ensure I captured their sentiments. While I offered to share the outline of their transcription once it was transcribed, all but one declined.

Data Analysis Methods

The interview *pláticas* data was analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying deductive codes and themes from theory to start the analysis, but I also allowed inductive codes/themes to emerge from the data (Boyatzis, 1998). I conducted multiple rounds of deductive and inductive codes of *in vivo,* values, and narrative coding of participants' stories to capture their own words, perspectives, beliefs, and overarching themes in narrative form (Saldaña, 2021). I initially started with as many as 90 codes and ultimately focused on approximately 30 codes based on LatCrit (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001), community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), and servingness (G. A. Garcia et al., 2019) frameworks. I then organized data excerpts into narrative themes based on the research questions and related to participants' experiences and perceptions of attrition factors that contributed to students' decisions to stop out, how student support services professionals interpreted the role COVID-19 on their work with students, and strategies that promote community cultural wealth and servingness mentalities. Examples of provisional codes extrapolated from student retention and departure theory include a lack of sense of belonging, financial reasons, academic preparedness, mental health reasons, not feeling supported, not being ready for the college experience, and COVID-related reasons (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Perez & Farruggia, 2022; Schademan & Thompson, 2016; Soria et al., 2023). I utilized LatCrit (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001), community cultural wealth, (asset-based) lens (Yosso, 2005), and servingness (G. A. Garcia et al., 2019) to lift students' voices when identifying administrative

racist barriers and other emerging structural themes impeding students' persistence, and to contextualize supports that provide culturally responsive practices. When the frameworks fell short in conceptualizing emerging themes, I utilized *in vivo* and values coding to capture their own words and to interpret their perspectives and beliefs (Saldaña, 2021). Examples of *in vivo* coding include staff and faculty being unprepared for students' increased needs since the pandemic and remote instruction impacting students' social and communication skills due to hindered interactions with their peers and faculty during remote learning.

Access

I currently work as the Director of Academic Advising at the research site. In that capacity, I have access to all of the university's data dashboards and have a collegial relationship with the student support service professionals I recruited for participation. Additionally, I have been in communication with the Director of Institutional Research for the past year about my research. They provided their support in helping me with my study and offered suggestions on phenomena that cannot be fully understood with data points and would benefit from qualitative research. I also had conversations with the university President, who supports and understands the importance of qualitative research in understanding why students leave. Given the drop in enrollment and retention, the administration understands the critical need to explore students' lived experiences. I also had the support of my Assistant Vice President in conducting the research during working hours.

Positionality

Because I work for the university where I conducted my research, it was critical to position myself as a UCLA student conducting a dissertation study, but I also disclosed my administrative role at CSUCI. My credibility and expertise as the Director of Advising afforded

me the access and support I needed to engage in the research study. As a director, I do not generally meet with students, so the student participants did not know me. As a first-generation Latina student who stopped out twice as an undergraduate, I had a unique position with the participants. Having a similar lived experience as the participants allowed for a more meaningful connection and building of rapport and trust during the interview process. Since some of the students had feelings of shame and embarrassment for stopping out of school, disclosing my experience mitigated said feelings and validated their experiences, helping them feel more comfortable disclosing their journeys with someone who could empathize and understand. I also invited them to speak in Spanish or Spanglish, and some students felt more comfortable expressing themselves in Spanglish.

On the other hand, given my collegial relationship with student support services professionals, it was vital to position myself as a university colleague. Being a colleague who understands students' needs and how COVID-19 affected student support services at the campus allowed for more authentic dialogue and an opportunity to work collaboratively in the meaning-making process and reenvisioning of campus supports that could better serve students. However, I also positioned myself as a UCLA student to mitigate credibility threats, which I will discuss in the next section.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

I took steps to diminish threats to my study's credibility. I was aware of how my biases could be a threat. I have worked in academic advising for over 17 years, working with numerous students who have stopped out, and I myself stopped out of school; consequently, I had ideas of attrition factors that may be impacting students. I used the protocols and coding procedures to prevent bias, asking participants the same questions, allowing room for follow-up and probing

questions, and operationalizing a systemic data analysis to avoid cherry-picking quotes. I also addressed this concern by incorporating rich narrative data with in vivo direct quotes, some of which contradicted or confirmed my biases. I conducted member checks during the pláticas to ensure validity, paraphrasing their responses for clarification and accuracy, and offered to send a transcription, but participants were honest in providing their feedback that they would likely not read through it.

I was initially concerned about participant reactivity with my position as an administrator and was unsure how that would affect how students or staff interact with me. I was concerned they might not want to say anything negative about the school or might be skeptical about my research motives. My methodology approach, utilizing *pláticas,* mitigated those concerns. *Pláticas* created a collaborative and relational space to share similar experiences. I was vulnerable in disclosing my college experiences with students and connected with staff to build trust. I was also transparent in addressing my positionality and invited participants to ask questions about my motives, research, and how I planned to share the data. I piloted the questions first to watch for reactions to questions that might need revision. My years of counseling experience made it easier to build rapport, ask follow-up or probing questions, and paraphrase what I heard. I also listened to my initial recorded interviews to ensure I was not leading, interrupting, or talking too much. Triangulating data also helped with addressing reactivity.

Given the unique and small sample, I am aware of the limitations of generalizing findings. Triangulating multiple participants' perspectives: students who have not returned, students who have or will return, and student services professionals helped to support interpretations. I validated my data by providing rich, descriptive narratives and quotes and an

in-depth narrative analysis using a rigorous data collection and thematic analysis procedure. While the sample may minimize the ability to generalize findings, it contributes to the gap in the research on the COVID-19 period effect and provides findings that can inform practitioners and provide direction for future research.

Ethical Considerations

There are many ethical considerations to address for my study. To minimize participant risk, I obtained informed consent before the interviews. I realized my questions could trigger certain feelings in students; consequently, I had a ready list of mental health resources to provide to students, but they were not needed. Further, the member checks during the *pláticas* allowed for clarification and accuracy of responses. To ensure anonymity, I used pseudonyms for participants to remove identifiable participant data. When reporting on staff participant responses, I labeled them "student services professionals" to protect areas with only one or two staff. Finally, I offered to prepare a case report to share with staff participants and campus administration. I informed the site's administration that if I collected negative information, I would frame it as a learning and growth opportunity for the institution to improve student support services and onboarding of students.

Lastly, I took precautionary steps to secure data. I informed the campus the original data was mine. I have two data sets, including audio, video, and transcription files. I have one copy on my laptop and the other via the UCLA box, which is password-protected.

Study Limitations

This study can be enlightening for other non-selective, small public four-year HSI universities; however, it may not be generalizable to large CSUs or primarily White Serving Institutions. While generalizability is limited, it contributes to a gap in knowledge on the

pandemic's period effect for the fall 2019 to fall 2022 cohorts affected by COVID-19. Attrition factors could change as interventions and trends change for newer cohorts. Moreover, focusing on one student population of Latina/e/o/x students can represent an additional limitation. It is further limited by not having quantitative data points to compare with qualitative experiences. Nonetheless, this study can be replicated at other HSI public, four-year universities to gather research on the student experience, the factors that influenced their decision to leave, and strategies and support that can better support student re-matriculation.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction to the Chapter

This chapter reports the findings of a qualitative narrative inquiry, centering on the experiences of Latina/e/o/x students' who attended CSUCI between the fall 2019 and spring 2023 semesters and stopped out between their first and second year. More specifically, I explored first-generation Latina/e/o/x students' first-year experiences at a public four-year HSI, affecting their persistence since the COVID-19 pandemic and the perceptions of institutional efforts to promote retention. Moreover, I explored how student services professionals interpreted the role of the pandemic in their work and inquired about what the university could do to rematriculate students who stopped out between their first and second year and better support them in persisting. I screened participants with a brief survey before using a *pláticas* approach with a semi-structured protocol to gather data from 18 participants, evenly split between student service professionals and student participants. Each *plática* was transcribed, coded through multiple cycles, and then analyzed into narrative themes.

Findings interpreted through Solórzano's and Bernal's (2001) Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit), Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth, and Garcia's (2019) Servingness concept revealed several overarching themes. First and foremost, the COVID-19 pandemic amplified equity issues and college transition challenges such as financial hardship, academic preparation, and low self-efficacy; moreover, online instruction undermined communication with faculty and peers and impeded students' social-emotional intelligence due to a lack of engagement in online learning. Additionally, mental health challenges increased; however, the pandemic also destigmatized mental health. Given the aforementioned challenges, students reported needing more support, and staff and faculty described feeling unprepared to support

them. Furthermore, staff turnover has increased since the pandemic, contributing to inconsistencies in student support and with most staff reflecting on their staff retention and burnout. In addition, institutional barriers led to student distrust and decisions to stop out. Lastly, students want to be listened to and seen as individuals with unique needs. In what follows, I first provide the profiles of participants, then provide evidence of these findings thematically, using participants' narratives throughout, and then conclude with participants' recommendations to decrease attrition and provide better support for students to be successful.

Profiles of Student *Pláticas*

I interviewed nine student participants between November 22, 2023, and March 15, 2024, with most *pláticas* occurring via Zoom and two held in my private office with the students who had returned to campus. When my initial recruitment efforts yielded only two participants from the fall 2021 cohort, I expanded my sample to cohorts from the fall 2019, fall 2020, and fall 2022 cohorts. Seven participants experienced in-person instruction; two lived in campus housing, five commuted to campus, and two only exclusively took online courses. All participants worked while enrolled in college, with the mode range being 20-30 hours a week, an increase from the average of up to 20 hours a week reported by staff that students typically worked before the pandemic. Five of the nine participants did not plan to return to CSUCI and are either working or attending another institution closer to home; two students have already returned to CSUCI, and two other students intend to return and are currently either enrolled at a community college or are working.

Table 4.1

Demographics of Student Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Cohort	Modality	Housing Status	Hours Worked	Current Status
Carla	Female	Fall 2019	Hybrid	Commuter	20-30	Attending CC, Returning
Nacho	Male	Fall 2019	Hybrid	Commuter	30-40	Working, Returning
Virginia	Female	Fall 2019	Hybrid	Commuter	20-30	Attending CSUCI
Miguel	Male	Fall 2020	Online	NA	40+	Working
Renee	Female	Fall 2020	Online	NA	10-20	Working
Norma	Female	Fall 2021	In-Person	Commuter	20-30	Attending CSUCI
Beatriz	Female	Fall 2022	In-Person	Dorms	30-40	Attending CC
Carissa	Female	Fall 2022	In-Person	Commuter	10-20	Vocational School
Jasmine	Female	Fall 2022	In-Person	Dorms	20-30	Attending CC

Profiles of Student Services Professionals *Pláticas*

I interviewed nine student services professionals (SSPs) from eight academic support and Student Affairs offices between January 17, 2024, to March 12, 2024. Most participants are staff of color and women with a minimum of a Master's degree completed, and the mode range of working at CSUCI is five to eight years. All participants had worked with first-year students before the COVID-19 pandemic and could compare pre- and post-pandemic experiences. The names of the specific departments where participants work are excluded to protect anonymity in departments with one or two staff.

Table 4.2

Demographics of Student Services Professionals Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Education Level	Years at CSUCI
Alex	Male	Latino	Master's	5-8
Ben	Male	Black	Doctorate	9-12
Brian	Male	Black	Master's	5-8
Christina	Female	White	Doctorate	5-8
Jennifer	Female	Latina, Indigenous	Master's	5-8
Maribel	Female	Latina	Master's	5-8
Melody	Female	White	Master's	9-12
Mia	Female	Black, Latina	Master's	5-8
Stella	Female	Latina	Master's	13-16

Key Findings/Themes

Personal Challenges and Struggles Contributing to Initial Stop Out Decisions

Preparation

Most staff participants articulated their perceived understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic, amplifying inequities and hardship challenges for BIPOC students. Ben, a staff participant with the university for over nine years, articulated that inequities and hardship issues were happening before, but the pandemic "really poured gas on these things." Ben reported noticing BIPOC, first-generation students struggling even more with college adjustment and being back in person, contributing to low self-efficacy. Some staff noted the educational inequities already existing in academic preparation for students of color being exacerbated further during the pandemic.

Inequities in the Opportunity to Learn in K-12 Schools. Staff participant Alex, who works predominantly with marginalized student populations, noted how the lack of resources

students of color encountered in high school seem to have lasting effects upon enrolling in college, and COVID simply exacerbated these effects due to virtual instruction:

> How academically prepared are our students of color for the rigor of college? Do their schools do a good job in terms of teaching them how to be a student? You find a lot of them don't understand what it means to be good students . . . in terms of note taking, test preparation. A lot of that sometimes is failing, because they're coming from communities where they have long-term subs for a few months, where there wasn't as many honors or AP coursework being taught, and on top of that, you add online learning during the pandemic. So, they're not as prepared as some of their other counterparts.

Alex's comments underscore the inequities many CSUCI students of color encountered in their K-12 education and how virtual learning during the pandemic further exacerbated those inequities. Extensive literature has documented the inequities in access to advanced coursework and teacher turnover in underfunded schools, which creates opportunity gaps in academic preparation, particularly for low-income BIPOC students (Jackson & Kurlaender, 2014; Mordechay & Orfield, 2017).

More than half of the students shared experiences that echoed Alex's account of BIPOC students receiving a subpar education. For example, student participant Carla shared that she took college preparatory classes in high school, but classes were much more demanding at the university. "I wasn't used to the workload and having to read. . . I had low self-esteem, and I didn't feel confident being in my classes. I don't think my high school prepared me." Carla's sense of a lack of preparation from high school was compounded during the shift to virtual learning in the spring 2020 semester.

> Then, having to take classes on Zoom while all of this was going on was just harder for me. If I was in person, I would . . . focus on class, or I would at least pay attention. But on my computer, I had all of this going on at home, and it was just really hard for me. I was really lost in the algebra class. Math was never a problem for me before the pandemic. I could just figure it out. But that class, I think the whole class was just lost. I just couldn't keep up.

Carla was already struggling with feeling disconnected from the university and losing her confidence from high school. Her realization of lack of adequate preparation, her experience with family members having to continue working on the "front lines" while others were isolated, and taking classes through Zoom, which she found extremely challenging to focus on, contributed to her decision to leave.

The Shift to Virtual Learning in High School. Other staff articulated the challenges of students engaging in virtual learning in high school, which did not equate to adequate academic preparation. For instance, Melody, another staff participant who has also been working at the university for over nine years, expressed:

> I think most students in their last few years of high school are getting prepared for the transition into a four-year university setting, but students who went through that virtually did not get. I think those last two years of high school tend to be more difficult in order to help prepare students for what they're going to get coming into college. That happening virtually was not the same for our students. They didn't have . . . I don't want to say there wasn't any rigor…But I think because everyone was so focused on basic survival during that time, a lot of students just kind of skated by and just really hurt them when they got here.

Melody's comments highlight a developing understanding of COVID-19's effect on students' learning in high school (Goldberg, 2021; Moscoviz & Evans, 2022). Due to an emergency shift for K-20 to remote instruction in California for 15 months during COVID-19, four participants in this study experienced the last one or two years of high school almost entirely online. Additionally, several other staff described how mental and physical health, social isolation, and financial hardships during COVID may have prompted some students to de-prioritize high school. Other staff participants pointed to an increasing number of students having to retake courses or seek extra help with writing in the years following the pandemic. For example, Maribel shared:

> I've had a lot of students having to retake math . . . or English because they couldn't keep up; something as simple as writing a structured essay, they don't understand. . . I don't know if it was just not taught in high school during the pandemic, but I feel like they weren't because they didn't understand or they got really bad grades on their papers, and they couldn't understand why.

Given the CSU's goals of students completing math and English requirements by the end of their first year, Maribel sees virtual instruction as hindering some students' ability to successfully pass courses on their first attempt. Like other staff, Maribel noted students' difficulty focusing online, especially if they had unstable internet or competing responsibilities at home.

Several students also shared experiences that echoed Melody's and Maribel's accounts of inadequate preparation in high school due to emergency shifts to online learning. For instance, Beatriz entered CSUCI in the fall of 2022 and described her frustration with online learning in high school:

> I'm very much more of a pen and paper type person. I don't like doing stuff online. Even now, I still take my notes on paper, but I would say that affected me because I like to be very interactive with my teachers and not being able to really communicate with the teacher affected my learning, but I couldn't say anything on Zoom.

Beatriz lamented how on Zoom, she encountered frequent interruptions, spotty internet, and less opportunity to ask clarifying questions. Additionally, she shared that actual learning, reflections, and teacher feedback were non-existent.

> It was kind of like, oh, I have to do the material. If I do the material, cool, I get the points. But it was never like, we're going to tell you what you're doing wrong. It was just like, okay, you're going to get the points.

For Beatriz, online learning was like checking boxes for assigned work but not thinking critically and retaining academic knowledge, which affected her when she resumed in-person instruction. Many other students shared anecdotes similar to Beatriz's.

Family Responsibilities and Cultural Expectations

While the family was a source of inspiration and familial capital for most students, they also contributed to students' attrition due to family responsibilities and expectations to help the household, which were heightened during the pandemic.

Job Losses and Having to Take on New Jobs. According to most staff and a majority of student participants, the COVID-19 pandemic amplified economic hardships and college transition issues, particularly for BIPOC students, increasing after the pandemic due to the rising cost of living and job losses. Student participants described family members losing their jobs and how, because of that job loss, they had to assume greater responsibility for paying for college and supporting their families. For example, Virginia shared, "My dad got laid off . . . my mom too. I had to fully pay for school; I had to pay rent, and I didn't have the money." Virginia increased her working hours to help provide for her family; however, by doing so, she could no longer balance school and work and did not have enough money to pay for additional school costs, prompting her to stop out.

Similarly, Miguel noted, "My brother and my mom lost their job to COVID, so I had to pick up another job." While Miguel was already working full-time and managing school, when he picked up the second job, he averaged 70 hours at work each week, which made it impossible for him to continue school. Miguel recalled thinking, "I'm lacking in all my academics, so I think the better option is just to let it go for the moment." Nacho likewise had to work more to help his family. These and several other student participants were already working when their family members lost their blue-collar, manual labor; they then picked up another job or more hours to help contribute to their families. Consequently, these working-class Latina/e/o/x

students could not prioritize school, which for some affected their confidence and self-efficacy in feeling capable of working, being in school, and being successful.

Nacho, who lives on a farm, also had the added barrier of no internet access at home. “At the time, I didn’t have internet here, so I couldn’t access any schoolwork or contact anyone.” Nacho’s story of having to increase his working hours and not having internet access shows the systemic inequities that farm-working Latina/e/o/x families living in a rural area experienced during the pandemic, which affected their college choices (Puente, 2022). Because of this, Nacho knew he would need to stop attending school. At the time, he did not formally withdraw, but he was later able to withdraw due to campus flexibility in requesting retroactive withdrawals due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Staff participants shared similar accounts based on their interactions with other students, describing the inequities experienced by Latina/e/o/x students, which were exacerbated during and after the pandemic. Maribel shared that, for many BIPOC students during and after COVID, their goal was “making sure their family had a roof over their head . . . having a full-time job or two jobs so they can help support their family.” Maribel recounted how many of her students’ family members lost jobs; consequently, they had to step in to increase their hours or get second jobs, which for some resulted in a decision to stop out of school.

Staff participants described in more general terms how students, in many cases, needed to prioritize work over school to meet their basic needs, leading to students failing classes or stopping out of the semester. For example, Mia explained how prioritizing family members’ basic needs contributed to students feeling a sense of shame or embarrassment about school:

> So [putting work ahead of school is] always going to come first because that feeds their basic needs, and [students think] ‘as long as I have my basic needs met, then I can focus on other things.’ But then you just failed . . . and then it’s shame. A lot of shame is put in

> their sense of self that 'Maybe I don't belong at the university. Maybe I'm not smart enough to be here.' When it's not that; you just need assistance.

Mia went on to talk about how some students of color often do not immediately seek help and support until it is too late and the importance of connecting students with resources and support to reduce their sense of shame or their sense of a lack of belonging for not being able to manage work and school.

Similar to Mia and Maribel, Alex noted first-year students prioritizing work; however, he described this particular phenomenon as a relatively new trend of students seeking employment first or coming in working rather than waiting to establish themselves academically before seeking employment.

> You're seeing students prioritizing work more than school. They're trying to be full-time both places . . . more of that from the get-go. I think historically, when I think back prior to the pandemic, you would see a lot of first years spend that first year … learning how to be a student. There were some who financially needed the funds, so they would start working, but for the most part, you'd see most of them kind of get their footing first and then transition to working. Now you see them transitioning, already working, and wanting to continue that. I find myself having a conversation with more and more students first-year saying, reminding them like, 'You're a student first or need to be a student first.'

