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## Insights into the Complexities of Identity in Persisting Latina College Students

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**INSIGHTS INTO THE COMPLEXITIES OF IDENTITY IN  
PERSISTING LATINA COLLEGE STUDENTS**

A Dissertation Presented

by

IRENE RODRÍGUEZ MARTIN

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

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

February 2010

Department of Education

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents: Maria del Carmen Seoane Rodríguez and Leonardo Rodríguez Palazuelos. It was their personal journeys that inspired my dedication to education and to creating educational pathways for other Hispanics, and for that I am eternally grateful.

I also dedicate this study to my sons, Michael and Nicholas, whose personal revelations in education always inspired me and continually renewed my passion for reading and learning.

*Con todo cariño*

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Finally, I wish to acknowledge and thank the 17 women whose voices are included in this study. I am humbled by their honesty and their generosity in sharing precious time to tell me their stories. It is their incredible spirits of resilience which has made this study so powerful.

*Se los agradezco de corazón*

## ABSTRACT

### INSIGHTS INTO THE COMPLEXITIES OF IDENTITY IN PERSISTING LATINA COLLEGE STUDENTS

FEBRUARY 2010

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This study explored the educational journeys of 17 academically achieving, low income and first generation college attending Latinas at three different selective institutions. While many studies have been dedicated to the reasons for the low graduation rates of Hispanics, this strength-based study focused on resiliency and on the relationships and strategies Latinas used to achieve success in the most unlikely of environments. The interviews considered: the ways in which Latina students persist and whether their pathways were consistent with Tinto's traditional model of persistence; how students developed the scholastic capital required for persistence; and the ways in which culture and campus affected their persistence.

The central themes fell into two broad categories: family and capital. Cultural context was found to be an essential component for academic success for these students, and family involvement was central to this context. Families wanted their daughters to become not just well-educated, but *bien educadas*, a term that includes formal education as well as cultural norms, values, and protocols. The study also revealed that the educational pathways of these women had been made possible thanks to teachers, friends



or programs that helped expand the family's social capital. However, the expansion of a student's capital and her growing development of scholastic capital were experienced as hollow unless she was able to integrate these experiences into her cultural world in a meaningful way. Family, teachers, mentors, and micro communities all played an essential role in the integration of this capital and in helping students develop bi-cultural identities.

Finally, the findings suggested that there may be some advantages for Latina students who attend a women's college or are at least a strong women's studies program. Because the Hispanic culture tends to be male dominated and perhaps because in the U.S. Hispanic populations tend toward higher rates of domestic violence, sexual assault, teen pregnancy, etc. all associated with poverty and lack of education, the students in this study gravitated toward education about women's issues, women's health, birth control, and women's rights

The findings from this study offer guidance for ways institutions of higher education might better support Hispanic persistence.

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## CHAPTER 1

### LATINO STUDENTS IN MULTIPLE CONTEXTS

#### Introduction

The long-term implications of the lack of a college education, specifically a bachelor's degree, can be seen in the socioeconomic stability and financial well-being of American families (Johnstone, 2005); this fact is well evidenced in the lives of Hispanic<sup>1</sup> families who are currently overrepresented as either living in poverty or at lower income levels. Family income in Hispanic households averages only about one-third of the average income of non-Hispanic White households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001a). In fact the median wealth of Hispanic households in 2002 was \$7,932, only 9% of the \$88,651 median wealth of non-Hispanic White households (Kochhar, 2004). According to Zambrana and Zoppi (2002), not only does the lack of education increase the likelihood of poverty and decrease the chances of social mobility for Hispanics today, it also hinders opportunities for intergenerational and future social mobility. That is to say, a radical intervention would be required to disrupt the devastating cycle of poverty and inadequate educational opportunities that currently exists. Callan (2001) reports that students "from families in the highest income quartile have an 80 percent chance of entering college... whereas students from families in the lowest income quartile have a only 35 percent change of entering college" (p. 87).

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<sup>1</sup> Use of the word *Hispanic* versus *Latino* varies by generation, country of origin, and even part of the country. In this paper, the most inclusive definition of Hispanic/Latino will be used: a diverse group of people who reside in the United States and were born in or can trace the background of their families to a Spanish-speaking country. This definition does not distinguish by race, nativity, citizen status, or primary language spoken. To further foster a sense of inclusivity, the term Hispanic and Latino will be used interchangeably and alternately.

Despite the seemingly overwhelming odds, there has been progress in the number of Hispanics entering college over the past thirty years. Between 1972 and 2002, the number of Hispanics college students between the ages of 18 and 19 increased by over 400 percent, while the number of non-Hispanic White college students increased by only about 33% (Fry, 2005). In essence, “Hispanic youth have [become] a major component of growth in undergraduate enrollment, accounting for a third of the overall enrollment” (Fry, 2005, p. 2). The paths taken to pursue their postsecondary education, however, have been fraught with challenges and academic success has been elusive: almost half of all Latino students begin their academic careers at two-year institutions (Santiago & Brown, 2004) and less than 20% of these students succeed in completing a bachelor’s degree (Fry, 2005). In fact, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2002) reports that only 40% of Hispanic students attained a bachelor’s degree within 6 years of entering college, compared to 56% of non-Hispanic White students who completed a bachelor’s degree within the same time period.

With one-third of all Hispanics currently under the age of 18 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003) and projections for the growth rate of the Hispanic population to continue, it is important for educators and policy makers to better understand the variables which influence Hispanic college persistence. The reasons for a student’s departure from or persistence in college are undoubtedly complex. There are researchers who have focused on the impact of financial resources on a student’s likelihood to persist (Farrell, 1999; Harrell & Forney, 2003; Heller, 2001; Hossler, Braxton & Coopersmith, 1989; Jackson, 1990; Johnstone, 2005; St. John, 1990; Tinto, 1988; Tierney, 1999). Economic resources affect not only college choice but also ability, or perceptions of one’s ability, to afford



college at all. Generally speaking the poor and working class are less likely to attend and persist in college than the wealthy; Hispanic students, by virtue of their significant over-representation in lower income and working class families share the same destiny (Tierney, 1999). Many of these researchers conclude, however, that while financial aid is an integral and essential factor, focusing on financial aid alone is insufficient to ensuring student persistence, and to do so fails to recognize the complexities of access and student persistence or departure (Harrell & Forney, 2003; Heller, 2001; Johnstone, 2005; Tierney, 1999).

Other researchers have highlighted academic preparation (Perna & Titus, 2005; Saunders & Serna, 2004; Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002), a factor often closely connected to economic status as a factor in student departure. Family income dictates the neighborhoods in which families live and the schools they are able to access. Lower income Hispanic students largely attend poorly funded inner-city high schools which have limited resources for enriched curriculum development and few resources to promote or support college aspirations. According to Zambrana and Zoppi, almost 40% of Hispanic youth live in poverty and “attend inner city or rural schools where both schools and home environments lack educational materials such as computers and books” (p. 41). Perna and Titus stress the importance of recognizing the structural context within which a student accesses resources; networks and resources available in schools were two of the primary variables they looked at in their study of college decision making across racial/ethnic groups. They noted that Hispanic students were more likely to attend high schools with the fewest academic resources available. They concluded that, “African Americans and Hispanics are disadvantaged in the college enrollment process...because of the low levels

of resources that are available to promote college enrollment through the social networks at the schools they attend” (Perna & Titus, 2005, p. 511). Saunders and Serna add that based on the lack of academic preparation, less than 43% of Hispanic high school students are qualified to enroll in four-year institutions (p. 147). Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the majority of Hispanic students represent first generation college attendees. With only 11% of Hispanics age 25 or older having attained at minimum a bachelor’s degree (compared to 28% of non-Hispanic Whites), higher education is an unfamiliar experience for families and one for which they are unable to provide informed guidance (Swail, Redd & Perna, 2003).

Student educational, financial and other resources, variously defined as student capital, have also been cited by researchers for their significant impact on college going behaviors. *Economic capital* refers to the financial capacity of a family to support their child’s college education. *Cultural capital*, characteristics learned from parents and family members such as language, cultural knowledge, traditions and values, define class status (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and affects how an individual views college and one’s sense of entitlement to a college education (McDonough, 1999). In her research, McDonough stated that the most “socially and economically valued” cultural capital comes from middle- and upper-class families because this capital most easily transferred into status, power and opportunity (p. 9). Students enact their cultural capital by aspiring to college careers which are similar or slightly higher than those of their family and social group; their choice of college type is also influenced by this cultural capital (McDonough, 1997). *Social capital*, on the other hand, is described as the social networks (resources, relationships, systems) that families access in navigating life’s

options, often demarcated by the bounds of their class status (Dufur, Parcel & McKune, 2008); social capital enhances socialization and an understanding of social norms/expectations and behaviors in various settings. Cultural and social capital play a central role in parents' knowledge about how to prepare children for college and ways to access college (McDonough, 1997). Finally, there is what Tierney (1999) refers to as *academic capital*, those characteristics that predispose one to applying for college such as essential academic skills; a mindset that values a dedication to high academic standards, structure and discipline; and a commitment to academic achievement and college aspiration. There is a strong connection between class and the various forms of capital and although they can be distinctly defined, there is significant overlap and interconnectedness between the various types of capital.

Traditional theories on persistence, like Tinto's interactional model, frame academic persistence as the result of the student's ability to successfully separate from his previous identity and integrate a new academic identity (Tinto, 1986). Supporting this theory has been research that correlates increases in student involvement on campus with student persistence (Astin, 1985). Many researchers have challenged Tinto's model of persistence some equating it to cultural suicide (Tierney, 1999) and others stating that a model devoid of family and cultural values/traditions is insufficient to explicate Hispanic student persistence (Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; González, 2002; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Rendón 2000; Saunders & Serna, 2004; Tierney, 1999). While effective in understanding the ways in which students develop a college going identity, Tinto's model does not adequately incorporate the importance of cultural contexts for

students of color or the strengths of Latino cultural capital which students bring to campus (Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002).

The first three propositions in Tinto's model indicate that a student's entry characteristics (among them a student's cultural, social, economic and academic capital) affect their level of commitment to the institution, to the goal of graduation, and to the likelihood of persistence in college (Tinto, 1975). Hispanic students from low income families, who represent the first generation to attend college, are seemingly disadvantaged in these entry characteristics; persistence, then, is dependant upon external interventions which can fill the gaps in capital resulting from the legacy of poverty. A fifth form of capital, referred to by this author as *scholastic capital*, refers to characteristics constructed by or with a college student to fill in gaps in the academic, social and cultural capital, the foundations of which are traditionally developed in school, home and community prior to college. This capital serves to enhance a student's commitment to college and their persistence in graduation. Scholastic capital includes but is not limited to understanding college culture, norms about college life, ways to access college resources, and the role of relationships with faculty, as well as an understanding of ways to integrate one's cultural identity with a college going identity. Unlike parent college knowledge (McDonough, 1997), which refers to a family's orientation to college, preparation for college, and ways to access college, scholastic capital refers to capital developed during college years that affect a student's persistence.

Undoubtedly, Hispanic students are burdened with the challenges of limited financial resources, inadequate public education systems, and institutional and personal racism, yet there are those who are able to make their way in the unfamiliar and racially

hostile environments of institutions of higher education (Smedley, Myers & Harrell, 1993). Few studies exist that help us understand how these students develop the resources needed to succeed in college against such unlikely odds. Although there has been some work on resilient Latino students, these studies emphasize “rare instances” of achievement (Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002, p. 36) and much more study is needed. The primary purpose of the proposed study is to 1) explore the relevance of persistence models as they apply to Latinos, 2) consider the role and significance of Hispanic culture as it relates to college culture and its impact on persistence, 3) explore the ways in which students construct scholastic capital (connections, relationships, systems, or programs) to help them academically persist, and 4) provide direction for future study in support of Hispanic student persistence in four-year colleges or universities. The following review of the literature provides a foundation for this exploration.

### **Persistence in College**

#### **Vincent Tinto’s Interactional Model of Student Departure**

Numerous scholars have proposed ways to impact college retention but perhaps no model is more frequently referenced or emulated than Vincent Tinto’s *interactional theory*, “a theory that holds paradigmatic status as a framework for understanding college student departure” (Braxton, Hirschy & McClendon, 2004, p. 7). The cornerstone of Tinto’s theory rests in understanding that there are two realms in the student’s world: the social realm and the academic realm; success in both realms is correlated with persistence, but success in one does not equate success in the other. Tinto focuses on the importance of bonding with a new culture, the college culture, as a means to support persistence and the completion of a degree. According to Tinto’s theory, “student leaving

reflects the individual's experience in the total culture of the institution as manifested in both the formal and the informal organization of the institution" (Tinto, 1986, p.137).

The key propositions of Tinto's theory are based on the rites of passage described in anthropology as members of a society ascend from one level to another, from youth to adulthood. He applied these same stages of passage to students in a college community: *separation, transition, and incorporation* (Tinto, 1986, p. 141). To better understand this popular model, a brief description of the stages as Tinto applied them to students in college follows.

To begin this passage, students must separate from their families and former communities. This process of separation can be stressful for students and can sometimes cause them to leave college rather than to persist. Tinto (1986) comments that this stress can be particularly difficult for those whose college communities are "markedly different in social and intellectual orientation from that which characterizes the family and local community" (p.140). He emphasizes that "staying in college depends on their becoming leavers from their former communities" (Tinto, 1988 p. 443). The student must be willing and able to make a shift in his or her previous social worlds in order to prepare for transition to the new academic world of college.

Transition is the period between separation from the student's previous identity and the integration into the new academic identity. Tinto (1988) asserts that achievement in this stage is solely reliant on the student's level of commitment to academic success; those that are sufficiently committed will persist, those who are not sufficiently committed will not survive. The "degree of difference between the norms and patterns of behavior in the past and those required for incorporation into the life of college" is a

significant factor in success at this stage (Tinto, 1988). For this reason he concludes that it is not unexpected that those of “minority backgrounds and/or from very poor families, older adults, and persons from very small rural communities” are more likely to experience problems (Tinto, 1986, p. 141).

Finally, in the incorporation stage, through contact with member of the college community, the student is able to integrate into the college community and share new norms, values, beliefs and identity with other members of the college. Failure to incorporate, or a decision to voluntarily withdraw from this membership results in the student’s failure to persist in college (Tinto, 1986).

Tinto’s assumptions about how one can succeed in college have directly influenced subsequent theories about student achievement and persistence in college (Tierney, 1999). Yet his writing was primarily based on research by mostly White researchers undertaken at a time before students of color were a critical mass in higher education (Rendón, Jalomo, & Nora, 2000); the perspective of Hispanics were yet to be recognized in this research. In fact, according to Zambrana and Zoppi (2002), until 1975 data on Hispanics went unrecorded altogether; until then “only four race categories were used: Black, White, Asian and ‘Other’” (p. 35). In other words, Tinto’s findings are primarily based on studies of White male residential students attending college full-time. Therefore, it does not seem altogether inaccurate that Tinto used an anthropological analogy when considering the movement of White students from White communities into predominantly White institutions of higher education. The analogy works quite well because the anthropological stages refer to cultural rites of passage and movement from youth to adulthood within the same culture; and it is appropriate to give importance to the

notion of culture as one moves forward within one's community. His model focuses on cultural traditions, norms and rites of passage within one culture. The model, however, is culturally biased toward the White culture and does not recognize the diversity of cultures represented in today's student communities.

In his later revision of this model, Tinto suggests that participation in social and academic systems is different from social and academic integration but remains clear about the need for academic integration as central to persistence (Tinto, 1993). Tinto himself commented that the relationship between race and persistence fell outside of the framework of his discussion and needed to be more singularly considered, commenting that "sub-cultures" had a unique and positive impact on persistence (Tinto, 1975).

Braxton et al. (2004) have challenged practitioners to question the "paradigmatic stature" of Tinto's interactional theory as insufficient to members of unique programs and specific populations, especially students of color. The issue of culture as it relates to persistence is, and should be, central to understanding the developmental growth of youth as they transition into adulthood during the traditional age of college attendance; culture, however, should not be defined by the standards of the White dominant community. Culture and cultural identity as they relate to persistence in Hispanics and other students of color, will be addressed in the next several sections.

### **Cultural Adaptations to a Traditional Model**

A number of researchers have challenged Tinto's model as it relates to students of color (Perna, 2000; Santos, 2004; Rendón et al. 2000; Saunders & Serna, 2004; Tierney, 1992). Tierney has played a central role in challenging what he calls the "scaffolding" of Tinto's model by challenging the assumptions upon which it has been built (p. 607).



Tierney reframes Tinto's description of *separation* from previous identities and communities and the *transition*, and *incorporation* into the academic culture, as "a form of cultural suicide, whereby [students] make a clean break from the communities and cultures in which they were raised and integrate and assimilate into the dominant culture of the colleges they attend" (p. 82). Theoretically, according to Tinto, the individual student's ability to survive this cultural suicide defines his or her success or failure to persist in college. Tierney contends instead that when students of color are able to affirm their own cultural identities, an experience he refers to as *cultural integrity*, their chances of graduating increase (p. 84). Programs attuned to the value of cultural integrity, incorporate the diversity of racial and ethnic identities in the development of college pedagogies and learning activities (Tierney & Jun, 2001).

Tierney (1999) studied this concept more closely in a three year study in which 40 African American and Hispanic 7<sup>th</sup> grade students were selected annually to participate in the Neighborhood Academic Initiative (NAI) in California. The project targeted low-income urban minority adolescents whose "chances of attending college without financial and other forms of assistance [were] slim" (Tierney, 1999, p. 85). The goal of the project was to help students achieve cultural integrity and an enhanced awareness of cultural identities in order to provide them with a stronger sense of belonging in college. The program utilized three key concepts to achieve this cultural integrity:

(a) *Develop Local Contexts* – Involve families and community members in preparing students for college. At times this includes educating families about their role in helping their child succeed. Central to this goal is "the assumption that family and neighborhood are essential elements of learning" (p. 86).

(b) *Affirm Local Definitions of Identity* – Students’ local cultural identities are affirmed in their community by staff who share their race/ethnicity or who value their cultural identity. Students are also prepared for racism and prejudice during the college experience through discussion and role modeling from NAI members. Clear expectations of good grades and high achievement, despite racism, are conveyed.

