

EXPERIENCES OF CONDITIONALLY-ADMITTED LATINX STUDENTS
TRANSITIONING TO A 4-YEAR UNIVERSITY

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my daughter, Vivian, who continually inspires me with her amazing capacity for empathy and kindness. She has endured much time without my undivided attention over the past five years while I was reading, writing, and completing coursework.

Yes, Vivian, I have finally finished my homework. Let's go outside to play.

ABSTRACT

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This hermeneutic phenomenological study explored the complex experiences of conditionally-admitted Latinx students during their first semester of enrollment at a public, 4-year university. Previous research on the topic has been built on foundational models of student transition and persistence, but existing theories that shape retention initiatives may not hold true for the diverse cultural backgrounds of Latinx students. Latinx critical race theory (LatCrit) was utilized as a framework to guide the research design and interpretation of findings. Data was collected from individual interviews with participants. The interviews were transcribed and themes were developed through a cycling methodology of immersion, understanding, and abstraction. Themes developed from this analytic process were used to write rich descriptions of the college transition experiences of conditionally-admitted Latinx students during their first few weeks of enrollment. The narratives of participants revealed both common themes and unique experiences that reflect the diverse backgrounds of Latinx students.

KEY WORDS: College transition, Latinx college students, Conditional college admission

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Recent Latinx high school graduates are now enrolling in college at a higher rate than White (non-Latinx) students (Fry & Taylor, 2013). This milestone was reached in 2012 as the result of long-term increases in Latinx college enrollment (reaching 69%) coupled with slight declines in White enrollment (now at 67%). Despite these enrollment gains, Latinx students are far less likely than their White counterparts to earn a college degree. According to 2014 U.S. Census Bureau data, 6% of the Latinx population aged 18-29 had completed an associate's or bachelor's degree, compared to 8% of the White population in that age range. The gap in bachelor's degree attainment is much more pronounced, with 7% of Latinx young adults earning this credential, compared to 21% of Whites (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). There is an immediate need for research designed to address the opportunity and achievement gaps experienced by Latinx students in higher education.

Statement of the Problem

Latinx students are consistently underrepresented in 4-year universities, yet overrepresented in developmental education (Bahr, 2010; Bettinger & Long, 2005; Orange & Ramalho, 2013). In addition, Latinx students are more likely to enroll in community colleges than 4-year institutions, even though the long-term goal for most (85%) is to earn a bachelor's degree (Crisp & Nora, 2010). Community colleges offer desirable benefits, including lower tuition costs, flexible course scheduling, and easier commuting. However, research indicates that Latinx students are less likely to earn their degree when they enroll at a community college with the intent to transfer to a 4-year institution, even when pre-college preparation and experiences are similar (Huerta et al.,

2013; Melguizo, 2009). For Latinx students who do enroll at 4-year institutions, experiences of a hostile racial and ethnic climate continue to affect students throughout their enrollment (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; McGee, 2016; Urbina & Wright, 2015; Yosso & Solórzano, 2006). Latinx students are most likely to experience hostilities in the form of microaggressions, casually degrading behaviors or comments that reveal bias against students of color. These insensitive affronts, whether intentional or not, cause stress to the recipient, who must constantly interpret the context and decide how to respond (Yosso et al., 2009).

Expansive research related to student integration has been conducted using Tinto's (1993) model of student persistence. Tinto's framework is based on a theory of departure: "In order to become fully incorporated in the life of the college, [students] have to physically as well as socially dissociate themselves from the communities of [their] past" (Tinto, 1993, p. 96). However, this model of breaking away from home communities while assimilating into the college culture as an essential step toward successful persistence may not hold true for all cultural backgrounds (Braxton et al., 1997; Gonzales, 2012). A model that emphasizes integration into a historically White academic culture discounts the roles of family connections, cultural identity, language, and religion in the lives of Latinx students (Gonzalez & Morrison, 2016). Tinto addressed criticisms regarding diverse student backgrounds in revisions to the model, but the original framework still guides efforts to improve student persistence both in practice and in research (Braxton et al., 2014; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Melguizo, 2011). Especially as the Latinx population is projected to double in the United States by the year 2060 (Colby

& Ortman, 2014), research is needed to better understand the needs and experiences of underprepared Latinx students as they transition to college life.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this proposed hermeneutic phenomenological research was to explore the complex experiences of conditionally-admitted Latinx students enrolled at a public, doctoral/research (moderate) university in Southeast Texas. Current efforts to improve persistence of first-year students at the study site focus largely on Tinto's (1993) model. However, the growing body of literature that addresses persistence for Latinx students indicates that Tinto's theory is not a good fit for this population because of questionable anthropological constructs and a focus primarily describing the transition for White males (Gonzalez & Morrison, 2016). The main source of data for the study was individual interviews with Latinx participants who were first-time-in-college, conditionally-admitted college students during their first year of enrollment. A Latinx critical race theory (LatCrit) framework was utilized to examine factors that supported or challenged Latinx students during their transition to college.

Definitions of Terms

College Transition. In this study, college transition will refer to the academic, social, environmental, and developmental changes that students experience after they enter college, especially during the first year.

Conditionally-Admitted Student. A conditionally-admitted student is one that does not meet all admission standards, but is admitted to the college or university contingent on meeting specific requirements or benchmarks after enrollment. Depending on the institution, conditional admission may result from a high school GPA, class rank,

or college-entrance exam scores that do not meet the requirements for standard admission. In this study, participants are conditionally-admitted students who did not earn the minimum college entrance exam score and/or high school GPA for unconditional acceptance to the university.

First-Generation College Student. Depending on the source, a first-generation college student may be defined as one whose parents did not complete a 2-year degree, a 4-year college degree, or as an individual whose parents did not attend college. In this study, a participant will be identified as a first-generation college student if neither parent completed a two-year or 4-year degree.

First-Year Experience. The First-Year Experience (FYE) describes programs offered by many institutions that are designed to introduce entering students to the college environment. These programs may include efforts to increase student participation in campus activities, seminar courses, faculty mentoring, and increased advising.

Freshman Interest Groups. These small groups of 15-20 students are designed to support academic and social transition for first-year students. At this study site, students select a Freshman Interest Group (FIG) based on an interest (e.g., exercise, volunteerism, entrepreneurship) or their academic program of study. Each FIG is led by a faculty advisor and/or senior student mentor, and activities provide outside-of-class opportunities for students to get to know other students and familiarize themselves with the campus culture.

Latinx. A single term does not exist to satisfactorily describe those with an ethnic background from Latin American and Spanish-speaking countries. The term “Hispanic”

focuses on language, while “Latino” (or the feminine form, “Latina”) emphasizes geography. Many people identify more closely with their country of origin (e.g., Mexican-American, Peruvian-American). Latina/o includes all people with an ethnic heritage from Mexico, Central America, or South America. The term “Latinx” is gaining popularity among scholars and activists as a gender-neutral, non-binary term to describe Latin-American descendants.

Opportunity Gap. Policy discussions have recognized that disparities exist in educational attainment between groups based on race, ethnicity, and socio-economic factors. This problem has often been explored as an “achievement gap,” with emphasis on differences in measured outcomes. The “opportunity gap” discussion shifts this focus from outcomes to inputs (e.g., health, housing, safety, enrichment, and academic preparation) as a factor in the inequities between groups in college enrollment and degree attainment (Carter & Welner, 2013).

Underprepared Student. Underprepared students have not yet developed the academic skills that institutions have determined are necessary to successfully complete college-level coursework. The factors contributing to underpreparedness may include (a) a gap in the academic standards necessary for high school graduation and the academic skills necessary for entry-level college coursework; (b) inadequate time-management, studying, and test-taking skills; (c) diminished motivation, self-efficacy, and perseverance; and (d) lack of access to resources about college admission, enrollment, procedures, and services.

Theoretical Framework

Because this study explored complex issues of ethnicity in the academic and

social experiences of students, LatCrit was utilized as a framework to guide the research design, as well as to serve as an analytical tool to interpret and organize findings. LatCrit originated from critical race theory (CRT), a collection of tenets developed by legal scholars to examine the intersecting roles of power and race within institutions and systems (Bell, 1980; Solórzano, 1998). CRT exposes and challenges Eurocentric norms that have become ingrained within society and examines the complex ways these notions have affected people of color (Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004). LatCrit extends the goals of CRT by addressing the additional issues of language, immigration status, ethnicity, nationality, and culture (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Yosso, 2006).

LatCrit explicitly calls out the existence of White privilege in formal educational settings (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Institutional racism negatively affects the college experience for students of color, which can contribute to ongoing issues with transition and persistence for these marginalized groups (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). Additionally, LatCrit challenges the Black/White binary that pervades discussions of race and overlooks the experiences of other groups outside of that limited framework (Espinoza & Harris, 2002). In inviting the exploration of diverse experiences of Latinx students, LatCrit also highlights the within-group differences found among Latinx populations (Valdes, 2002).

Delgado Bernal (2002) has challenged the politicization of knowledge in formal education, where Anglo-American ways of knowing are valued over others. She has utilized a LatCrit framework to argue in support of educational research that acknowledge that students of color hold and create knowledge, even if their perspectives often are not validated by traditional institutions of learning. For example, bilingual Latinx students are

often perceived as lacking in English proficiency if they speak with a non-standard accent. Whether through conscious or unconscious bias, even instructors and other students who explicitly avoid discrimination based on visual appearance may make stereotypical assumptions about students with foreign speech patterns. This accent discrimination is acknowledged in a LatCrit framework as a form of oppression, and instead the skill of multilingualism is valued as a strength.

LatCrit is an appropriate framework for qualitative inquiry into the experiences of Latinx students because this theory takes into account the contradictory nature of many institutions of higher education. Colleges and universities hold the potential to empower students through the equalizing opportunities of education, yet in many ways continue to marginalize Latinx students and other students of color by continuing a long history of emphasis on Anglo history, research, and tradition, while silencing or distorting the voices of racial and ethnic minority students (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). LatCrit also addresses researchers' tendencies to perpetuate deficit-informed methods that focus on achievement gaps for students of color instead of emphasizing their complex backgrounds and experiences as assets to both the students themselves and to the institutions they attend (LatCrit Primer, 2000).

Adding to the importance of experiential knowledge, LatCrit encourages the inclusion of participant narratives in research as an authentic representation of oral narratives in Latinx culture (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). The use of this critical lens allows researchers to incorporate storytelling, counterstorytelling, parables, *testimonios*, *cuentos*, *refrânes*, chronicles, and narratives to understand the lived experiences of individuals (Irizarry, 2012; Pérez Huber, 2010; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

This component of LatCrit theory guided data analysis and research findings. Instead of compiling a pre-determined list of topics for discussion with participants, I began with a few grand tour, mini tour, and experience-based questions (Spradley, 1979). I followed with probing questions to learn more about the topics of concern offered by student participants. As an outside observer (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), it would be presumptuous to assume that I should determine and frame the concerns of Latinx students. I strived to honor the experiential knowledge of the participants by organizing my findings around student narratives: “It is within the context of racism that monovocal stories about the low educational achievement and attainment of students of color are told” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 27). The application of participant storytelling provides a Latinx-centric framework and connects readers with a valuable tradition.

Research Questions

One central research question and several related sub-questions were developed to describe Latinx students’ experiences as they transition to college during the first semester of enrollment. The following grand tour question and research questions guided this study:

How do first-time, conditionally-admitted Latinx students describe their transition from high school to college?

1. What external supports have these students experienced?
2. What liabilities impede transition to college for these students?
3. What coping strategies do the students employ?
4. How can institutions improve the transition experience for this student group?

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Much of the existing research focusing on Latinx students in higher education has examined statistical factors without accounting for the social struggles of Latinx youth (Irizarry, 2012). However, categorical labeling of measurable traits alone cannot capture the complexity of the range of factors affecting the achievement of Latinx students in higher education. According to Bahr (2010), “race itself is not a cause of the disparities; rather, it is the many correlated facets of inequality that lead to lower preparation and achievement among historically disadvantaged racial groups” (p. 212). Even with current programs and interventions designed to improve overall completion rates, Latinx students still earn lower GPAs and are less likely to graduate than White students (Massey et al., 2011). In addition, some researchers have suggested that Latinx students are virtually “invisible” within educational and psychological research with a higher education focus (Rodriguez et al., 2000). This chapter will provide an overview of the literature related to student transition during the first year of college, possible limitations of predominant transition theories as applied to Latinx students, and factors that influence academic outcomes for Latinx students, in particular those who are first-generation college students (FGCS).

College Transition

The first year of college is critical because it is within this time frame that students are mostly likely to decide whether to depart from an institution (Nalbone et al., 2016). First year college experiences often are a focus of retention and persistence research because the likelihood of degree attainment increases dramatically for students

who return for their second year of college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Self-efficacy, involvement, engagement, and academic performance often serve as outcomes through which first-year experiences are evaluated (Azmitia et al., 2013; Goenner et al., 2013; Harmening & Jacob, 2015), but these measures do not adequately explore the emotional experience and process of transition (Nuñez & Sansone, 2016; Palmer et al., 2009).

Applicable Transition Theories

Several theories that link psychosocial development with college transition informed the methodology of this study. Schlossberg's Transition Theory was developed to explore adult development but is often applied to student adaptations to college transition. Chickering's Theory of Identity Development relates specifically to students in higher education environments. Tinto's Theory of Student Departure examines the relationship between student transition and retention.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory. Nancy Schlossberg (1981) described her model as a method of "analyzing human adaptation to transition" (p. 2). She defined transition as a process through which changed assumptions about oneself and the world necessitates a corresponding change in behavior and relationships. She proposed that her model might help us better understand how to help adults as they face transitions:

But what exactly accounts for such differences between individuals and within the same person at different times in life? What determines whether a person grows or deteriorates as the result of a transition? Why do some people adapt with relative ease while others suffer severe strain? (p. 31)

Schlossberg (1981) explained the interaction of three variables that affect adaptation (or lack of adaptation) to transition: (1) the person's perception of the

transition, (2) characteristics of the environment (pre- and post-transition), and (3) characteristics of the individual. She later modified her theory to present transition as a process consisting of three stages: approaching change, taking stock, and taking charge (1989b). She described the 4 S's (situation, self, support, and strategies) as variables within the "taking stock" stage. Although the theory was developed to assist in understanding reactions to transition for all adults, scholars (including Schlossberg herself) soon applied the model to suggest appropriate institutional supports for college students in transition (Paul & Brier, 2001; Griffin & Gilbert, 2015; Schlossberg, 1989a).

Evans et al. (2010) acknowledged that Schlossberg's transition theory, although originally addressing adult learning and experiences, was a good fit for college students because it addressed the interaction of the specific situation and the individual's perception of events. The study authors described the actual experience of transition from high school to college as being similar for most students; it is the individual perceptions of and reactions to this central event of transition that result in vastly different outcomes. Evans, et al. (2010) recommend a future focus on quantitative and qualitative research in an effort to support the theory's validity in higher education transition processes. Because there is a current lack of validated quantitative assessments related to Schlossberg's theory, the authors suggest qualitative research to explore the individual experiences of college students who are encountering transitions, especially "research related to diverse student populations, such as students of color; students with disabilities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students; and international students," as such studies have the "potential to increase our understanding of, and ability to assist with, various transitions

that these students experience while moving into, through, and out of our higher education settings” (p. 226).

Several recent qualitative studies have utilized Schlossberg’s theory of transition as a model to explore and interpret college transition for marginalized groups of students. In a study focused on the lived experiences of conditionally-admitted students, Schlossberg’s theory served as a framework for developing and structuring the interview protocol. For example, questions were developed to explore both the experience of transition (“To what extent were classes easier or harder than you expected?”) and the participants’ perceptions of the event (“Please tell me how you experienced the Alpha Program impacting your sense of yourself academically.” [Wildman, 2016, p.197]). DeVilbiss (2014) used the theory as a lens through which the experience of transition for conditionally-admitted college students was examined. Gayer (2017) challenged the applicability of Schlossberg’s keys of transition (moving in, moving through, and moving out) to the experience of Latino males transitioning from community college to a 4-year university, finding that students had not fully completed these stages well after the transfer process.

Chickering’s Theory of Identity Development. Chickering and Reisser (1993) drew from previous research in higher education to identify and describe several aspects of development of college students and possible institutional supports. In this model, student development is organized into seven vectors; unlike linear stages of development, students might experience several categories at once. The seven vectors include: (1) developing competence (intellectual, interpersonal, and physical), (2) managing emotions, (3) moving through autonomy toward interdependence, (4) developing mature

relationships, (5) establishing identity, (6) developing purpose, and (7) developing integrity.

Several issues involving college transition can be classified into one of Chickering's vectors, and the first three in particular. For example, learning appropriate studying strategies is related to development of intellectual competence. Interacting with students from different backgrounds is related to development of interpersonal competence. Experiences with homesickness and stress are related to managing emotions. Seeking advice from others while independently managing one's own academic and social schedule is related to interdependence and autonomy.

Chickering's theory also identifies seven environmental influences on student development and suggests seven higher education practices designed to foster healthy identity development in college students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The environmental influences include institutional objectives, institutional size, student-faculty relationships, curriculum, teaching, student communities, and student development programs. Student-instructor contact, cooperation among students, prompt feedback, increased time on task, and respect for diverse talents and ways of learning comprise the recommended principals for good practice in the theory. In expanding the theory to include environmental factors, Chickering and Reisser acknowledged the important role the institution plays in encouraging or hindering the college student's ability to progress through the seven vectors of identity development.