Alex and several other staff noticed that since the pandemic, more students, particularly BIPOC, are working more hours to provide financial support to their families and to pay for school, supporting the student participants' experiences.

Responsibilities for Childcare and Care of Other Family Members. About half of the students also contributed their family expectations and responsibilities as critical factors that impeded persistence, confirming prior emerging quantitative findings (Soria et al., 2023) about the student experiences during and after COVID-19 but adding student narratives. Norma, a commuting student with younger siblings, had responsibilities at home. She attempted to

continue attending school while working, taking her siblings to and from school, and caring for them afterward, and she explained:

> I had to work more. I had to take care of my brother and sister, and I just had all of these family expectations of helping clean at home. So that was a priority for my parents, for me to just step up and be more at home to help them and my siblings. So there's nothing the university could have done. It was just having to take care of my brother and sister.

When schools re-opened, Norma's siblings' school had in-person instruction, but after-school care was not open, so her parents asked her to take on the responsibility of caring for them while they worked. As Norma described above, taking care of her brother and sister was just something she needed to do as an older sister, and because of that, she de-prioritized school.

Likewise, most staff described Latina/e/o/x students who shared stories similar to those of Norma. To illustrate, staff Brian, who supervises several student assistants, provided the following account:

> For those living at home, sometimes their family doesn't understand what it means to be going to college and getting a degree, and so their parents just kind of see it as an interest outside of the household, and they want them to get a job, or they want them to take care of their siblings or clean. There have been many times when student assistants told me, 'home isn't a happy place for me because when I'm at home, I'm expected to do work, specific to my gender.'

Brian went on to describe how a few of his female student assistants who commute are expected to do gendered roles of helping the household and caring for siblings. Their families did not understand the university demands of reading, writing, and projects, and according to the students, their parents believed that when they were not at school, they should be helping the family at home.

Similarly, another staff Christina, identifying as White, noted how her students' families expected that students would prioritize family obligations over school. She further explained:

> And so it was increased expectations about working and family care but not as much support for education, or the parents might support education but didn't know how to support that by giving them time to dedicate to school. And so the idea of you're not just

> going to class . . . you're just reading, so that's not work or that's not school. I think a lot of it's Latinx students but also first-generation.

Christina understood that during and after the pandemic, there were Latina/e/o/x students who were expected to work to contribute to the household. As non-Latina/e/o/x staff, Brian and Christina were careful in expressing Latina/e/o/x families' limitations in their support or understanding of how much time students needed to focus on their studies. They understood there were cultural gender norms within Latina/e/o/x families that expected female commuter students to continue helping with household chores and caring for younger siblings. Brian further shared. "In many ways, her parents did encourage her to stop out because they felt like she was more useful at home, and I know that she had a lot of internal turmoil about that." For that student, Brian shared that she stopped out primarily due to family responsibilities.

Latina/e/o/x staff also talked about the cultural norms and expectations of Latina/e/x families. Alex, for example, spoke about the experiences and expectations of his commuter students and those living in housing. Alex described how COVID-19, in some ways, gave students more responsibility with their siblings. This perspective aligns with Norma's experience. They were at home with younger siblings during virtual instruction, helping them join virtually, which continued after the in-person transition.

> They're still responsible for the younger siblings. You walk 'em to school, drop 'em off, you go to school, you focus for seven, eight hours of just being a student. You get out of school and then go pick up your sibling, take a moment. Now you're the de facto responsible adult. I find myself having a conversation with more and more students first year, reminding them, 'You're a student first or need to be a student first.'

Alex has observed some of his students prioritizing their family role instead of their student role. While the advice to be a student first comes from a good place, it does not consider how that might not be feasible for some students as family needs may need to come first.

On the other hand, Maribel understood that after the pandemic, there was a shift in what students perceived as more important. “This group of students is a little different. The students are more like, ‘We have to take care of the family.’ The focus has changed a little because of the challenges that these families are going through now.” Maribel knew that some students’ families were going through economic hardship or lost childcare resources, so students had to prioritize their family’s needs.

Alex further explained the challenge of family support and expectations for students living away from home, sometimes contributing to attrition and preventing students from fully connecting to peers, faculty, and staff or taking advantage of academic opportunities.

> How much is their home life requiring them to not be here academically. I’d say most of the students in their first year struggle with that especially the ones who move on to campus struggle with trying to live two lives, going home every weekend. A problem arises during the week at home, rushing back home . . . and not being able to really concentrate on their studies, whether it’s . . . preparing for exams, but also, financially . . . needing to get a job, a second job, send money back home. . . or just sense of community. They’re not building those connections on this campus because they’re going home every weekend, and they’re not able to build that connection with classmates . . . professors, with counselors . . . that’s a big challenge for our students because they’re here, but they’re not here. . . . Sometimes, in the Latino community, families can be a big support system, but . . . they can also . . . guilt trip their kids for not being home for the weekend or missing a family function. Especially in the Latino community, where family means so much, it can be difficult for the student to leave for a couple of weeks . . . you see more with the Latino community than with the White community or with parents who have degrees who understand they’re not going to come back until Thanksgiving break. For the Latino community, it’s expectations. ‘It’s been two weeks, you haven’t come home.’

Alex describes how Latina/e/o/x families’ cultural expectations of being present for family functions, times of crises, or simply being with the family can jeopardize their connection and commitment to college. While strong family ties and students going home every weekend or as often as they could occurred before the pandemic, what changed after the pandemic, according to both staff and students, was that they found it even more challenging to be away from their family, which prevented them from fully integrating into the campus community.

Feeling Disconnected from Family, Especially after the Pandemic. For students Beatriz and Jasmine, who lived in campus housing, being away from their family was one of the main reasons they left the campus. They lived about two to three hours away and could not make it home as often as they wanted, and after the pandemic, they found it more difficult to be away from their families for a prolonged period. Jasmine described:

> My family is very family-oriented. So going from having family support every day to having family three hours away and only being able to see them once a month was challenging for me year-round, and . . . brought out a lot of suppressed feelings like anxiety and depression about being away. So mentally that was draining on me, especially while having to work to pay for my schooling.

During the pandemic and social isolation, Jasmine became closer to her family, spending most of her time with them. Consequently, when she moved to the university and did not receive their daily emotional support, it weighed heavily on her ability to integrate into the university fully, despite having friends and doing well academically. Being away from her family and the financial costs factored into her decision to leave. Similarly, Beatriz echoed the difficulties of living away from family. “It was really just a distance thing. If I had maybe one or two of my family or my partner even an hour closer, I would’ve definitely stayed.” For Beatriz and Jasmine, the primary reason they left was because they could not handle the emotional toll of not being able to see their family more often.

Another staff participant, Maribel echoed students’ challenges adjusting to college and being away from home; she explained, “Some students are wanting to go back home, not wanting to be away from the family.” Maribel shared how, for Latina/e/o/x students, family is very important. During the pandemic, folks got to spend more time with their family during quarantine, and she noticed that, since the pandemic, Latina/e/o/x students have experienced a more challenging time living away from home, being away from their families.

Challenges with Socio-Emotional Intelligence and Interacting with People in Person

Hiding Behind Screens and Masks: Socio-Emotionally Stunted due to the Pandemic.

The majority of staff participants also described a loss of socio-emotional intelligence and the inability of students to socialize and communicate with others because of the pandemic. Socio-emotional intelligence is the ability to cope with environmental factors to successfully navigate intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, adaptability, and stress management (Martín-Requejo & Santiago-Ramajo, 2021). Students with higher levels of emotional intelligence can better adjust and demonstrate higher academic performance. Several staff participants described students' challenges reconnecting with peers during or after the pandemic. For example, Brian articulated:

> I think being virtual for so long, for some of our students when they were in high school, they just lost a lot of those skills to make connections to build good relationships. And when they got here, it just continued. We were kind of softly back. So some of them were softly here, where you're wearing a mask . . . not hanging out . . . scared of people. So now we're at a place where we're not wearing masks all the time; we can be more social.

Brian talked about how the shift to virtual learning in high school constrained students' opportunities to interact and make connections, and even upon returning to in-person instruction in college, mask mandates enabled them to continue partially hiding. They were in-person but not engaging as much, as students and folks were generally still cautious about COVID-19. Brian also relayed conversations with his student assistants in which they recognized that the pandemic had affected their confidence and ability to interact with others. He also shared that even his most active student assistant talked about how it took some time to interact with people and build community with peers "because he was just so out of practice of interacting with people."

Other staff participants also described students' developmental interruptions and loss of social and cognitive skills because of social isolation during the pandemic. Christina described:

> [Students] are chronologically 18. Developmentally, they are 16, maybe, and yet, they're living in housing. And so it was already hard to navigate housing when you're an 18-

> year-old pre-pandemic. And so I don't mean developmental delays that they have a cognitive disability… but they didn't learn the study skills necessarily because they weren't doing group projects together where you have to negotiate those things. And so, they also didn't learn the basic things around self-regulation. When you're in a classroom, you have to hold yourself together. If you're at home, with your video off, you don't have to really figure that out so much.

Christina reflected on how the socio-emotional intelligence of students in the 2021 and 2022 cohorts was stunted due to social isolation and limited online interaction. In her interactions with students since the pandemic, she saw increased challenges in college adjustment and the ability to interact with peers and faculty due to not practicing those skills; this led to decisions to leave for some students.

Research shows that typically, during childhood and adolescence, students learn to express themselves and regulate their and others' feelings and emotions by acquiring emotional competence (Denham, 2019). Christina and several other staff reported and described that the interruption of social interaction during the pandemic prevented students from fully developing their emotional intelligence. Staff also reported and described their conversations with students on the challenges of interacting with others after the pandemic. For example, Mia recalled how students described having little, if any, interaction with anyone outside their immediate family; as a result, she described rehearsing possible social interactions with students to lessen their anxiety:

> We push people to clubs and orgs. We push people to events. We'll practice how to go. We will do a run-through. Yes, because that anxiety is that deep. 'I have lost that, and now I'm not even confident enough to talk to them. I sound stupid, or I might say the wrong thing, or they might think I'm a weirdo.' We're all weird. But getting them to that level of okayness to reach out is difficult. And they continue to cycle the need and comfort of online things because it's easier.

Mia also corroborated students' increased anxiety to engage in social interaction with their peers or anyone on campus, noting that rehearing conversations and coaching them to engage with

others became more prevalent after the isolation to in-person transition. She described how they lost the ability to connect with people, increasing their anxiety level and decreasing their ability to cope. “Their inability to manage it, which before COVID, they would have pushed through.” Mia and other staff reported students being in survival mode, “I appreciate you trying to survive rather than giving up, but we’re seeing them give up way too often now.” They contribute the lack of coping skills and social isolation as reasons for attrition but also students’ lack of mental capacity.

Students who returned to in-person instruction during their first year of college articulated a loss of socio-emotional competence by describing less social interaction and engagement in the classroom and on campus and having challenges making friends. For instance, Carissa, a commuter student from the fall 2022 cohort, expressed, “I feel like I was just there. No one acknowledged you. Everyone was respectful but not the friendliest.” Carissa described a lack of social interaction between students and how isolated she felt as she made no friends that year.

Similarly, Norma described her initial excitement to be back in person and her reluctance to talk with her classmates:

> So I think maybe I talked to one or two in some of my classes, but people didn’t really talk, and we were still wearing masks, so it was harder to see facial expressions, so I think we could kind of still hide behind our masks. It didn’t feel like there were many events or things to do, so I usually would just go to class, sit in my car, go to my next class, and then go home.

As a commuter, Norma sat in her car in the parking lot between classes instead of going to a student center, the library, or the student union, as she felt safer there and did not have to engage with others. Having been able to hide behind screens and then behind masks, students like Norma sought safety in what they found familiar – their cars, homes, families – making in-person interactions with peers, faculty, and staff all the more challenging to initiate and sustain.

This anecdote is consistent with staff observations and recounts of what commuters shared with them.

Navigating Classes Again in Person: Silence and Awkwardness. By contrast, Beatriz and Jasmine lived in student housing and had a different experience. They found it much easier to make friends and socialize with others who lived in their residence hall; however, interacting with students in classes led to silence and awkwardness. For instance, Jasmine shared:

> I think there was definitely a lot more people not sitting next to each other. There was less group work than I was familiar with for sure. And then the classes, because CI was a smaller school, weren't as big as what I was used to in high school where we had probably 30 people for each class. And at CI, I think my biggest class ever was 30 people with most smaller, which made it awkward when people didn't talk.

Jasmine had returned to in-person instruction her senior year of high school and was used to engaging in more group work, which was less present in her courses. She found it awkward at times when classes were not very engaging. Beatriz described her class experiences as mixed. She remembers the course she enjoyed the most, in which the professor was very accommodating, connected with students, and had them engage in group work. Beatriz recounted, "I made a lot of friends in that class, especially when it came to group projects." Both Jasmine and Beatriz recognized the importance of group work for opportunities to engage with their peers, but this was absent in most of their classes, which resulted in awkward, silent classroom interactions.

Recognizing Constraints on Mental Health and Mental Capacity

Another prevalent theme that emerged among more than half of the student participants and almost all of the staff is evidence of mental health concerns and decreased capacity increasing for students since the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing to attrition. The financial

hardships, adjustment challenges, and difficulties with social interactions further compounded students' mental capacity and mental health challenges.

COVID as the Final Straw after Early Adjustment Struggles. Carissa, whom I discussed earlier, had difficulty transitioning in person and making friends. She described her first-year experience as mentally draining, and by the end of the semester, Carissa knew she would not return for her second year.

> I was already struggling with my mental health, and then not having anyone with me there that I knew, just surrounded by strangers in classes that I don't enjoy. I'm basically isolated. It was just not a good environment for me.

Carissa's mental health challenges began during the pandemic due to social isolation, which was further heightened when she struggled to integrate into the campus and make friends socially. Ultimately, the continued social isolation and lack of social interaction with her peers increased her mental health challenges, causing mental exhaustion.

Likewise, Carla, who enrolled at CSUCI in the fall of 2019, also struggled with her mental health. While her challenges began before the pandemic, the onset of COVID seemed to overwhelm her completely.

> I was struggling with the workload. I was working. My mental health was . . . I was still feeling like I don't really want to be in college. I had low self-esteem, and I didn't feel confident being in my classes. I was feeling lost, and I wanted to see maybe if I take a break and recharge, then I can just come back to it. I was feeling like a lot of it was my own fault and my time management and not working hard enough. . . . Then COVID happened. It was just like, I'm done. I wasn't thinking about going back. This is where college ends for me, or so I thought at that time . . . feeling super overwhelmed.

Before the pandemic, Carla struggled to adjust to college due to the lack of adequate academic preparation in high school, which affected her self-confidence. She also struggled to manage work and school and felt disconnected from the campus community. It was the final straw when

the pandemic hit, and Carla slowly checked out as her mental capacity was exhausted, expecting to never return to school.

Staff articulated how the pandemic influenced both a decrease in mental capacity for students and increased awareness of mental health concerns because of social media. For example, Brian noted how students have shared, "'I need to talk to somebody, and I know that I can't talk to people at home. I can't talk to my mom, but I can go and get a referral to CAPS.'" Brian described how, during the pandemic, there was an increase in articles and messages about mental health concerns rising due to COVID-19, which he believed helped to destigmatize seeking mental health services for BIPOC students. He noted that before the pandemic when he recommended students go to the university's counseling office, BIPOC students would say, "'We don't do that; that's a White people thing.' And now, it's like, 'we have to do that because if we don't, we may have a breakdown.'" He recounted knowing many students who were now more open about utilizing campus counseling services, even male students of color.

Mia shared a similar perspective and added, "If you look on TikTok, everybody's a narcissist. Doctor TikTok says . . . and a lot of times they're getting false information." Mia noted that compared to pre-pandemic, more students are going to counseling services, which she attributes to social media. Still, she views it as dangerous as students might get inaccurate diagnoses or information.

The Pandemic Undermined Students' Resistance Capital and Resilience. In addition to mental health awareness increasing due to social media, Mia and other staff also described the increase in mental health challenges, resulting in a decrease in mental capacity and resiliency for students.

> Since COVID, we're seeing the mental capacity of people is dipping down below where their resilience zone is, and this resilience zone that allows them to keep flowing through

> life. . . . Their adjustment to any stressor or any traumatic event is way worse than it was prior to COVID. We're seeing even simple things that people were able to manage, roommate issues . . . or a failed class they were able to manage that a little more . . . They still had a level of capacity to say, I can still make it, or I can still get through it. Now, it's just like it goes from zero to 100 by the time the cognitive distortions are just grandiose at this point. You get an F, and now they're ready to kill themselves. It jumps straight to that. But we're seeing that their capacity to handle any form of stress is just less than it was pre-COVID.

Mia described students' reduced socio-emotional intelligence, resilience, and resistant capital. Students' developmental interruptions and social isolation hindered their ability to adjust to in-person or virtual learning, managing financial hardship, and adjusting to college in general. Previously, some students who experienced challenges and inequalities could persevere using their resistance capital and resiliency; however, Mia noted that, since COVID, far more students could no longer cope with their stressors, causing them to want to withdraw from conflicts or challenges. Her analysis is consistent with student participants like Carla and Carissa, whose mental capacity and resistance capital were exhausted by the effects of COVID. Additionally, for students Beatriz and Jasmine, who exhibited moments of resistance capital, their family primarily served as their source and motivation for resistance; however, living far from their families reduced their resiliency.

A couple of the staff also noted systemic social justice issues that affected BIPOC students' mental health. For example, Christina shared:

> It feels tragic actually to see what students are up against now, because I think it's harder than ever. And then we add the whole, let's put politics in the mix there and all the stress associated with that and social justice issues that are just obviously systemic. Then elections coming up, which is a heavy burden on students. It affects them directly. It's not like a trickle-down. It's like an immediate impact.

As students struggled to manage the effects of the pandemic on their capacity to learn, socialize, and support their families, they also encountered extreme stress from civil unrest in the spring of

2020, the political uncertainty of the 2020 presidential election, and conflicts domestically and abroad. On this note, Mia added:

> [Students wonder,] 'How do I even stay focused and present? How do I even maintain that active appearance in class when yesterday somebody just got shot by the cops or something else happened? The war is happening. Texas is trying to have a civil war.' So much stuff is happening. It's like, do they even have the mental capacity to just be present here because life is really lifing right now, and when they're not given any tools, how do you deal with it?

Christina and Mia demonstrated having a critical race lens in examining how racist practices and societal inequities, such as the George Floyd murder and the subsequent racial reckoning and backlash, affect BIPOC student experiences and mental trauma. Societal issues affect how students show up in the classroom and how they engage or disengage if they are not given the validation and support to cope.

Navigating the Institution, Developing Trust, and Establishing Confidence

In addition to experiencing a reduction in resiliency because of stunted socio-emotional intelligence, students' navigational capital was also hindered. For example, some staff noted the barriers that students of color and first-generation students have of not knowing how to navigate the university:

> Now compounded with having gone through the pandemic during very critical years of their development, and for students who attended orientation virtually, that's completely not the same as coming to campus and meeting the folks that are going to support you . . . I feel like we've seen this trend of students who just give up once they start struggling in one area; usually, I think it probably starts with their academics, and it's just like, I don't know what resources are available to me, and I'm not going to go find out. – Melody

Melody described how first-generation students already had challenges navigating the university before the pandemic, and after, the pandemic contributed to a reduction in students' resistance and navigational capital. Whereas before, Latina/e/o/x students were likelier to utilize their navigational and social capital to seek campus resources, having a virtual orientation where they

did not connect with or meet staff in person or receive a campus tour, compounded with a reduction in socio-emotional intelligence hindered students' ability to interact with others and feel confident and welcomed to navigate the institution. All staff affirmed similar sentiments about students having a more significant challenge navigating campus resources or college after COVID.

More than half of the students supported the staff's account of not knowing how to navigate university services and their frustration in feeling confident to seek them out. For example, when I asked the student, Virginia, why she did not seek out services, she noted she lacked the "*confianza* [trust] and my timidness, my *vergüenza* [shame and embarrassment] of being, oh, you need help." Prior to the pandemic, Virginia exhibited resistance capital, being undocumented and persevering even when teachers and bullies made her feel inferior. She chose CSUCI because it was small, and she thought it would be more supportive and easier to navigate. Despite having connected with staff and peers right before the pandemic, after the pandemic, Virginia questioned her safety as an undocumented student and lost *confianza* in seeking out services, feeling *vergüenza* to ask for help and for stopping out. Carla similarly shared:

> I think these services were there for me, but I didn't know how to use them. So yeah, I think a lot of it was on me because I didn't know how to navigate through too many resources or feel confident enough to take advantage of them.

