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Latinas in the Pipeline to Baccalaureate -Prepared Nursing: Challenges and Supports in Persistence to Degree and Professional Licensure

Cheryl Ann Sheils

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LATINAS IN THE PIPELINE TO BACCALAUREATE-PREPARED NURSING:
CHALLENGES AND SUPPORTS IN PERSISTENCE TO DEGREE AND
PROFESSIONAL LICENSURE

A Dissertation Presented

by

CHERYL A. SHEILS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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School of Education

Educational Policy, Research, and Administration
LATINAS IN THE PIPELINE TO BACCALAUREATE-PREPARED NURSING: CHALLENGES AND SUPPORTS IN PERSISTENCE TO DEGREE AND PROFESSIONAL LICENSURE

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CHERYL A. SHEILS

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Jeungok Choi, Member

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Christine B. McCormick, Dean
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Essa, my husband, Jim, and my children, Siobhán, Caitrin, and Daniel. Their love, support, and confidence in me helped me overcome even the most difficult times in completing my doctoral degree.

This work is also dedicated to present and future Latina nursing students. My hope is that the findings from this study will assist them in their persistence to the baccalaureate degree and beyond.

To the Latina students who so graciously shared their time and stories with me, my sincere gratitude, and I include the following lines as they seem to capture their spirit of determination:

“I have a dream, a song to sing,
To help me through most anything,
And my destination makes it worth the while,
Pushing through the darkness, still another mile.”

“I Have a Dream”
ABBA, 1979
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Thanks are also due to Dr. Elizabeth Williams and Dr. Jeungok Choi, who served as members of my dissertation committee and provided advice and feedback during the many stages of this project.

Additional thanks go to my husband, Jim Sheils, for his expert and patient proofreading of the many iterations of this manuscript and to my friend and nurse colleague, Rosa Feldman, whose counsel has been of great help in carrying out my research.

I would also like to acknowledge the Beta Zeta at Large Chapter of Sigma Theta Tau, International, the Elms College, and the Elms College Alumni Association for providing funding this research project.
ABSTRACT

LATINAS IN THE PIPELINE TO BACCALAUREATE-PREPARED NURSING: CHALLENGES AND SUPPORTS IN PERSISTENCE TO DEGREE AND PROFESSIONAL LICENSURE

MAY 2010

CHERYL A. SHEILS, B.S.N., AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE

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The United States is rapidly becoming a more racially diverse nation. Racial minority groups are projected to make up 47% of the total population in 2050 and if current population trends continue, they are projected to surpass the non-minority population by the end of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, the Latino population, already the nation’s largest minority group, is expected to triple in size and is projected to account for 29% of the total U.S. population by 2050. Unfortunately, the educational pipeline has created a shortage of Latinos in higher education. At the same time, the United States is suffering from a national shortage of registered nurses. It is, therefore, of great concern that the proportion of minority students in nursing education programs is also not keeping up with population trends. Moreover, persistent inequalities in educational opportunities have led to persistent social inequalities between majority and minority groups, including inequalities in healthcare. Increasing racial diversity among health professionals is essential, not only as a matter of educational equity, but also because evidence indicates that diversity among providers is associated with improved access to healthcare for racial
minorities. A main route to upward mobility and equality of opportunity for minorities in the healthcare industry is equity of access and success in achieving the baccalaureate nursing degree. There is an increasing body of literature which addresses retention and persistence of minority nursing students; however, the greater majority has focused on Chicano Hispanics and Black students. Further research is needed to identify factors associated with retention and persistence of other Latino groups. This study uses a qualitative design with Spradley’s method of ethnographic interviewing to learn about the experiences of Puerto Rican nursing students attending college in the Northeast. Obligations to family, financial constraints and academic under-preparedness are some of the key findings gleaned from analysis of the data.
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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Statement of the Problem

The influence of shifting population demographics in the United States has created the need for a diverse professional nursing workforce educated with the minimum of a baccalaureate degree for entry-level practice. Unfortunately, the retention rates for minority nursing students are substantially lower than those for Whites (Jeffreys, 2004), not only limiting the numbers of minorities in nursing, but also impacting the numbers of nurses overall. The research problem for this study addresses three interrelated issues which are linked to the changes in population demographics: insufficient numbers of minorities in higher education, the national nursing shortage, and the inadequate number of minority nurses. Each of these issues is considered below.

Changing population demographics. The United States is rapidly becoming a more diverse nation. It has been predicted that non-White racial and ethnic groups will constitute a majority of the American population during this century (National Academy of Sciences, 2003). Ethnic minority groups are expected to experience more rapid growth than the White population between now and 2050 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999). In fact, the minority population is predicted to account for nearly 90% of the total population increase over the 55 years of the projection (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999). Furthermore, Hispanics (also referred to as Latinos in this study) have now surpassed African Americans as the largest U.S. minority group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000c). Between April 2000 and July 2001, the Hispanic population grew 4.7%, compared with a 1.5% growth in the Black population (Miller, 2003). All of this will
lead to a substantial decrease in the proportion of the White population from 74% to 53% of the total population by 2050 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999). These trends are also reflected in the demographics of the Northeast, which now has the third largest Hispanic population in the country, the majority of whom are of Puerto Rican origin (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a). In addition, according to Census Bureau statistics, Hispanics comprised 8.2% of the total population in the state of Massachusetts in 2007 (United States Census Bureau, 2007a).

Minorities in higher education. Unfortunately, the proportion of minority students in higher education is not keeping up with the growth trends among the general population. Alon and Tienda (2007) posit that higher education is expected to serve democratic societies and promote social mobility, and that the postsecondary system in the U.S. has made appreciable strides toward promoting equal opportunity of access for all. However, while annual college enrollment rates have generally increased for ethnic and racial minorities, they still lag significantly behind enrollment rates for Whites, and the gap has not been sizably reduced in the past twenty years. For example, Hispanics constituted 15% of the total U.S. population in 2007 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007a); whereas, enrollment statistics for Title IV institutions in 2005 indicate that Hispanic students represented only 3.9% of the total enrollment for 4-year institutions compared with 5.5% for Blacks and 30.3% for Whites (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, Whitmore, & Miller, 2007). At the same time, Hispanics represented just 5.2% of the total for 2-year institutions compared with 4.9% for Blacks and 21.4% for Whites (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, Whitmore, & Miller, 2007). Allen, Bonous-Hammarth, and Teranishi (2006), Bowen and Bok (1998) and others attribute the gap to a block in the “pipeline” of students in the secondary education
– to – higher education transition for underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities (Allen et al., 2006, p.127).

The educational pipeline has clearly created a shortage of Hispanics in higher education. According to Hutmacher (2001), persistent inequalities in educational opportunities have led to persistent social inequalities between majority and minority ethnic/racial groups; this includes inequalities in healthcare. Increasing racial diversity among health professionals is essential, not only as a matter of educational equity, but also because evidence indicates that diversity among providers is associated with improved access to care for racial and ethnic minority patients, and greater patient care and satisfaction (National Academy of Sciences, 2003).

The nursing shortage. The National Center for Health Workforce Analysis (United States Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2002) reported a registered nurse (RN) shortage of 6% in the year 2000. Based on trends in the supply and anticipated demand, the National Center for Health Workforce Analysis has predicted a 12% shortage in 2010, a 20% shortage in 2015, and a 29% shortage in 2020 (DHHS, 2002). This amounts to an estimated shortage of 340,000 nurses by 2020 (American Association of Colleges of Nursing [AACN], 2007b; 2007c). The projected shortage in 2020 resulted from an anticipated 40% increase in demand between 2000 and 2020 compared with an anticipated 6% growth in supply (DHHS, 2002).

Factors driving the growth in demand for nurses include a projected 18% increase in population, a larger elderly population, advances in healthcare (DHHS, 2002) and alternative job opportunities. In contrast, the projected growth in supply is expected to peak at 10% by 2011 and then begin to decline as the numbers of nurses leaving the
profession due to retirement exceed the numbers entering (DHHS, 2002). The DHHS (2002) attributed the decrease in supply of RNs to declining numbers of nursing graduates (there were 26% fewer RN graduates in 2000 than there were in 1995), and the aging of the RN workforce. In 2005, the average percentage shortage of RNs for the New England states was 10.5% compared with an average of 7% for the entire country (DHHS, 2002). The average percentage shortage for New England in 2020 is predicted to be over 30%; compared with a national average of 28.8% (DHHS, 2002).

In 2005, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASU) addressed the issue of the national nursing shortage from a higher education perspective in an issue of *Policy Matters* (AASU, 2005). This document states that given the projected shortages, higher education will be asked to educate more nurses (AASU, 2005). The AASU (2005) calls for policymakers and higher education leaders to support programs that will attract sufficient numbers of students and produce more nursing graduates.

The biggest issue facing nursing education programs is the inability to accommodate the number of prospective nursing students because of the high cost of nursing education, lack of hospital space for clinical experiences, and the lack of credentialed faculty (AASU, 2005). In the 2003-2004 academic year, an estimated 125,000 qualified applicants were rejected by nursing programs and more than three-quarters of institutions cited a lack of faculty as the main reason for turning students away (AASU, 2005). The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (2002) placed nurse educators on the “endangered list” (p. 28), noting that enrollments in masters and doctoral programs was virtually flat and that it was unclear
where the future nursing school faculty would come from. The AASU (2005) is calling for significant state and national investments to help increase the capacity of nursing programs, to attract qualified applicants, and to keep nurses in the profession. In addition, the AASU (2005) notes that minority students have historically been underrepresented in nursing, and advocates for targeted recruitment efforts to increase their numbers in basic and advanced degree programs to prepare minority nurse clinicians for direct patient care as well as for nursing faculty positions.

Minorities in nursing. The rationale for increasing diversity in the healthcare workforce is to improve the overall health of the nation (The Sullivan Commission, 2003). In the National Academy of Sciences’ (2003) report, In the Nation’s Compelling Interest, it states, “Few professional fields will feel the impact of the …Grutter case – and the potential influence of greater levels of racial and ethnic diversity – as profoundly as the health professions” (p. 3). The report goes on to say that, “To a great extent, efforts to diversify health professions fields have been hampered by gross inequalities in educational opportunity for students of different racial and ethnic groups” (National Academy of Sciences, 2003, p. 3). Given that a main route to upward mobility and equality of opportunity for minorities in the healthcare industry is equity of access and success in achieving the baccalaureate nursing degree, it is of great concern that the proportion of minority students in nursing education programs is also not keeping up with general population trends (Hellinghausen, 2000). Since the focus of this study is Latinas in nursing, their representation in the current healthcare workforce and in nursing education programs is emphasized here.
Findings from the National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses (DHHS, 2004) indicate that the percentage of Hispanic nurses increased from 7.2% in 1980 to 12.2% in 2004. However, despite the impressive growth rate, the actual numbers of non-White, Hispanic or Latino nurses remain relatively small, and the diversity of the RN population remains far less than that of the general U.S. population (DHHS, 2004). In fact, in 2004, the Hispanic RNs remained the most underrepresented group of nurses when compared with their representation in the U.S. population.

The most recent (2005) national data available on all baccalaureate nursing education programs put Black enrollment rates at 12.3%, Asian enrollment rates at 6.0%, and Latino enrollment rates at 4.2% as compared with 71.6% for Whites (National League for Nursing, 2006). According to the AACN’s (2007a) Annual State of the Schools report, Hispanic/Latino enrollment in AACN-member baccalaureate programs reporting for fall, 2006, represented only 5.4% of the total; while Blacks represented 12.1% and Whites 74.8%. What’s more, Latino enrollment in undergraduate programs increased by only 0.2% between 2001 and 2007 (AACN, 2007a). Additionally, Latino enrollments in baccalaureate nursing programs in New England for fall, 2006, averaged only 2.6% of total enrollment (AACN, 2007a). According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN; 2007b), average reported enrollment rates for Black and Latino students in AACN-member baccalaureate nursing programs in Massachusetts for the 2006 academic year were 10.6% and 4.8% respectively as compared with 77.7% for Whites.

A number of initiatives have been launched both by governmental and private agencies with the objective of drawing attention to the need for diversity in the health
professions. Publications such as *Healthy People 2010* (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2000) and *Missing Persons: Minorities in the Health Professions* (The Sullivan Commission, 2003) call for increased numbers of registered nurses from under-represented racial and ethnic groups to serve an increasingly diverse patient population. Efforts to increase the number of minorities in nursing education programs, such as *Discover Nursing*, sponsored by Johnson & Johnson (2004), are slowly bringing more students of diverse cultures into nursing programs.

While entry-level baccalaureate enrollments have slowly been responding to national recruitment efforts, Latino enrollments are still significantly lagging behind as noted above. If current enrollment patterns at the local and national levels continue, we will be faced with an increasingly critical shortage of RNs in general, and an even more critical shortage of racially diverse RNs (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). Efforts to address the nursing shortage, along with a heightened awareness of the need for nurses of color, resulted in a number of publications on strategies to enhance recruitment, retention, and graduation of minority nursing students (e.g., Baldwin, 1994; Bessent, 1997; Jeffreys, 2004; and Maville & Huerta, 1999). This study is designed to learn more about the perceptions of a specific Latino subgroup (e.g., Puerto Rican) in the context of today’s social and educational environments.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to explore, using ethnographic interviews, the experiences of Latina baccalaureate nursing students in their efforts to graduate and become registered nurses. The study will focus on Latina students’ perceptions of challenges and supports in their persistence to degree and professional licensure.
**Research Questions**

What do Latino students in baccalaureate nursing education programs identify as challenges to and supports for persistence to degree and professional nurse licensure? In addition to this, there are several associated research questions for this study. The associated research questions are:

- What individual (personal) attributes do Latino baccalaureate nursing students identify as promoting or inhibiting their academic success?
- What environmental (institutional) attributes do Latino baccalaureate nursing students identify as promoting or inhibiting their academic success?
- What external (outside of school) elements do Latino baccalaureate nursing students identify as promoting or inhibiting their academic success?
- What elements specifically related to their professional nursing studies do Latino nursing students identify as promoting or inhibiting their academic success?
- How does membership in the Latino culture enhance or inhibit persistence to degree in a baccalaureate nursing program?

**Significance of the Study**

Current research indicates that, in spite of their growing numbers in the population, Latinos are significantly underrepresented in higher education and higher education nursing programs. Much of the extant research on minorities in nursing (e.g., Baldwin, 1987; Boyle, 1986; Campbell & Davis, 1996; Rami & Hansberry, 1994), has been descriptive using samples of Black nursing students. At best, research on Hispanic nursing students is limited. In fact, research aimed at understanding causal factors that contribute to Hispanic students’ grades and dropout rates from any field of study is scarce.
(Mow & Nettles, 1996). Furthermore, there is a need for researchers to specifically select, define and describe ethnic minority groups and subpopulations (Mow & Nettles, 1996).

The research that does exist on Hispanics has, to a great extent, focused on Mexican Chicanos in the Southwestern United States. Currently, nearly 10% of Hispanics living in the U.S. reside in the Northeast, and over 60% of that population is Puerto Rican (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a). It cannot be assumed that the findings from research that has been done with Chicanos is generalizable to all Hispanic subgroups. Hence, there is a need for research focused on students representing the ethnic group that constitutes the majority of Latino students in nursing programs in the Northeast. In addition, studies of minorities in community college nursing education programs outnumber those that have been done in baccalaureate settings. Nora, Barlow, and Crisp (2006) propose that only knowledge of the experiences of individuals within specific institutional settings could accurately describe the unique characteristics of retention and departure from institutions of higher education. With the recent push toward the baccalaureate as the entry-level nursing degree, it is becoming increasingly important to learn more about the experiences of Latinos in baccalaureate programs. Moreover, the majority of research on Latinos in higher education has been done in large, selective, public institutions. This study will sample students from a smaller, less selective, private college with the intention of adding a different dimension to the existing body of knowledge. It is hoped that the findings from this study will be especially useful to less selective institutions because students who attend these schools are likely to be less well-prepared academically and therefore find the nursing curriculum particularly challenging.
The proposed study will draw upon the experiences of Latino baccalaureate nursing students utilizing a qualitative research approach in an effort to capture the depth and richness of their experiences in persistence to degree and professional nursing licensure. This study will supply qualitative data to supplement the existing body of quantitative data from empirical research as well as add to the limited body of qualitative data currently available on Latino nursing students. Understanding Latino student experiences as described in their own voices is the initial step in developing successful intervention strategies that may eventually improve student outcomes (Hurtado, 1994).

Findings from this study will add to current knowledge of Latino nursing students’ perceptions of barriers and facilitators to success and will be useful to local and regional postsecondary educational institutions at both the organizational and nursing division levels in terms of policy and program planning. Knowledge of Latino students’ perceptions of individual (student) attributes (e.g., cultural background), institutional attributes (e.g., classroom pedagogies), and external factors (e.g., finances) will be useful to admissions officers, administrators, faculty, student affairs officers, and other campus personnel involved in students’ success.

In order to achieve positive educational outcomes, all stakeholders need to thoroughly understand the challenges involved in Latino nursing students’ educational experiences before they can plan and implement support systems designed to meet those challenges. Positive educational outcomes will lead to higher graduation rates and greater numbers of licensed Latino nurses in the available pool of health care workers. Increasing the number of Latino nurses is essential to increasing the overall number of nurses and to improving healthcare access and outcomes for the Latino population.
Latinos are rapidly approaching 50% of the total population in several parts of the country, including the Northeast (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000b). The nursing workforce can ill-afford to have fifty percent of the population unavailable as potential nurse-recruits because of insurmountable challenges in baccalaureate nursing education programs.

In summary, the problem identified for this study is that a lack of minorities in higher education and an associated lack of minorities in baccalaureate nursing education are contributing to the national nursing shortage. The purpose of this qualitative study is to add to what is currently known about Latinos’ perceptions of challenges and supports in persistence to degree and nursing licensure with particular emphasis on students of the Puerto Rican subgroup who are attending smaller, less selective colleges. Findings from this study are intended to be used by higher education stakeholders such as administrators, faculty, and student affairs personnel to help shape programs and policies that will assist students in overcoming those challenges and increase the likelihood of their success in becoming registered nurses. Ultimately, this study is intended to benefit the profession of nursing and the nation’s healthcare by providing knowledge that contributes to an increase in the overall number of nurse graduates and, in particular, by increasing the numbers of Latino nurses available to provide culturally-sensitive healthcare to an increasingly diverse U.S. population.

Assumptions

There are several assumptions related to the proposed study. The first assumption is that there are factors related directly to milieu of the nursing major which influence Latino students’ perceptions of their education experiences. A second assumption related
to this study is that challenges and supports as identified by Latino nursing students can be used to inform future policy and programs in nursing higher education. A final assumption is that the researcher’s experiences and perspectives relative to the research topic will, in spite of due diligence, bring a certain degree of bias to the inquiry (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

Definitions

The race categories used in this study are consistent with those used in the United States Census 2000, and are as follows: “White” refers to people having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa; “Hispanic” or “Latino” includes both male and female members of this racial group (whereas, “Latina” designates female members) and refers to people of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race; “Black” or “African American” refers to persons having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa; and “Asian” refers to people having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent (United States Census Bureau, 2000a, p. 2).

A further point of clarification regarding the terms “Hispanic and Latino” is that the two terms are used interchangeably depending upon whichever term is used by the authors of the studies cited in the review of the literature. The term “Latino” is used to refer to the population generally, or to groups of students representing both genders. However, since there were no male participants in this study, the findings and discussion of the findings refer to “Latinas” only, which is also reflected in the title of the study.
The term “minority” refers to under-representation with respect to numbers in the general population and in the higher education pipeline. For the purpose of this study, “minority” refers to persons of Black (or African American), Hispanic (or Latino), Asian, Native Hawaiian (and Pacific Islander), and American Indian (or Alaskan) races.

The term “biculturalism” refers to the ability of a minority individual to step in and out of the repertoires of two distinct and disparate cultures (Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2002). In the context of this study, biculturalism refers to being acculturated into the Latino and White cultures.

The definition of “persistence,” used in this study, is successful completion of an undergraduate degree at one or more colleges (Berger & Lyon, 2005).

Baccalaureate nursing education is defined as any four-year undergraduate program that leads to the baccalaureate degree in nursing. Professional nurse licensure is defined as the state-mandated credential required for the practice of nursing and acquired by passing the National Council Licensure Examination.

**Overview of the Paper**

Given that the purpose of this paper is to explore the experiences of Latino nursing students’ persistence to degree and professional licensure, chapter two begins with an introduction of the literature review starting with population demographics. This is followed by a review of the literature on racial diversity in higher education, including minority access, student engagement and retention, admissions criteria, academic preparation, the impact of affirmative action on minority admissions and the issue of affordability. The literature on recruitment and retention of Latino nursing students is
reviewed next. Finally, studies related to nursing student graduation rates and licensure examination outcomes are presented.

Chapter three begins with a discussion of the conceptual framework for the study. The research question is stated next, followed by a description of and rationale for the research design and methodology. Next, the participants for the study are identified along with the methods for collecting, organizing, coding, and interpreting the data. Finally, limitations of the research design are discussed.

Chapter four presents the results of the study reported according to the major themes revealed in analysis of the data. A profile of the participants is included, then the findings related to student characteristics, institutional environment, and Latinas in professional nursing are reported.

Chapter five is a discussion of the findings including a breakdown in relation to the research questions. The Framework of Persistence developed from analysis of the data related to challenges and supports influencing Latina nursing student persistence is described. Ways in which this study contributes to current knowledge in this area are explained next. Finally, recommendations for practice, policy and research are delineated.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This study is concerned with Latinos’ perceptions of supports and challenges in obtaining a baccalaureate nursing degree and professional licensure. Since Latinos in nursing higher education are the population of focus, this chapter will begin with a review of the literature concerning Latino demographic issues. In addition, this chapter will review some of the most important literature which provides an understanding of the educational experiences of Latinos in terms of access, engagement and retention in higher education generally. Finally, this chapter will include a review of the literature pertaining to racial diversity in the nursing workforce with a focus on recruitment, retention, and outcomes of Latino nursing students in the pipeline to professional nursing.

Changes in the United States Population Demographics

It is well documented that the United States (U.S.) population is becoming increasingly diverse. If current trends continue, racial minorities, including non-White Hispanic, Black, American Indian/Eskimo/Aleut, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Hispanic (also referred to as Latino), will account for nearly 90% of the total growth in the U.S. population between 2005 and 2050. This is due to both the numbers of immigrants to the U.S. and to the numbers of their U.S.-born descendants (Pew Hispanic Center, 2006; U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999). Racial minority groups are projected to make up 47% of the total population in 2050 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999). While the non-Hispanic White (non-minority) population will remain the largest (53% of the total) by the end of the 45 year (2005-2050) projection period, if the current population trends
continue, the minority population is projected to surpass the non-minority population by the end of the twenty-first century (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999).

The Latino population, already the nation’s largest ethnic minority group, is expected to triple in size (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999) and is projected to account for 29% of the total U.S. population by 2050 as compared with 14% in 2005 (Pew Hispanic Center, 2006). The U.S. Department of Commerce (1999) predicted that the Latino population would experience a 258% increase, growing from 26.9 million in 1995 to 96.5 million in 2050. This group is diverse as well. Of the total Hispanic population reported in Census 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a), 58.5% were Mexican, 9.6% were Puerto Rican, 3.5% were Cuban, and 28.4% were Other Hispanic (e.g., Dominican, Central American, South American).

This study focuses on Northeastern U.S., therefore, it is important to review demographic statistics for that region. Overall, the Northeast (including the six New England states, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania) was determined to have the third largest Hispanic population in the country, 9.8%, following the West with 24.3% and the South with 11.6% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a). Moreover, 60.9% of Puerto Ricans, 13.6% of Cubans, and 2.3% of Mexicans resided in the Northeast.

These population trends point to several issues which are critical to the nation’s health and the education of its healthcare workforce: the representation of racial minorities in higher education, racial diversity in the healthcare workforce, and recruitment and retention of racial minorities in baccalaureate nursing programs. This study is an important one because it focuses specifically on Latinos in baccalaureate
nursing education. The literature pertaining to each of the issues central to this study is reviewed below.

Racial Diversity in Higher Education

An examination of the issues associated with racial diversity in higher education begins with a review of some key indicators related to postsecondary access and success. Therefore, national and regional data on educational attainment for racial minority groups are presented first in order to provide a context for review of the issues. Since the Hispanic/Latino population is the focus of this project, data for that population are emphasized here. The remainder of the discussion in this section focuses on a review of literature that addresses the significance of diversity in the achievement of postsecondary educational outcomes.

National data indicate that Hispanics have not been well served by our educational system. According to The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems and Jobs for the Future (NCHEMS; 2007), 38% of Hispanics have less than a high school level of education, 28% have a high school diploma, 16% have some college, 5% attain an associate’s degree, and 13% attain a bachelor’s or higher degree. By comparison, only 8% of the White (majority) population has less than a high school education, whereas 33% of Whites have earned a bachelor’s degree or higher education (NCHEMS, 2007).

In 2002, Hispanics represented approximately 14% of the traditional college-bound population of 18-23 year olds, but only 9% of total college enrollment (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2002; National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). Furthermore, when compared to Whites, Hispanics had a 13% higher chance of dropping out of higher
education (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2002). Enrollment statistics for 2005 indicate that Hispanic students represented 3.9% of the total for 4-year institutions compared with 30.3% for Whites and 5.2% of the total for 2-year institutions compared with 21.4% for Whites (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, Whitmore, & Miller, 2007).

Since the setting for this project is in Massachusetts, it is important to review educational statistics for the New England area. Data for the New England states indicate that between 1990 and 2000, 58% of the Hispanic population completed high school compared with 86% of the White population (Coelen & Berger, 2006). Furthermore, only 40% of Hispanics in New England had completed a four year college degree compared with 56% of Whites (Coelen & Berger, 2006).

Massachusetts outperforms the nation in the percentage of recent high school graduates going on to college (74.6% versus 68.8%; NCHEMS, 2007). However, 2005 data for the state of Massachusetts indicate that 31% of Hispanics had not completed high school, another 31% had achieved a high school diploma, 16% had some college, 5% had an associate’s degree, and 17% had a bachelor’s or higher degree (NCHEMS, 2007). Comparative 2005 data for Whites in Massachusetts indicate that 7% had not completed high school, 25% had a high school diploma, 17% had some college, 9% had an associate’s degree, and 42% had a bachelor’s degree or higher (NCHEMS, 2007).

These data are particularly worrisome when one considers that the number of Hispanics who achieve four-year college degrees is by no means keeping pace with the current and projected numbers of Hispanics in the population at any level of comparison - national, regional, or state. As Coelen and Berger (2006) point out, there are serious
“...consequences of minority population growth and educational attainment for the future workforce…” (p. 17).