(c) *Create Academic Capital* – Provide a safe learning environment for learning the essentials for college; convey high standards of academic excellence; provide structure; model academic discipline with an emphasis on achievement; model college aspiration; and provide financial assistance. By expanding the cultural, social and economic capital of participants, the NAI served to create a path to college that previously did not exist for the student or family.

The results of the NAI have been impressive: the program was successful in achieving a high school graduation rate of 70% and a 60% rate of enrollment to a four-year college, in a community whose overall local college-going rate was 20% (Tierney, 1999). This is a remarkable shift in what has been called ‘college-going behavior’ for a group of students with strikingly low college enrollment rates. Unlike Tinto’s model, which focused on students making a shift in their personal sense of identity in order to succeed in the college culture, Tierney focuses on institutions reaffirming a student’s identity and on developing the academic capital required to prepare him or her for the college culture. Unclear from this study is whether these three key concepts (local contexts, affirmation of identity, creation of academic capital) carry over into college and if so, what impact they have on college persistence. Nonetheless, Tierney provides a

useful departure from Tinto's model. I would like to consider Tierney's three key concepts in more depth and look at what other researchers have found that would affirm their relevance for Hispanic students.

### **Develop Local Contexts**

Santos (2004) echoes Tierney's focus on the importance of family involvement in her study of the motivational factors contributing to the decision making of Hispanic students to enter a two-year college. The study, which was undertaken in the South Bronx of New York City, included 179 Hispanic participants, 65.9% of whom were Dominican and 19% were Puerto Rican (the remainder were 'other Hispanic'); nearly three quarters of the respondents lived on incomes below \$15,000 (Santos, 2004). When asked to identify the person(s) who provided encouragement for pursuing higher education respondents stated that family played an important role; in fact, 41.3% of respondents identified family support as essential (Santos, 2004). Like Tierney's research found in the NAI project, the value of including family as an important factor in supporting persistence for Hispanic students was further confirmed by Santos' research.

While also affirming the important role of family for Hispanics, Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2003) note an additional cultural factor significant in understanding Mexican immigrant support systems: the communitarian character of Mexicans. Utilizing an ethnographic design, Stanton-Salazar and Spina followed Mexican-origin adolescents from San Diego (75% of whose parents had not finished high school) for 16 months (1991-92) to study their social networks and help-seeking practices. According to Stanton-Salazar and Spina:

The debilitating effects of poverty and exclusion not only have to do with ecological conditions that deny young people consistent access to institutional (material) resources (e.g., well-funded schools and parks), but also to the social capital necessary to protect them from risk behaviors (e.g., illegal activities) and forms of alienation and despair that often emanate from the collective exposure to such harsh conditions (p. 233).

To offset this deficit, the authors found that resilient Mexican high schoolers utilized a broader network of support closely tied to community, ethnicity, and tradition. “In addition to parents and school personnel, five categories of adults emerged as key constituents in the networks of the most resilient adolescent participants: older siblings, extended family members, family friends, community- or university-based informal mentors, and role models” (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003, p. 233). For Mexican immigrants, what Tierney called “local context” extends to a broader definition of ‘family’. Stanton-Salazar and Spina also commented that this communitarian orientation was best typified by “the construct of *confianza en confianza* (trusting mutual trust) which denotes a psychocultural expectation for on going exchange, mutual generosity and reciprocity set in the context of trusting and intimate relations” (p. 241). The importance of reciprocal trust and support in the Hispanic community will be examined further in the *Hispanic Students: Core Values and Norms Related to Education* section below.

### **Affirm Local Definitions of Identity**

Saunders and Serna (2004) followed 10 first generation Latino college students and tracked their ability to maintain a “college-going identity” after their participation in *The Futures Project*. Like the NAI project, the *Futures Project* was based in part on the assumption that students would experience racism and prejudice as part of their college experience (Tierney, 1999). Similar to the NAI’s focus on introducing students to the

potential of racism on college campuses, the *Futures Project* incorporated a research curriculum for students which focused on educational equity and access. Through this research, “marginalized youth developed and demonstrated the skills and competencies needed for college access while also acquiring a critical perspective of schools as potentially dominant and oppressive structures” (Saunders & Serna, 2004, p. 149). They also developed needed skills and competencies to enter college and a network of professionals and peer colleagues that supported their transition to college. Two years following their high school graduation, the Saunders and Serna found that all but one of the *Futures* students in the study had either utilized their old network, or reconfigured the old network and incorporated new networks at college, in order to reaffirm and maintain their college-going identity. A distinguishing characteristic between the students was the level of their confidence and trust in their new environments (Saunders & Serna, 2004). Sustaining old networks, and in most cases developing new social networks, were central to the *Futures* student’s persistence by affirming who they were culturally and who they were becoming as college students. According to Saunders and Serna (2004), the fact that an “old network” was available to students was critical to their adjustment and sense of confidence. An important dimension of this study is that it addressed both access and retention by interviewing students into their second year of college; many studies have focused on access or retention but not the long term impact of access interventions on retention.

### **Create Academic Capital**

In Tierney’s (1999) research on the NAI project, the creation of academic capital was depicted as part academic skill building, part role-modeling college going values for

families whose histories lacked a college frame of reference, and part financial assistance. Perna's (2000) research on African American and Hispanic students underscores the importance of what Tierney called the creation of academic capital. Perna's study drew from the 1994 follow-up to the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) to consider how social and cultural capital impacted upon an econometric model of four-year college-going. She found that after controlling for social and cultural capital, gender, cost, benefits, financial resources, and ability, Hispanics were as likely as Whites to enroll in a four-year college or university. "In other words, the lower observed enrollment rate for Hispanics is attributable to their lower levels of the types of capital required for college enrollment..." (Perna, 2000, p. 135). In fact, Perna found that for Hispanics, social and cultural capital was as important as academic ability in contributing to decisions to enroll in a four-year college or university. This study shifts focus away from financial aid, anticipated benefits of higher education, and academic ability in high school as central reasons why Hispanics do not enroll in college. Instead it underscores how deficits in social and cultural capital affects educational opportunities. For first generation Hispanic college attendees raised in poverty, the social and cultural capital of families has significant deficits. In essence, according to Perna, enhancing family social and cultural capital through culturally affirming programs like the NAI, students would be advantaged in their college enrollment decisions. According to Saunders and Serna (2004), by enhancing cultural and social capital, students not only acquire the skills and knowledge to consider and enroll in college, but they also "begin to accommodate a college-going identity" (p. 159) which can sustain them as they move toward the completion of their degree.

Zambrana and Zoppi (2002) echo the importance of enhancing cultural and social capital to expand academic opportunities for Latinos. In their extensive research of the literature on Latina academic achievement, Zambrana and Zoppi assert that historically, “Latino cultural capital has not been easily translated into social capital” (p. 34). Although all classes “have their own forms of cultural capital, the most socially and economically valued forms are those possessed by the middle and upper classes” (McDonough, 1997, p.9). Cultural capital is popularly recognized as class values that help generations achieve or maintain their place in the social structure. As a result, Hispanic cultural capital appears to offer little to social advancement. In contrast, however, Zambrana and Zoppi redefine Latino cultural capital as “cultural wealth” (p. 45) which includes numerous and essential characteristics of resiliency such as a religious foundation, a collectivist orientation, respect and reverence for family, respect for elders and authority figures, and responsibility to and support of family and siblings. They further cite that despite this richness, deficits in Hispanic cultural capital make it difficult to sustain resiliency in Latinas as they move through the academic system; these deficits include the lack of “role models that encourage development of self-discipline through positive feedback, problem-solving skills, and access to resources” (p. 45). Programs like the NAI reinforce cultural assets while bolstering deficits and expanding students’ capacities to develop academic capital (Tierney, 1999). Zambrana and Zoppi caution, however, that traditional Latino culture and values conflict with the values of educational institutions; the result has been academic practices which are discriminatory and alienating to Hispanic students. The authors urge schools to not only value but also build

on the cultural wealth that Latino students bring to campus in order to help them achieve academic success.

The findings of Perna (2000), Saunders and Serna (2004), Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2003), Saunders and Serna (2004), Tierney (1999), and Zambrana and Zoppi (2002) all affirm the importance of the integration of culture and a cultural identity as Hispanic students begin their journey into college. These studies underscore the importance of connections and relationships in both cultural community and college environments to enhance student scholastic capital. Many predominantly White institutions of higher education, however, reproduce and transmit White dominant values and traditions without regard to the differences or unique contributions of Hispanic cultures (Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002); how Hispanic students sustain cultural integration in a foreign, if not potentially hostile White dominant college culture creates unique challenges for students. To better understand these challenges and the impact of integrating a cultural identity on persistence, the next section will focus on issues such as campus racism, microaggressions, pressures to assimilate/acculturate, and the challenges of integrating cultural identity in a campus environment.

### **Hispanic Cultural Identity in an Academic Context**

The failure of Tinto's model to differentiate between the White dominant culture and other racial and ethnic groups suggests that the lack of persistence in Hispanics translates into the 'failure' of Hispanics as students. Rendón et al. (2000) draw a comparison between Tinto's model and theories of acculturation/assimilation which also require separation from one's cultural traditions, customs and language and assimilation into the dominant White culture. The authors state that this theory is based on the



troubling assumption that minority groups are *less-than* the dominant culture, and that failure to assimilate is either “deviant” or “self-destructive” (p. 518).

Philosopher Iris Marion Young’s (1990) framework of *cultural imperialism* provides an additional perspective on Tinto’s model. According to Young, cultural imperialism involves a system which universalizes the experience of a dominant population and generalizes it as the norm for all sub-groups within the population. According to this model, by applying, or even adapting, a retention model which has been effective in achieving academic success normed on White, middle-class male students, institutions of higher education are guilty of cultural imperialism; they have “universalized the dominant group’s experience and culture, and established it as the norm” (p. 59). The model “suppresses difference” (p. 11) between the dominant group and other students whose culture, life experiences, and ways of entering a new community are different. The result of cultural imperialism is the oppression or marginalization of the ‘*other*’, rendering the other’s perspective invisible if not deviant or inferior (Young, 1990). In essence, Tinto’s model makes invisible the experiences of Hispanic students striving to adapt to college.

Hispanic students have struggled to succeed in educational systems which have failed to recognize the difference between the White dominant culture and the culture of first generation Hispanic students. Developing a more inclusive model of persistence requires creating an academic context for Hispanic identity and giving voice to the unique experiences of Hispanic students and other students of color.

## **The Impact of Campus Climate on Hispanic Student Identity**

Consider again Tinto's stage of incorporation, the stage in which students integrate into the college community and share the new norms, values, beliefs and identities as other community members. Astin (1985) adds to this stage by stressing that involvement and developing a sense of belonging are essential to this stage of incorporation into the institution; these are key factors that support persistence. Paradoxically, numerous studies on campus climate report that predominantly White colleges and universities are experiencing racially charged campus environments (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella & Hagedorn, 1999; Davis et al., 2004; Fischer & Hartmann, 1995; Hurtado, 1992; and Smedley, Myers & Harrell, 1993). Tinto and Astin's recommendations, then, take on an irony of contrasts for Hispanics and other students of color. By suggesting that in order to persist in higher education, students must identify, if not bond, with institutions they perceive as racially hostile, students of color experience a unique set of stressors (Cabrera et al., 1999; Smedley, et al., 1993).

Cabrera et al. (1999) described campus racial stresses as having important implications for persistence for students of color. The authors describe racial stresses as significant in two key ways: first, the impact is unique to students of color, and second, racial stresses not only heighten feelings of not belonging, but they also affect academic performance. In their study of African American and White students, they found that perceptions of prejudice and discrimination exerted an indirect but significant effect on persistence; exposure to prejudice and intolerance also lessened commitment and indirectly weakened decisions to persist on the part of African Americans. Another key finding is that for African Americans these stresses could be offset by parental support

while in college, and that decisions to persist could be directly influenced by parental encouragement. Although this study did not include Hispanic students, it seems reasonable that some analogies could be drawn between the impact of racially charged campuses for African American students and the impact upon Hispanics and students of color in general.

Smedley et al. (1993) developed a multidimensional stress-coping model to consider more closely the impact of a dominant culture (a predominantly White campus) on students of color and found that “minority status stressors...undermined students’ academic confidence and [their] ability to bond to the university” (p. 448). Specifically, the study set out to assess whether being a student of color increased the risk for poor college adjustment. The study included responses from the 161 students of color who participated throughout the duration of the project. The findings affirmed that students experienced additional stress by virtue of their status as students of color, and that this additional stress impacted their feelings about being at college. Students in the study experienced “heightened concerns over their academic preparedness, questions about their legitimacy as students at the university, perceptions of negative expectations from White peers and from the faculty, and concerns about parental/family expectations....” (Smedley et al., 1993, p. 447). Of the 161 students participating in this study, 45 were African Americans and 76 were Hispanic students (54 Chicano and 25 Latino). Although this study focused on the experience of students of color broadly, the voice of Hispanic students is well represented in the findings. Unfortunately, findings were not disaggregated by race/ethnicity.

Hurtado and Carter have done extensive research on numerous issues regarding Hispanics and education. In one study they undertook (1997), nearly 300 Hispanic students were surveyed regarding their perceptions of racism and sense of belonging on campus. Like Cabrera et al. (1999) and Smedley et al. (1993), Hurtado and Carter found that perceptions of a hostile environment are negatively correlated with Latino student feelings of belonging in predominantly White campus communities. They also found, however, that membership in campus groups, especially cultural groups, and in the case of this study religious groups, serve as good proxies for feelings of belonging for Hispanic students. The authors speculated that one reason “why Latino students who belong to these organizations have a stronger sense of belonging is *because they maintain connections with these external campus communities* and hence maintain some link with the communities that they were familiar with before they entered college [emphasis added]” (p. 338). Hence, for Hispanics, an important element in negotiating a racially hostile campus environment rests in the ongoing association with familiar cultural and religious groups. This finding contradicts Tinto’s theory that persistence and integration are dependent upon the disassociation from previous groups; in fact, it finds quite the opposite.

Lopez’s (2005) research examined the impact of racial tensions and sense of belonging in Latinos on persistence. Lopez found that feelings of alienation and stress from a hostile racial climate increased over time for Hispanics which directly related to a student’s sense of belonging and social and academic integration. Despite a hostile campus racial climate, however, the 5-year retention rate for students in his study was 90.1% (Lopez, 2005). Lopez further found that increased racism was accompanied by

increased intragroup activity which is consistent with Smedley et al.'s (1993) finding that solidarity with one's racial/ethnic group increases as campus tensions intensify.

According to Lopez, a limitation of this study is that it included only students who volunteered to participate, thereby possibly skewing the results. The study also included only Hispanics from a selective and elite private institution which may limit the transferability of this study to a broader range of colleges/universities (Lopez, 2005).

A more recent construction of the impact of campus climate has focused not on more overt experiences of racial hostility, but on the more subtle, ongoing and eroding effects of what has been called racial microaggressions. Sue et al. (2007) defined racial microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavior, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (p.271). Solorzano, Ceja and Yosso (2000) studied the impact of racial microaggressions on African American college students through a series of focus groups of 34 students attending an elite predominantly White institution. They found that while not overt, the "cumulative effects of racial microaggressions can be devastating" to students (p. 72). The themes highlighted by respondents who experienced racial microaggressions included: feeling invisible, a sense of self-doubt, anxiety about the legitimacy of their admission to college, and feeling "drained by the intense scrutiny their everyday actions received" (Solorzano et al., 2000, p.67). Sue et al. (2007) underscore that the experience of racial microaggressions is not limited to the "White-Black" experience but also applies to "White-Latino or White-Person of Color" encounters (p. 284).

The above findings (Cabrera et al., 1999; Hurtado & Carter 1997; Lopez 2005; Smedley et al., 1993; Solorzano et al., and Sue et al., 2007) provide a compelling presentation of the challenges experienced by first generation Hispanic students who endeavor to negotiate an unfamiliar, if not hostile campus environment. Despite these challenges, findings from Barajas and Pierce (2001), Cabrera and Padilla (2004), González (2002), and Rendón et al. (2000) report that some Hispanics have created their own ways to successfully negotiate their academic journeys. To better understand and contextualize these successes, however, let me shift briefly to address core cultural student norms or values which researchers have found to be relevant to understanding their academic experiences of Hispanic students.

### **Hispanic Students: Core Values and Norms Related to Education**

An exhaustive discussion of Hispanic values and norms is beyond the scope of this paper not only because of the number of unique cultures incorporated under the umbrella of the term Hispanic, but also because of the impact that different national, sociopolitical and generational influences have on traditional values and norms. Nonetheless, it is essential to recognize that cultural distinctions exist between Hispanic cultures and the dominant White American culture and to endeavor to understand how these differences may impact upon student success. This section highlights some of the distinctions between the two cultures with particular attention to more traditional and overlapping norms which researchers have found to have relevance to Hispanic education. While the norms/values I have selected to discuss have been found to overlap in a number of Hispanic traditions (in particular Mexican and Puerto Rican populations), it would be presumptuous to assume that they are values equally shared by every

Hispanic. It is incumbent upon every campus community to inform itself of the norms, values and traditions unique to the Hispanic students they serve.

An additional consideration to note in discussing cultural values/norms is the differences in the U.S. Hispanic population by nativity. While 14.8% of the U.S. population in 2006 identified as Hispanic, 8.9% of that percentage are defined as native born Hispanics, while the remaining 5.9% are foreign born (Pew Hispanic Center, 2006). As the influence of cultural norms and values is discussed below, it is important to factor in the influence of cultural socialization from other countries for those who were not native born.

Let me begin, however, by demarcating one of the most quantifiably researched, fundamental, and persistent differences between White students and Hispanic students; while it is not cultural per se, it sets the stage for a significant distinction between the two communities. I refer here to the socioeconomic difference between Hispanics and Whites. As discussed in the introduction, overall Hispanics are overrepresented as either living in poverty or in lower income levels with 22.5% of Hispanics living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001a). It is noteworthy to also specify that in 2000, this translated into more than one-quarter (27 percent) of all Latino children under age 18 living in poverty, compared to only 9% of White children (Fact Sheet on Latino Youth, 2002). Proportionately speaking then, there are more poor Hispanic students than poor White students, and overall Hispanic students are less well off than their White counterparts.