Chickering's (1969) original published description of the seven vectors was developed from research on the identity development of traditional-age, white males enrolled at a 4-year university. In the revised model, Chickering and Reisser (1997)

“tried to use language that is gender free and appropriate for persons of diverse backgrounds” (p. 44). Several studies have examined the vectors’ applicability to explaining identity development in more diverse college student populations, including Black first-generation students (Liversage et al., 2018), women enrolled in STEM programs (White & Massiha, 2016), students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (Elias & White, 2017), and students with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status (Dominguez, 2017). These and other studies have validated Chickering’s (1969) theory, as it addresses both internal and external influences in the identity development of students with diverse backgrounds (Evans et al., 2010).

Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure. Tinto’s model (1988) includes three stages through which he asserted students must navigate during the first year of college to prevent early departure: (1) separation, (2) transition to college, and (3) incorporation into college. Drawing from anthropologist Van Gennep’s (1960) descriptions of rites of passage, Tinto described student integration as a process that depends on separation from past connections to facilitate incorporation into the new surroundings:

The first stage of the college career, separation, requires students to disassociate themselves, in varying degrees, from membership in the past communities, most typically those associated with the local high school and place of residence.

Depending in part on the character of those communities, especially on their views regarding the worth of college attendance, separation may be quite difficult or merely an accepted part of the process of movement that most persons are expected to make in the course of their lives. All separations, however, entail some form of parting from past habits and patterns of affiliation. The process

leading to the adoption of the behaviors and norms appropriate to the college almost always require some degree of transformation and perhaps rejection of those of the past communities. However close, the life of families and high schools and the demands they impose upon their members are by necessity qualitatively different from those that characterize most colleges. (p. 443)

Tinto (1988) explained that the second stage, transition, is equally stressful for many students. The scope of this stage depends on the degree to which the community of the past differs from the college. He acknowledged that groups of students who had previously been excluded from higher education (including students of color) were more likely to find that their past life experiences and social norms were incompatible with the college environment. The final stage of incorporation occurs when the students have navigated through transition and successfully assimilated into the community of the institution. Incorporation is challenging for new students because orientation programs designed to introduce students to the college environment are short-lived, and formal student organizations (fraternities, sororities, intramural athletics, extracurricular programs) may only reach out to a very small number of entering freshmen.

Criticism of Tinto's Theory of Student Departure. Although Tinto's model of student departure is the most commonly referenced theoretical perspective in student persistence research (Melguizo, 2011), some scholars have critiqued the theory as lacking in addressing differences in racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Attinasi (1989) criticized the anthropological construct of Tinto's theory and suggested that a model of student departure should focus on a qualitative inquiry into student experiences instead of drawing inferences from tribal traditions. Additionally, he posited that Tinto's theory is

only useful for homogenous (male, White, residing on campus) groups of traditional students.

Tierney (1992) questioned the use of anthropological grounding in a theory of student departure. Tribal rites are embedded within cultural foundations, and he cautioned that the utilization of rituals to understand student transition inexorably ties the event to the dominant culture at the institution. When the student's cultural background differs from the dominant culture at the college or university, a social integrationist approach places the burden on the student to adapt to the institution: "Tinto has misinterpreted the anthropological notions of ritual, and in doing so he has created a theoretical construct with practical implications that hold potentially harmful consequences for racial and ethnic minorities" (p. 603). Tierney expressed concern that the analogy to a rite of passage is problematic for students of color. The rites of passage Van Gennep (1960) referenced were taking place within individual tribal societies. For example, the Ndembu of Africa celebrate rituals of development from childhood to adulthood. The participants in these rites are well-versed in the cultural traditions and expectations both before and after the ritual. They are not experiencing a transition that is incongruent with their past experiences, as is the case for students who find the college environment to be at odds with their own cultures and backgrounds. Students who are members of an ethnic minority may never fully experience the separation phase that is critical in Tinto's theory because of their strong commitments to their original cultural heritage.

The aspect of integration in Tinto's theory has also served as a subject of discord in its applicability to students who are racial and ethnic minorities (Gonzales, 2012;

Hurtado, 2007; Rendon, 1992; Tierney, 1992; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). In advocating for a one-way adaptation of the student to the institution, such a model ignores how students themselves affect change at an institutional level (Kuh & Love, 2000). In her personal account of college transition as a Mexican-American student, Rendon (1992) challenged the notion that students should adapt to fit into the culture of the institution, suggesting that colleges must change to adapt to increasingly diverse student bodies. Tinto himself has questioned continued use of the term “integration,” if not the idea behind it (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009): “I don’t use the word integration anymore—haven’t used it in decades” (p. 423). He agreed with Tierney’s (2000) critique that the term implies that students must give up their ethnic and cultural heritage to succeed in college. However, he still asserted that the premise behind the terminology is an accurate predictor of student retention and explained that role playing or code switching is an example of how non-traditional students might forge a connection to the institution:

Hispanic students have to know how to play by the rules of the institution, what values exist and how to negotiate that world. It doesn’t mean they have to become White—but they have to be conversant with the rules of the game. There is some sense of having to play the role.... It isn’t you; it’s the role you play. That is the difficult part for students of color—how to conserve a sense of who you are while you are playing this other role. (p. 424)

Tinto’s example of how Latinx students might successfully transition to college continued to espouse the notion that students, not institutions, must adapt, even if the term “integration” is abandoned over issues of semantics.

Gonzales (2012) refers to Tinto's model as a "deficit-based perspective" (p. 127) because of its emphasis on integration. She asserts that practices based on cultural-deficit thinking support an outdated assumption that Latinx students lack the "right kind of capital" and continue to marginalize different ways of knowing, working, and living. She notes that Tinto has adapted his subsequent work to include diverse student experiences, yet colleges and universities continue to deploy his initial deficit-based model of departure in their retention efforts.

Numerous scholars have advocated for alternate theoretical frameworks and consideration of cultural factors in studies focused on transition and retention for students of color (Attinasi, 1989; Clayton et al., 2017; Hurtado, 2007; Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendon, 1992; Tierney, 1992). Cano and Castillo (2010) examined the distinct effects of *acculturation* and *enculturation* on cisgender Latina students attending a predominately White institution (PWI). The researchers define acculturation as "an individual's process of learning about and adopting White cultural norms," with enculturation contrasted as "the process of socialization (or resocialization) into and maintenance of the heritage culture norms" (p. 222). Whereas previous research investigating the relationship between acculturation and Latinx student distress had resulted in mixed findings (Zane & Mac, 2003), Cano and Castillo (2010) implemented an instrument to measure the bilinear effects of both acculturation and enculturation. The researchers found that the incongruence between integrating into the norms and traditions of a PWI while maintaining a connection to their cultural values does contribute to stress, and that "Latina college students who do not perceive themselves as exhibiting or practicing behaviors associated with Latino culture are at a higher risk of distress" (p. 227). In a

contradiction to Tinto's theory (1988), Cano and Castillo (2010) warn that Latinx students who are acculturated will not necessarily feel integrated into the fabric of the institution. In this case, "a majority of the participants ... were behaviorally acculturated yet did not adopt White cultural values and beliefs (p. 227).

A more recent study (Clayton et al., 2017) further explored Latinx students' connections to their ethnic and cultural identities as a factor in college transition for first-generation students. The researchers did not anticipate that the participants would display widely varying degrees of connection to Latinx culture, and they urged that future research should be designed to investigate "how making connections related to one's cultural identity may be easier or more desirable for some and is associated with the challenges of being a first-generations student" (p. 15). This conclusion acknowledges the complexity of Latinx cultural identity, which may be further explored using LatCrit theory as a framework to delve into the within-group differences among Latinx students.

Latinx First-Generation College Students

In general, FGCS attend less competitive colleges and are less likely to engage in academic and extracurricular activities on campus (Pascarella et al., 2004; Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). Fewer FGCS (27.4%) earn a degree after four years in comparison to students (42.1%) with one or more parents who attended college (DeAngelo et al., 2011). The opportunity/achievement gap persists after six years, when 50.2% of FGCS have earned a degree, compared to 64.2% of fellow students whose parents attended college (DeAngelo et al., 2011). This gap has been attributed to differences in socio-economic background (Johnson et al., 2011), a greater need to work while enrolled in college (Pascarella et al., 2004; Phinney & Haas, 2003), substandard K-12 academic preparation

(Horn & Nuñez, 2000; Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016), and decreased access to the White, middle-class cultural capital that institutions treat as the normative standard (Horn & Nuñez, 2000; Stephens et al., 2012).

Since the early 1970s, the percentage of students from all racial/ethnic demographics who are FGCS has declined, but the proportion has remained highest for Latinx students (Saenz et al., 2007). More often than with any other ethnic group, parents and other family members of Latinx students do not have access to practical knowledge about college access and application processes (Tornatzky et al., 2002; Tym et al., 2004). Latinx students who are FGCS are more likely to be placed in developmental education coursework, are less likely to meet admission requirements for a 4-year university, enroll in fewer credit hours, are twice as likely to leave college before earning a degree, and are less likely to progress to graduate school (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007; Engle et al., 2006; Tym et al., 2004). These difficulties are compounded by the struggle of Latinx students to balance the pull of their home, family, and community with goals afforded by higher education (Gloria & Castellanos, 2012). External priorities and obligations (environmental pull factors) work against persistence for all students, but many subpopulations are especially susceptible to “pull factors,” including Latinx students and FGCS (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Crisp & Nuñez, 2014).

College Readiness of Latinx Students

Depending on standards set by state boards of education and/or individual institutions, students are assessed as either academically prepared for college coursework or they are assigned one or more courses designed to prepare them for entry-level coursework. College readiness of Latinx students is affected in part by disparities in the

high school curriculum (Brickman et al., 2013). Achievement gaps in math remediation for Latinx students mirror racial disparities in math achievement at the K-12 level (Bahr, 2010). Even when multiple demographic, academic, socio-cultural, and environmental-pull factors are examined, high school academic achievement may represent the greatest influence in whether Latinx students are placed in developmental programs (Crisp & Nora, 2010).

In developmental math courses, there is a high correlation between math skill level at enrollment and the likelihood to remediate successfully (Bahr, 2010). Students who are placed in the lowest levels of developmental coursework have a greatly reduced chance of advancing to gatekeeper courses. Bahr's study highlighted this disparity of enrollment in developmental coursework, as 27% of White underprepared students placed into highest-level math course, but only 15% of Latinx students placed at the same level. In addition, only 17% of White students in the study were placed into the lowest level, whereas 31% of Latinx students were placed at that level. Other studies showed similar gaps between Latinx and White student achievement in developmental reading (Barnes & Slate, 2014).

Latinx students who exhibited high levels of academic achievement in K-12 environments often find that they are still deemed academically underprepared for college coursework (Brickman et al., 2013). In a study that focused on the higher education aspirations of Latinx students who attended under-resourced high schools, one participant explained the frustration with feeling academically unprepared for college, despite taking Advanced Placement coursework and graduating from high school with a 3.93 GPA:

It's overwhelming because I'm here but I don't have the same skills as others. I don't have the same knowledge as them because their schools had a different level of teaching and learning. ... That's probably why I'm taking remedial college English and math because my school didn't teach me to be at the college level. (Acevedo-Gil, 2017; p. 14)

Although all of the 37 participants in this study recognized the disconnect between their high school preparation and the actual demands of college coursework, in some students this realization was internalized and manifested as self-doubt. Acevedo-Gil (2017) outlined a need for future research to examine the narratives Latinx students construct about their academic possibilities and the factor of self-perception in the gap between higher education aspirations and outcomes. The researcher also recommends implications for practice, including the need for both high school counselors and college academic advisors to discuss anticipated obstacles to college success with Latinx students with a heightened sense of awareness of the self-reflection students may be making about their own abilities to overcome obstacles (Acevedo-Gil, 2019).

In another study focused on academically underprepared Latinx students, the participants drew upon their own cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) to successfully navigate the obstacles they encountered in college (Duncheon, 2018). The participants attended the same magnet high school, yet all were overwhelmed by academic challenges during their freshman year of college. The students addressed the difficulty they experienced with college reading and writing in particular; all had taken an Advanced Placement English course in high school, but they were assigned only a few, brief writing assignments. The students recognized that their peers' high school preparation was in

better alignment with the expectations of college English, both in the literature to which they had been exposed and the amount of structured writing they had practiced.

However, although all of the students reported feeling academically underprepared for college, they were able to successfully draw upon aspirational and navigational capital to respond to obstacles with perseverance and positive thinking. They devoted additional time to study, sought mentors, attended tutoring, and visited professors during office hours. Duncheon (2018) concluded that although the magnet high school the participants attended did not provide rigorous academic preparation, the close-knit environment of the school setting and its supportive adults may have provided the cultural capital necessary to overcome setbacks. The dominant observation in previous research has been that underprepared and underrepresented students are less likely to seek outside help from instructors, and that they view their professors as unapproachable (Hurtado et al., 2007). In contrast, the students in this study described their instructors as helpful and supportive. This difference may be attributed to changes in faculty training and attitudes, but also to the higher motivation and confidence of this group of participants. These findings may be useful to programs designed to assist students who are assigned to developmental education programs in college; a cultural capital framework holds promise in understanding how Latinx students might be able to overcome gaps in educational opportunities.

College Experiences of Latinx Students

Difficult college transitions can negatively impact student persistence (Tinto, 1993). The college transition presents a specific challenge to Latinx students “because the first year is so difficult, racial and ethnic tension can negatively affect Hispanic students’

personal and social satisfaction with college” (Weismann et al., 1998, p. 20). A greater understanding of the factors influencing the academic and social adjustment for Latinx students is critical to the development of institutional support that may facilitate the transition process (Castellanos & Jones, 2003).

Pre-college experience. College readiness of Latinx students is affected at least in part by substandard high school curriculum (Brickman et al., 2013; Rodriguez & Oseguera, 2015). College readiness programs such as Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) serve to deliver a more rigorous curriculum to low-income and minority students through access to advanced placement (AP) courses and extra academic services and support. In a recent study, researchers examined whether AVID program participation affected college success of a group of 85 high school graduates (85% of whom were Latinx) in Texas (Huerta et al., 2013). Measures of college success included enrollment in college immediately after high school graduation, attainment of a minimum 2.0 GPA after one year in college, and testing out of developmental coursework.

Huerta et al. (2013) found that 94% of participants enrolled in college, and 67% of the participants earned a GPA of 2.0 or higher at the completion of their first year in college. Only 40% of the group avoided developmental coursework through testing and placement. However, participants who took math courses for all four years in high school were less likely to require referral to developmental programs. This finding adds further support to research conducted by Bahr (2010) and Nora and Crisp (2012), which found correlations between high levels of math completion in high school and a reduced likelihood of enrollment in developmental math for Latinx students. Furthermore, 37% of the students who took developmental courses were still considered to be on target to

graduate within six years as a result of AP credit and dual enrollment earned during AVID program participation. Although institutions might be discouraged by potentially large percentages of students who have participated in the AVID program yet are not determined to be college-ready, the college-level credit earned during high school may compensate for the additional time spent taking developmental coursework. In addition, the program's emphasis on study skills, organization, and self-advocacy empowers Latinx students and other underrepresented groups to persist through academic challenges.

Crisp and Nora (2010) utilized data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) Longitudinal Study to develop a profile of Latinx students who enrolled in developmental coursework at a community college during the 2003-04 school year. Of several characteristics measured to compare Latinx students enrolled in developmental coursework ($n=300$) to Latinx students enrolled in credit-level coursework ($n=280$), pre-college variables of high school mathematics preparation, high school GPA, and delayed college enrollment had a statistically significant impact on persistence into the second and third years of college.

In other studies, the highest level of high school math completed has been closely correlated to placement in postsecondary remediation (Bahr, 2010), which was supported by Nora and Crisp's (2012) findings. Nora and Crisp's extended study utilized the same BPS data source as their 2010 research, but focused on Latinx students enrolled in developmental coursework at 4-year institutions as well as community colleges. High school calculus was completed by 14% of the Latinx students enrolled in credit-level coursework, compared to 7% of the students placed in developmental math. In addition,

26% of the credit-level students had earned a high school GPA of 3.5 or greater, while only 17% of the students in developmental coursework had achieved a similar GPA.

Irizarry (2012) utilized critical race theory as a tool to examine the experiences of Latinx high school students who are learning within a racially-charged academic system. The research findings were organized around *refr  nes*, Spanish-language idioms or proverbs. The utilization of this storytelling technique provided a Latinx-focused framework for analysis of the students' experiences.

The researcher asserted that we cannot measure the influences of student effort and self-regulation without also acknowledging the influence of a K-12 structure that limits opportunities for Latinx students through insufficient resources, limited curricular inclusion of Latinx cultural influence, and escalating racism.

Irizarry's (2012) research focused on the academic pathways of small groups of students from two public high schools in an economically disadvantaged district. One high school was a district magnet school that offered modern facilities, opportunities for international study, and advanced placement courses with a student body primarily comprised of students of color. The second campus studied was a traditional campus where curriculum, faculty demographics, and pedagogical methods were relatively unchanged over the past 30 years; during that same time period, the community had experienced more than 500% growth in the Latinx population, resulting in a campus demographic that was approximately 50% White and 50% Latinx.

The researcher (Irizarry, 2012) noted that as the demographics of the second campus changed over the years, few changes were implemented in the curriculum, instructional practices, or demographic makeup of the faculty. The school was effectively

still set up to serve a predominately White student population. Study participants described the campus as two separate schools within one building, one for White students, with access to a college-preparation track and extracurricular activities, and the other for Latinx students, with remedial and fundamental coursework. The students recognized these disparities, but assumed that the White students had more inherent ability. Irizarry (2012) described this division of opportunity as “academic apartheid” (p. 298).