The link between diversity and education outcomes. Work by Hurtado (2001) and García and Smith (2002) stress the important role of higher education in preparing a diverse workforce equipped with the skills needed to build and sustain communities and relationships in a pluralistic society. Hurtado (2001) studied the effect of classroom teaching on learning outcomes. Student outcomes were sorted into three categories: (a) “civic outcomes,” defined as “student’s capacity for engagement in pluralistic democracy,” (b) “job-related outcomes,” defined as skills that employers judged as important, and (c) “learning outcomes,” defined as key skills higher education faculty expect students to acquire in college (Hurtado, 2001, p. 192). The results of Hurtado’s (2001) study suggest that different racial/ethnic faculty use different teaching styles that influence the content taught and the way it is delivered in the classroom. Hurtado (2001), in her chi-square analysis of data from a national random sample of 4,250 undergraduate students, found statistically significant relationships between students’ self-reported achievement in all three categories of outcomes (noted above) and activities that are associated with having a diverse student body and faculty. This was especially true in the category of “civic outcomes,” such as acceptance of people from diverse backgrounds, cultural awareness, tolerance of diverse beliefs, and leadership abilities (Hurtado, 2001, p. 198). Furthermore, Hurtado’s (2001) findings indicate that curricular diversity improves language and writing skills, critical thinking, as well as students’ assessments of their own learning.
Hurtado’s (2001) study is not without its limitations, among them a disproportionate number of White faculty participants, and the use of self-reported data. On the other hand, this was a large, national, multi-institution study which focused on the cognitive and affective development of students, the findings of which support the concept that diversity in the learning environment is linked to positive educational outcomes.

If diversity in the classroom does, in fact, make a difference, then it follows that there needs to be a connection between the curriculum and the characteristics of the learner. García and Smith (2002) charged that the traditional curriculum does not adequately address the attributes of today’s learners. These authors provide a framework for curricular transformation in order to prepare students to live in a multicultural, complex, global society (García & Smith, 2002). They base their critique of current curriculum and pedagogy on the fact that they have traditionally been centered around the White, male, middle-class experience in America such that the curriculum has included bias, omission, and stereotypes related to other racial, ethnic, gender and cultural experiences.

García and Smith (2002) also posit that while the college curriculum needs to reflect developments in scholarship and teaching for the “new majority,” changing demographics is not enough reason for curriculum transformation. In their view, it is more of a moral, social justice issue concerning the use of power in the public agenda. García and Smith (2002) urge revision of content to include more diverse views, experiences, and perspectives that reflect the characteristics of the learners. In that way, their work expands on that of Hurtado (2001).
García and Smith (2002) propose several phases of curriculum change beginning with absence of diversity viewed from the prevailing (majority) perspectives to efforts that focus on groups whose perspectives might be added, to questioning the status quo from diverse perspectives, and finally, to a curriculum informed by new knowledge, methodologies, and pedagogies drawn from multiple perspectives. These pedagogical shifts, they contend, will bring about a greater degree of cooperation, collaboration, and active participation in the learning process (García & Smith, 2002). García and Smith (2002) advocate that the new paradigm of an inclusive curriculum will result in educational benefits for the new majority and the new minority as well as the learning process itself.

The key factors that affect the ability of faculty to meet the needs of diverse students include the characteristics of the students and their learning styles and needs along with the characteristics of the faculty and their teaching abilities and styles. The increasing presence of culturally diverse students in higher education has served to make academia more aware that learning differences do exist, perhaps because racial and ethnic diversity are more obvious; that traditional teaching methodologies are not universally successful or applicable to all students; and that there is an urgent need to reach an ever-broadening audience of learners. This study will contribute to what is currently known expressly about Latino students’ learning experiences in nursing higher education programs.

**Minority Access to Higher Education**

Participation in higher education is, to a great extent, an issue of access. It is, therefore, helpful to have an understanding of what has and has not received attention in
higher education research on access and enrollment of Hispanics. Mow and Nettles (1996) argue that although there has been a growing amount of research on Hispanics in recent years, much of the higher education inquiry on minorities has previously centered on the college experiences of Blacks. They further point out that what little research has been done on Hispanics, has focused on Chicanos and call for further research that would classify racial and ethnic minority groups and subpopulations far more carefully (Mow & Nettles, 1996).

In their review, Mow and Nettles (1996) report conflicting findings on underrepresented racial/ethnic minorities in higher education depending on where (in which part of the country) data were collected, as well as the selectivity and types of institutions. These authors report inconsistencies in definitions, research methods used, including sampling, and absence of a sound theoretical framework to guide research on minorities among over 3200 undergraduate institutions across the U.S. (Mow & Nettles, 1996). They also note that most of the research to date has been descriptive and comparative, using demographic data, high school grades, SAT scores, and other quantitative academic data such as graduation rates (Mow & Nettles, 1996). Earlier research suggested significant differences between Hispanics and other groups in terms of college attendance, degrees earned and drop out rates (Mow & Nettles, 1996). For example, Hispanics were reported to attend college at lower rates than Whites and Asian-Americans based on data from the 1970s and 1980s, with Chicanos attending at a rate of just under 40% and Puerto Ricans attending at a rate of about 50% (Mow & Nettles, 1996). Mow and Nettles (1996) propose a “Conceptual Model of Factors Related to Undergraduate Minority Students’ College Access, Experience, and Performance” (p.
which includes student background characteristics, institutional characteristics, student behaviors and experiences, and student outcomes as a suggested list of variables and definitions that could be used in future research on minority students.

While numbers obtained via quantitative studies certainly outline the access story for minorities, qualitative data specific to Hispanic subpopulations are desirable in order to provide the much-needed details. While they do not specifically call for the use of qualitative research methods, Mow and Nettles (1996) do point out that the ways in which attitudes, behaviors and experiences affect college participation among Hispanics needs more extensive exploration. Using a qualitative research methodology, the goal of this study is to generate rich, thick, descriptive data on the educational experiences of Latino nursing students.

It is also useful to review some of the literature on patterns of recruitment, on the politics of access, and on college choices and application behaviors of racial groups. To begin with, Bowen and Bok (1998) provide one of the most comprehensive studies of race in higher education admissions in *The Shape of the River*. Using the College and Beyond (C&B) database built by the Andrew Mellon Foundation, these authors explore the patterns of recruitment of disadvantaged, high risk, under-prepared students for more than two decades at several colleges and universities practicing selective admission. The data file for C&B contains admissions and transcript records of 80,000 full-time undergraduate students who entered twenty-eight highly selective colleges and universities in the fall of 1951, 1976, and 1989 (Bowen & Bok, 1998). The findings from Bowen and Bok’s (1998) research that are most salient to this study are reviewed here.
Bowen and Bok (1998) review the court challenges to admissions policies that take race into account and argue that if race-neutral admissions standards were used, fewer minorities would qualify for admission. In these authors’ view, race is relevant in determining which candidates merit admission because taking race into account helps higher education institutions achieve three important objectives: (a) identifying individuals with high potential, (b) addressing long-term social needs, and (c) allowing students to benefit from diversity on campus.

Bowen and Bok (1998) observe that educational inequities present in under-resourced primary and secondary schools are a significant underlying cause of unequal preparation for college among minority students. They allow, however, that it will take a long time to address these issues and in the meantime, it is important to give an advantage to those who need it (viz., racial minorities) in order for them “to move into the mainstream of American life” (p. 285). Especially pertinent to this study, they further note that race-neutral admissions would lead to a paucity of minorities in the healthcare professions (Bowen & Bok, 1998), which could have extremely serious consequences, including persistent healthcare disparities.

A drawback to the Bowen and Bok (1998) study is that it is focused on Blacks because, according to the authors, information on that population was most available in the C&B database. Considering the ever-increasing numbers of Latinos in the population, it is disappointing that these authors did not place more emphasis on this group in their research. Nonetheless, their findings are, at least to some extent, applicable to other underrepresented populations such as Latinos because of educational inequities shared among minority groups.
Recently, Karen and Dougherty (2005), have taken issue with what they call the “ideological cover of fiscal crisis and meritocracy…which have moved U.S. policies away from the aims set by the Higher Education Act of 1965” and which have resulted in increasing “inequality of college access and choice by race and class” (p. 46). In a thoroughly coherent and concise article on access, these authors offer several specific proposals for increasing the representation and success of subordinate groups in the academy. Karen and Dougherty (2005) explain that the government has supported policies to expand access to higher education because it corresponds with the needs of business and fosters economic growth (Karen & Dougherty, 2005). These authors further state that access is of utmost importance because there is clear evidence that it is linked to not only substantial economic but also non-economic benefits, including increased pay, job satisfaction, and employment stability (Karen & Dougherty, 2005).

Karen and Dougherty (2005) point out that while the rate of college entrance increased sharply during the 1980s and 1990s, the racial gap in college access got larger. What is more, their research indicates that the increased racial gap in access is most pronounced for the more selective institutions and that attendance at 2-year schools is highly correlated with racial minority and lower socioeconomic groups.

Karen and Dougherty (2005) indicate two ways by which subordinate groups (e.g., racial minorities) can get access to higher education: expanded student aid, and changes in admissions practices. They also outline three key ideological frames that are working to resist democratization of higher education: (a) branding affirmative action admissions policies as reverse discrimination, (b) meritocratic admissions policies which build in racial and class advantages, and (c) decreasing the availability of need-based aid.
which the research indicates is critical to minorities, especially Latinos [Longerbeam, Sedlacek, & Alatorre, 2004]; Karen & Dougherty, 2005). Karen and Dougherty (2005) note that merit aid increased from 9% of state graduate aid dollars in 1982 to 22% by 1999.

Karen & Dougherty (2005) propose several solutions for equalizing access for underrepresented groups. The two solutions aimed directly at higher education are: (a) increasing need-based aid in the form of scholarships and grants (as opposed to loans); and (b) changing the admissions process to reduce the emphasis on test scores, meritocracy, and legacy admissions in favor of race-conscious affirmative action, increased emphasis on high school grade point average and class rank, and using a “disadvantaged index” based on parents’ education and income (p. 49). Additional literature on the subjects of admissions criteria, affirmative action, academic preparation, and affordability are included later in the review.

Although the Karen and Dougherty (2005) article is clearly biased against meritocracy, their arguments are lucid and succinct. Still, they may be fairly criticized for not having presented a more balanced analysis of the access issue. In addition, it would have been useful for them to have included more current access statistics to inform their discussion.

In support of Karen and Dougherty’s (2005) criticisms of racial bias within meritocratic admissions policies, Jalomo (2000) provides a comprehensive discussion of the limitations of using SATs to assess learning in minority students. According to Jalomo (2000), SAT and other standardized assessments are inadequate measures for minorities because they measure parents’ income and education levels more than
students’ achievement and ability to perform in college. Jalomo (2000) further contends that standardized test validity is a concern for minorities because forced-choice tests don’t measure educational preparation and life experiences.

The closely related topics of college choice and applications behaviors for underrepresented students are addressed in the following studies. To begin with, Cabrera and LaNasa (2001) looked at the connection between socioeconomic status (SES) and college enrollment patterns. Using the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88) database, which tracked 15,000 eighth graders with follow up surveys in tenth and twelfth grade and two years out of high school to examine what the authors identified as the three tasks critical to enrolling in college, they explore how low-income students make college attendance decisions (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001). Logistic regression was used to assess the effects of school-based and family-based variables on the probability of becoming college qualified, graduating from high school, and applying to a four-year college (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001). Results central to this review are included here. The Cabrera and LaNasa (2001) study demonstrates vast discrepancies between the backgrounds and experiences of the lowest and highest SES students on the path to college. When SES was taken into account, 71% of the lowest-SES students did not obtain the academic qualifications needed to support college enrollment (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001). Furthermore, only 65.5% of the college-qualified, high school graduates from lowest-SES backgrounds actually applied to four-year institutions, significantly below the national rate of students with similar qualifications from high-SES backgrounds (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001).
Also, students who were first generation to college were found to be at higher risk, which Cabrera and LaNasa (2001) attribute to lack of parental familiarity with college, as is frequently seen among immigrant populations, the decisions that are involved in choosing college preparatory courses in high school, the college application process, and access to sources of financial aid. In the analyses conducted by Cabrera and LaNasa (2001), upper-SES individuals were advantaged in all three of the “critical tasks” (p. 119) on the path to college.

A finding of particular importance was that being Hispanic of low or middle-SES was determined to be a significant risk factor for securing a high school diploma and for applying to college (Cabrera & LaNasa, 2001). Although the authors provide a number of tables indicating differences among racial groups, they do not focus on the differences in their discussion.

To be sure, not all Hispanic students are in the lower-SES and one should not equate being Hispanic with being poor. However, according to the United States Census Bureau (2007b), Hispanics had a poverty rate of 21.5% in 2006, indicating that more than one out of every five Hispanics fell within the parameters of lower-SES. Given these statistics, Cabrera and LaNasa’s (2001) findings apply to a substantial number of Hispanic students in the pipeline to college.

Another study of college access was conducted by Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, and Rhee (1997). Their research focuses on differences in access and choice among racial/ethnic groups. Hurtado et al. (1997) use the NELS:88/92 data base to analyze college preparation behaviors, application behaviors, and attendance at first choice of institution. These authors found that students of color tended to submit more college
applications than Whites and interpret this to mean that students of color who did not drop out of high school scored similarly on college entrance tests, had similar SES backgrounds, and were more strategic than Whites about the college application process (Hurtado et al., 1997). On the other hand, Hurtado et al. (1997) note that Latino students were the least likely to engage in an extensive research and choice process, which seems to run contradictory to the view that they are more strategic.

In addition, Hurtado et al. (1997) found that 47% of Latino students did not even apply to college during 12th grade; in fact, they note that despite the recent increase in college-age Latinos, their pattern of college access and choice is unchanged since the 1970s. Of the Latinos that did apply to college, 55% chose 2-year institutions, which was the largest percentage of any racial/ethnic group in the study (Hurtado et al., 1997).

Addressing the current political context that has generated anti-affirmative action around admissions policies, Hurtado et al. (1997) posit that preferences for historically underrepresented groups, used with other personal and academic admissions criteria, have not created unfair advantages because the numbers of underrepresented students who were able to reach higher education were so small. They further state that increasing the diversity of the student body in terms of race/ethnicity and SES becomes a more difficult task under fragile affirmative action admissions programs and reduced availability of financial aid – two of the main redistributive measures identified as having the potential to improve college access (Hurtado et al., 1997).

In summary, the literature on minority access suggests that institutions of higher education need to continue to track the types of students they recruit, college application behaviors, and the myriad factors involved in college choice. Campus administrators and
admissions officers need to continually reassess positions and policies that could diminish educational goals for diversity or potentially diminish their enrollments if they adversely affect minority populations.

Admissions criteria. Much has been written on the topic of admissions criteria given the recent court cases and opinions surrounding affirmative action for underrepresented racial minorities. Literature dealing specifically with affirmative action will be reviewed separately below. Here, it is helpful to look at literature that speaks to admissions from an institutional policy perspective and to review the various admissions criteria that have been employed by colleges and universities as they have a direct impact on the numbers of Latinos in the postsecondary education pipeline.

Marin and Yun (2005) discuss the concept of “educational scrutiny” to support the creation of strong internal accountability systems that demand justification for policy decisions (p. 199). They note the importance of an admissions research/policy framework given the need for higher education institutions to adapt to the changes in U.S. demographics (Marin & Yun, 2005). They claim that such a framework informed by the law, specifically the Grutter and Gratz Court opinions, and designed to examine the internal consistency of university policies, will allow for an evaluation of policies and processes in terms of how they might affect the diversity rationale (Marin & Yun, 2005).

Marin and Yun (2005) identify potential conflicts between the use of race and SAT in admissions decisions. These authors note that, when controlling for income level and socioeconomic status, SAT scores have been strongly correlated with race, with Latinos (and Blacks), on average, scoring lower than Whites and Asians (Marin & Yun, 2005). So that, if SATs are strongly weighted in the admissions process, there is the
potential to hamper institutional efforts to achieve a racially diverse student body (Marin & Yun, 2005). Returning to Marin and Yun’s (2005) educational scrutiny framework, some institutions may, on analysis, find that there is little conflict – that the representation of minorities will provide the desired level of diversity. If not, the framework would provide a model for analysis as to how the use of SAT and race can be reconciled.

In *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education*, Bowen, Kurzweil, and Tobin (2005) provide an assessment of race-sensitive admissions policies. They outline several positions in support of such policies including: (a) insuring the educational benefits of diverse student bodies (as discussed earlier), (b) decreasing the disparity in access to power and opportunity that is related to race in America, and (c) accommodating for test score gaps between minority and other students (Bowen et al., 2005). They also note that race-sensitive admissions are considered by some to correct, at least in part, for disadvantages that these students, as a group, have experienced and continue to experience due to racial stigmas (Bowen et al., 2005).

The work of Bowen et al. (2005) contributes a great deal to the corpus of knowledge on admissions criteria. However, like Bowen and Bok (1998), their research is based on the C&B data which are drawn from the most selective institutions, provide precious little on Latinos, and exclude a great number of colleges and universities where racially diverse students are found. It bears repeating that the continual use of preexisting data rather than the development of new (and one would argue more representative) databases should be called into question.
Academic preparation. A critical component to understanding minority access and racial diversity in higher education is having an appreciation for the issues surrounding students’ preparation for college. The literature reviewed next contributes in different ways to an understanding of how students are prepared or, as can be the case for many minority students, under-prepared. A resource with suggestions for better preparing low-SES students is included in this review.

In *The Source of the River*, Massey, Charles, Lundy, and Fischer (2003) use data from the C&B database and the National Longitudinal Study of Freshmen (NLSF) to describe some of the key factors that impact academic preparation for minority students. This review will focus on the findings for Latino students. First, Massey et al. (2003) found that only two-thirds of Latinos had a father with a college degree and almost one-half of the Latino mothers were not college graduates. Second, most Latinos in the study grew up in segregated neighborhoods and attended local public schools (Massey et al., 2003). Third, as compared with Whites, Latinos were found to be far less well prepared academically for college work which, according to Massey et al. (2003), was associated with the circumstances of their upbringing in that they were denied access to one or more forms of capital, especially human and financial. Fourth, approximately 7% of Latinos entered college with the predisposition to either doubt their own ability or to be fearful of living up to negative stereotypes that are associated with racial group membership (Massey et al., 2003).

The findings described above build on those of Bowen and Bok (1998), who investigated factors leading to gaps in college performance. A major factor that they identify is family background, including place of residence, schools attended, parents’
level of education, family resources and educational aspirations. Bowen and Bok (1998) suggest that the number of books at home, opportunities to travel, nature of conversations in the home, and parental involvement in their children’s education are what matter most in preparing future generations for successful college careers.

In their very practical guide for educators, Tierney, Colyar, and Corwin (2003) discuss specific components of college preparation programs that might be used to improve college-going rates of low-SES urban youth (minorities included). In an effort to avoid redundancy, let it suffice to say that the same comments that were included above relative to the use of pre-existing data sources apply here with respect to the work of Massey et al. (2003) and, again, Bowen and Bok (1998). Tierney et al. (2003) address program improvement but they do not indicate what data they base their recommendations on. While they indicate that there are nine key components of their program which are most likely to improve educational achievement for underrepresented students, they do not provide a rationale as to why they should work. Grounding their recommendations in action or other nature of research would have made them more credible. On the other hand, many of the recommendations are supported by Bowen and Bok (1998) as well as Massey et al. (2003).

Affirmative action. In the 1970s, federal officials incorporated reports on student enrollment into the affirmative action plans they required, which had the effect of making race-conscious admissions not just permissible but mandatory (Bowen & Bok, 1998). However, affirmative action policy is broad enough to allow for many variations on a theme by college administrators and admissions officers, and significant controversy has existed regarding whether and how to implement affirmative action in admissions
policies. To understand the role of affirmative action in the college admission process, it is advantageous to review its history, interpretations, and application. Furthermore, no review would be complete if it were not to include an overview of recent court decisions and their impact, actual and potential, on admissions policies.

Tierney (1997) provides an historical analysis of affirmative action in higher education citing both the rationales for and the criticisms against it. According to Tierney (1997), affirmative admissions agendas came about as a reaction to the predominance and preferential treatment of White male students on college campuses. Critics of these practices argued for programs that would remedy the under-representation of racial, ethnic, or other groups in higher education (Tierney, 1997). This led to the formulation and adoption of college recruitment and admissions policies that sought to provide equal education opportunity for all applicants and minimize the probability of discrimination against minorities due to gender, race, ethnicity, or other characteristics (Tierney, 1997).

Tierney (1997) outlines three rationales for the creation and implementation of affirmative action. The first, compensation, refers to addressing previous discrimination; the second, correction, pertains to the alteration of present discrimination; and the third, diversification, concerns the importance of creating a multicultural society (Tierney, 1997). According to Tierney (1997), there are three main criticisms for affirmative action. The first is that affirmative action is unfair to groups not protected by the polity and that it works against the establishment of a race-blind society; this reverse discrimination can be seen as providing unfair privileges to one group at the expense of others (Tierney, 1997). The second criticism is that affirmative action creates victims;
the argument is that it tries to help those who are helpless, rather than correct fundamental inequities (Tierney, 1997). Here, affirmative action is seen as ultimately harming the disadvantaged by reinforcing the idea in themselves, and in society, that they are social victims (Tierney, 1997). The third criticism of affirmative action cited by Tierney (1997) is that it dilutes standards by admitting students into higher education who are unqualified. Those that ascribe to this viewpoint feel that admission to college should be based purely on merit and that affirmative action contributes to the weakening of quality. This argument seems to be winning out based on recent trends towards meritocracy in university admissions.

Since this study is set in New England, it is important to include a report by Coelen, Berger, and Crosson (2001) in which they review the practice of affirmative admissions within New England colleges and universities. They note that leaders in institutions in New England prefer to keep affirmative admissions because the pool of qualified minority students is too small and the environment for recruiting minority students is becoming more competitive (Coelen et al., 2001). These authors suggest continued support for affirmative admissions at the institutional and state levels (Coelen et al., 2001).

Coelen et al. (2001) organize their research into several components: analysis of recent court cases; interviews with and surveys of education leaders across New England; and econometric modeling to determine academic credentials and comparative admissions rates for minority as well as White students. Coelen et al. (2001) found that:

(a) between 1995 and 1999, New England four-year colleges and universities had not admitted minority students who did not meet the required (non-affirmative action)
academic credentials, (b) minority students attending four-year New England institutions were academically qualified for enrollment, (c) qualified minority students were being accepted at rates equal to or greater than those for Whites in all types of four-year institutions in New England, (d) higher education leaders believed in the educational importance of a diverse student body, and (e) minority students were underrepresented as a percentage of the undergraduate population in New England.

Based on their findings, Coelen et al. (2001) make several policy recommendations, the first and most significant of which is that New England should continue its support for affirmative admissions. Additional recommendations are designed to support the first and include improving the qualified minority applicant pool, striving for a student body with many forms of diversity, articulating institutional admissions policies that reflect the value of diversity, and staying informed about the parameters and legal challenges to affirmative action (Coelen et al., 2001).

At this time, Court decisions in Regents of the University of California v Bakke (1978), Hopwood v Texas (1996), Gratz v Bollinger (2000), and Grutter v Bollinger (2002) have left higher education officials somewhat confused as to which direction to take in the future regarding preferential admissions based on race. Swail, Redd, and Perna (2003) provide a concise review of the use of affirmative action programs in higher education and the legal challenges to diversity initiatives in recent years. In Regents of the University of California v Bakke, the Supreme Court opined that race or ethnicity could be considered a plus (perhaps referring to the point system) when evaluating applications, but using quotas is illegal (Swail et al., 2003). Based on that case, selective colleges continued to consider race as one of several factors for admissions. However, in
the 1990s a number of federal appeals courts and voter initiatives disputed the legality of affirmative action programs established under Bakke (Swail et al., 2003). One of the most important challenges that began to limit the span of affirmative action programs was Hopwood v Texas (Swail et al., 2003).

In Hopwood v Texas, a federal appeals court outlawed affirmative action in Texas, ruling that student diversity has no educational benefits, that the goal of racial diversity is not a “compelling interest” (p. 34) for the use of affirmative action in higher education, and that it is illegal to use race as a factor in admissions (Swail, et al., 2003). Since the Hopwood decision, voters in California, Washington state, Florida, and Georgia have outlawed the use of affirmative action in state colleges and universities (Swail et al., 2003).

More recently in 2003, the Supreme Court heard two affirmative action cases that were brought against the University of Michigan. In one case, Grutter v Bollinger, in which a White woman was rejected by the University Law School, the Court upheld the use of race as a factor in higher education admissions (Grutter v Bollinger, 2002). In the other, Gratz v Bollinger, a case brought on behalf of rejected White applicants to the undergraduate College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, the Court found that the educational benefits of diversity are real and had been substantiated by the university (Gratz v Bollinger, 2000). Thus, the decisions in the Michigan cases indicate that, while the Justices had reservations about Michigan’s policies, race-conscious college admissions have served a valuable purpose with few, if any, options.

Clearly, the literature demonstrates that higher education is entangled in the controversy over affirmative action and indicates the need for more proactive policies
that help academe serve the public good by advancing, affirming, and expanding participation in the democratic process. What is not clear, is what direction will be the most advantageous and least litigious in increasing Latinos’ (among others) participation in baccalaureate programs.

Affordability. Population demographics demonstrate the nexus between low-SES and minority group membership; therefore, college affordability is a major consideration in the discussion of racial diversity in higher education. Heller (2005) provides a skillfully synthesized report on the affordability of higher education for minorities by comparing tuition costs with the availability of financial aid.

Heller (2005) put together data from the College Board, which includes survey results from over 2,000 higher education institutions across the nation as well as data from the U. S. Census Bureau. He points to the large increases in college tuition in recent decades. According to Heller (2005), average tuition prices went up 732% at public and 639% at private four-year institutions between 1976 and 2004. Heller (2005) further points out that the median family income increased only 252% during the same time period. His findings indicate that minorities are most affected because, by and large, they have lower incomes (Heller, 2005). For example, in 1999, 17% of Native American, Black, and Hispanic families were living with incomes below the federal poverty level (Heller, 2005). In fact, according to Heller (2005), U.S. Census data for 2000 put median family incomes for Hispanics well below $35,000. Thus, minorities and low-SES students are more price-responsive than are White and middle and upper-class SES students because they lack their own resources to pay for college (Heller, 2005).
While tuition costs have risen, student financial aid resources, which include grants, loans, tax credits, and work-study assistance, have shifted considerably (Heller, 2005). Heller (2005) goes on to explain that for the 2003-4 academic year, 70% of total aid provided by the federal government was in loans and, unlike grants, loans do not lower the price of attending college.