Also, Nacho described:

> I think I was a little bit more inhibited with what I had gone through and with what my family was going through financially, so I felt like I was more shy, not wanting to really ask for help and not really knowing how.

As suggested by Virginia's, Carla's, and Nacho's experiences, students seemed to understand the existence of support services on campus. Still, the university did not normalize the utilization of support services, making them feel embarrassed and diffident in seeking out services, especially

if they are not more accessible to new students. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced a transition to online learning and services, Virginia, Carla, and Nacho were even less likely to reach out for help. Their self-described lack of confidence made them reluctant to seek needed support, contributing to their decisions to unenroll after their first year.

The COVID-19 pandemic hindered students' perceptions of their self-efficacy, resiliency, and willingness to pursue resources to achieve their goals, contributing to their inhibition of engaging with the campus community. For Miguel and Rene, who enrolled during the fall 2020 semester, their experience online made it even harder to access resources. For example, Renee noted, "It's difficult to navigate where to go for resources. I didn't even officially drop out. I just stopped showing up, and no one called or noticed." Similarly, Miguel recalled, "When I tried to look for help, it was hard to find, maybe if the help was easier to find. I kind of just gave up." Miguel and Renee's experiences illustrate a reduction in their resistance capital to persevere, further compounded by the institution's challenging pivot to completely remote instruction and student support, which did not provide clear access or outreach to students, making it easier for them to disenroll.

Institutional Challenges Contributing to Initial Stop Out Decisions

While students and staff described many personal challenges that directly contributed to stop-out decisions, they also articulated a number of areas where the institution fell short of providing adequate support. Faculty and staff were seemingly unprepared for students' increased needs and challenges and sometimes lacked empathy and understanding. Institutional messaging promoting 15-unit loads and a four-year graduation led to decreased self-efficacy for some students who were unable to manage. Increased staff turnover and burnout led to student service

interruptions and delays, and racialized microaggression experiences threatened students' sense of belonging and mental health.

Faculty and Staff Not Prepared for the Intensity or Range of Student Challenges

Another prevalent theme that arose for almost all staff and a few students was how unprepared faculty and staff are for students' increased range of needs with a reduction in socio-emotional intelligence and other equity challenges intensified since the COVID-19 pandemic. For some students, these institutional challenges contributed to their decisions to stop out or leave the institution.

Staff and Faculty Sometimes Lack Empathy. Student participants also shared their frustrations with campus staff and faculty who did not understand or empathize with their emotional needs. For instance, Virginia also shared how alone and confused she felt in her first semester, describing:

> I don't think a lot of the advisors here or professionals and professors, CI in general, just don't understand what kind of experience we bring into here. All the emotions we come with that we are constantly battling that keep us from learning, from continuing our education that go a lot deeper than what we can fully understand ourselves. Some of us don't have a single clue coming in and feel very alone, very lost, and broken.

Virginia, who has now returned to the university, shared how lost and anxious she felt in her first year, grappling with being a first-generation student and not knowing how to navigate the campus, flustered with the pandemic, and all the emotions that came with a loss of learning, engagement, and financial hardship, which she was still battling with upon her return. Other students shared similar sentiments about faculty not being accommodating, not showing empathy, or understanding their circumstances and hardships during and post-COVID.

Faculty and Staff are Unprepared for Students' Increased Needs and Challenges. Several staff members echoed the observation that students have come in with more challenges and emotional concerns since the COVID-19 pandemic and that some faculty and staff did not

consider the effects of the pandemic on students, voicing frustrations about students not meeting them halfway. Maribel explained:

> We always talk about the high school to college transition . . . And I think the transition period from COVID to being back on campus, for some students, that transition hasn't really happened. They're still working on it . . . and we're not taking into consideration that some students haven't had the opportunity or the ability to transition fully . . . and people have not fully seen the impact of this. We're starting to see the impact . . . and some students have returned and decided to stop out.

Maribel describes the adjustment challenges associated with COVID-19, which many students are still experiencing. She suggests that students need more support from staff to help them with the transition, but staff and faculty do not entirely understand how the pandemic has affected students and how they can better support them. Another staff Brian also shared:

> You have a lot of people who need your attention . . . who need or want something from you. And sometimes you may be working with something with the student, and they may just be getting ready to open up. They may just be at that place where they're getting ready to make a breakthrough, and somebody else needs you. Somebody else wants that same attention. . . They just need some interaction with someone who's not their peer, and it's easier to talk to staff than their peers.

Brian has noticed his student assistants have more needs and challenges than before the pandemic. They seek him out to confide in and talk to him as they believe he is more likely to listen and not reject them than their peers. Brian has enough of an understanding of the pandemic's effect to know students need more support and compassion, but he and other staff do not have the time and capacity to address all their needs.

Maribel elaborated on how some staff and faculty have failed to understand students' needs since the pandemic and how they need to shift how they interact and work with students. For instance, when talking about the loss of learning and socialization, Maribel mentioned:

> They appear less patient and get frustrated with students. This inability to take the students' point of view and think, what is it that the student is going through that's maybe preventing them from succeeding? Maybe it's not that they don't want to understand it; maybe they just don't know how to understand it. We're always saying we have to meet

> students where they are and hold the student's hand, but some are unwilling . . . For me, it's very frustrating because we got into this job for a reason.

Maribel voiced frustration about a seeming lack of empathy among some of her colleagues who do not try to understand students' struggles from a student perspective. She believes some people are unaware or unwilling to accept that the pandemic isolation and virtual instruction hindered students' emotional intelligence. Thus, she thinks it is upon higher education professionals to teach students how to engage and be successful.

Similarly, staff Melody described how the pandemic has led to more cautious interactions between university employees and students:

> I've seen a lot of conflict between either students and their peers or students and their faculty, and I also see it from the faculty as well … I am seeing less ability to manage classrooms than we had before and just handle those interpersonal conflicts. I think part of it … during the pandemic, we all became hyper-aware of our own self-preservation and protection.… And so now we're seeing a lot of students who are claiming that they are feeling threatened by other students, faculty that are feeling threatened by students, an increase in reports of bullying and harassment, and some of them are legitimate.

Melody illustrates the effects of the pandemic on students, staff, and faculty alike, which has resulted in more guarded interactions and, for faculty, less ability to recognize or empathize with students' needs and challenges in the classroom. Staff Christina similarly recounts how, since COVID, students have struggled to navigate the university and communicate with others. She shared an example of how a routine misunderstanding led a student to give up on clarifying their next steps. "If they have a negative experience with one person in Financial Aid, they say, Financial Aid is awful, instead of finding someone else to talk to, so they don't go back."

Despite the campus experiencing a decrease in enrollment, almost all the staff proclaimed that students' needs are more significant. For instance, Christina also shared:

> If you look at it just in terms of ratios, our ratios look okay. However, the concerns that students are coming in with are so much more complex, and they need more. And so that takes its toll on just seeing all the things that are affecting students, but also on the staff

> that's also trying to navigate through the impact of just helping the student and knowing all the things that they have to go through.

Christina described how the student-to-staff ratios in her office are proportioned adequately, but since the pandemic, students are coming in with more needs, which take more time and energy from staff. Similar to Christina, several other staff described the compassion fatigue and emotional drain of helping students through the various challenges they have experienced, which span from financial and housing insecurity, family deaths and other losses due to COVID-19, and students' emotional roller coaster of coping and transitioning from virtual to in-person interactions.

Service Interruptions, Insufficient Coordination, and Navigational Challenges Due to Staff

Turnover and Burnout. Another theme that emerged among staff members contributing to an interruption in student services was staff turnover and burnout. While none of the student participants identified issues with staff turnover or burnout, all the staff disclosed that since the pandemic, they have reflected on their retention and the theme of staff turnover and burnout. Students encountered this phenomenon as delays or interruptions in expected services. These findings on increased staff workload and burnout are consistent with emerging research on higher education employee turnover (Bichsel et al., 2023) and add staff voices to understand this phenomenon further.

Due to poor staff retention efforts and burnout, CSUCI experienced significant turnover and service interruptions during and after the pandemic, with many staff participants reflecting on their work as higher education professionals. For example, Alex pondered, "Why are we doing this? I know students are at the forefront of our work, and it can be a very fulfilling profession, but at the same time, it's not the only thing that matters in our lives." Before the pandemic, Alex recounted how he advised multiple student clubs in addition to his full-time

position, often translating to long evenings. During the pandemic, he realized it was not worth his mental health and personal time, considering students' increased needs, increased workload due to being short-staffed, and low pay. Many staff participants shared similar sentiments.

Additionally, staff talked about the importance of leadership support in their retention; for some, that support is felt directly, but for others, it was missing. For instance, Jennifer noted:

> We reframed how we do work . . . were told it was okay to not be okay, and we were provided with ways to support. It's almost like a pipeline. Our leadership supported us so that we could support the peer mentors, and the peer mentors could support the students. . . . and then we scaled down or scaled back.

Jennifer described empathic, supportive leaders who understood that for staff to support students during the pandemic, they needed to be supported, shown care, and not given more work than they could handle. However, for others who were understaffed, their leadership expected them to manage additional workload without providing empathy or support. For example, Ben shared:

> We're always talking about students, and we need to retain and support them. But what is it we need to do as an institution to support the individuals who work here and give so much to our students? . . . I'm a firm believer you can't have this abuse. You can't keep taking stuff. Some things you got to let fail. It's how the organization knows it's broken. If it fails, sucks for us sometimes, but it sucks more for you if you're carrying all of this.

Ben described the university's focus on student retention, which neglects staff retention. It was no surprise to him and other staff when colleagues who experienced burnout from increased workloads and student needs left. They believe leadership is likelier to notice and act when students complain due to limited services and delays.

Turnover Undermines Trust, as Students Need to Become Acquainted with New Staff. Staff provided numerous anecdotes of how staff turnover affected student services and created distrust among students. They all experienced staff turnover in their area. "We lost staff, and even when we got more staff, it wasn't enough. . . the need, the demand, and work is more, and that causes staff to feel more stressed because less students but more need." As noted

previously, reduced socio-emotional intelligence and resistant capital in students created more needs and challenges, and services were delayed for those who sought support. Some staff also discussed the training time to onboard new colleagues, which further delays student support and adds to their workload. Alex described the situation this way:

> You're getting new individuals, and there's a learning process . . . When did I think I was the most prepared for my last role - when I was leaving it. When am I fully preferred for my current role? Now that I've been in it for two years. But if there's constant turnover, then you're going to be affected by that. And I think there was a lot of turnaround during the COVID years. You look at any department on this campus, and there's been a lot of changes . . . that instability makes it difficult for students to be successful, going to an office if there aren't enough people or they don't recognize folks.

Alex recounted how all student support services offices have experienced turnover and understaffing since the pandemic. For many of the students who have increased needs and challenges since COVID and a reduced capacity to navigate and seek out services, when they do finally get the confidence to seek support, they are presented with a delay in services or feel disillusioned when the person they previously met with is gone. Mia similarly noted:

> If you have continuous turnover in those spaces, then students don't feel trust. They don't feel stabilization, they don't feel that there's any consistency there. 'So why go to those spaces to try and stay in school and get the help that I need?'

Mia brought up an important point of how an increase in turnover can undermine student trust in student services and the campus. Most of the staff illustrated how BIPOC students, in particular, found it challenging to seek out campus resources due to a reduction in navigational and resistance capital. When someone they are working with leaves, they get discouraged from starting over and making connections with someone new, or it could take a while for them to get an appointment.

One of the students, Carissa, shared that when she finally got the courage to make an appointment with an academic advisor, she had to wait a month to get a meeting. "I got a reminder phone call about the counselor meeting, but by then, I had already decided I wasn't

returning, so I didn't go." Carissa considered leaving school and sought help at the Advising Office to discuss it, but she got disillusioned when it took too long to get an appointment. Mia also shared the challenge of being understaffed across campus and its effects on student retention.

> They're never going to get the student back because the student has been trying to access services for so long and reaching out for help, and the university has failed them, and so therefore, they're not coming back. We lost them.

Mia stresses that timely services are necessary for students to feel trust and support from the university, and when offices are short-staffed, students are disillusioned. Several of the staff shared similar sentiments about staff turnover and service delays, adding to institutional challenges that contribute to Latina/e/o/x students' attrition.

Lack of Normalized Care and Coordination of Student Support Services and Resources. Another gap identified by all the staff participants and half of the students that contributed to students' attrition is the lack of normalized care and coordinated student support services and communication with students.

***Lack of Normalized Care*.** As previously shared, some students had difficulty navigating campus resources and believed the university should be doing a better job coordinating student support and communication of services. For example, Virginia shared:

> Some of us don't have a single clue coming in. And I think the heavy lifting is going to have to be done from your guys' end because you are the ones who hold more power and have more experience about how this works.

Virginia voiced the challenges she experienced not knowing how to navigate the university and recommended that the university and support staff, who understand how the university operates, should be guiding students about the various campus support services. In a similar fashion, Carla recommended, "Make students aware of what programs they have, where they can find them, who can help them with what, encourage them to ask questions, encourage them to take up space

and use their resources." Based on Carla's experience of reduced resiliency and lack of sense of belonging in her first year, she implores the university to provide students with clear information and encouragement to normalize seeking out campus support services. Also, Miguel, who stopped out partly because he could not connect with Financial Aid or Academic Advising, mentioned, "Make things easier to find for a student or reach out to them. I feel like just making things more accessible can make a difference." Miguel complained about the difficulty of navigating the university campus webpage to find information and recommended that it be updated for more accessibility of resources and information. He also suggested the campus be proactive in reaching out to students.

Some staff also made suggestions aligned with students' recommendations of making resources more accessible and guiding students to student services. They discussed the importance of staying informed about all campus resources to support students better. For Maribel, collaboration with campus partners is critical. "It doesn't mean collaborating on a project; it's collaborating to get answers and the proper help that students need." Maribel prides herself on reaching out and connecting with all campus support services offices to serve her students better. She believes all staff should be doing the same. Similarly, Christina stated:

> We might be more effective at saying, 'Here's what you could expect from that meeting,' preparing them for a realistic interaction that they're not just going to meet with you and everything's going to be fine. Create a warm handoff. This is what they could expect. We can collaborate more so that we're referring students back and forth.

Students who have experienced a reduction in navigational and resistance capital need to be coached and guided on how to reach out to student services offices so they learn how and what questions to ask and set expectations for how the exchange might occur. With a warm handoff between students and campus partners, services can be coordinated to gain students' trust. Another staff, Brian, suggested normalizing help for students:

> Normalize needing help and getting help . . . we lose a lot of students, specifically our Latinx students . . . sometimes people are so ashamed they're not doing well . . . making grades. They feel they're letting everybody down. . . . We're putting all of our hopes and prayers in you. So when they're fumbling in classes or not doing what they need to do . . . shame drives them into a hole where they don't answer emails or come to meetings.

Brian raises salient points about normalizing students needing and getting help. His account of Latina/e/o/x students feeling shame if they start "fumbling" resonates with what student Virginia shared about the *vergüenza* [shame and embarrassment] she felt in asking for help. Brian also talks about the pressure students might feel to let their family down, interacting with their shame, which may lead to them shutting down. Staff Melody also spoke about the importance of normalizing and talking to students about resources:

> Students feel maybe their situation isn't bad enough to use Basic Needs or CAPS . . . then once . . . we sit down and have a conversation about, 'Oh no, this is available to you as a student who is paying student fees. This is the same as using the Rec Center or the Student Union.' But students feel they're . . . undeserving of that support. . . . once we can get connected . . . sit down and have a conversation with them, make them realize we do want them to be successful, and we are here to support them, that can be a turning point.

Melody discussed the resistance she has observed in students seeking Basic Needs and psychological counseling services. She believes students feel undeserving of receiving services, while other staff and students noted their embarrassment in seeking help. What is agreed upon is that staff should normalize services to students, connecting them with a warm handoff.

Lack of Coordination of Student Support Services and Resources. The lack of normalized care leads to uncoordinated student support services and communication. For instance, Jennifer shared how several offices are engaging in targeted student outreach and providing student programming, but they operate in silos without coordinating the outreach and support.

> It's so hard when the usual suspects are doing the work . . . and don't get invited to the table, and they're like, 'Wait, this work's already happening over here.' It feels like sometimes no one's talking to each other, or someone has this idea to do something, and

> it's like, 'Wait a minute. What do you mean this is your idea? Why didn't you follow up with them? They've been doing it for five years.' No one knows what each other's doing, and it's this small siloed scramble to keep students, but it's not coordinated.

Jennifer voiced frustration about her area being left out of planning and consideration when a new peer mentoring program emerged without consulting them, which confuses students if they do not coordinate efforts and reach out to the same students. Other staff voiced similar concerns about services being siloed, which often leads to inaccurate information or referrals provided to students; this leads to distrust and missed opportunities to connect students with resources that could support their retention.

A few staff addressed concerns about students being incorrectly referred to offices without campus partners first contacting them to confirm services. For example, Brian shared:

> Sometimes, students are so disappointed when they show up to our center, and they're like, 'I was told you all have X, Y, Z.'And we're like, 'Who? How? I don't know why they even directed you.' And it's not even something that's in the realm of what we do . . . It's almost like nobody knows what anyone else is doing. . . . I would say it's because there's such a high turnover rate that people don't know. . . .The institutional knowledge isn't here. So, in many ways, it's like the clueless leading the clueless.

The unintended consequence of high turnover, as stated by Brian, is that institutional knowledge is lost, and new folks do not have the information or ability to seek information from those who may know. It also further undermines students' trust in the university to provide accurate information and support. Comparably, Alex shared:

> Some of the confusion of knowing exactly what each office does or what they can and cannot do. . . . So instead of just referring the student, pick up the phone, call the office, and inquire before sending students somewhere. . . . I think a big part is being transparent with the student too. What I mean by that is sometimes the answer is no, and our failure as professionals we just don't want to be a bad person, that we make the student go to multiple offices just to answer the question that we already know, which is no.

Like Brian, Alex also observes campus partners incorrectly referring students to campus services without reaching out to confirm services, which further delays student support. Still, he raises

another issue about staff sometimes withholding information from students to avoid giving them information they may not want to hear, such as not qualifying for emergency funds. Like others, Alex stresses the damage that can occur when services are uncoordinated or unconfirmed.

Students' Frustrations with Financial Aid Create Anxiety and Accelerate Their Departure

For some students, the institutional challenges of severe service delays and significant frustration with the Financial Aid Office hindered their student experience, contributing to their decision to depart from the institution. For Beatriz, it was the primary reason for leaving and losing trust in the school.

Delays in Disbursement and Response Times. Beatriz recounted her demoralizing experience with the financial aid process. She was supposed to get a Middle-Class Scholarship, but it did not arrive by the time fees were due, so she had to take out a loan, and her parents had to take out a Parent Plus loan to pay for housing and tuition.

> We had all qualified for the Middle-Class grant . . . and it was like, where was this money? When we were asking about solutions to pay for school, it was like, no take out a loan. We were like, no, where's my grant?

Beatriz talked to other students in campus housing who also had delays in their disbursement. She was distraught when she recounted this experience and was mad that their solution was to get a loan, which had financial implications for her and her parents.

Beatriz remembered getting a notification from the Student Aid Commission awarding the scholarship, and when she reached out to the Financial Aid Office to inquire, she was told, "I'm sorry. We haven't received the names for the people that got that grant yet. I was like, we have the evidence, we have the file number, we have the case number. When's the money coming in?" To Beatriz, it did not make sense that they would not have her name and that it took so long to get a response from them as she sent numerous emails and made phone calls. She further elaborated on conversations she had with fellow students:

> Taking a loan was my last option. A lot of us come from low-income households, and our parents are working to get us to go to school . . . but then they have to take out loans that build up interest . . . I feel like they could be more clear when it comes to what they're advising. When it comes to financial aid, some people either have wealthy parents . . . or . . . they're getting paid off by the state, but that's not the case for most of us. It's like, what were we supposed to do coming from COVID?

This account of students struggling to afford college and accruing student loan debt supports prior research (The State of Higher Education 2023, 2023; *Time to Finish Fixing FAFSA*, 2020). For Beatriz, accruing college student debt was something she did not want to do. It appears that understaffing also affected the Financial Aid Office, creating delays in disbursement. Ultimately, for Beatriz, this experience influenced her decision to leave.