Irizarry (2012) noted that the background characteristics of the groups of students at both campuses were essentially the same, and all of the participants expressed a strong desire to attend college. The difference between the two groups was the lack of opportunities for academic enrichment, college preparation, and culturally-affirming support for the students enrolled at the more traditional high school. He concluded that institutional racism could be remedied by increasing efforts for college preparation while also recruiting more Latinx staff and faculty to give students access to adults who could provide culturally-specific insight and advice.

University vs. community college. Latinx students are more likely to enroll in community college than White students, even though the long-term goal for most (85%) is to earn a bachelor’s degree (Crisp & Nora, 2010). Community colleges offer attractive benefits, including lower tuition, more flexible scheduling, and easier commuting. However, researchers have concluded that Latinx students are less likely to earn a bachelor’s degree when they enroll at a community college with the intent to transfer than if they had initially enrolled at a 4-year institution (Huerta et al., 2013; Melguizo, 2009).

Prior to Melguizo's 2009 research analyzing degree attainment for Latinx students, studies had reached conflicting results regarding the influence of first attending a community college. Melguizo's (2009) methodology was unique in correcting for self-selection so that the influence of participant characteristics could be separated from the influence of the institutions. In addition to the explanatory variable of transfer to a 4-year institution, the researcher included several control variables that measure high school achievement.

This study used two datasets of Latinx students—one group who graduated high school in 1982, and a second group who graduated high school in 1992 (Melguizo, 2009). After applying control variables, analysis of the 1982 cohort found a lowered probability of degree attainment by 27% for Latinx students who transferred from a community college. Findings for the 1992 cohort were more surprising; after controlling for other contributing factors, Melguizo (2009) concluded that there was no difference in baccalaureate attainment between transfer students and students who enrolled directly at universities. Although the degree rate was still much lower for community college transfers, the researcher attributed the difference to characteristics of the participants (e.g., socioeconomic status, high school academic preparation, college entrance exam scores) instead of institutional differences. This higher contributing influence of individual characteristics and pre-college characteristics indicated that community colleges were providing adequate academic preparation for continued studies at a university. Melguizo (2009) acknowledged that the study was limited by the small sample size and oversampling in states with large Latinx populations. In addition, she noted that the transfer rates of Latinx students are still very low and posited that Latinx

students who wish to earn a bachelor's degree will have a higher probability of success if they enroll at a 4-year institution.

Nora and Crisp (2012) also compared groups of Latinx students who were enrolled in community colleges ($n=460$) and universities ($n=220$), and their research focused on students who were enrolled in developmental coursework. They found that Mexican-American students were more strongly represented in community college (51% vs. 40%), while Puerto Rican students were strongly represented at 4-year institutions (22% vs. 12%). First-generation citizens were more likely to enroll at a university (51% vs. 44%). Community college students were three times as likely as university students to have one or more dependents (21% vs. 7%). There was a significant difference in financial aid awarded, as 28% of Latinx students enrolled in developmental education at community colleges received no financial aid, compared to 13% of the students enrolled at 4-year institutions. The largest disparity was in delayed enrollment (18% for 4-year institutions vs. 42% for community college). The researchers noted that some of these differences may be attributed to student characteristics and not necessarily to the institutions.

Many states have set goals to increase the share of residents who hold degrees, including Texas, where plans are in place to increase the percentage of young adults (25-34 years old) who hold a postsecondary degree from the current rate of 41% to 60% by the year 2030 (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2017). Changing population demographics in the state increase the imperative to examine the factors that affect degree enrollment, retention, and degree attainment for Latinx students. Nationally, the gap in attainment of an associate degree between Latinx and White adults is relatively

small (3.4%), while the gap at the bachelor's level (12.7%) is the largest (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Because the long-term goal for most Latinx students who enroll in institutions of higher education is to earn a bachelor's degree (Crisp & Nora, 2010), yet the Latinx/White degree attainment gap at the bachelor's level persists, additional research and resources are needed to identify and remedy the systemic barriers that limit Latinx pathways to degree completion at 4-year institutions.

Faculty demographics. There is evidence that the demographic makeup of a school's faculty affects the educational outcomes of Latinx students (Grissom et al., 2015). In Irizarry's (2012) study, students valued having Latinx teachers who could relate to their academic struggles, with one participant describing how teachers of color "get us in special ways, like ways that your family get you" (p. 301). Students also conveyed the importance of having teachers who could describe their own struggles with navigating the college admissions and transition process as racial and ethnic minority students. The fact that these teachers attained their goal of completing college provided a source of inspiration for the participants. Researchers Ingersoll and May (2011) have advanced the belief that "minority students benefit from being taught by minority teachers, because minority teachers are likely to have 'insider' knowledge due to similar life experiences and cultural backgrounds" (p. 1).

The underrepresentation of Latinx students in higher education is eclipsed by the underrepresentation of Latinx faculty, both in K-12 and in higher education. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) from the 2011-12 school year, 23% of K-12 students nationwide were Latinx, but only 8% of the teachers were Latinx (Boser, 2014). In higher education, data collected from the Fall 2016 semester

showed that 5.57% ($n=39,907$) of the nationwide full-time faculty was Latinx, serving a student population that was 17.55% ($n= 3,602,345$) Latinx (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). When the NCES began collecting this data in 1993, 3.23% of faculty were Latinx, while Latinx student enrollment represented only 8.32% of total college enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 1993). These numbers reflect that while Latinx student enrollment in higher education is increasing rapidly, representation by Latinx faculty remained stagnant. This disparity is perpetuated by lower completion rates of Latinx students in postsecondary education, and the gap continues to grow.

Summary

Student retention is a critical issue in higher education, capturing resources in the forms of research, engagement programs, uniquely-designed curricula, and advising strategies. However, many institutions are addressing college transition and student persistence with a universal approach. This entails the implementation of interventions that are based on research and theoretical models that address college transition for White students at predominantly White institutions, without regard for the potential cultural disconnect for Latinx students and other minority groups.

As described in this chapter, several theories inform institutional programs for first-year experiences, with Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1988) serving as the dominant model both in research and in practice (Melguizo, 2011). Some scholars have been critical of the effectiveness of Tinto's theory in explaining the college transition experience for more diverse student bodies (Gonzales, 2012; Tierney, 1992). Existing quantitative research details the characteristics of Latinx students that correlate with

academic success and enrollment persistence, including the academic background of their parents (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Crisp & Nuñez, 2014), placement in developmental coursework (Brickman, et al., 2013), and institutional characteristics (Huerta et al., 2013; Irizarry, 2012). However, there is an ongoing need for qualitative inquiry into the lived experiences of Latinx students who may struggle with the transition from high school to college in different ways than other students.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This chapter begins by revisiting the research questions of this study, which will explore the lived experiences of conditionally-admitted Latinx students during their first year of college. The research methods of the study will also be described, including the justification of a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis. In addition, the specific actions taken to collect, organize, and analyze data will be discussed in this chapter. Throughout my description of these procedures, I will explore my role and how it may affect my interpretation of the data.

Research Questions

This qualitative study was developed to explore the complex experiences of Latinx students who are conditionally admitted to a public university. Most conditionally admitted students at the study site are also enrolled in one or more college readiness (developmental education) courses to prepare them for entry-level coursework. One of the goals of this research was to provide rich data for administrators, faculty, and staff who work with this group of students. The research was guided by the following research question (and subquestions):

How do first-time, conditionally admitted Latinx students describe their transition from high school to college?

1. What external supports have these students experienced?
2. What liabilities impede transition to college for these students?
3. What coping strategies do the students employ?
4. How can institutions improve the transition experience for this student group?

Research Design

This study utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to examine the experiences of underprepared Latinx students as they transition to college. This qualitative method was selected because I was interested in capturing the lived experiences of Latinx students through their perspectives. A phenomenological approach values subjective experience over objective representations of reality (Cohen et al., 2013). In contrast to a case study approach to qualitative research, phenomenological studies derive meaning based on common experiences of several participants, allowing the researcher to discover hidden meaning beyond the text of transcripts (Grbich, 2007). In addition, phenomenology was chosen for this study because its tenets complement those of the LatCrit theoretical framework. LatCrit challenges the institutional norms that value Anglo-American ways of knowing above all others (Delgado Bernal, 2002). A goal of phenomenological research is to examine “meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 57); this approach allowed for an exploration of college transition from the unique perspective of Latinx students as told in their own words.

Modern hermeneutics originates from 17th century methods of interpreting biblical scriptures (Crotty, 1998). The etymological roots of hermeneutics can be traced to the Greek god Hermes, who had the ability to translate and interpret the words of the gods so that they could be understood by humans (Moules, 2002). Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) developed hermeneutic phenomenology as a theory as both an extension of and response to the work of his mentor, Edmund Husserl (Henriksson & Frieson, 2012). Husserl had described a process of transcendental (or descriptive) phenomenology, by

which researchers could study phenomena by bracketing their experiences and knowledge (Cohen & Omery, 1994). In this way, the researcher might observe the phenomenon in a detached manner, freed from preconceived ideas.

In contrast, Heidegger rejected the notion that a researcher can remain completely objective and distant through phenomenological reduction (Van Manen, 2015). He insisted that observations, beliefs, feelings, and experiences are interminably intertwined with the world around us and cannot be separated. In new encounters, we learn through our interpretations that are grounded in and guided by what we already know or assume (Gadamer, 1989). Although Husserl advocated for phenomenology that was unimpeded by interpretation, Heidegger was unabashedly interpretive.

My goal in this research was to interpret a phenomenon instead of merely describing it. I agree with Heidegger's belief that my understanding of the phenomenon involves interpretation that is influenced by my background and experiences. This process was guided by moving through a cycle of reading transcripts, reflexive journaling, and interpretation. Through a hermeneutic process, I analyzed the narratives of participants to discover themes and interpret the meaning of their lived experiences (van Manen, 2015).

Role of the Researcher

My interest in this topic of study was influenced by the qualitative research paradigms that align with my own philosophies. The hermeneutical process of interpreting the lived experiences of others espouses a constructivist-interpretivist approach. A critical-ideological paradigm extends this process by interpreting the

experiences of participants within the contexts of privilege, marginalization, and empowerment (Ponterotto, 2005).

I pursued this topic in part because Latinx students are underrepresented at the study site, yet are yet overrepresented in the population of students entering the university with conditional acceptance. I recognize that Latinx students are a marginalized group on the campus, and there are few Latinx faculty and staff members to serve as mentors or role models. One of the goals of this study was to carry the *testimonios* (testimonies) of these students.

I also acknowledge my role as a non-Latinx, outside observer. I have not shared the phenomenon experienced by the participants. However, as the wife of a first-generation Mexican immigrant, and the mother of a Mexican-American child, I have been influenced by beliefs, stories, and experiences that cannot be put aside. In a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this pre-understanding cannot be eliminated (Koch, 1995). I employed strategies to limit the effects of preconceptions (e.g., asking non-leading questions, keeping a reflexive diary, providing an opportunity for participants to review their transcripts for accuracy).

Context

The study took place at a public university in southeast Texas with a total enrollment of approximately 15,000 students. The university is located in an urban industrial area and is primarily a commuter campus, although about half of the freshman class live on campus. Approximately 16% of students enrolled at the study site are of Latinx ethnicity.

Applicants to the university who do not meet the minimum college entrance exam scores and high school class ranking are asked to provide a personal statement that addresses their goals as well as plans to overcome academic struggles. Approximately 20% of applicants who are accepted are granted conditional admission because they have not met the minimum criteria for unconditional admission. Students with conditional acceptance are given one academic year to meet several contract responsibilities, including mandatory advising, participation in retention programs, and minimum GPA requirements. About half of the conditionally-admitted students successfully complete their individualized contracts each year, and administrators have determined that attendance and participation in coursework were the largest factors in successful transition for these students.

Administrators at the study site have also implemented programs to increase retention and matriculation of Latinx students (whether or not their admission is conditional). These services include mentoring, leadership development, career exploration through internship opportunities, and cultural enrichment activities.

Selection of Participants

A purposive, criterion-based sampling strategy was most appropriate for this study because it is important to identify participants who have experienced the same phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994). All study participants were self-identified Latinx students. Both male and female students were included in this research. All students also met the study site's definition of conditionally-admitted in that they did not earn the minimum college entrance exam score and/or high school GPA for unconditional acceptance to the university.

An adequate sample for a phenomenological study is projected to include between six and ten participants (Morse, 1994). For the purpose of this study, I conducted individual interviews with six participants. Interviews as a method of qualitative data collection allow participants discover, construct, and describe their experiences (Hatch, 2002). Unlike other methods of data collection (e.g., surveys, observation, document review, experimentation, or literature reviews), interviews allow researchers to make meaning of the lived experiences of participants (Seidman, 2019).

Instrumentation

The primary data source for this study was transcripts of interviews conducted with conditionally admitted Latinx students. Open-ended, probing questions were developed from the research questions, input from mentors and colleagues, and from my own experiences in working with conditionally-admitted students. (See Appendix D for the complete list of interview questions.) The order of questions was purposefully arranged from more general (grand tour, mini tour) to very specific (examples, experience) in an effort to build rapport with participants before delving into more personal experiences (Spradley, 1979). Before the interview protocol was implemented, the questions were field tested on Latinx students at the study site who were not participants in the study. I pilot tested the protocols on Latinx students who have already been enrolled for one or more years, soliciting their input for clarity in questions to be asked and thought processes in providing responses. Input from other students who have experienced the same phenomenon lends credibility and dependability to the interview protocol (Chenail, 2011).

Procedures

Before beginning data collection, IRB permission was obtained first from the study site, then from Sam Houston State University. After IRB approval (Appendix A) was granted, the registrar at the study site collected a list of potential participants who met the criterion sampling specifics. There were 95 students who met the sampling criteria. An introductory e-mail (Appendix B), facilitated by the registrar, was sent to all potential participants to explain the purpose of the study and to gauge interest from students.

Students who expressed interest in participation were sent a link to an online questionnaire (Appendix C) to request background information and screen for study eligibility. Data fields collected the student's age, the highest level of formal education completed by each parent, race/ethnicity confirmation, languages spoken, commuter/resident status, and preferred method of contact. There were a total of 13 respondents to the qualifying questionnaire.

All respondents were contacted to schedule individual interviews, and meetings were set up and conducted with six participants. Interviews took place in person in most cases, but a phone interview was used for one participant who was not available to meet in person. According to Seidman (2019), interviews with participants are appropriate for phenomenological research because the method allows a better understanding of the lived experiences of individuals. Spradley (1979) further describes the value of the information participants can provide in interviews:

I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your

experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?
(p. 34)

For this study, interviews provided the most direct opportunity for Latinx students to voice their experiences with college transition.

The interviews were scheduled for approximately 45-60 minutes, to take place in a private conference room on campus. After the consent form was signed and general questions were been answered, the audio recording and interview began. In the case of the single phone interview, the signed consent form was collected through e-mail before the interview began. The interview protocol followed an introductory statement about the nature and purpose of the research.

Steps were taken to ensure the confidentiality and to protect the identities of participants in this study. A pseudonym was selected for each participant. These pseudonyms were used in the transcripts and in the final dissertation report. The only location of the actual participant names was on the informed consent forms. The eligibility questionnaire was conducted through a password-protected Qualtrics account to which I have the only access. The eligibility questionnaire did not request sensitive or extremely personal responses, and the only personally identifiable information was a contact phone number or e-mail address. After participants were selected, the eligibility questionnaire responses for participants were printed and stored along with the informed consent forms in a locked file cabinet in my home office. All records that included personally identifiable information will be destroyed one year after the study concludes.

Data Analysis

One of the hallmarks of hermeneutic phenomenology is that the analytic method is not rigid and should not be pre-determined (van Manen, 2015). However, van Manen's influence on education research has also led to standards and models that have been utilized in previous research utilizing this approach. Through reflexivity, the researcher may move in a hermeneutic circle, cycling between portions of the data and the whole of the data to discover phenomena, reflect on their meaning, and make interpretations (Langridge, 2007). During this reflection, the researcher may draw from prior experience and knowledge as an aid in interpreting the data, instead of attempting to bracket these influences.

Data analysis began by reading and coding the transcribed interviews. The inductive data coding was guided by the first-cycle and second-cycle coding techniques advocated by Saldaña (2015). Themes were developed through a cycling methodology of immersion, understanding, and abstraction (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Immersion involved repeated reading of the transcript. Understanding resulted from journal writing, reflection, and analytic memo writing. The abstraction step involved the development of themes using van Manen's "existentials" as guides: lived space (spatiality), lived body (corporeality), lived time (temporality), and lived human relation (relationality).

Urquhart (2013) defines saturation as "the point in coding when you find that no new codes occur in the data. There are mounting instances of the same codes, but no new ones" (p.194). Similarly, other researchers have considered saturation to be the point at which continued analysis of data does not lead to new emergent themes (Given, 2016;

Olshansky, 2015). For the present study, continued analysis of the interview transcripts did not result in new emergent themes. As a result, collection of data through additional interviews was not necessary.

Validation, Credibility, and Trustworthiness

My status as an outside observer posed some risk to the validity of this study. As a means to counteract any potential bias, I shared the resulting transcripts with participants to ensure that their stories and experiences were been represented accurately. Additionally, because a hermeneutic phenomenological study involves understanding and interpretation, I kept a reflexive journal to explore my own experiences and to acknowledge how my role fit with and affected the research (Laverty, 2003).