It is also understood from studies cited earlier that Hispanic students are more likely to be first generation college attendees than their White classmates. For most Hispanics, there is little cultural familiarity with college or with a “college going” norm;

this finding was echoed in an unpublished pilot study undertaken by Rodríguez Martin (2007). In this unpublished study, first generation Hispanic students were interviewed about their parents' perspectives on going to college. Instead of inquiring about available majors or the quality of instructors, one participant reported that her parents asked about the provision of basic needs on campus:

I was the first one to be doing that [going away to college] and [my father] didn't really understand what would happen to me. How would I eat? Where would I live, and so forth. ... My mother worried about what would happen if I got sick.  
-Marina (p. 11)

Instead of being able to turn to parents or community members for advice or counsel about college, first generation students learn about college as best they can on their own and often find themselves in the position of advising their parents about their endeavors. Nilda, another participant in the study discussed how she brought materials home to her parents, translated the materials and explained to them what she was planning to do and why: "So I started talking with my mom and started explaining to them, educating them, of the things that I was learning. After a time they became very supportive of what I was doing" (Rodríguez Martin, 2007, p. 11). These excerpts speak to the additional sociocultural challenges of aspiring to college without a family context in which to do it. These students experienced gaps in the scholastic capital required to nurture persistence.

High rates of poverty and the relative lack of experience with college are two essential and enduring realities which frame additional considerations of Hispanic cultural norms as they relate to education. LaRoche and Shriberg (2004) refer to what they call a "cultural mismatch" between home and school environments when discussing the cultural norm differences between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students (p. 205).



Researchers have cited a number of values which overlap in most Hispanic cultures which help us to better understand this mismatch; among them are *familismo* (Abraham, Lujan, López & Walker, 2002; LaRoche & Shriberg, 2004; Organista, 2007; Rudolph, Corneilisu-White, & Quintana, 2005; Zaya & Palleja, 1988), *respeto* (LaRoche & Shriberg, 2004; Organista, 2007), *confianza* (Organista, 2007; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003), and *personalism* (Organista, 2007) which is closely connected to the allocentric/communitarian values of the Hispanic community (LaRoche & Shriberg, 2004).

The most researched, fundamental, and frequently cited value is that of *familismo*. *Familismo* refers to the strong interpersonal relationships between and obligations to family members, an emphasis on the family unit, and the expectation of family loyalty and reciprocity; additionally the roles, advice, and expectations of the family are valued more highly than those of the broader society (LaRoche & Shriberg, 2004; Organista, 2007; Villarreal, Blozis, & Widaman, 2005; Zaya & Palleja, 1988). Organista refers to the family as the most central social-psychological and cultural institution of the Hispanic experience. For Hispanics, the boundary of family reaches beyond the traditional American nuclear family and includes extended family, religious family roles (i.e., godmother/father), and community members who have been accepted as family members (Villareal et al., 2005). *Familismo* has been found to persist not only across Hispanic cultures but also across generations of Hispanic families in the United States (Organista, 2007; Villarreal et al., 2005). In a study of 452 Hispanic families, Sabogal, Marín, Otero-Sabogal, Marín, and Perez-Stable (1987) found that while there were shifts in behaviors regarding obligation, the attitudinal effects of *familismo*, that is, expectations of loyalty and reciprocity, persisted over generations of acculturation and across cultures (Mexican,

Cuban and South American). In studying *familismo* in mainland Puerto Rican families, Zayas and Palleja also found that while the effects of *familismo* may decrease in second generation adult children, “*familismo* seems to find its salience among the young in times of personal or familial turmoil” (p. 264). Even in later generations for whom the value of *familismo* has decreased over time, like many systems, when stressed, there is a tendency to revert to the familiar.

The term *respeto* is closely tied to *familismo* and refers to the deference paid to the family hierarchy and elders (LaRoche & Shriberg, 2004). The values of *familismo* and *respeto* stand in stark contrast to the value of “individualism and autonomy stressed in the United States” (Rudolph et al., 2005, p. 66). This dual set of values means that when entering the college environment, Hispanic students must learn to negotiate individualistic autonomous presentations publicly, while also privately maintaining their obligations to and connections with family. Allocentrism is the tendency to define oneself through social relationships and group goals rather than individually (LaRoche & Shriberg, 2004). Stanton-Salazar and Spina’s (2003) term of communitarianism is defined in terms similar to allocentrism in that communitarianism gives priority to community over the individual. Both qualities have been ascribed to Hispanic cultures and stress the collaborative and communal experiences of Hispanics in relationship to others and to their communities (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003).

*Personalism* and *confianza* are values closely related to allocentrism and communitarianism. *Personalism* refers to a primary focus on the relationship (as opposed to tasks or needs) and on connecting with individuals (Organista, 2007). It is through the cultivation of *personalism* that *confianza* (trust) or *confianza en confianza* (trust in trust)

is developed (Organista, 2007; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003). Hispanic traditions, such as reserving time for the afternoon *café* with colleagues or family, and *sobra mesa* (extensive lingering at the table to talk after a meal) are examples of how Hispanic communities prioritize time for relationship building and connection over competition and task; the result is the development of networks of trust, reciprocity, collaboration, and support. The traditional American values of individualism and competition, which are “relentlessly promoted and used as a standard against which all students are compared”, are not consistent with the rich diversity of values in the Hispanic communities within our society (LaRoche & Shriberg, 2004, p. 219).

While “the sheer number and range of studies” on *familismo* conclude that *familismo* is indeed a core value of the U.S. Hispanic culture (Villareal et al., 2005), further research is needed on the values of *respeto*, *personalism*, *confianza*, allocentrism and communitarianism. Though frequently cited in literature about Hispanics and education as relevant and important factors, no studies were found which assess the distinct meaning of these values to specific Hispanic ethnicities or the influence, if any that these values may have intergenerationally on educational outcomes.

In summary, first generation Hispanic college students often find themselves shifting between two worlds of conflicting values and priorities. Many are unable to negotiate this conflict and leave prematurely. Others discover a “way to navigate” and persist, though the elements of this path are not yet fully understood. LaRoche and Shriberg (2004) urge “resilience studies to identify the variables and processes that allow these [students] to excel” (p. 217). Anzaldúa (1987), Barajas and Pierce (2001), Cabrera and Padilla (2004), de Anda (1984), González (2002), Ramos-Zayas (2004), Rendón

(1999), and others have explored this duality of identity or bi-culturalism that serve students as they find their way between two worlds. Findings around this duality of identity will be considered in the next section.

### **First-Generation Hispanic Students: Borderland Identities and the Development of Micro-Culture**

In a two-year ethnographic study, González (2002) considered campus culture and the experience of two Chicano students in a predominantly White campus. In this study the author highlighted the absence of Chicano culture (culturally, physically, and epistemologically) on campus and described the impact of surviving such an environment as “cultural starvation” (p. 214). At the conclusion of his study he pondered, “If what was meaningful to Chicano students in the past – their cultural way of life – is missing in the present, how are they expected to survive and persist in predominantly White universities?” (p. 215). According to the studies that follow, the answer may lay both in the ability of Hispanic students to maintain a duality of identity and in their ability to ‘recreate’ ethnic culture where there is none.

### **Borderland Identities – Bicultural Identities**

Anzaldúa (1987) provides a rich description of what she calls the “*borderlands*”: that space “wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrink with intimacy” (p. i). For many Hispanic students, attending a predominantly White college is one of those borderland experiences, a space where poverty abuts privilege, where the White dominant presses against first generation Hispanics, where English language trumps Spanish, and where the culture of

*familismo* is diminished in favor of individuality and competition. Living on the border or in the margins while at the same time keeping one's multiple identities intact (Anzaldúa, 1987) is a skill developed by many Hispanics when they are young and honed in settings like a predominantly White campus in order to survive. This integrated identity allows Hispanic students to keep a foot in each culture; the student learns to adapt behaviors so that they are appropriate in each context. The concept of maintaining an authentic sense of cultural identity while entering a new culture is central to this duality. Ramos-Zayas (2004) highlighted the importance of maintaining 'cultural authenticity' in her study of mainland Puerto Ricans who identified culturally with Puerto Rico. This notion of authenticity is evaluated both internally and from external referents and relates to the perception of the individual's identification with the colonizer. Students who maintain cultural authenticity and have successfully navigated both worlds have achieved an integrated sense of self identity in two cultures, a "hybrid identity" (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000, p. 249); they are literally bicultural.

de Anda (1984) identifies three key roles that help students of color learn to negotiate their bi-cultural identities which are applicable as we consider Hispanic students: *cultural translators*, *mediators*, and *models*. *Cultural translators* are members of the individual's ethnicity who have been successful in developing a bicultural identity; these individuals share their own experiences and can help students learn ways to live between the two worlds using strategies they have found to be successful. According to de Anda, "translators are probably the most effective in promoting dual socialization (p. 103). *Mediators* are individuals from the mainstream population who can guide Hispanic students; while they are not able to assist in helping to negotiate between the two cultures,

they are able to help students access information and resources in the new culture that the student might not have been able to access otherwise. Finally, *models* are individuals whose “behavior serves as a pattern to emulate in order to develop a behavioral repertoire consistent with the norms of the majority ... culture” (p. 104); this latter role does not serve to develop a bicultural identity but is an option to be considered in assimilating into a new culture.

de Anda (1984) further adds that biculturation is predicated on the assumption of an overlap in values, norms, perceptions, etc. between two cultures; the greater the overlap between cultures, the easier a bicultural identity can develop. When there is little or no overlap between the cultures, there are more challenges to integrating a bicultural identity (de Anda, 1984). This latter point is significant as we consider coupling the range of college campus cultures from public to private elite, with the range of Hispanic backgrounds. For example, a Hispanic student attending a public university in Texas might find some overlapping values, norms and perspectives between his or her ethnic culture and the campus culture. On the other hand, a Hispanic student attending a selective, private institution in the Northeast might find the differences between the two cultures more extreme.

In an in-depth two-year study of 45 mentors and 27 mentees, Barajas and Pierce (2001) looked at the impact of cultural translators, mediators and models on Hispanic student persistence; a specific focus of this study was to consider differences by gender. Participants in the study were involved in a mentor program and were defined as successful both because they completed high school and maintained passing grades in college. Participants were predominantly poor or working-class Puerto Ricans, Mexicans

and Hondurans. Through the use of interviews, observation, questionnaires, and student grade records, the authors found that Hispanic students created unique paths to academic success which are more complex and varied than simply adopting White middle-class behaviors. The Hispanic female students discussed their success in terms of their relationships with other Hispanics and the maintenance of both a strong positive sense of racial ethnic identity and a college going identity (Barajas & Pierce, 2001); this group made use of mentors who served as cultural translators to help them integrate their bicultural identities.

The Hispanic male students, on the other hand, relied on White models, especially sport coaches, who reinforced notions of individuality and competition (Barajas & Pierce, 2001). The use of models is more consistent with traditional assimilation models and the Hispanic males in this study adapted their behaviors to the behavior of the dominant culture, focusing on qualities such as competition and individuality. As the Hispanic male students moved through college, the consequence of this choice was evident; the males described feeling less supported and more isolated than their female counterparts (Barajas & Pierce, 2001). Moreover "...the models from the dominant group ...encouraged mainstream success but did not help [the Hispanic male students] learn how to navigate between dominant and minority group cultures" (Barajas & Pierce, 2001, p. 874). This study has significant meaning for the importance of developing a bicultural identity for Hispanic students, and for the need for cultural translators in colleges and universities to support the development of scholastic capital. It also underscores the need to consider gender as a meaningful variable in research on Hispanic student success.

Cabrera and Padilla (2004) undertook an in-depth qualitative study with two Mexican graduates (one male, one female) in an effort to better understand the academic resilience of students experiencing severe economic, cultural and social challenges. The authors found that the students utilized social networks to enter “the culture of college, and familial support to keep themselves grounded in their values and culture” (p. 168). This study is an illustration of the efficacy of de Anda’s (1984) bicultural focus in that it demonstrated the ways in which these students used one set of resources to help develop their college going identities, and another to maintain their ethnic identities; the students described both of these experiences and relationships as essential to their academic success. Success for these students came not from remaining entrenched in one identity, but rather in the fluidity they experienced in navigating between both cultures.

Finally, Rendón et al. (2000) also emphasize biculturalism and dual socialization in their conceptualization of the ways in which Hispanic students construct their own paths to academic success. They add, however, that “dual socialization does not occur naturally in a college environment that contains values, conventions, and traditions that are alien to first-generation students, many of whom are minority” (p. 522); this is a process that must be fostered through institutionalized efforts like the mentoring described by Barajas and Pierce (2001) or through what Rendón (1994) called “validating” relationships (p. 39). Validating agents actively reach out to students and validate their contributions/efforts both interpersonally and academically; they affirm students as being capable and are invested in both their personal and social adjustment (Rendón, 2000). Rendón (1994) studied the impact of student involvement and of out-of-class experiences on achievement of broader educational goals. She interviewed 132



students representing a wide range of students from colleges involved in the *Transition to College Project* of the National Center on Postsecondary Teaching, Learning, and Assessment. Rendón (1994) found that validation was key to the success of Hispanic and other nontraditional students. Validation affirms the identity and contributions of each student as important and meaningful; it lends to a greater integration of an ethnic identity with a college going identity. It also expands the student's understanding of the value of education and sense of belonging in the institution. This simple yet powerful intervention is the result of a culturally attuned, student-centered academic environment.

The work of Barajas and Pierce (2001), Cabrera and Padilla (2004), de Anda (1984), Rendón et al. (2000) all speak to the importance of relationship and specifically the significance of actors such as mentors and cultural translators in helping students affirm and integrate cultural identity with a college going identity. More importantly, by filling in gaps these relationships help students develop the scholastic capital required to succeed academically and to persist in college. To understand how Hispanic students nurture the cultural "hunger" that González (2002) describes, let us consider the ways in which micro-Hispanic cultures have been created and their impact on Hispanic students.

### **The Importance of Recreating Hispanic Micro-Cultures**

González (2002) likened the experience of being on a campus devoid of adequate amounts of ethnic representation to "cultural starvation" and that, in essence, students were "working on empty stomachs" (p. 214). The two male, Mexican participants in his in-depth ethnographic study felt invisible in the social, physical and epistemological worlds of campus (González, 2002). The author described the students' efforts to replenish this cultural void through the regular use of Spanish music and speaking

Spanish with each other and with friends. They also augmented their experiences by choosing a Chicano roommate, maintaining close friendships with other Chicanos, and by joining the Chicano student group (the social world); by displaying ethnic themed posters and Chicano political symbols in their room (the physical world); and by selecting courses in Chicano literature and Chicana/o studies (the epistemological world) (González, 2002). González (2002) cited family as possibly most important to this cultural anchoring and described regular visits to and from family members as revitalizing to the students; these visits gave the students “the energy and support needed to persist at the university” (p. 211). These findings were consistent with those of Hurtado and Carter (1997) which found that for Latino students “feeling at ‘home’ in the campus community is associated with maintaining [culturally relevant] interactions both within and outside the college community” (p. 338).

Mayo, Murguia and Padilla (1995) undertook a comparative study looking at how student experiences foster social integration and what the impact of social integration has on academic performance for Mexican American, African American and White students. The study included administering a questionnaire to students from each of the racial ethnic groups, followed by telephone interviews with 340 Whites, 315 African Americans, 292 Native Americans and 344 Hispanics. The factors they considered included assessing the impact of: having a role model of the same race/ethnicity in faculty/staff members; having opportunities to meet with faculty outside of class; participating in clubs/organization; feeling satisfied with personal contact with instructors, etc. Among their findings, they reported that Mexican Americans were most involved of all three racial/ethnic groups in student organizations, especially in culturally

related student groups, and that this involvement correlated quite strongly and positively with academic performance (Mayo et al., 1995). Involvement in culturally relevant centers is also important to developing a sense of belonging and support, and to academic commitment (Jones, Castellano & Cole, 2002; Mayo et al., 1995). While Hispanics may not experience a sense of belonging on the larger campus, their connections with cultural groups serves as a good proxy and an effective means to persist in college (Lopez, 2005). These studies demonstrate that students not only seek out means to create havens of Hispanic culture on campus, but that these connections also serve as conduits to strengthen both their connections to campus and their identification with their ethnic communities. These are essential components to a positive academic experience for Hispanic students.

A final study by Laden (1998) outlines the impact of the *Puente Program*, an exciting integration of de Anda's theories of bicultural identity, Rendón's assertions about the role of validation, and key components of Tierney's NAI project. Most importantly, the results of the Puente Project are singularly impressive. The goal of the Puente Project was to work with Hispanic students in thirty-eight of California's community colleges to effect higher transfer rates to four-year colleges. The project included three central goals. The first goal was to provide "two semesters of intensive English instruction focusing on writing and reading about the students' Latino cultural experiences and identity" (Laden, 1998, p. 36). This goal highlights de Anda's (1984) thinking on dual socialization in that it combines writing (an academic skill) with reflecting on identity (an experience which strengthens cultural identity). In this portion of the Puente Program, the student begins to integrate two identities. Writing about their

cultural identities and experiences is also a powerful way to create a presence in the student's "epistemological world" (González, 2002).

The second goal of the Puente Program was to provide students with "Latino counselors who have first-hand knowledge of the challenges that students [will] face" (Laden, 1998, p. 36). This objective affirms the student's cultural identity (Tierney, 1999) through use of de Anda's concept of cultural translator, a Hispanic guide who understands both the individual life experience and what students must learn to succeed in the academic world. These counselors helped prepare students for the academic world and for experiences in the dominant population; their personal success provided them with effective advice on how to negotiate both worlds.

The third goal of the Program was to provide students with "mentors from the Latino professional and academic community" (Laden, 1998, p. 36). This objective aligns quite nicely with Tierney's (1999) programmatic goals in the NAI, the use of local contexts to ground students in capacity within their own culture and the expansion of college going values through the use of academic mentors.

Finally, Laden (1998) adds that the program "...addresses [the students'] unique needs through sensitivity to and affirmation of their ethnic identity building on their cultural strengths" (p.36). In her review of the Puente Project, Rendón (2002) cites the Puente Program as an example of how validation can "transform nontraditional students into powerful learners" (p. 665). The result of combining so many powerful interventions is indeed impressive: the overall grade point average increased on average 1.06 points; 100% persistence in college was achieved; and 33% of the participants transferred to a senior institution compared to fewer than 5% of all Latino community college students

during that time period (Laden, 1998). Rendón (2002) calls the Puente Program “an example of equity and liberation in education” (p. 665). This unique program creates a different way to enter into and succeed in college for Hispanic students. Not explored in the study was whether participants carried these characteristics over into their “senior institutions” and if so, how these characteristics contributed to their success in the new program. Further study is recommended to explore what elements of this program can be incorporated into traditional four-year programs to achieve similar outcomes.