> There's no point coming back here. If I have to argue this much just to get financial aid answers, then there's no point. I'm not going to have good financial aid next year. What's to say it won't happen in the following year? So there was a long time with me fighting with them until August, and I was like, I'm no longer attending. Please send me all my records, my transcript, everything.

After she finally got the disbursement of her grant during finals, it took months to request the parent loan to be canceled instead of the refund she received. While she exhibited resistance capital in "fighting with them," at that point, she had lost trust in the school and was no longer interested in returning.

More than half of the staff also commented about the delay in services and disbursement of Financial Aid, echoing concerns about the time it took students to hear back from the Financial Aid Office, even when they tried to reach out themselves.

> So a student would wait a long time to get a response back or even to get connected . . . It is . . . very frustrating to student affairs professionals trying to mentor and guide these students, and it's like, 'I haven't heard back yet' . . . And even with us reaching out to say, 'Hey, is there any word?' 'We're backlogged?' And I feel for them. I know how it is to be backlogged, but I think that . . . is really something that needs to be addressed. – Stella

Stella acknowledged the Financial Aid office was short-staffed, but she noted that, at the very least, the professional courtesy was to respond to students, stating they would need more time to

review the emails instead of having them unanswered. She further elaborated that with finances being a critical resource for students' continued persistence, there must be enough staff and prompt responses. Other students and more than half of the staff cited financial aid processes and unclear communication as barriers and reasons for students' attrition.

Lack of Communication and Outreach Confuses Students. For a few other students, not only did they not receive the disbursement in time, but they also did not receive clear guidance on the steps they needed to complete. Nacho described his experience with the Financial Aid office:

> I ended up paying out of pocket at first, but later I ended up getting refunded like a few months after. So that was one of the reasons why I didn't drop the classes. I hadn't dropped classes before, so I didn't know what that was like as a first-gen student. I didn't fully comprehend what Ws were or what a refund meant, or anything like that. I just felt like, dang, I'm having a lot of complications with financial aid.

Nacho mentioned possibly missing documents but did not remember having anyone explain the steps needed. However, the Financial Aid Office did not disburse his financial aid when tuition was due, and he had to pay the tuition. When he increased his working hours, he wanted to drop a class but did not know how it would affect his Financial Aid and did not get a timely response to meet the drop deadline. He found the whole process confusing. This experience aligns with other students' and staff's anecdotes of unclear communication and a lack of student outreach.

Staff Stella recounted students' challenges in navigating requests for documentation, sharing an experience about a student who had to appeal their financial aid because they were on academic notice:

> So she started the appeal letter, and it wasn't until mid-semester that she heard back, and that stress of thinking, 'oh my gosh, how am I going to pay?' She wanted to drop out because she wouldn't be able to pay. A student should never have to wait until mid-semester after all the drop deadlines to get a response; that is unacceptable! And they still expect students to pay instead of giving them a grace period. The student repeatedly said, 'how am I going to focus on classes?' It's hard to tell 'em to focus, study, or to come up

> with money in the meantime. Even if they say they could pay in payments, how are they going to pay when they . . . and their parents can't afford it? . . . it's almost punitive to make a student do all of that . . . to keep financial aid, when they're challenged already.

As an advocate for her students, Stella was quite upset when sharing these student experiences, which were not isolated. There were two concrete issues Stella raised about the financial aid process: students have to wait a month or more to receive a financial aid determination on their appeal, and students are required to pay for student fees while they wait, which affects their mental well-being and capacity to focus on classes. She acknowledges that the Financial Aid office cannot entirely control this, recognizing the Department of Education's role.

Alex shared a similar anecdote emphasizing the inequity for Latina/e/o/x low-income Pell-eligible students while they await a delayed decision.

> How many are going to say forget it? Things like that can affect the likelihood of persistence for some students. And how many do we lose in that process or get discouraged by that process? I think that's just something Latino families have to play into; something you need to account for.

Alex questions how student-centered this process is for students and what an institutional, systemic barrier it is for low-income students who cannot afford to make payments while they wait. While none of the student participants had the experience of needing to appeal for financial aid, this anecdote is similar to Beatriz's experience with going most of the semester without receiving her scholarship disbursement and feeling forced to acquire loans to pay for tuition and fees. In Beatriz's case, coming from a middle-class background, her parents could qualify and obtain a loan, but that would likely not be true for low-income families, as Alex conjectures.

Students Describe the Need for More Financial Aid Advising for Routine Questions.

With the financial aid process being so complicated and confusing for students to navigate, students voiced the need for accessible financial aid advising to answer routine questions about eligibility requirements and documentation. For instance, Virginia shared:

> I had trouble my first semester trying to get financial aid advising. It was a little bit tricky. I thought I could go into Financial Aid, but they were like, oh, you need to make an appointment, you need to do this, you need to do that, and it wasn't welcoming.

The financial aid email communication was confusing for Virginia, but when she attempted to get clarification, she felt scolded for not having an appointment. She could not immediately get one due to staff shortages, further delaying her disbursement.

Another systemic challenge a few students experienced concerning financial aid was the eligibility requirements for full-time status. For example, Miguel noted:

> I heard that I wouldn't get financial help if I wasn't a full-time student. That was also a factor because I heard if you're part-time, you won't get the finance help, so I was like, uh, then I might as well just drop.

At one point, Miguel remembered seeing communication that he needed to be a full-time student, but he did not know if that meant 12 or 15 units. When he had to take on a second job exceeding 40 hours, Miguel knew he could only attend part-time, but Miguel could not locate information about receiving financial aid as a part-time student and did not know how to reach out for help, so he decided to drop out.

Some staff like Alex and Stella, also talked about the lack of support and counseling offered by the Financial Aid Office to students. Alex raised the question, "Can you remember the last time Financial Aid did a workshop – a year or two ago?" His point was that the Financial Aid office was not proactive in getting information out to students or providing support and should be providing workshops, especially during this time of updates to federal financial aid. Stella recommended that Financial Aid create a new counseling position. "Have a person that could just counsel; that's their 100% job to coach them through the system. They're busy doing all the processes, but they don't have anybody that counsels them through their processes." Stella described the Financial Aid Office as process-oriented and imagined a position or person who

could do outreach to students, counsel, and coach students about all things financial aid, walking them through all the processes to remove institutional barriers in receiving financial aid.

The Financial Aid office began offering student workshops toward the end of my data collection process. Examining financial aid processes and documents was not part of this study; however, when I was analyzing participant *pláticas*, information emerged through social media (Instagram) on a few campus accounts and the university financial aid website (*FAFSA Simplification*, 2024; *Financial Aid Workshops*, 2024; *Free Federal Financial Aid Webinar*, 2024; *Get Ready: Be Prepared!*, 2024). The Financial Aid Office offered workshops in late February, March, and April to assist students with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), California Dream Act Application (CADAA), scholarship applications, and information sessions about the upcoming increase in Fall 2024 tuition. The main campus account also promoted a federal Financial Aid webinar in Spanish to students, parents, and supporters. These workshops show that the Financial Aid Office is trying to support students better in completing financial aid processes and minimizing barriers.

Imposing 15-Unit Minimum on Course Loads Overwhelms Students

Another barrier that half of the participants identified was the campus messaging on 15 units to finish. While some student participants sufficiently managed 15 units, the high unit load was more than other students could handle. Feeling overwhelmed or overburdened negatively affected their self-efficacy in believing they could be successful in school, which was corroborated by observations and comments from staff participants. A few students were upset with academic advisors and the campus for imposing high unit loads, especially during the COVID-19 years. Renee struggled with the heavy course load she took in her first semester, which an academic advisor told her to take during orientation. When asked what the university

could do to better support students in reaching their academic goals, Renee responded that there should be "more training for guidance counselors. I felt like whoever helped me with my classes was trying to get me to graduate as fast as possible, because that was a lot of classes to take that first semester during COVID." As a first-generation student who struggled to adjust and take online classes, Renee felt that the advisor did not consider her needs to succeed in her first semester. Unfortunately for Renee, taking that high unit load reduced her self-efficacy and resiliency to persevere.

Similarly, Virginia, whom I met in person, was visibly upset when she talked about her experience and the messaging given about taking a 15-unit load to graduate in four years. To her, it was an equity issue. "Our path is not linear. The campus likes to say, graduate in four years. Stop imposing that on students, at least not on the working class. We're going to struggle a little bit along the way." Virginia expressed frustration and hurt that the campus provides messages to students that they should take a full unit load, which she found to be impossible since she also works 30 hours a week to contribute to her family. This messaging from the university made her feel ashamed for not being able to meet that expectation. However, she also knew it was unrealistic for her, especially during the pandemic when her family had job losses and there was so much uncertainty. Even now that Virginia has returned to the campus and completed two semesters since her return, she has not taken more than 12 units per term.

Another student, Carla, also talked about her experience taking 15 units.

> I didn't know about the workload or how any of that worked. So I think that was one of my struggles my first semester. At our orientation, they just told us, add this class, add that class . . . so I added 15 units. And I didn't think about it. I was like, okay, I'm supposed to add this many classes. . . . Now looking back at it, at Oxnard College, I never take that many units because I know how much time I have to put into each class. So that was one of my struggles is not knowing, why I'm doing something, only doing it because somebody's telling me to do it, and I don't know how to navigate college.

As mentioned previously, a few reasons for Carla leaving were her lack of connection to campus and her mental health. One of the contributing factors to her mental health was her belief that she could not be successful in school, which was partly due to her not being able to manage a 15-unit load. As a first-generation student, she did not question enrolling in that unit load, as academic advisors told her to enroll in that unit load. It can be a disservice to students when a universal plan is imposed on all students without considering their needs and capacity based on what other responsibilities they may have. Carla has been successfully taking 12 units at her community college and just registered for 12 units at the university for fall, which she believes is a healthy load for her.

Several of the staff shared anecdotes that support these students' perspectives. For example, Jennifer shared:

> I've heard students talk about being encouraged to take 15 units is hard. It's a lot, especially when they don't know how to balance going to school yet, period. So sometimes, if they take 15 units in their first semester, they come back in the spring, they've already got one D, F, or W because it was too much. And so, how do they catch up? They say this happened because it was too much.

Jennifer raises a critical point about the harm of encouraging 15 units in the first semester when students have not yet learned to adjust and balance school. Particularly during and since COVID, when there were inequities in learning and virtual instruction, making that adjustment even more challenging for students. Another staff participant, Alex, noted, "Right, but then they're saying, well, 15 units. They fail a class. So now they don't like their experience. That's discouraging, and they drop out." Alex and Mia also discussed the harm of students taking more units than they can handle. They acknowledged units being tied to funding and facilitating a four-year graduation but note that in fixing two gaps, the university creates another by jeopardizing students' retention if they have a negative experience, failing a class that also affects their mental health.

When students fail a class or have a challenging time managing the load, it affects their self-efficacy and belief in being successful in college. For students like Renee and Carla, it led to their decision to drop out. While more than half of the student participants struggled with the high unit load in their first semester, as they were also working, a couple of the students completed 15 units while working successfully. The historical college progress metrics of funding institutions by full-time equivalents (FTE) of 15 units harm BIPOC and other students who work or have other responsibilities that do not allow them to take an FTE load.

Experiences with Racism, Microaggression, and Harassment Demoralize Students

Some of the participants shared their experiences with racism, microaggression, or harassment, which affected their mental health and student experience, contributing to institutional factors affecting their persistence. For instance, Beatriz shared racist comments made by a history professor, which infuriated and demoralized her and other Latina/e/o/x students. The following is what Beatriz experienced:

> He was a little biased when it came to race, especially because there were only five of us Mexican students in that class, and everybody else was his ethnicity . . . So it was little jabs he was saying, but he didn't think anybody would catch. . . . He could have said that in a way where it doesn't sound like he's being offensive or gloating about it, because it wasn't like, 'Oh, people are getting deported.' It was like, 'Yeah, people are getting deported' in a happy, joyous mood . . . that's not something to be joyous about, especially because you worry about your own family that doesn't have documents. . . . what if one day I come home from school and they're not here? So hearing that and especially talking to other classmates . . . that's not something that should be talked about. And we can't really say anything at the end of the day because we're the student, and he's the teacher.

Beatriz described her inner turmoil and distress towards her professor, but she felt powerless to say anything for fear of retaliation. However, she felt brave enough to talk to her "Mexican" peers, who all interpreted and felt the professor's comments similarly. After the George Floyd murder and subsequent national conversations about racialized experiences, it became easier for students and people in general to talk about racism, but the power dynamics in the classroom still

existed; consequently, Beatriz did not feel safe speaking up in class, and considering her financial aid experience, she did not trust the university to report the incident. As Beatriz considered national politics and sentiments towards undocumented people, she initially thought her university was a safe space. When she had this experience, it caused her anguish and undermined her connection to the campus.

Norma described a similar experience with the same professor, but it was in a different semester.

> My professor would make comments . . . I remember there was conversations about illegal immigrants . . . and I don't remember exactly what was said, but I remember being upset because I have people in my family who don't have legal status. So the professor was saying, 'Yeah, they shouldn't be here. They should go back home to Mexico.' And that really upset me because I have family members who are here and work so hard. . . . I drive to school and see Latino people working in the fields, picking the food we will eat and the hard labor that other people will not do, but there are people complaining they should go back home. So that was really upsetting to me. Also, it's an assumption that all undocumented people are from Mexico. I'm sure there are people from other countries and ethnicities, but . . . some people always think of Mexicans being 'illegal.' The professor just kept on, and so after that, I just stopped listening. It was just hard to hear.

I met Norma in person, and she was visibly upset as she recounted this experience. While I had heard a similar story from Beatriz before, this landed differently, as she had tears, and I could feel the emotion and recall similar experiences I had. Norma mentioned the irony of driving into school each morning, as the university is surrounded by fields worked on by Latina/o/e/x folks who work tirelessly to provide for their families. Still, some people do not respect or value it. She could not believe she had heard a professor express that view on a university campus with a large Latina/e/o/x population. While her primary reason for leaving was to help her family, this experience made it easier to leave.

There were also staff who shared student accounts experiencing microaggressions. For example, Jennifer recounted:

> But just understanding, as faculty, what it's like to murder a student's spirit. Do you have any idea what you did murdering that spirit? . . . I've known of people in the Education program who've been told, 'You should not be a teacher. You're really bad at this.' Wait, what? But you're a teacher? Your professor told you that? Your professor said to you, 'You're really bad at this?' Why are they here? . . .You're a faculty member in the Education program telling students that . . . being an encouraging human being who sees someone has a dream to do something; how could you do that on a simple human level?

As Jennifer replayed that interaction of how demoralized and small the student felt, depicting it as "murdering a student's spirit," she was furious that an educator could crush a student's dream without giving them support and guidance. If the student had not interacted with Jennifer, she would have left the university. She further expressed:

> We have the opportunity to reinvent and reimagine an institution for them [first-generation students of color] because they are here, and if you don't want to work harder or not even working harder, if you don't care to support the students we have . . . that are part of our community, then go look for a place that better serves the type of institution you want to work for, or if you're simply not happy in your work, that's on you. You've got time to find some happiness and joy in your life. This work is meaningful and . . . people who want to be here want to do this meaningful work with this community and this population. If you don't want to serve our students, there's the door.

As a newer and smaller campus with a majority minoritized student population, Jennifer sees the university as having the opportunity to transform students' lives and social mobility. She has grown tired of hearing a few professors complain about students coming in unprepared and unwilling to provide the tools and support they need to succeed, blaming them rather than the K-12 educational systems that failed them.

Likewise, Mia shared her frustrations as she recalled student stories of the same faculty repeatedly creating racist and harassing environments for students of color, who saw that reporting did nothing for them.

> So now you have to work with them [students] on this radical acceptance that you can't change people. . . . How do you bring energy to that and use that as fuel? Sometimes, you just get tired of teaching that, too . . .Why do I have to keep teaching them to be resilient but not change the person who's doing it? . . . So I have to teach them how to navigate through that, but we should also be reprimanding some of them, professors. So the

> students have faith in us and believe things will get done if we report . . . How do I help this student process this pain . . . gain some understanding but still have to show up to this class. . . One faculty member teaching that class, and they're the most heinous faculty members you ever met in your life.

When Mia spoke, it was evident she was deeply impacted by the racist interactions the students had with their faculty. As a woman of color and student service professional who cares about students, Mia could empathize and relate as she has experienced similar microaggressions herself at the university. As one of the few and, at the time, the only person of color in her office, Mia worries about the students if she decides to leave. She identified this as a systemic barrier and broken system that protects faculty while students continue to suffer and lose trust in the institution. Mia also raises a critical point about teaching and imposing resiliency on students when the faculty or institution needs to change or be held accountable.

Brian also narrated some racialized experiences and opportunities he provided for his student assistants to discuss their experiences. Brian depicted times when students of color have felt hurt and reminded of historical racist practices through literature or when professors used language that offended or did not validate their identity with proper pronouns. He also shared:

> We were talking about race and implicit bias . . . tying it back to their lived experience. Our intern was shocked because she hadn't seen that kind of interaction . . . from students in a non-academic space . . . seeing how they were having these conversations about their lived experience in such a comfortable, natural way . . . And so I think that's what happens is you have a few strong people who start, role model that, and now other students within their group . . . want to participate too. 'I want to talk about my lived experiences, too'. . . So much comes out, and they start trusting. . . . they trust each other so they can share their own challenges with implicit bias and how they fit within certain situations, whereas the average student doesn't have that same built-in support.

Brian has created a safe space for his student assistants to discuss racialized experiences, creating opportunities for social capital. He facilitates conversations so students can process their feelings in a supportive environment while connecting with their peers, realizing their experiences are not isolated. However, Brian realizes this kind of space and support does not exist for most students.

He also shared, “Unfortunately, that's not rare. I think that some students on our campus have had very racially tainted experiences just being on our campus.” For Brian, these conversations happen more often than he would like, undermining students’ sense of belonging and mental health, usually leading to referrals to the Counseling Office.

Strategies for Rematriculating Students in Good Academic Standing

Better Coordination of Support and Services

As noted before, staff participants identified a gap in the coordination of student support services as they operated in siloes. They all discussed the importance of coordinating care and support across student offices to promote the retention and rematriculation of students. For example, Jennifer recommended “Less siloing on campus. We need a more streamlined understanding of co-curricular programming being done so A - we can leverage support for each other and B - nonduplicate efforts to reach more students.” Jennifer recommended a concerted effort to leverage support and target different students to maximize limited resources.

Likewise, Ben suggested working with first-year programs to coordinate support for other student groups. He identified current programming, such as first-year learning communities and faculty and peer mentoring groups, which captures some of the student population but not all. He acknowledged students in those programs have the opportunity for support and information gathering that can help with the transition and successful onboarding of new students, but it needs to be shared with other campus partners so that they can relay information or provide similar support to different student groups who are not in these programs. Ben also raised the concept of being accessible to students early on in a welcoming manner so that when students encounter challenges later in the semester, they remember the interaction and are more willing to reach out for help.

Stella also recommended events or other opportunities for a concerted effort:

> It's important to coordinate the care . . . make it easier for students to navigate the resources by creating events or opportunities to bring everyone together so that all the services can be coordinated . . . a campus approach can be a good tool to support the students because when you're short-staffed, and you don't have the ability to do things, if you pull everybody together to help . . . that can be a very successful support.

Stella's recommendation aimed to resolve two issues participants brought up: limited services due to short staffing and students' perception of inaccessible resources. When efforts are coordinated, as suggested, events and opportunities can be created to bring campus resources together to make them more accessible to students. Student services offices or programs can also divvy the students to target more student groups.

Another staff participant, Alex, recommended coordinating student success workshops across student support services to assist students with regaining and building their engagement and student success skills.

> We need to get back to the fundamentals in terms of creating a sense of engagement on this campus . . . academic preparation as well. Who's offering what? Budgeting, planning – who offers those workshops? . . . Academic preparation workshops . . . do you guys still offer? How do we streamline that stuff so that you're offering it and programs like EOP . . . DASS . . . DGS and professors are sending students to it. Or if you guys don't have the capacity, but there's a coordinated group of people that commits to do one and then shares out the resources . . . so it doesn't feel like one area is responsible for all of them.

When Alex shared his observations of students needing to learn how to engage, study, budget, and plan, he recalled student success workshops offered by the Academic Advising Office on topics such as time management, how to communicate with faculty, and exploring campus resources. He highlighted the importance of bringing these types of workshops back, considering students' loss of skills since the pandemic. Alex also suggested coordinating a student success series various campus partners could commit to hosting and referring students to.