When a hermeneutic phenomenological approach is utilized, the demonstration of credibility and trustworthiness is critical because the researcher reflects on prior knowledge during analysis instead of attempting to bracket out these experiences (LeVasseur, 2003). As an additional practice of rigorous research, the decision trails of the researcher should be explicit in interpretive analysis (Koch, 1996). I attempted to make my decision trails clear in the research results by describing and acknowledging how my experiences and reflections guided the study, from the initial development of research questions, to data collection, and finally through the analysis process.

Study validation may also be supported through triangulation of data sources, methodologies, investigators, and theories (Denzin, 2012). For this study, data triangulation was achieved by collecting data from multiple individuals who may have different ways of processing and understanding the same experienced phenomenon. Methodical triangulation was incorporated by collecting different types of data.

Interviews provide rich data beyond verbal statements; gestures (e.g., nodding, leaning forward in chair, scowling), pauses, and tone of voice provided additional content for analysis that may either confirm or contradict information gathered from transcripts alone (Denham & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). Peer debriefing was utilized to aid in investigator triangulation. Finally, the use of a LatCrit framework to examine multiple existing theories of student transition provided theoretical triangulation.

The application of Denzin's (2012) categories of triangulation enhanced the validity of results while also promoting the attainment of data saturation. Fusch and Ness (2015) asserted that data triangulation and data saturation are inexorably linked, with each one assuring the other: "Triangulation is the way in which one explores different levels and perspectives of the same phenomenon" (p. 1141). The collection of thick and rich data may not guarantee saturation without collaborating, supportive methods designed to answer the research questions.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology for this research on the lived experiences of conditionally-admitted Latinx students. The research design was hermeneutic phenomenology. Data collection consisted of individual interviews. All participants self-identified as Latinx and were conditionally admitted during their first year at a public, 4-year university. The purpose of this study was to foster a deeper understanding of the experiences of Latinx students during their transition to college, especially those who are at a greater risk of leaving the institution.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

In October of the Fall 2019 semester, I sought to engage conditionally-admitted Latinx freshmen in a conversation about their college transition experiences. The purpose of this endeavor was to explore the complex experiences of these students and the factors that support or challenge their transition from high school to college. The findings from this chapter are based on analysis of a qualifying demographic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. In the first section of the chapter, a rich description is provided for each participant in brief profiles. A summary of the participant characteristics is presented in Table 1. The second section of this chapter addresses the themes and relevant codes that address each of the study's four research questions. Results of analysis relating to the individual research questions are presented in Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5. The emergent themes are illustrated using the words of the participants, as the presentation of findings were guided by a LatCrit framework, using narratives, *testimonios*, and counterstories. Fictitious names have been used for all people, cities, and colleges/universities mentioned in the study.

A total of 13 students completed the qualifying questionnaire that was distributed by the university registrar by e-mail. Of these 13 students, six participated in semi-structured interviews. In addition to sharing the selection criteria (Latinx, conditionally-admitted, freshman classification), all of the participants identified their ethnic heritage as Mexican-American. Because recognition of complex experiences and within-group differences is an essential tenet of a LatCrit framework (Valdes, 2002), this chapter

includes a narrative description of each of the six students presented. This form of presentation presents the participant “... in context, to clarify his or her intentions, and to convey a sense of process and time, all central components of qualitative analysis” (Seidman, 2019, p. 119). The varied backgrounds of the participants and their personal characteristics affect how they experience the shared phenomenon of college transition. These participant profiles also serve as a means to honor the histories and voices of the students.

Table 1

Summary of Participants

Participant	Characteristics
Natalia	Lives on campus Both parents earned college degrees Film Studies major
Sara	Lives on campus First-generation college student Social Work major
Raul	Lives with parents First-generation college student Biology major
Camila	Lives on campus First-generation college student Pre-Nursing major
Daniel	Lives on campus First-generation college student Criminal Justice major
Nicole	Lives with parents First-generation college student Political Science major

Note. All participants identified as Mexican-American

Participant Profiles

Natalia. The Garcia family immigrated to Texas from Mexico when Natalia was seven years old. Natalia remembers this period in her life as a difficult transition experience that has continued to affect how she adjusts to change: “I had depression at seven because I couldn’t speak English. I had a hard time making friends because it was a whole different culture. So I dressed differently, I moved differently than everyone else.”

Natalia initially began college at another public university in the state, about 150 miles from her home and the study site. She lived in an apartment with her older sister, but she still experienced the familiar feelings of isolation and depression because she was living off campus and her sister was working long hours. Natalia was majoring in biology at this university with the goal to eventually study dentistry, but she found that her high school education in math and science did not adequately prepare her for college coursework. After appealing to her parents, Natalia withdrew from college after the Fall 2018 semester, took the spring semester off, then enrolled at Travis University (the study site) for the Fall 2019 semester.

Natalia is the only participant in the study with a parent who completed a college degree. Both of her parents earned their degrees in Mexico before immigrating to the United States. Some of Natalia’s earliest memories are of her father working on his graduate studies and earning a master’s degree.

Natalia is now living at home with her parents in the same city where Travis University is located. Not only has she changed her choice of college and her living situation, but she has also switched to a new major – film studies. She is excited about her new goal to pursue a career making short films or music videos, and she is preparing

herself for the future adjustment she will face in seeking this dream: "... I'm kind of scared to leave. But if the opportunity comes, I will take it. I'll try to find the motivation to take it."

Sara. As the third sibling in her family to attend college, Sara benefits from the experiences of her older sister and brother. However, she was the first in her family to move away from home for school, as her sister attended a community college and her brother complete a program at a technical college close to home. Sara's parents and some of her teachers attempted to persuade her to begin her studies at the community college in her hometown, but she had strong feelings about enrolling at a 4-year university:

A lot of the stereotype with the area is if you go to [community college], you stay there and you don't really finish. Or you don't transfer because it's a 2-year college. You don't really transfer to a big university or something. So I tried to avoid that and push myself to be somewhere else.

Sara lives in a residence hall on campus, and she also has a built-in social network through her participation in the marching band. This group has provided an important sense of belonging for her, as she had only one high school classmate who also enrolled at Travis University, and they were signed up to be roommates. Leaving home for college proved to be a traumatizing experience for Sara's hometown friend, who ended up withdrawing at the end of her first day of class. Although she considers herself shy, Sara feels welcomed in the marching band and even finds comfort in quick, casual greetings from other members in passing between classes.

Participation in high school band was a factor in Sara's college application and enrollment decisions. She recounts that her high school guidance counselors focused on

students in the top quartile for meaningful college advice, and that students of color were almost always excluded from this opportunity. Her band directors encouraged Sara to attend the local community college, but when she explained her wish to enroll at a 4-year university, they let her know about various opportunities at institutions where they had connections to the band programs. One of her high school band directors helped her set up an audition at Travis University that resulted in a scholarship.

Raul. As the oldest sibling in his family and a first-generation college student, Raul struggled to fulfill his dream to go to college. Unlike several other participants in the present study, he did not benefit from the experiential knowledge of older siblings who attended college. In fact, his role as the oldest child requires a high level of attention to household responsibilities, in addition to his college and work commitments. His parents moved to Texas from Mexico before he was born, and his family serves as his primary motivation to succeed at Travis University:

I'm doing this for myself, and my parents want better things for me than they have been able to have for themselves, but mostly I want to make them proud.

And I want to be a good example for my sisters, my brother. I want them to know that I can do it, and that will make it easier for them when it's their turn.

Raul is determined to forge a path for his siblings to follow.

Raul describes his high school as one where college preparation was insufficient, and most students were encouraged to pursue vocational career opportunities. He was discouraged by a lack of information and support from his high school counselors, but a vocational advisor helped him research career options and suggested that he apply to Travis University. Although he does not have a specific professional goal, Raul has

chosen to major in biology as a precursor to a possible occupation in the medical field. He has been placed in a developmental math course, which he views as a bridge to fill the gaps between his high school preparation and his future math courses: “I think we’re learning some of the same math from high school, but I didn’t always pick it up back then. I think this class is putting me on the right track for success.” He acknowledges that he took the minimum number of math courses that were required for graduation from high school, and that he remembers little from those classes. Raul appreciates that his current developmental math instructor makes the content relatable, interesting, and easier to understand.

Raul lives at home with his family, just a few miles from campus. He keeps busy with a part-time job he has held for two years, and he is responsible for helping to care for his younger siblings. Because of these commitments, Raul takes a practical approach to his college studies. He is not engaged in social activities on campus and does not express interest in that aspect of the college experience. Regarding the freshman interest groups, he states: “Between classes, and work, and taking care of stuff at home ... I just don’t have time for extras. I mean, I can see where it’s probably helpful for students who came from other parts of the state or something, but I’m more focused on taking my classes and my other responsibilities.

Camila. When Camila, a pre-nursing student, arrived to the interview for the present study, she was speaking to her mother on her cell phone. She speaks to her parents by phone every day to maintain a strong family connection because she lives on campus, a one-hour drive from her hometown: “If I don’t talk to my mom, I feel like there’s something wrong with my day.” She initially considered enrolling at another

institution that is about 200 miles from home, but it was important for her to stay closer to home in case of an emergency, and the shorter distance makes her feel more emotionally connected to her parents.

Camila has an older brother, but she is the first person in her family to attend college. Her mother and father were supportive of her decision to attend college, but they struggled with her decision to leave home:

My mom was upset because I am her only daughter. But she was also happy because in our family, I would be the first RN and I am the first person to come to a university in my family. My dad was more like – he did not love it. He was like, you're my only daughter, you've never been away. This world, you know, there's so many people and it's like, you know, you're so innocent and you don't know much about life and stuff. And so my dad was more of like in denial of me leaving. I mean, he's kind of come to get used to it, but he still says he would have preferred for me to stay home and go to a community college.

Camila also doubted the decision during her first few weeks at Travis University, because she did not know anyone and felt isolated from her family. It was her mother who convinced her that she had made the right decision and should finish her degree at Travis University.

Unlike several of the other participants in the present study, Camila feels that her high school guidance counselor provided invaluable support. Camila struggled with personal and academic issues during her first year of high school. Her counselor helped her get back on track after that first year, but Camila still felt her goal to enroll at a 4-year university was insurmountable because of her earlier grades. With additional

encouragement from her counselor, she applied to Travis University, where the conditional-acceptance policy allows her to pursue academic achievement and full admission, despite having a high school GPA below the standard minimum requirement.

Daniel. Leaving home for college forced a difficult transition for Daniel's family, who live in the Rio Grande Valley, more than 400 miles from Travis University:

They talked the big talk about going to college, but I guess they didn't mean going AWAY to college (laughing). My mom especially, she was like, "Don't you think it would be better to go to Abbott College first, so you don't have to go away right away?" She made it like – I know she was worried about me, but I think she knew it would be even harder for her.

But she understood. I think she gets it, because she wants what's best for me, even if it's upsetting for her.

Daniel, however, had never considered attending the local community college. He looks forward to seeing his family in person during the holidays, but talking to his parents and siblings regular on the phone and through video chat has helped ease his homesickness.

The freshman interest groups on campus have provided Daniel with a strong sense of belonging. Because Travis University serves as a commuter campus for many local students, Daniel has noticed cliques of students who knew each other from high school and have extended their social networks into college. He notes that no one in his freshman interest group knew each other before enrolling at Travis University, which made it easier for him to make connections and forge friendships within this group. One of the local residents in his freshman interest group has even welcomed out-of-town students to dinners at home with her family. "Especially because living in the dorm is

nothing like home ... even though I'm not spending time with my family, there is this connection to family life, family time, feeling welcome there."

The freshman interest group has also served as an academic support for Daniel. The faculty and student advisors offer advice and have set up structured time for the group to study. In addition, this close-knit group, especially those who live on campus, meets up on their own several times a week to work on class assignments. Because of this support system, Daniel has not found it necessary to utilize academic services on campus, such as the tutoring or writing centers.

Unlike the other participants, Daniel grew up in a Latinx-majority community. He appreciates the diversity in the student body at Travis University, but notes that he does not see that same diversity in the faculty. Daniel describes his experience with exposure to different cultures as having a positive impact on his overall college experience and does not believe his ethnicity has affected his interactions with students, staff, or faculty.

Nicole. As a member of the third generation in her family to live in same area where Travis University is located, Nicole has strong ties to the community and her large extended family. Her older sister graduated from Travis University and was the first in her family to attend college. Nicole explains that there is a perception that Travis University is not a top-tier institution, but she but she is encouraged by the success of her sister, who is now attending law school and working at a respected law firm. In the hopes of achieving a similar outcome, Nicole is majoring in political science with plans to attend law school and eventually work as an attorney or lobbyist.

Not one to shy away from opportunities for networking, Nicole is involved in multiple activities both on and off campus. She describes these outside commitments

with the rushed authority of someone who has somewhere else she needs to be. She has pledged to a sorority, is a member of the Young Republicans organization, is working to reactivate the campus Young Republicans charter, serves on the student activities board, and is active in Engineers Without Borders. She was also a member of the student government association, but she gave up that activity as a concession to her physician's directive to cut back on her number of commitments when she suffered a brain aneurysm soon after beginning courses at Travis University.

She mentions the aneurysm casually while describing her exhaustive list of club activities and her part-time job, as if a medical emergency is a typical college freshman experience. Nicole insists that her busy schedule, which she describes as "a lot more laid back" than the many obligations she undertook in high school, is not affecting her recovery and health. "Apparently my doctor feels that I'm way too active and that I need to calm down, which I'm not used to doing." Immediately after recounting her physician's warning that she needs to reduce her level of stress, she excitedly chronicles the ongoing process for a community service project in which she is involved, and expresses disappointment that she will have to miss a convention the following weekend for yet another organization because she already has other commitments. After missing almost three weeks of class during her hospitalization and recovery, Nicole is anxious to make up for lost time.

Findings for Research Question One

There was one central, grand-tour question guiding this study: "How do first-time, conditionally-admitted Latinx students describe their transition from high school to college?" The first research question relating to this central question was "What external

supports have these students experienced?” This question was developed as a means to explore the positive experiences students report that have prepared them for the academic and social challenges of transition from high school to college. Participants were asked about encouragement, preparation, and support they may have received from different sources both before and during the transition process. Table 2 outlines the themes and specific codes that relate to this research question.

Table 2

Emergent Themes and Relevant Codes for Research Question One

Theme	Relevant Codes
Institutional Factors	Campus services Freshman interest groups Advisors Faculty
Precollege Experience	Academic preparation Encouragement from family Encouragement from others
Family Support	Support from siblings Support from parents

Institutional factors. Participants reported ways in which interventions, programs, or people affiliated with the institution provided varying levels of support during college transition. In some cases, such as Freshman Interest Groups, Travis University specifically developed programs to familiarize students with the campus and encourage social connections. Other institutional factors, such as staff interactions, were largely dependent on the situation and the individuals involved.

Several students described the positive impact of their interactions with the learning services center on campus. Camila recounted the assistance she received when

she struggled with a specific course. “The professor has an accent and it’s kind of hard to understand her and to learn from her because she teaches at a fast pace,” she explained.

“So I decided to go to the tutoring center and ask if they had tutoring for that class.”

Camila reported that the tutoring center has provided her with additional resources and strategies that she was not receiving in the course directly, which has improved her confidence and grades.

The staff at the learning center also introduced Camila to an additional resource she had not been utilizing. She was referred to the campus writing center, where she received assistance with grammar and composition for writing assignments for her English course. Camila noted that these learning services not only helped her gain proficiency in the skills that are important to college success, but they also served as an equalizing influence. “I feel like they give everybody the same opportunity and they don’t make a difference in who should be more successful and who shouldn’t be,” she said. For students who did not receive rigorous academic preparation in high school, university support services mitigate the opportunity gap experienced by historically marginalized groups.

Sara utilized the learning center to focus on strategies for success in all of her courses:

Miss Cooper helped me with learning different ways to study or learning how to take notes better. And also focusing on time management – she helped me built a whole schedule of every day because I have no time for anything. Even just for simple things like eating, to put it on my schedule and make sure I have time for that. She broke it down hour-for-hour every day.

Time management is an important skill for Sara to master because she intentionally stays very busy to avoid feeling homesick. In addressing this issue, the learning center supported an academic need and also aided in a healthy emotional coping strategy that supports Sara's successful college transition.

In Raul's case, the learning center provided a space outside of class where he could feel more comfortable asking for assistance:

I guess with the tutoring center, I know they aren't going to give me a grade. They are just there to help. I feel like with my professors, I don't want them to know what I don't know. Does that make sense?

Four of the six participants in this study asserted that the university-organized Freshman Interest Groups (Cavalier Community) provided one of, if not the most invaluable experience for new students during academic and social transition. Camila explained the impact of this program:

I feel like my best experience probably has been being a part of the Cavalier Community. I feel like since I know these students, because we're a small club or when we get together, I feel like time goes by faster than if I'm in my dorm studying or watching TV.

Daniel also praised the Cavalier Community as an integral support during college transition: "That has probably been – no, I know it has been the best – it has been the most helpful part of this whole experience." He added, "The stuff that I thought I would have in common with my roommate, the stuff we could talk about – that has happened with the Cavalier Community."

Especially in programs of study where students do not begin related coursework until their sophomore year or later, the Cavalier Community provides an early connection to faculty and experienced students in individual departments. “Not only do you meet people that are freshmen and in social work, which is kind of cool, but you also meet your professor, who you wouldn’t normally meet until your junior year,” Sara explained. Daniel described similar benefits:

The Cavalier Community has a student leader – a student who is near the end of the program – and we have a faculty mentor. So we are able to learn more about the program and have that kind of access before we are even eligible to take the official classes.