### **Discussion**

A child born in this country to Mexican parents, who have clawed their way out of abject poverty... who, despite textual illiteracy and racism, tenaciously hold on to deep religious convictions and cultural values; whose lives center around their family and dreams of a better life for their cherished first-born child, all of their children... truly is not the problem. The problem... is educational systems which have not adapted successfully to such diversity, which have not looked in the face of such a child and seen beauty and potential, but function instead in a deficit finding mode. (Carger, 1996, author of *Of Borders and Dreams: A Mexican-American Experience of Urban Education*, p. 7 as cited in Villenas & Deyhle, 1999).

Undereducated, underemployed and overrepresented in poverty, the literature not only paints a bleak picture of the current status of Hispanic communities, but also projects poor prospects for their future advancement in light of the low rates of Hispanic academic persistence. Predominantly White institutions of higher education, originally designed to support the success of upper- and middle-class White students, have largely failed to recognize the important role of culture for first generation Hispanic students; some researchers have described Hispanic students as “culturally starving” on today’s U.S. campuses (González, 2002). Not only have campuses failed to create a cultural presence for Hispanics on campus, but they often present as racially hostile environments.

Latinos are left feeling as though they do not belong, and questioning their ability to succeed and their legitimacy on campus (Cabrera et al., 1999; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Smedley et al., 1993; Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002).

Remarkably, studies in this review have found that there are first generation Hispanic students who have persevered against staggering obstacles by constructing their own scholastic capital nurtured through the development of borderland identities (Anzaldúa, 1987) and the creation and nurturance of Hispanic micro-cultures on campus (Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; González, 2002). These studies have not advocated that Hispanic students retreat into cultural enclaves to achieve academic success, but rather encouraged their robust involvement in both their cultural micro-environments *and* in their new academic cultures. According to these studies, scholastic capital can be constructed through relationships, connections and resources drawn from both academic and cultural environments; student persistence rests on the ability to navigate strategically between both worlds. Many studies have highlighted family and cultural identity as central to Latino student success (Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; González, 2005; Laden, 1998; Rendón et al., 2000; Tierney, 1992; Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002). These findings mark a departure from Tinto's model which advocates a separation from previous communities and identities. While supporting Tinto (1986, 1993) and Astin's (1985, 1996) claim that involvement in college communities supports persistence, these studies indicate that the challenge for Hispanic students is to find ways to be able to develop scholastic capital through meaningful involvement in two cultures simultaneously.

While there is much we know about the Hispanic student experience, there are a number of gaps in the literature. To begin, the majority of studies have focused singularly on Mexican students or on west coast Hispanic students, which are predominantly Mexican. Other studies have focused on the ‘Hispanic’ student as a monolithic whole; but very few studies have considered differences in educational experience by unique Hispanic ethnic groups; particularly missing from the literature are studies discussing the experience of Puerto Rican students, the second largest Hispanic population after Mexican Americans (U.S. Census, 2007). Additionally, more emphasis has been on studies assessing pre-college programs and their efficacy in developing college going characteristics, but fewer studies on characteristics/behaviors of Latina students while they are in college that positively affect persistence. Finally, those studies on college persistence have primarily attended to student deficits rather than to the strengths and resiliencies of Hispanic students who have succeeded. Despite the missing information, the literature seems consistent in finding that a richer understanding of the relationship between culture and the campus experience is essential to understanding the academic persistence of Hispanics.

The proposed qualitative study explores the ways in which first generation, low-income Latina students at four-year institutions develop the scholastic capital required for persistence; who or what are the sources of developing scholastic capital and how are they developed? Additionally, are the ways in which Latinas persist consistent with traditional persistence models (Tinto, 1986); in what ways are cultural adaptations helpful in understanding persistence for Hispanics? Finally, how does the interaction between culture and campus context effect persistence?

A small pilot project on Latino student persistence was undertaken in 2007 (Rodríguez Martin) to explore and ground this study. Four major themes emerged from the pilot project which will serve as central concepts within the overall framework of the larger study; briefly they are: 1) cultural boundaries and the effects of crossing them, 2) the complexity of integrating identity, 3) the importance and influence of personal networks, and 4) the centrality of family.

The first theme, *boundaries and the effects of crossing them*, relates directly to literature on the challenges and importance of integrating a bicultural identity (de Anda, 1984; Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; and Rendón et al., 2000). In discussing student educational experiences, I will highlight both the fears about crossing borders and the sources of support and reassurance in navigating between cultures and norms.

The second theme, *the complexity of integrating identity*, builds on the student's ability to explore the notion of crossing borders. I will take particular note of the degree to which Hispanic cultural identities are integrated with new academic identities. The capacity to balance identities will be of particular interest in this study because in contrast to the predominance of studies which have taken place on the west coast where Latinos are well represented in the general population, this study will be set in the Northeast, a geographic region where Hispanics are a more isolated minority population. Unlike West coast studies, where Hispanic students might identify with a majority Hispanic campus population, Hispanic student populations in the Northeast are not only small on and off campus, but they are incredibly diverse within the rubric of Hispanic itself often including Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Cubans, Dominicans, etc.



The third theme, *the importance and influence of personal networks*, in part referred to in the literature as cultural translators (de Anda, 1984), validating agents (Rendón, 1994), or the use local contexts (Tierney, 1999); each term refers to expanding cultural capital, social and academic capital into the scholastic capital needed to persist. I seek to better understand how academically persisting Hispanic students develop their networks, and how these networks or individuals have helped them successfully negotiate campus environments.

Finally, the concept of the *importance of family* to the Hispanic individual generally and to Hispanic students specifically has been cited as central by numerous scholars (LaRoche & Shriberg, 2004; Organista, 2007; Perna, 2000; Saunders & Serna, 2004; Smedley et al., 1993; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003; Tierney, 1999; Villarreal et al., 2005; Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002; Zaya & Palreja, 1988). This study will illuminate the ways in which connection with family for these students has or has not been maintained, and how this relationship has affected persistence from the student's perspective.

### **Personal Biography**

I situate my research within my personal beliefs/values, professional experience and personal background. To begin, I believe that the creation of an environment that supports persistence is a form of educational access. Without investing in efforts which support the academic success of *all* accepted students, access to higher education is a "hollow gesture" (Callan, 2001) which allows for the persistence of the social order. Institutions of higher education should recognize and respond to the unique needs of the diversity of students in their ranks. In this regard, I would say that I use a social justice lens as I approach my research.

Professionally, for the past seven years I have served as the Director of Graduate Enrollment at a selective liberal arts college in New England; a key responsibility has been the recruitment and retention of students of color. I also serve as the liaison to the school's Latino Student Group. I have had the benefit of getting to know many of the Latino students who have achieved success in their undergraduate academic journeys and have now set their sights on a higher level of academics. Despite their undergraduate accomplishments and the achievement of having been selected by one of the most prestigious graduate programs in the country, many Hispanic students confide fears about being adequately qualified for enrollment and about "belonging" in the graduate school community, and their concerns about ultimately failing. They have also discussed feelings of isolation and perhaps most concerning, a sense that succeeding may somehow represent an abandonment of their families or communities. The ongoing feelings of inadequacy and illegitimacy in high achieving Hispanic students provide a powerful backdrop for my work.

Finally, personally I identify as a Latina, a first generation college attendee, and daughter of immigrants raised in an ethnic community; Spanish was spoken in my home and it was indeed the first language I spoke. My personal and professional experiences combine to provide me with the advantages and challenges of being both an insider (a Latina) and an outsider (the researcher). Villenas (2000) aptly defines this position as a "fluid space of crossing borders and, as such, a contradictory one of collusion and oppositionality, complicity and subversion" (p. 91). In my pilot study, I experienced the enormous generosity with which participants willingly, even eagerly, shared intimate narratives about their lives and their families. At the same time I felt an exquisite

responsibility to accurately convey the meaning, the power, and the urgency of their stories. In this work, I personally share with my participants a commitment to the success of tomorrow's Hispanic students.

## CHAPTER 2

### DESIGN AND METHODS

#### Conceptual Framework

This study is informed by models of persistence which underscore the importance of the connection to and integration of a college going identity as the foundation for persistence in college (Astin, 1985; Tinto, 1975, 1986). While this model has proven effective for exploring the multiple factors involved in student departure, it has been decried by researchers of persistence in students of color who feel that it has been inadequate in its treatment of racial/ethnic culture as relevant to Hispanic student persistence (Perna, 2000; González, 2002; Mayo et al., 1995; Santos, 2004; Tierney, 1999). Cultural adaptations of the persistence model address the importance of cultural integrity (Anzaldúa, 1987; Barajas & Pierce, 2001; Cabrera & Padilla, 2004; González, 2002; Tierney, 1999) and the construction of scholastic capital to fill gaps in the cultural, social and academic capital of first generation college attendees (Laden, 1998; Rendón et al., 2000; Tierney, 1999). This study intends to expand thinking on persistence as it relates to Hispanic students by gaining insight into the ways in which Latinas integrate cultural identity and develop the scholastic capital needed to persist academically.

#### Research Questions

The research questions of this study focus on the relationship between Hispanic culture and the development of scholastic capital in Latina students:

- 1) In what ways do first-generation, low-income Latina students at four-year institutions develop the scholastic capital required for persistence?

- (a) Who or what are the sources of scholastic capital and how are they developed?
- 2) Are the ways in which Latina students persist consistent with traditional Tinto's model of persistence (Tinto, 1986; Tinto, 1993)?
- (a) In what ways do cultural adaptations inform our understanding of persistence for Hispanics?
- 3) How does the interaction between culture and campus context affect persistence?

### **Overall Design and Rationale**

In order to more fully understand persistence among Latinas, it is essential to give personal and cultural voice to their lived experience in the educational system. The voices of students, in particular the voices of impoverished students of color, are rarely heard in dialogues about their lives (Nieto, 1992); for this reason I chose to use qualitative research as the research method of this study. Qualitative research methods “consist of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3) and help researchers “hear silenced voices” (Creswell, 2007, p. 40); a qualitative study presented as the ideal genre for research which focuses on the lived experience of Latina students in college.

Participants in this study included low income, academically achieving Latina students enrolled in three selective<sup>2</sup> four-year institutions. While the issues of gender and class are difficult to disentangle from those of ethnicity, it was hoped that by restricting

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<sup>2</sup> I will define “selective” according to Barron’s Profiles in American Colleges (1999). Barron’s categorizes colleges with SAT scores of 1001-1145 as selective, 1146-1239 as very selective and over

participation to just women and lower-income students, it would be easier to control for gender and class. The choice to use selective colleges responds to research which finds that students of color (Alon & Tienda, 2005), and specifically Hispanic students (Fry, 2004) experience greater success persisting at selective institutions. This finding is particularly intriguing as one might assume that the gap in cultural, social and academic capital might be greatest for lower income, first generation Hispanic students at selective institutions of higher education. Understanding how first generation Latina students successfully develop the scholastic capital required to bridge that gap and to navigate these potentially more extreme differences may provide insights useful to other institutions of higher education.

Three distinct college settings were utilized in this study: a private non-denominational woman's college, a Catholic co-educational college, and a private non-denominational, co-educational college. While a co-educational experience represents the dominant educational experience available in the U.S., both a woman's campus and a Catholic campus respond to characteristics which might have corresponded positively to factors within Latino culture.

A woman's college was included because, being a traditionally male dominated culture (Organista, 2007), an all-woman's campus might represent a more appealing option for Hispanic daughters. Hispanic families might perceive a women's college as a safer or more protected environment for young Hispanic women allowing them to feel more confident and supportive of their daughter's choice. In terms of the student's experiences on campus, however, Latinas might experience women's programs as

providing them with unique and new opportunities to have voice and to develop an individual sense of self as a strong Hispanic student and woman.

Similarly, because religion, most prominently Catholicism (Organista, 2007) has been repeatedly cited as a source of support in Hispanic communities (Hurtado, 1992; Lopez, 2005; Organista, 2007), colleges with a religious mission may offer a particular comfort to families and students unfamiliar with college programs. The more familiar Catholic community might provide additional support for Latina student persistence not present at non-denominational schools. This study sought to capture some of the varying influences of distinct campus contexts on persistence by using campus environments as an additional lens through which to consider student insights.

The data for this study was gathered through semi-structured group interviews held on the three campuses (i.e., one group per campus), followed by individual interviews with selected students from each institution to explore themes. While the literature highlights the benefits of using focus groups as an effective means to collect additional information through the interaction of participants (Creswell, 2007; Rossman & Rallis, 2003), the selection of group interviews for this study was based less on the utility of traditionally defined focus groups and more on the identification of an interview means which was culturally responsive and appropriate to Hispanics in four important ways. First, a group format is consistent with the collectivist nature of traditional Hispanic cultures (Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002) where discussions of the group take on deeper meaning than individual contributions. Second, the use of groups relieves individual participants from the oft cited sense of hypervisibility experienced by students of color (Davis et al., 2004, Solorzano et al., 2000); a group discussion allows points to

be made without creating a sense that their answers represent the consensus of all Hispanics. Third, a group dialogue allows for interethnic reflection; that is, discussion will allow students to consider and comment on multiple identities, such as identifying with both a specific Hispanic group and with the larger external, homogenous definition of Latino. Finally, in light of the numerous studies that discuss Hispanic student fears of belonging or legitimacy on campus (Cabrera et al., 1999; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Smedley et al., 1993), it was my hope that a group conversation would minimize perceptions of risk in speaking openly and instead engender greater feelings of safety in discussing campus experiences of vulnerability, challenge, and success.

A disadvantage of group interviews was that it limited the researcher's ability to safeguard the confidentiality of the comments made by participants. Confidentiality was discussed at the onset of each group conversation and efforts were made to underscore the importance of agreeing as a group that comments made in the session would not be repeated outside of that setting.

### **Participants**

Criteria for participation included being Hispanic, female, and first generation to attend college. The study relied on the high correlation between lack of college education and low socioeconomic status (Johnstone, 2005) as a preliminary marker for the likelihood that participants would also be from low income families. Additionally, because language is often a barrier for employment, it was further assumed that having parents who spoke Spanish presented a second potential marker of income; that is, the combined criteria of Spanish being spoken in the home and the lack of parental college education served as an effective proxy for lower socioeconomic status. Though not a



criteria for participation, preference was given to students from homes in which Spanish is spoken. While participants were not directly asked to report on family socioeconomic status, they were asked to respond to a question about the kind of work their parents did. Student reporting on family income was deemed to be culturally inappropriate, likely to be inaccurate, and provide a deficit oriented frame to the study. Finally, as an indicator of academic persistence, it was required that students self-report to be in good academic standing (i.e., not on academic probation). Preference was given to students in their third or final; second year students in good academic standing were considered if the group size was small.

In light of the specific criteria for participation, I used purposeful criterion sampling. Because each campus required its own Institutional Research Board (IRB) process, recommendations for best campus contacts was solicited upon receiving the campus IRB approval. Initial conversations about the project began with the Dean of the College, the Director/Dean of Institutional Diversity, or the Dean of Student Life depending upon the campus. These individuals were helpful in identifying additional individuals who had varying degrees of contact with students to assist me in my outreach. The administrative offices were helpful in identifying second, third, and fourth year first-generation Latinas and in distributing a series of flyers and emails about the project. Some of the administrators met directly with student groups to talk about the research.

In addition, I searched the websites for each campus and identified faculty with names which appeared to be Hispanic, as well as faculty who taught in areas such as Ethnic Studies, Spanish, Latin American Studies, etc. Emails about the project were sent to these faculty members asking them to forward emails along to potential students with

their endorsement of the project and to forward the email on to others who may be involved with Latinas on campus. Finally, I used the website to directly identify Latina student groups and student group leaders. These leaders were also sent an email about the project. On two of the campuses I was fortunate to have a student offer to partner with me in my outreach; they helped post flyers about the project and spoke about the research at student group meetings. The goal was to recruit 4-6 students per group at each school for a total of 12 – 18 participants and I was successful in reaching that goal.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Students responding to the email solicitation or posters were initially contacted by email to review the purpose of the project, to discuss the time involved in agreeing to participate and to confirm criteria required for participation. When it was confirmed that a student met the criteria and was agreeable to the time commitment involved, she was asked to complete and return a brief mini-demographic survey (Appendix B) and the letter of consent (Appendix C and D) or the letter of consent as modified by the appropriate Institutional Research Board. The demographic survey was originally utilized in the pilot project (Rodríguez Martin, 2007) and was vetted by two critical friends of color, one the daughter of immigrants and one the daughter of a second generation citizen. Special attention was paid to language used around parents so as to not introduce class or national bias. Selected participants were invited to a group discussion at a specified date and time on campus. Once interview dates are secured, appointments were confirmed by email.

Data was collected in two tiers: first group interviews, and then individual interviews to further explore and understand meaning. Group sessions began with a

reiteration of the purpose of the project and verbal consent for recording; students were given a copy of the signed consent they had provided by email and asked to sign copies for my files. On occasion, new participants joined the group with a friend; these students were provided with the demographic questionnaire and the letter of consent at the session. Additionally, general guidelines about the confidentiality of the group conversation were discussed and all members were asked to agree that the content of the conversation not be shared with others outside of the group discussion. An interview guide (see *Guiding Questions*, Appendix E) which was successfully tested in a pilot project (Rodríguez Martin, unpublished 2007) was used as a guide for the group discussions. The guiding questions were flexible and informal to allow students to voice their own experiences (Freeman, 1999) and to raise areas not included in the question guide. While flexible, the questions were guided by a theoretic frame that recognized inconsistencies between prominent theories of persistence, cultural values of Hispanics, and the availability of scholastic capital. Although structured in English, participants were invited to respond in English or Spanish to ensure that the concepts they were trying to express were accurately conveyed. Interviews were one and one half hours long and recorded; notes were also taken during the interviews. Participants were offered a copy of the recording for review and or editing. Recordings were promptly transcribed (using pseudonyms) as were personal reflections and notes taken during the interviews; I was the sole transcriber of the recordings. Recordings were destroyed after transcription. Notes and transcription will be held in a password protected, personal electronic file for three years and will then be destroyed.