Heller (2005) notes that between the 1960s and 1990s, financial aid was awarded based on need; however, in the 1990s, a major change in financial aid policy brought about a shift in favor of merit-based aid. In fact, merit scholarships have become the fastest growing category of financial aid (Heller, 2005). Merit-based aid, which is based on high school grades and standardized test scores, disproportionately benefits students from well-off families and disadvantages underrepresented students, effectively reducing the affordability of a college education for lower-SES students (Heller, 2005).

An important point to consider is that the data on financial impediments presented by Heller (2005) are based on students who were able to overcome the barriers and enroll, whereas, almost 170,000 of the qualified applicants in the fall of 2000 were unable to enroll due to price. In an effort to address the current financial aid predicament, Heller (2005) makes three recommendations: (a) financial assistance should be focused on need rather than merit in order to meet the ideal expressed in the Higher Education Act of 1965, (b) need-based aid must be funded at levels commensurate with the demands of the populations who depend on them, and (c) higher education institutions must do all they can to ensure high quality education at the lowest possible price.

The literature on minority access to higher education provides valuable background for understanding some of the key factors contributing to the
underrepresentation of Latinos in professional nursing programs and in the healthcare workforce. The key factors reviewed above include admissions criteria based on test grades, challenges to affirmative action admissions policies, under-preparedness for college, and affordability constraints for low-SES students. Access is the first step in increasing the numbers of Latinos in professional nursing education programs. Next, student engagement plays a major role in terms of retention and persistence for these students.

Student engagement. Before reviewing the literature specific to minority student retention, it is advantageous to first look at some of the literature on student engagement theory and to consider what has been learned from the National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE). To that end, Astin’s (1997) theory of student involvement and Tinto’s (1993) student departure theory will be reviewed, followed by Kuh’s (2001) description of the NSSE and report on three years of data from the NSSE (Kuh, 2003). In addition, Milem and Berger’s (1997) work on the development of an integrated model of college student departure and their subsequent research (Berger & Milem, 1999) to examine the application of that model will be included.

Astin (1997) states that “student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 251). He goes on to say that a student who is involved spends considerable time and energy on studying, campus activities, student organizations, and interactions with faculty and other students (Astin, 1997). According to Astin (1997), involvement occurs along a continuum and includes both quantitative and qualitative elements. For example, the number of hours a student spends studying can be measured quantitatively; the degree to
which the student comprehends what is being studied would be measured qualitatively (Astin, 1997). While Astin (1997) notes that his theory of student involvement is based on the construct of motivation from the discipline of psychology, he prefers the term involvement as it “connotes the behavioral manifestation of that state” (p. 255).

Astin’s (1997) theory of involvement is quite similar to Tinto’s (1993) interactionalist model (reviewed below), in that they both deal with the issue of persistence in college. Astin (1997) asserts that involvement, engagement, and affiliation are integrating experiences that promote student development and academic progress. Tinto (1993) claims that the degree of student engagement determines whether students will drop out or persist.

Tinto (1993) constructed a theory of student departure which explains the longitudinal process of student leaving from institutions of higher education. Tinto’s (1993) original theory of student departure was developed from descriptive material that came from the National Longitudinal Study (NLS) of the high school class of 1972. Tinto (1993) uses the term departure rather than dropout (as used in Astin, 1997), which shifts the focus of student leaving from being entirely student-centered to including institutional factors and the interrelation of the two. In his revised model, Tinto (1993) further describes the experience and process of integration and its impact on student retention and college persistence. The revised model stresses the importance of the collaborative efforts of faculty, staff, and other members of higher education institutions in student persistence.

Tinto’s (1993) model consists of five primary components: pre-entry attributes, goals commitments, institutional experiences, integration, and outcome. Pre-entry
attributes include family background, skills and abilities, and prior schooling (Tinto, 1993). Student attributes (specifically, the intention to obtain credentials), and commitment (reflected in motivation and effort) affect goals, commitments, and external communities (which include influences beyond the college community, such as family, neighborhood, finances, and work obligations; Tinto, 1993). Additionally, Tinto (1993) describes two systems of interaction experiences that affect student integration: academic and social. He further distinguishes between formal (within the classroom) and informal (outside the classroom) educational interactions and how they contribute to a student’s level of academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993). Tinto’s model, which takes a person-centered approach to integration, does not consider a student’s social and cultural norms which may be in conflict with campus culture, such as may be the case for Latino college students.

Tinto (1993) stresses the importance of finances as one of the external forces affecting student persistence. Fluctuations in the availability of financial support due to economic shifts, changes in types of student aid, and changes in family or individual finances can, therefore, play a major role in determining whether or not a student starts or stays in college, chooses a two-year over a four-year program, or maintains part-time or full-time employment. Again, given the SES of many minority students, financial aid is a crucial determinant of student involvement and persistence for underrepresented groups.

Both Astin (1997) and Tinto (1993) address the importance of involving students both in and out of the classroom to promote engagement and retention and reduce the risk of departure. Kuh (2001, 2003) uses data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to address the connection between the quality of student learning
and engagement. The NSSE data base consists of statistics from student surveys designed to assess the extent to which students engage in good educational practices based on the *NSSE 2000: National Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice*, which includes: “level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student interactions with faculty, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment” (Kuh, 2003, p. 13; Kuh, 2001). After two administrations of the NSSE in 2000 and 2001, information about student engagement has been gathered on students from approximately 320 different four-year colleges and universities (Kuh, 2001).

Kuh (2003) points out that until the NSSE was developed, judgments about the quality of undergraduate education were based on information such as SAT scores, faculty credentials, and campus resources. However, as the pool of postsecondary students becomes more diverse, it is important to examine the engagement patterns of these diverse groups (Kuh, 2003). The NSSE results take into account a host of demographic variables on students as well as on institutional types and selectivity (Kuh, 2003). The finding most apropos to this study was that students who reported more experience with diversity were more involved in other valuable educational practices and reported greater gains on learning and personal development (Kuh, 2003).

Kuh’s (2001) report includes information on the research methodology for the NSSE, including validity and reliability, pilot testing, questionnaire content and administration, and sampling techniques. However, if any of the results were categorized by student demographics, it is not apparent in Kuh’s (2003) analysis. Knowing how different racial/ethnic groups responded to survey questions would provide institutions with valuable information specific to the populations represented on their campuses.
Such information would better enable campus officials to adapt pedagogy and policy to meet the needs of their students.

Building on Astin’s (1997) theory of student involvement and Tinto’s (1993) stages of integration, Milem and Berger (1997) developed a modified theory of student persistence in which they suggest that the “incorporation of students into the college environment result[s] from a series of behaviors and perceptions” (p. 390). They postulate that students’ involvement behaviors (or the lack thereof) influence their perceptions regarding the extent to which the institution supported learning, and those perceptions, in turn, influence the likelihood that students will further involve themselves in learning (Milem & Berger, 1997).

Milem and Berger (1997) use data obtained from students at a small, highly selective, residential, research university in the Southeastern United States. Data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) and the Early Collegiate Experiences Survey (ECES) collected in the fall of 1995 as well as data from the Freshman Year Survey (FYS) collected in the spring of 1996 were used. The sample consisted of 718 students (46% of the entering freshman class) which the authors noted was generally representative of the population demographics (Milem & Berger, 1997).

The results of this study demonstrate that: (a) perceived institutional support was strongly correlated with academic integration, (b) academic integration did not predict either institutional commitment or intent to reenroll, and (c) social integration was a strong predictor of institutional commitment and intent to reenroll (Milem & Berger, 1997). Milem & Berger (1997) note that students at this university came in with high grade point averages so, for this population, social integration may have been more
influential because they had less concern or difficulty with academics. This study also shows the importance of early involvement, especially with faculty (Milem & Berger, 1997).

In a subsequent study, Berger and Milem (1999) examine first-year retention at a private, highly selective research university to test the direct and indirect effects of the constructs of their modified model of student persistence. Berger and Milem (1999) utilize the same data as they had for the 1997 study except that, in this later study, they use seven sets of independent variables to test the model. Again, multivariate analysis was performed (Berger & Milem, 1999). Results most pertinent to this study include the following: (a) peer support has a positive impact on involvement, (b) faculty involvement leads to greater institutional involvement, (c) perceptions of institutional support lead to greater academic integration, (d) those who are less socially integrated are also more likely to involve themselves with faculty, (e) family income appears to be associated with positive peer relationships and institutional commitment, and (f) high school grade point average has a statistically significant direct effect on early involvement, perceptions, and subsequent commitment (Berger & Milem, 1999).

In their discussion of the findings, Berger and Milem (1999) note that the students most likely to persist are those whose values, norms, and behavior patterns are congruent with those that are already dominant in the campus environment. Berger and Milem’s (1999) study shows that students who are least like the dominant group, especially with regard to race and political attitudes, are least likely to persist. One might reasonably surmise that these findings reflect the campus racial and political climates. It should be noted that, while it is clear that some of the participants in the study were Black, the
authors do not explicitly state the extent or nature of racial diversity on campus (Berger & Milem, 1999); therefore, it is not known whether the findings would have been the same for other minority groups. Nonetheless, the findings from this study indicate that if retention, especially for underrepresented groups, is important, then higher education must find ways to ensure that campus environments reflect the diversity of norms and values of multicultural students (Berger & Milem, 1999).

Future research with samples of diverse students from diverse institution types would allow further testing of Berger and Milem’s model. It cannot necessarily be assumed that their findings would be reproducible in other higher education contexts. Given the increasing diversity of college student populations and current data on low minority retention rates, replication studies would be very valuable in adding to what Berger and Milem found.

The value of this study is that it takes place in a smaller, less selective, private college with Latina nursing students and adds to what is currently known about the influence of campus environment on persistence to degree for this minority population.

Minority student retention. Literature on minority retention is reviewed here in order to provide background for the literature which specifically addresses Latino retention. This section will begin with a review of work by Rendón (1993) on transition to college and minority student retention. Next, Tierney’s (2000) discussion on the importance of focusing on the cultural aspects of college student departure will be included. Finally, the contributions made by Reason (2003), Swail, Redd, and Perna (2003), and Braxton, Hirschey, and McClendon (2004) on improving minority student retention and reducing departure will follow.
Rendón (1993) uses focus group interviews with 132 culturally and academically diverse students at four different types of institutional settings to explore how students who arrived on campus with little confidence in their ability to succeed responded to validating experiences provided by faculty and others both inside and outside of class. Her findings indicate that students who started out being very unsure of their ability to be successful could be transformed into fully participatory and successful members of the college academic and social communities (Rendón, 1993). Rendón (1993) highlights the role of faculty as a central one in the validation process and makes specific recommendations targeted at creating validating classrooms.

Rendón’s (1993) study adds qualitative data to what was known about the role of culture in minority student success. Her findings point out that culturally competent faculty are critical elements in any model of student engagement and retention (Rendón, 1993) and support the model later developed by Tierney (2000) reviewed below.

Tierney (2000) claims that in Tinto’s (1993) model of student departure, integration begins from the institutional perspective, and assumes that the background of the individual is relatively unimportant provided he or she can relate to the social activities on campus. Tierney (2000) suggests that his Culturally Responsive Model for Educational Success is oriented toward affirming the identity of the student. Low-income and minority students, Tierney (2000) says, need to have teachers, assignments, and pedagogies that validate who they are.

Tierney’s (2000) intervention model makes sense because it promotes the concept of cultural competence in academia and provides a somewhat different lens through which to view minority student involvement and persistence. However, although Tierney
(2000) maintains that one college preparation program, the Neighborhood Academic Initiative, based on his model has been successful, he does not delineate what outcome measures were used, nor does he provide data from students in the program to substantiate his claim.

In another study, Reason (2003) reviews research on the changing demographics of students in higher education and the student variables that predict retention. Pertinent to this study, Reason’s (2003) findings demonstrate that the literature related to race and retention consistently reveal statistically significant relationships over several decades of research. For one thing, Hispanics (along with Blacks and Native Americans) are far more likely to withdraw than Whites (Reason, 2003). Secondly, he notes that high school rank and first-year college GPA account for the majority of the difference in withdrawal rates between racial minorities and Whites. Based on his review, Reason (2003) urges that colleges and universities provide academic assistance to first-year students to help keep their GPAs high and notes that faculty involvement with students is especially critical during the first year.

Swail et al. (2003) authored a very informative and comprehensive monograph dealing with the realities of and strategies for minority student retention. Along with a host of other statistics, they note that in 2000, only 11% of Hispanics had attained at least a bachelor’s degree, compared with 28% of Whites and 44% of Asians (Swail et al., 2003). Swail et al. (2003) identify four “critical junctures” in improving these statistics (p. vi). In keeping with the focus of this project, the implications for Hispanics will be emphasized here. The first juncture they identify is academic preparation for college, for which they list several related factors, including high school graduation rates and SAT
scores, which were lower for Hispanics (Swail et al., 2003). The second juncture is graduation from high school because, as they note, in 2000, 43% of Hispanics (more than twice the percentage as that for Blacks) in the U.S. that were 25 and older had not completed high school (Swail et al., 2003). The third critical juncture is enrollment in college which, the authors note, did not change substantially for Hispanics from 1979 to 1989, but did increase somewhat in 1999 although not nearly at the rates as those for Whites. The fourth critical juncture is persistence to college degree because only 47% of Hispanics who first enrolled in four-year institutions in 1995-6 actually completed a bachelor’s degree within six years, as compared with 67% for Whites and 72% for Asians (Swail et al., 2003).

Based on these and additional educational and sociodemographic statistics on minorities, Swail et al. (2003) developed the Geometric Model of Student Persistence and Achievement as a more comprehensive way to explain student attrition than that which Tinto (1993) had offered. In Swail et al.’s (2003) model, the student is placed at the center, interacting with cognitive, social, and institutional factors. The monograph also includes elements of a comprehensive retention program and exemplars from practice.

Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon (2004) offer recommendations for policy, practice, and scholarship surrounding college student departure. Braxton et al. (2004) point out that the current rates of departure from two and four-year schools (45% and 25% respectively), “affect the stability of institutional enrollments, budgets, and the public perception of the quality of colleges and universities” (p. 1). Important to this study, Braxton et al. (2004) note that the six-year rate of college departure for Hispanic students entering four-year institutions directly after high school graduation was 53.5% as
contrasted with 39.3% for Whites. These authors also identify factors that contribute the most to minority persistence. First, the ability to pay is identified as a high priority concern for Hispanics and, as noted earlier in this review, perceived inability to pay may also result in lower social integration and greater likelihood of departure (Braxton et al., 2004). Second, students whose cultural origin is distinctly different from the dominant culture of a college or university must find an affinity group; otherwise, they may perceive that there is no potential for community, which makes commitment, integration, and persistence less likely (Braxton et al., 2004).

Braxton et al. (2004) make several recommendations for colleges and universities to reduce the departure of racial and ethnic minority students. To begin with, they must enroll a critical mass of racial minority students to promote the sense of shared community (Braxton et al., 2004). Next, they must embrace a diverse student body and honor the history and cultures of the different racial and ethnic groups on campus (Braxton et al., 2004). Finally, higher education institutions “should implement Tierney’s intervention model for ‘at-risk students’” (p. 77).

The literature on minority student retention reviewed above promotes a student-centered approach which validates students’ racial backgrounds and supports cultural competence in all aspects of the college community, both academic and social. The retention models proposed in this body of literature place students at the center of persistence efforts which, according to these authors, is the key element in minority retention and which has been underemphasized in other models.

Latino retention. This portion of the review concentrates on literature related primarily to Latino students. It begins with a review of what is known about Latinos in
four-year institutions and some of the problems that have been identified with applying traditional models of student attrition to Latinos. Next, literature related to the effects of institutional climate on Latino persistence will be reviewed. A report on students’ own perceptions of what matters in Latino retention is included next and, finally, recent articles related to Latino attrition, improving recruitment and retention, and ways to assess minority student performance are reviewed.

In their assessment of Hispanics in four-year institutions, Nora, Barlow, and Crisp (2006) point out that most studies that address issues of student persistence among minorities do not study Hispanics in isolation and the data have been derived from studies that include both minority and non-minority student populations. They report that meaningful data on Latinos have identified several major constructs of interest which Nora et al. (2006) use to design a Student/Institutional Engagement Model Theoretical Framework. The framework is constructed as a decision tree which considers student background factors in educational aspirations and commitment to attend college, campus academic and social experiences, cognitive and non-cognitive educational outcomes, final commitment toward degree attainment and, ultimately, persistence to degree (Nora et al., 2006).

Nora et al. (2006) include a discussion of research findings related to each construct of the framework and point out where further research is needed. Their assessment indicates that for first-time-in-college (first semester/year) Hispanic students, anything that disrupts their academic success increases the likelihood of them dropping out (Nora et al., 2006). Also, Hispanic students who attend part-time, have to work to
pay their tuition, or fail or withdraw from core courses for any reason are unlikely to return (Nora et al., 2006).

Nora et al. (2006) reason that because higher educational institutions are so diverse and student experiences on campus are so diverse, more research is needed to learn how colleges influence the academic and social experiences of Hispanic students. They advocate for single and like-institution studies designed to capture the persistence process for Hispanic students within the unique context of individual institutions (Nora et al., 2006).

Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2002) address the limitations of using models such as Tinto’s (1993) model of institutional departure in minority student research. Their argument is based on the fact that any model built on an “acculturation/assimilation framework” (p. 591) essentially negates the “bicultural and dual socialization” (p. 587) aspects of the minority experience (Rendón et al., 2002). They point out that studies of minority students based on the acculturation/assimilation framework focus on perceived cultural traits or differences (e.g., poor motivation, academic deficiencies) as the source of a group’s inability to succeed (Rendón et al., 2002). At the same time, these studies exclude the contextual and historical forces on racial and ethnic communities and fail to challenge theoretical assumptions based on traditional aged, full-time, residential, middle-class, White, male students (Rendón et al., 2002). They conclude that the acculturation/assimilation framework does not allow Latino students to contribute their own perceptions and definitions of all that constitutes integration, nor would their definitions influence the views of White students.
Rendón et al.’s (2002) article draws attention to two important aspects of minority student retention that were not included in other works. One is that minorities are socialized into two different, overlapping cultures, which they must negotiate during their college experience (Rendón et al., 2002). The other is the importance of active campus outreach in validating minority cultures and increasing student involvement and learning (Rendón et al., 2002).

Hurtado and colleagues report on the effect that institutional climate has on talented Latino students for the purpose of identifying areas for institutional improvement (Hurtado, 1994), to understand how campus climate affects Latino students’ adjustment to college (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996), and how campus racial climate affects Latino students’ sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Hurtado (1994) used standardized test scores and other institutional data to assess specific climate issues facing talented Latino students at four-year institutions. Her findings suggest that Latino students identify that racial tension on campus is attributed to a lack of awareness of the Latino culture by the majority students, especially at large campuses with large numbers of minority students, and that open, responsive administrators and a caring faculty play a major role in improving campus racial climate and reducing hostility (Hurtado, 1994).

Hurtado et al. (1996) studied the factors that affect Latino student adjustment to college life. Using the same quantitative and qualitative database as Hurtado (1994), Hurtado et al. (1996) found that Chicanos were significantly less likely than other minorities to score high on measures of social adjustment in the second year of college, but that virtually none of the student background characteristics were related to adjustment. Rather, they found that institutional factors such as college type and size,
transitional experiences, and campus resources were positively correlated with adjustment (Hurtado et al., 1996). Hurtado et al. (1996) also determined that perceptions of racial tension were associated with lower levels of adjustment and attachment in both academic and social arenas.

Building on the work of Hurtado et al. (1996), Hurtado and Carter (1997) tested a conceptual model of the precursors of a sense of belonging in examining the extent to which Latino students’ background characteristics and college experiences in the first two years contributed to their sense of belonging in the third year. Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that racial tension or experiences of discrimination had a negative impact on Latinos’ sense of belonging and that early transition experiences could be important predictors of a sense of belonging in the later college years. Some of the early transition experiences that contributed to a higher sense of belonging in these students included peer study groups, connections with social and religious groups, faculty interactions, and learning to manage time, finances, and schedules (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Their results suggest that students’ subjective sense of integration in campus life deserves much greater attention (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Among other suggestions, Hurtado and Carter (1997) urge future research to examine how students resolve transitional dilemmas and on students’ strategies for success.

In a more recent study of the impact of campus environment on Latino identity and persistence attitudes, Castillo, Conoley, Choi-Pederson, Archuleta, Phoummarath, and Van Landingham (2006) examined the relationship among Latino ethnic identity, perception of the university environment, and persistence attitudes at a predominantly White institution. Using objective measurement scales, Castillo et al. (2006) found that
“a student’s perception of the university environment mediated the relationship between ethnic identity and persistence attitudes” (p. 270). Their results demonstrate the need for campus officials to focus on the campus environment in order to improve persistence attitudes (Castillo et al., 2006). Furthermore, these researchers found that the more highly ethnically identified the Latino students were, the more sensitive they were to the environment.

Together, the findings of Hurtado and colleagues (Hurtado, 1994; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996) and of Castillo et al. (2006) regarding Latino perceptions of campus climate and its impact on persistence are important to this study because they suggest that understanding Latino experiences is an important step in improving persistence. Of particular relevance is that the research by Hurtado et al. (1996) and Hurtado et al. (1997) signified the value of qualitative research in investigating the challenges Latino students face in persistence to degree in four-year institutions.

In another study of Latino student retention, Longerbeam, Sedlacek, and Alatorre (2004) note that investigations into the unique aspects of Latino retention need more attention in the literature. Qualitative and quantitative data obtained from discussions with Latino students indicate that Latinos are more likely to embrace diversity, are concerned about finances, are more likely to work, and have differences in perceptions about the causes of departure as compared with non-Latino students (Longerbeam et al. (2004). Longerbeam et al.’s (2004) results related to Latinos support the research findings reviewed earlier that address factors related to minority retention.
A recent article by Hernandez and Lopez (2007) reviews the characteristics of Latinos in the pipeline to college. In addition to them being a very heterogeneous group, there were several other significant findings which Hernandez and Lopez (2007) organize into the categories of environmental, involvement, and social factors. Two of the most important themes that Hernandez and Lopez (2007) identify and which have consistently been associated with Latino retention are the influence of family ties and the stress of financial concerns. Hernandez and Lopez (2007) stress the value of faculty-student interactions and student-centered faculty as primary variables in student satisfaction. Also, in keeping with what Rendón et al. (2002) said, Latinos must manage personal identities within a framework of the minority and majority American cultures; therefore, they need skills to interact with both groups (Hernandez & Lopez, 2007).

It is not only essential to understand the characteristics and perceptions of Latinos in higher education, but to also use those data to promote best practices in recruitment, support, and retention initiatives. Olive and White (2007) explored best practices according to recent literature on Latinos in postsecondary education. To advance the success of postsecondary Latino students, colleges and universities must, according to Olive and White (2007), “take action beyond what is done for ‘all’ underrepresented student populations” (p. 25). Because a Latino’s family is so fundamental to the student’s success, they stressed the necessity to integrate families into the college experience from admissions to enrollment and beyond (Olive & White, 2007).

Literature that addresses minority student retention and, more specifically, Latino student retention, indicates that factors such as faculty validation of cultural identity, the value of affinity groups on campus, institutional climate, and the critical role of financial
support are fundamental to increasing the numbers of Latinos in postsecondary education, in nursing education programs, and ultimately, in the healthcare workforce. This study provides an opportunity to explore these issues with Latina nursing students and to subsequently inform planning and policy efforts by administrators, faculty, and other campus leaders committed to preparing future healthcare professionals.

**Racial Diversity in the Healthcare Workforce**

The literature reviewed above demonstrates that the educational pipeline has created a shortage of minorities, particularly Latinos, in higher education. The effects of this shortage are being acutely felt in professional programs that prepare future members of the healthcare workforce. Since the focus of this study is the nursing workforce, the literature related to nursing and nursing education is addressed here.

In 1996, the National Advisory Council on Nurse Education and Practice (NACNEP) convened the Expert Workgroup on Diversity to assist them in developing a national agenda for increasing workforce diversity (NACNEP, 2000). Their efforts resulted in a report to the Secretary of Health and Human Services and Congress (NACNEP, 2000). In the report, NACNEP (2000) identifies several issues related to diversity in nursing education and practice and outlines a number of goals and actions covering, among other areas, recruitment, retention, and graduation of minority students.

To begin with, NACNEP (2000) points out that the underrepresentation of minorities in nursing education perpetuates the underrepresentation of minorities in the nursing workforce. Thus, the Council said, nursing education is the starting point for addressing the issue of increasing diversity in the nursing workforce (NACNEP, 2000). NACNEP (2000) further states that substantial improvements in baccalaureate nursing
program admissions and graduation rates are necessary to bring about the needed increases.

Second, the NACNEP (2000) report points out that there are very few studies in the literature and little data documenting the barriers to substantial growth in minority enrollments and graduation from nursing programs for specific racial/ethnic minority groups. Neither are there comprehensive data available on the minority applicant pool or on drop-out rates from nursing education programs (NACNEP, 2000). Such data are needed to design and implement new ways to attract and retain minorities (NACNEP, 2000). The NACNEP (2000) Workgroup identifies several barriers to increasing the numbers of minorities in nursing education, including inadequate guidance and pre-nursing academic preparation, financial constraints, and non-supportive institutional recruitment and retention policies and learning environments.

Simply increasing the enrollments of minority students will not adequately address the nation’s need for a racially diverse nursing workforce. The other very important consideration is the types of programs in which students are enrolling. The DHHS (2004) notes that most RNs received their basic nursing preparation in associate degree (AD) programs and, as of March, 2004, 42.2% of Hispanic nurses were educated at the AD level, whereas 36.1% had attended baccalaureate programs (DHHS, 2004). By comparison, 34.2% of Whites were educated at the AD level and 33.3% were educated at the baccalaureate level for the same time period (DHHS, 2004). Furthermore, the Pew Health Professions Commissions (1995) report acknowledges that although AD programs are an efficient way to provide basic instruction for hospital staff nurses, they do not “adequately address the potential opportunity and enormous demands that will be placed
on nursing in the future” (p. 41). The pattern of enrollment in AD nursing programs indicates that “strategies are needed to increase the numbers who enroll in generic baccalaureate programs and to facilitate and accelerate the academic mobility of those who obtain their basic education in AD programs” (NACNEP, 2000, p.11).