Developing a Strategic Plan for Support and Outreach to Students Interested in Returning

Staff and student participants also shared recommendations on what the university could do to help students create a strategic plan for stopping out and rematriculating to the campus. Staff Maribel recounted making a plan with students.

> I work with them really hard to create a plan, whether it's to come back, go to a community college, take it slow, and then come back, knowing they can stop out for a year and then reevaluate coming back . . . taking the time to explain because it's not just about a one-minute conversation, it's a full conversation. Sometimes, it's multiple conversations to create a plan so that they are able to leave and come back.

Maribel talked about the importance of coaching students with a formal plan, including how long they can be gone without needing to make a formal request to come back, giving them the option to attend a community college if that better supports their financial and familial needs, and how and when to reach out when they are ready to return to campus so that they can be guided through the return process.

Student participants also discussed the importance of outreach, whether by calling or sending email invitations, for students to feel welcome to return. Norma returned to the university because someone contacted her about returning to the campus.

> It was someone who was a coach. . . .They asked me why I left and encouraged me to go back, and I really appreciated that call. They called a few times. I don't think I would have returned to CI for a few semesters if they hadn't reached out. They connected me with . . . Academic Advising, so I ended up having a virtual appointment with the advisor and talked about what I was taking at Oxnard College and . . . what classes I could take if I was going to return in the fall semester. So then, I ended up coming back last semester.

Norma stopped out one semester and then attended Oxnard College in the spring of 2023. She intended to complete all her lower-division requirements at Oxnard College, but when she received the phone call about returning, she felt wanted and encouraged to return. After meeting with an academic advisor, she felt confident about returning and continuing her education.

As part of CSUCI's plan to re-engage and re-enroll underserved students, they partnered with Inside Track to have re-enrollment coaches connect with students who had stopped out for at least a year (GI 2025 March 2024 Update, 2024). Similarly, Nacho and Carla, who have since enrolled for the fall 2024 semester at CSUCI, credit the *plática* and connection made with the researcher for returning. Nacho commented:

> So it really helps, and it makes me feel like, hey, her intentions at reaching out to me and helping me reapply or like spark an interest in returning is so cool. You know, I think that one-on-one connection will make a difference. *Da confianza* [gives trust].

Nacho knew he wanted to return to school one day, but as time passed and he continued to work on his family's farm, school became less of a priority. However, talking about his experience in Spanglish and being asked if he considered returning and the help he needed to return gave him the *confianza* in himself and the institution.

Similarly, Carla shared, "I think I want to transfer back to Channel Islands." Carla has been attending a local community college. After I asked her if she planned to continue pursuing a four-year degree, she mentioned her thoughts about returning to the university. I then explained the process and offered to meet with her later in the semester to review her progress, and she responded enthusiastically:

> I hope I can connect to the school a lot more, not just go to class and go home and be a commuter student. I feel I have a lot more confidence in myself as a student and myself taking up space. So I hope to connect with you, connect with the faculty a little bit better, take advantage of even EOP, and try to connect with students better there.

Like Nacho, Carla acknowledges the importance of connecting with someone who instills the *confianza* to not only return to school but to get involved and engage with others. She attributes her confidence to a few factors: more stability within her family, including finances, taking fewer units, being a little older and wiser, and supportive, positive experiences at her community

college. At Oxnard College, she receives services from the Extended Opportunity Program and Services (EOPS), which has cultivated her aspirational and social capital.

Exit Interviews and Leaving the Metaphorical Door Open

Staff noted the importance of normalizing stopping out and leaving the metaphorical door open for a student, informing staff of their plan to stop out. For example, staff Christina shared:

> If we're talking to a student about taking the semester off, we'll say, 'We will be here. We want you to come back . . . call us when you get back, email us while you're not a student, and let us help.' That's actually where some of our successes are. Not every single student . . . has to stay; it's that we can get them help, and then they can come back.

Christina understands not all students can persist, and for some students, what they may need to be successful is to take some time off from school to take care of themselves or their families' needs. Still, the university needs to reach out to students who have left and help them create a plan to return. Another staff, Mia, shared similar sentiments:

> We have to look at the bigger picture, and we have to be okay letting people go, but saying, come back . . . showing them, we want them back, but leave the door open. Don't just get angry at them for wanting to leave or needing to prioritize something other than school because that's what they're going to do. If we look at Maslow, we're going to prioritize our basic needs first, and especially if you have kids or other family responsibilities, you're going to do that. And so showing that compassion.

Like Christina, Mia understands the harmful impact encouraging students to stay can have. She references Maslow's hierarchy of needs to explain why some students must leave school to meet their needs. Still, the staff and faculty need to show more compassion when students are struggling, normalize students leaving, and provide support to minimize students' *vergüenza* [shame] in leaving so they can have the *confianza* [trust] to return.

Making Students Feel Seen and Understood as Individuals

Another salient theme that emerged for more than half of the participants was the importance of listening to students' needs and concerns and seeing them as unique individuals

both for mitigating students' decisions to stop out and to help them return. For a few students, this theme interacted with the messaging of students graduating in four years. Virginia, Carla, and Renee did not feel that the university saw them as individuals or considered their capacity in relation to their circumstances. Virginia, who has been back at the university for a year, has had time to reflect on her first-year experience and had much to say about what the university could be doing better for students.

> You need to humanize us . . . see us as actual humans with emotions. We already have the *ganas* [desire] and now we just need you to invest the time and to really believe in us that we can do it . . . Why do you want to see me succeed? What do you gain? . . . So understanding that my value in this institution goes beyond the monetary one to society. What are we hoping to create? . . . It'd be really interesting to have a program where we could sit down with everyone who works on campus and voice our struggles . . . for them to understand where we're coming from and to hear about our difficulties getting to this place. How long are some people's drives . . . two-hour bus rides? Did we eat? Did we have a healthy breakfast . . . have money for lunch, dinner? How are we getting home tonight? Do they understand how cold the campus gets sometimes? How lonely it gets?

Virginia displayed raw emotions when talking about how she felt and what she heard from her peers. Using the words that the university needs to humanize students with emotions, she clarified that she did not think the university saw students as unique individuals but rather as student groups. Something in her first-year experience made her believe the university did not believe in her success or messaging that stood out about the benefits to society when students attain degrees rather than her own transformational growth. She did not feel valued or thought the university truly understood students' daily struggles. It was hard to maintain my composure, empathizing with every word, but also realizing the multifaceted ways an institution can minimize students' individual journeys. Virginia suggested an impactful programming idea to give students a space to voice their concerns and struggles to all staff, faculty, and administration. Student Beatriz also recommended, "Be more involved with students and what they have to say when it comes to their struggles paying for school, in the classroom, or other

concerns.” Beatriz similarly believed it was important for the university to connect more with students so they could understand and address their concerns.

Staff also shared sentiments on the importance of communicating and connecting with students individually. For example, Melody stated:

> I found that once we are able to get connected with a student . . . sitting down and having a conversation with them and making them realize that we do want them to be successful and that we are here to support them, that can be a turning point for the student.

Melody and other staff described how although the campus provides messaging about wanting to support students to be successful, until staff talk to a student one-on-one, providing individual, catered encouragement, students may not trust or believe the university cares about their personal success. Making that connection is the difference between a student persevering or leaving.

Other staff participants stressed the importance of not seeing students in terms of data and showing that the university cares and values them. For example, Ben explained:

> Not just the data point . . . and it can't just be a task. Students can't just feel like a checkbox. . . . You got to care. It's simple, but you can't go through the motions; our people see right through you . . . they need to be seen and understood and know that we also care about them and their experience. It needs to be comprehensive.

Considering the multifaceted ways in which students have been affected by the pandemic, which include feeling disconnected and distrustful towards the university, it is critical that the university show genuine care to students to retain them and bring them back. Ben shared that the university often talks about students through data points, but they must be seen as individuals with varying degrees of needs to distill how best to support them. He cautioned performative interactions with higher leadership that attend events and leave without following through.

Ben and Brian elaborate on how BIPOC students sometimes interpret performative interactions by higher administration that do not appear to show genuine care.

> It feels more like a zoo-esque-type thing versus an appreciation-type thing. . . . Okay 'Do you like me or care about me? Do you want to connect with me?' Or there's this piece of feeling like you're on display . . . I don't know if an ooh or an ahh at our students directly, but it's like, 'oh, we need more Black people here . . . more Brown students here'. We need this, and then it's not the individual . . . and I don't think that builds connection.

Ben compares students of color to being on display at a zoo, where they are seen as novelties to meet a quota but not recognized as individuals. Similarly, Brian, who is intentional, present, and attentive to his students' needs, relayed a conversation with a student. "I can be more real with you because I see you all the time . . . you're part of my community circle." For students to build trust with the university, they must see people show up for them constantly or do outreach.

Jennifer explained how the university can show support and care to returning students.

> What's going to keep them here? I think being seen, heard, listened to, being understood, asked for their opinions, and being loved and valued and trusting people. One student, a peer mentor who is a senior, talked about appreciating their mentor sessions because she says it dissolves the hierarchy . . . when they're together in . . . their mentor meetings. It's all of them together and getting each other through . . . no hierarchy with the professor.

Jennifer reflected on all the programming and support the university offers. Particularly for students who left, who lost their resiliency and trust in the university, she believed faculty and peer mentorship would best support their retention. If students' lived experiences are validated and they feel seen, understood, and valued, they will build trust with the university and stay.

Emphasizing Servingness

Student and staff participants illustrated examples throughout the university where some university stakeholders illustrated a "servingness" concept of being responsive to students' needs, considering the development of nonacademic outcomes, and the university taking responsibility for supporting students' success (G. A. Garcia et al., 2019).

In Coursework and Faculty Interactions. For students, servingness showed up in a few classrooms and university spaces. For example, Carla talked about a Chicana/o Studies course she was in:

> That professor was very open, and I think he saw that I was trying. So every assignment I would turn in, he would say, this isn't what I'm looking for, but great job. Here's what you can do next time. So I think that's when I changed my major because we had the Chicano Studies . . . [Chair] come into that class and tell us about the program and . . . I think I chose Sociology because it was safe, and then I switched over to Chicano Studies because I just felt more connected . . . it was the only class where it wasn't older or mostly White people, but I felt like I could connect more with the people and the peers.

Carla felt seen and supported by her Chicana/o Studies professor, who noticed she struggled with course expectations, but he encouraged and guided her to do better. She felt her cultural background reflected in the curriculum and the classroom, feeling more connected with her peers in her Chicana/o Studies course than in other classes where Latina/e/o/x students were the minority. While Carla had to stop out then, she continued in the Chicana/o Studies program and looks forward to connecting with faculty and peers in the fall upon her return.

During the COVID-19 years, a few students also talked about the compassion some of their professors demonstrated when various challenges arose. For example, Beatriz shared:

> He was very good at understanding we are college students, but some of us work and have other lives. So he was understanding where it's like, here's an assignment, do it, but if you are overwhelmed or anything, let me know. He said, if you need anything, let me know. And especially when stuff happened within my family, he was like, you know what? I got you. In what way could I support you?

While not all her professors were as accommodating and supportive, this professor made a big difference in her academic success that semester. He showed empathy and support when her family was going through difficulties.

Nacho and Norma also spoke highly of their professors. For Nacho, one of his History professors really connected with the students. "I really loved her class. I wish I could've

completed it. She reached out to me shortly after and was lenient with the homework, with COVID, as we were online." Nacho connected with his professor, whom he respectfully referred to as "*la doctora*" [female doctor]. She was his only professor of Latina/o/e/x descent, who showed care and passion through her teaching. When classes transitioned online, she was also the only professor who called him. While Nacho could not complete the semester due to a lack of internet access, the professor left a lasting impression and voiced his desire to retake her class upon his return. Norma also shared her current experience with inspiring and supportive faculty that she identified with in her Chicano Studies classes.

> I feel like when they're talking, they understand my experience. They shared that they were first-generation students, and college wasn't necessarily easy for them either. So, I feel like they get it. And so it's motivating to see, okay, they did it. I could do it, too.

Students need to see faculty who look like them, who have shared similar experiences, and who they can see as an example of someone who made it despite the obstacles. It nurtures their resistance and aspirational capital.

The staff member, Jennifer, also provided student feedback about professors who showed care.

> The faculty that check-in . . . take a minute to transition into class . . . who know the students by their names, students are saying, 'These faculty are the ones keeping me here. I feel like I belong . . . like I'm supposed to be here. I feel seen, I feel heard because this professor knows my name and asks me how I'm doing and remembers when we have conversations.' And there's professors who do simple grounding exercises coming into class or let you get something off your chest before starting . . . those check-ins are huge, and they talk about their mental health being tended to very simply by doing those things.

Jennifer corroborates the student participants' testimony of the critical need for students to be seen as individuals, given compassion, and the transformative power that professors learning students' names and a start of class check-in can have on students' mental health and validation.

It is noteworthy to identify that the majority of professors student participants and Jennifer described were faculty of color.

Through Faculty Hiring. When students were asked what the university could do to support Latina/e/o/x students better, a few noted the university should hire more Latina/e/o/x faculty and shared a few negative experiences. For example, Beatriz elaborated on this point:

> Hire more Hispanic professors because especially so many times I wanted to take the Chicano studies or the Spanish class, but there's only two, three professors, and they're limited classes, so you can't get into these classes because they're filling up so quickly that there's no opportunity. I think I only had one Hispanic professor my whole time there. So I would've felt more comfortable and supported, especially with the experience that I had with my history professor where I felt like that professor was being racist towards my people. So I would've preferred to have someone who could understand the struggles of Latino students where they look like me. I had mostly White professors.

Beatriz described the impact a Latina/e/o/x professor could have had during the semester in which her history professor made racist comments about undocumented students. I was the first non-peer she shared that experience with, and she needed that support and validation of knowing she was in the right to be upset. Consequently, Beatriz thought students' experiences could be improved by having more Latina/e/o/x professors who looked like her and understood Latina/e/o/x students' challenges and biases faced.

Similarly, Brian raised the importance of representation in counseling spaces. He recounted a student's hesitation in seeking campus counseling services:

> Until we got our latest new clinician, who was Latina, that was a huge barrier for some of our students . . . 'There was nobody there who looked like me. I would go if there was somebody . . . but there's nobody who I can . . . identify with these things and understand.' And so I think now that there is somebody, that has also increased students going and . . . knowing okay, now there's another level of support for me in that space.

Students mentioned their need to identify with support staff and faculty to feel trust and validation. Before the Latina hire, they believed no one at the psychological counseling office

could truly understand their culture and challenges, so they did not seek out the service. For some students, it is the difference between staying and leaving the university.

Programming to Promote Group Interactions and Community. Brian has shared the transformational impact that creating intentional group spaces for his student assistants for healing and sharing lived experiences can have on students' mental health, resiliency, and perseverance. Brian's support and space are similar to what Virginia described as what the university could do:

> Programs that allow for group conversations that help not just with identity but with self-esteem and self-worth . . . as a community and not just in an individual aspect or going to see psychologists on campus. More opportunities for that kind of connection with others who may be all thinking and feeling the same way, kind of what we did at the island . . . I felt like I was fighting with women like me for the first time, getting to hear them, being around them, . . . a little girl who could just be herself without anyone else telling her what to do or how to do it . . . And being able to let that side of me show without feeling . . . shame. That's how I felt being right for the first time; I felt *hermanidad y communidad* [sisterhood and community].

Virginia previously shared the challenges she faced in processing her emotions and the imposter syndrome she felt of not being worthy to be in college. She got the opportunity to attend a Chicana Latina Retreat at Santa Rosa Island, which had a transformational impact on her self-worth and self-esteem. For the first time, she felt validated with her linguistic capital by the faculty and staff who organized the trip as Spanglish was spoken. She connected with Chicana/Latina peers, having the opportunity to process emotions, experiences, and challenges, building social capital, and even demonstrating resistant capital as she felt empowered to fight with other "*mujeres*" [women] against all forms of oppression by using her voice. Given the impact of this community healing experience, she wished other students could have this opportunity for validation and support to nourish their aspirational capital. While she

acknowledged the support the counseling clinicians could provide, she also recognized the power of peer connection.

Develop Mentorship Programs. Virginia also recommended the creation of mentorship programs with older peers, staff, or faculty with similar identities as the students, who inspire them because they have successfully navigated the college transition process and can validate the student's experience. A mentor can provide social capital and also model for a student how to cope and thrive while having a reciprocal impact on one another.

Staff participant Jennifer, who works with peer mentor programs, also described the transformational impact of mentorship and validating students' cultural identity.

> We have to build trust in honoring who they are as people and knowing where they come from culturally. It's going to be familial, encouraging, and comforting, and they're more likely to ask for help. They're more likely to be okay not knowing. Just finding that one person who is like, 'You can totally do this. I trust you. You trust me. Let's do this together.' There's this humanizing experience that we're both being impacted as mentor and mentee and doing this together that's going to keep them here.

Jennifer described programming infusing a servingness mentality of catering to and serving the students, who are mostly Latina/e/o/x, providing a supportive familial environment that caters to the importance of family for Latina/e/o/x students and builds community, family capital, and trust. She believes this can make a difference in the persistence of Latina/e/o/x students. Jennifer also shared feedback collected from student surveys about mentoring experiences:

> Many professors of color were first-gen students. . . . Students feel like these professors understand them . . . their experiences, where they come from . . . what it's like to be in a first-year program and not know what's going on. . . .The faculty mentors ask about their families, about what they're doing outside of school. I think they feel seen as a full person. The mentorship activities they offer are very academic, but they're also very student-centered . . . We have faculty mentors speaking in Spanish and Spanglish to the students. One student told me that the moment a professor started speaking Spanglish to her, she was like, 'I'm home. Someone's here to take care of me.' And they were okay.

Jennifer described a culturally responsive program and faculty of color mentors as intentionally connecting with and serving the needs of Latina/e/o/x students. They honor their linguistic capital, see them as individuals they want to get to know, and treat them like family, providing them with the validation and social capital they need to persevere and thrive.

Student Beatriz also shared the impact of other informal mentors around campus.

> People in my dining hall were really nice. They always welcomed me, talking to me in Spanish, and you knew to speak Spanish to them because they felt more comfortable not speaking English. Also, hearing other non-Spanish people use a little Spanish in order to communicate with them. It's like, okay, they're fully supportive here.

Beatriz enjoyed the Spanish conversations with the staff at the dining halls, which reminded her of home and family, always welcoming all the students and asking them how they were doing, asking about their families, showing care, and validating her linguistic capital.

Involve Families More and Create Cultural Familial Experiences in the University.

Others also discussed the importance of incorporating the cultural and familial experience into the university. For example, Maribel described:

> When it comes to our Latinx students, we need to involve their families in the process . . . having gone to a bigger CSU, families are very highly involved in those campuses . . . There's lots of parent interaction . . . events where the families are brought on campus to experience the beginning with their students. We need to be doing more of that.

As a Latina, Maribel understands the importance of inviting families to participate in Latina/e/o/x students' college experiences, making them feel welcomed and part of the college experience, and therefore, sees it as an opportunity for the campus to bridge that gap for families. Student Norma recently attended a university event with her family:

> I ended up going last month to *Noche de Familia* [Family Night], . . . with my parents and my brother and sister . . . that was my most favorite thing that I have gone to at the school, and my parents really enjoyed it as it was in Spanish, and they could understand. That was actually their first time on the campus . . . So I feel like after that, they really felt, 'Wow, okay, now I understand that we need to support you more in going to school'

> and understanding I need to spend more time focusing on school . . . they kind of get it more how much is needed for the time I need to dedicate to studying and doing school.

Norma expressed excitement and validation of bringing her family to her campus at an event catered to Spanish-speaking families. Her parents felt connected to other parents and enjoyed everything about the event. Given that she had stopped out to support her family and siblings at home, the event with a panel of students and parents gave her family a better understanding of the dedicated time needed to allocate to school and how they could support her better. The event also helped to show Norma how committed the campus is to their students:

> For me, feeling connected . . . that professors care about me, the President cares about me, all the people at the school . . . I realized at *Noche de Familia* [Family Night] how invested people are in the students at CI. So I think knowing that they care . . . they understand that we struggle and that they're there to help us. I think that's what continuing to feel and receive that support it's going to help me. It feels like a college now. What I imagined it might be like. So I'm really enjoying it, trying to go more to the Latinx Cultural Center and just going to different events happening on campus. . . . So yeah, I'm really feeling more motivated, and things are much better.