Assignment to an individual academic advisor was another important institutional support reported by participants. “I know my counselor is great,” Nicole remarked. “She always checks up on me and makes sure I don’t have any issues with any of my professors or classwork, and she’s always making sure I’m getting ready for registration.” Natalia also emphasized the importance of regular meetings with her advisor. “They check up on you, see how you’re doing in class, and give you resources.... He helped me learn about the resources that weren’t so obvious to me.” Raul reported that his advisor has been “checking up on me, asking how I’m doing in class, giving me some tips. Like reminding me that I need to ask for help when I need it. I’m not good about that.” Daniel described the difference between his experiences with counseling/advising in high school and at college: “That’s one thing that has definitely been better than with high school. My advisor actually checks up with me and has gotten to know me and has been really helpful with questions.”

Lastly, faculty assistance was frequently mentioned as consequential support provided by the institution. Nicole, who missed several weeks of class due to her medical issues, expressed gratitude for the flexibility faculty extended to her:

All of my professors have been great as far as working with me. All of them are allowing me to take my exams on a time that I'm able because I work.... All of my professors have been awesome with working with my work schedule and school schedule, for getting back to normal.

Sara credited the university for keeping freshman class sizes at a manageable size to encourage faculty and student interaction. "They try to keep their classes small so you actually get a chance to talk to the professor, because that has helped me out in most of my classes," she said. Camila also acknowledged the positive influence of her instructors:

I feel like they have helped transition because we're undergraduates, freshmen who have just got to university. So they have helped us transition by being a little more understanding of things. And they have also helped us by kind of giving us small talks here and there like, you know, you got to stay motivated, you got to try and nothing's impossible. Like if you need help, there's tutoring for everything or you have the writing centers. So they let you know what tools are available to you to make this easier.

Precollege experience. Several participants described academic, family, and social experiences during high school that readied them for the transition to college. In these cases, the influence of teachers, parents, siblings, and others served to bridge the gap between high school and college expectations. Understanding of the varied

precollege experiences of Latinx students may serve to inform both high school and college administrators of opportunities to maximize college preparation efforts.

Two of the six participants in this study reported that their high school courses prepared them for academic success in college. Both of these students, Nicole and Camila, were enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) and dual credit courses in high school. Nicole in particular described the high academic expectations of her high school teachers:

She was like, you just need to study everything you can, you need to read the book, you need to do outside tutoring, at-school tutoring. And I learned in my U.S. history class how to take notes the right way, how to study the right way.... And then my English class being dual credit, I learned how to analyze things the right way. I learned what verbiage to use. I learned to use grammar more properly than I did before. So I think everything I did my junior year was a lot more tedious, and I feel like now that I'm in college, it feels like I'm in my junior year of high school again, but now obviously I have more experience and I have better study habits, which has made it a lot easier for me.

Well before she enrolled at Travis University, Nicole gained valuable experience in balancing her social and family life with difficult academic expectations.

Camila also arrived at college confident in her ability to succeed in coursework. Although she struggled with separation from her family, she felt prepared to meet academic challenges:

My high school was an early college high school. So I did start off with a few college credits.... I do feel like that really did prepare me because I've been in

college already and I do feel like my high school courses also impacted me into being responsible.... You have to study and not just put it to the side and procrastinate about it.

All of the participants described high levels of encouragement from their parents to attend college. The parents of these students urged their children to attain the highest level of education possible, often because they themselves did not have an opportunity to attend college. For the one participant whose parents did graduate from college, the impetus for this encouragement was financial stability: “He wanted me to live a comfortable life,” Natalia explained regarding her father. “He wants me to have a nice house, a nice car, things like that – so he doesn’t have to worry about me when he’s gone.”

The participants who were first-generation college students described the encouragement from their families as a desire to see their children earn college degrees. The benefit of education itself was prized more highly than the possible financial advantages. Nicole emphasized this point in describing her father:

So my dad didn’t even finish grade school. He was originally from Mexico, and when he came over to the United States, I think he was 15 years old.... He always told himself, “When I have kids, I’m going to push them to be more than what I was.” He said the only way he would ever be happy with how he raised us would be if we graduated from college, whether it be as four-year degree or a master’s or a doctoral.... So my dad always pushed us to not just be content with what we are now, but to continue going further until we reach our full capacity.

Natalia's mother was open with her daughters about changing educational expectations and aspirations for women in Latinx cultures: "So I know in the Mexican households, and the Hispanic households in general, the wife tends to not work or go to college," she explained. "Well nowadays it's changing a lot, and my mom is – she's not in agreement with the Hispanic wife not working.... So you need to push to always be your best, and she is not content with a four-year degree."

Encouragement from Raul's parents also stemmed from a desire to make the most of opportunities in a new country. "My parents always talked about college and taking advantage of the opportunities we have that they didn't have growing up," he said. "My parents are from Mexico, and I think when they came here they realized that they maybe didn't have the best opportunities, but things could be different for us – for their kids."

Finally, although some participants did not feel their high school academic experience adequately prepared them for college-level coursework, most did have at least one high school teacher, counselor, or advisor who provided encouragement and assistance with applying for college. Raul remembered an advisor for vocational programs who stepped outside his normal area of expertise to lend assistance. "I was interested in doing something in the medical field, but I didn't know what options are out there," he explained. "He told me about some careers I didn't know about."

Daniel described a teacher who was able to use his professional connections with Travis University to help during the admissions process. "I think he made some calls for me, not that he pulled any strings or anything," Daniel laughed. "... he actually helped me apply on a computer in his classroom." Similarly, Sara's high school band directors

utilized their professional network to help her set up an audition, which resulted in a scholarship award.

Family support. Most participants reported ongoing encouragement and advice from family members as an important factor in their emotional well-being and determination to succeed in college. Sara relied on support and information about the college experience from her older sister. “She told me there’s going to be moments when it’s kind of difficult ... It just shows how much you’re willing to push through those kinds of things.” Similarly, Natalia described her older sister as being “very supportive of me continuing my education and helping me out in school.”

Camila also drew inspiration from a sibling; in her case, a younger brother is enrolled in college-level courses while in high school. He consistently reminds Camila that he can succeed, and that she can too. “I feel like he’s a person who has helped me a lot through this transition,” she reported.

Other students described the motivating impact of their parents. “My parents have been behind me 100%,” Daniel said. “They’re always saying stuff like ‘You are making us proud’ or reminding me that I have what it takes, building me up like that.”

Raul also described the importance of emotional support from his parents:

I mean, even though they aren’t helping me with school stuff, I know they are always there for me. They tell me they are proud of me, stuff like that. My mom especially asks me questions about my classes, about my professors, the other students. I know she really is interested. I guess it makes me feel good about what I’m doing, about the sacrifice if you can call it that.

Findings for Research Question Two

The second research question asked, “What liabilities impede transition for these students?” This question was developed to explore the specific challenges conditionally-admitted Latinx students face during college transition. Participants were pointedly asked about difficulties they have encountered, but other liabilities emerged in the overall discussion of their college transition experiences. Three themes related to this research question emerged during coding and analysis of the transcripts. Table 3 summarizes these themes and the relevant codes.

Table 3

Emergent Themes and Relevant Codes for Research Question Two

Theme	Relevant Codes
Facing Challenges	Attendance Financial issues Discrimination
Feeling (Dis)Connected	Leaving home Making friends
Precollege Experience	Academic preparation Encouragement from others

Facing challenges. The theme “facing challenges” specifically addresses the adversities participants faced during the college transition process. Several probing questions were included in the interview protocol to prompt discussion about some of the challenges students faced in their first few weeks at college. The participants described academic, financial, and social barriers that caused ongoing frustration.

Sara, Daniel, and Natalia reported struggles with class attendance. “Sometimes it’s hard just to even find the motivation to go to class,” Daniel admitted. “It’s so easy to

find something else to do, even though you know you're going to regret it." Sara also explained that although "towards the beginning of the year it was going great," she has lost that initial momentum and motivation to attend class.

Natalia went into more detail about the reasons for her decreased attendance in class: "You're not really forced to go to class, like they're not going to call your parents if you're not there. So I just kind of took that to heart and wouldn't go to class." This statement highlights the difficulties students encounter with the sudden loss of external motivation (pressure from parents) to go to school/class. She added that her interest in attending individual courses varies: "In classes where I don't like the teacher or I don't have any friends, I kind of have a hard time going to them, or I need the motivation to go."

Raul cited finances as a difficult challenge during college transition:

I still work at the same job I've had since high school, so that takes up a lot of my time, but's something that's expected, and it's important so I can – I need a car to get to school, and I need to pay for as much as I can because there are opportunities my younger brother and sister need too.

For Raul, the challenges of outside work commitments, familial obligation, and financial pressure are intertwined.

Natalia also reported that she felt a guilt during college transition because of the financial stress placed on her parents by her college enrollment. She felt that her family had fallen between the cracks in the financial aid process:

I wish they would have like a bigger net for financial aid, because some people, even though it seems like they have money – we're still struggling to pay things

off. Things happen. Like my mom had the surgery, I got in a car accident and it got totaled. But since it wasn't my fault, the car was paid off. But we still had the burden of getting a new car. I didn't have a car for a while and it affected my attendance and my grades. I just wish it was easier for financial aid to help out other students that, you know, when it's not obvious.

As a result of the guilt she felt for her parents' financial situation, Natalia overextended her own resources. "I'm always worried about money and gas, if I want to buy anything, and being in debt because I didn't have a job for a month," she said. "So I got a credit card, you know? And I owe a lot of money."

Another liability Natalia reported experiencing during transition was discriminatory behavior from a course instructor:

I had like to report a teacher because he was bullying me in class. And my other friend, who – we're both people of color. And he is a white man. And I've had really bad problems with him getting on to me for little things to the point where one day it led to me having a panic attack because of him targeting just me. I took it to my advisor and my advisor took it to the dean of students and I've had meetings trying to get out of the class because I couldn't handle being in the same room as him, because it got too bad.

This experience cast a shadow over Natalia's overall college experience: "It made me kind of iffy about college in itself," she said. "I didn't want it to affect me or my views on it. But ultimately it did."

Although other participants did not experience being direct targets of discrimination, several reported witnessing racism on campus. Camila described another

student who was “considering leaving the university, to try to transfer to a different school because he says there’s just too many African-American people.” Raul noticed that international students were frequently targets of discrimination. “I have heard people making comments about international students, like who might be from Asian or I guess Arab countries or something, and maybe there are assumptions about their cultures,” he said. “It’s probably something some people have never been around before, but maybe that’s something college will help with, that experience of being around people who are different.”

Feeling (dis)connected. Although several participants described their relationships with family as an important support during college transition, these connections complicated college transition for students who left home for college. Sara explained, “It’s kind of lonely. But that’s just me being close to my family. ... That’s just kind of a moving away thing that I expected.” Camila reported similar feelings of feeling isolated from her family: “I feel like at the beginning I did feel a little bit of regret just because I’m really attached to my mom. And I feel like, you know – I came here, and there’s nobody. I don’t know anybody.” Daniel also described the challenge of coping with college transition while away from his family:

I would say that, dealing being on my own a lot of the time when I’m used to having my brother and sister and family around. I probably thought I wanted to get away from that, but now I miss it.

Some participants also recounted the challenges they encountered in trying to forge new connections by making friends on campus. “I kind of had a hard time adjusting because I’m not the greatest at making friends,” Natalia explained. “So I kind of got

depressed because I didn't see anyone." She compared college transition to her experience of moving to the United States as a child and trying to form new friendships: "It's not that easy for me to move and adjust quick because the first time I moved, I moved from Mexico to America ... that kind of reminded me a lot of that."

Daniel and Camila arrived on campus with expectations that they would form friendships with their roommates. "I thought I would have a roommate who is going through pretty much the same thing, and we would have that in common, you know?" Daniel said. "So my roommate's home is only about an hour away, so he goes home most weekends, he's hardly ever around, and we don't really have much in common." Camila reported a similar experience:

I did think that, you know, that I was going to have a lot more friends. I did think that me and my roommate would have a better relationship. I would think, I don't know anybody, you don't know anybody. It would be like a common thing for me, I would think, you know, hey, what's your schedule like? I don't want to eat lunch by myself. When can you eat lunch? And I got something completely different. My roommate does not like to talk at all. I haven't spoke to her since we moved in or anything. She's just completely like on her own. . . . I expected people to be more social and try to make friends.

For these students, the difficulty of leaving behind family and friends at home is compounded by the challenge of making new connections.

Precollege experience. While some participants credited their high schools for providing an important foundation for college transition, Natalia and Raul were disappointed by the lack of preparation they received for college-level coursework. "I

was not very good at science because of high school, because I didn't have good teachers," Natalia explained. "And I guess they kind of failed me coming here or to go to college. ... I had a hard time keeping up with a lot of courses."

Raul also felt that his high school did not provide enough preparation for college success: "I don't think my high school was one where – There are other schools where a lot of the students go to college. My high school wasn't like that. Some students might want it, but it usually doesn't happen." He lamented that the high schools where interventions are most needed are those that end up with the fewest resources:

I guess it would help if it was possible to learn more about getting started while you're still in high school. I don't know if they would just do that at the better high schools though, where more students go to college. I think it's the other high schools – the schools where nobody expects you to go anywhere in life – those are where students need the most help, like a helping hand to make a better life. That's where I'm coming from.

Although Sara felt that teachers at her high school provided the high levels of academic support necessary for successful college transition, the guidance counselors did not provide equitable support for all students:

Actually talking to her about college and application stuff, I'd never really talked to her about that because she mainly focused on the top 10 percent and where they were going and how they were doing and their SAT scores and all this. This sounds horrible to say, but the minorities were like the lower people.

Raul described a similar experience with lack of encouragement from his high school guidance counselors: "They didn't really talk about college to us, unless maybe

you were in the top whatever percent, and I wasn't," he explained. "The only times I talked to my counselor was about scheduling my classes."

In addition, Raul reported a lack of encouragement from his friends at home:

Some of my friends were happy about me coming here, but a lot of my friends aren't going to college, and they would – it was sort of teasing, but maybe jealousy too. They would tell me I'm acting like I'm too good for them, or that I don't want to hang out with them anymore.

Findings for Research Question Three

The third research question asked, "What coping strategies do these students employ?" While the first research question focused on external factors that supported the students during college transition, this question explored the self-initiated actions participants undertook to improve their academic performance and emotional well-being during the first few months of college. This question was developed in recognition of the important role the individuals take during transition to college; they should not be considered passive bystanders who rely on support from others. Table 4 outlines the themes and specific codes that relate to this research question.

Table 4

Emergent Themes and Relevant Codes for Research Question Three

Theme	Relevant Codes
Academic Self-concept	College academics Personal traits Goal setting
Feeling Connected	Family High school friends Institution

Academic self-concept. This theme addresses the way participants described their own academic achievement and goals. The students in the present study judged their achievement based on grades, motivation, and study habits. The participants also described their professional and other goals as motivation to succeed in college.

Sara highlighted the anxiety new college students feel when they do not yet know how college academic expectations may differ from those in high school. “I expected the worst, so I was expecting I was going to fail or be close to failing,” she explained. “But I’m actually doing really good. I think probably one of my lower grades are Bs. And so I’m kind of surprised more than anything. But I think I’m doing pretty good.”

Daniel also recognized the gap between high school and college academic expectations:

In high school, we had so much time for assignments, and our teachers went through every single step and told us exactly how to prepare for tests. I don’t think we would have passed if they didn’t, and we did learn a lot. It’s just different at Travis. You can’t get by the same way you did in high school, just studying for a few minutes on the bus or whatever.

Despite the increased educational rigor, he remained confident in his performance.

“Yeah, my grades have actually been really good, other than U.S. history,” he admitted.

“I’m going to try to bring up my grade in that class, but other than that, I’m doing ok.”

Of all of the participants, Nicole was most confident in her ability to succeed in her courses because the high expectations that were placed on her during high school.

“Honestly, I feel like I’m going good right now in all of my coursework because I haven’t found that it’s hard for me,” she explained. “I think it’s just because I’ve learned

to juggle schoolwork and extracurricular for about three years now, so I feel like I'm actually doing a lot better in college than I was in high school."

Several participants attributed successful college transition at least in part to their personal traits, including motivation, self-accountability, and ambition. Daniel described his intrinsic motivation to complete his degree:

I guess I feel like I have something to prove. Something to prove to myself, and to people who think I won't make it. I know what I'm capable of, and I just have to prove that I can do it, that I'm not going to give up or drop out. I don't think about anything else, any other option. I don't have a backup plan, and I don't want to feel like I have that – like a safety net. Even if it doesn't get better, or if it gets even harder, it's just a few years of sacrifice right now. After that, I have options. That's what motivates me.

Raul also described strong intrinsic motivation, but he focused on benefits that would be gained by his family. "I mean, I'm doing this for myself, and my parents want better things for me than they have been able to have for themselves, but mostly I want to make them proud," he explained. "And I want to be a good example for my sisters, my brother. I want them to know that I can do it, and that will make it easier for them when it's their turn," he added.

Nicole recognized that she has strong persistence in her drive to achieve academic and personal goals. Her motivation is tied to her future career plans:

I'm very dedicated and I'm very ambitious, so whatever college I would have gone to, I would keep those same traits and work towards the goals that I have

always wanted to accomplish, which is becoming a lawyer and maybe going into politics one day.

Because Camila struggled with separation from her family, she often described college as a sacrifice she needs to make for an eventual benefit. “So after college, I do hope to get my degree and be an RN, but I want to be an RN specifically for the baby's NICU,” she said. “I want to dedicate most of my time to my job. So I feel like if I went to school four years it's for something I'm passionate about.”