**Recruitment and Retention of Latino Nursing Students**

An historical perspective of minority recruitment and retention in nursing is provided by Baldwin (1994), who notes that vigorous recruitment campaigns for non-traditional (including minority) students were launched in the late 1960s and early 1970s when Title VI of the Civil Rights Act provided financial assistance for minority students’ education. Although many students of color were recruited, very few actually graduated (Baldwin, 1994). Later, in 1989, the DHHS Commission on Nursing recommended that institutions of higher education invest in robust efforts to recruit minority nursing students (Baldwin, 1994). In the 1970s and 1980s, there were studies on educating minority nursing students; however, they often did not define or distinguish among the various minority groups, but rather considered them in the aggregate (Baldwin, 1994). Furthermore, what research was done, was primarily quantitative and focused on objective measures of student achievement (Baldwin, 1994). Baldwin (1994) makes a case for the need to obtain qualitative data, to clearly identify and target each minority group in the recruitment and retention process, and to consider the special needs of each individual group. She states that each group has different cognitive styles and intellectual talents that cannot be generalized to other racial or cultural groups (Baldwin, 1994).

Continuing with the historical perspective, the remainder of literature on recruitment and retention of minorities in nursing will be presented in chronological order
by publication date so as to present an evolutionary picture of what has been studied about these issues. To begin with, Bessent (1997), in a survey of thirty-two major research universities, reports on a number of issues related to recruitment, retention, and graduation of minorities in nursing. The more selective institutions identified the lack of a large pool of qualified minority applicants as a barrier to recruitment, and almost all institutions identified a lack of adequate financial resources as a significant barrier (Bessent, 1997). The findings from this study also suggest that successful retention of minority students requires strong personal support services ranging from advising to mentoring and that there is a need for additional staff to accomplish this (Bessent, 1997). The survey further reveals a significant gap between the level of minority enrollment and the numbers of minority graduates (Bessent, 1997). The most frequently mentioned barriers to completion of a nursing degree program were financial aid and inadequate basic skills (Bessent, 1997). Bessent’s (1997) research is part of a comprehensive report on recruitment, retention, and graduation of minority nurses sponsored by the American Nurses Foundation (ANF).

Another contributor to the ANF report, Cruz-Avalos (1997), supports the deduction that inadequate preparation and financial barriers are very significant for Hispanic nursing students. Cruz-Avalos (1997) also points out that an appropriate level of cultural sensitivity in the curriculum, access to ethnic nursing organizations, and adequate mentors are also critical factors. Moreover, Cruz-Avalos (1997) states that it is well known that Hispanics are not a homogeneous group; there are differences in their educational preparation and socioeconomic indicators, and there are generational differences within each subgroup. Such differences, according to Cruz-Avalos (1997) are
crucial for the comprehensive study of factors important for the recruitment and retention of Hispanics in nursing.

Later, in a study using their own Academic Social Support Framework, which proposes that achievement is a function of social support, Walcott-McQuigg, Chen, Payne, and Giddens (1999) investigated the impact of social support on minority nursing student success. Their Framework includes informal (e.g., family and friends) and formal (e.g., financial aid, faculty, counseling programs) sources of support. Walcott-McQuigg et al. (1999) drew a convenience sample of thirty-nine students from a state university in the Midwest to examine social support needs, the support network, and the extent to which social support needs were met. Fifteen (39%) of the participants were Hispanic-American (not broken down by subgroup; Walcott-McQuigg et al., 1999). Results of the questionnaire demonstrate that higher levels of social support lead to greater academic success and that it is important to identify and provide for the social support needs of ethnic minority students (Walcott-McQuigg et al., 1999). Limitations of the Walcott-McQuigg et al. (1999) study include the use of a very limited convenience sample and a questionnaire that was designed for this study and for which there were no tests of reliability or validity.

Tucker-Allen (1999) developed a Minority Student Nurse Questionnaire (MSNQ) to ascertain how minority nursing students felt about their educational experiences in a large urban multiversity setting. Of the 44 students in the sample, 25% (11) were Hispanic (not broken down into subgroups; Tucker-Allen, 1999). Findings from the Tucker-Allen (1999) study provide some very useful information about the feelings of Hispanic nursing students in this setting. The most pertinent findings from her study are
that, compared with other minority groups, Hispanics: (a) had more dissatisfaction with basic support courses that prepared them for the nursing major and felt that the college should have provided other types of academic assistance programs for minorities, (b) perceived that advisors were not always available, not pleasant, and not cooperative, (c) experienced a sense of isolation and loneliness at the college, (d) had more difficulty adjusting to the demands of the nursing program, (e) had the highest rate of attendance at minority student support group meetings, (f) more often lived at home with parents whose incomes were below $15,000 per year and received a smaller percentage of need-based scholarships, and (g) were more often employed, worked longer hours, were more in debt to finance their education, and spent less time studying.

Concerned with the lack of data on the educational mobility of Hispanic nurses, Villarruel, Canales, and Torres (2001) recently used focus group interviews to learn what Hispanic nursing students would identify as “barriers and bridges” (p. 245) to nursing. Participants were recruited from local chapters of the National Association of Hispanic Nurses located in California and Texas, as well as in New York City and in Springfield, Massachusetts (Villarruel et al., 2001). Participants were of mixed Hispanic ethnicity, including Mexican, Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Central and South American (Villarruel et al., 2001).

Villarruel et al. (2001) report that perceived barriers include financial constraints because of the cost of education and loss of work-related income, rigid institutional environments, perceived discriminatory behavior by faculty and peers, and perceived lack of support from families (Villarruel et al., 2001). Paradoxically, some of the same things that were identified as barriers by some participants were identified as bridges by others.
(Villarruel et al., 2001). For example, flexible institutional policies and family, faculty, and peer support, were identified by some as facilitators to successfully completing the nursing curriculum (Villarruel et al., 2001).

One of the most recent works on understanding the process of nursing student retention is a study by Marianne Jeffreys (2004). Jeffreys (2004) presents an organizing framework for understanding nursing student retention, identifying at-risk students, and developing both diagnostic and prescriptive strategies to facilitate success and innovations in teaching and research. Jeffreys’ (2004) proposes a conceptual model for retention, “Nursing Undergraduate Retention and Success” (NURS), intended to be used as a structure for developing, implementing, and evaluating retention strategies. Her model does not, however, identify aspects of retention specific to the study of nursing, such as proficiency in pre-requisite science courses and the need to develop skills required for objective test-taking, and interpersonal communication, for example.

As part of the NURS model, Jeffreys (2004) considers the impact of student affective factors on nursing student achievement, persistence and retention. In the NURS model, affective factors include cultural values and beliefs, self-efficacy, and motivation. Jeffreys (2004) notes that the degree of congruence between students’ values and beliefs and the values and beliefs of their surrounding environment (the environment of nursing education) ultimately affects retention. She points out that the culture of nursing currently reflects many of the dominant societal values and beliefs held in the U.S., such as adherence to traditional teaching-learning strategies, and that persistent “cultural blindness” (p. 43) has posed major obstacles to the needed changes in nursing education (Jeffreys, 2004).
Jeffreys (2004) also notes that self-efficacy (confidence) has been strongly linked to persistence behaviors and motivation. In the NURS model, self-efficacy is proposed as an important factor influencing students’ actions, performance, and persistence for learning tasks (Jeffreys, 2004). Furthermore, Jeffreys (2004) suggests that students with low self-efficacy will benefit the most from early intervention strategies. Jeffreys (2004) posits that self-efficacy changes over time in response to new experiences and that culturally diverse (non-White) nursing students’ self-efficacy perceptions were significantly influenced by their educational and health care experiences.

In summary, the literature on recruitment and retention of Latino nursing students includes studies that have addressed comprehensive retention models and programs, barriers and facilitators to degree completion, and issues around social support for minority nursing students. Recurrent themes drawn from these studies include the need for financial support and mentorship for Latino students. While each study contributes valuable insights into recruitment and retention, many use previously untested data collection instruments or are limited in other ways such that the results are not generalizable. Furthermore, some studies do not distinguish among Latino subgroups, and others group Latinos with other minorities. It is clear that more work needs to be done in this area in order to create evidence-based institutional policies that will support recruitment and retention of Latino nursing students.

**Latino Nursing Students’ Persistence to Degree and Professional Licensure**

Information with regards to the numbers of Latino nurses being awarded baccalaureate nursing degrees is limited in terms of amount and in terms of accessibility. Gardner (2005) states that exact numbers of minorities who drop out of nursing education
programs before completion are not available due to a lack of documentation among nursing programs. As noted in Chapter 1 of this study, data reported by the National League for Nursing and the American Association of Colleges of Nursing indicate persistently low percentages of minorities enrolling in nursing education programs, especially for Latinos.

Bessent (1997) reports that between 1992 and 1997, an average of 21 undergraduate nursing degrees were awarded to Hispanics as compared with a total (for all students) average of 602 undergraduate nursing degrees for the thirty-two institutions in her study (as described above). However, she does not indicate how the number of degrees awarded compared with the number of Hispanic students who had enrolled in these schools.

The only study found in the literature that addresses minority student success from the perspective of graduation and NCLEX-RN pass rates is one by Jeffreys (2006), in which she uses select student profile characteristics and academic outcomes available via student transcripts, college graduation records, admission records, and other demographic records to track progression, graduation, and licensure exam results at one associate degree program in New York state. For this group of 112 students, 11% of which were Hispanic, 67% finished in four or five semesters; the graduation rate was 75% (Jeffreys, 2006). A comparison of ethnic group distribution indicates an approximate 80% first-time pass rate on NCLEX-RN for all students combined, suggesting that ethnicity is not a variable influencing first-time pass rate on the RN licensing exam among graduating students in this study (Jeffreys, 2006). Although
Jeffrey’s (2006) data are not generalizable, the tracking process she describes could be easily adaptable to other nursing education programs.

**Summary**

This chapter begins by noting the need to study Latinos in higher education. Despite the increase in the Latino population, college participation rates for this group remain low. The majority of research on Latinos has focused on Mexican Hispanics from the western and southwestern regions of the country. While studies focused on Latinos of Caribbean descent are increasing, most have been quantitative in nature using data gathered from large, urban, selective institutions. The literature indicates that problems of access related to academic under-preparedness, test scores, and affordability pose significant barriers for Latino students. Furthermore, student involvement, campus environment, and external socio-cultural factors all impact Latinos in the postsecondary pipeline. Works by Astin (1997) and Tinto (1993) provide a platform from which more contemporary theory on retention, such as Milem and Berger’s (1997) Modified Model of Student Persistence, has evolved.

Literature pertaining to the nursing workforce demonstrates the underrepresentation of Latinos in the field and the need to increase the numbers of Latinos educated at the baccalaureate level to provide culturally competent care to currently underserved minority populations. The majority of research on Latino nursing student persistence has been on Chicanos, or has dealt with Hispanics in the aggregate with other minorities. A number of studies have used quantitative methods with data collection instruments that have no proven reliability or validity. A few recent studies have used a qualitative approach, but none have focused exclusively on Caribbean
Latinos. While data relative to outcomes for Latinos are limited, a review of the literature indicates that for those Latinos that do persist, their chances of passing the nurse licensure examination are roughly the same as for the general population of first-time test-takers.

**Conclusion**

It is clear from the literature reviewed here that Latino student persistence is a complex and multifaceted subject and that there is much yet to be learned. Diversity within Latino sub-populations and among campus environments points to the need for campus and population-specific studies that explore access, retention, and persistence to degree. This study targets a specific Latino sub-population in a small, less selective private college environment. The data obtained from the study will enhance and expand what is reported in this review of the literature. Furthermore, the literature presented in this review clearly indicates the need for further study of Latino baccalaureate nursing students’ perceptions of challenges and supports to access, persistence, and professional licensure.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

This study is designed to explore Latinos’ perceptions of supports and challenges related to obtaining a baccalaureate nursing degree and professional licensure. The literature on minority student retention and, in particular, Latino retention, suggests that student and institutional attributes along with factors external to the learning environment all play a role in persistence for these students. While a number of studies have explored the Latino higher education experience, the majority of these studies have used quantitative methodology, have utilized pre-existing data bases that include limited information on minority students, were done in large, selective, research institutions in the West or Southwest, and/or whose participants have been predominantly Chicano (of Mexican descent). In terms of nursing, the literature on minorities in nursing education has, for the most part, been quantitative and has focused on Chicano and Black students attending associate degree programs. By using a qualitative research methodology, this study is designed to learn more, from their own voices, about the experiences of Puerto Rican Latino nursing students attending college in the Northeast. The value of this qualitative design is that it yields thick, rich, descriptive data regarding the experiences of Puerto Rican students in the pipeline to professional nursing which can be used to generate strategies that will lead to increased numbers of Latino nurses in the healthcare workforce.
Conceptual Framework

Building upon the review of the literature, there are three main concepts that frame the design of this study – persistence to degree, cultural values and beliefs, and nursing as art and science. Traditional models of student retention and persistence are both useful for understanding the various factors that have been linked to student success; however, for this study these models need to be considered in relation to Latino culture as well as to the unique characteristics of nursing education.

Persistence. Tinto’s seminal (1993) theory of student departure, which suggests that student retention and persistence are determined by the interaction of student and institutional factors, considers both academic and social aspects of student integration. Tinto’s (1993) theory is useful in understanding the roles that individual student characteristics and the learning environment play in persistence for students who are dealing with challenges unique to the nursing major (e.g., science-based curriculum, demanding clinical schedules, objective style testing). Tinto’s (1993) model, does not, however, consider how diverse cultural norms affect persistence, an aspect which is integral to this study of Latino nursing students.

While Tinto’s (1993) theory is useful because of its emphasis on the ways in which student characteristics interact with the campus environment, Astin’s (1997) theory of student involvement connects the degree to which students become behaviorally engaged with the academic experience to the concept of persistence. Measures of engagement include such things as participation in campus activities and interactions with faculty and students. Owing to the rigors of course work and field experiences, nursing students can find it challenging to involve themselves with students
and activities outside of nursing, including the use of social and academic resources which, in some cases, can make the difference between success and failure.

Underpinning Astin’s (1997) theory is the construct of motivation as a key element in retention and persistence. Persistence behaviors and motivation have been strongly correlated with self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy is defined as the student’s perceived confidence for learning or performing specific tasks or skills necessary to achieve a particular goal (Jeffreys, 2004). Strong self-efficacy enhances goal commitment and performance outcomes, whereas weak self-efficacy is associated with lower persistence, poor motivation and insufficient goal commitment (Jeffreys, 2004). Jeffreys (2004) proposes self-efficacy and motivation as important factors influencing nursing student retention and persistence. The myriad knowledge and skills required for the discipline of nursing demand that students have a high degree of motivation and self-efficacy in order to be successful.

While the works cited above address issues related to persistence in general and with regard to nursing in particular, they do not focus on the unique context of persistence in nursing for Latino students. Hernandez and Lopez (2007) use the educational environment, student involvement, and social factors as a framework for understanding Latino student persistence. Individual characteristics (e.g., primary language and level of educational achievement), involvement (e.g., with faculty and student organizations), and socio-environmental factors (e.g., family, financial issues, ethnic community orientation) are all considered to be significant determinants of persistence and success for Latino students and must be evaluated in light of cultural norms within the diverse Latino sub-groups (Hernandez & Lopez, 2007). Therefore,
persistence in Latino nursing students can be influenced by factors such as academic preparedness, bilingualism, cultural norms that govern interactions with faculty and peers, and family obligations.

Cultural values and beliefs. Clearly, culture is an important consideration to take into account when examining the ways in which we can better understand the experiences and patterns of persistence for Latino students. The concept of culture for this study is based on Leininger’s (1988, 1991) Theory of Culture Care Diversity and Universality, which was developed for the purpose of learning and understanding human caring within and between cultures. Rendón et al. (2002) provide a link between cultural socialization and persistence. Jeffreys (2004) links the concept of culture in Leininger’s Culture Care Model, based on the theory of Culture Care, to persistence in nursing education.

Leininger (1994) defines culture as “patterns of learned values, beliefs, and behaviors that are shared from generation to generation within a group” (p. 155). The Culture Care Model considers the world view of a cultural group, including the influences of such things as kinship, lifeways, politics, economics, education, and religion, and how that world view affects patterns and practices of care, including nursing care (Leininger, 2002).

Rendón et al. (2002) note that Latino students experience “bicultural and dual socialization” (p. 587), which involves the overlap of minority and majority cultures. Recognition of bicultural and dual socialization is instrumental in improving persistence to degree attainment (Rendón et al., 2002). Latino nursing students must navigate two sets of cultural norms – those related to Latino ethnicity and those related to professional nursing. The preponderance of members of the nursing profession – faculty, direct care
providers, and administrators - represent the White majority culture. Therefore, the culture of nursing as a profession reflects the dominant White majority value system, present in American academia and society. Furthermore, pedagogical changes in nursing education curriculum and teaching-learning strategies have been very slow to change in spite of increasing student diversity and diverse learning styles (Jefferys, 2004). Thus, Latino nursing students may experience some degree of cultural incongruence in the greater academic learning environment, in dealing with nursing faculty and peers, and in working with healthcare staff in clinical settings, particularly in the areas of time perception, attachment to family and community, verbal and non-verbal communication styles, gender role conventions, and dealing with authority figures, any or all of which may affect their persistence (Baldwin, 1994; Rendón et al., 2002).

**Nursing as art and science.** The interactional nature of college persistence requires not only that we understand the backgrounds and cultural norms of students, but also that we recognize the importance of appreciating the influence of the particular academic environment in which students are striving to succeed. With this in mind, one must address the unique context of nursing education. Rogers (1992) describes nursing as both art and science. She defines the science of nursing as an organized body of abstract scientific knowledge; whereas, the art of nursing is the creative use of science for “human betterment” (Rogers, 1992, p. 28). The concept of nursing as art and science used for this study is based on a framework by Cooper (2001), which builds upon Roger’s definitions. Cooper (2001) distinguishes between general (cognitive) and particular (non-cognitive or affective) knowledge. General knowledge includes the empirical or scientific knowledge-base of the bio-psycho-social sciences (e.g., anatomy, pathophysiology, psychology,
health assessment), ethical principles, and professional codes of practice (Cooper, 2001). Particular knowledge is the basis of the art of nursing and includes knowledge unique to the nurse, the client, and the circumstances (e.g., advocacy, compassion, empathy, ethical practice; Cooper, 2001). Cooper (2001) further refers to particular knowledge as “engaged knowledge” (p. 5) because it is directly related to the relationship between the client and nurse and reflects the client’s response to the artful application of science to practice.

Since nursing is both art and science, students must demonstrate competency in both domains in order to meet minimum standards for entry-level practice. Cultural differences in learning or communication styles, styles of approach in social interactions, and differences in values and customs, as noted above, can present distinct challenges for students in the nursing major who are not only required to achieve proficiency in the sciences but are also required to interact effectively with nursing faculty, health professionals, clients, and families from the majority culture as well as a diversity of cultures. Thus, the art and science of the discipline may pose unique challenges to Latino nursing student persistence.

Each nursing student arrives on campus with a certain set of identities including cultural identity and individual characteristics. Once on campus, these identities affect a nursing student’s perception of how he or she “fits” with the culture of the institution and within the nursing education milieu. The resulting degree of cultural congruency or incongruency will influence the extent to which the student engages with faculty and peers on campus. The degree of campus involvement will ultimately affect persistence in baccalaureate nursing education.
The concepts that compose the framework for this study are thought to be especially salient for Latino nursing students. The overall general construct of academia reflecting the White majority history and culture is perceived to be the standard. Therefore, not only must Latino nursing students navigate the academic, social, and institutional challenges to persistence, oftentimes from an educationally disadvantaged background, they must do so using a set of cultural norms and perspectives that may result in some degree of social and/or cultural incongruence. These issues, in turn, have the potential to affect their goal commitment, performance outcomes, and, ultimately, retention rates.

In conclusion, the conceptual framework for this study suggests that a student’s ability to develop proficiency in the art and science of nursing is influenced by one’s ability to navigate the higher education culture in general as well as the culture of professional nursing education. Thus, persistence in baccalaureate nursing education, the central concept in this framework, is the result of the interrelationship of the discipline of nursing as art and science, issues related to the Latino and professional nursing cultures, as well as individual and institutional variables (see Appendix A for diagram of conceptual framework).

**Research Questions**

What do Latino students in baccalaureate nursing education programs identify as challenges to and supports for persistence to degree and professional nurse licensure? In addition to this, there are several associated research questions that build on the conceptual framework. The first three questions address the predominant persistence
factors identified by Hernandez and Lopez (2007), Villarruel et al. (2001), and Gardner (2005). The fourth and fifth questions specifically address the nursing curriculum.

The associated research questions are:

- What individual (personal) attributes do Latino baccalaureate nursing students identify as promoting or inhibiting their academic success?
- What environmental (institutional) attributes do Latino baccalaureate nursing students identify as promoting or inhibiting their academic success?
- What external (outside of school) elements do Latino baccalaureate nursing students identify as promoting or inhibiting their academic success?
- What elements specifically related to their professional nursing studies do Latino nursing students identify as promoting or inhibiting their academic success?
- How does membership in the Latino culture enhance or inhibit persistence to degree in a baccalaureate nursing program?

**Research Design**

This is a qualitative study using ethnographic interviews for data collection and a focus group for member checking. The unit of analysis is the individual student. A qualitative research design is utilized as the intention of the study is to gain an understanding, in their own voices, of Latino baccalaureate nursing students’ perceptions of factors that challenge and support their persistence to degree completion and professional licensure. Marshall and Rossman (2006) note that a qualitative methodology is appropriate for research that: “…seeks cultural description…, elicits multiple constructed realities…, elicits… subjective understandings and interpretations…, delves into complexities and processes…, or investigates little-known phenonema” (p. 53).
Other characteristics of qualitative inquiry iterated by Lincoln and Guba (1985) include using a natural setting, and the “human instrument” (p. 39) for data gathering, inductive data analysis, emergent design, and negotiated outcomes.

Inductive data analysis is used in order to discover patterns, themes, and categories emergent in the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). A qualitative research approach is most appropriate for the study because it provides for thick, rich description of the multiple realities experienced by the participants, and the inductive analysis process provides a basis for decisions about transferability to other sites (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, negotiated outcomes allow for an interpretation of reality that is reconstructed by the researcher and verified and confirmed by the respondents in context of their “local value patterns” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 41).

The need to explore the lived experiences of Latino nursing students through qualitative research is well supported by the literature as a means to supplement the existing body of quantitative data on Latino student persistence. For example, Hurtado and Carter (1997) note that more attention needs to be given to Latino students’ subjective sense of integration on campus. Also, Hurtado et al. (1996) and Hurtado et al. (1997) point out the value of qualitative research in investigating the challenges Latino students face in persistence to degree in four-year institutions.

The preponderance of studies on Latino nursing student persistence have employed quantitative methods and have yielded data such as enrollment statistics, degrees awarded, and NCLEX pass rates (e.g., Bessent, 1997; Gardner, 2005; Jeffreys, 2006). The few studies that investigate academic and social support issues either use a quantitative design and/or do not distinguish among minority subgroups (e.g., Tucker-
Allen, 1999; Villarruel et al., 2001; & Walcott-McQuigg et al., 1999). Thus, the review of the literature makes clear the need to expand our current data base with qualitative data that addresses some of the more subtle and sensitive complexities of persistence for specific Latino subgroups, an area of study that has been relatively neglected. A qualitative approach allows the researcher to elicit emic perspectives of Latino nursing students in their natural setting, (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) as a means of identifying patterns in perceptions and behaviors related to student persistence. With participants as co-researchers, the researcher is able to collaborate with the participants using their construction of reality in an effort to create an agenda for improving the number of Latino students in the pipeline to professional nursing (Creswell, 2003).

The ethnographic interview as research method. This study uses Spradley’s (1979) method of ethnographic interviewing as a means of collecting qualitative data. Ethnography originates in the discipline of Anthropology, thus, the concept of culture is of central importance. According to Patton (2002), ethnography provides a way of looking at the culture of a group of people from the insiders’ (emic) perspective. Spradley (1979) asserts that the ethnographic interview is a conversation with the explicit purpose of looking for cultural themes in the data. Ethnographic interviews are, therefore, appropriate for this project because the researcher’s purpose was to obtain insight into the nursing education experiences of participants related to the issue of persistence of Puerto Rican students in baccalaureate nursing education. Thus, the students served as the primary data sources for this project and the focus of the inquiry was their experience related to persistence to degree.
Role of the researcher. My presence in the role of researcher in the study setting was relatively brief but personal (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). I needed to negotiate access as well as establish relationships with the participants. There were several areas of concern related to access and role that had to be addressed. First, as a member of the nursing faculty at a similar nearby institution and an alumna of the research institution, I am well acquainted with the nursing curriculum and faculty of the study site, which facilitated access to students. On the other hand, since the two institutions draw from the same catchment area for students, competition for enrollment placed some limitations on my role in terms of involvement in the setting and in meeting the demands of reciprocity. Furthermore, it was necessary for me to maintain a formal relationship with the institution and students in order to meet expectations of professional collegiality and propriety.

Second, I obtained permission for research on human subjects from the Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC) at the study site as well as from the University of Massachusetts to protect the rights of participants (Cresswell, 2003). The process of gaining approval for the study and access to the site took approximately eight weeks. It was also necessary to devote sufficient time to gain the approval of the institution’s “gatekeepers” and to establish trusting relations with the participants before data gathering could begin. A preliminary meeting was held with a member of the nursing faculty at the study site who agreed to post a short letter from me to the Latino students on their virtual classroom web site and to introduce me and my project to the Latino students. In addition, meetings were held with the Division of Nursing Chair and with a few members of the nursing faculty for the purposes of introductions, sharing information
about the purpose and timeline of the study, roles of participants and researcher in the study, plans for reporting results, answering initial questions at the start of the project, and ascertaining how best to introduce the project to students. Additional activities at the site centered on recruiting participants and arranging for and conducting the individual and focus group interviews. Interviews began four weeks after HSRC approval of the project.

Finally, part of the role of the researcher is to have an exit strategy (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). For this project, each participant received a verbal “thank you” and words of appreciation at the end of the interview. At the completion of all data collection, I made a gradual exit from the setting, using the focus group as a transition, explaining what the final report would look like, and leaving participants with offers of tutoring assistance, along with expressions of gratitude. These measures were intended to reduce the risk of feelings of resentment or abandonment on the part of the students (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Ethical considerations. Rossman and Rallis (2003) state that in order for a study to be judged as trustworthy by potential users, it must conform to standards of competent practice and ethical conduct. This means that the methodology used to generate the data must be rigorous, the data must be reported accurately, and the findings must be useful (transferable) in other situations (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Measures to ensure trustworthiness of this project are incorporated in the remaining sections of this chapter.