For Norma, recently attending Noche de Familia had a transformational impact on her continued commitment, persistence, and aspirational capital to succeed. She has not only been receiving validation, mentoring, and modeling from professors sharing their experiences in Chicana/o Studies classrooms, but that validation has also transcended to an institutional level. Norma talked about how much she appreciated all the staff, faculty, and President, who showed compassion, commitment, and student support. She finally feels that connection and sense of belonging to the campus.

Related to family, a few participants also recommended the importance of building local community relationships to build a college-going and receiving culture for Latina/e/o/x students. Virginia recommended:

> Having more social events for the whole community . . . for our parents to come in and see what we're really dealing with. Have an open house, at least for my community, the

> undocumented community . . . who want their children to come to the university. Create the university culture sooner . . . so that when we come here, it's not our first time going to the islands, cafe, or the library, so they can be like, 'This is a place you can feel safe.'

Virginia imagines a campus where students and their families start attending university events as early as elementary school, so they can envision the space as a welcoming and attainable place for all students and, in particular, for undocumented students to feel that they can be safe at the campus. Similarly, Alex talked about the importance of catering to our local community.

> We've never really done a really effective job of that. We're trying to get these students from elsewhere. And if we know finances are an issue, then why aren't we doing a concerted effort to try to get our local students who are tied to their family and community. Isn't that what CSUs are for, to bring up their communities?

While Alex identified that most transfers are local, most first years are not. He raised a critical point about the increase in financial hardships, which make colleges less accessible; therefore, the campus should focus on recruiting and investing in their local students, inviting families to the university early on. Jennifer also enthusiastically proclaimed:

> If we were known . . . and part of the community on a regular basis, and we were known as a school of Brown excellence, our students would be proud to be here. We want to come here. We are an HSI of Brown excellence serving these students, and look what our students are going into the community doing afterward. Our students who come in want to work in our community; they might leave, but they come back. And so it's not seen as a hub for bringing students back into the community. We're not in the community at all.

Jennifer envisioned a campus that builds relationships with the local community, creating opportunities to serve the region's needs and having a reciprocal relationship with local residents who build leadership and social advocacy skills that allow them to return and uplift their communities. She also envisioned an HSI institution committed to serving their Latina/e/o/x students in a culturally responsive way, developing a reputation for excellence.

While not planned for analysis in this research, while data was being analyzed, the institution's report for reaffirmation of accreditation became available, incorporating some of the

recommendations provided by participants. The institution site has committed to integrating a servingness mentality by being a student-ready campus that supports student learning and post-graduate outcomes better and incorporates a student success framework that includes non-academic outcomes and a commitment to nurturing a healthy campus climate that creates a sense of belonging for students (CSUCI Institutional Report for Reaffirmation, 2024).

Summary and Conclusion

This narrative inquiry centered on the experiences of Latina/e/o/x students who attended CSUCI between the fall 2019 and spring 2023 semesters and stopped out between their first and second year. The *pláticas* from 18 participants, including nine student services professionals, generated multifaceted findings on COVID-related effects that led to Latina/e/o/x students' challenges and struggles, which contributed to their decision to stop out. Several institutional challenges and gaps were identified, undermining students' capacity to persist. The participants offered a plethora of recommendations and strategies to rematriculate students and promote retention utilizing a Servingness framework and student-ready mentality.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction to Discussion

As a first-generation student from an immigrant working-class Latina/e/o/x family, I experienced the transformational impact of a college degree on my immediate and extended family's livelihood and social mobility. I was inspired to pursue the field of Academic Advising in higher education because I experienced many challenges and interruptions in my educational path but had an encouraging Latina counselor who connected me with support and inspired me to do the same for other students, particularly marginalized students who did not have the social capital to navigate college.

Over the years, I saw an increase in BIPOC students entering and leaving college successfully, but then the COVID-19 pandemic transpired, and gains appeared to regress. I saw a disproportionate number of Latina/e/o/x students leaving college because they had to work to help support family members who lost jobs, took care of family, or could not afford school. When we resumed in-person instruction, I noticed our enrollment and retention for first-year students had decreased significantly. Consequently, in this study, I sought to uncover how COVID-19 had impacted students' experiences and decisions to leave college between their first and second year and how student support services professionals interpreted the role of the pandemic on their work with students and their retention. Moreover, I sought to identify recommendations to support students better and strategies to rematriculate students who had stopped out.

This qualitative narrative inquiry used a *pláticas* approach to honor participants as co-constructors in a collaborative meaning-making process (Fierros & Bernal, 2016) and to center Latina/e/o/x students' voices who had stopped out sometime between the end of the spring 2020

and spring 2023 semesters in a culturally-responsive way. As detailed in Chapter 3, I held 18 one-on-one *pláticas* with three participant groups: Latina/e/o/x students who do not plan to return to the institution, those who have already returned or will return by fall 2024, and student services professionals who serve these student groups. I conducted multiple rounds of deductive and inductive coding of participants' narratives. I initially started with as many as 90 codes and ultimately focused on approximately 30 codes based on LatCrit (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001), Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), and Servingness (G. A. Garcia et al., 2019) frameworks. I then organized data excerpts into themes related to participants' experiences and perceptions of attrition factors, impacts on student support services, and strategies that promote community cultural wealth and servingness mentalities.

In this chapter, I synthesize the significance of themes related to the research questions and contextualize them within existing and emerging research. Based on my study's thematic findings, I then offer recommendations for practitioners, the institutional site, and policy leaders and consider future research. To conclude, I reflect on how this study has impacted me.

Summary of Findings

Utilizing a narrative inquiry with a *pláticas* approach as a methodology provided a deeper understanding of students' experiences and factors contributing to their decision to stop out while also offering a safe space to reimagine student supports that are likelier to promote rematriculation and retention. Analysis of qualitative data revealed several key themes on COVID-19's period effect. Over half of the participants perceived the COVID-19 pandemic as amplifying opportunity gaps and college transition challenges. Inequities in K-12 education compounded with virtual instruction exacerbated gaps in academic preparation, college adjustment, financial hardship, and low self-efficacy for low-income, first-generation BIPOC

students, contributing to Latina/o/e/x students' decision to leave school. Additionally, since the pandemic, for low-income Latina/o/e/x students, family responsibilities and cultural expectations of helping to contribute to the household financially, taking care of the family, and being present with the family also contributed to students' attrition. Most participants also described a reduction in socio-emotional intelligence due to the pandemic isolation and virtual instruction, which inhibited students' ability to socialize, communicate with others, and cope with environmental changes, resulting in decreased mental capacity and resiliency for students.

Another prevalent theme that emerged for most participants was that, systemically, the multifaceted effects of the pandemic have not been understood fully. For example, faculty and staff have been seemingly unprepared for students' increased range of needs related to their stunted socio-emotional intelligence and other equity challenges that have been intensified as a result of the pandemic's period effect. Some institutional agents appear to lack empathy and understanding when interacting with students, growing frustrated about students' decreased academic preparation, non-prioritization of school, and reduced communication and coping skills. Institutionally, campus messaging that promoted 15-unit loads for all first-year students, compounded with their increased range of needs, led to decreased self-efficacy, shame for not meeting expectations, and distrust in the university for not understanding their needs. Other institutional challenges of increased staff turnover and burnout led to student service interruptions, delays such as financial aid disbursement, and uncoordinated student support services, further undermining students' trust in the institution. Lastly, racialized microaggression experiences threatened students' sense of belonging and mental health.

Discussion of Findings

Personal Challenges and Struggles Contributing to Initial Stop Out Decisions

Inequities in Academic Preparation Coupled with Virtual Instruction

My study's findings significantly contribute to the emerging body of research examining the COVID-19 pandemic's period effect on educational disruptions and its exacerbation of existing inequities and educational outcomes for aspiring and current Latina/o/e/x undergraduate students. This study confirms some of the patterns seen in recent quantitative studies that have found gaps in educational outcomes for BIPOC low-income students (Goldberg, 2021; Schnieders, 2023), and my findings add a critical dimension of students' narratives and experiences to this growing conversation in higher education. Most emerging research has centered on quantitative regression analysis and survey methods. My *pláticas* approach revealed a more nuanced understanding of Latina/e/o/x students' multifaceted experiences of systemic inequities in their virtual high school experiences coupled with challenges with in-person college adjustments.

Several participants described inadequate academic preparation in high school, amplified by ineffective virtual instruction and a focus on completing assignments versus thinking critically about academic knowledge. For many students, the isolation in Zoom during a global pandemic also made it harder to concentrate and retain information. This subpar, interrupted education diminished their self-efficacy in believing they could succeed in college, ultimately reducing resiliency and contributing to their decision to leave. This study affirms post-pandemic research that has underscored growing gaps in access to education and support during virtual instruction, further hindering educational outcomes for BIPOC low-income students and

contributing to college attrition (Gee et al., 2023; Goldberg, 2021; Moscoviz & Evans, 2022; Schnieders, 2023).

In a review of emerging research on the impact of interrupted learning during the pandemic, scholars found that BIPOC students, particularly low-income students from high-poverty schools, have experienced a disproportionate loss in reading and math achievement (Gee et al., 2023; Schnieders, 2023). Because they were likelier to have less access to academic support and technology as compared to White students or BIPOC students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, there continues to be a learning lag for these students. This study affirms this data and advances our knowledge about students' experiences. Student participants in this study shared their struggles with virtual instruction, such as needing to share computers at home with family, having unreliable internet access, and tending to siblings while their parents worked in person during isolation. Student participants also shared their first-year challenges with math and reading, with staff participants corroborating observations of more students struggling to adapt to in-person instruction and math and English courses since COVID. Given that research shows students who do not complete these foundational courses are likelier to stop out (Mitra & Zhang, 2022) and that the CSU requires students to complete math and English in the first year, this gap in completion is concerning.

Family Responsibilities More Important Than School

Many of the student participants, the majority from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, experienced amplified financial hardship, with family members losing their jobs and having to assume greater responsibility for paying for college and supporting their families. Studies and reports have consistently shown that BIPOC, first-generation, low-income students had a greater likelihood of experiencing financial hardships of housing/food insecurity and family income loss

during the pandemic (Black & Taylor, 2021; Goldberg, 2021; Perez & Farruggia, 2022; Puente, 2022; Soria et al., 2023; The State of Higher Education 2023, 2023), and many of these same students have also tended to report having caregiving responsibilities. These studies and reports also cite the increased cost of living and income loss as factors impeding persistence and rematriculation for low-income Latina/e/o/x students, as students generally, and participants in this study in particular, prioritized working and supporting their families over continuing in college. Working an average of 25-30 hours while attending school full-time, and in some cases, for commuter students, taking care of siblings or other family household needs proved impossible, making some students feel shame about the inability to balance school with family needs.

Family Complexities in Relation to Persistence, Especially after the Pandemic. While parents generally supported students in pursuing college and were often a source of aspirational and familial capital in Latina/e/o/x students' perseverance, cultural expectations also negatively influenced their retention. Prior research substantiates that for Latina/e/o/x students, family support and relationships with loved ones are critical to their college transition and adjustment (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kuh & Love, 2004; Yosso, 2005). However, particularly for Latina participants in this study who commuted, their families did not fully understand the time needed to focus on school, requiring them to come home after classes to take care of younger siblings and household chores. For residential students, parents expected them to call often and go home every weekend to be with family or to help support them, hindering their integration into the campus community. This finding suggests the complexity of familial capital and is consistent with work done by Gloria and Castellanos (2012) while also offering further nuance due to the complicating layer of the pandemic. The pandemic brought

some families closer together, enhancing their familial capital and initially was students' primary source of resistance capital when they went away to school; however, after the pandemic, students were less willing to be far away from their families, and seeing them less frequently reduced their resiliency.

Challenges with Socio-Emotional Intelligence and Interacting with People in Person

Scholars have identified several factors that contribute to persistence: positive student-faculty interactions (Hurtado et al., 2011; Schademan & Thompson, 2016), peer mentorship (Yomtov et al., 2017), self-efficacy (Bolkan et al., 2021; Haktanir et al., 2021), social capital (Kornbluh et al., 2022; Yosso, 2005), sense of belonging (Gopalan & Brady, 2020), and resilience (Haktanir et al., 2021); however, as noted in other research and throughout this study's findings, the COVID pandemic hindered students' ability to engage and socialize. Although limited, research is emerging regarding the period effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on socio-emotional intelligence for students, with most research emerging internationally. Data shows social isolation during the pandemic reduced emotional intelligence in children (Martín-Requejo & Santiago-Ramajo, 2021) and that university students with high emotional intelligence were likelier to engage in self-regulated learning and remain resilient to COVID-related challenges (Albani et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023); however, these previous studies did not account for students' socioeconomic status. This study reinforces work done by Schnieders (2023) regarding students' reduced socio-emotional intelligence due to the pandemic's effect and shifts to virtual instruction. Moreover, my findings elevate Schnieders' (2023) conclusions by providing more nuance into how students' intersecting identities of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender further compounded their experiences and inequities.

Much of the current research on the pandemic's effects on college students has centered on students' experiences during the early years of COVID-19 isolation, and this study adds to the research by examining students' adjustments to in-person interactions after isolation. The shift to emergency virtual learning constrained students' opportunities to interact and connect with their peers and teachers; consequently, when students transitioned to in-person instruction, they found it challenging to interact with others. Mask mandates then allowed them to partially hide and not engage as much as folks were generally still cautious about the pandemic. Commuters sought safety in their cars between classes, making in-person interactions with peers and faculty more challenging to initiate and sustain. Most staff participants reflected on these challenges, noting that, in addition to academic interruptions, students experienced developmental interruptions in their socio-emotional intelligence, reduction of study and coping skills, and self-regulation with others, confirming emergent research on the pandemic's effect on socio-emotional development during COVID-19 (Albani et al., 2023; Boccaccio et al., 2023; Martín-Requejo & Santiago-Ramajo, 2021; Schnieders, 2023).

While student participants preferred to be back in person, interacting with others tended to cause anxiety. Some students preferred the perceived safety of their computer screens or face masks, corroborating previous work on hindered communication associated with masking and the inability to see facial expressions (Boccaccio et al., 2023; Swain et al., 2022). This study confirms this finding while adding that mask-wearing led to more guarded interactions between students and institutional agents, with faculty being less able to recognize students' needs and challenges adequately. For some student participants, the lack of social interaction led to feeling disconnected from the campus, and their reduced coping and study skills made it more challenging to adjust, affecting their resiliency and mental capacity to persist.

Constraints on Mental Health and Mental Capacity

A number of studies have examined the period effect of the pandemic on students' mental health and wellness, which contributed to students' attrition (Copeland et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2022; Mitchell, 2023; Stressed out and Stopping out: Mental Health Crisis, 2023). Research shows that adolescents experienced an elevated negative affect associated with loneliness and depression due to a loss of emotional connection and perceived support during the pandemic, and COVID-related stressors were more prominent for those in low-income, urban households (A. A. Rogers et al., 2021). Consistent with this study's findings, students had anxiety about leaving their homes and struggled to focus on school.

The Pandemic Undermined Students' Resistance Capital and Resilience. Yosso (2005) designed a community cultural wealth model, highlighting students of color's assets and abilities rather than focusing on underdeveloped skills. These include having the aspirational capital to be hopeful despite barriers; validating linguistic capital in bilingual skills and cross-cultural awareness; a commitment to family and community through familial capital; utilizing social and peer networks through social capital; the historical resiliency and navigational capital in navigating racially hostile and unsupportive institutions; and the resistance capital to advocate for and challenge inequitable, oppressive structures. A study on first-generation Latina/e/ox students during the pandemic found that despite financial and mental health challenges, students with high community cultural wealth (e.g., more empathic, supportive professors, peer study groups, and family support) were likelier to cope and adjust to online courses (Green, 2023). The participants in this study counter those findings. A key difference in the study is time. The aforementioned study was conducted during virtual isolation, and this study examined students' adjustments' after in-person interactions resumed, with students experiencing a longer time in

isolation and virtual learning, as well as social and political unrest, which also affected students' mental capacity.

The majority of my study's participants are from low-income families; the findings show that their intersecting identities of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender experiences, coupled with subpar academic preparation and adjustment challenges with social interaction and navigating the university, further compounded their mental health and capacity. Even students who described having previously persevered utilizing resistant capital to overcome obstacles and challenges such as economic hardship, bullying, and their undocumented status experienced a depletion of resiliency and self-efficacy during the pandemic, experiencing mental exhaustion and an inability to cope.

Institutional Challenges Contributing to Stop Out Decisions

While students and staff described many personal and systemic challenges that directly contributed to stop-out decisions, they also articulated a number of areas where the institution fell short of providing adequate support and empathy, hindering their trust in the university.

Faculty and Staff Not Prepared for the Intensity or Range of Student Challenges

Prior studies have identified the critical role that institutional agents play in students' successfully adjusting and navigating the university culture and developing a sense of belonging (Hurtado et al., 2015; Schademan & Thompson, 2016; Stanton-Salazar, 2011), particularly for first-generation low-income BIPOC students. With the pandemic's effect on student learning, socio-emotional development, financial insecurity, adjustments to in-person, and mental health, most faculty and staff were seemingly unprepared for students' increased range of needs. Staff participants talked about faculty and other staff feeling frustrated and lacking empathy for students' increased needs without fully understanding how COVID impacted students. This

finding adds a new contribution to the literature on the gap in understanding COVID's period effect and the need to continue exploring its effects by capturing students' lived experiences to support them better and reinforcing prior literature on institutional agents' critical role in students' college adjustment and sense of belonging.

Students' Nonlinear Paths and Imposing 15-Unit Course Loads Overwhelm Students

Several studies have suggested that students (including first-generation low-income students) who take a 15-unit load have better academic outcomes and graduate at higher rates (Attewell & Monaghan, 2016; Chan, 2022; Venit, 2017). Consequently, many institutions, including CSUCI, have heeded these scholars' recommendations to strongly encourage all first-year students to enroll in at least 15 units per term. Many student participants who worked an average of 25-30 units described feeling overwhelmed when academic advisors imposed a 15-unit load in their first semester. They struggled with not only adjusting to college during and post-pandemic but also experienced learning loss or interrupted learning, struggling to balance working to support their and their family's needs.

The students initially trusted the university but then grew upset when they realized the university did not consider their unique needs and capacity to take a manageable load. While none of the student participants failed a class while taking 15 units, their grades were lower than expected, and it completely overwhelmed and negatively affected their self-efficacy in believing they could be successful in school. This finding is consistent with research by the Community College Research Center (2014) and even Attewell and Monaghan (2016), as these studies previously have cautioned that 15-unit loads are counterproductive for students working 30 or more hours each week. Research shows a significant percentage of Latina/e/o/x students worked more than 30 hours a week due to financial hardships during COVID (*FactSheets: Latino*

Students in Higher Education, 2022). Many student participants from working-class backgrounds who experienced economic hardship during COVID and other challenges found it unrealistic to maintain a 15-unit load, so they left the university. Staff noted that the university was trying to solve the problem of decreased enrollment by meeting 15 units of full-time equivalents to increase funding. They understand the university wanted to help students facilitate a four-year graduation, but these efforts negatively impacted some students' retention.

Service Interruptions, Insufficient Coordination, and Navigational Challenges due to Staff Turnover and Burnout

The COVID-19 pandemic also created a period effect in higher education employee retention. Staff burnout and turnover led to service interruptions, insufficient coordination and outreach, and students experiencing navigational challenges that hindered their self-efficacy.

Turnover and Burnout Undermines Trust. Emerging research since the pandemic finds that higher education staff are more likely to leave higher education, increasing turnover across universities (Bichsel et al., 2023). Survey findings show that over 60% of Student Affairs staff were likelier to seek other employment opportunities within the next year, higher than any other group. My study confirms these findings and contributes to the emerging research on the period effect of the pandemic by providing a fuller understanding of how the pandemic has impacted staff's work with students and the effects of service interruptions. Staff reported that many of their colleagues left the university due to burnout from increased student needs and staff workload due to increased turnover. Staff illustrated that BIPOC first-generation students found it challenging to seek out campus resources due to a reduction in navigational and resistant capital during COVID, which was worsened when a trusted staff left. When students experienced

service delays and inaccurate referrals and information, it created distrust in the university to seek services and stay.

Lack of Normalized Care and Coordination of Services. Scholars have also identified the essential role of coordinating student support services and resources to cultivate persistence among first-generation, low-income BIPOC students (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Holcombe & Kezar, 2020; Romero et al., 2020; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). However, institutional knowledge is lost when a campus experiences understaffing and turnover. Also, it takes time for new staff to learn their job and all campus support services, limiting opportunities for coordination and increasing the probability of inaccurate referrals. Student participants talked about the *vergüenza* [shame and embarrassment] and lack of *confianza* [trust] in the university to seek help and services. They did not feel welcomed or encouraged to seek out services, finding information challenging to navigate and wanting the campus to reach out to them. This data is consistent with the literature on Latina/e/o/x students needing to feel validated and supported in a familial community, creating familial capital of an extended university family that helps connect them with resources and support (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Romero et al., 2020; Yosso, 2005).