Camila was very deliberate in setting specific goals that will be achieved through her attainment of a degree. She plans to buy a home for herself, but she added that she also wants to buy a car for her mother “because I feel like she deserves something in return for all the hard work she's done for me.” Her close relationship with her mother is intertwined with her motivation for both immediate and long-term goals:

I feel like one personality trait that I feel like impacts me a lot is I like to dream big. I have determination. . . . My mom has always told me, if you dream big, your dreams can scare you a little bit, but everything's possible. So that's why I feel like when people tried to talk me down saying that, “oh, nursing is a really hard career to pursue,” I'll just try to remember, like what my mom says – If your dreams scare you, then you know you're dreaming big enough for yourself and it's possible – other than dreaming small, and it's not getting you anywhere. So I feel like being determined and having that visualization of myself being successful and being able to travel and doing something that I'm passionate about, I feel like determination is something that has really had a big impact on my life. And that's what's helped me here at school.

Feeling connected. The theme “feeling connected” describes the types of relationships students make and maintain during their transition to college. The types of connections participants described included family, community, friends, and the institution. This theme relates to the first research question in instances when the participating students described connections as having a positive impact on the college transition experience.

Students who continue to live with their parents while attending college can more easily maintain familial bonds. While they still face other challenges of college transition, they remain grounded by a home life that is relatively unchanged. Nicole, for example, is very close to both her immediate and extended family. She considers this trait as integral to her Latinx culture: “So being a Hispanic family, we hold family values very closely to us. So we try to stay home as much as possible and stay close to home.” She keeps a busy schedule, but living with her parents provides frequent opportunities to spend time with family. Amidst the many changes she experiences through college transition, her home life remains constant.

We always try to eat dinner together at least two or three times a week, whether we bring a friend, or—there are five of us, three sisters, including me, and my mom and my dad. So whether it’s just us five or my sister has something to do or I have something to do, we always try to meet two or three times a week for dinner. If we aren’t able to do that, we always at least watch a movie together, we socialize once we’re home, we have a group message, so we always check up on each other and the group message includes my uncles and my aunts and stuff.

We're very, very family oriented, so anytime we're able to do stuff together, we do.

For students who move away from home for college, maintaining bonds with family is more difficult but important effort. Daniel reported that he speaks to his parents on the phone or through text a few times a week, although the conversations with his father are more brief. "My dad's not one for talking on the phone, but I talk to my mom quite a bit, and my dad will get on the line to ask me, 'How's class? How's work? Do you need money?'" Daniel also video chats with his sister through facetime.

When Camila, a pre-nursing student, arrived to the interview for the present study, she was speaking to her mother on her cell phone. She speaks to her parents by phone every day to maintain a strong family connection because she lives on campus, a one-hour drive from her hometown: "If I don't talk to my mom, I feel like there's something wrong with my day." She initially considered enrolling at another institution that is about 200 miles from home, but it was important for her to stay closer to home in case of an emergency, and the shorter distance makes her feel more emotionally connected to her parents.

Participants also sought to maintain connections with high school friends. In Natalia's case, her childhood friends still live at home but make an effort to visit her at college. "They knew I was upset and I was lonely," she explained, "so they would try to come see me." Some of Raul's high school classmates also stayed home to attend Travis University, and seeing them on campus provides a sense of familiarity. "Sometimes I see students I knew from high school, and we might just say 'hey' or sometimes stop and

catch up.” Maintaining these connections eases the transition to making new friends in unfamiliar surroundings.

Several participants also reported ways in which they made the effort to form a connection to the institution in their first few weeks of attendance. Sara credited the band program as the factor that has made the most positive impact on her transition to college: “I think that’s the only reason I’m doing better than someone who isn’t, because I got involved in the band program. And so that’s helping a lot.” As a marching band member, she arrived to campus a week before other students, moving into the residence hall early and participating in marching drills for several hours a day. The band program provided an immediate social network and an opportunity to meet both continuing and new students before most other students arrive to campus on the first day of class. “With band, they’re very welcoming, like a lot of them are very welcoming. And even if I get random ‘hi’s’ and I’m like, I don’t even know your name, but ‘hi.’ The marching band is small enough that Sara can bond within small groups, such as within her instrument section, but large enough that she regularly runs into other members on campus. A random greeting between classes can reinforce a connection to the institution.

Nicole also reported feeling a strong connection to the campus because of her involvement in several student organizations. Like Sara, Nicole forged this connection to the institution as soon as she arrived. “Since the first week of school I have tried my hardest to get the Young Republicans started back up on campus,” she explained. In fact, Nicole’s main ongoing conflict is the struggle to reduce her connection to the institution through the time commitment of participating in several clubs and groups. “I wanted to be on the freshman committee for SGA, but my doctor said I had to let some things go,”

she lamented. “My doctor said I need to stop being a part of too many organizations on campus, because he’s pretty sure that’s what caused my vein to pop.”

Findings for Research Question Four

The final research question asked, “How can institutions improve the transition experience for this student group?” The purpose of this question was to include student perspectives about institutional interventions that are not sufficient or have not been implemented at all. Research question one addressed external supports experience by participants, and institutional factors emerged as a common theme reporting by the students in this study. Research question four, however, provided participants with an opportunity to evaluate the efficacy of the institutional factors they noticed in their transition experience. The interview questionnaire also included a prompt to solicit ideas from participants about institutional interventions that were not experienced at all but may have provided additional support.

Table 5

Emergent Themes and Relevant Codes for Research Question Four

Theme	Relevant Codes
Facing Challenges	Discrimination Financial issues Roommates Emotional journey
Institutional Factors	Diversity Freshman interest groups

Facing challenges. This theme also emerged from analysis of the transcripts for research question two, regarding liabilities and obstacles participants faced during college transition. For that question, the findings were related to challenges that resulted from

any source. For research question four, this theme specifically applies to factors that are under some amount of control by the educational institution.

As was previously described in the findings for research question two, some students reported experiences with racial or ethnic discrimination, either as personally experienced or witnessed on campus. Natalia described being targeted for constant reprimand by a white, male instructor. Although she was pleased with the response of her advisor and administration at the university when she reported the behavior, she recognized that similar instances may go unreported, and that the university should provide all students with clear protocols for reporting any instances of discrimination.

Before that incident, I was doing fine. And then that incident happened. And I felt like the people that were in a position of authority, they helped me out a lot. But I wasn't alone, because another girl in my class – another woman of color – she was going through the same thing, and we stood up for ourselves together. Like I said earlier, I'm usually pretty shy, and maybe I wouldn't have said anything if it was just happening to me. What would have happened then? I would probably be afraid to go to class, and I would end up failing. There's no way this is the first time this happened.... Students need to know they will be supported, that someone will believe them if they have to report a professor.

According to Fall 2018 enrollment data from Travis University's office of international student services, international students make up approximately 5% of the total student population at Travis University, with most of these students coming from South Asia. Although Raul did not describe being the target of any discriminatory behavior, he frequently witnessed international students being targeted by other students.

“I think some students are rude to the international students, though,” Raul said. “I think Travis University should try to do something about it, instead of just throwing everyone together and hoping it works out.”

The experiences of Natalia and Raul exemplify some of the challenges Latinx students face with discrimination in their daily lives on campus. Natalia confronted her situation by contacting her academic advisor and university administration, but she acknowledged that she may have remained silent if another student of color had not shared her experience. She and her classmate found encouragement in each other to address the bias. Raul witnessed racial discrimination, but did not comfortable speaking up in the moment. As a student of color, he may have felt that he could also become a target of harassment by drawing attention to himself. Both Natalia and Raul emphasized the need for the university to address issues of discrimination and harassment on campus.

Several participants also reported the challenges they faced with the financial hardship of attending college and expressed that the institution should do more to prepare students for this difficult aspect of college transition. Daniel felt that Travis University should help fill the gap for the lack of financial aid information some students receive in high school:

Now that I’m here, I’m finding out from other students that they got financial aid opportunities because they’re Latino. They didn’t help us with that at my high school, and I guess they should have, but I wish Travis University would tell Latino students about that when they apply, when there is still time before you get here.

Natalia also expressed disappointment that the university could not do more to assist with financial aid. Her parents' salaries disqualified her from need-based aid, but her parents could not afford to pay for all of her college expenses. As a result, Natalia has already started accumulating debt to pay for living expenses. "I feel like I'm caught in the middle – I couldn't get financial aid, but my family can't afford to pay for everything," she explained. "I know the university can't help everyone with expenses, and I don't even know what they could do, but I feel like I'm on my own with this." Daniel and Natalia recognized that the university has limited funds for scholarships and aid, but they assert that more can and should be done to make information available about college expenses and options for financial assistance early in the admissions process. The financial hardship faced by these students and their families complicate the transition process by adding an additional burden to the academic and social changes experienced by all students during their first year in college.

For some participants, dramatic changes in their living arrangements created an unexpected strain during their first few weeks at college. Both Daniel and Camila moved into the on-campus residence hall and described the challenge of living with a roommate who is not compatible. "The university said they would do their best to match us with a roommate, but we have nothing in common," Daniel said. There has to be a better way to match up roommates." Camila reported a similar experience. "I feel like the only thing I dislike about the university is their matching for the roommates," she said. "I feel like they don't do a very good job of matching because my roommate in my case is a complete opposite." Daniel and Camila spoke at length about the disconnect between their expectations and actual experiences with roommates, as detailed in the "feeling

(dis)connected” theme for research question two. Both participants tasked the university with improving the process of roommate assignments.

Participants also discussed the challenge of the emotional journey taken during college transition and the role the university might take in easing this difficult aspect during their freshman year. Daniel explained how the university was not addressing this need in his experience:

I don't mean to make it sound like I'm sad or depressed or anything, but it's quieter than what I'm used to. Lonely is the best word to describe it I guess. It's not something I expected, and maybe Travis University doesn't see it as an issue because they focus so much on the students who are involved in everything and who are outgoing. Even when I talk to an advisor, they ask if I'm going to class, if I'm getting extra help if I need it, but I wish they would understand that's not the hardest part of all of this.

Sara also detailed the emotional turmoil some new students experience and the need for the institution to address the issue:

I feel like there should be more awareness on how not only it affects students mentally and physically because they're moving and everything, but more awareness to mental health issues, because I know my roommate, she would have panic attacks because she did not want to be here and stuff like that. And so before she moved out – and yes, that there is help on campus and she talked to people, but I guess it wasn't enough. And also just teaching people that this might happen to you, and if it does, you need to talk to someone.

Daniel and Sara revealed the struggle many students in transition experience with emotional and mental health issues. The pressure of adjusting to college life without their usual support system in place is extremely difficult, especially for students who are not aware of access to mental health counseling or choose not to pursue this resource.

Institutional factors. The theme of institutional factors relates to issues over which Travis University has direct control. The only code where a participant mentioned as an area where improvement is needed is in faculty diversity. Although most participants specifically complimented the racial and ethnic diversity of the student body, Daniel noticed that the same could not be said about the university's faculty.

Yeah, I do see diversity in the students at Travis, but – no, you don't see as much diversity with the professors. At my schools in the Valley – my elementary, middle, high school – most of the students were Hispanic, and most of our teachers were Hispanic too. So it probably wasn't all that diverse. But here – at Travis there's a lot of diversity in the students, but most of the professors I have and the ones I've met are white, or some Asian.... There should be more black professors, more Hispanic professors. That's important too, for role models, for examples of what we can achieve.

Summary

A profile of each participant and a summary of participant demographics served as an introduction to this chapter. These rich descriptions of participants were followed by a presentation of the findings for each research questions, presented in the participants' own words to the extent this was possible. The first research question was posed to explore the external supports that aided the participating students during their

transition from high school to college. The influences of institutional factors, precollege experience, and family support emerged as prevalent themes. The second research question was designed to address the liabilities that impeded transition to college. The themes that emerged included unexpected challenges students faced after they arrived at college, the struggle to build and maintain connections with others, and precollege experiences that negatively impacted preparation for college-level academics. The third research question investigated the coping strategies participants relied on to manage the difficulties of the transition experience. The academic self-concepts and the importance of connections to friends, family, and the institution described by participants emerged as themes for this question. The fourth research question was intended to prompt participants to suggest ways the institution can improve the transition experience. The specific challenges students faced and faculty demographics emerged as themes in this discussion.

CHAPTER V

Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the complex experiences of conditionally admitted Latinx students during their transition from high school to a public 4-year, public university. In this chapter, each research question is reviewed and answered. In addition, recommendations for future research are offered.

In following a LatCrit framework (Solórzano, 1998), this discussion of findings is influenced by several of the same tenets that guided the research design and organization of findings. LatCrit emphasizes the within-group differences among Latinx populations (Valdes, 2002), and the divergent experiences of participants will be noted in this chapter. In addition, the tradition of counterstorytelling will be incorporated, giving voice to participant experiences that contradict with the stated goals of the institution (Pérez Huber, 2010). Finally, LatCrit addresses the tendency of educational institutions to focus on deficit-based models of student achievement instead of emphasizing the different forms of knowledge Latinx students hold. In this chapter, Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model will serve as a guide to examine the assets from which Latinx students can draw improve their transition process and to transform the institution itself.

Discussion of Research Question One

The first research question asked focused on the external supports that participants reported as having a positive impact on the college transition process. Participants were asked about sources of encouragement, preparation, and assistance they may have received both before and during the transition process. Three themes emerged

from analysis of the interview transcripts with six participants. The relevant themes included institutional factors, precollege experience, and family support.

Institutional factors. This theme related to interventions and support that were provided by the university. Several participants described the positive impact of utilizing on-campus resources such as the learning center, individual tutoring sessions, and the writing lab. For example, Camila recounted her experience with visiting the learning center when she was falling behind in a difficult course. The learning center scheduled tutoring for the course and also directed her to the writing lab, where she received assistance with writing assignments for another course.

Sara and Raul also related positive experiences with the on-campus learning center. Sara described the importance of using this resource to learn strategies and skills that could be applied in all of their courses, such as time management. Raul pointed out that the learning center provided an atmosphere where he felt more comfortable asking questions, without worry of revealing to his professors that he was struggling. Camila pointed out that these campus services provided an equalizing influence for students who may not have received adequate academic preparation during high school. This sentiment was also expressed in the findings of Duncheon (2018), where Latinx students who did not receive rigorous high school academic preparation relied on supportive staff and faculty on their college campus to draw upon the aspirational and navigational capital needed to persevere. In Duncheon's study, Latinx students sought out mentors and attended tutoring to overcome gaps in their previous educational opportunities. This observation contrasted with previously accepted findings that

underprepared and underrepresented students are less likely to seek outside help with coursework (Hurtado et al., 2007).

The difference in findings in both the Dunccheon (2018) research and the present study may be attributed at least in part to the participants being Latinx. In utilizing a LatCrit framework to analyze these findings, we are reminded of the tendency to perpetuate deficit-informed methods that focus on achievement gaps for students of color instead of emphasizing their complex backgrounds and experiences as assets (LatCrit Primer, 2000). Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model provides an asset-based guide for understanding how Latinx students may draw from aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital to succeed in aspects of college transition where other students may struggle.

For example, most of the participants noted that teachers and/or guidance counselors did not prepare them for the academic expectations of college, and all have been conditionally admitted to the university because they did not meet the established admissions requirements. In a traditional, cultural capital viewpoint (Bourdieu, 1986), these students would be deemed to be critically at risk of failing courses or leaving the institution because they were not well-versed in the dominant (Anglo-American) cultural capital. Recall how Raul hesitated to ask questions in class, because he didn't want his instructor to know that he had never been exposed to the subject that was being discussed. In cultural capital framework, this deficit would figure prominently in a discussion of Raul's potential to persist and complete his degree.

However, from the viewpoint of the Community Cultural Wealth Model (Yosso, 2005), all participants in the study drew from cultural capital to overcome academic

challenges. Raul utilized familial capital in reminding himself that he is making sacrifices for the benefit of his family, just as his parents made sacrifices of time, comfort, and finances to open opportunities for him. Daniel demonstrated aspirational capital when he remained positive despite some disappointing grades in his history class. He recognized that his lax study habits that got him by in high school would no longer work, and he was confident that he was capable a stronger effort. Camila also drew from aspirational capital for setting clear goals for future professional and personal achievements. Nicole relied on navigational capital to seek support from her instructors after falling behind on coursework due to a medical emergency. Sara utilized resistant capital to summon the courage to report discriminatory treatment from a course professor, demonstrating her innate power to transform an oppressive environment. A deeper understanding of this cultural wealth should inform institutional practices in academic support.

Four of the six participants in this study described their Freshman Interest Group participation as a critical aspect in their successful academic and social integration at the university. While some institutions combine course linking (registering students in the same sections of two or more courses) with their Freshman Interest Group programming, the groups at Travis University serve more as an extended orientation course to facilitate access to campus resources and to promote strategies for academic and social support throughout the first year of enrollment. Students within the same Freshman Interest Group are not necessarily enrolled in other courses together, but the program was developed to provide holistic support (e.g., academic skills, time management, self-assessment) to first-year students. The positive experiences of the participants in this study confirm the findings of previous research that extended orientation courses and

first-year-experience seminars provide opportunities for students to discuss the challenges of adjustment to college life as they arise during the critical first weeks and months of enrollment (Reid et al., 2014).

In addition, this extended group orientation model of the Freshman Interest Group provided opportunities for social interaction and emotional support between classmates experiencing similar challenges with college transition (Ang et al., 2019). Peer-to-peer interaction as a means of academic support is effective in increasing retention for first year students (Altermatt, 2016). Deliberately designed programs that encourage collaboration between students promote retention because the social interaction between peers naturally extends into the college community (Woosley et al., 2011).