The second tier of interviews was held after recordings were transcribed and themes were developed. These one hour discussions were held with individual representative of each group to further probe issues raised in the group discussion and to test my analysis and interpretation of emerging themes; individual interviewees emerged from group discussions and were contacted directly about participation. These member checks added to the validity of the findings collected and interpreted.

In addition to formal data collected through the group interviews, material data was collected on each campus. Field notes were recorded as I moved through conversations with key gatekeepers and become familiar with the networks/resources available to track and access Latina students. These observations provide a powerful contribution to the desired thick description (Rallis & Rossman, 2003) of the study. Observer notes were recorded from campus contacts and conversations. Observation notes were particularly important as they applied to the group itself and to specific group dynamics: group make-up; how people seated themselves; responses to group leadership and power; representation by ethnic group; perceived hierarchy of members; etc.

### **Data Analysis**

All interview recordings were replayed within days of the original interview while the affect and energy of the group were still vivid. Listening to the tapes a second time allowed me to hear responses, comments and reactions with a third ear, listening for nuances not only in what was said, but in the choice of words and language they used. Notes were also taken on the configuration of the room, who sat with whom, which participants were more vocal, which were quieter, etc. In essence, efforts were made to reconstruct not just the conversation but the connections between participants and how

they responded to each other in addition to the discussion itself. This process helped me develop some beginning themes and categories within which to organize data.

After each second playing, interview recordings were transcribed. Transcripts were coded by color (using a different color for each school) and by font (using a different font for each ethnicity). The use of distinct colors for schools and fonts for ethnicity made it possible to later scan sorted categories to see if a theme was more prominent on a particular campus or from a particular ethnic group. (Generally speaking, there was a fair amount of diversity in each of the themes that emerged.) Transcripts were reviewed for immediate and preliminary thoughts about patterns; field notes, personal reflections and memos which were maintained in an ongoing fashion during the time of the interviews and throughout the process of data analysis, were also re-reviewed at the point of transcription.

After all recordings were transcribed, participant statements, personal reflections, memos and field notes were preliminarily considered according to themes identified in the literature or the pilot project; see the Data Analysis Matrix (Figure 1). This system allowed for a continuum of coding which potentially affirmed familiar themes but also allowed for new themes to emerge. Special attention was given to word choice, language choice, and cultural context of words chosen to assist in better interpretation of ideas and themes conveyed.

	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>School Setting</b>	<b>Source</b>	<b>Class Year</b>
	(Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, Other)	(Co-Ed, Single-Sex, Catholic)	(transcripts, field notes, material data, etc.)	(third or final year)
<b>Pilot Study Themes:</b>				
Crossing Cultural Boundaries				
Issues of Integrating Identity				
Personal Networks				
Centrality of Family				
<b>Key Categories from the Literature</b>				
Affirmation of cultural identity				
Bicultural Identity Formation				
Collectivist Orientation				
Cultural Translators				
Effects of microaggression				
Hispanic cultural capital – deficit				
Hispanic cultural capital – strength				
Lack of sense of belonging				
Legacy of poverty				
Mediators				
Microcultures				
Models				
Religious Foundation/Values				
Respect/reverence for family				
Respect for elders/authority				
Responsibility to/support of family				
Source of Scholastic Capital				
Validation				
Validating Agents				
Use of local contexts				
<b>New emerging categories from the study</b>				

**Table 1. Data Analysis Matrix**

The group discussions were re-reviewed a number of times aurally in order to particularly note affect and inflection. Transcript sections were copied and pasted into new documents either headed by a theme/category in the Data Analysis Matrix or in new categories that seemed to arise from reading or listening to the conversation. Written transcripts were reviewed in an ongoing basis in search of categories of ideas within and across campuses; these multiple successive reviews allowed for a data analysis spiral or

reflexive process which uncovered deeper levels of meaning and allowed for nuanced themes to emerge (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). In this way the process was both deductive and inductive and allowed for shifts in patterns and a deeper understanding of themes. Analysis was considered with an open mind and willingness to allow meaning and structures to surface (Rossman & Rallis, 2003); this required time between transcript reviews. Ideas or categories of ideas were eventually narrowed by central themes detailed and supported by participant citations in order to give evidence and greater voice to the educational experiences described.

The Data Analysis Matrix also proposed three possible configurations by which to consider the information in the process of analyzing the data: by ethnic group, by school setting, or by class year. Emerging themes were reconsidered by these groupings to consider the possible emergence of new or nuanced interpretations.

Interpretations were triangulated in several ways. Once categories or central ideas were interpreted from the first set of transcripts, the second tier individual interview participants were asked to respond to clarifying questions and to comment on their validity of interpretations. Categories and emerging themes were also discussed with Latina professional colleagues for input, validation, and for deeper interpretation of the findings and/or for alternative interpretations of findings. The literature was also consulted for relevant theories that corresponded to or deepened interpretations of the data (Creswell, 2007). Data was further triangulated through cultural material collected and through observable data recorded in notes, memos and reflections.

## **Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations**

The trustworthiness of this study is found both in its standards of rigor and in the care taken to maintain ethical boundaries and responsibilities. Standards of rigor are set not only by the profession but also by individual educational institution involved, and the boundaries of ethical behavior applied not only to ways in which I managed participant data but also how I guarded against my own biases.

Professionally, trustworthy qualitative research requires that a study is well grounded in the literature, credible, systematic, transparently described, and analyzed without personal biases (Cresswell, 2007; Rossman & Rallis, 2003). This study has conformed to the standards of identifying, documenting, and stating a problem, as well as full disclosure in the methods to be utilized in securing and working with participants. Additionally, the study was clear in the “transferability” of its findings, a flaw of many qualitative studies as cited by Drisko (1997). The findings generated from this study are bound in time and space (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) to the campuses and the students from these campuses. While the findings are not intended to be broadly transferable to all Hispanic students, they will give voice to student experiences and provide insights from which institutions of higher education may benefit. Rigorous efforts were made to triangulate the interpretations drawn from the findings to give greater weight to their meaning in context.

With regard to institutional standards, the Institutional Research Board of each institution involved was consulted and the practices of each institution were followed carefully in submitting Human Subject Review permissions. Copies of all permissions are on file to safeguard both the study and the participants involved.



In terms of professional ethics, the confidentiality of participants has been of the utmost priority in this study and efforts were made to safeguard individual identities throughout the duration of the study. Pseudonyms for both schools and participants were used throughout and family information was reported in aggregate form rather than connected directly to students. These efforts notwithstanding, participants were made aware that while it was agreed that conversations would remain confidential, neither confidentiality nor anonymity could be guaranteed. Participants were informed that they could decline the invitation to be involved at the outset of the study or at anytime during the conversation without any adverse consequences. Recordings have been maintained under password protection and were destroyed after transcription; original transcription materials and notes will be maintained for three years.

Finally, in terms of personal ethics, as an insider/outsider, it was important that I was transparent with participants about who I am and what my background is both personally and professionally; this was especially important in light of the fact that I serve as the Director of Graduate Enrollment at Smith College. I assured participants that I would remove myself from the role of evaluator should they at some point chose to apply to the Smith College School for Social Work, thereby making their comments in this study irrelevant to a possible subsequent evaluation for admission.

Also as an insider/outsider I made efforts to guard against my own biases without disadvantaging my personal insights in understanding what was being said. Triangulation of my interpretations was particularly important in light of my own personal educational experiences. My goal has been to ensure that it is the *emic* voice that emerges from my

findings rather than the *etic* or analytically constructed interpretation of a researcher (Rossman & Rallis, 2003).

By honoring professional, institutional and personal standards of professionalism and ethical behavior, the trustworthiness of this project has been safeguarded.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are two primary limitations to the proposed study. First, while I recognize that the histories, levels of acculturation, socio-economic status, citizenship, immigration status, culture, traditions, acceptance into the U.S. culture, and language of various Hispanic groups vary widely, due to the limited number of Hispanic students on east coast campuses, participants were broadly recruited as “Latinas” rather than by specific ethnic group. I acknowledge that studies which allow for greater heterogeneity by Hispanic group provide more specific information which can better respond to the needs of distinct Hispanic groups; ideally, research on Hispanics should be disaggregated by specific ethnic groups whenever possible.

Second, this study focuses specifically on students attending four-year institutions in the northeast. Due to the unique set of variables associated with students attending two-year programs, students from these institutions will not be included. It should be noted, however, that because nearly half of incoming Latino students attend two-year programs, an important perspective is not be addressed in this study, but should be undertaken in a separate study. The demographic questionnaire participants completed at the onset of interviewing asked whether students began their education at a two-year institution; none of the participants in this study had begun their academic study in two-year programs.

## CHAPTER 3

### FINDINGS

The findings section is divided into three parts: *Part 1–The Schools* provides an overview of the colleges selected, general information about the community in which each campus is located and information about the Latina community at each campus. *Part 2–The Students* presents a breakdown of the demographic information on the students who participated in the study; these two sections set the stage and context for considering the interviews which are included in the third section. *Part 3–Insights into the Latina Academic Journey* considers student transcripts and categorizes and considers themes which emerged from the discussions.

#### **Part 1 – The Schools**

One of the central questions posited in this study is, *how does the interaction between culture and campus context affect persistence?* To consider the impact of campus environments, students were interviewed on three distinct campus settings. Because Hispanics are a traditionally male dominated culture (Organista, 2007), a women’s college was selected as a setting which might provide opportunities for Latina students to have voice and develop an individual sense of self as a student. Additionally, because of the prominent role Catholicism plays in most Hispanic communities (Organista, 2007), a Catholic college was also selected. Finally, for comparison and because of its predominance in the U.S., a non-denominational coed college was selected. Pseudonyms for each of the colleges were appointed as follows: the all women’s college –*Damas College* (DC); the Catholic university–*St. Margaret’s University* (STM); and the non-denominational, coed university–*Millers Falls University* (MU). All schools were

located in New England and met Barron's (1999) definition of *selective* with average SAT scores of over 1000. While a number of selective colleges met the above criteria, few colleges reported a Hispanic population large enough from which to potentially draw a group of participants. A final criterion in selecting colleges then was that the college/university must report a coed Hispanic population of at least 200 students (this rate was decreased for the women's college).

I begin with a brief review of the local community in which each of the three colleges are set as well as a general description of the college website in terms of the school's community of color; in effect, a real world and virtual assessment of how similar or different the college communities are from the neighborhoods in which participants were raised. I then shift to describe the campus community starting with a summary of the resources each college made available to me in my outreach to the campus Hispanic community; theoretically these would be the same resources students might access as they navigate their way on campus. Additionally, I include information on the responses to email requests for assistance that I sent out to faculty at each campus who either had Hispanic surname or taught in a discipline with traditionally larger representation of students of color (i.e., Spanish Language/Culture, Ethnic Studies, Afro-American Studies, Latin Americans Studies, etc.). Finally, the composition of the student body on each campus is described as it relates to racial/ethnic diversity.

### **The Local Communities**

Damas College is a small, gated, liberal arts college located in a predominantly White, fairly well educated, suburban college community. According to census data, over 85% of its residents are White and 5% are Hispanic; over 88% of adults have completed

high school or some college and fully 46% have completed their bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Department of Commerce, June 2009). Though notably more educated than the average U.S. population (80% having completed high school and 24% their bachelor's degree or higher), at \$41,800 the community's median income falls below the national median income of \$50,740 (see Table 2). Additionally, 9.8% of its citizens live below the poverty line (U.S. Department of Commerce, June 2009). While the town is somewhat isolated, a major and diverse metropolis is approximately two hours from campus. According to college materials, DC students are able to easily access a broader multi-college community from which they can enjoy expanded academic offerings, contact with coed students at other campuses, and involvement in a broad range of social activities.

	<b>U.S.</b>	<b>Town in which Damas is located</b>	<b>Town in which MU is located</b>	<b>Town in which STM is located</b>
<b>Percent White, non-Hispanic</b>	66%	87.8%	77.5%	93.6%
<b>Percent Hispanic citizens</b>	15.1%	5.2%	5.3%	2.3%
<b>Percent over 25 who have completed a high school degree or more</b>	80.4%	88.7%	83.6%	91.6%
<b>Percent over 25 who have completed a BA or more</b>	24.4%	46.1%	34.4%	52.2%
<b>Median household Income</b>	\$50,740	\$41,808	\$47,162	\$83,512
<b>Percent persons living below poverty</b>	13%	9.8%	7.5%	2.9%

**Table 2. – City Demographics**

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, June 2009

The college's admission website includes a web page for parents which has been translated into Spanish. This section includes a number of sub-categories about student life, however the links back to the admission and financial aid pages are in English. The student life page includes information about DC's commitment to multiculturalism, a link

to the college's pre-orientation program for students of color, and two links to programming specific to African-American students. A Latina student group was posted on the website which listed the contact information of current Latina student leaders making them easily accessible to prospective students.

The key contact person identified for the purpose of recruiting for this research was the director of DC's multicultural programming, a non-Hispanic administrator of color. While the Damas director of multicultural programming was helpful in facilitating connection to the Latina student group leaders, the DC faculty were particularly active in responding to my email requests for help; faculty helped identify and personally reached out to potential participants for the study. Several faculty members responded providing me with advice or the names of students they felt would make appropriate participants. Student leaders identified by the Director of Diversity or taken from the website were also active in outreach and recruitment.

Millers Falls University is a small, liberal arts university set within a busy section of a mid-sized suburban community. A review of census data finds that just over 77% of the local residents are White and 5% report being Hispanic (U.S. Department of Commerce, June 2009). Overall they are closer to, though slightly higher than, the national averages for education: 83% of its citizens have completed high school and 34% have completed at least a bachelor's degree. At \$47,162 their median income is also slightly lower than the national average (Table 2). At Millers Falls, the nearest large city is only one half hour away by car.

The MU site includes connections to a fully translated admission page and numerous other pages which have also been translated into Spanish including an

invitation to a fall event specifically designed for Hispanic families. The student group page includes a surprising number of student groups targeting Latinos, some social, some academic, and one which is family oriented sponsored by Hispanic alumni and students. Several contact persons were identified to support the research including the vice-president of diversity initiatives and an associate dean, both of whom were Hispanic. An associate director of multicultural initiatives was also appointed to support the effort; she was a non-Hispanic person of color. Cold emails to faculty yielded enthusiastic responses from faculty; several faculty members emailed me to inquire information about the study and or offer to extend their own personal invitations to students to encourage their participation. The vice-president and the associate dean also made themselves personally available to reach out to students with whom they had relationships; the associate director was helpful in distributing materials and securing space. Student leaders were eager, available and willing to reach out to friends about the research.

Finally, St. Margaret's University is a small, gated, liberal arts, Catholic university set in a quiet residential section of a mid-sized suburban community; the closest metropolis is about one hour away by car. Of the three college settings, St. Margaret's was by far the most affluent and homogenous. Census data report that over 95% of the community's population identified as White, while only 2.3% of the community was Hispanic (U.S. Department of Commerce, June 2009). Comparatively speaking, this was a highly educated community with over 90% of adults having completed high school and more than half having completed a bachelor's degree or more. Not surprisingly, at \$83,512 the median income was significantly higher than the national average; only 1.8% of the population was reported to be living below the poverty line (see Table 2).

The key contact persons identified for the purpose of recruiting student participants at MU were the director of St. Margaret's multicultural programming, a non-Hispanic woman of color, and the assistant director, a Hispanic woman. If faculty responded to my cold emails, it was to forward the inquiry on to appropriate students; no responses were sent directly to me from faculty. The director and especially the assistant director took a personal and very active role in recruiting participants. The assistant director seemed to know the majority of the Latina students personally and not only made individual outreaches but also spoke about the project at the various student groups; she also encouraged student leaders to reach out to potential participants. Her personal involvement stood out among the three schools; her position was well situated within the institution providing her with direct contact with students as well as access to resources at higher levels in the college.

St. Margaret's website included fewer student groups by comparison to the other two schools and the Latino student groups listed were primarily social in nature. While none of the website was translated into Spanish, the site included announcements about the expansion of an initiative launched in 1999 which targeted a large and very diverse community close to campus (pseudonym – *Nearbycity*); the population in *Nearbycity* is about one-third Hispanic and one-third African American (U.S. Department of Commerce, June 2009). Until recently, the college granted a full tuition scholarship annually to one student who graduated from any of four specific high schools in *Nearbycity*. According to the web announcement, beginning in 2008, this program was expanded to guarantee a full tuition scholarship to any student from any of seven *Nearbycity* high schools who qualifies for admission and whose family income falls



below \$50,000. Additionally, accepted students may apply for and receive financial aid to cover housing and other campus expenses. Although not specifying that the program is directed at students of color, the combination of family income criteria and the Nearby city demographics greatly increases the odds that students receiving this scholarship will be either African American or Hispanic. The impact of this new outreach has already been felt and is evidenced by the fact that the number of Hispanic students in the 2008-09 entering class (freshman year) is nearly four times the number of Hispanic students found in the senior class (according to Common Data Sets for St. Margaret's). Students comments about the impact of this scholarship are included in Part 3.

### **The Campus Communities**

Overall, the campuses shared approximately the same size student body with only 800 students separating the largest campus population, St. Margaret's (3,470 students), from the smallest campus, Damas (2,610 students); Millers Falls fell between the two campuses with 2,787 students (see Table 3). A more meaningful difference is noted in the percent of students of color<sup>3</sup> each campus hosts: Damas reports the greatest number of students of color with 27%, Millers Falls cited 26% students of color and St. Margaret reported that only 16% of its students identify as students of color. Interestingly, these differences even out when considering the number of Hispanic students within each community of color: Damas and St. Margaret both report that 7% of their students are Hispanic, while Millers Falls reports 8% Hispanic students. Finally, because this study focuses specifically on women, Damas reported the largest number of Latinas (females)

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<sup>3</sup> The term Students of Color included students who were African Americans, Asian, Hispanic or Native American and U.S. citizens or permanent residents.

with 170 students, while St. Margaret hosted 162 Latinas (63% of the coed Hispanic population) and Millers Fall reported 118 Latinas (52% of the Hispanic coeds) (Table 3).