Informed consent of participants is crucial for the ethical conduct of research using human subjects (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Informed consent assures “that the participants are not deceived about the study and that their participation is voluntary”
An informed consent letter was signed by each participant (see Appendix B). Since it is not ethical for the researcher to be in any way deceitful in the conduct of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006), students were also provided with full disclosure regarding my role as nursing faculty in another program and regarding the purpose of the study.

Another ethical consideration for this study is related to the establishment of trust between the researcher and participants. Qualitative research involves building and sustaining relationships with the participants such that when the study is completed, the participants may experience a feeling of abandonment (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The researcher must, therefore, strive to convey a sense of “participatory, shared, and purposeful engagement with participants” in order not to breach the ethical principles involved in ethnographic research (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 78). In this study, every effort was made throughout the interviews to demonstrate a genuine commitment to learning about and accurately reporting students’ experiences and an exit strategy was included in the plans for the project.

Finally, ethical concerns regarding institutional constraints had to be considered for this study (Krathwohl, 2004). Some of the interview questions generated data that had the potential to reflect unfavorably on the institution (e.g., the availability of academic support). Participants were reassured that all data would be reported with scrupulous attention to confidentiality and anonymity both for them and the institution and that emphasis would be placed on their needs for support rather than on any shortcomings of the institution.
Participants and Data Sources

Sampling techniques. The participants for this study were obtained from a sample of Latino baccalaureate nursing students from a small, less selective, private, liberal arts college in Western Massachusetts. According to enrollment statistics for fall, 2008, this institution had a total undergraduate enrollment of 1,668 – 41.6% White and 9.8% Hispanic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Fall 2008 enrollment statistics for the Division of Nursing indicate that 38 out of the total 278 nursing students were Latino.

A two-tiered approach to sampling was used. First, purposeful sampling was used to identify the nursing program from which participants were drawn because it allowed me optimal access to Latinos in a baccalaureate nursing program. Then, purposeful sampling was used again to identify students for the study. Faculty from the nursing program were consulted to identify a sample of Puerto Rican students; these students were then invited to meet with me and invited to participate. A participant group of 10-15 students was desired with representation across curriculum levels (e.g., sophomores, juniors, and seniors). Students willing to participate were provided with my contact information (phone and email) for the purpose of scheduling individual interviews. The six Latina students present at that meeting agreed to be interviewed.

In an effort to establish trust and rapport with the students, I explained that my goal in doing the interviews was to learn from them what helps and what hinders their success and to use that information to improve how I related to and teach diverse students and also to share what I learned with my colleagues in nursing education. I noted that my intention as a nurse educator was to mitigate the challenges and enhance the supports to
the extent possible in an effort to improve retention. I wanted to allay any anxiety related to them sharing information with me so I stressed that my intention was to use the information for the purpose of promoting their success. I believe that conveying a sense of partnership with them was helpful in gaining their trust because they expressed gratitude at having someone interested in their experiences and eagerness to be involved. After meeting with me, some of the participants said they would encourage their Latina peers to participate in the study as well.

To obtain additional participants, flyers with information about the study and how to reach me were placed in the entry way and in the nursing student lounge where the Division of Nursing is located. Also, I received permission to introduce the study to students in several of the nursing classes. These efforts were successful and interviews continued until there was input from students at all levels of the nursing curriculum and data saturation was reached (Krathwohl, 1998). A total of 11 interviews were completed. One of the interviews was not used in data analysis because the student was Latina but not of Puerto Rican background and therefore, did not match the criteria for the study. In sum, data obtained from interviews with 3 sophomores, 3 juniors, and 4 seniors of mixed academic ability (self-reported) were used.

Establishing trustworthiness. A critical aspect of conducting qualitative research is the trustworthiness of the project (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Trustworthiness was achieved through member checking, peer debriefing, triangulation of data, prolonged engagement, reflexive journaling, and independent audit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking, the process of having participants check the accuracy of the account as recorded by the investigator (Creswell, 2008), was achieved by taking the data back to
the participants and asking them to validate and/or modify the data. Member checking was employed throughout the process of data collection and analysis and at termination of data collection (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Debriefing, a process of systematically talking through the research process, occurred regularly with a non-involved professional peer and included assessment of the research experience, decision-making, and next steps in data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation, the process of corroborating evidence collected for accuracy and congruency was accomplished by cross-checking data and interpretations with multiple participants as different sources of the same information (Lincoln, & Guba, 1985).

Prolonged engagement in this study involved in-depth contact with and persistent observations of participants over a ten week period. This allowed sufficient time to build trust, become familiar with the culture of the setting, and test for misinformation introduced by the interviewer or interviewees (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reflexive journaling involves introspective writing that displays the researcher’s thought processes and bases of decision-making about the inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A reflexive journal was kept throughout the project which included a diary of each interview experience, decisions, impressions, and next steps. An audit trail also provides evidence of the trustworthiness of the project. In order to validate that the project was carried out within the boundaries of good professional practice and that the outcomes were consistent with the raw data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), an audit trail consisting of records of verbatim transcripts, contact summaries for each interview, demographic survey forms, coding schema, and data analysis notes was retained.
Participants were the key informants in this study. In-depth interviews were the main source of evidence, in which I explored participants’ perspectives in order to obtain rich, detailed information regarding their experiences in baccalaureate nursing education. One-on-one, face-to-face interviews were conducted in the students’ natural educational setting.

While it is optimal to appeal to participants on the basis of the contribution they can make to knowledge, the use of incentives has been shown to be worthwhile, especially in research involving interviews (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, “norms of reciprocity suggest that the researcher cannot be simply a spongelike observer…” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 79). Therefore, because their time and input is valuable, participants were offered a flash drive as an incentive. I made it clear that students were being compensated for their time, not their responses, and they were to be as candid and forthright as possible during the interviews (Patton, 2002). Other forms of reciprocity that I offered included tutoring the nursing students or assisting them to identify and access academic or social support services. Additional data included observations of non-verbal communication during interviews as this is a rich source of contextually relevant data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Collection and Analysis

Demographic data was collected for each of the participants using the Biographic Data Survey developed for this study (see Appendix C) in order to determine each student’s racial/ethnic subgroup and provide a description of the sample in the findings of the study. For this study, demographic data consisted of birth year, gender, racial subgroup(s), high school attended, level in the nursing curriculum (sophomore, junior,
senior), whether or not the participant transferred into the baccalaureate program from an associate degree program, and number of semesters in nursing education.

Interviews were conducted in either a small conference room or an unused office in locations convenient to the nursing classrooms so that students could more easily schedule interviews before or after classes. These rooms provided quiet, relaxed, private space for interviewing. Each interview began with words of appreciation to the participant, an introduction to how the interview would proceed generally, and a request for permission to use a tape recorder. In order to foster a trusting relationship with each participant, I also reviewed the purpose of the study and my intentions to use what I learned to improve outcomes for Latino nursing students. They appeared to be at ease with this and very willing to tell their stories. Interviews took between one and two hours, and were scheduled at least one-half hour apart so as to protect confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. All interviews were recorded using two microcassette recorders - one as a backup for equipment failure. Field notes were taken during the interviews to record the date, place, and time of the interview, as much detail as possible about the physical environment, and to capture non-verbal communication. Field notes were expanded immediately afterward to record observer comments, how the interview had progressed, and any other reflections and remarks that seemed pertinent. Likewise, field notes were taken during the focus group interview and included interactions among students. Field notes were kept in an electronic journal and reviewed several times for insights and questions that needed follow-up or clarification. Analytic notes were also recorded electronically and included preliminary impressions and possible explanations emerging from the data.
I conducted all of the interviews in this study using a focused interview style approach (Yin, 2003). This interview approach is open-ended and assumes a conversational manner, but follows a set of questions (Yin, 2003). The research questions were intended to explore what the life experience of baccalaureate nursing education is like for Latino students drawing on the themes from the literature and the conceptual framework of the study. Spradley’s (1979) method of ethnographic interviewing was used to develop descriptive questions that would allow me to establish rapport with each participant and elicit as much information as possible related to the conceptual framework during each interview. The interview questions were pilot tested during the construction phase with one Latina nursing student not participating in the study and two recent Latina nursing graduates. Edits for clarity of wording were made based on their suggestions. The research questions were not designed to determine causality, but rather to discover what is happening for Latinos in a higher education setting generally and in nursing education specifically. Introductory questions were used to open the dialogue, followed by the key research questions (see Appendix D for Interview Schedule). Each participant was asked all of the questions, although the order of questions varied slightly as the conversation warranted in a few of the interviews. Probing questions were used to encourage additional dialogue and for clarification purposes. Participants were very forthcoming with detailed answers to the questions and shared both their successful and unsuccessful experiences as nursing students. In addition, they freely shared cell phone numbers with me in case I needed further clarification or follow up information.
I performed some transcription to become intimately familiar with the data. A professional transcription service was hired to carry out word-for-word data transcription of the remainder of the interviews. In order to “fully know” the data, each tape was audited a minimum of three times; once without the written transcript and at least twice while reading along with the transcript. This process enabled me to correct transcription errors that resulted from inaccuracies in interpretation of words spoken in accented English or from unfamiliarity with nursing terminology. In addition, it allowed me to discern the degree of congruency between what students said and their non-verbal language during the interviews. The measure of congruency between verbal and non-verbal communication offered clues about any hesitation, wariness, or apprehension in answering the interview questions. I also listened for mutuality of understanding between interviewer and interviewee in the wording and intention of questions and answers. Participants were contacted by email as needed with follow-up questions for clarification purposes. Information gathered from the interviews and field notes were reviewed several times in their entirety as a process of data “immersion” (Creswell, 2008; Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

The data were coded using open and axial coding procedures. Codes are labels used to describe a segment of text; coding consists of a process of segmenting and labeling the text to form descriptions and broad themes (Creswell, 2008). Open coding, a process of identifying, naming, and describing phenomena, is used to locate themes and assign preliminary codes in a first attempt to condense the data into categories (Neuman, 1997). Axial coding, a process of relating codes to each other, is used to focus on the preliminary themes more than on the data itself, in order to discover additional codes or
new ideas (Neuman, 1997). The purpose of axial coding is to look for categories or concepts that cluster together (Neuman, 1997). After coding the entire text of each interview, the number of codes was reduced to obtain major themes (Creswell, 2008). Spradley’s (1979) method of ethnographic analysis was used in a limited manner for categorization of data and recognition of patterns and themes. His analytic method assumes multiple interviews with each participant with corresponding levels of data analysis, whereas, this study uses a single interview with each participant. Nonetheless, Spradley’s (1997) approach was very useful for identifying and analyzing semantic relationships in the data. Spradley (1979) suggests several universal (used in any culture) categories of semantic relationships that are useful in data analysis: strict inclusion (X is a kind of Y); spatial (X is a place in Y, X is part of Y); cause-effect (X is a result of Y, X is a cause of Y); rationale (X is a reason for doing Y); location for action (X is a place for doing Y); function (X is used for Y); means-end (X is a way to do Y); sequence (X is a step in Y); and attribution (X is an attribute of Y). Spradley (1979) also notes that informant-expressed semantic relationships (articulated by the informants in accordance with their own cultural traditions) reveal categories of cultural knowledge present in the data.

Initially, the data were coded by hand according to concepts that emerged from analysis of the interviews (open coding) and each code was assigned a definition to reflect the parameters of that code. For example, the concept of cultural identity, coded “Cult. Ident.,” was defined as “identification and affiliation with the Latino culture.” The list of codes and definitions went through several iterations and regroupings during analysis of the first three to four interviews, but as each subsequent interview was
analyzed, the codes and definitions required only a few revisions. Axial coding was then used to organize codes into themes suggested by the conceptual framework of the study (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) and which emerged from analysis of the data.

The process of on-going data analysis made it possible for me to earmark certain categories for follow up as part of continuous data collection processing and sequencing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Following analysis and coding of each interview, a contact summary form with coded themes was created. Once all the contact summary forms were completed, they were merged into a summary form which combined codes according to salient points gleaned from analysis of the data.

The key preliminary findings were presented to the focus group for member checking six weeks after the last interview was completed. The focus group was held in a conference room in the same building as the individual interviews and was attended by three participants: one sophomore, and two juniors. It lasted approximately one hour and fifteen minutes and was recorded and transcribed in the same manner as the individual interviews. While those in attendance did not represent the full participant group and could only speak for themselves, they agreed that the findings (with just one point of clarification on the changing role of Latinas in American society) based on their experiences, were valid.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations, as defined by Creswell (2008), are the “potential weaknesses or problems with the study” that are identified by the researcher (p. 207). There are several limitations identified for this study which are related to the researcher. To begin with, I am not a member of the underrepresented Latino racial group that is the subject of this
study. There is, therefore, the risk of researcher bias based on membership in the majority culture. In addition, a researcher from the majority culture may not have the same degree of credibility as a researcher would have with Latino nursing students, and this may have limited what the students were willing to share about their college experiences. In addition, being from a different racial background than the participants could significantly influence my “etic perspective,” or what sense I am able to make from the data (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 50). The final limitation related to the researcher is that being a nursing faculty member in a baccalaureate program may not only be a source of bias, but it also creates a power gradient between me and the students, which may have influenced what information the nursing students were willing to share.

A second limitation is related to the sample, which was restricted to a group of 10 students from a small, private, less selective college in Western Massachusetts, limiting the generalizability (although, not the transferability) of the findings.

**Conclusion**

This chapter presents the qualitative research design selected for this study of ten Latina baccalaureate nursing students in Western Massachusetts. A qualitative design was selected because it allowed the researcher to elicit, first-hand, perspectives of what student nurses identify as challenges to and supports for persistence to degree and professional licensure.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the study and is divided into three sections. The first section describes the entry characteristics of the Latina nursing students who participated in this study, beginning with a profile of the participants, including: age, gender, racial/ethnic group(s), level (year) in the nursing program, prior college experience, number of semesters spent to date in nursing education, and expected year of graduation. The second section presents students’ perceptions of the institutional environment. The third section depicts how students describe the ways in which their entry characteristics and the institutional environment influence their views of baccalaureate nursing education and their role in professional nursing.

Student Characteristics

Participant profile. As shown in Appendix E, eight of the ten students in the study self-identify as Puerto Rican, whereas two students self-identify as Puerto Rican and Dominican. The participants in the study range in age from twenty-one to thirty-four, with five students between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-seven, and five students between the ages of thirty-one and thirty-four. All of the participants are female (there were no male Latino students in the nursing program during the time of the study). Eight of the ten students have one or more children. One of the students lives on campus; the other nine are commuters. All of the participants are full-time students. All of the students work one or more jobs; all but one work in healthcare-related positions such as
medical assistant or certified nursing assistant. Five of the students are the first
generation in their family to go to college.

Three of the participants are sophomores in the nursing program, three are juniors,
and four are seniors. Eight of the ten participants transferred into the baccalaureate
program from a community college; one student transferred from another four-year
college that did not have a nursing program; and one was not a transfer student. One of
the students in the study has an associate’s degree in science (not in nursing); another
student earned a prior bachelor’s degree in social science. Two of the participants report
they spent a total of four semesters in nursing education, including time at a community
college; four report they spent five semesters; and four report they spent six semesters in
nursing education. These numbers include semesters for nursing prerequisites. Four
students expect to graduate in 2009, three in 2010, and three in 2011. Given the number
of months spent in nursing education and the estimated year of graduation, it is evident
that several of these students have repeated one or more courses, putting them back by at
least a semester if not a full year because of when courses are offered.

The next part of this section includes findings related to students’ entry
characteristics including: cultural background characteristics, socioeconomic status,
language skills, biculturalism, academic preparedness, and individual competencies
which impact the student’s ability to persist. Student characteristics are depicted in the
Framework of Persistence (see Appendix F).

Cultural background. This study is built on the assertion that discovering cultural
realities through the use of student voices offers an important context for comprehending
the issues involved in access and persistence to degree. An understanding of Latino
students’ experiences in baccalaureate nursing education must come from a description of their own perceptions.

All of the participants in this study report that they share a common Latino cultural heritage with respect to values, traditions, and beliefs. For example, they report that in the Latino culture, family is the most highly valued entity; it is the center of the student’s life experience. Therefore, the Latina nursing student’s roles and subsequent areas of responsibility in the family are given primary importance; family relationships and obligations always come first in terms of decision-making and in allocation of time and attention. These strong family connections are affirmed repeatedly in the interviews. Jamie, a 22 year old with a small child says, “We tend to start [families] a little earlier…more family focused…and then everything else kind of goes around that.”

Joslyn, a 27 year old single mother of two, puts it this way:

…culturally family comes first…always family comes first and it was hard for me to explain to some people…it was hard for them to understand that and no matter how I said my family comes first, my son needs me … you hear, “Well, this is nursing school, you need to be here.”

For these Latina students, work is considered the second priority after family commitments. Furthermore, they regard school as a type of work, so these students continuously struggle to balance time for family, work, and school. Since time allocation is a determinant of the students’ investment in learning activities, it is also one of the most critical determinants of persistence. While several participants voice parallel sentiments, Joslyn says it most succinctly: “God, family, work, and school is work…school is not in any other of those categories…it is work and there must be [an] understanding that that is part of our culture.”
The value that family members place on education plays a significant role in the students’ decisions to finish high school or go on to college. Most students note that they receive encouragement and support from their parents and/or spouse to stay in or return to school. For example, Joslyn relates the following:

No one in my family had gone to school. My mom went to college but she never finished and my dad didn’t finish middle school so I was [a] first generation grad and I really wanted to do that… do something that I was always told…by my parents… “you really should go to school; you should go to college,” and it was something that I felt I wanted to do, not only for myself but for my family. Like something for them to be proud of and embrace with me.

Students state that family members provide encouragement to stay in school, to keep trying, and never give up, no matter what. In particular, several participants cite an influential female relative, often the mother, as being their strongest source of support. Lola states, “they [family] know the commitment that I have with school and they are happy. They are like ‘oh it’s almost over, it’s almost over and, you know, my mother is like, oh my daughter is going to be an RN!’.” Olivia notes,

…you could just tell they [parents] expected more from me. You could just tell, I mean I got pretty decent grades in school…so they were always so proud and so I think even from the beginning it was always there and they never said, ‘You have to go to college,’ but they always made sure…what do you want to do next…?

Ilysa reports: “…my mom is always like… ‘you can do it, I know you can do it’ …that push to keep going.” Victoria notes, “My father always said, ‘You want to work in a factory like me the rest of your life? You don’t. Get an education.’ So I think that’s what rang in my head.”

Even for those students who report having failed and repeated one or more courses, family members continue to maintain a positive attitude and cheer them on. Several students mention that it is their family that helps to keep them focused on the
goal. In addition to emotional support, the majority of participants note that they rely on family members to provide childcare while they are at work or in school.

However, not all families are as encouraging, as Nina reports:

…she [her mother] doesn’t really agree with me going back to school to get a bachelor’s because in my family… you don’t need a bachelor’s degree because the way they grew up, they all got jobs out of high school and everybody was fine. I don’t really think she understands how important to me it is to finish something I said that I was going to do …

That being said, only one student out of ten in the study relates that her family members do not agree with her getting a college degree to the point where she finds it impossible to study at home and cannot rely on family to assist with childcare or other responsibilities.

Family support notwithstanding, several students note the importance of getting their college degree as it will enable them to offer their children a better future. Jamie puts it this way:

I don’t want to ever have my daughter have to go through some of my struggles. There was a lot of struggling, a lot of sacrifice. I think about that, and that’s what makes me kind of push myself even more. Trying to rise above that… bar…rise above that stereotype; rise above poverty.

The data regarding cultural background indicate that in the Latino culture, it is common for young women to have children early, often directly after high school which, in turn, can impact their ability to continue their education. In addition, the data demonstrate that Latino family values and traditions strongly influence these students’ decisions about work and school and that the Latino family – work priority value system poses both challenges and opportunities in terms of persistence in college. While these students may have felt pressured to leave school and start their families at a young age,
they also recognize the value of obtaining a professional degree both for themselves and for their families.

**Socioeconomic status.** When students were asked to describe the most challenging aspects of being a full-time nursing student, it is noteworthy that none of them initially included finances. However, when the subject was introduced, the universal response was that money is one of the two most critical elements in their ability to stay in school (the other element being time). It may be that for these students, financial constraints are considered an expected or accepted part of their life experience so that they do not necessarily single it out in the context of school.

When asked about finances, all ten participants in this study acknowledge that they live on very tight budgets and find it necessary to work while going to school. Eight of the students are supporting children on their own or with a partner. Several of the participants report that they put family finances on the line and sacrifice a great deal in order to afford school, especially if they reduce their work hours in order to spend more time on school requirements. Amanda reports that she is in danger of losing her house because she cannot afford the payments:

> Right now I’m almost in foreclosure but I don’t care… my ability to pay the mortgage has gone down because I’m in school but I feel that this is more important right now. I’m almost there, I’m almost done. It doesn’t matter…

Lola stresses the importance of living by a budget and making choices:

> I am walking out of school with $50,000 in student loans…I cut my hours at work. I moved back home, which was fine because it worked out well because I have a support system, but you really have to learn how to budget.

Students state that the income provided by their jobs is essential to meet school expenses not covered by financial aid (most do receive some financial aid) and to cover
family and home expenses. Joslyn describes the stress caused by the need to make
difficult choices:

I have to work, I have to support me and my children, I have to make sure the roof
is over our heads and everything is paid but…because of the demands of being in
a [nursing] program and being dedicated to the program, I have had to shuffle my
resources…on top of what I have for childcare because I can’t pay anyone to do
this because my funds are already very, very, very limited. So with the stress of
school…and then the stress of home and outside, financial is a really big one
where it causes a lot of strain and…I kind of throw the hands up, like…I wish I
could just work full time and make sure that everything was all set…but, you
know, you can’t…

Students report that the need to bring in a certain amount of income makes it very
difficult to also put in the amount of study time needed to keep their grades high enough
to progress in the nursing major. In fact, they point out that often the more demanding
their course work, the more stressed they become trying to balance time to work with
time to study. Several students indicate that as they have progressed in the nursing
program, they have had to make the difficult decision to reduce their work hours because
they were at risk of failing out. For example, Victoria expresses the following:

I’m just dropping the every other weekend [of work] because it really is getting to
a point where I can’t be doing this work…that is like the only option I have
because…that’s where my grades are starting to hurt and I just don’t have it in me
to keep, you know, balancing both at the same time.

On the other hand, participants also state that they look forward to a better paying
job once they graduate, along with the ability to reduce the number of jobs and/or work
hours so they can spend more time with their family (children especially) or friends. For
instance, Joslyn states:

I’m a single mom so I’m a full-time mom, full-time student, you know, I work so
it’s a lot on my plate…hopefully [I’ll]… spend more time with my family which I
know they have suffered a lot from me kind of being so busy….I feel I have lost
a lot from my kids. They are little…
Some participants note that traditionally, Latinos have occupied low-level jobs, many in healthcare, and it’s time for them to move up on the socioeconomic scale; to not be content with the status quo. Amanda, a medical assistant, says: “…the thought just makes me feel like I have accomplished something, something positive with my life, you know, something to represent my community and my heritage…just a self pride that I have accomplished something that was hard.” Dania conveys the following:

I definitely support more of us Hispanics to become… not only… nurses but even other [jobs requiring] higher education, just because we are always pretty much in the bottom of everything…Just ‘cause there [are] not many Hispanic professionals…and every time that there is a Hispanic doing something for a community or gaining a professional degree [of] any sort, that makes me feel good definitely because…I think it is time for us to start moving up in general…the whole [Latino] population.

The data indicate that, for most of these Latina students, finances are a significant challenge because in addition to attending school, they must also be able to work the number of hours that will provide the needed level of income. In addition, the data suggest that these students may have entered nursing with unrealistic expectations regarding class and clinical hours as well as the rigors of course work vis-à-vis continuing to hold one or more jobs and care for children. Several participants acknowledge having to readjust their expectations and priorities, though such difficult choices add stress to their already demanding lives. The data further show that these Latina students see the socioeconomic benefits of having the nursing degree as outweighing the financial risks they experience in the process of obtaining it.

Language skills. Six of the ten participants in the study report Spanish as their primary language; two report English as their primary language; and two report being equally conversant in both Spanish and English. Of the two students who cite English as
their primary language, one states she is also fluent in Spanish; the other states she is able to understand Spanish but does not speak it as fluently. Five students report learning both Spanish and English simultaneously from early childhood; three learned English when they started school at the age of five; and two learned English in middle school at the age of thirteen when they moved to the U.S. from Puerto Rico. Three of the participants indicate that they tend to do some Spanish-English translation when reading and writing in English, resulting in the need for more time and, in some cases, academic assistance. Limitations in language skills can make the complex reading and writing assignments required in the nursing curriculum a challenge for these students. Dania offers this example from her own experience:

I can get into tears when I have to write a paper. I mean even though I’m a senior I still have such a hard time and it is the way I have to word things because when I write them down…like I definitely know what I want to say and I have the idea and…when I write it down, it’s almost like…the Spanish…back into the Spanish and English.

Ilysa describes her difficulty with English as a second language in the classroom this way: “…when I am sitting in a lecture, it’s like my head is trying to translate everything so I am trying to listen and focus but I am [also] trying to understand things in my mind.” Amanda relates a particularly poignant scenario regarding her language skills when she began nursing school:

My English was… not too great, and my reading skills were a little slow because I was taking a little bit too long to read, to comprehend everything, and somebody told me that I will never be a great nurse because my English is not great. So that almost broke me or at least shattered me so bad that I was…really reconsidering changing my major.¹

The participants in this study cite bilingualism as both a benefit and an added responsibility in healthcare. According to these students, the benefit is being able to
communicate directly with Spanish-speaking patients in their own language without the need for a third party to interpret. This, they say, is important because Latino patients are more likely to share personal health information with a member of their own cultural community who they perceive to be non-biased. Jamie suggests that, “…there is just a lack of quality, because they are waiting for an interpreter. So, their quality of care…is just put on hold. That’s why I decided to become a nurse.” Lola notes the following scenario regarding her interactions with Spanish-only speaking patients:

It’s awesome because just knowing that you can go into a patient’s room and they may not speak any English and you can have a conversation….It would be like suffocating where you can’t speak another language and you want to get something across.

The disadvantages, as described by the students, are related to health risks for the patient and legal risks for the student nurse regarding accuracy of translation – bilingual students feel they have an additional responsibility to get the translation right and no excuse not to; and time away from their own patient care assignment to translate for other nurses. Students report that they have found ways to deal with the disadvantages and that it is more important to focus on the advantages. For example, most participants say they do not translate for informed consent or other medical/legal documents. Nina says, “that’s one thing I don’t really feel comfortable doing…because… I feel like if I am missing something, it is going to be the end of the world, especially in healthcare.” Several participants say they serve as interpreters only if there is no certified interpreter available. A few say that they find ways to swap patient care responsibilities temporarily with another nurse who needs their assistance with translation.