Four participants in the present study credited their academic advisor as an important source of academic support. Nicole, Natalia, Raul, and Daniel all mentioned that their advisor proactively checks in with them, instead of waiting for their assigned students to approach them when an issue occurs. Natalia expressed her gratitude to her advisor for encouraging her to seek additional academic supports and resources on campus outside of her courses. Acevedo-Gil (2019) emphasized the importance of academic advising for first-year Latinx students and included recommendations for practice for proactive advising for this student group. These recommendations included early outreach to aspiring college attendees and building trusting relationships with students over time. Acevedo-Gil acknowledged that policy and funding changes would be necessary to increase the number of college counselors and academic advisors available to meet with students. Although advisors at Travis University do not have the large number of staff that would be needed for early outreach in high schools, students who are

enrolled are assigned to an advisor so they can build rapport and trust. This practice supported participants in the present study.

Nicole and Sara described their course instructions as approachable and helpful. Nicole depended on flexibility and understanding from her instructors as she caught up on assignments after her medical emergency, and she confirmed that all were extremely accommodating. Nicole credited the university for keeping class sizes small to encourage interaction between faculty and students. She reported her instructors as being very understanding of the struggles of new college students. Likewise, participants in the Duncheon (2018) study described their instructors as helpful and supportive.

However, not all participants in the present study described positive interactions with faculty. Camila and Raul both noted that they sought assistance from the campus learning center because they felt intimidated by the idea of approaching their instructors for extra help. Both of these participants believed their questions would affect their instructor's perception of their academic ability, so they felt more comfortable seeking outside assistance for assistance with academic strategies and specific course-related tutoring. Their experience echoed the dominant finding from previous research that underprepared and underrepresented students are more likely to view their instructors as unapproachable (Hurtado et al., 2007). The conditions that affect whether this student group will seek academic support and the types of support with which they are most comfortable are potential topics for additional investigation.

Precollege experience. Codes that were relevant to the theme of precollege experience included academic preparation, encouragement from family, and encouragement from others. The level of coursework taken in high school prepared some

participants for the academic challenges of college, but encouragement and advice before arrival at college also provided a level of support to several students. The varied and complex precollege experiences of Latinx students may serve to inform college administrators of areas where they may work with high schools to bridge the gap between high school achievement and college expectations for many students.

Nicole and Camila were both enrolled in AP and dual credit courses while in high school. Similar to the research of Huerta et al. (2013), where 60% of the Latinx high school AP and AVID students in the study group were enrolled in developmental coursework in college, high levels of precollege academic preparation do not necessarily result in unconditional college acceptance or enrollment in college-level coursework., the Huerta et al. study acknowledged that advanced high school academic preparation found in AP courses and AVID programs emphasized study skills, organization, and self-advocacy that may enable underrepresented groups to persist through obstacles in college. Similarly, Nicole and Camila described confidence in their ability to meet the academic challenges of college course expectations. They attributed their present success not to course content they learned in high school, but to the learning and study methods they became familiar and comfortable with when they were enrolled in high school AP coursework.

All participants in the present study reported high levels of encouragement from their parents to attend college. All but one of the participants was a first-generation college student. The FGCS in this study may not have benefited from parental knowledge of how to navigate the college admissions and enrollment process, but they did draw from other sources of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005). Similar to the Latinx

students in previous studies (Ceballo, 2004; Borrero, 2011; Vega, 2016), the participants were motivated in part by the hardships their parents had experienced as a result of the lack of educational opportunities. Nicole and Raul both recounted the stories their parents told about immigrating from Mexico, dreaming of the opportunities they would open for their children someday through hard work and sacrifice, although they had not completed high school themselves. For these participants, attainment of a college degree is a source of pride for the entire family, representing a successful result to many years of struggles. As reported by Gloria and Castellanos (2012), these *testimonios* are of particular importance to Latinx families as a strong cultural factor of their history and identity. The challenges their parents faced and overcame served to bring their children to the cusp of academic and financial accomplishment. As the students remember and retell these stories of adversity, it strengthens their resolve to channel adversity into motivation.

Although most participants did not report a high level of high school academic preparation, most did describe teachers, counselors, or other school staff who encouraged them to go to college, or in some cases even assisted them with the application process. Their experiences are consistent with students in Borrero's study (2011), who indicated that high school personnel have a large influence on the college ambitions of Latinx students both through nurturing an appreciation for continued education and practical assistance with navigating college admissions.

Family support. Most participants in the present study reported ongoing encouragement and advice from parents, siblings, and other family members as an important factor in their college persistence. Natalia and Sara both had older sisters who attended college. These siblings served both as an inspiration and a continuing source of

support; Natalia and Sara call or text their sisters regularly to ask for input on both academic and social matters. Their experiences support the conclusions of previous research that college-going siblings increase self-efficacy and motivation for Latinx students (Brenes, 2012; Ceja, 2006).

Other participants cited the ongoing support from their parents as strong motivation to succeed in college. Daniel and Raul noted that although their parents cannot provide practical advice about academic struggles, the pride they express provides important encouragement and bolsters their self-confidence. Gloria and Castellanos (2012) similarly indicated that maintaining connections with parents motivates Latinx first-generation college students to succeed. Although the high expectations of their parents may add pressure, there is no indication that this stressor is detrimental to successful college transition or degree completion. This finding also supports the importance of familial capital as described in Yosso's Community Cultural Capital Model (2005). While previous research has indicated that strong ties to family may disrupt a student's social integration to the institution and their academic progress (Hurtado et al., 2007), The Mexican cultural value of *familismo* (loyalty, commitment, and dedication to family) has been found to bolster persistence for Latinx college students when mediated by parental encouragement (Ojeda et al., 2011). While obligations to family may still serve as a barrier to persistence for some Latinx students, familial relationships also offer support and encouragement, in addition to fostering a sense of duty in the student to achieve dreams not only for themselves, but for their family as well (Schwartz et al., 2009).

Discussion of Research Question Two

The second research question addressed the liabilities or obstacles that participants reported as impeding their successful college transition. Three themes emerged from interviews with the study participants. These themes included facing challenges, feeling (dis)connected, and precollege experience.

Facing challenges. This theme reflects the specific adversities participants faced during the college transition process. The students reported social, emotional, economic, and academic factors that frustrated their efforts during their first few months at college.

Natalia, Sara, and Daniel reported struggles with class attendance. Natalia in particular described sudden change in attendance expectations from high school to college: “... they’re not going to call your parents if you’re not there. So I just kind of took that to hear and wouldn’t go to class.” For students relied on extrinsic motivation (pressure from parents) to attend class regularly in high school, mustering the intrinsic motivation to attend lectures, labs, and class meetings in college presents a challenge. Previous research has found strong positive correlations between course attendance and grades (Dalelio, 2013; Gbadamosi, 2015; A graded attendance policy can serve as an extrinsic motivation for students to increase their attendance (Zhe et al., 2019), but the students in the present study who admitted they missed class frequently also explained that class attendance was not formally tied to their course grade.

Natalia and Raul both reported financial pressures as a liability to their successful college transition. Pascarella et al. (2004) and Phinney and Haas (2003) attributed lower rates of degree attainment for FGCS in part to the greater need to work while enrolled in college. Raul’s experience exemplifies this struggle; he has difficulty balancing his work

commitments with his school schedule, but his employment is necessary to pay for his transportation and to help his family. The financial challenges that can serve as liabilities to transition are often intertwined in a complicated series of environmental pull factors (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Crisp & Nuñez, 2014).

Natalia was the only participant who reported a personal experience with discriminatory behavior. Although she reported the behavior of her course instructor and is satisfied with the response from university administration, she still feels some emotional trauma. “I didn’t want it to affect me or my views on it,” she said regarding her current level of comfort as a woman of color on campus. “But ultimately it did.” Weismann et al. (1998) described the college transition experience as being particularly challenging to Latinx students because of the potential effect of racial and ethnic tensions on these students’ satisfaction with the college experience. Although Natalia has found much to enjoy in campus life, an incident of discrimination from a person in a position of authority is a permanent memory of her first-year experience.

Feeling dis(connection). Several students described the importance of connections to others during the college transition experience. Some of the codes for this theme related to connections to family, friends from home, new friends on campus, and to the institution itself. In some instances, the lack of one or more of these connections served as a liability to successful college transition.

While several participants described their connection to family as an ongoing support in college, familial connections complicated transition for students who moved away from their home community to attend college. Natalia, Sara, Camila, and Daniel described leaving home as a significant emotional loss. Natalia compared the separation

from her family to her experience with leaving Mexico to move to the United States as a child. The complicated feelings of Latinx students who leave home for college was compared to survivor guilt by Moreno (2019). According to Moreno, the guilt experienced by these students comes in multiple forms: physically leaving family members behind, causing financial strain, seeking opportunities for oneself, and feeling different from others in their home community. This concept was initiated by Geraldine Piorkowski (1983), who described the emotions FGCS feel when leaving their families and communities behind as survivor guilt. The term “survivor guilt” refers to the experiences of Holocaust survivors who immigrated to the United States and continued to struggle with the burden of surviving a traumatic event when so many others did not (Niederland, 1961).

Daniel and Camila both described feeling disconnected because of their struggles to forge new friendships at college. McCabe (2016) has described the importance of friendship networks at college for academic success and social and emotional health. For example, she described one of her participants, a Latinx male student who felt lonely when he first arrived on a predominantly white campus. After joining a Latinx fraternity, he developed a close-knit circle of friends who provided academic and emotional support, in addition to helping each other cope with the challenges minorities faced on campus. This participant described his friend group as a “family.” Because Daniel and Camila did not find these types of social connections after their arrival on campus, they felt perpetually disconnected – no longer connected to their home community, and not connected to their college community.

Precollege experience. While some participants in the present study described their high school academic preparation as a source of support for transition, Natalia and Raul felt academically underprepared for the expectations of college-level coursework. Natalia felt that her high school did not provide the level of science coursework that would lead a college-level curriculum. Raul described his high school as a campus where most students are not expected to go to college, so there were not resources or academic standards in place to prepare him for postsecondary education. Their experience matches the finding of Brickman et al. (2013) that disparities in high school curricula affect the college readiness of Latinx students. Additionally, Crisp and Nora (2010) found that high school academic preparation was the largest influence in whether Latinx students would be placed in developmental education coursework. In Acevedo Gil's (2017) research, even Latinx students who recognized that their high school did not provide adequate academic preparation occasionally internalized this realization as self-doubt.

Sara complimented the efforts of her high school teachers, but she cited a lack of encouragement and support from her high school guidance counselor as a contributing factor in her difficulties to prepare for college. In her experience, students of color were not advised about college entrance examinations or other college preparations and were instead referred to the career center for students who would prepare for vocational training. Raul described similar interactions with high school guidance counselors. Acevedo-Gil (2017) has stressed the importance of high school guidance counselors discussing strategies for overcoming anticipated obstacles to college transition success with Latinx students; the struggles of Sara and Raul have exemplified why this type of

preparation and encouragement from high school counselors is critical to bridging the gap between high school and college.

In a LatCrit analytic framework, the *testimonios* of these students serve as a counterstory to reveal the injustices students endure in educational settings (Delgado Bernal, 2002). The students' narratives of their lived experiences show the personal stakes at hand within the "contradictory nature of education, wherein schools most often oppress and marginalize while they maintain the potential to emancipate and empower," (Yosso, 2005). In the present study, the participants' voices validate the experiences of many other Latinx students within a system that perpetuates academic, social, and economic inequality. Several of the students interviewed described how the structure of their high schools encouraged college preparation for only a small number of students, and they observed that students of color were often excluded. The LatCrit tradition seeks to center future theory and practice based on what we have learned from these stories (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

Discussion of Research Question Three

The third research question focused on coping strategies the participants utilized during college transition. This question explored the intrinsic, self-initiated actions participants undertook to improve their academic performance and emotional well-being. Two themes emerged from analysis of the interview transcripts: academic self-concept and feeling connected.

Academic self-concept. This theme focused on how participants described their academic achievements and goals. The students in this study described their achievement

in terms of grades, motivation, and study habits. The relevant codes for this theme included college academics, personal traits, and goal setting.

Sara and Daniel both explained that that they were not sure what level of academic achievement their instructors would expect. Both of these participants were pleased with the grades they had earned in the first two months of classes. Nicole felt that her high school curricula prepared her for college-level coursework, and that in some cases her high school course assignments were more challenging. These participants' development of a positive academic identity as a coping strategy during transition is supported by prior research findings: Students who made the most successful transition to college were those who arrived at college with a clear self-concept and found that the university environment was congruent with their goals (Azmita et al., 2013). Conversely, students who struggled with positive identity development experienced disruptions in their relationships with friends and family, further complicating adjustment to college. The Azmita, et al. (2013) research highlighted associations between mental health, identity development, various sources of emotional support, and successful college transition.

Daniel, Raul, Nicole, and Camila all described personal traits as having a positive impact on their college transition experience. Daniel and Raul attributed their early success to their motivation to prove their capabilities both to themselves and to their families. Nicole described her ambition to succeed in everything she does, and also her career-motivated goal setting to become a lawyer. Camila is very deliberate in both setting and visualizing her goals for success. She has specific goals to work as a NICU RN, buy a home, and purchase a car for her mother. These students drew from

aspirational capital, as described by Pérez (2017) in research that drew from asset-based frameworks to understand how male Latinx students exercised their community cultural wealth to succeed in college. Pérez' aspirational capital concept draws from Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model to explain how students of color draw from cultural strengths to overcome obstacles in navigating situations and social institutions (including educational spaces) that were not designed to include them. Pérez attributes the exclusionary nature of higher education toward Latino males in particular as being related to underlying systemic issues that ignore the cultural values and knowledge that Latinx students possess.

Feeling connected. While some participants described a lack of connections as a liability during college transition, several described connections as an important coping strategy. In this study, the theme of feeling connected relates to the types of relationships and connections students make and maintain during college. Participants described connections to family, friends, and the institution as important assets during college transition.

Nicole continued her close ties to her family as she lived at home while attending courses at Travis University. She explained that family values and staying close to home are important traits of her Latinx culture. While previous research has often focused a sense of belonging related to students forming connections to the institution (and reducing connections to their home community), Pokorny et al. (2016) supports a "stayed education" model, where institutions recognize the importance of students' sense of belonging through continued familial and community ties.

Participants also sought to maintain connections with high school friends. Natalia moved away from home to attend college, but her friends recognized her social struggles at college and came to visit to cheer her up. Raul continues to live at home, and he frequently sees high school friends on campus. Maintaining these connections provides him with a sense of familiarity while so much else has changed.

Sara and Nicole reported feeling connected to the institution because of their involvement with campus-sponsored organizations. As a member of the band, Sara stayed busy with marching practice and immediately gained a large social network. Nicole was active in several organizations, even taking some leadership roles. Student engagement and extracurricular involvement are critical factors in feeling connected to the institution and increasing the success of college transition and persistence (Harmening & Jacob, 2015). In addition, extracurricular participation facilitates healthy college transition and adjustment for first-generation, ethnic/racial minority students (Wittup & Hurd, 2019).

Discussion of Research Question Four

The fourth research question asked how institutions can improve the transition experience for conditionally-admitted Latinx students. Participants were invited to evaluate the efficacy of interventions they noticed at the institution, as well as suggest new ideas institutions should implement to aid students during the transition process. Two themes emerged during interviews with study participants: facing challenges and institutional factors.

Facing challenges. Two students in the present study reported experiences with racial/ethnic discrimination, either as personally experienced or witnessed on campus.

When Natalia felt that she was singled out for reprimand because she is a woman of color, she reported the incident to her academic advisor, and later to the dean of students. As a result of this experience, she surmised that similar incidents may often go unreported. She asserted that the institution should take steps to encourage students to come forward if they experience a similar incident, and that students should be assured that they will be protected and supported.

Raul recognized and appreciated the racial and ethnic diversity on campus, including the presence of international students on campus. However, he noticed that some other students are rude to international students, either outwardly or by obvious and intentional avoidance, such as making an effort not to sit next to or near an international student on the campus shuttle bus. He explained that enrolling a diverse student population is not enough in and of itself to promote diversity and recommended that Travis University make an effort to create a welcoming environment for all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, or country of origin. Although prior research indicates that racialized events do not necessarily deter students of color from succeeding in college, dealing with racial discrimination and racial microaggressions leads to increased anxiety in students and promotes an environment where racial stereotypes lead to assumptions about admission policies (e.g., affirmative action) and negative perceptions of the academic abilities of marginalized student groups (McGee, 2016).

Natalia and Daniel urged that Travis University should do more to assist all students in general, and Latinx students in particular, with the financial aid process. Daniel's high school did not provide adequate information about accessing financial aid, and it was only after he arrived on campus that he learned about funding opportunities

from other Latinx students. Natalia had already begun accumulating credit card debt to pay for college and personal expenses because she did not qualify for financial aid. Previous research has shown that Latinx students are more likely to work longer hours, and that they are more likely to leave college due to financial pressure (Longerbeam, Sedlacek & Alatorre, 2004). Participants in the present study also indicated that financial issues have added additional stress to that they did not fully anticipate, adding to academic and social challenges that they did expect. Within the LatCrit analytical framework, the experiences of Natalia and Daniel show how various forms of oppression can intersect in the lives of Latinx students (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001), further complicating the transition process.