College	Total full-time student body	Percentage of U.S. students of color (Asian, African or Native American or Hispanic)	# of U.S. Hispanic students / % of total student body	# of Latinas (female) / % of co-ed Hispanic population	Resulting percentage of student body
<b>Damas College</b>	2,610	27%	170 / 7%	170	7%
<b>Millers Falls University</b>	2,787	26%	228 / 8%	118 / 52%	4%
<b>St. Marg't University</b>	3,470	16%	256 / 7%	162 / 63%	5%

**Table 3. Campus Communities of Color**

Source: statistics drawn from public "Common Data Sets", College Board, 2009, or provided by the individual college/university.

While the elimination of male Hispanic students significantly reduced the number of potential participants at all but Damas College, the additional criterion of being first generation to attend college had an even more severe impact on the potential pool. For Damas College, 96 of all of the Hispanic students were both female and first generation college attendees at the time of the study, about half (56 percent) of all of the Damas Hispanics. At Millers Falls only forty Hispanic students were both first generation and female (34% of all Millers Falls Latinas), and at St. Margaret's 60 Hispanic students were both female and first generation attendees (38% of all St. Margaret Latinas) (Table 4).

College	# of Latinas (female)	# First generation Latinas / % of all Latinas	Resulting % of overall student body
Damas College	170	96 / 56%	3.7%
Millers Falls University	118	40 / 34%	1.4%
St. Marg't University	162	60 / 38%	1.7%

**Table 4. First Generation College Attending Latinas**

Source: statistics drawn from public "Common Data Sets", College Board, 2009, or provided by the individual college/university.

It is significant to note that the final resulting number of female Hispanics who are also first generation college students represents an incredibly small sub-community on each campus: only 3.7% of all Damas students are first generation college Latinas, while only a mere 1.4% of the Millers Falls students and 1.7% of the St. Margaret's student body are first generation college Latinas. The minute numbers of first generation Latina students on these three campuses seems to capture the isolation and sense of invisibility cited by both González (2002) and Solorzano et al. (2002) in their studies of students of color and Latinos on predominantly White campuses.

Overall, the existence of Hispanic students at these selective New England campuses is small. Smaller still is the population of Hispanic women who are forging an educational path as pioneers in their families, if not in their communities, by attending college. These first generation Latinas are unique and rare on these predominantly White campuses, and also in the predominantly White and affluent communities in which the colleges reside; it is unlikely to find much sense of likeness either on or off campus. This predominance of a majority race, class and culture is important to bear in mind as we move forward to consider the unique and individual participants of this study.

## **Part 2 – The Students**

Criteria to participate in the group discussions required that the student identify as Latina, be in at least her sophomore year and not on academic probation, and identify as a first generation college attendee; in all 17 students participated. While all of the students reported meeting the above criteria, one Puerto Rican student from St. Margaret's (Margót) indicated that she had been equally raised by both her father/stepmother and her biological mother; her biological mother had completed college but her father and step mother had not. Because of the overall under representation of Puerto Rican perspectives in the research literature, I chose to include her in the conversation at St. Margaret's.

To increase the likelihood that students participating were from lower income families, two additional criteria were preferred but not required: (1) that they were raised in a predominantly Hispanic or Black neighborhood and (2) that Spanish was their first language. These facts were collected through the Demographic Questionnaire (Attachment B).

All 17 students participated in one of three discussion groups; four students participated at Damas College, six students at Millers Falls, and seven students at St. Margaret's University (Table 5). Because the final total population of first generation Latinas at each campus was so small, the discussion groups resulted in a meaningful rate of participation at two of the campuses. The four Damas students represented only 5% of the potential participant pool, but the six Millers Falls students and seven St. Margaret students represented fully 20 and 21% of all potential participants respectively (Table 5). In light of the small campus community sizes, it is not surprising to note that participants at each campus arrived to the discussion group together, clearly knowing each other well

and having established friendships with each other. Students on all three campuses commented that they tended to know most other campus Latinas at least in passing if not very well.

College	# of non-first years who are also first college attendees	# of students participating / % of pool
Damas College	76	4 / 5%
Millers Falls University	30	6 / 20%
St. Marg't University	33	7 / 21%

**Table 5. Student Participation Breakdown**

Statistics drawn from public "Common Data Sets", College Board, 2009, or provided by the individual college/university.

Although more than half of all Hispanic students begin their education in two year programs (Santiago & Brown, 2004), this proved not to be the case for any of the students participating; all of the participants in this study had begun their studies as a first year student at their current campus and they all anticipated graduating within the traditional four year period. Six of the participants were seniors, nine were juniors and two were second semester sophomores (Table 6). All students were traditional student age and age appropriate to the year in which they were studying.

A number of Hispanic nationalities were included in the discussion groups; in all 10 students identified as Dominican or part Dominican, six students stated they were Puerto Rican or part Puerto Rican, two identified as Mexican, one said she was part Ecuadorian, and one identified as Peruvian; all but four were born in the United States. While Dominicans comprised more than half of the total respondents overall, there was a diversity of nationalities within each campus discussion group. Most of the students

College	Pseudo -nym	Age	Class Yr	Major	Primary Latino group	Race	Place of birth	High school attended	First language spoken	Current primary language	Neigh- borh'd
<b>Damas (All Women's College)</b>											
	Claudia	21	senior	Sociology	Puerto Rican	Blk/ Hisp.	NY	Catholic	Spanglish	English	1
	Eva	20	junior	Psychology/ Econ.	Puerto Rican & Dominican	n/a	Boston	Charter	Spanish	Spanish	2
	Marisa	21	senior	Gov't & Sociology	Dominican	Latina/ Hisp.	NY	Public	Spanish	Spanish	1
	Sofia	21	senior	Women & Gender	Ecuadorian & Puerto Rican	Latina	NY	Catholic	English	English	1
<b>Millers Falls (Co-Ed University)</b>											
	Alys	20	junior	Math & Art	Dominican	Latina	NYC	Public	Spanish	Spanish	1
	Ariel	20	junior	Social Studies	Puerto Rican	Puerto Rican	NYC	Public	Spanish	Spanish	1
	Carolina	19	soph.	Afro-American Studies	Dominican	Latina	NYC	Public	Spanish	both	1
	Dalma	20	junior	History	Dominican	n/a	Dominican Republic	Private	Spanish	English	1
	Elena	20	junior	East Asian Studies/ Psychology	Dominican	Dominican	NY	Private	Spanish	English	1
	Laurita	21	senior	Psychology & Sociology	Dominican	Black	Dominican Republic	Private	Spanish	both	1
	Sylvia	20	junior	Psychology/ Romance Studies	Mexican	Biracial	CA	Public	Spanish	Spanish	1
<b>St. Margaret's (Catholic University)</b>											
	Ana	21	junior	Psychology	Dominican	Hispanic	Dominican Republic	Private	Spanish	Spanish	1
	Cristina	22	senior	Finance & Spanish	Mexican	n/a	Mexico	Public	Spanish	Spanish	1
	Carmen	20	junior	English	Puerto Rican	Black	CT	Private	both	English	1
	Flora	21	junior	Sociology	Dominican	Latina	NY	Public	Spanish	Spanish	1
	Margot	21	senior	International Studies & Biology	Puerto Rican & Dominican	n/a	NY	Catholic	Spanish	both	4
	Marta	20	soph.	Marketing	Peruvian	Latina	NY	Public	Spanish	English	5
1 = predominantly Latino/Black; 3 = about equal (Latino/Black and White); 5 = predominantly White											

**Table 6 – Student Demographics**

reported being children of immigrant parents or in the case of Puerto Ricans, migrant parents (Table 7). The majority of the students identified racially as Hispanic, Latina or Puerto Rican, while two identified as Black and two stated they were bi-racial (Table 6).

	Dominican Republic	Ecuador	Mexico	Peru	Philippines	Puerto Rico	U.S. Mainland
<b>Mother's Place of Birth</b>	9	0	2	1	0	2	3
<b>Father's Place of Birth</b>	9	1	1	1	1	3	0

**Table 7 – Parents' Place of Birth**

Because of the small group sizes, the optional criteria of primary language spoken and neighborhood make-up was not used to screen out potential participants.

Nonetheless, upon reviewing demographic data it became apparent that all but one student spoke Spanish as her first language; in fact eight students still identified Spanish as their first language while two felt they were equally bilingual, the remaining seven felt they were now more proficient in English than Spanish (Table 6). Additionally, only one student described her neighborhood as “somewhat more White than Latino/Black” and one “predominantly White”; all the remaining students were raised in “predominantly Latino/Black neighborhoods” with one student rating her neighborhood as “somewhat more Latino/Black than White.” In theory, these additional criteria, coupled with being a first generation college attendee, would increase the likelihood that students were coming from lower income families. A review of the parent occupations reaffirms this theory (Table 8); the majority of jobs listed by students are primarily unskilled labor normally associated with lower wages.

<b>Father's Occupation</b>	<b>Mother's Occupation</b>
car painter	assembly worker
carpenter	Childcare provider
cook	Community organizer
deceased	Disabled
dye-press operator	Entrepreneur
entrepreneur	home health aide
porter	homemaker/ housewife(5)
sales rep	Lawyer
taxi driver	museum attendant
truck driver	Receptionist
waiter	teacher
unemployed (2)	Teacher's aide
unknown (2)	Blank
n/a	
blank	

**Table 8. Parent Occupations**

In sum, while the students participating in this study included a wide variety of Hispanic backgrounds (Dominican, Ecuadorian, Mexican, Puerto Rican and Peruvian), they represented a narrow slice of socioeconomic status. Almost all of the students came from predominantly Latino/Black neighborhoods; were children of immigrants or Puerto Rican migrants; and were raised by parents (or a single parent) who spoke Spanish, had little or no formal education, and worked in unskilled positions. This synopsis stands in stark contrast to the descriptions of the local and college communities in which they are currently studying. Tinto (1993) tells us that too large a leap between community and college environments increases the likelihood that a student will fail to persist in college. McDonough (1997) concludes that capital – social and economic – define and limit student college choices. She used the term “bounded rationality” (p. 8) to describe how



students' educational options and academic success are constricted by the family and community's access to social capital including characteristics such as parent's education, parent's career path and family/neighborhood economic class. Additionally, González (2002), whose ethnographic study explored the educational journeys of Latinos in predominantly White institutions, commented that lower income Hispanics living in predominantly Black/Hispanic communities and who come from families in which Spanish is spoken face the greatest challenges when it comes to academic success in college. So how is it the students participating in this study are succeeding? Six of them are second term juniors and another nine are in their final semester as seniors; their graduation seems imminent. Understanding the inherent differences between the families/communities from which these students are coming and the world in which they are currently studying becomes important as one considers the stories they tell about resilience and how they have navigated success in an elite academic world.

### **Part 3 – Insights into the Latina Academic Journey**

First generation college attending Hispanic students from low income families are disadvantaged in a number of ways as they begin their college journeys. Their academic aspirations are compromised by a number of factors related to poverty including minimal educational resources; schools and homes which lack computer labs, computers, and other advanced technologies; limited access to mentors and positive academic role models; higher rates of at-risk behaviors like drinking and drugs; exposure to personal or community violence; higher rates of depression and suicide; and higher rates of unprotected sex (Organista, 2007; Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002). But the disparity between the academic starting point of a first generation, low income Latina and her White

counterpart is perhaps nowhere more pronounced than it is on elite, predominantly White, New England campuses.

The Latinas in this study are part of tiny micro-communities on their campuses and they represent radical differences from the majority student body in socio-economic class, early educational experiences, family upbringing, family educational status, culture, and language. They experience gaps in the types of capital various authors have cited as essential to the success of traditional students in college: academic capital (Tierney, 1992), social capital (McDonough, 1997), and cultural capital (Zambrana & Zoppi, 2002). A central question then is how do Latina first generation college students construct *scholastic capital*, the capital which fills in the gaps in the academic, social and cultural capital, needed for academic success in college?

The interview guide (Appendix E) provided a flexible direction for the conversations held with students at each campus. Because this project is strength-based, interviews focused on sources of resilience that brought students to campus and the supports they developed on campus to reaffirm their choice of college and their capacity to persist in school. Students were also asked to reflect on what they felt might make an ideal academic setting for Hispanic students. This final question allowed students to prioritize particular strengths of their community or to identify particular challenges that they experienced.

The themes which emerged from the interviews were sorted into three central categories in this part of the Findings Chapter: (a) internalized strengths, (b) negotiating between two worlds, and (c) reflections on the ideal academic community for Hispanics.

The Data Analysis Matrix (Table 1) was utilized to reaffirm themes from the pilot study and/or the literature, as well as to identify new themes which emerged from interviews<sup>4</sup>.

**Internalized Strengths:  
“El que Sabe Nada, Vale Nada”<sup>5</sup> –But it’s All on You**

Each conversation about education began with students discussing the important role parents had played in developing their academic determination. Paradoxically, however, because parents’ lack of English skills and limited exposure to formal education often left them with few tools to support this goal, students understood that this would be a journey they would make largely on their own. The incongruity of these combined messages is evidenced in the following vignettes by students who could be best described as both academically driven and singularly independent.

Interviewees reported that from an early age parents spoke about the opportunities that education could afford them. They spoke intently about their parents’ clear and consistent desire that they achieve academically.

Marisa (DC): Well my mother always told me education is always important. She would say “*el que sabe nada, vale nada*,” if you don’t know anything, you’re not worth anything. And that was always instilled in my head. And my father was the same way - that education is really important and that [it] will open doors for you... That’s what I’ve always heard throughout my life.

Sylvia (MU): My parents were very adamant about me going to college because they really didn’t get a chance to, work was more important than studies. But somehow they became aware that studies were more important than work and they instilled that in me like, “We really want you to go to college.” I don’t remember when it started but it was always: education, education, first, and then eventually it was just college in general.

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<sup>4</sup> In citing student comments, student pseudonyms are followed by the initials of the college they attend as follows: DC – Damas College; MU – Millers Falls University; STM – St. Margaret’s University.

<sup>5</sup> Quote by Marisa (DC). Translation: He who knows nothing, is worth nothing.

The majority of the students were raised by large extended families who also echoed messages about education and college. Cristina (STM) commented, “My family is actually very supportive. ...And they always told me to continue studying and I always got good grades. And my uncles and my aunts told me continue to go to school...” Sofia (DC) added, “Yeah, my grandma was always proud of me because originally I wanted to drop out of school.” Even culturally important community groups added a voice of support for academic achievement:

Carmen (STM): And church supported me as well. I don’t go as much now, but everyone in church would say, “You’re a Hispanic woman, don’t be a statistic,” and I told myself I never would be. I just knew there was a higher calling for me.

Sofia (DC) shared that her “mom was serious about our getting a good education because she saw [what happened] as a result of ... being careless about her [own] future and she didn’t want that to happen to us.” Ariel’s parents also saw education as a safeguard to ensure that their daughter would not experience the challenges in life they had endured:

Ariel (MU): I think my parents... after working so hard for so much, they knew from the beginning that they didn’t want me to go through that, and they wanted me to be ahead of them, they never wanted me to go through the same things they had. So it was always said that I was going to college. Pretty much from the beginning they expected me to complete everything – my bachelors and my masters. They were like, “You just got to continue, you can’t stop because, we worked for you to do this.”

Students discussed the great extents to which their parents went to ensure that they had the best educational opportunities possible. The fact that so many parents struggled to provide opportunities for their daughter’s education served as motivation to persist and succeed. Sofia (DC) shared, “Education was very important; we had to work

as hard as we could because my mother worked hard to get us into these schools.”

Carmen adds:

Carmen (STM): I describe myself as being very hard working. I saw all the struggles my parents had to go through. My whole inspiration for me to be an educated woman was for me not to have them struggle anymore and to make them proud.

Some parents moved to the United States specifically in pursuit of educational opportunities for their children:

Marta (STM): My mother, she’s an independent and strong woman, and I really admire her. I want to be like her but I want to go beyond her level. ... I want to make her proud because I want her to know that she didn’t come to America for nothing. I want her to know that I’m glad she came here for me and for my brothers. Not that it’s just her dream, because it’s mine too, but that she had a reason to come to America. I am the way I am because of her.

Still other parents took even more extreme tactics to ensure better educational access.

Carolina (MU) commented that, “Even if it came to lying to get us into good schools, my parents were really pushing and willing to do that, and so I’m grateful for that.” Her story centered on the New York education system which matches families to schools depending upon the neighborhood in which they live.

Carolina (MU): I grew up in Harlem... but I definitely wasn’t in a great neighborhood so the elementary school that I belonged to would not have been a good one. So my parents, well my mom, lied on my sister and my application and told them that we lived in a different area so that we’d be able to get into one of the top schools in district 3. My mom said we lived up on 90<sup>th</sup> street so that me and my sister could get in there. And that’s how me and my sister were able to get into the gifted and talented program.

It seemed evident that parental messages about college began very early on in life for these students. Numerous family decisions were guided by what parents felt would ultimately best advantage their daughters educationally. Academic aspirations were not limited by their parents’ lack of formal education, their social class, or their community

resources. The aspirations they held for their daughters surpassed goals for high school, and even junior college; they included goals for a four year degree and in some cases an advanced degree. This support pushed students to resist conformity with what was around them and at times resulted in students feeling isolated or ostracized for reaching beyond the norm.

Ariel, a young Puerto Rican woman who was born in New York, described how her parents' were concerned that negative mainland stereotypes about Puerto Ricans might dissuade her from exploring her academic talents. In New York she had been singled out as exceptionally talented and on the U.S. mainland that felt "out of the norm" for a Puerto Rican. Her parents wanted her to take pride in being both Puerto Rican and academically talented. They felt returning to Puerto Rico might provide her with a wider range of socially acceptable options:

Ariel (MU): My parents came to the U.S. for a while, but the reason that they came back to Puerto Rico was that because they didn't want me to have to deal with the whole class or expectation issue or peer pressure thing, or whatever. ... They were like, "No, you're going to be raised around people like you. Cuz if you're the dorky one, you're the dorky one but there are going to be other Latina dorky ones like you." ... So I was the nerd in my class [in Puerto Rico] but there was another guy nerd that was Latino so that was ok. ... I think that helped me advance myself, that I wasn't doing something weird or out of the ordinary [for a Puerto Rican woman].