The data provided by these students indicate that despite any disadvantages associated with translating, the predominant perception is that bilingualism is a definite
advantage in terms of providing quality healthcare for Latinos. Students feel that this is especially true given the numbers of Spanish-speaking patients and families they interact with in clinical settings and that any challenges associated with translating can be overcome.

Biculturalism and dual socialization. The participants in the study describe themselves as equally socialized into both the White and Latino cultures with experience, knowledge, and understanding of the behavioral repertoires of each. They are especially proud of their unique ability to integrate and socialize within what are now the two foremost cultures and languages in the U.S. These students portray a clear understanding of the significance of biculturalism and dual socialization as members of a diverse society and, even more importantly, in terms of what they can contribute in healthcare settings with respect to understanding Latino’s health beliefs, food preferences, and use of home remedies. Amanda sums it up this way: “I can just integrate into two different worlds… with no problem.” She goes on to say, “I feel like I will have more responsibility and more viability because I have the ability to understand both [languages and cultures].”

Biculturalism and dual socialization also provide these Latina nursing students with a distinct perspective on cultural bias and discrimination in the classroom as well as in clinical settings. Several participants assert that they have experienced bias against Latinos by White students in the classroom and stereotyping by White nurses and doctors where they work or have their clinical experience. For example, Olivia explains:

…on the clinical floor, you would hear comments…about the Hispanics and I am always the one…I am always like, “you can’t judge because you don’t know where people come from.” So…I’m that kind of person that I don’t assume somebody’s situation without knowing them.
Lola states, “I think I am going to be a lot more sensitive to my patients because… I have heard the remarks… ‘Spanish, 89-year-old coming in…oh God…doesn’t probably speak any English, doesn’t know anything’.”

Others indicate they have been criticized by fellow Latinos for going to college and studying what they perceive to be a White profession. Olivia says, “some will criticize and say ‘you think you’re White,’ so you have to be strong and want it so bad…finishing nursing school is everything.” She also relates her experience with bias upon returning to school as a Latina single parent:

As a traditional student I didn’t see it as much but when I had my own child and I was not married…and I was going to school and I hadn’t finished college, that’s when I saw a lot of biases.

None of the students indicate that bias and stereotyping will prevent them from pursuing a career in nursing; in fact they cite these concerns as among the most important reasons for increasing diversity in the healthcare professions. Thus, there are both supporting and challenging aspects to biculturalism and dual socialization for these Latina nursing students. The data indicate that they are able to manage the negative aspects and capitalize on the positive aspects of bridging both cultures.

Demographic characteristics. A significant finding from this study is that six of the ten participants are over twenty-three years old so that in this sample of Latina nursing students, more than half are considered non-traditional students in terms of age. While students gave no indication that age poses any particular benefit or challenge, one has to consider how the life experiences and responsibilities of these non-traditional students impact teaching and learning in both class and clinical settings (all six have one or more children as well as work experience).
As noted earlier, all participants in the study are female. Six of the students report there are gender role differences that persist in the Latino culture. According to these students, women often do most of the household work and take care of the children even if they are full-time students and have jobs. Olivia, who has one younger male sibling says, “I am the one who tries to take care of everything…making sure things go smoothly in a day or whatever needs to be taken care of in the house.”

Moreover, childcare responsibilities make it difficult for them to attend class or clinical very early in the morning, at night, or during their children’s after-school hours. Lola relates, “I did a clinical at night this past semester, and it was hard for me ‘cause my son is eight.” Joslyn notes,

...as the [nursing] program progresses, more time is consumed during the day and evening, like from morning to afternoon, evening, or even in clinical or weekend clinical. …You have to… be flexible with the program…the program can’t always be flexible to you and that was where I would find a lot of challenges.

Another gender issue that Amanda points out is that, being the first in her household to attend college, she feels some stress related to the traditional role relationship with her husband. She states, “…he’s feeling a little bit threatened by me finishing school…him being the man of the house, supposedly providing…now I am going to be the major income provider.” Amanda acknowledges that gender roles are not the same for every married couple and though in her experience “in the Hispanic community, that’s the norm,” she recognizes there are exceptions.

The students also indicate that in the Latino culture, the norm is that nurses are female. They say the traditional Latino male would not become a nurse because the role of the nurse is associated with the role of women. On the other hand, two of the participants see the traditional roles of Latino men and women changing with younger
generations, especially for those born in the U.S., with Latino men and women sharing home and childcare responsibilities. Joslyn says: “…women aren’t as submissive as they were before…They are more aggressive, assertive…” Two of the students speculate that changing gender roles may result in more Latino men entering nursing in the future.

Data pertaining to age and gender indicate that, for the most part, these Latina nursing students are non-traditional in age, have children, work, and shoulder most of the responsibilities for home and childcare even while attending college full-time. Thus, in their efforts to be successful, most of these students are continually shifting their time and energy among multiple role responsibilities and evaluating priorities based on their cultural value system while, at the same time, negotiating challenges related to the scheduling and academic requirements of a very rigorous baccalaureate nursing education curriculum. Furthermore, traditional gender roles can not only create conflicts for a Latino male to consider a career in nursing, they can also create conflicts related to a man’s position as primary breadwinner.

Social support. Students in this study report that personal relationships are very important in the Latino culture, not only with family members, but also with friends and co-workers. Participants indicate that their friends in the Latino community are supportive of them although most of the Latinos they went to high school with under-value a college education or maintain a view that it is not a possibility or a realistic option for them. In fact, these students report that many of their friends dropped out of high school, some just a few weeks before graduation. Nonetheless, Latino friends are reported to be impressed by what these students have accomplished and think it is good
for members of the Latino community to obtain professional degrees. Joslyn relates a conversation she recently had with a Latino high school friend:

… ‘we [friends] always knew you… were going to go to college’… It was like a shock for me hearing that as an adult and he was serious about it. He told me, ‘I’m really proud that you made it and that you have done this….but I couldn’t do it.’ It’s almost like why not? And I think it comes from [my] upbringing from home.

All but one of the students in this study are currently employed in low-level, low-paying health care jobs. Several indicate that their professional colleagues convinced them to go back to school and get a degree in nursing. In some cases, the students and their co-workers decided to return to school together. Students report strong interpersonal support among their Latino co-workers.

The data relative to social support indicate that the encouragement provided by friends and co-workers facilitate their ability to persist in school. Additionally, co-workers play an important role in urging these Latinas to return to school and further their education. While not many of the students’ friends in the Latino community see college as a realistic option for themselves, they are a source of praise and encouragement for those who do. Although students receive social support from several sources, Latino role models for success in nursing education and practice are few, so, for the most part these students are attempting to overcome a variety of difficulties while creating their own paths to success.

Academic preparedness. Most of the students in this study indicate that they were not prepared for the level of work required in the nursing major, even if they had done well in high school and/or in prior higher education courses. Some state that their high school preparation was academically weak and that they were not encouraged to take
courses that would have better prepared them for a science-based curriculum. Moreover, some students went so far as to say that, in their opinion, the inner city high schools they attended don’t prepare Latinos for college and their families do not encourage it, either; thus, many Latinos, they say, come out of high school poorly prepared for college-level work. Jamie describes her own experience with the transition to college:

> It is a hard transition especially because I was here at local high school… not prepared to come to a bachelor [degree] program…. I took honors classes, I took AP classes, but I felt that it was not at the level of like coming through college….you’re not mentally, physically, emotionally prepared to start a program that is intense like this.

Eva, who attended a public high school in a nearby town and took classes at a community college, reports, “here it is definitely stepped up a notch…you know, test-taking…in the nursing program.” Joslyn, who has taken college-level courses elsewhere relates:

> “…I had never experienced a class that was like that…it was such a shock to me, like oh my God, this is nothing like what I know.”

Nearly all of the participants report that they failed and had to repeat one or both semesters of Anatomy and Physiology in order to continue in the nursing major because they found the level of work was far more demanding than anything they had studied previously. In addition, these students, particularly those for whom English is a second language, note that nursing courses which require lengthy reading assignments with complex concepts and vocabulary (they cite Medical-Surgical Nursing, Pharmacology, Pathophysiology, and Research) as especially challenging.

The majority of participants in the study report that they did not choose a baccalaureate program as an informed preference over an associate’s degree program. Rather, they did their nursing prerequisites at a community college and transferred. The
students who transferred from a community college state they did so because they were either not accepted into the nursing program or were wait-listed at the community college and chose to explore other more expedient options. However, they state they now see the benefit of having the four-year degree in terms of status in the profession as well as the ability to go on to graduate school. Amanda comments, “It [bachelor’s degree] opens more doors. I can do more with it. I can expand my knowledge, I can just pretty much go anywhere I want with it and that’s important to me.” Dania notes, “I just believe that in the future, they are going to expect more…BSN than Associate’s Degree nurses.” Comparing the BSN with the AD programs, Nina states, “I felt like there was more knowledge…assessment skills seem to even be better.” Eva, who works in a nursing home, adds, “it definitely is more valuable and I have noticed that you can’t do as much with your Associate’s Degree as you can with your Bachelor’s Degree… and there is…a difference…you know, just in your skills and …your theory.” Lola, who works as a nursing assistant at a local hospital, reports, “…there is a big difference in the BSN…you get a lot of classroom time, you get a lot of clinical time…and…anyone who has an [AD]…, they are going to have to go back and get a BSN…”

All nine of the transfer students indicate that the choice of which baccalaureate program to transfer into was made based on the number of credits accepted by the four-year school and immediate availability of seats in the nursing major as they could afford neither the money to repeat courses nor the time to be placed on a waiting list.

The data on academic preparedness demonstrate that in the majority of cases, these Latino students arrived on campus with inadequate academic preparation and unrealistic expectations of the level of scholarship expected of baccalaureate nursing
students. In addition, the data suggest a lack of awareness on the part of the students regarding the extent of time and effort necessary to succeed in the nursing major because it is at a higher level of difficulty than what these students have previously experienced. For the most part, these students’ academic backgrounds appear to present more challenges than supports in persistence to degree.

**Competencies contributing to persistence.** Students in this study cite self-efficacy and motivation to achieve a baccalaureate degree as the most influential factors in access and persistence to degree. They report that their own motivation above any other personal characteristic enables them to persevere. For example, when asked what inspires her to continue, Ilysa says, “My internal motivation, just because I am the only one in my family that has ever gone to college.” Amanda relates, “…you need to want to do it. That’s the major point…if you are here because your family wants you to be here or for any other reason than just you wanting to be here, it is not going to work.”

Students relate time and again their personal determination to persist, in spite of having to put other things in jeopardy (e.g., time with children, work hours, rent payments) to focus on school. Moreover, they report that as first generation Latino students, the opportunity to accomplish something significant by moving from low-status to high-status jobs in healthcare is highly motivating and empowering for themselves and for the larger Latino community.

Without exception, participants stressed that organizational skills, time management skills, and their ability to prioritize are other essential components to persistence. They express the need to be experts at organizing their time in order to manage household responsibilities, work, childcare, and school assignments. They
describe prioritizing how they allocate their time very carefully and make the most of evening and weekend hours to study and work, especially if they have young children. They also say they forfeit time at family gatherings to study, which is a very difficult thing to do in the Latino culture. Lola says this about setting priorities:

…it took me a while to figure out what works for me as getting my priorities straight and getting my schedule situated… I never, ever leave anything for the night before….if I have a homework assignment due….because I have a child and if he gets sick I may end up in the ED (Emergency Department).

Jamie explains how she copes with her busy schedule: “Multitasking, if you have a family, it’s harder… time management…The beginning of the semester I am a mess. I’m very, very anxious. I’m like oh, my God. Once I get into a rhythm – okay.” Victoria notes how being a mother and student make prioritization a must:

…and if you are dealing with your kids and stuff… it’s like your time is shifted to something else… and your grades suffer. That has happened to me a couple times so you have to prioritize what is more important at that time. I’m learning that.

These students also cite the importance of self-reliance as an important value in the Latino culture but self-reliance works for and against them in some ways. Self-reliance is an advantage in terms of taking responsibility and accountability – behaviors considered essential in baccalaureate nursing education. On the other hand, it can hold students back from asking for academic assistance as soon as they identify the need because, in the Latino tradition, one does not ask for help unless absolutely necessary. This is especially the case with the younger students (sophomores); whereas, the more advanced students (juniors and seniors) express that they have learned to be more comfortable asking for help. For example, Ilysa explains, “…in the Hispanic culture it’s just hard. You really don’t want to…you try your best not to look for help…my mom
specifically…brought me up to say…unless you really need it, you shouldn’t look for help.”

The data suggest that these Latina students believe strongly in their ability to accomplish their goal of achieving a degree in nursing, in spite of other commitments competing for their time and attention. Their success thus far is due, in great part, to their motivation and skills in time management, organization, and prioritization – talents they have developed in other life experiences and bring to their educational experience. At the same time, the data also suggest that in their efforts to be self-sufficient, these Latina students may delay seeking academic assistance, potentially jeopardizing their ability to attain their degree.

Evidence provided by the students in this study pertaining to entry characteristics indicates that they perceive aspects of their background as Latinas to be the most significant elements of getting into and through a baccalaureate nursing program. Factors they identify as being associated with membership in the Latino culture, including strong family orientation, self-sufficiency and determination as well as bilingualism and biculturalism, equip them with attributes that both challenge and support persistence to degree.

**Institutional Environment**

The second section of this chapter presents students’ perceptions of the institutional environment according to their relative importance, including: financial aid, peer relationships, mentorship, nursing tutors, nursing faculty, nursing curriculum, and campus academic support services. Characteristics of the institutional environment are depicted in the Framework of Persistence (see Appendix F).
Financial aid. As noted in the discussion on socioeconomic status, finances are a leading challenge to staying in school identified by participants of this study. The majority of students report receiving some financial aid in the form of scholarships and/or they benefit from federal grant or loan programs, such as those provided through the American Council on Education (ACE) and the U.S. Department of Education. Some students state they qualify for the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) grant for nursing workforce diversity made available through the Division of Nursing. For those who do qualify, this grant provides, among other things, much needed scholarships and stipends. Only one of the participants of the study reports having a work-study position on campus, which also helps defray the cost of tuition. Most of the students emphasize the need for financial aid to cover educational expenses and further note that if what they receive in aid is lost or decreases significantly, they would most likely have to “stop out” (temporarily leave school) for some period of time. Ilysa’s words echo what several participants said about financial aid being a deciding factor in which school to attend. She says she is at this institution because, “…this was the college that gave me the most financial aid,” she says, “I got the biggest scholarship here…” Joslyn notes that she depends on the financial aid she gets in the form of “…loans and scholarships…[which cover] school stuff…[such as] tuition [and] books…”

Data provided by these Latina students indicate that, with very few exceptions, they are extremely concerned about finances and consider financial aid a necessity for going to school. While not all participants indicate that they receive financial aid, those who do say they depend on it. Should a student find it necessary to stop out for financial reasons, her academic program would be interrupted resulting in the loss of time and
money, both of which are counterproductive in the process of completing a degree and improving one’s socioeconomic status. While it is beyond the scope of this study to explore the details of financial aid, it is clear that it makes attaining a nursing degree an affordable opportunity for Latino students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Peer relationships. For the purpose of this study, peers are defined as fellow nursing students. Participants report that peer relationships are an essential source of social, emotional and informal academic support. These students state that although family members also provide social support, most are unable to share the students’ lived experience as students in higher education and are, therefore, limited in the extent of understanding and support they can offer. Peers, on the other hand, are said to serve as friends, study partners, and important sources of information and encouragement. Peer relationships are described as strong mutual support systems in which peers buoy each other up and look out for one another. In fact, students note that peers provide unflagging support during the most difficult times.

Several students report that they go to their peers with questions related to class or clinical assignments before they go to the nursing faculty. Peers, they say, are more readily accessible and are taking the same courses, thus enabling them to share valuable knowledge. In addition, they rely on their “senior” peers for advice on how to be successful in future courses or in completing especially difficult assignments. Eva, for example, says that her main source of support in school is “fellow students because if we are confused about something, we can ask each other exactly and …compare notes in class in case somebody has missed something …” Dania relates that when she needs help she contacts one of the two peers she studies with. She says:
I have two classmates that, we have been kind of stuck like glue since…junior year and we help each other out. What one doesn’t get, maybe the other one gets and we explain it to each other, so that has been a good help to me.

Students state that peer groups often shift because of stop-outs, drop-outs, or fail-outs, and some note that, for these reasons, they currently have fewer or different peer relationships than when they started the nursing program. This is a significant finding in view of the fact that peers are considered a key component to success. For example, Ilysa relates the following about her peer group: “…a lot of my friends… failed out last semester from med-surg so I am kind of by myself right now. I am the only one that has made it so far. Hopefully I keep going.” Moreover, Joslyn indicates that her study group:

…started with five and it has unfortunately come down to two. Three haven’t made it through…you know, the program process. It was actually this past year…we lost one last spring and then we lost another one last fall and now it is down to just me and her…

While students’ perceptions of peer relations are mostly positive, an additional finding related to peer groups for these Latina students involves their perceptions of bias on the part of other students. Jamie relates the following:

…our class is diverse… so I kind of feel like you tend to stay more towards your ethnicity …group wise…I kind of feel like sometimes you tend to get looked at because… we have some… students and they do have heavy accents and there was a student who…was White and she didn’t know - she was like, “why would they even talk if you can’t even understand them?” I thought that was really ignorant and I did tell her, ‘I think you’re being very ignorant because the same way he pays ‘X’ amount of dollars to come here, they do too. So they have the right to ask questions.’ I feel that sometimes that happens and they’re just kind of rude about it and you just kind of let them know ‘cause…they roll their eyes and just walk away….We are a big class, but I kind of still feel… like we’re still are a minority within our class.

According to this student’s account, bias based on ethnic diversity among nursing peers can result in some uncomfortable situations in the classroom.
The data relative to peer relationships indicate that they are highly valued by this group of students for social and academic reasons. Moreover, students note that changes in peer groups result in loss of friendships as well as emotional and academic support. Support derived from peer relationships is reported to be very important to their success in the nursing program; therefore, change or loss of such support has the potential to create a significant challenge in persistence to degree. The fact that students often seek assistance from peers rather than faculty may be related to the fact that they feel more comfortable with persons at the same status level or it may have to do with the importance Latinos place on being seen as self-reliant and independent. This practice, however, could jeopardize their success because information obtained from peers rather than faculty can potentially be inaccurate or incomplete. In addition, while the data are limited, there appears to be some degree of intra-group support among nursing students who share minority status.

**Mentorship.** Students report that mentors are available for those who qualify through the HRSA and ACE grant programs. Mentorship is coordinated by the Division of Nursing and is provided by advanced-level nursing students who maintain a 3.3 or better grade point average. Generally mentors and mentees meet on a weekly basis, but contact can be more or less frequent depending on need. Students indicate that the main objectives of the mentorship program are to provide expertise to less experienced students to help them advance in the program, to enhance their education, and to build relationships and networks. Students who are mentored note that they find that the mentorship program has a very positive impact on their ability to succeed and they hold the mentors in very high regard. Several students also mention that the Nursing Grant
Coordinator is very helpful in finding them compatible mentors. Amanda, a junior, has a senior nursing student mentor through the ACE program. She describes her relationship with her mentor this way:

…if I have any question or a problem…like a paper or something that I totally don’t get she is my first resource. I go from there and then keep asking questions and she’s good, she’s awesome, she is really awesome. She says, “How are you doing? This is how I did it.” and then she will give me hints, [for example] “…and make sure you don’t make this mistake because I made this mistake…” you know, it is more like an inside [view] of what she went through and it helps, it does help.

As another example, Jamie states, “I have a mentor here. She just helps me…She does touch base with me every week. If I have any questions, I’ll ask her…If she can’t answer my question, she’ll ask someone else.”

Ilysa, who has been mentored and expects to become a mentor next year points out, however, that although many of the students who qualify for mentors are Latino, at this time, all of the mentors in nursing are Caucasian. She says, “there is not one…[mentor] that speaks Spanish.” Ilysa will, so far as she knows, be the only Latino nursing student mentor.

The evidence presented by participants of this study suggests that mentorship is greatly valued by the Latina students who qualify for the program. They claim that working with a mentor has a definite impact on their grades and promotes their ability to progress in the nursing curriculum. The availability of Latino mentors who share an understanding of the life experiences of the students they are mentoring could serve to further enhance the positive aspects of the program, especially as more Latinos enter the nursing major. It is important to note that from the information obtained in this study, it
is unclear whether the mentorship program actually leads to increased retention of Latino nursing students.

Nursing tutors. According to the students in this study, the HRSA and ACE grant programs provide tutors for nursing students in the sciences, math and nursing courses. Furthermore, students report that even those who do not qualify for the grant programs can receive tutoring if they request it through the Division of Nursing Grant Coordinator and/or through the Academic Resource Center (ARC). Members of the nursing faculty, graduate students, and upper division peers serve as tutors for the nursing courses. Students rate the academic support they receive from tutors as very advantageous, but at the same time note that they often have difficulty connecting with the tutors because of scheduling conflicts. Eva, for example, reports, “They do offer tutors but I haven’t really gone because they have been conflicting with something that I had scheduled… I haven’t gone this semester.” Victoria, who admits she is in jeopardy of failing out, states:

There is tutoring… it’s my mistake where I should, you know, use all my resources available to help me out but I just…like I said I have such a busy life that I don’t have that time. If I’m not in school, I have an assigned date of work so it’s not like I can say, “Okay, well next Tuesday I am going to come in”…I can’t, I’m working...

Latina nursing students in this study recognize tutors as both available and beneficial, but inaccessible because of scheduling conflicts. Family responsibilities and work hours leave little time for these students to take advantage of tutoring. As a result, it is an underutilized resource for students in this group, many of whom could benefit greatly from this type of support.

Nursing faculty. Students in this study did not typically include the nursing faculty in conversations about challenges and supports until asked about student-faculty
relationships. It was determined however, that for these students, personal connections with faculty members are an especially important aspect of the learning process; students want the faculty to know them as individuals with different backgrounds and situations. Yet, although students state unanimously that they hold the nursing faculty in high regard for their professionalism and expertise, the majority of students do not feel they have a close enough relationship with their instructors, especially in their first (sophomore) year. Eva, a junior student, says, “All the teachers…know what they are talking about. They have been teachers for a while so they can relay the information well.” Amanda, also a junior, tells about a time she was having difficulty with a particular nursing course:

…last semester I was having a rough time…and I went to the teachers….They sat down with me and explained it to me, they gave me support…they gave me tips [on] how to look at tests…they…raised my self esteem back up. I did good and managed to pass it.

Victoria, a sophomore student, relates how, because her study group could not help her do better on exams, she took the initiative to go to the professor who told her to sign up for an appointment so she could see “…exactly what I’m not getting about the questions….So I did go to her. I’m not afraid.”

Participants report that their main contact with the nursing faculty occurs in classroom and clinical settings and, to a lesser extent, for academic advising or for academic support. Several participants note that sophomore classes have very large numbers of students (one-hundred was the number given by the students and later validated with the nursing faculty) making it very difficult for the teachers to get to know the students as individuals. In fact, students were outspoken about their dislike for large class sizes in sophomore year and believe they are not conducive to good faculty-student relationships or to the best teaching-learning environments. Whereas, they say, by
second semester junior year, class sizes are smaller because of attrition and by senior year the faculty and students know each other better. Joslyn, a senior, states, “…thinking [of] how the classes have grown and how many students they have to handle…I don’t even like the way they do their lectures…” Eva, a junior, adds, “…I find if there are less people at lecture, the better the lecture ends up being…I don’t want to say it’s more individualized, but you kind of get more attention…” Nina, a sophomore, says, “…the numbers…it is overwhelming because I feel like I have spoken to my professors maybe twice so…they don’t even know who I am first off. Second…in class I miss a lot…it really hinders communication…”

Academic advising involves meeting with an assigned faculty member to plan for the upcoming semester. These meetings occur twice a year and are reported to be fairly brief and focused on course selection for registration. Students describe these meetings as routine and efficient but not a time for individualized academic support. The decision to seek out faculty for the purpose of academic support with course or clinical work is related, in most cases, to the student’s level in the program. For example, sophomore students perceive high faculty-student ratios as limiting the availability of the faculty to provide academic support so they tend to seek help from their peers instead. Nina, a sophomore, observes: “…they always say ‘my door is open,’ and I totally believe them, but they are always so busy… and there are always so many [students] that there are lines. It’s just too much.” Jamie, another sophomore, adds: “…because they [faculty] are so swamped, I try to reach out to other sources, because I really can’t go there.”

On the other hand, junior and senior students more often report ease of access and closer working relationships with the nursing faculty. Eva, who is a junior, notes, “…now
there is more …of a relationship between the teachers and students. They know you on a first name basis and they say hello or how are you doing…?” Even so, when asked about her relationships with the faculty, Olivia, a senior, reports:

I haven’t built a real deep relationship with any of my teachers because there are so many of us. They don’t know me….They might know who I am by name but they don’t know who “I” am, they don’t know me as a person...

As part of their relationships with faculty, these Latina nursing students stress the importance of having the faculty take their cultural values into consideration - that faculty understand that in the Latino value system, family comes before work and school is a type of work. Nina says it is important for faculty to understand that while they advise students to make school a priority, there may be a lack of family support for Latino students to do that. She states:

…I hope that [faculty] can kind of understand…if it’s a Puerto Rican student… what might be coming at them because I can almost guess that their family doesn’t think it is as important as everybody else does and probably they are telling them the same thing that my family told me, “…what’s the point? There is no point. Why are you going to pay all that money for that? You are just going to have to pay it back.”

Findings from this study related to students’ perceptions of nursing faculty indicate that faculty members are held in high esteem and that students need and want close faculty-student relationships. Since all but one of the students in the study are commuters, the classroom is the primary place where faculty and students meet for academic and social purposes thus, large classes with high faculty-student ratios make engagement with faculty and the learning process more challenging. Furthermore, these Latina nursing students express the need for faculty to make more of an effort to take their cultural value system into consideration when providing advice or academic support.
Nursing curriculum. Students’ observations relative to the nursing curriculum primarily center on the topics of course requirements, progression policies, class sizes, and cultural diversity in the classroom. To begin with, most of these Latina students report they did not feel academically prepared for the rigorous prerequisite science courses (e.g., Anatomy and Physiology) needed for the nursing major, citing inadequate preparatory courses in high school. Students’ comments indicate that these courses are extremely challenging because of the unfamiliar scientific vocabulary and the unanticipated amount of study time needed to learn such complex material. Joslyn describes it this way:

It’s very, very demanding…very… time consuming whether inside [the] classroom or outside. I remember thinking back from my methods of study in high school to my first year…[in college] to what was demanded in a nursing program was nothing…nothing was as demanding as when I entered a nursing program and actually started, you know, studying in this major. Everything else seemed to like…not to say came easier but it… did not demand as much time and effort as it requires in nursing….the time and effort you have to take… studying material, dedicating time to studying for exams…just everything. It rolled over to outside just what you may expect. It’s a lot more demanding and obviously if you don’t put the effort in, it’s easy to kind of fall through the cracks.