Students' Frustrations with Financial Aid Create Anxiety and Accelerate Their Departure. For some students, institutional challenges with financial aid, including delays in disbursement and unclear communication, hindered their student experience, contributing to their decision to depart the institution. Some students demonstrated resistant capital when they persisted despite delays in disbursement, requiring them to cover the costs or get loans. By contrast, for other students, the delays and unclear and untimely communication about financial aid processes, such as missing documentation and policies that enforce full-time units to receive aid, completely demoralized them, reducing their resiliency and accelerating their attrition. This

data is also consistent with research showing that inadequate information or lack of awareness of financial aid processes can lead to student departures (Perez & Farruggia, 2022; *Time to Finish Fixing FAFSA*, 2020) and that particularly for Latina/e/o/x students, financial aid and perceptions about the support of financial assistance at institutions are important (Venegas, 2015). Some staff recognized the Financial Aid office's limitations on Department of Education policies related to satisfactory academic progress and timeliness to a degree, advocating for a change in federal policies. Scholars have also noted the limitations of federal and state policies but suggest that institutions can facilitate institutional commitments to increase financial aid or align institutional goals with financial aid policies.

Lack of Validation and Experiences with Racism, Microaggressions, and Harassment Discourage Students. Some students shared experiences with racism, microaggressions, or harassment, which discouraged students, affecting their mental health and student experience. A couple of students experienced racist comments in the classroom, creating anguish and powerlessness due to fear of retaliation, which undermined their connection to the campus and mental health. Staff corroborated having heard students share racialized experiences that demoralized them, especially when reports proved futile, described as a systemic barrier protecting faculty while students suffer, lose trust, and leave the institution. Other staff shared student anecdotes of faculty "murdering a student's spirit," their aspirational capital, seeing them as under-prepared or not possessing skills that could be learned if faculty and staff took the time to nurture them. This data is consistent with a substantial body of research on the ways that institutional microaggressions and hostile campus racial climates threaten Latina/e/o/x students' resistance and perseverance (Acevedo & Solórzano, 2023; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Solórzano,

1997; Yosso, 2005; Yosso et al., 2009). Student participants described the importance of validation and holistic support to counter microaggressions and societal unrest.

Implications for Practitioners

Consejos and Strategies for Retaining and Rematriculating Students

Develop a Strategic Plan for Support and Outreach

Many participants recommended that staff coordinate support services, engage in outreach, encourage and guide students to services, coach them on navigating spaces, and provide clear information and referrals. Staff suggested coordinating services through first-year programming, such as learning communities and peer mentoring. They stressed the importance of connecting with students early on in a welcoming manner to create bridges and warm hand-offs to student academic and support services. The literature affirms that institutional agents should be intentional in coordinating siloed support structures to cultivate holistic relationships between students, faculty, and staff that bridge resources and aid Latina/e/o/x students in developing academic skills for success (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Holcombe & Kezar, 2020; Love, 2012; Romero et al., 2020). Especially with financial aid being a critical resource for Latina/e/o/x students' perseverance, participants emphasized the importance of having financial aid counselors who could provide clear communication, outreach, coaching, and counseling on completing financial aid processes and collaborating with other student service offices. This data affirms the recommendations raised in the research about the need for timely awards, efficient bilingual and bicultural communication with students and their families, and coordination of financial aid services with other student support offices (Perez & Farruggia, 2022; Romero et al., 2020; Venegas, 2015).

Given student challenges since the pandemic in academic and student success skills, staff participants recommended coordinating workshops across student support services offices on topics such as time management, budgeting, financial aid, communicating with faculty, and exploring campus resources. These *consejos* [recommendations] are consistent with recommendations in the literature that student affairs professionals should be providing workshops or summer programs on college expectations and academic success skill-building to counter the achievement gap among first-generation Latina/e/o/x students (Haktanir et al., 2021; Romero et al., 2020).

Participants also provided *consejos* about doing outreach by calling and sending email invitations to students who have stopped out so they could feel welcome to return. One of the participants who returned emphasized the critical factor of receiving several phone calls from a coach who encouraged her to return and connected her with an academic advisor. The advisor then walked her through all the steps needed to return, including an academic plan. Two students returning in the fall felt validated and encouraged by participating in this study, citing it as their reason for having the *confianza* to return. With the increase in attrition since the pandemic, research has emerged on the continued need to study students who have stopped out of college to understand their needs better so they can be rematriculated. Consistent with this study's findings, the research emphasizes the importance of personalized outreach, simplifying return processes, and providing advising support for academic plans (California Competes, 2024; *Fulfilling the Promise*, 2020).

Facilitate Stopping Out and Leave the Metaphorical Door Open

Another *consejo* participants had was on the importance of normalizing students stopping out but leaving a metaphorical door open for the student to return. Staff understood the harmful

impact encouraging students to stay in school can have when they struggle to manage their multiple responsibilities with school. They emphasized showing compassion and helping students with a plan to leave to eradicate the *vergüenza* [shame] in leaving so they can have the *confianza* [trust] to return. The plan might include attending a community college closer to home, taking time off to work, or helping facilitate the return process by creating a timeline of when staff will follow up with a student. This study reinforces the emerging recommendations on transforming the narrative of stopping out to normalize taking time off (Munip, 2024). It elevates it further by recommending that institutions be intentional in helping students create a plan and a timeline to do outreach to students.

Emphasizing "Servingness"

Student and staff participants illustrated examples throughout the university where some university stakeholders illustrated a "servingness" concept of being responsive to students' needs, considering the development of non-academic outcomes, and the university taking responsibility for supporting students' success (G. A. Garcia et al., 2019). They advocated expanding "servingness" campus-wide and being a "student-ready" campus.

Create a "Student-Ready" Campus that Validates Student's Individual Experiences. Institutions need to cater to their students by becoming "student-ready" campuses that serve and provide holistic support to students, validating their individual experiences.

Understand and Validate Students' Individual Experiences. Many participants advocated for the critical need to listen to students' needs and concerns, seeing them as unique individuals to mitigate decisions to stop out and help them return. Students requested the creation of programming and spaces where they could share their stories, concerns, and struggles with staff, faculty, and administrators about finances and other college adjustment challenges so that

the university could better understand and address their concerns. Students want to feel genuine care, be validated to belong in the campus community, and *confianza* [trust] in the university. This data is consistent with the data on interpersonal validation and the critical role that institutional agents play in students' adjustments, navigation, and sense of belonging to the university, which can have a mitigating effect against oppressive experiences to help with students' resistant capital (Hurtado et al., 2015; Romero et al., 2020; Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

***Create a "Student-Ready" Campus*.** In addition to coordinating support and outreach to students, staff participants also advocated meeting them where they are in their student journey. They acknowledged that some students might need more support, and the institutional agents' responsibility was to assess what they may need to connect them with resources and services. A few challenged the narrative that students need to be college-ready when there are access and opportunity gaps and a pandemic that has impacted learning. Instead, they advocate for universities to be better prepared to serve students. This finding is consistent with literature that calls for "student-ready" universities, redefining readiness to a university culture of intentional, responsive, holistic student support (McNair et al., 2022). Given systemic racialized inequities and social disparities that hinder students' access and preparation for college, compounded with the pandemic's period effect on students' development and mental health, it is even more dire that institutions transition from a college-ready to a student-ready mentality. Student-ready universities use data and feedback to understand who their students are, their challenges, hopes, and aspirations, and then respond with appropriate resources and student support to help them thrive and succeed.

Through Pláticas with Students. To understand students' needs, institutions should make intentional efforts to get to know and assess their students' needs and experiences. Data analysis

of academic outcomes will not provide a complete picture of student experiences and challenges, and research methods that include surveys, focus groups, and interviews are recommended. Institutions with a high percentage of Latina/e/o/x students should use culturally responsive research efforts to capture student feedback. Using a *Pláticas* approach where the staff, faculty, or administrator can express themselves authentically, showing vulnerability, validates students' linguistic capital, creates reciprocity, and a safe space to engage in conversation and address challenging and traumatic experiences. Ultimately, it provides more profound and enriching discussions, and for focus groups, it creates an opportunity for students to share and connect as they navigate their experiences and emotions together.

Preparing for Future Disruptions. As institutions continue to assess and understand their students' needs and challenges, a student-ready campus must also prepare for the next disruption, both anticipated and unanticipated. As an educational system, we were unprepared for the COVID-19 pandemic in pivoting to emergency remote learning and fully understanding the effects on students' learning, adjustment, and socio-emotional development. There will continue to be national disasters, global unrest, political and social turmoil, protests, and national elections that will perpetuate inequities and challenge students' capacities to resist and persevere. Consequently, it behooves institutions to prepare for the next disruption and be better equipped to respond to students' needs and challenges by proactively reaching out and showing care.

In Curriculum, through Faculty Hiring, and via Faculty-Student Interactions. As Latina/e/o/x students continue to experience challenges in college adjustment and integration, discrimination, and racialized microaggressions, it is imperative students get the opportunity to connect with faculty of color who can mitigate racialized, oppressive experiences by providing cultural validation, inspiration, and academic support, nurturing their resistant and aspirational

capital (Hurtado et al., 2011, 2015; Romero et al., 2020; Schademan & Thompson, 2016). Consistent with the research, participants shared anecdotes of encouraging, inspiring, and supportive professors who were accommodating and made them feel seen and valued. These professors were Latina/e/o/x or other identities of color. They shared their experiences as first-generation students who validated their adjustment struggles and offered them inspiration, mentorship, and academic support. A few students also shared feeling most in community with peers and faculty in Chicana/o Studies courses, as they felt their cultural background reflected in the curriculum and classroom. Not all professors were supportive, but these professors kept the students persisting at least to the end of the semester.

Students believed hiring more Latina/e/o/x faculty would better support students' needs, especially when facing microaggressions on campus. This data is consistent with the research on the positive effects of validating, supportive student-faculty interactions. There continue to be disproportionate percentages of faculty of color. As of fall 2022, 72% of postsecondary faculty are White, with only six percent Latina/e/o/x faculty (*Fast Facts*, 2023). The faculty representation at CSUCI is better, with 19.2% Latina/e/o/x, compared to 60.3% White; however, only 10.1% are tenured or tenure-track faculty (*CSUCI Employee Snapshot*, 2023), and it does not mirror the 60% Latina/e/o/x student population. Consequently, there is a need to hire more Latina/e/o/x faculty and other faculty of color intentionally.

The literature also emphasizes the importance of students seeing themselves in the curriculum (Acevedo & Solórzano, 2023; G. A. Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015), and this study affirms this finding. Assembly Bill 1460 (2020) prompted the CSU to incorporate an ethnic studies requirement as a general education requirement, embedding a culturally relevant curriculum institutionally (CSU: Graduation Requirement: Ethnic Studies, 2020); nonetheless, culturally

relevant curricula cannot exist within the confines of ethnic studies courses. Leadership and administrators must continue allocating resources and supporting faculty development opportunities to infuse culturally responsive pedagogy throughout all academic units to address opportunity gaps and better support Latina/e/o/x and other BIPOC students. Given students' developmental and academic needs and the microaggressions occurring in classrooms, faculty development leaders must provide more culturally responsive training and direction to faculty to better support students' increased needs and gaps in knowledge, in addition to being culturally aware of how the language they may use can harm students.

Programming to Promote Group Interactions and Community. Some participants also discussed the transformational impact of creating intentional group spaces for healing and sharing lived experiences on students' mental health, resiliency, and perseverance. One of the participants got the opportunity to attend a Chicana Latina Retreat, which transformed her self-worth and self-esteem and provided a space for community healing. She felt validated with her linguistic capital as Spanglish was spoken, connecting with Chicana/Latina peers by sharing experiences and challenges and building social capital. She received validation and support from the faculty and staff who organized the event, nourishing her aspirational capital and imagining the possibilities if all Latina/e/o/x students received this opportunity. Literature on peer connection outside of the classroom with peers who share similar racial and cultural backgrounds underscores this perspective for Latina/e/o/x student's college integration, self-efficacy, and sense of belonging (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kornbluh et al., 2022; Yomtov et al., 2017).

Develop Mentorship Programs. In addition to group programming facilitating shared experiences, participants also advocated for developing and expanding mentorship programs

with peers, staff, or faculty from similar identities. Students wanted a mentor who understood their cultural background and could inspire them to navigate the college transition process, validating their experience and cultural identity and modeling how to cope and thrive while having a reciprocal impact on one another. A staff participant further described a current mentoring program with a culturally responsive, servingness mentality of intentionally catering to and serving Latina/e/o/x students.

Mentors cultivate a familial environment that honors students' linguistic capital, see students as individuals they want to get to know as a whole person, and provide them the validation and social capital they need to persevere and thrive. This data affirms the literature on how mentorship programs with peers, staff, or faculty can be integral to first-generation students' navigational and social capital (Almeida et al., 2021; Yomtov et al., 2017) and contributes to the research on the critical need to develop familial and interpersonal mentorship that infuses servingness concepts and validates Latina/e/o/x students' cultural values (Delgado-Guerrero & Gloria, 2023). With mentorships' transformational impact on Latina/e/o/x students' academic outcomes and sense of belonging, institutional efforts should be made to financially support and implement campus-wide mentoring programs with peers, staff, and faculty with a culturally responsive and servingness mentality to support students better.

Involving Families More and Creating Cultural Familial Experiences. Given the cultural significance of family, participants emphasized the importance of continuing to incorporate a cultural, familial experience into the university. One of the student participants who returned to campus shared her recent experience attending a campus *Noche de Familia*, a Spanish-speaking event, with her parents and siblings, who visited the campus for the first time that day. The event included a panel of students and parents with various faculty, staff, students,

and administrators, including the university President and Vice Presidents, in attendance. While the student had been receiving validation and support from her Chicana/o Studies faculty, the event transcended her validation institutionally. It had a transformational impact on her commitment, persistence, and aspirational capital to succeed, knowing that the university valued her and her family. *Noche de Familia* is an example of Garcia et al.'s (2019) multidimensional conceptual framework of servingness in HSIs that posits that institutional activities with culturally relevant programs for Latina/e/o/x students mitigate racialized experiences when students experience culturally validating experiences such as speaking in Spanish with peers, faculty, and staff and eating cultural food.

Participants also stressed the importance of cultivating local community relationships to build a college-going and receiving culture for Latina/e/o/x students so they can envision a welcoming and attainable space for themselves. For students to feel connected and validated at the university, they and their families must be invited early in their primary school years. The surrounding community needs to trust that the university is invested in creating opportunities to serve the region's needs and cultivates a reciprocal relationship with residents that builds leadership and social advocacy skills, allowing them to return and uplift their communities. This finding is consistent with research on leveraging ecosystem partnerships and shared accountability to address student needs and cultivating student success by engaging actively in the community and educational pipeline to create collaborative innovations to support the community (Bathgate et al., 2011; McNair et al., 2022; Stevens, 2020).

Consejos for Faculty

As revealed in the literature and this study, faculty play a critical role in students' college adjustment, sense of belonging at the university, and cultivating students' aspirational, social,

and navigational capital. Given the traumatic experiences students have experienced due to the pandemic, specific practice recommendations include developing more compassion and empathy to understand how the pandemic has affected students academically and developmentally, being receptive to attending professional development workshops on culturally responsive pedagogical practices, and connecting students with additional support to build their student success skills. In the classroom, faculty should also consider integrating interactive exercises that allow students to develop social interaction and communication skills with faculty and peers to cultivate social capital.

Faculty should also take the time to be more personable and connect with their students, demonstrating an ethic of care (Hurtado et al., 2011). Students take cues from faculty in assessing faculty's interest and care in their development as students. They could be the only institutional agent students regularly see and come in contact with. Consequently, faculty should take the time to show students they value and care about them as human beings. Several students and staff provided anecdotes about the impact culturally affirming language and simple class check-ins had on students' mental health and perseverance.

Consejos for Staff

Staff in student support services also have an essential role as institutional agents in coordinating student support services and resources to cultivate navigational and social capital to facilitate persistence among first-generation low-income students. As informational agents, they serve multiple functions in advocacy, knowledge sharing, advising, coaching, bridging, and integrating students into the university culture (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). With staff turnover increasing since the pandemic, it is essential staff keep updated on changes and have accurate

knowledge of support services and functions to advise students on university processes and connect students with timely resources early in their college experience.

Staff should also incorporate culturally affirming language and practices that build *confianza* [trust] in the university and reduce the *vergüenza* [shame and embarrassment] in asking for help. Students need to feel validated and supported in a familial manner, cultivating familial capital of an extended university family that connects them with resources and support (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012; Romero et al., 2020). Practitioners have adapted *chisme* [gossip] as a form of information sharing, used as a marketing tool that not only validates Latina/e/o/x students' culture but adapts *chisme* as a liberatory practice that supports the sharing and coordinating of information and resources on how to navigate university spaces successfully (Gutierrez, 2017; Obregon & Ruiz, 2024). Staff should consider adopting similar strategies at their institutions, along with *metiche* [intrusive] advising. Student supports like Academic Advising and Financial Aid should engage in *metiche* advising by proactively doing early outreach and sending inviting and clear communication to connect students with support.

Implications for the Institutional Site and Similar Campus Demographics

This study's findings hold significant implications for university administrators at CSU Channel Islands and other universities with similar student demographics. Public universities with a majority minoritized student population have the social responsibility to disrupt systemic, embedded racist systems and reimagine a university that enables social mobility, closes the achievement gap for their students by intentionally serving their students, and becoming a student-ready campus that provides a vision of a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) that embeds servingness and culturally responsive practices institutionally. As a researcher in this study with an insider perspective, I am cognizant of current servingness practices occurring in pockets of

the study site and of recent commitments leadership has taken to institutionally align strategic planning with a servingness framework and a student-ready campus with a culture of assessment. They have operationalized a student success framework that cultivates students' educational and post-graduate goals, caters to developing skills that uplift them, their families, and their communities through high-impact practices and experiential learning opportunities, and infuses enrichment and holistic activities in developing their whole self (CSUCI Institutional Report for Reaffirmation, 2024). Still, there is a continued need for accountability and assessing outcomes.

Through Financial Assistance and Timely and Clear Communication

Given the increase in the cost of living and student tuition and the role that finances play in college student retention, it is critical campus institutions provide low-income students with additional financial support to minimize financial barriers through scholarships or emergency funds. Scholarships should be created to incentivize students who have stopped out to rematriculate. Additionally, given the gap in timely and clear communication and outreach to students about the financial aid process and delays and challenges with FAFSA Simplification, there should be strategic planning and coordination of financial aid processes and services. Financial awards, disbursements, and communication about additional documentation should be timely and clear. Financial Aid Offices should make a concerted effort to hold Spanish bilingual workshops and sessions for students and their families. Institutions need to commit to funding a financial aid position whose primary role consists of financial aid outreach and coaching students about financial aid processes and policies. There needs to be better coordination of financial aid services with other student support offices, which can assist in connecting students with financial aid or providing basic information about policies and requirements that might jeopardize their eligibility. Moreover, financial aid policies can align with institutional goals for student success.

Implementing early alert interventions that support students can prevent them from losing their financial aid due to Satisfactory Academic Progress policies.

Stop Imposing Linear Paths

Less than 36% of students in the CSU graduate within four years (*Graduation and Continuation Rates: First-Time Full-Time Freshmen*, 2023); nevertheless, the CSU imposes a four-year graduation as the norm and recommends 15-unit loads to improve graduation rates and inform university budget allocations. While some students may successfully complete 15 units, it can harm students working 25 or more hours. Institutional messaging that all first-year students should enroll in 15 units can adversely affect their self-efficacy in believing they can succeed in college if their working hours or other family responsibilities preclude them from managing 15 units. Data analysis should include unit completion outcomes and qualitative student feedback that captures their working hours and experience managing their loads. Decisions about recommended unit loads should not be based on the percentage of students who successfully complete units, budget allocations, or four-year graduation rates that most students do not attain but rather on students' individual needs and capacity.