Others were not as lucky to escape being singled out for doing something exceptional for someone from their ethnicity. For Dalma, succeeding academically also meant negative attention. Despite parental encouragement, the struggle to overcome pressures to conform rested with her alone:

Dalma (MU): Like in middle school I did really well, but I was definitely a dork; I mean, that's how my family conceived of me as did people like in my school and in my community. [Interviewer: Being a dork was a bad thing?] Yes, being a dork

was a bad thing! ... I definitely had positive reinforcement from my mother about education, but I definitely experienced negativity about my trying to do well in school or doing something well in my life.

Although they urged their daughters to do well in school, parents had limited resources to help them achieve this goal, according to the students. As long as the students were in the lower elementary grades, parents and grandparents seemed able to help out, but students began to outpace their elders fairly early in their education. This left the burden of fulfilling educational expectations entirely on their shoulders. Claudia, who was raised by her mother, a single parent, gave an example of how her academic curiosity was inspired by her grandmother:

Claudia (DC): It's not like we have those two parent homes [where the parents] went on and took anything beyond algebra. Like my grandmother went to like 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade and that's all she remembered. But her 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade in Puerto Rico is a little different from 6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> grade in New York. But that was it, she got the beginning of algebra, but that was it. But before that, the adding and subtracting and things that you use in life, she knew how to do that and she helped me and she interested me in doing math; like math for fun! We lived across from a public school and they used to throw out work books and my grandma would pick them up and hand them to me. I was in second grade and working on 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade math because I thought it was just fun!

Having internalized the motivation to succeed in school, students discussed the frustration of carrying this burden alone. Early on schoolwork became a task completed in isolation; when academic challenges came up, parents were unable to help not only because they could not understand English, but also because the academic content was beyond them. Claudia again:

Claudia (DC): And so [my grandmother] knew math would get me money but she really couldn't help me after the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. She was like "I can't really do anything about that anymore – have fun, and work with the examples and instructions..." My mom was focused on my getting an education because I think she saw my potential but ...[she] couldn't really help me and I didn't have the opportunity to ask for help...it was all on me.

When asked how she managed challenging schoolwork without help from her parents,

Marisa (DC) responded:

[I would just] cry until [I] got it! That was what I would do. When I was younger I would just cry for a while and then my mom would just, well she would get frustrated too because she couldn't help me! And then I would just relax and just get back to it. I remember once I called the homework help line it was so bad. I called them and they didn't know what to do either! It was awful and so I just had to figure it by myself, because there was really no one else to go to.

Her response was spontaneously echoed by others in the group who affirmed that this was how they too had managed.

At times, it was not only the educational gap between parent and child that prevented parents from helping students, but also the realities of limited time to dedicate to schoolwork; for single parent and two parent families alike, earning an income was a top concern and ongoing stress. Sofia (DC): "My mom couldn't really help with my homework because she was always working; she was a single parent, my dad left. I was raised by my grandma because my mother was always working." For many students, access to education hinged on their parents' ability to earn money. Two students joked about the transparency of financial struggles for students attending one New York City Catholic high school:

Sofia (DC): I remember one time I got kicked out for two weeks and it was the worst time I've ever experienced. It was really hard because my sister and I were doing really well in school but they refused to help us. ...And you'd see these kids being kicked out and if you saw someone missing for more than three days, then you know that it was because they weren't paying tuition and they were kicked out.

Claudia (DC): And that was the ongoing joke! If you were gone for more than three days then Sister had something to do with it; she was the president of the school and they would just kick you out [if you missed a tuition payment]. And



when you come back, not only do you have to make up the work from the two weeks, you have to continue and our workload was no joke!

Adding to the burden of achieving high academic expectations on their own, students were very aware that their success or failure could have an impact on younger brothers, sisters or cousins who saw them as a role model for what they could achieve. Their individual success created the possibility of an opportunity for those that followed; if they failed, the destiny of their family might go unchanged. Several spoke about how seriously they carried this responsibility:

Ana (STM): The other thing that's important [to me] is that I'm the oldest of 4 sisters and that's very important to me not just because I have to make my parents proud but to have my sisters continue in my footsteps; not all of them are. It's a burden.

Sylvia (MU): And also like I'm sort of the oldest [on both sides of my family]. ... I was the oldest child, so, without knowing it, I was setting the rules for what was going to happen. Like if I can do it, then maybe possibly they could as well.

Claudia (DC): My sister sees Damas College... she sees all these women, she doesn't know where we're going but even at this age she says, "I want to go to Damas College." And that's something that when I was 8 years old I couldn't have even imagined! I couldn't fathom it. It would be like a dream going to college, especially a college with Damas's name. She's understanding and she sees what I'm doing, even with the stress, but I'm her role model. ... She sees and it's something that children from the inner city don't see. I think it's good for her to be around this!

While affirming the centrality of family as a source of personal determination and academic support, a more powerful, consistent, and yet confounding theme arose in the course of this study. Family played an important role in inspiring academic aspirations but this was coupled with an understanding that the family had limited capacities to help their daughters achieve that goal. The combination of these two messages made for frustration, confusion and at times isolation on the part of students as they pursued their

academic journeys alone. While students' focused determination propelled them through their early years in school and toward college, students were at times marginalized by others in their community as different and non-conforming. Parents also soon found that, once their daughters' academic ambitions were in motion, they were less able to pull their children back into traditional roles of being an *hija*<sup>6</sup> and this at times caused friction in their relationships. In order to maintain the needed connection with their families and communities, daughters balanced frequently contradictory messages; this capacity to balance and translate messages served as the beginning seeds for ultimately learning how to “dance” between two cultures.

**Bachata'ing<sup>7</sup> between Two Worlds:  
La Hija Buena<sup>8</sup> and the American Scholar**

**Is it “*Estas Mejorando La Raza*”<sup>9</sup> or “*Te Estas Poniendo Blanquita*”<sup>10</sup>?**

The more these women succeeded, the more they experienced conflicting messages from their families. A second central theme, one that germinated early in their academic decision making and then continued into their college lives, was the conflict between staying rooted in family/community while reaching academic aspirations. Parents wanted their daughter to improve herself, but to also stay the same; to achieve academically, but be “like us.”

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<sup>6</sup> Translation: daughter

<sup>7</sup> Term coined by Dalma (MU). The *Bachata* is a popular Hispanic dance originating in the Dominican Republic.

<sup>8</sup> Translation: The good daughter

<sup>9</sup> Quote by Dalma (MU). Translation: You are bettering the race.

<sup>10</sup> Quote by Dalma (MU). Translation: You are becoming White.

As the women experienced increased success, those who had actively supported them became at times ambivalent. When faced with the possibility that academic ambitions might change their daughter (or granddaughter, niece, etc), or worse lead them to leave home, family support sometimes became less certain. Claudia (DC), whose grandmother had inspired her love of math, shared the following response from her grandmother when she spoke with her about going away to college:

[By 6<sup>th</sup> grade] I already knew I was going to college and this was going to be it! ... [But] my grandma was like, "Eh, you could stay home." And I was like, "I can *not!*" ... Like I was going to go to Harvard, I was going to be a straight A student; I was going to be a Bio major and pre-med and these dreams that were far-fetched for a 6<sup>th</sup> grader!

Her grandmother had been her inspiration for education, her enthusiastic supporter who celebrated when she drew high grades in school. Her mixed response about *leaving* for college was now confusing for Claudia. Dalma (MU) added that similarly, the harder she worked academically, the more resistance she began to feel: "Right and then like as I spent more time at school I did feel a lot of resentment from my family; like I was thinking I was better than them because I was getting an education and I knew certain things and they didn't..."

Eva's (DC) early support of education from family was motivated by their need to expand the family's resources. They had slated her as the family translator and deliberately opted to keep her in bilingual courses so that she could learn both languages and become the mediator between extended family members and the rest of the world; an educated and bilingual woman would be a significant asset for the extended family. But as Eva's academic achievements progressed, so did her own personal aspirations, and

they did not center entirely on the family's needs. Her idea to attend a charter school conflicted with the family's plan and was met with less than enthusiastic support:

Eva (DC): So at the beginning it was just that [education and helping the family] and when [my mother] realized that I wanted to do more than just that she started to get worried. Like when I went to high school, I wanted to go to a charter school not a public school, and she wanted me to go to a public school instead of a charter school because public school gets out earlier than a charter school; the charter gets out at 5:00 and I'd have to stay two hours extra for tutoring for extra help. My mother didn't approve of that, that was my decision to get into that school.

For Eva's parents, the extra hours at school meant she had less time to fulfill family responsibilities and obligations. Though Eva's academic achievements made her parents proud, at the same time they felt conflicted; students felt confused by the resulting ambivalence.

Parents sometimes struggled to reassure themselves, and others, that their daughters *could* be both educated and also still Hispanic, but their own uncertainty left them vulnerable to the challenges of extended family members and sometimes unsure that they were making the right decisions for their daughters. Some family members worried that becoming too educated might mean becoming less Hispanic and more White.

Carolina and Dalma's (MU) cutting exchange underscores the madness of these contradictory messages:

Carolina (MU): I went to a public school but the "good" public schools in N.Y. And I think I got [crap] from everyone. I definitely was like the "smart one" in the family. And with all my cousins, I got a lot of [flack] from them too! And it was so ridiculous. I was like the really smart girl and like, "Oh you'll probably go to college too, you're like that 'little White girl'" – they loved using that phrase.

Dalma (MU): (chiding tone) *Te estas poniendo blanquita!* [You are becoming White!]

Carolina (MU): I know! Oh I was like, “A Latina woman can’t be educated? Cannot be smart? Cannot speak well?” It was just sad that your own family can’t seem to divide a racial identity from smartness or from wanting to do better. I mean, why would I want to live in my neighborhood forever? Why *wouldn’t* I want to improve myself intellectually? You think that being your family, able to racially identify with everything you’re going through as a woman, as a Latina, that they would be able to understand it, but they were sometimes your worst critiques. It was horrible. And that was my cousins! People my age!

Dalma (MU): Yeah...it’s a weird paradox, like on the one hand you have them saying, “*O estas mejorando la raza!*” [Oh, you are bettering the race!] [laughter from all] and there’s all this weird ideology, like we came here to do something but then like you make moves to do that and then you’re like, you’re betraying where you came from becuz... I don’t know, for weird, not very relevant reasons.

For Hispanic families this ambivalence represents a *cultural paradox*<sup>11</sup> about academic success which differs from the dominant American paradigm. The dominant paradigm sees academic achievement as acquiring the academic skills, norms, and culture of academia; the culture of academia at a predominantly White institution being White. Hispanic families want their children to find a way to be both academically successful *and* different from the White dominant population in terms of their culture, traditions and norms. It is interesting to note that even the language used in each culture to convey what it means to be educated differs between English and Spanish. In English, when we say one becomes “well educated,” we normally imply they attend college or pursue advanced degrees. In Spanish, the term “*bien educada*,” while literally translating to “well educated,” refers to a broader definition of education; it may include formal education but it also includes manners, values, norms and an awareness of cultural protocols. For instance, if a young college graduate referred to his instructor as “*tu*” instead of “*usted*,”<sup>12</sup> I might comment, “*Es mal educado*.” While literally this phrase translates to “he is poorly

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<sup>11</sup> “Cultural Paradox” – term coined by Kathy Sisneros.

educated,” it means, “he is rude” or “he has bad manners,” despite the fact that he has a formal degree. In Spanish, being educated translates to academic skills, manners, values, and cultural norms. While Hispanic parents want their children to acquire academic skills, and even the capacity to negotiate in an academic culture, they also want them to maintain their Hispanic pride and culture; to acquire education as a set of skills without “becoming” part of the dominant culture. The cultural paradox for Hispanic families is that they want daughters who are “*bien educadas*.”

In the following excerpt, Ana provides an example of the distinctions families make about education. Because of her high academic achievement in middle school, Ana was one of a small handful of students selected to attend a private, elite high school in her community. She searched for words to describe her experience as she shared this account of being in an elite White world:

Ana (STM): My high school was out in the suburbs and it was really expensive, it was like \$40,000 a year! It was really crazy. And it had these really wealthy White girls that had everything they could possibly want in their lives and it was really great for them. It was interesting to spend those four years of my life with them *because it pushed me too; not having a life like that (because conceited and stuck up isn't what I want), but having a little bit of what they had* [italics added]. And coming from a family where my parents didn't have that, it was... [trails off]. My school was so far, it was about an hour and a half from my home by public transportation, it was just intense. And these girls were like 16 and they had Lexuses and BMWs and I was like, “*What?*”

Ana's hard work had been rewarded with the opportunity to advance her skills at a highly resourced academic program. There she was exposed to some of the best academic resources, but she was at the same time overwhelmed by some of the corresponding material benefits. In the highlighted passage, she seems to struggle with wanting to be

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<sup>12</sup> Translation- “tu” is the form of “you” which implies familiarity and informality; “usted” is the form of “you” which implies formality, respect and/or deference.

“*bien educada*,” that is, wanting to be as academically challenged as the more privileged White students, but not wanting to becoming like them.

Families and students seemed to be struggling with the multiple meanings and impact of education in each culture. This tension continued to be evidenced throughout the interviews. Despite their anxieties, however, parents persisted in supporting their daughter’s exploration of college options on some level. To ultimately gain access to college, however, families and students both knew that additional support and guidance would be needed from outside the family.

**“¿A Donde Tu Estas Mandando esa Muchacha?”<sup>13</sup>:  
The New Opportunities Afforded by Expanded Capital**

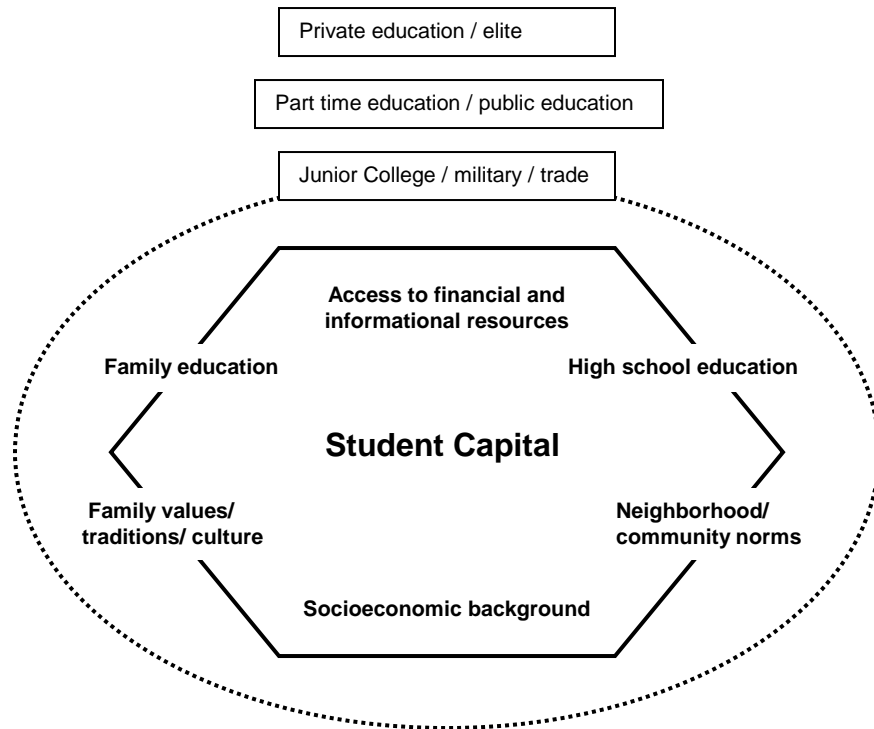
Numerous authors state that the boundaries of capital restrict or expand educational pathways for students (McDonough, 1997; Tierney, 2001; Zambrana & 2002). An individual’s family educational background, high school resources, access to informational/financial resources, socio-economic background, family values/traditions/culture, and the norms of the neighborhood/ community combine to define the educational pathways a student might access (i.e., junior college, the military, part-time college, public institutions, selective institutions, etc.). McDonough (1997) argues that choices that fall outside of this “bounded rationality” (p. 8) make little sense in the context of family and community. Diagram 1 is a pictorial representation of this theory as it might apply to a first generation, low-income family (the dotted lines representing bounded rationality). The educational paths chosen by the women in this study, however, fall significantly outside of the options dictated by their bounded

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<sup>13</sup> Quote from Laurita (MU). Translation: Where are you sending that girl?

rationality, or their sources of social and cultural capital. How is it they were able to access opportunities outside of their cultural boundaries?

**Educational Pathways...**



**Figure 1. Educational pathways defined by the boundaries of a first generation, low income student.**

In reflecting upon the paths they took to reach college, students talked about an awareness of systems which advantaged some but disadvantaged others, specifically Hispanics. They also talked about the programs, individuals, and at times serendipity which played a role in providing them with access to the resources needed to reach their academic goals. Separate from academic skill and educational motivation, which for these women was very much an internalized value, access for these students was ultimately gained through externally expanded capital. While the interventions helped expose students to systems that would advantage them educationally, the texture of the expanded



social and cultural capital (i.e., personal connections, familiarity with protocols, etc.) rested with an outside person or program, rather than within the student herself or her family; this left them vulnerable and unsure about ways to navigate between these new places and their cultural worlds. The fragility and vulnerability of externally expanded capital became a third theme in the study.

A hallmark of the conversations with these young women was that their boundaries of capital seemed actually quite fluid as a result of various external interventions. These externally expanded boundaries introduced unexpected opportunities for students. In the case of Ana, the expansion of capital accessed through private high school served to expose her to resources not previously accessible to the family, and to whet her educational aspirations and solidify her academic determination to attend St. Margaret's. Similarly, when Eva (DC) saw the possibility of college laid out before her, she opted for charter school. Attending charter school enhanced her future options:

Eva (DC): In my middle school I had a lot of fun; I wasn't a straight 'A' student, I was more rebellious. I was just the popular girl and did what I wanted to do, not paying attention in classes. A charter school rep came to our classroom and said you could turn your life around. That they would throw away these grades that you have now and could start brand new if you wanted to go to college, and I decided I wanted to do that... The people in my charter school were very supportive and reinforced in us college and beyond, like, "This is your goal. We want you to get through it." And slowly but surely I became a straight 'A' student in high school.