Several participants, especially those who are ESL students, indicate that they have problems with some of the more lengthy reading and writing assignments, which are common in nursing courses; they find the vocabulary challenging and they need more time to read and grasp the material. A significant number of these students note they have trouble with accuracy in interpreting assignment directions and test questions as well, putting them at risk for unsatisfactory grades. Ilysa, whose primary language is Spanish, says that Nursing Research was extremely difficult for her. She says, “I have to say that class was one of my hardest because it was mainly focused on writing. It was all
about writing papers.” Nina says she thinks that fear related to poor writing skills drives students to give up, she says:

I think it might be fear and I feel like…a lot of times running away is easier… I said [to another student], “why are you going to quit because of one paper? You turn it in wrong…worse case scenario, everything you wrote is wrong. But guess what? They are going to write next to it what’s right or they are going to say, ‘See me,’ and you can go and you can learn how to do it right.” I said, “It is one paper.” And she goes, “Oh you’re right.”

Other students express difficulty with the amount of time required to complete their course and clinical paperwork each week, especially during sophomore and junior years when the work is reported to be very heavy. Several students describe the challenge involved in keeping up with the work load. Dania remarks,

I was on a… schedule before but if something didn’t get done, oh well, I will do it tomorrow…you know, it wasn’t a big deal. But now it is a big deal so it has got to either be done or… one thing is just going to get on top of another and then it is going to be double work.

Ilysa further notes,

Last semester it was hard, med-surg….was very intense. A lot of work, a lot of chapters to be read, it was very fast-paced. When you turned your back you had an exam, the next time you know it you have another one so it was a lot of work, a lot of work, especially with clinical.

Progression policies pose an additional challenge for these students. Policies in the Division of Nursing are more stringent than in other Divisions, as is common across nursing programs. For one thing, the minimum passing standard is higher (C+) in the nursing courses and prerequisites. In addition, progression policies set limits on the number of times a course may be repeated and the total number of courses a student is allowed to fail and still remain in the major. Thus, many students report high levels of stress related to the need to keep their grades up while balancing the demands of family, work, and school. Progression policies notwithstanding, these students emphasize that
they are committed to finishing the program and are prepared to do whatever is necessary
to persevere, even if it means repeating courses or entire semesters.

Instructional methods in the nursing curriculum consist of classroom, online,
skills lab, and clinical learning experiences. Classroom learning poses the greatest
challenge for these students because of large class sizes and because of what they
describe as overwhelming amounts of content covered in some class. Students whose
primary language is Spanish find it particularly challenging because they are trying to
make connections between the concepts being presented and the language used to express
them while at the same time listening to the instructor.

Online learning support materials available through textbook publishers and/or
posted by faculty on the virtual classroom web site are reported to be very helpful and
most students say they do use them. A few students note they do not have internet access
at home so their access to these materials is limited to when they are on campus.
Unanimously, the students in this study prefer hands-on learning in the lab or in the
clinical setting where they can be actively involved in the learning process, interact more
readily with their teachers, and receive immediate feedback. Moreover, while
experiences in the classroom or with course work can be discouraging at times, clinical
experiences are consistently reported to be encouraging and thus reinforce their decision
to become nurses.

Some of the participants in the study point out that when the topic of cultural
diversity is covered in class, the information presented is not always current and includes
unwarranted generalizations. They indicate that cultural traditions are changing with
younger generations but the books are not keeping up so what is taught is somewhat
outdated. Nina states, “I feel like they [the faculty] missed it….Especially with the Puerto Rican culture.” Moreover, there are no Latino nursing instructors in this nursing program to validate or invalidate the information presented in the reading. In addition, a few students report that bias and stereotyping occur in class and clinical settings in spite of the cultural competence education included in the nursing curriculum. Ilysa asserts:

They have misconceptions and certain stereotypes to us and when you come from that [culture], you get angry and you want to cry sometimes because you are hearing your peers talk about your culture like it is degrading or it’s something that they don’t want to be a part of and when you are raised and that is your culture…that’s like me saying “I don’t want to be around Americans.” I don’t bring down your beliefs, so why bring down mine? It’s hard sometimes to hear your peers talk about your culture that way.

Although perceptions of cultural bias may add to their challenges, when participants were asked to describe the overall experience of being a nursing student, Amanda put it this way:

It is a rollercoaster ride. Tossing up and down. You have plenty of support and the teachers are great, you know, you put your 100%, they put their 100%, you can pull it through…down side is you have a lot of reading to do, have a lot of work, a lot of paperwork but it can be done so you got to buckle up and just go along with the ride.

The data supplied by this group of Latina nursing students on their perceptions of the nursing curriculum illustrate that they find the coursework far more demanding than what they had previously experienced both in terms of the level of work and in terms of the amount of time needed to get it done. Reading and writing assignments are particularly challenging for students if English is their second language. Additionally, students report that strict Division of Nursing Progression Policies pose an additional challenge to persistence. Furthermore, these Latina students suggest that cultural diversity education provided in the nursing curriculum is dated and does not necessarily eliminate
cultural bias among peers. Nevertheless, despite the variety of challenges they encounter, these students convey that they intend to persist in the nursing curriculum unless and until they fail to meet progression standards.

**Campus academic support services.** In addition to tutoring provided by the ARC, the other main campus resource mentioned by participants is the Writing Center (WC). The WC is available to all students and offers personal assistance with writing technique, proof reading and editing. It is unclear from conversations with the students whether the WC is expected to offer special assistance with academic writing for non-native speakers (ESL students). However, these Latina students indicate that there are no Spanish-speaking instructors at the WC and that those who work there are not able to help them with writing problems specifically related to academic writing in English. Ilysa relates the following:

> there is a writing center here…The only thing is, it is hard to explain myself when I am having problems…when I am having difficulty writing and when they read my papers, you know, how the whole verb placement and the sentences in Spanish being completely opposite.

Dania offers a different perspective on the WC related more specifically to writing assignments in nursing:

> [The college]…does have a writing center but it’s not…I don’t think it is very efficient when it comes to us nurses because there are certain things we write [about] and they don’t understand it ’cause they are English professors so…I mean they will give you maybe the grammar part…but does the sentence really make sense?

As a consequence of these kinds of experiences, students who have sought help from the WC at some point in the past have not returned because they feel it was not worthwhile.

Findings on students’ perceptions of campus academic resources focus on their perceptions of the Writing Center. These Latina students indicate that the absence of
Spanish speakers and of staff familiar with the nursing curriculum at the WC detract from its usefulness. Consequently, they report dissatisfaction with and underutilization of this important campus academic resource. It may be that students have unrealistic expectations as to what kind of assistance the WC can deliver or that the WC is unaware of or unprepared for the type of writing assistance Latino nursing students are in need of.

Overall, information related to students’ perceptions of the institutional environment indicates that with very few exceptions financial aid is the most essential element in their ability to remain in school and complete their nursing degree; without it, they would have no alternative other than to stop out or drop out. In addition, students’ perceptions support the concept that personal relationships are important in the Latino tradition, including relationships with peers, faculty, mentors, and tutors in the academic environment. Furthermore, time is precious; these students report having to make compromises that affect the amount of time they have to study, which can, in turn, jeopardize progression.

Peers and mentors are regarded as very important sources of personal encouragement and academic support, however, nursing faculty and tutors are often underutilized as academic resources due to what students see as limited accessibility. Additionally, while most of these Latina students note they need help with writing skills, the WC is not perceived to be a useful academic resource for nursing majors with Spanish as their primary language. Overall, these data suggest the need for mentors, faculty, and tutors of diverse backgrounds to better support diverse students.
Latinas and Professional Nursing

The third and last section of this chapter describes ways in which students’ perceptions of their entry characteristics and experiences in baccalaureate nursing education will influence their roles as Latinas in professional nursing practice.

The data reveal several factors that determine how the Latino world view affects patterns and practices of nursing care provided by these students as well as how the students view their contribution to the profession of nursing. These data fall into three main areas of focus: providing culturally sensitive, culturally competent care; providing high quality healthcare to the greater Latino community; and expectations and empowerment associated with the professional role.

Providing culturally sensitive, culturally competent care. To begin with, these students take a relationship-based approach to nursing care delivery which recognizes that consideration of patients and their families contributes to successful healthcare outcomes. In describing their approach to nursing care, students note the overlap between Latino cultural values and the culture of nursing. Joslyn explains it this explains way:

… [in nursing] you care for each other as a culture like we do. We care for each other whether it be neighbor, family or friend, we look out for each other. We are a very nurturing and caring community or culture and that’s what I am going to be…practicing as a nurse. I am going to be compassionate, I am going to [do] a lot of things that I do on a regular basis with my family. I am going to be caring for people that I don’t even know and I’m fine with that. That’s a gift that I’m offering to other people…

Without exception, participants in this study indicate that as a result of their own life experiences, they are more likely to view the patient in the context of culture and may be better prepared than some of their Caucasian counterparts to deliver culturally competent care. Ilysa notes:
…it upsets me when… a lot of people get frustrated with them [Latinos], especially when they are Spanish-speaking only…I am more compassionate when it comes to culture and cultural sensitivities and the fear that comes along when you are in this different scenario and you are out of your niche and it’s scary… especially when you are not speaking the language. It definitely has made me a more compassionate person.

Jamie suggests that a lack of experience on the part of many White nurses results in a lack of “understanding [of] the cultural aspect of nursing,” and because of that she is more “passionate about helping someone who is different,” someone whose cultural background is “not the norm.” Amanda describes how her own life experience enables her to empathize with patients of diverse backgrounds:

…it has actually been an easier transition for me. The reason I say that is because I felt the same way when I came to United States. I felt left out, I felt lost… totally lost. So when I see people coming to me that I have to take care of it hasn’t been difficult for me to have patience to try to understand where the patient is coming from because I was there once…

In addition, students report that bilingualism and biculturalism give them important advantages in providing high quality healthcare to Latinos.

Jamie remarks:

…when you go to hospitals or to primary care physician, you always see Hispanics that speak no English [and have] to wait for an interpreter which diminishes their quality of care… their quality of care is just put on hold. That’s why I decided to become a nurse.

Students indicate that another benefit of being bilingual is that they can judge when Latino patients are more at ease providing health status information in their native language. Joslyn notes,

…if I feel it is more comfortable for the patient[to speak] in Spanish, I automatically start talking to them [in Spanish]… I will ask them… “How are you doing?” and I will… reflect on the answer… If I get my own sense that they are more comfortable [speaking] in Spanish, then I will automatically say, “…do you want me to talk in Spanish? Does it make you more comfortable?” Or…if they
recognize that I’m… Latina, they will automatically start talking to me in Spanish.

Students also provide scenarios that illustrate how the quality of patient care can suffer when there is a language barrier between the nurse and the patient. For example, Dania reports a situation where the patient was labeled uncooperative until she was able to intervene:

He [the patient] didn’t understand them [English-speaking nurses] so when they were going to do something, he would resist… So I went in to interpret and pretty much he was…labeled…very uncooperative….And I don’t think that she [the nurse] understood that [language] was the problem but her answer was, “They can’t call an interpreter every time they are going to do something to him.”

The data provided by these Latina students demonstrate that they see bilingualism and biculturalism as assets in their nursing practice and that Latino cultural values of empathy and compassion are closely aligned with the culture of quality nursing care.

Participants also report that positive interactions with Latino patients serve to validate and reinforce their career choice. Joslyn comments:

…being in the field of nursing… is gratifying. I felt it for a while now that this is where I am supposed to be and I am supposed to help people and I can tell by how people react to the way I care for them…like someone that speaks Spanish that is unable to communicate, just being able to talk to them, and I have even heard it from them [Latino patients]….and the [nursing] program, even though it is difficult and it is a challenge….if you have that determination everything is possible.

Providing high quality healthcare to the greater Latino community. Students in this study emphasize the importance of their role in improving the quality and quantity of culturally competent health care for the Latino community with a focus on outreach to ethnic neighborhoods and the need for improved health education. Ilysa explains how the Community Nursing course gave her a different perspective on population-based care compared with hospital nursing:
…taking community for the first time this semester, it opened my eyes to a whole new side of nursing…on the floor, in the emergency department…you don’t see that community outlook and I was actually able to help my own Latino groups so I hope that in the long run, after I get some experience, I am able to do outreach to my own community and to where I grew up.

She goes on to say, “A lot of the population that we are dealing with right now is mainly Spanish-speaking so I know I am going to have an advantage once I graduate.” Olivia also sees the value of community outreach. She says, “I want to be more of a community type nurse…I want to work in the poor neighborhoods…set up a clinic.” Community nursing, she says, “was so easy…it just came so naturally, you know, I didn’t have to force myself to learn it the way I had to learn everything else.”

Eva notes the importance of being in a position to provide health education to the Latino population:

It feels good being Latino and potentially helping someone who is [Latino] because they do need help and they do need health education. Latino people don’t like to really talk [about their health] to people out of their [own] culture.

The testimonies provided by these Latina nursing students demonstrate their awareness of the need for and the potential benefits of having Latino nurses provide health care to patients who share their cultural background and language. They also validate that healthcare professionals from minority groups are more likely to work in community settings providing services for minority populations.

Expectations and empowerment associated with the professional role. A few of the students in this study point out that some Latinos hold a relativistic view of time, which can cause problems with punctuality not only in terms of class schedules and assignments, but also when joining the dominant American workforce once they graduate. In addition, there are expectations of behavior and dress associated with the
professional role that some Latinos entering the nursing profession may not be aware of.

Dania comments:

There are certain [requirements] that you are expected to meet. You are expected to turn in certain things at a certain time; you are expected to act a certain way; you are expected to be at certain places at certain times and to me it becomes a challenge.

She adds, “…you are expected to act professionally…you are expected to dress appropriately.” Dania notes that it is important for students to learn these role expectations from the nursing faculty.

Furthermore, Joslyn is concerned that the priority placed on family role responsibilities in the Latino culture could conflict with professional role expectations when she is a nurse. She reports that even now there have been times when she could not get to her job as a nursing assistant because of a family crisis. She says, “You want to be accountable, you want to show… that you are dedicated. The corporate world doesn’t see it that way though, and I think that… has been the biggest challenge.”

On the other hand, the majority of participants in the study voice very positive attitudes regarding their ability to serve as role models for other Latinos. Dania remarks:

…and we [Latinos] are always pretty much in the bottom of everything and every time that there is a Latino doing something for a community or gaining a professional degree of any sort, that makes me feel good definitely because…I don’t know, I think it is time for us to start moving up…just [for us] at least to be somebody…

Olivia adds:

If you hit the community and focus more on providing education and resources for the Latino community, they will find an outlet and want to be something more and continue on higher in whatever field, either nursing or whatever, but particularly nursing because around here there is a Latino population and we do need Latino nurses but they don’t have the resources out there to want to make them succeed. It’s not just getting into college and providing resources in college; it starts way before college and it’s not…it’s not out there. I can speak from
personal experience. They [Latinos] don’t have that support in high school to make them want to be anything…They just feel hopeless…. now when they see me… “Oh, you are going to be a nurse? Wow!” They think it is something so big that [they] can’t accomplish it…I’m just saying I can accomplish that, too.

Nina emphasizes the need to get the message out to nursing faculty and to the Latino community that, like her, Latinos can be successful in school. She says,

“I do want people to know that I can do well, and yes, I have a kid, and yes, I’m Puerto Rican…and I am graduating in 2011!” ….I feel like a lot of times the easier [way] is encouraged rather than the harder, long road….I see them quit [school]… I hear it a lot of times, “Oh I just want to quit, I can’t do this, I will just stay a CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant)… Latinos as a whole are so much stronger in other ways; they could just really learn to be stronger about education.

Eva remarks that the Latino women who come to the nursing program are strong and should be encouraged to “really soar and fly because we really do need Latino nurses out there” to provide culturally competent health education to the Latino population. She says, a Latino nurse has an advantage in that because she is the one

…who knows the kind of day-to-day struggles that they [patients] might be going through or who looks the same as them… and knows their culture and knows the things that may be too sensitive to talk about…or at least explain things that are a sensitive subject…

Knowing they can be successful in school and in the healthcare workforce provides these students with a sense of accomplishment and, as Joslyn puts it,

I want to say [I] have a sense of a little bit of power. I have never held a position that I felt that I had a little bit of [power]. You have to put yourself out a little bit more [as a nurse] where, as a CNA, I am kind of still in that path that I do what I’m assigned to do… It [nursing] is empowering. It does show you the light. You do see that change.

The data on students’ perceptions of their role as Latinas in professional nursing suggest that they possess a desire to work with Latino populations using their knowledge of language, customs and health beliefs to improve the quality of healthcare delivery.

These students feel they are in a unique position to provide their fellow Latinos with a
degree of culturally sensitive care that non-Latino nurses are unable to provide and find satisfaction in their ability to do so. The data also show that these Latina students are aware that certain professional role expectations may require them to learn new behaviors as they adapt to the nursing workforce culture. Furthermore, participants view themselves as important role models for other Latinos to further their education, especially in the field of nursing. This is particularly noteworthy in view of the fact that they themselves have few, if any, role models to learn from. These students take a great deal of pride in their educational accomplishments thus far and feel a sense of empowerment for themselves and for the greater Latino community.

Conclusion

The findings of this study are presented according to the major themes revealed in analysis of data obtained from ten Latina nursing student participants. The data disclose a total of eight salient student entry characteristics, the most significant of which is the Latino cultural heritage because, to a large degree, all other entry characteristics are related to that. In addition, the data reveal seven key aspects of the institutional environment, the most significant of which is financial aid because it is so closely tied to students’ socioeconomic status and their need for financial support. The evidence obtained from these students indicates that any of their entry characteristics or characteristics of the learning environment can serve as potential sources of challenges or supports to persistence; the two are interrelated issues. The data from this study suggest that those Latina students who are the most resourceful in their use of supports and the most flexible in dealing with challenges are the ones most likely to persist.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore Latino students’ experiences in baccalaureate nursing education. This study focuses on students’ perceptions of challenges and supports in persistence to degree and professional licensure. In addition, this study seeks to gain a greater understanding of the relationship between the Latino and professional nursing cultures in an effort to influence future practice, policy and research that could lead to increased numbers of Latino nurses.

The first part of this chapter provides an overview of the main findings of the study. The second part describes the findings in relation to the research questions and linkages with the literature review. The third part explains the Framework of Persistence that was developed from the data. The last part of the chapter presents recommendations for practitioners, policy makers, and researchers on improving access for and retention of Latinos in baccalaureate nursing education.

Overview of the Findings

The findings of this study are based on analysis of the data obtained from interviews with ten Latina students representing all curriculum levels of a baccalaureate nursing program. The interview questions were designed to discover students’ views on predominant persistence factors identified in the literature on Latinos in higher education as well as any additional persistence factors identified by the students themselves, including issues specifically related to Latinos in baccalaureate nursing education (Hernandez & Lopez, 2007; Villarruel et al., 2001; Gardner, 2005). The interview data
provide evidence of students’ perceptions of individual (personal) and environmental (institutional) attributes, external (outside of school) elements, elements directly associated with professional nursing studies, and the influence of membership in the Latino culture, all of which influence their ability to persist.

Analysis of the data reveals the following eight major findings from this study:

1. In the Latino cultural value system, family is the top priority, followed by work, while school is typically considered a type of work. As a result, these Latina nursing students are continually challenged in terms of time and attention needed to meet the demands of family, work, and academics; they grapple with the necessity to reorder their priorities to satisfy the requirements and expectations of all three.

2. Despite the emphasis they place on the need to work, students did not cite financial constraints as a challenge to persistence until I specifically asked, at which point they acknowledged that as one of their chief concerns.

3. Most students report being academically underprepared for the nursing curriculum, especially those who attended inner-city public high schools.

4. These students chose a baccalaureate program in order to expedite degree attainment rather than because of the value of the baccalaureate over the associate degree.

5. While they may have issues with reading and writing in English, participants in this study view bilingualism and biculturalism as very important assets in the repertoire of skills and abilities they bring to professional nursing.
6. These students place great emphasis on personal relationships – with family, peers, faculty, and patients. The Latina students who participated in this study made it clear that they want their nursing faculty to know them as individuals and to appreciate their cultural value system.

7. Many of the students plan to work in community settings with underserved, diverse populations once they are licensed professionals.

8. The Latina nursing students interviewed for this study feel they have something unique and vital to contribute to the healthcare of an increasingly diverse population; they demonstrate a stalwart determination to persist to degree, and are willing to do whatever it takes to achieve their goal.

The findings reported here relate specifically to Latinas; however, they may also apply to other groups as well. First generation students, other under-represented minorities, non-native English speakers, academically underprepared students, and/or non-traditional college students, may share some of these same perceptions. For example, family responsibilities, the need to work, and difficulties with English language skills are potential challenges for some of these other students as well. In addition, other cultural groups have the potential to make unique contributions to improved healthcare for their communities.

Findings in Relation to the Research Questions

What individual (personal) attributes do Latino baccalaureate nursing students identify as promoting or inhibiting their academic success? Students identify a number of individual college entry characteristics which can promote or inhibit their academic success. To begin with, membership in the Latino culture has a profound impact on all other
individual characteristics because it is the source of the value system they use to
determine their priorities. A major finding in this study is that in the Latino culture family
comes first, followed by work; with school viewed as a type of work. As a result, these
students face an ongoing conflict between the demands of family, work and school. In
addition, in situations where the families do not place the same value on higher education
as the students do, there is an additional challenge to persistence because while work is
seen as necessary to provide for basic needs, school is not. In such cases, family members
are more apt to support work-related efforts than they are to support students’ educational
endeavors. On the other hand, families that value higher education are a vital source of
support and encouragement. These data are consistent with those of Walcott-McQuigg et
al. (1999) and Villarruel et al. (2001) who report that social support (such as that
provided by family) leads to greater academic success and persistence to degree.

A most interesting finding is that until I introduced the subject of finances,
students did not identify economic issues among their challenges. This was surprising,
given the evidence to the contrary in the literature coupled with what students said about
the need to work. However, once the question about finances was asked, their responses
(both verbal and nonverbal) implied that it goes without saying - finances are, in fact, a
major challenge. The majority of participants in the study are from families with limited
financial resources so that not working is simply not an option and cutting back on work
hours because of school can put them at significant financial risk. Thus, these findings
support those of Tinto (1993), Braxton et al. (2004), and Heller (2005), who found that
the availability of financial resources or the perceived ability to pay for college is a major
force affecting access and persistence. In addition, Longerbeam et al. (2004) report that
Latinos are more likely to be concerned about finances and more likely to work, and Heller (2005) notes that ethnic minorities are highly tuition cost responsive because of limited financial resources. The Latina students who participated in my study confirm the need to work and identify finances as one of their top two challenges to persistence.

Students for whom English is a second language identify challenges with some of the more complex reading and writing assignments. However, bilingualism and dual socialization also enable them to integrate into two different world cultures and converse in the two predominant languages of our society today. Latina students in this study feel validated and encouraged by their ability to communicate effectively and accurately with Spanish speaking patients and feel this contributes to the quality of healthcare for the Latino population.

More than half of the participants in this study are non-traditional students in terms of age and life experiences. Eight of the ten students are 23 years of age or older and all but two have children. In addition, traditional gender role expectations for women in the Latino culture persist in many of their families. Child and home care responsibilities result in multiple role obligations for these women who are also full-time students, seriously challenging their ability to be successful in school. Yet, the need to provide for their families motivates these Latina students to persevere with their education in order to obtain a better job and improve their socioeconomic status.

Academic preparedness is another challenge to success identified by the students in this study. Those who attended inner-city public high schools are the most challenged by the nursing curriculum, but all of the students report difficulties adapting their study habits and time management to the rigors of a science-based major. They have few, if
any, prior comparable academic experiences to draw upon. These data corroborate findings by Cabrera and La Nasa (2001) and Massey et al. (2003) that Latinos are at higher risk for departure from college because of lack of adequate college preparatory courses in high school, and lack of familiarity with the post-secondary education environment because fewer of their parents have any college experience. These findings also support research specific to recruitment and retention of Latino nursing students including studies by Bessent (1997) and Cruz-Avalos (1997) who found Latino students as a group have inadequate basic academic skills and a need for strong personal mentoring and support. Students who participated in my study report feeling underprepared for college both in terms of the amount of time and the level of scholarship required to be successful.

A very significant finding related to academics is that the majority of participants in the study chose a four-year nursing program as a way to expedite their education, rather than because they preferred a baccalaureate over an associate degree. Students report lengthy wait-lists for the nursing major at local community colleges which would postpone degree attainment for a year or more. Furthermore, the decision of which college to attend is based, in large part, on the number of transfer credits accepted, as most students took their nursing prerequisites at community colleges. For these students, time is money; they want to enter the job market as quickly as possible. These findings are congruent with the literature on Latinos in higher education. For example, previous studies by Hurtado et al. (1997) and Karen and Dougherty (2005) indicate that racial minorities have lower college participation rates overall and higher participation rates in 2-year colleges than do Whites. The data from my study indicate that most of these
students are first in their families to go to college and that they initially attend community colleges.

Students also identify a number of individual competencies that serve to promote their success, including self-efficacy and motivation, determination, and the ability to multitask. These Latina students demonstrate a positive attitude and are resolved to persevere in spite of the many challenges they face. These data support Jeffreys’ (2004) findings that cultural values and beliefs, self-efficacy, and motivation are important affective factors that influence retention.

What environmental (institutional) attributes do Latino baccalaureate nursing students identify as promoting or inhibiting their academic success? Students note several features of the institutional environment that impact their ability to succeed. First, financial aid is a leading issue for these students. Scholarships and grants make it possible to stay in school; without financial assistance, most say they would be unable to continue and several of those interviewed acknowledge that the amount of financial aid they receive is a major determinant of which college they attend. These findings relate to what Tinto (1993), Braxton et al. (2004), and Heller (2005) found regarding the availability of financial resources as noted earlier.