Implications for Policy Leaders

Policymakers must continue to work with educators to revise and create data-informed policies that reflect the changing needs of students. Policies, metrics, and budgetary financial allocations have the power to either eradicate societal inequities to close the access and opportunity gap for low-income, first-generation BIPOC students or to continue to exclude them systemically from accessing and staying in college. Completion metrics were created to assist policymakers and higher education leaders in shaping funding strategies and to assess and identify improvement areas (Reyna, 2010). However, these metrics were created for the

traditional residential college student, working 20 or fewer hours and attending school full-time. This metric is unrealistic for the first-year student needing to work 25 or more hours or the commuter with significant family responsibilities. Considering how the pandemic disproportionately impacted Latina/e/o/x first-generation students, particularly in financial insecurity, they are more likely to work 30 hours, making 15-unit loads unmanageable. Policymakers must reevaluate how they fund institutions on 15-unit full-time equivalents and find alternative funding models. Equity goals of eliminating opportunity gaps must align with funding. Institutions with a higher percentage of Pell-eligible BIPOC students should receive more funding to create the necessary support structures for students' success. Otherwise, these funding models will harm the very institutions in most need of funding, with the most significant impact on social mobility.

Moreover, there needs to be a reinvestment in education at the national, government, and state levels to counter the escalating tuition costs and cost of living. We need to invest in our future. There is a need for continued improvements to the financial aid system. Financial aid policies have historically rewarded students based on academic achievement and timeliness to a degree, not necessarily on financial need. The Department of Education has attempted to improve processes and financial assistance through the Simplification process. It has revised the formula to calculate aid to allocate more funding to Pell Grants for low-income students who need it the most. It is a start in the right direction; however, there is a continued need to assess the impact of policy and process updates on students and the complications that might arise or unintended barriers for students who do not have access to resources.

Contribution to the Literature and Future Research

Most research on the COVID-19 pandemic exists through survey collection about the adjustments to online learning, mental health effects, and economic hardships that are impeding BIPOC low-income students from attending and persisting in college. This study contributes a wealth of knowledge to the period effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, filling a gap in the emerging body of research examining opportunity gaps in persistence rates for Latina/e/o/x students between the first and second year since the pandemic. Much of the current research on the pandemic's effects on college students has centered on students' experiences during the early years of COVID-19 isolation, and this study adds to the research by examining students' adjustments to in-person interactions after isolation. The findings from this study point to critical implications in understanding the multifaceted ways COVID-19 undermined students' first-year experiences and impacted their decisions to leave college. My study advances our understanding of the period effect of the pandemic, finding that emergency remote learning during the pandemic and mask-wearing during the first year of in-person adjustment reduced students' socio-emotional intelligence. The systemic inequities compounded with this stunted growth led to challenges in academics and social interaction, mental health, navigating the university, and resiliency. Continued research is needed to assess COVID-19's long-term effects on students' interrupted growth and learning, particularly for BIPOC students.

Pláticas as a Method for Collecting Data and Developing Rapport with Participants

The *pláticas* methodology approach provided a vulnerable, safe space to engage in a collaborative, relational process with participants, validating and honoring their experiences as co-constructors of the meaning-making process (Fierros & Bernal, 2016; Morales et al., 2023). I was vulnerable in disclosing my college experiences as a first-generation, working-class Latina

who had to stop out of school because I got pregnant. I talked about the shame of stopping out and the imposter syndrome I had, believing I was incapable of keeping up with school until I met with a Latina counselor who believed in me and connected me with resources. I recounted that thanks to that counselor, I am an educator, inspired to help other students achieve their hopes and dreams. This vulnerability created a connection and trust with the participants, allowing for a deeper understanding of Latina/e/o/x students' first-year experiences and the multifaceted factors that contributed to their decision to stop out. The *pláticas* also provided a collaborative space to reimagine student supports and strategies that are likelier to promote rematriculation and retention and support the literature on utilizing asset-based frameworks with culturally responsive practices that validate Latina/e/o/x students to improve student success outcomes.

Consideration of the Experiences of Students of Color at Other Types of Institutions

This study centered on the first-year experiences of first-generation Latina/e/o/x students who stopped out during the COVID-19 pandemic years at a small, public four-year HSI university to understand better the period effect of the pandemic on students' experiences. The study uncovered a wealth of knowledge on an emerging field in the research, providing insight into the experiences of a population of students that is often overlooked and challenging to study. This study can provide direction for future research. By replicating this study in other institution types to include other BIPOC students, transfers, and other institutional agents like faculty to understand their perception of how the pandemic has affected students and how they show up in their classrooms, we will have a more complete and nuanced understanding of how the pandemic has impacted students. Given the significant impact and rich narrative data that emerged in *pláticas*, I recommend that future research consider utilizing a *pláticas* methodology approach, which provides a space to build trust with participants and allows them to be co-constructors in

the meaning-making process, resulting in meaningful data. Further research is necessary to continue understanding the pandemic's longitudinal effects on both academic and non-academic outcomes.

Conclusion and Final Reflection

Educators and leaders must work together to bridge the societal inequities divide and close the opportunity gap for Latina/e/o/x first-generation students in college access and completion gains to promote transformational impact and social mobility. They have the social responsibility to disrupt systemic, embedded racist systems, reimagine institutions that create equitably funded support structures, and cultivate culturally responsive practices that validate students, retain them, and promote post-graduate outcomes. Given embedded systemic barriers and pandemic disruptions that amplified inequities and students' self-efficacy, institutions must take a moment to assess and learn about their students' experiences to create meaningful interventions and support programs that cultivate students' community cultural wealth and serve their needs. Institutions must embrace a servingness, student-ready framework that meets students where they are and coordinates support and resources within their institution and across ecosystems to develop students' navigational and social capital.

This study has tremendously impacted my journey as an educational leader. It reinvigorated my passion as a social justice advocate and educator. It was an area of study that was personal to me, as I was a first-generation, working-class Latina student who struggled with college adjustment, lacked the social and navigational capital to ask for help or understand how to navigate a siloed university system, and had faculty whose words made me feel like I did not belong. Utilizing the *pláticas* methodology with my participants allowed me to validate the students' experiences and engage in authentic responses of frustration, understanding, empathy,

and connection to similar experiences. Students had a safe space to share their experiences and trauma. They felt *confianza* [trust] to share, validated in stopping out, reducing their *vergüenza* [shame an embarrassment], and felt more empowered to imagine better support programs or practices that intentionally support the needs of Latina/e/o/x students. I had engaging conversations with colleagues who shared their perceptions and experiences with Latina/e/o/x and other BIPOC students' attrition and the effects of the pandemic on their work with students. Together, we had the opportunity to reimagine a university that intentionally serves its students' needs, normalizes and coordinates student support and outreach, makes students feel like they belong, and is a vehicle for transformational growth and social mobility. This study allowed for meaningful collaborative *pláticas* with participants and reminded me of the transformational power of connection and engaging in conversation to understand and learn.

> You need to humanize us. You need to see us as actual humans with emotions. We already have the *ganas,* and now we just need you to invest the time and to really believe in us that we can do it . . . because we can. – Virginia

APPENDIX A

Student Screening Questionnaire

Participant Inclusion Requirements
You are eligible to participate in this study if you are a Latine/x student who attended California State University (CSUCI) sometime during the Fall 2019 to Spring 2023 semester in your first year of college and did not return to CSUCI in your second year. For more details, refer to the Research Study Information Sheet.

Time Commitment
This questionnaire will take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete, and the interview will take about 45-60 minutes of your time.

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1. Gender: How do you identify?
   - Female
   - Male
   - Non-Binary
   - Prefer to self-describe below:

   - Prefer not to respond

2. What is your age?
   - 18
   - 19
   - 20
   - 21
   - Other (write-in)

3. How would you describe your racial or ethnic background? (Mark all that apply)
   - Asian
   - Black or African American
   - Indigenous or Native American
   - Latina/o/e/x or Hispanic
   - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
   - White

- Other (write-in)
- Prefer not to respond

4. Are you a first-generation student? (meaning neither of your parents graduated from a four-year college)
   - Yes
   - No

5. In what language do you prefer to communicate?
   - English
   - Spanish
   - Spanglish
   - Other (write-in)

6. What region do you currently live in?
   - North Coast
   - Central Coast
   - Local – Ventura County
   - Island Empire
   - Northern San Joaquin Valley
   - San Francisco Bay Area
   - Southern San Joaquin Valley
   - Los Angeles County
   - San Diego – Imperial
   - Superior California
   - Non-California Residence

7. What is your current status? (mark all that apply)
   - Attending college somewhere else (write in below)

   - Attending CSUCI
   - Working
   - Attending trade/technical/vocational school
   - Taking a break from school
   - Taking care of or helping family members at home

8. What was (is) your chosen academic major (check all that apply)
   - Anthropology
   - Applied Physics
   - Art
   - Biology

- Business
- Chemistry
- Chicana/o Studies
- Communication
- Computer Science
- Dance Studies
- Early Childhood Studies
- Economics
- English
- Environmental Science & Resource Management
- Global Studies
- Health Science
- History
- Information Technology
- Liberal Studies Teaching & Learning
- Mathematics
- Mechatronics Engineering
- Performing Arts (Music or Theatre)
- Pre-Nursing
- Political Science
- Psychology
- Sociology
- Spanish
- Undeclared/Exploratory
- Other (write-in)

9. As of today, do you plan to return to CSUCI? (Not displayed if "Attending CSUCI" is chosen)
   - Definitely not
   - Probably not
   - Might or might not
   - Probably yes
   - Definitely yes

10. Are you willing to be interviewed by the researcher? The interview aims to learn about your experience as a first-year student at CSUCI and how the university can (could have) support(ed) you better.
    - Yes
    - No

11. Please provide the following contact information (displayed if yes selected).
    - Name
    - Email
    - Cell Phone Number

You have reached the end of the questionnaire. Thank you for your responses. The researcher will follow up if you are if you are selected to be interviewed.

APPENDIX B

Student Semi-Structured Interview Protocol – (Non-Returner)

Interviewee Name:

Selected Pseudonym:

Date:

Time:

Introduction

Thank you so much for your willingness to be interviewed! I know how busy you must be, so I genuinely appreciate your time. I will first start by sharing a little about myself and why I'm doing this research study. As I've mentioned in my email, I am a UCLA doctoral student, and I am interested in understanding why students stop out or leave college between their first and second year. Particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, many students have left college, and Latine/x students have left in greater numbers, so I am interested in learning from students about the factors that influenced their decision to leave and what universities can do to better support them. Your voice and experiences are important in better understanding why students leave and what you recommend to serve and support students better. I am interested in exploring this topic for a few reasons. I am the Director of Academic Advising at CSUCI, and I want to learn how to support students better so they can be successful and feel connected to the campus. Also, during my first year of college, I was a first-generation Latina student; I was the first in my family to go to college; my parents immigrated from Mexico, and I grew up in a working-class family, so going to college was a big deal, but during my first year of college, I stopped out of school, because I got pregnant. At the time, I questioned my ability to be successful at my school. I later went back to school, but I stopped out a few times, so this is an experience I personally relate to.

Informed Consent

Before we get started with the plática, I want to review a few guidelines. This plática will last approximately 45-60 minutes. All the information you share with me will be confidential. The information that I report through the study will not reference specific individuals. Some questions may focus on sensitive topics about COVID-19, race, socioeconomic status, and family. I'd like you to be honest about any good or challenging experiences at CSUCI without worrying about offending. If you feel uncomfortable answering a question at any time, please let me know, and we will move on to the next question. With your permission, I will record this meeting to capture our conversation, which will be transcribed. I will keep your responses confidential, using a pseudonym for you and anyone else you name. Do you have a pseudonym

you would like to use, or do you prefer that I choose? After the plática, I will send you a $25 Amazon gift card for your participation. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself and your high school and pre-college experiences. (probe, what was high school like, academic preparation, social engagement online learning modality)

2. Who or what influenced your decision to attend college? (probe – teachers, family, student groups, personal goal)

3. Why did you decide to attend CSUCI (probe – did the COVID-19 pandemic impact your decision?)

4. Tell me about your first semester at CSUCI. Describe a typical week regarding classes, activities, work, friends, and personal/family time.

5. How prepared did you feel as you navigated your first term (or first year)?
    a. Where were you successful (in academics, in life)?
    b. Where did you feel most challenged (or struggled)? (probe – tell me about a difficult week, how often did you attend class, what was going on in your life?)

6. How did COVID affect your typical week? How did COVID-19 affect your life?

7. In what way, if any, did your race or ethnicity affect your experience during your first year? (probe – can you think of any policies or university practices that did not consider your background or experiences; interactions with faculty, students, or staff?)

8. Describe your experience paying for college. (probe – any financial challenges; did you receive financial aid, scholarships, or support from family?)

9. At what point did you know you would not/might not return to CSUCI? Tell me how you made that decision (probe - who did you talk to on campus or at home; how did COVID/finances/college readiness impact this decision?)

10. In reflecting on your initial decision not to return to CSUCI, what do you think CSUCI could have done differently to support you better? (probe – describe any experiences seeking out support programs or services)

11. What have you pursued in life since leaving CSUCI? How have these pursuits impacted your thinking about your educational future, whether at CSUCI or elsewhere? (probe - key individuals/factors encouraging/facilitating their return.

12. What needs to change or happen for you to return to school? (probe – addressing challenges/struggles)

13. What do you think is needed for the university to support students better in reaching their academic goals? (connect with their response)

14. Is there anything else relevant to your first-year college experience that you would like to share that we haven't discussed?

15. Do you have any other questions for me?

Thank you so much for your time. I appreciate you sharing your experiences with me.

APPENDIX C

Student Semi-Structured Interview Protocol with Consent (Returner)

Interviewee Name:

Selected Pseudonym:

Date:

Time:

Introduction

Thank you so much for your willingness to be interviewed! I know how busy you must be, so I genuinely appreciate your time. I will first start by sharing a little about myself and why I'm doing this research study. As I've mentioned in my email, I am a UCLA doctoral student, and I am interested in understanding why students stop out or leave college between their first and second year. Particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, many students have left college, and Latine/x students have left in greater numbers, so I am interested in learning from students about the factors that influenced their decision to leave and what universities can do to better support them. Your voice and experiences are important in better understanding why students leave and what you recommend to serve and support students better. I am interested in exploring this topic for a few reasons. I am the Director of Academic Advising at CSUCI, and I want to learn how to support students better so they can be successful and feel connected to the campus. Also, during my first year of college, I was a first-generation Latina student; I was the first in my family to go to college; my parents immigrated from Mexico, and I grew up in a working-class family, so going to college was a big deal, but during my first year of college, I stopped out of school, because I got pregnant. At the time, I questioned my ability to be successful at my school. I later went back to school, but I stopped out a few times, so this is an experience I personally relate to.

Informed Consent

Before we get started with the plática, I want to review a few guidelines. This plática will last approximately 45-60 minutes. All the information you share with me will be confidential. The information that I report through the study will not reference specific individuals. Some questions may focus on sensitive topics about COVID-19, race, socioeconomic status, and family. I'd like you to be honest about any good or challenging experiences at CSUCI without worrying about offending. If you feel uncomfortable answering a question at any time, please let me know, and we will move on to the next question. With your permission, I will record this meeting to capture our conversation, which will be transcribed. I will keep your responses confidential, using a pseudonym for you and anyone else you name. Do you have a pseudonym

you would like to use, or do you prefer that I choose? After the plática, I will send you a $25 Amazon gift card for your participation. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself and your high school and pre-college experiences. (probe, what was high school like, academic preparation, social engagement online learning modality)

2. Who or what influenced your decision to attend college? (probe – teachers, family, student groups, personal goal)

3. How and why did you decide to attend CSUCI (probe – did COVID-19 pandemic impact your decision?)

4. Tell me about your first semester at CSUCI. What did a typical week look like in terms of classes, activities, work, and personal/family time?

5. How did COVID affect your typical week? How did it affect your life?

6. How prepared did you feel as you navigated your first term (or first year)? Where were you successful (in academics, in life)? Where did you feel most challenged (or struggle)? (probe – tell me about a difficult week, how often attended class, what was going on in life)

7. In what way, if any, did your race or ethnicity affect your experience during your first year at CSUCI? (probe – can you think of any policies or university practices that did not consider your background or experiences?)

8. Describe your experience paying for college. (probe – did you receive financial aid, scholarships, or support from family?)

9. At what point did you know you would not return to CSUCI in your second year? Tell me about how you made that decision (who did you talk to on campus or at home; how did COVID/finances/college readiness impact this decision)

10. In reflecting on your initial decision not to return to CSUCI, what do you think CSUCI could have done differently to support you better at that time? (probe – describe any experiences seeking out support programs or services)

11. What have you pursued in life since leaving the institution? How have these pursuits impacted your thinking about your educational future at CSUCI? (probe - key individuals/factors that encouraged/facilitated their return.

12. Similarly to leaving school, the decision to return to school is also a complex decision with many factors. Describe your decision process in returning. (probe –safer with COVID more stabilized, in-person or online courses, university outreach, student services office, finances)

13. What needs to happen for you to continue attending school and graduate at CSUCI?

14. What do you think is needed for the university to support students better in reaching their academic goals?

15. Is there anything else relevant to your first-year college experience that you would like to share that we haven't discussed?

16. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you so much for your time. I appreciate you sharing your experiences with me.

APPENDIX D

Institutional Agent Screening Questionnaire

Participant Inclusion Requirements
You are eligible to participate in this study if you have worked at CSUCI for at least five years and supported first-year students from the Fall 2019 to Fall 2022 cohorts.

Time Commitment
This questionnaire will take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete, and the interview will take about 45-60 minutes of your time.

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1. Gender: How do you Identify?

    - Female
    - Male
    - Non-Binary
    - Prefer to self-describe below:

2. What is your age range?
    - 25-29
    - 30-34
    - 35-39
    - 40-44
    - 45-49
    - 50+

3. How would you describe your racial or ethnic background? (Mark all that apply)
    - Asian
    - Black or African American
    - Indigenous or Native American
    - Latina/o/e/x or Hispanic
    - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
    - White
    - Other (write-in)
    - Prefer not to respond

4. What is your highest education level?
    - Some college

- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctorate (Ph.D. or Ed.D)
- Professional Degree

5. What is your position or role on this campus? (write-in)

6. How many years have you worked in this field?

    - 1-4 years
    - 5-8 years
    - 9-12 years
    - 13-16 years
    - 17+ years

7. How many years have you worked on this campus?

    - 1-4 years
    - 5-8 years
    - 9-12 years
    - 13-16 years
    - 17+ years

8. Are you willing to be interviewed by the researcher?

    - Yes
    - No

9. Do you prefer to participate via Zoom or in person?

    - Zoom
    - In Person

10. Please provide the following information:

    - Name
    - Email
    - Phone Number

You have reached the end of the questionnaire. Thank you for your responses. The researcher will be in contact to schedule an interview.

APPENDIX E

Institutional Agent Semi-Structured Interview Protocol with Consent

Interviewee Name:

Selected Pseudonym:

Date:

Time:

Introduction

Thank you so much for your willingness to be interviewed! I know how busy you are, so I genuinely appreciate your time. I am a UCLA doctoral student, and the information collected from this interview will help me better understand why Latine/x students stop out of school between their first to second year and what universities can do to better support them. As the Director of Academic Advising and a CARE team member, I am also interested in exploring this topic to learn how COVID may have impacted student services and student retention.

Informed Consent

Before we get started, I want to review a few guidelines. All information shared in connection to this study will be confidential. Data reported will be without reference to any specific individuals. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. Some questions may focus on sensitive topics about COVID-19, race, and university policies and practices. If you feel uncomfortable answering a question at any time, please let me know, and we will move on to the next question. With your permission, I will record this meeting to capture our conversation, which will be transcribed. I will keep your responses confidential, using a pseudonym for you and anyone else you name. Do you have any questions before we get started?

1. Tell me about the work you do at the university.

2. Tell me what it was like for you doing that work when the pandemic hit.

3. What are the reasons you have observed of why Latine/x students stop out of CSUCI?

4. Describe students' adjustment to college since the pandemic. (probe - academic preparedness, social interaction, mental health, academic readiness, and sense of belonging)

5. From what you have observed working with first-year Latine/x students, how has COVID-19 impacted students' persistence in college? (probe – students' social, academic, and psychological adjustments)

6. How has COVID-19 impacted your work with students? (probe – mental health, social or academic concerns)

7. What are key institutional challenges/barriers that students often struggle with in their first year? (probe – institutional structures, policies, processes)

8. What barriers/challenges impede your work with students?

9. What supports are particularly effective at facilitating your work and connections with students?

10. What strategies can the university implement to rematriculate students?

11. Is there anything else relevant to your experience working with Latine/x students in their first year of college that you would like to share that we haven't discussed?

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