Sara and Daniel both expressed a need for the institution to address the mental health of new students. Both of these participants described their feelings of loneliness after leaving home, and Sara's roommate left the university and returned home early in the semester because of the extreme emotional turmoil she experienced as a result of separation from her family. Sense of belonging is associated with the mental health of students in transition and plays a critical role in whether they persist or leave college (Azmitia et al., 2013; Johnson, Soldner & Leonard, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005)., Students from racial and ethnic minority groups often face additional challenges in forming a sense of belonging on campus when there are few students, faculty and staff from a similar background to model healthy identity development (Syed, Azmitia & Cooper, 2011).

Institutional factors. This theme was related to issues over which Travis University has direct control to effect change. Most participants stated that, from their

perspective, Travis University was already doing everything possible to assist in the transition process for conditionally-admitted Latinx students. Most participants agreed that the student body is racially and ethnically diverse, but Daniel noted a lack of diversity in the university faculty. “That’s important too, for role models, for examples of what we can achieve,” he explained. While the other participants attended high school in racially and ethnically diverse areas, Daniel was raised in the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas, where the population is majority Latinx. The other participants were used studying with teachers of a different racial or ethnic background, but Daniel found the lack of Latinx instructors at Travis University to be incongruous with his prior educational experiences. Daniel acknowledged that the Latinx-majority K-12 student and faculty populations he grew up with were also not racially and ethnically diverse, but he recognized that it is important for students to see their own ethnic and cultural backgrounds reflected in the role models who are available to them.

Daniels’s assertion is supported by Irizarry (2012), who has documented higher education institutions’ tendencies to make few changes in curricula, institutional practices, or demographic makeup of the faculty even as student populations become more racially and ethnically diverse. He described this form of institutional racism as a division of opportunity and “academic apartheid” (p. 298). Additional research validates that Latinx students benefit from being taught by Latinx instructors who have similar life experiences and backgrounds (Grissom, Kern & Rodriguez, 2015; Ingersoll and May, 2011). Students of color are more likely to earn higher grades (Fairlie et al., 2014), report positive interactions with faculty (Trolan et al., 2016), and perceive the value of their

degree as worth the time and financial investment (Gallup, 2016) when instructed by and interacting with faculty members of color throughout their enrollment.

Implications for Practice

This study investigated the lived experiences of conditionally-admitted Latinx students enrolled in their first year at a public, 4-year university. The participants were asked about improvements that could be made to aid in the college transition process for Latinx students, and their suggestions should guide changes in practice at the study site. The participants identified issues related to racial/ethnic discrimination, financial struggles, and emotional adjustments that served as barriers during their first few weeks of enrollment. The study participants emphasized the university's role in these issues and urged that decision-makers with the ability to create and implement policy should take action for the benefit of future Latinx students at the institution. Other institutions may also find these suggestions useful, but because the experiences of Latinx students are diverse and complex, conversations with their own students should guide changes in practice.

Two participants identified harassment as a form of discrimination that they either witnessed or experienced on campus. Both participants described the lasting impact of these experiences as affecting about how they felt about the university as a whole. The university should carefully examine both positive and negative student perceptions of the campus climate, especially among students of color. In addition, the university should evaluate how student perceptions of the campus climate affect persistence and other academic outcomes for students of color, conditionally-admitted students, FGCS, and other historically marginalized groups. Training related to creating a climate of

inclusivity should extend not only to all faculty and staff, but students should also understand how to identify and act on discriminatory behavior whether it is exhibited by other students, staff, or faculty. Training for all stakeholders should be considered a long-term, ongoing process. Faculty, staff, and members of the local community who have expertise and investment in diversity issues should be included in developing training modules that address implicit and explicit bias, institutional racism, microaggressions, privilege and power in the classroom, cultural identities represented on campus, community building, and facilitation of productive dialog.

Several participants noted that the financial obligations associated with attending colleges created a burden that made it difficult for them to focus on academic and social transition. Financial barriers for Latinx college students are often intensified by other outside obligations, including working long hours to alleviate financial pressures both for themselves and their families (Longerbeam et al., 2004). Universities' financial services to Latinx students and other underrepresented groups should extend beyond providing access to federal financial aid resources, and financial counseling must be made available as a standard practice at an early stage in the admissions process. Funding for private scholarships to help students who are not eligible for federal grants and aid should be sought and obtained. Providing targeted financial counseling and aid to Latinx students demonstrates an understanding of their complex circumstances.

All but one of the participants in this study expressed a preference to seek support from academic advisors and other personnel in academic support services rather from their course instructors directly. As the professionals who are most likely to foster long-term relationships with students during their enrollment, academic advisors and other

student-support specialists are uniquely positioned to identify institutional policies that prioritize the values of the dominant group over the cultural wealth assets of Latinx students. Advisors working in these roles at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) in particular must maintain a heightened sense of awareness of the systemic nature of racism. It is not enough for an individual to monitor and adjust their own behavior with students of color; advisors should be willing to advocate for change on behalf of students of color, and universities must support them in this endeavor.

Participants in the present study identified emotional struggles as a complication during their transition to college. Some students described feeling overwhelmed by the challenges they faced while feeling alone and alienated. These emotional struggles were intensified for students who moved away from home and their existing support systems. While students may be aware that there are counseling services available on campus, it is not necessarily clear that these services are free. In addition, the stigma associated with mental health may cause students to avoid this resource (Wu et al., 2017). Students should be involved in discussions about perceptions of counseling on campus and appropriate methods of outreach. Efforts should also be made to foster a sense of belonging on campus for Latinx students, starting with recruiting and hiring practices that ensure that Latinx staff and faculty are available to model healthy identity development (Syed et al., 2011) and transform curricula and policies to challenge the traditional narratives that have excluded non-White histories, literature, and contributions to academia.

Finally, institutions should continually re-evaluate admission requirements, including standards for conditional acceptance. Conditional acceptance itself is a

manifestation of Bourdieu's (1986) traditional cultural capital theory. Conditional acceptance was created to ease the rigid admission requirements and to acknowledge that students who do not meet those standards may succeed academically. However, the use of conditional acceptance still asserts that these students still have something to prove, and that they arrived to college with deficiencies. The tools used to measure these deficiencies are college entrance exams and high school class rankings. Both of these measurements have been touted as being colorblind and merit based, without regard to opportunity gaps that would place students of color at a disadvantage (Sulé et al., 2017). Examining this admissions structure through a LatCrit lens reveals the inherent racism in taking a deficit-based position that students of color are responsible for their past academic performance because they entered college without the knowledge and skills the institution has decided are normative (Yosso, 2005). A more holistic admissions approach would value the community cultural wealth students of color bring to the institution in terms of support for their own success and also for their potential to transform the university through their social, academic, and cultural contributions.

Recommendations for Future Research

While much research focuses on deficit models and the obstacles faced by underprepared Latinx students, Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) provides an asset-based framework from which future research may examine how Latinx students draw from their community capital to persist in college enrollment and degree attainment. Participants in the present study described their desire to overcome the struggles faced by their parents as a form of aspirational capital. Additional studies that focus on various sources of capital (linguistic, familial, cultural, social, navigational)

would be useful in promoting the strengths Latinx students bring to the college community.

Additionally, recent research has trended toward conclusions that the traditional frameworks through which student transition has been examined do not apply to the complex backgrounds and experiences of Latinx students (Acevedo-Gil, 2019; Cox, 2016). Institutions currently rely on the models of transition discussed in the literature review for this study (Tinto's Theory of Student Departure (1988), Schlossberg's Transition Theory (1981), Chickering's Theory of Identity Development (1993), but these frameworks are frequently a poor fit for understanding the college transition experience of Latinx students. Additional research is needed to develop new theories, models, and conceptual frameworks that account for the lived experiences of Latinx students.

While previous research has found that participation in ethnic/cultural academic and social organizations fosters a sense of belonging for students of color (Delgado-Guerrero et al., 2014; Stuart, 2008), there is a paucity of research investigating why Latinx students join (or choose not to join) cultural-specific organizations. Although there are academic and social organizations for Latinx students at the study site, none of the participants in the present study had participated in or had plans to join any of these groups. Future research may examine that factors that influence this decision and investigate whether Latinx students who do not join official organizations may form informal networks with Latinx peers with similar outcomes.

Finally, the findings for the fourth research question in the present study were limited by the short amount of time students had been enrolled. This question was

developed to investigate student perceptions of how the institution could improve the transition experience for conditionally-admitted Latinx students. Additional research could include subsequent interviews with participants after completing one year of enrollment, offering them time to reflect on the institutional interventions that were inadequate or to propose supports they did not receive that would have bolstered their college transition process.

Summary

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the complex experiences of conditionally-admitted Latinx students enrolled at a public, doctoral/research (moderate) university in Southeast Texas. The experiences of the participants focused on external supports, liabilities that impeded successful transition, and student-initiated coping mechanisms during transition. In addition, the study participants provided recommendations for changes in practice at the institution based on their own observations and experiences.

As anticipated, the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the participants led to varied levels of comfort with the college transition process. An important shared theme amongst all participants was the importance of family. The students felt an overwhelming need to overcome the educational obstacles faced by previous generations and to make their parents proud. The importance of familial connections made transition extremely difficult for students who moved away from home to enroll at the university. Of the participants who left home for college, even those who showed outward signs of successful transition (earning good grades, joining extracurricular activities, making new

friends) felt a profound sense of loss and loneliness without the physical presence of their families.

As Latinx students are consistently underrepresented at 4-year universities, research and practice should focus not only on increased enrollment of this student group, but also on increased retention and degree attainment. The college transition experience can be improved for conditionally-admitted Latinx students by increasing the reach of support services (e.g., advising, learning centers, tutoring, writing labs) that are too often neglected during budget cutbacks while also recruiting and hiring more Latinx faculty. There is no question that Latinx students will benefit from increased educational opportunities, but there is still a need for postsecondary institutions to understand the value Latinx students add to the educational community. This research serves as a statement to Latinx students that their voices are important and will be heard.

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APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL DOCUMENT



Date: May 2, 2019 12:42 PM CDT

TO: Tonya Colunga
Ricardo Montelongo

FROM: SHSU IRB

PROJECT TITLE: Experiences of Conditionally-Admitted Latinx Students Transitioning to a 4-Year University

PROTOCOL #: IRB-2019-107

SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial

ACTION: Approved

DECISION DATE: May 2, 2019

ADMINISTRATIVE CHECK-IN DATE: May 2, 2020

EXPEDITED REVIEW CATEGORY: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Greetings,

The above-referenced submission has been reviewed by the IRB and it has been Approved. Because this study received expedited review and the IRB determined that a renewal submission is not needed, this decision does not necessarily expire; however, you will be receiving an email notification on the anniversary of this study approval, which will be on May 2, 2020 (**NOTE:** please review the reminder information below regarding Study Administrative Check-In). This study approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Since Cayuse IRB does not currently possess the ability to provide a "stamp of approval" on any recruitment or consent documentation, it is the strong recommendation of this office to please include the following approval language in the footer of those recruitment and consent documents: IRB-2019-107/May 2, 2019/May 2, 2020.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Modifications: Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please submit a Modification Submission through [Cayuse IRB](#) for this procedure.

Incidents: All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please submit an Incident Submission through [Cayuse IRB](#) for this procedure. All Department of Health and Human Services and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

Study Administrative Check-In: Based on the risks, this project does not require renewal. Rather, you are required to administratively check in with the IRB on an annual basis. May 2, 2020 is the anniversary of the review of your protocol. The following are the conditions of the IRB approval for IRB-2019-107 Experiences of Conditionally-Admitted Latinx Students Transitioning to a 4-Year University.

1. When this project is finished or terminated, a **Closure submission** is required.
2. Changes to the approved protocol require prior board approval (**NOTE:** see the directive above related to **Modifications**).
3. Human subjects training is required to be kept current at citiprogram.org by renewing training every 5 years.

Please note that all research records should be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project. If you have any questions, please contact the Sharla Miles at 936-294-4875 or irb@shsu.edu. Please include your protocol number in all correspondence with this committee.

Sincerely,

Donna M. Desforjes, Ph.D.
Chair, Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects
PHSC-IRB

APPENDIX B

INTRODUCTORY E-MAIL

Dear Prospective Participant,

I am a doctoral student in the College of Education at Sam Houston State University and would like to invite you to participate in a qualitative study that will explore the experiences of Latinx students during their first year of college. I, the researcher, am conducting this study to fulfill the requirements of my doctoral degree.

Please complete the attached questionnaire so I may determine whether you are eligible for the study. If you are eligible, I will ask you to review a consent form prior to your participation in a focus group on campus. Because your participation is voluntary, you can choose to withdraw from the study at any time. Your identity will not be disclosed in the study, nor will the name of the institution you attend. All records pertaining to your involvement in the study will be kept strictly confidential.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete the online eligibility questionnaire within five business days. If you are selected to participate, I will follow up with you to answer any questions you may have and to schedule the focus group discussion.

Thank you,

Tonya Colunga
Doctoral Candidate
Sam Houston State University

APPENDIX C

ELIGIBILITY QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Do you identify your ethnicity as Hispanic or Latina/o/x? (Y/N)
2. What is your ethnic origin/group (Mexican-American, Cuban-American, etc.)
note: You may indicate more than one group, or none
3. Did you enter college within one year of graduating high school? (Y/N)
4. Describe your current residence:
I live on campus.
I live with a parent/parents.
I live with another family member.
I live off campus, but not with family.
Other:
5. Are you enrolled as a first-year student?
6. Are you enrolled as a full-time student (12 or more credit hours)?
7. What is your major field of study (or are you currently undecided/undeclared)?
8. What is your mother's highest level of education completed?
No formal schooling
Some formal schooling, but did not complete high school or earn a diploma
General Equivalency Diploma (GED)
Some college, no degree
VoTech program completer/graduate
Associate degree
Bachelor's degree
Graduate degree (master's or doctoral)
Do not know/not applicable
9. What is your father's highest level of education completed?
No formal schooling
Some formal schooling, but did not complete high school or earn a diploma
General Equivalency Diploma (GED)
Some college, no degree
VoTech program completer/graduate
Associate degree
Bachelor's degree
Graduate degree (master's or doctoral)
Do not know/not applicable

10. If you are eligible for this study, I would like to contact you to set up a focus group discussion with the other participants. Please provide a phone number and/or e-mail address.

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction

My name is Tonya Colunga, and I am a doctoral student in the College of Education at Sam Houston State University. I am conducting a study to explore the experiences of Latinx students as they transition to college. The purpose of this interview is to learn about factors that have affected your college experience during these first few weeks. A pseudonym will be used to ensure your anonymity and confidentiality. Do I have your permission to record this discussion?

Interview Questions

1. Tell me how you chose to attend [college name].
2. What impact did your parents, other family members, and friends have on your decision to go to college?
 - Probes: What things were said or done?
 - What concerns did others have about you going to college?
 - What encouragement did you receive from others?
3. What impact did high school teachers, counselors, administrators, or other school professionals have on your decision to go to college?
 - Probes: What statements or actions made you feel school professionals had either high or low expectations for your plans after graduation?
4. What experiences in high school prepared you for college?
 - Probes: Did your classes prepare you for the academic expectations of college?
 - Were there any programs or services that prepared you by bridging the gap between high school and college?
 - Were there any people who have already attended college who let you know what to expect?
5. What challenges have you faced during your first months in college?
 - Probes: What have you found difficult academically or socially?
 - Have you been earning the grades you expect?
 - What commitments or obligations do you still have to your family while you are attending college?
 - What other outside commitments do you have while you are attending college?
 - How has your actual experience in college compared to what you expected before you arrived?
 - What has been the biggest challenge so far?

6. What support have you received during your first weeks in college?

Probes: Who has helped you most with your transition?
 How has your family helped you with transition?
 How have friends helped you with transition?
 How have classmates helped you with transition?
 How have professors/instructors helped you with transition?
 How have staff members helped you with transition?
 How have extracurricular activities or clubs helped you with transition?
 What affect have orientation, counseling, freshman interest groups had on your transition to college?
 How has [college name] fostered a sense of belonging on campus?
 ... Has that helped?
 What has been your best experience so far?

7. What personal motivation has helped you during these first few weeks in college?

Probes: What goals do you have for life after college?
 What personality traits have made adjustment to college more or less difficult?

8. Is diversity important to [college name]?

Probes: Give examples of ways [college name] has encouraged or discouraged diversity.
 Are faculty sensitive to the issues of Latinx students? Give examples.
 Have you experienced instances of racism from other students? Give examples.
 How have these experiences affected your motivation to succeed?

9. Have you considered leaving college? Why?

10. What recommendations would you make to [college name] to make transition to college life easier for all students? What about for Latinx students?

11. Is there anything else you thing I should know to better understand your college transition experience?

12. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

VITA**Tonya Mattson Colunga****Education**

Master of Education, Louisiana State University

Bachelor of Arts – English, Louisiana State University

Professional Certification

Texas Educator Certificate, Secondary English

Professional Experience

Clinical Instructor, Lamar University, 2014 – Present

- Evaluate prospective students' applications for qualifications and eligibility
- Develop rubrics to assess applicants' areas of strength and deficiency
- Design and implement systems to facilitate the application/acceptance/enrollment process
- Provide assistance to applicants in selecting appropriate programs and degree plans

Service to the University

College of Education Representative, University Admissions Committee, 2017-2020

Assessment Steering Committee, 2017-2018

Faculty Mentor, Freshman Interest Group, 2015

Presentations

Colunga, T. M. (February, 2018). Experiences of conditionally-admitted Latinx students transitioning to a 4-year university. Paper presented at Southwest Educational Research Association Conference, New Orleans, LA.

Professional Organizations

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

College Reading and Learning Association of Texas

International Literacy Association

Texas Association for Developmental Education