Students cite their class peers as key sources of social and academic support. In fact, peers are used as first-line sources of information before faculty primarily because students find peers easier to access, especially sophomores who are less familiar with the nursing faculty. Peers are also noted to be an important source of intra-group support among minority students. Unfortunately, peer groups often change because of attrition from the program and some students find this particularly disconcerting. Data obtained
from this study support prior research by Astin (1997), Milem and Berger (1997), Kuh (2001, 2003), and Hernandez and Lopez (2007), who found that involvement with peers and faculty are significant contributors to student satisfaction and persistence. The Latina students in my study indicate that their affiliation with peer groups facilitates their academic progress.

Mentors provided through the HSRA and ACE programs are identified as great sources of support in that they provide guidance and encouragement that help students adjust to life as a nursing student. Research specific to recruitment and retention of Latino nursing students includes studies by Bessent (1997) and Cruz-Avalos (1997) who found Latino students as a group have inadequate basic academic skills and a need for strong personal mentoring and support. Students in my study report very positive experiences with mentors, although I was unable to determine whether mentorship resulted in improved learning outcomes. Nursing tutors, also provided through the HSRA and ACE programs, are, however, underutilized by these Latina students primarily because of scheduling difficulties. All but one of the students are commuters and have childcare and/or work obligations that make it impossible for them to remain on or return to campus for tutoring appointments. So, although students acknowledge the need for the extra academic assistance, they do not often take advantage of it.

The nursing faculty is viewed by the participants of this study as highly qualified and students appreciate and benefit from their expertise as educators. However, students also report that high student – faculty ratios make it very challenging to access their teachers. The Latina students in this study indicate that personal connections are very important in their culture and that it is important for the faculty to know them as
individuals, but large class sizes make that virtually impossible. Students cite high student-faculty ratios and limited involvement with faculty as impediments to their progress, which is congruent with what Astin (1997), Milem and Berger (1997), Kuh (2001, 2003), and Hernandez and Lopez (2007) learned regarding the positive effects of faculty-student relationships. The students in my study also emphasize the need for the nursing faculty to have a better understanding of their cultural value system and how that affects their priorities in terms of juggling family, work and school when issues with academic progress arise.

Several challenges are identified related to the nursing curriculum. In addition to the issues noted above regarding the lack of academic preparation and additional challenges for nursing students with English as a second language, the other challenge that these students identify is associated with how cultural competence is taught in the nursing curriculum. Students relate that cultural competence is primarily taught from information found in texts that, in their opinion, have outdated and inaccurate material when it comes to the Puerto Rican culture. In addition, students report experiencing or witnessing cultural insensitivity, bias, and prejudgment in class and clinical settings, notwithstanding the nursing faculty’s attempts at teaching the importance of practicing cultural sensitivity and competence. Research by Rendón (1993) and García and Smith (2002) points to the need for validating classrooms in terms of a cultural competence curriculum while Hurtado and Carter (1997) found that experiences of discrimination have a negative impact on Latino students’ sense of belonging. Furthermore, Villarruel et al. (2001) report that discriminatory behavior by faculty and peers is a barrier to Latino nursing student success. The findings from these studies are validated by the Latina
students in my study who report the need for nursing faculty to create learning environments that do more to foster cultural understanding and collegiality among diverse students and utilize more effective methods of teaching cultural competence.

A last aspect related to the institutional environment pertains to campus academic support services, specifically the Writing Center. Students convey the need for personnel at the Writing Center to provide better support for nursing students. They report dissatisfaction with and underutilization of this much needed resource. This is especially true for non-native English speakers who tend to be more challenged by complex writing assignments.

Tucker-Allen (1999) notes that Latino nursing students have difficulty accessing faculty advisors and adjusting to the demands of the nursing curriculum; that they more often come from very low SES families, are more in debt to finance their education, have to work more hours and, as a result, spend less time studying. Tucker-Allen’s (1999) findings are well supported by the data from my study.

What external (outside of school) elements do Latino baccalaureate nursing students identify as promoting or inhibiting their academic success? Friends and co-workers are cited as important sources of support for these students. Even though their Latino friends may not have continued on in school themselves, they offer words of encouragement and admiration for their counterparts who do. Co-workers in the healthcare field are another important source of support. Those who are nurses serve as professional role models; those who are working as unlicensed assistive personnel have, in several cases, persuaded their Latino co-workers to return to school and get a professional degree.
What elements specifically related to their professional nursing studies do Latino nursing students identify as promoting or inhibiting their academic success? Nursing curriculum requirements, including prerequisite science courses, are reported to be very challenging, especially the Anatomy and Physiology courses that many students had to repeat. For those students who are non-native English speakers, lengthy and complex reading and writing assignments are particularly challenging because of the level of scholarship and time involved. Academic progression policies in the Division of Nursing are more stringent than those for other majors and pose an additional challenge for educationally disadvantaged students. On the other hand, the students in this study report positive experiences with on-line academic support provided by text-book publishers and nursing faculty, especially because it can be accessed during off hours and in off campus locations. In addition, many of the participants note that they feel very comfortable in the skills lab and clinical settings as these experiences offer hands-on learning and immediate feedback.

How does membership in the Latino culture enhance or inhibit persistence to degree in a baccalaureate nursing program? Participants in the study spoke with energy and enthusiasm about how membership in the Latino culture enhances their ability to provide culturally sensitive, culturally competent care; to improve the quality of health care to the Latino community; and how it influences their perceptions related to expectations and empowerment associated with the professional nursing role. The perception of empowerment appears to fuel persistence for these students.

Students consider bilingualism and biculturalism to be their strongest assets for providing culturally sensitive care to Latino patients and they cite numerous positive
patient care experiences that are both validating and encouraging and support their
determination to complete their degree. One of the most significant findings related to
biculturalism is that many of the students interviewed for the study plan to work in
community settings with Latinos who are underserved by the current healthcare system in
order to reduce health disparities for this population. The participants in this study feel
that as Latina nurses, they will be able to provide higher quality care for members of their
community because they are able to understand the norms and values of both the Latino
and White majority cultural environments; thus, putting them in a position to act as
brokers for better health care.

A finding related to how the Latino culture interacts with the culture of nursing is
that these Latina students note the need to accommodate to the expectations of the
professional nursing role and the nursing workforce culture, which reflects dominant
American workforce values. Specifically, they refer to expectations regarding
punctuality and the conventional work ethic. While role expectations may pose certain
challenges, students also feel supported by the hope to serve as role models for other
Latinos to pursue a career in nursing. In addition, they express feelings of empowerment
for themselves as well as for the greater Latino community in achieving a professional
degree, something that, so far, very few of their counterparts have been able to do. While
the study by Jeffreys (2004) notes the significance of self-efficacy, there are no known
prior studies which related feelings of empowerment with Latino nursing student
persistence.
A Framework of Persistence

A Framework of Persistence was developed based on analysis of the data from this study, which suggests that factors which influence Latina nursing students’ persistence fall into two main categories: student characteristics and characteristics of the academic institutional environment (see Appendix F for the Framework of Persistence). Student and institutional characteristics are displayed as cogwheel shapes in the diagram. The wheel representing students’ characteristics related to culture is the largest and most central because for these students, it denotes the most significant aspects of getting into and through a baccalaureate nursing program. This wheel includes aspects of the students’ life experiences that they identify as significant: cultural background, demographics, biculturalism, language skills, and social support. Socioeconomic status (SES) is given its own cogwheel because of the emphasis students place on financial resources in persistence to degree. The third cogwheel in student characteristics includes academic preparation and individual competencies (e.g., self-efficacy and motivation); additional attributes students identified as contributing to persistence. Institutional characteristics are noted by participants to be of secondary importance to their personal characteristics in their ability to persist. Cogwheels representing aspects of the institutional environment which students identify as significant include: financial aid, peer relationships, and other features of the learning environment, consisting of nursing faculty, nursing curriculum, tutors, mentors, and campus academic support.

The cogwheels can be imagined to rotate, so that the various aspects of student characteristics and of the institutional environment could articulate and thereby influence a student’s educational experience. Furthermore, the line separating student and
institutional characteristics is not a solid one; the wheels can be imagined to move across the line in a dynamic model of interaction among all aspects of a student’s experience that ultimately influence persistence. Most any of the students’ entry and/or learning environment characteristics can serve as potential sources of challenges or supports to persistence; the two are often interrelated issues. For example, mentors and financial aid are sources of support when available but these same factors are seen as challenges when they are unavailable or inadequate. Likewise, language skills for bilingual students are tremendous assets in patient care settings, but can also present challenges when it comes to academic writing assignments.

Contributions to the Knowledge of Latina Nursing Student Persistence

This study adds to what is known about Latina nursing student persistence in several ways. First, it is a single-institution study set at a less-selective private, liberal arts college, whereas the majority of prior studies were done in either community colleges or in selective, public, university settings. In addition, the sample was comprised of Latinas of Puerto Rican or Puerto Rican and Dominican heritage, thereby addressing the need to study Latino sub-groups represented in local populations rather than Latinos as an aggregate.

Furthermore, while the findings of this study corroborate those presented in the literature on Latinos in higher education, it also contributes to current knowledge of Latinas in baccalaureate nursing education in a number of ways. The first is that with respect to cultural background, while traditional gender role expectations may be changing with younger generations, they remain strong in some Latino families, and may pose a challenge to persistence in nursing education for females as well as to access to
nursing education for males. Second, is the dual issue of wait-lists in community colleges for associate degree nursing programs and comparative ease of credit transfer from community colleges to baccalaureate programs for students who must use their time and money efficiently. This issue certainly has a significant impact on choice of school and, therefore, choice of program (associate versus baccalaureate).

Third, the majority of studies focus on traditional students in terms of age and life experiences. The participants of this study provide rich data from the perspective of non-traditional, commuter students who spend a minimum amount of time on campus and, therefore, have limited access to faculty outside of the classroom. Fourth is the imperative for nursing faculty to acquire a better understanding of the Latino cultural value system and to utilize that understanding for advising students and for teaching cultural competence in the classroom. Finally, Latina nursing students recognize biculturalism and dual socialization as unique assets which they can use to their advantage working in diverse health care settings in order to address health disparities for underserved populations.

The Framework of Persistence developed from this study contributes to current knowledge of Latina baccalaureate nursing student persistence in several ways. First, this model depicts the emic perspective of students with a distinctly Puerto Rican cultural heritage on challenges to and supports for degree attainment and addresses the interaction of student and institutional characteristics on persistence for this particular population. The Framework also incorporates the link between Latino cultural values and the art of professional nursing practice for a diverse society. The last and most significant contribution made by this Framework is an awareness of the many areas in which
sensitivity to the cultural background of the student plays a role in enhancing the ability of the student to persist. The Framework can, therefore, be used to inform administrators, faculty, admissions and student affairs officers, and others in designing campus programs and nursing curricula that reflect and respect the needs of Latina students.

**Recommendations for Practice, Policy and Research**

The findings from this study provide the impetus for making recommendations for practitioners, policy makers, and researchers, working in the field of higher education and, in particular, baccalaureate nursing education programs. The findings are grounded in the voices of the Latina students that represent their perceptions of the challenges and supports affecting persistence to degree. The recommendations presented here emerge from students’ descriptions of their own experiences and are intended to bring more Latinos into the nursing workforce.

**Recommendations for practice.** The following are recommendations that address students’ financial concerns, academic preparedness, academic and social support, faculty-student relationships, faculty development, and teaching and learning methodologies. The first recommendation is to establish seminars conducted by college financial aid officers for low-income Latino families and students to provide them with information on how to finance a college education, including eligibility for Pell grants, and assistance with the grant application process. The intention of these measures is to increase awareness of the availability of aid and how to access it.

Many of the participants in this study report their high schools did not provide them with the academic background or information they needed to pursue a college education. Therefore, there are several recommendations that address the difficulties with
the transition to college. The first of these is to educate high school guidance counselors on the need to give specific information to first-generation Latino students about how to set realistic goals for college, including what colleges and what careers to consider. The second is to develop outreach programs with high schools in which student affairs officers and college student ambassadors help familiarize Latino high school students and families with the various aspects of the college experience. This recommendation has the added benefit of creating linkages between high school and college students. The third recommendation is to create credit-bearing college transition programs that could be offered in 12th grade or during the summer before college to get Latino students ready for college-level work; including preparation for the Anatomy and Physiology courses, note-taking, study skills, and writing skills. Another recommendation in this area is to institute a “1st Year Seminar” course specifically designed to help acclimate students transferring from community colleges. All of these recommendations are intended to improve access and retention rates for educationally disadvantaged Latino students.

Another recommendation for practice is to establish core groups of student advocates whose purpose it is to reach out to Latino students and help them connect with available resources on campus. This capitalizes on the concept that personal relationships are important in the Latino tradition and recognizes that Latinos value self-sufficiency and may not seek the assistance they need. With the same rationale in mind, the next recommendation is to adopt proactive academic advising systems that reach out to Latino students rather than waiting for them to ask for help.

A further recommendation for practice is to engage the Student Nurses Association on campus in establishing orientation programs that target Latino nursing
students and their families to help them understand the expectations of a baccalaureate nursing curriculum. This would address the lack of a college-going culture among Latinos as well as promote family support, which students in this study say they derive great benefit from. Another recommendation is to establish connections with Latino nurses in the practice environment and with the local chapter of the National Association of Hispanic Nurses for the purpose of developing a cadre of career mentors and professional role models to work with Latino nursing students. An additional suggestion is to create programs in which nursing graduate students advise and mentor undergraduate Latino students and earn credit towards their graduate degree. This would serve as another source of mentorship for Latino students and at the same time, introduce them to the possibility of graduate education.

To address students’ comments related to teaching cultural competence, one recommendation is to provide nursing faculty development programs that help faculty examine their own attitudes regarding teaching diverse students and assists them in creating relevant cultural competence curricula that validate students from diverse backgrounds, and that substitute simulation and immersion experiences for direct (lecture) teaching methodologies. Another recommendation that recognizes the value of diversity is to provide support for Latino students that acknowledges the importance of the Latino value system and meets students where they are in order to help them maximize support structures and overcome challenges to persistence, for example, having bilingual staff available in academic resource centers.

A further suggestion is to place students in cohorts that follow the same course and clinical schedules throughout the nursing curriculum. This would facilitate the
establishment of strong Latino nursing student peer and study groups. The final recommendation for practice is to establish student-faculty ratios for sophomore level nursing courses that optimize the faculty-student interactions and individualized attention which these students consider important for their success.

Recommendations for policy. The following are recommendations that address the allocation of funds at the national, institutional, and departmental levels to support students and innovative programs in nursing higher education. The first recommendation, intended to draw more Latinos into the nursing profession, is to create policies to build capacity at institutions that serve low-income minority and first-generation students. This will ensure opportunity for the fastest growing segments of our student bodies, with particular attention to smaller, less-selective, private institutions that primarily serve local populations. Another recommendation is to target public subsidies (e.g. under Title VIII) to steer the composition of the future nursing workforce toward more BSN graduates by expanding baccalaureate and graduate education programs that produce nurses for positions in professional practice, education, and research. A recommendation along similar lines is to reallocate Medicare funds currently targeted to pay hospitals for the educational costs of training diploma nurses toward those that produce BSN graduates. These efforts address the increasing demand for a professionally educated and diverse nursing workforce.

A fourth recommendation is to build institutional and departmental budgets that consider the particular needs of first-generation and minority students, such as academic and student support services that help those with the greatest need. The Latina students who participated in this study find the mentorship program very beneficial for both social
and academic reasons; it may, therefore, be useful to initiate or expand existing mentorship programs in order to provide this resource to more students. In addition, data analysis also points out the need to expand the availability of tutors to accommodate the schedules of those who commute, work, or have family responsibilities.

In this study, students’ ability to pay for college is identified as a key factor in persistence. Therefore, the fifth suggestion is to develop 5-year co-op nursing education programs which allow students to alternate semesters of academic study with semesters of full-time employment, which would help alleviate some of the financial stress experienced by low-income Latino students.

The sixth recommendation is to establish policies that facilitate transfer from 2-year programs as suggested by Smith, Miller, and Bermeo (2009), including: robust credit transfer agreements; flexible scheduling of academic and support services; dual enrollment programs; centrally located registration and financial aid offices; and diversity among faculty and staff with backgrounds similar to students’. A seventh recommendation is to designate HRSA funding for projects that create agreements between 2 and 4-year colleges to establish programs that bring Latinos currently working in healthcare as unlicensed assistive personnel into community colleges and on to baccalaureate programs for their BSN degrees with a portion of the funding available as scholarships or stipends for students. These recommendations are intended to assist low-income and first-generation students in obtaining a baccalaureate degree in nursing.

Recommendations for future research. The intention of this study is to help fill the gap in the literature regarding what is known about the predominant Latino subgroup which represents the most rapidly expanding cultural minority population in
the Northeast vis à vis their experiences in baccalaureate nursing education programs. The following are recommendations for future research that can improve upon and/or augment the findings of this study.

The first recommendation is to conduct a follow-up study with the same participants for the purpose of obtaining outcome data relative to program completion and NCLEX pass rates. The findings could be used to create a comprehensive database on Latino nursing student persistence and licensure rates which is not currently available.

The second recommendation is for a study using a sample of male Latino student nurses in order to learn what they perceive as challenges and supports in persistence to degree. These data would be useful in planning recruitment and retention efforts for male students and for comparison with data from studies with female students.

A third suggestion for future research is to conduct studies that include multiple interviews with each participant which would enhance the quality and credibility of the data. A fourth recommendation is to conduct additional qualitative studies that more deeply examine the relationships between Latino students and mentors or students and faculty and their impact on learning outcomes. The data from such studies would be useful in determining which efforts produce the most favorable outcomes in terms of student satisfaction, academic achievement and progression in the major, retention, and graduation rates for Latino nursing students.

The fifth suggestion is to carry out studies that use multiple data collection methods, including observation of students in classroom and clinical settings, to supplement what is learned in interviews. Data from multiple sources will further inform the question and add to the trustworthiness of the study. The sixth recommendation is to
conduct ethnographic studies with more time in the field to follow students through the
nursing curriculum, including longitudinal studies which would allow the researcher to
probe more deeply into the multiple worlds that Latino nursing students negotiate from
the beginning to the conclusion of their studies. A seventh recommendation for future
study is to conduct research with larger samples of Puerto Rican nursing students to
obtain further data on this Latino sub-group and to enhance the robustness and
transferability of the findings. For example, it would be advantageous to conduct
additional studies with larger samples of Puerto Rican baccalaureate nursing students,
including multi-institutional studies using survey instruments designed to test the
generalizability of the Framework of Persistence. A final suggestion is to carry out
retrospective studies with recent Latina nursing graduates to obtain the insights of those
who have successfully completed their degrees. Information obtained from those who
have had the lived experience could be used for planning retention strategies.

Concluding Message

Nurse educators and policy makers need to have a clear picture of how to help
Latina students be successful in the pipeline to the baccalaureate degree. To this end, the
findings of this study may be used as the impetus to drive future research, policy and
practice. Latina students, especially those who are low-income and first-generation, need
to know how to access and use financial, academic, and social support, while we, in the
academy, need to know how to provide those supports. The ultimate objective is for
Latinas to be equitably represented in the nursing workforce and to be prepared for
graduate education for practice, teaching and scholarship. Nurse educators and policy
makers today need to look toward the future for nursing education and nursing in an
increasingly diverse society; this necessitates a broad world view in which they must see
the significance of their roles in promoting Latina nursing student retention in order to
address the insufficient numbers of minorities in higher education, the national nursing
shortage, and the inadequate number of minority nurses.

The students who participated in this study offered this take-home message to
nursing faculty and to future students, that sums up how they get through the challenges
they face every day: “¡La perseverancia y persistencia!”
Note

1 Later in the interview, Amanda indicated that this discouraging comment was made by a nurse educator at another institution.
Persistence is determined by the degree of campus involvement which, in turn, is influenced by the interrelation of cultural identity, individual characteristics, institutional culture, and professional nursing education.
CONSENT FORM

Study of the University of Massachusetts Amherst
Latinas in the Pipeline to Baccalaureate-Prepared Nursing:
Challenge and Supports in Persistence to Degree and Professional Licensure

CONSENT FOR VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION IN DISSERTATION RESEARCH PROJECT

Dear Baccalaureate Nursing Student:

I am a doctoral student in the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. I would like to invite you to participate in a qualitative research project about challenges and supports for Latina students working toward a baccalaureate nursing degree and professional licensure. I am interested in learning about your perceptions of what promotes and what hinders your success in the nursing program in order to inform policies which address persistent inequalities in the nursing workforce. Your participation will include being interviewed twice by me, once individually and once in a focus group, for 60 to 90 minutes each time using a focused interview format.

Please read the following and sign below if you are willing to participate in the dissertation research project outlined above:

I volunteer to participate in this qualitative study and understand that:

1. I will be interviewed by Cheryl Sheils using a focused interview format.
2. The questions I will be answering address my views on challenges and supports in working toward a baccalaureate nursing degree and professional licensure.
3. The interview will be tape recorded to facilitate analysis of the data.
4. My name will not be used, nor will I be identified personally, in any way or at any time unless I request to be identified. I understand that it will be necessary to identify participants in the dissertation by college affiliation.
5. I may withdraw from part or all of this study at any time.
6. I have the right to review material prior to the researcher’s final oral exam or other publication of the dissertation.
7. I understand that results from this survey will be included in Cheryl Sheils’ doctoral dissertation and may also be included in manuscripts submitted to professional journals for publication.
8. I am free to participate or not to participate without prejudice or penalty.
9. Because of the number of participants, I understand that there is some risk that I may be identified as a participant of this study.

I appreciate your giving time to this study. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at sheils@elms.edu or 413-265-2435. You may also contact my committee chairperson, Dr. Joseph Berger, at 413-545-2231.

Thank you,

Cheryl A. Sheils

________________________________    _______________ _________________
Researcher’s Signature                Participant’s Signature

_______________      _______________
Date                  Date

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Dear Student:

Please complete the following survey to the best of your ability so that I may have some background information about the participants in my study. Your answers will be used only to describe the participant group as a whole, not to identify any one individual. This survey is completely voluntary and you may choose not to answer any one or more of the survey items. Thank you.

Please fill in or check as appropriate:

1. Your year of birth: 19_____

2. Your gender: Male □ Female □

3. Please check the racial/ethnic group(s) that you most closely identify yourself with:

   - Costa Rican □
   - Cuban □
   - Dominican □
   - Salvadoran □
   - Guatemalan □
   - Haitian □
   - Other(s) __________________________________________

   - Honduran □
   - Jamaican □
   - Mexican □
   - Nicaraguan □
   - Panamanian □
   - Puerto Rican □

4. Do you refer to yourself as Latina/o □

   - Hispanic □
   - Other _____________? Not Applicable □

5. What is the name of the high school you attended? _________________________________

6. At what level are you in the nursing program? Sophomore □ Junior □ Senior □

7. Did you transfer here from a community college? Yes □ No □

If you answered “Yes” to question # 7, what is the name of the community college you transferred from? _________________________________
8. What is the total number of semesters you have spent so far in nursing education, including time spent in a community college? 1 □ 2 □ 3 □ 4 □ 5 □ 6 □

9. What year do you expect to graduate with your degree in nursing? ________
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

*First, I’m going to ask you a few general, basic questions about why you decided on a nursing career:*

Can you describe for me how you got interested in becoming a nurse?  
Tell me what brought you to this particular nursing program.  
Explain for me why it is important for you to get your BSN.  
What do you hope to accomplish by getting your BSN?  
What do you think your life will be like as an RN?  
Describe for me how you expect your life will be different when you are an RN.

*Next, I’m going to ask you some questions about your experiences as a student nurse:*

If you were speaking with a younger (e.g. freshman or sophomore) nursing student, what would you say about the nursing major?  How would you describe it?  
What do you spend most of your time on when you’re not in class or in clinical?

Can you tell me all the things that happen when you are preparing for class?  
For clinical  
For an exam?  
Since starting college, tell me about the courses that were or are the hardest for you?

Could you describe for me what typically challenges you the most as a student nurse – in class/ in clinical?  
Could you give me an example of what gives you a hard time as a student nurse – in class/ in clinical?  
Can you give me an example of an experience you found especially challenging in class or clinical?  
Can you give me an example of an experience you found especially helpful or supportive in class or clinical?  
If you were having difficulty with your schoolwork, where would you go or who would you go to for support or help?  
Make a list of all the different kinds of things that could stop you from staying in school and finishing your degree – having to do with school or outside of school
Make a list of all the different kinds of resources that can help you stay in school and finish your degree – again, both at school or outside of school.

Look at the list of what can stop your success. Which one is the most important? Explain.

Look at the list of what can help you be successful. Which one is the most important? Explain.

*Now I’m going to ask you a few questions about being a Latina/Hispanic student nurse:*

Can you talk about what your experience has been like so far as a Hispanic woman in a bachelor’s degree nursing program?

What has it been like for you bringing your Spanish culture into the culture of nursing?

When you are with other Spanish-speakers, do you usually speak Spanish or English?

If you were talking with another Spanish-speaking classmate about what makes it hard for you to be successful in the nursing program, how would you say it in Spanish? What words would you use?

If you were talking with another Spanish-speaking classmate about what helps you to be successful in the nursing program, how would you say it in Spanish? What words would you use?

If you were talking with a younger (e.g. freshman or sophomore) nursing student, what would you say about the nursing major? What words would you use?

How does your life experience as a Latina/Hispanic help or get in the way of your success as a nursing student – any impact of birth order or gender?

*And a few final questions for today:*

Will you be the same kind of nurse as a non-Latina/Hispanic nurse? Does membership in the Latino/Hispanic culture make a difference as to the kind of nurse you’ll be? How?

Is there a question that you thought I would ask but didn’t or a question that you feel I should be asking about Hispanics in nursing education?
## APPENDIX E

PROFILE OF LATINA STUDENT NURSE PARTICIPANTS

(n= 10)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Racial/Ethnic Background</th>
<th>ESL</th>
<th>Transfer Student</th>
<th>Level in Nursing Program</th>
<th># of Children</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ilysa</td>
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<td>PR</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>One or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>NT</td>
<td>PR/D</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>One or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dania</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>One or more</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Joslyn</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. PR = Puerto Rican; D = Dominican; ESL = English as a Second Language; T = Traditional Age; NT = Non-Traditional Age
APPENDIX F

FRAMEWORK OF PERSISTENCE

Framework of Persistence: Latinas in the Pipeline to Baccalaureate-Prepared Nursing

Student Characteristics

- SES
- Cultural Background
- Demographics
- Biculturalism
- Language Skills
- Social Support

Institutional Characteristics

- Financial Aid
- Peer Relationships
- Faculty
- Curriculum
- Mentors
- Tutor
- Academic Support

Persistence to BSN
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