Students gave multiple examples of systems which controlled access, advantaging some but unavailable to others; the key to accessing these systems often rested with the interventions of individuals who took a personal interest in a student and in effect, expanded their capital. Alys discussed how the intervention of one teacher, at a very young age, had long-term implications for her future education:

Alys (MU): My parents didn't know how to work the system. And they got help from my first grade teacher... I guess I was more advanced than the other kids and I'd go to the second grade class to do reading hour and things like that. And then the teacher approached my mom and said that it seemed that I was very advanced and that they didn't skip kids any more so that I should look into possibly being admitted to another school downtown and possibly to another district. And then I ended up qualifying for the program! [So]...I was put in a yellow school bus and transported downtown. But with that I guess I was very lucky because ...there's kind of a really good public school system in New York *but it's only available to some* [italics added]. So if you know how to work the system you're on a good track to go to college. ... Getting set up in that elementary school got me set up to automatically get into a good program in the middle school and automatically a good program in the high school. And then it just opened up my opportunities really early.

In taking a step back from her personal experiences, Sylvia provided this account of how Hispanics were systematically denied access to opportunities White students were generally aware of. In this example she discusses a little known fact in the Hispanic community that simply choosing a specific high school would give you access to a unique program that significantly advantaged you in your college planning. She had inadvertently arrived at this high school because she followed her best friend's lead. Only after she was there did she realize what everyone else there already knew; they had made strategic choices to be there, she was there coincidentally:

Sylvia (MU): I feel like there's a screening process that goes on so like some people go [on].... I feel like my high school was a sort of metaphor for what was going on in the whole city. Like people who knew about [this specific] program, and actually to get into this one specific class, could make it into a better program. You could really see this by—I don't want to make this racial, but it was just a fact of the matter—all the White kids who went to the public school, went to the school because of [this specific] program, which I didn't even know about until I was *in* the high school. And they all ended up in the program because that's what they were going after.

While acknowledging the role of mediators and translators (de Anda, 1984, p. 103) who facilitated their access to college, students frequently described what felt at

times like happenstance journeys to through college decision making. Marisa describes what she experienced as a random encounter with a teacher that ultimately turned out to be the start of her path to Damas:

Marisa (DC): How I found out about Damas was just luck, it was really ridiculous! I was going up the stairs and there was a teacher and she had a lot of things in her hands, [so] I asked if she needed help and she said, “Oh do you want to go on a trip with me?” She was going to see the Phantom of the Opera and some conferences. I went with her and got to know her better and she said, “You’re such a good student.” ... She said she knew a recruiter from Damas and talked to my principal and so everyone at my school was like, “Marisa is going to be the new person to go to Damas College” and “You seem like the perfect fit!” And from that point forward I was the girl that was going to go to Damas. And I’d never heard about Damas!

Sylvia’s decision to attend MU was influenced not by a careful study of the curriculum and in consultation with family about what school best met her needs, but by a comment from a family friend to visit MU and what happened to her *after* she visited the MU campus; she had missed her return flight home and was so impressed by how college officials took care of her, that she chose MU:

Sylvia (MU): The other [thing that happened] by chance was MU. My mom is a community organizer and so she had a family friend that was an alumna and she was like, “Here, you should apply,” and I was like, “Oh, ok...” and so I just submitted [it on] my Common Application. And then I got in and ended up visiting, and missed my [return] flight, so I had to stay overnight. But I was like, they took such good care of me that I was like – “I’ve decided to come here.”

Eva’s naïve application to Damas was also in some ways also the result of chance. Her advisor asked her to add Damas to the list of colleges on her Common Application, and since her high school covered application fees, it cost her nothing to accommodate his request. She never explored the particulars of the college before arriving for a campus visit and was stunned to find that she had been accepted to a women’s college:

Eva (DC): I didn't know anything about Damas and my advisor said, "E, you should go to Damas." And our school, because it's charter, all our applications were free. So I was like, "Ok;" it was free so like I didn't mind. ...I never knew it was all girls, until I was coming over here - seriously! I had an option between Damas, BC and UMass Amherst and he took us on a field trip here. And there were two other girls from my school that were accepted. So we came over and we were talking about meeting all these cute boys and this and that. And we were half way here and my counselor said, "I hope you know that Damas is an all girls' school." And I was like, what? And I knew I did not want to go to an all girls' school. I never applied to [names other all girls' schools], no all girls school! I didn't know about Damas at all. So when I got here I thought, I don't want to come here, I'm not going to go to this school. But I saw this beautiful campus, I didn't even look at the education, and I was like, maybe. But my other friends said they were coming here and I was like, ok, if you all are coming here, I'm going to go too.

Finally, Dalma's early academic achievement had provided her access to an elite but also a "super, super predominantly White [high] school in New Hampshire;" this program, in turn, significantly increased her college options. When asked how she weighed out the various college options, however, she described the selection process as literally random:

Dalma (MU): And coming into college, I applied to eight schools and got into all of them. I just randomly picked a bunch of schools to apply to because I was just like, it doesn't matter where I go it will be the same—a bunch of White people. And I feel like I've been kind of coasting.

Externally expanding resources exposed students to greater options but they lacked the resources to be able to carefully assess decisions about the next steps to take. Their choices placed them in environments where who they were—ethnically, socioeconomically, and culturally—represented a life experience outside of the campus norm. They often found themselves in new, traditionally "non-Hispanic" spaces (i.e., private high schools or elite colleges), where they described themselves as feeling isolated as a Hispanic, surprised by wealth, uprooted or torn, and wondering what it

meant to be outside of their Latino world. Recalling that all but two of the students came from predominantly Hispanic and or Black neighborhoods, the students in this study may have underestimated how different a predominantly White campus could be:

Margót (STM): When I came here it was culture shock. ... It was totally weird to see another person of color. It was like there really weren't many people of color, like, [eventually] you knew every student of color by name.

Marisa recounts with surprise that Damas celebrated the diversity they had achieved at her convocation: "I remember at convocation someone saying that our class had the most women of color ever! And I looked around and I thought, *really?*"

The college choices of the students in this study clearly fell outside of the reach of their communities. They were aware that, academic talent aside, access to these systems had been achieved through the assistance from programs, individuals or in some cases coincidental luck. Students now found themselves in unfamiliar worlds with few personal resources with which to manage these new experiences. Actively maintaining their Hispanic culture and traditions meant familiarity, support, comfort and a community of warmth and acceptance; but it also complicated the demands on students when cultural expectations clashed with academic policies.

### **It's Our Responsibility - *Familismo*: Independent yet Interdependent**

For the students interviewed in this study, attending college did not represent the same rite of passage it does for the dominant population, nor did it involve the same traditions and customs. Most of the students interviewed undertook the application process on their own and letters of acceptance, which carried an unfamiliar importance for parents, went uncelebrated by families. Laurita shares her experience with family as she made the exciting decision to attend Millers Falls:

Laurita (MU): So when I finally was looking at the schools I'd been accepted to and where I wanted to go and then chose MU, and I told my parents.[My mom's] reaction was like, "Oh ok, congrats." Like I was expecting her to be really excited and she wasn't and that really hurt me. ... And it was crazy cuz a lot people at the school, like when they found out where I was going, they were so excited for me like, "I know you're going to do great things over there!" Everyone was like giving me hugs. I felt like my community—I don't know, like everyone at my school was celebrating my success but no one at home was celebrating my success. So I was like, "Oh whatever!"

By comparison to parents who are so involved in their child's college decisions that they have recently been dubbed "helicopter parents" (Lum, 2006) by college officials, the parents of these first generation Latinas may seem on the surface to lack involvement with their daughters in the college process. This assessment, however, would be inaccurate. For these parents, their daughters' move to college represented a major leap of faith and an extraordinary confidence in their daughters' judgment and independence. Flora's (STM) mother was torn by her wish to support her daughter and her own anxieties about what it meant: "My mom was like, 'If that's [what] makes you happy, because if you are out there crying your heart out, I will die.' She [told me] 'Do whatever makes you happy—just go for it!'"

While parents recognized their daughters as independent in many ways, they did not regard them as independent in same way that most American families do, nor did they anticipate that their role in family would change as a result of college. Without concessions to their academic expectations of their daughters, the Hispanic parents maintained expectations of involvement with their daughters in terms of a cultural interdependency, otherwise known as *familismo*. This theme of being independent and yet interdependent with family was seen as an important, yet at times challenging, goal these women set out to achieve in college; this is the third central theme of this study.

The students in this study almost unanimously described themselves as independent; in fact, many described their White classmates as *more* dependent on family than they were. Here Carmen explains the difference in dependence between her and her two White roommates:

Carmen (STM): I considered myself more independent [than my roommates] and they were more dependent upon their parents. Like I started working a job in my junior year in high school. I've been working every year and now I have three jobs while I'm here. I felt kind of different from them... like out of the box. ... I just thought I was more independent than a lot of people here. I mean, I didn't have everything handed to me. They would just call their mom and say, "Mom can you send me some money?" and I thought, wow, I kind of wished I could do that!

And while, at least in the sense that Carmen describes above, the participants were independent from families, they also expressed a mutual need and even a personal desire to stay connected with family while at school. On the simplest level, students talked about just maintaining ongoing contact. Sylvia (MU), a junior, commented that her mother wanted her to call "too often" and she persuaded her that she calling twice a week would work best; she described this frequency as mutually acceptable and has maintained at least this much contact with her mother throughout her three years at Millers Falls. Flora (STM), also a junior, stated, "I have to go home at least every two weeks." Carmen (STM) stated that she chose a college within driving distance of home so she could have her "rice and beans once in a while." These examples reflect a mutual desire for ongoing contact and connection with family while at the same time remaining actively engaged in school.

The interconnectedness between student and family was not simply about maintaining family relationships or even about the opportunity to replenish their "cultural selves" (González, 2002, p. 209) on a campus that held little Hispanic representation. It

responded directly to the responsibility and obligations traditionally associated with family—*familismo*. Ana, who isn't able to go home regularly because she does not have a car, describes how she still addresses her family obligations long distance:

Ana (STM): I don't get home that often because Boston is three hours away. And because I don't have a car, it's five, six hours on the bus.... It's kind of hard that way, and I'm the oldest of four. And I have a nephew now and I know [my mother] needs me. Some parents know English and others don't and she doesn't know any so you know, even now she calls me to pay the bills for her, or "Call Verizon my phone isn't working," or "Call Comcast, my TV's not on," I don't know. I have to do all the family errands and stuff.

Marisa also discussed balancing school demands and family responsibilities. She described having always done "all the translating, and [going] to all my mom's and dad's appointments, and my grandparent's, and my aunts' and uncles'." When the family experienced a major crisis at home while she was at college, all family members were called in to respond, and that included Marisa:

Marisa (DC): My uncle got locked up and they think I'm a lawyer already, because I'm into politics and law. And everyone calls me, for everything I feel. And it's nice in one way that they think so highly of me, but I try not to let it stress me out. Well, I say, I'm happy I'm fine; like it's my family, I'll put down anything to take care of them. They wanted me to go to court when he went to court and [to] call the lawyer.... I went home for that.

These students expressed personal expectations that they be able to negotiate both family obligations *and* academic responsibilities. Claudia described being able to address both obligations thanks to the support provided by the extended Latina community at Damas who understood these expectations:

Claudia (DC): It's our responsibility. I've had a lot of family emergencies. ... Family emergencies come in the way and it's so hard.... [There was] an emergency back to New York which my friends helped me out [with], to get home, [to] make sure things were ok, and to regulate things, and then to get back here by Monday for class! My friends are always there to support me, cuz they



know things like that always happen. Marisa and I can relate because family emergencies happen for us, as opposed to the rest of our [non-Hispanic] friends.

Marisa also comments on fulfilling family obligations as something she wants to do; a meaningful role she willingly carried throughout her four years at Damas:

Marisa (DC): I *want* to help out my family; I want to support myself and my family. ...I want to show a good example for my family and my younger cousins. I put this pressure on me to do everything. But I feel like I have to, not a lot of people in my family have done this. And hopefully it happens. The fact that we are graduating this year, that's another boundary we've we gone against and now it's time to get a job or go to grad school or law school; we'll see!

The value of *familismo* had a strong influence on these students. This may be due in part to the facts that they were not only first generation to attend college, but most were also first generation U.S. citizens; only three students were not first generation citizens. Finding academic policies which recognized and accommodated *familismo* was a major challenge for these students; figuring out ways to maintain this value, however, was implicit in being *bien educada*.

### **Como Ser Bien Educada<sup>14</sup>: Integrating Expanded Capital**

As a result of a combination of talent, desire, motivation, programs, interested others or good fortune, the students in this study found themselves presented with some potentially life changing decisions to be made. While students normally consult with parents at these important life junctures; the students in this study had little orientation with which to weigh options, but family members had even less. Students and parents alike struggled to bridge the gap between the world in which they lived and the worlds their daughters were about to enter. A fifth and final theme of this study was the importance finding means to integrate expanded capital into their cultural selves.

Despite their desire to be supportive, parents lacked the sort of capital needed to help their daughters make their decisions. They were uncomfortable with the unfamiliar and struggled with anxieties about where their children were going. Carolina's father seemed to have resisted wanting to believe that his daughter might actually be looking at colleges outside of New York; culturally it did not seem plausible that this would be an option his daughter might consider:

Carolina (MU): My dad didn't believe I was coming to MU until I was packing for college about a week before I was supposed to go....My dad for some reason thought I'd been accepted to and was going to Columbia even though I was [visiting] a school in [New England]. And he was like freaking out. He was like, "I can't believe that you're leaving us!" It was like the whole father, Dominican Dad, like "Oh my daughter she's leaving, oh no!" He honestly didn't believe I was leaving until I was packing and my mom had to sit him down and say "Yes, she accepted MU a few months ago." ... My dad was just a bit apprehensive about me leaving. I think it was just a wanting to protect his daughter kind of thing.

Claudia's mother, who was unable to bring her to school on the first day, was surprised to find that her daughter was attending a women's college when she brought her back to campus at Thanksgiving:

Claudia (DC): I knew Damas was an all women's college, my mother on the other hand did not. She didn't have a say or have an opinion about where I was applying because I was applying to schools and making my decisions on my own. She didn't know it was all girls until after the Thanksgiving break when [she drove me] back.

Laurita's parents, on the other hand, had assumed that she was attending a women's college; finding out that it was coed when they arrived on campus made for a difficult beginning to her time at Millers Falls:

Laurita (MU): I had visited the school before, but [my mom] hadn't, and so she came to drop me off with my dad and my brother. And my dad was like, "Why are there boys on the same floor? What school did you apply to? What is wrong with

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<sup>14</sup> Translation: How to be well-educated.

you!?” I finally, I was fighting with them instead of being happy. This was supposed to be a happy moment for me and it really wasn't; it was all about them screaming at me.

College life meant allowing daughters to enter new worlds that were frighteningly different if not seemingly risky. This moment of transition represented perhaps the single largest gap between the students' two life experiences. Without having yet developed a meaningful way to integrate expanded capital back into their cultural selves and into connection with families and communities, students were left in a vulnerable position as they undertook their college journeys. They encountered conflicting expectations between family and college that created anxieties and tension which threatened success in academia, or acceptance/affection from their communities. Many struggled to find resources to help them understand how to bridge the two worlds.

Eva found herself at the point of leaving college when she was faced with expectations to respond to a major family crisis. When her grandfather died, she found that the cultural norm of attending a week of mourning were foreign and inconsistent with the demands of campus. Damas officials made it clear that leaving school for a week was out of the ordinary and indicated that they didn't really see Eva staying at Damas if she went to the Dominican Republic for a week. The institution seemed disappointed that Eva would choose this cultural obligation over her academic responsibilities. She was in a panic until she reached out for help:

Eva (DC): What anchors me here? Honestly, at the beginning that was the question! What anchored me in my high school was like at the beginning of charter school my mother was so against me, that it was my motivation to finish and succeed! ...When I came here, that obstacle left me and I wondered what was going to keep me here and I didn't know. ... [When after my grandfather died] my automatic thing was that I had to go to Dominican Republic and I had to be with my family; so that was another obstacle and I ended up being back on academic

probation again sophomore fall semester. And it was hard and my first year dean wasn't comprehending why I had to go to DR. ... And she didn't understand that, and she was like, "I don't see you staying here at Damas", and she wasn't being helpful to me and I was shocked and I was like, "I'm going to show *you* that I can make it here!" ... One of my faculty, [an] English Director, is a good friend. I would tell him when I was having problems. He was with me when I was having all these issues... when my grandfather died and he told me, "Do what you have to do, that's your priority, and when you come back everything will be ok."...

If I hadn't gone to the DR I wouldn't have to go back on probation. ... I [got] a letter saying that if I didn't pass my sophomore year they were going to kick me out of school. I've never had that; I've never experienced that, and I was like, "I'm *not* going to get kicked out of here!" So at the end, I was scared and I was doing everything [I could]! ... He [the English Director] helped me get all my deadlines together. He was there for me. And at the end when I realized I passed the 2.0 requirement, I was like—I cried! It was really hard because increasing your GPA here is really hard. To get an A? You can't get an easy A here! And now I have the satisfaction that I know that it's for me now. I'm not doing this for anyone else; I'm doing this for *me*.

In the above passage, Eva's family obligations put her academics in jeopardy and she struggled to regain balance in both environments. The English Director was able to help Eva integrate both her cultural identity and her student identity. He empathized with the family crisis, encouraged her to honor her cultural obligations and promised to help her develop a plan to also honor her academic responsibilities when she returned. This support anchored Eva at Damas; it empowered her to actively choose Damas *for herself* rather than choosing Damas because it had serendipitously been added to her Common Application.

Other students sought out integration between the campus and ethnic culture by connecting with other campus Hispanics or even the greater community of color. Carolina discussed finding warmth and acceptance in the MU Latina community and Alys comments that while there weren't many Hispanics in the math department, she found a kindred spirit in the "larger" math community of color; a group of four:

Carolina (MU): When I first came on campus, one of my primary goals was like, I want to get so involved in the Latino community... I definitely felt embraced by the Latino community here at college. And there were a lot of difficult things, like just getting used to living away from home, I'd never done that and that was really hard and getting adjusted to the amount of work that we were doing here, and I felt like I dealt with a lot.

Alys (MU): At first it was just me. But then I started finding a little community. So now I'm a math major and I have a concrete group, there are like four of us who are students of color and that are in that major and that work together and usually have classes. But if we didn't have that network, I know that it would be difficult to continue in those types of classes and in that type of environment. We're pretty definitely, extremely the minority, and I'm the only Latina that I know of right now that is in that major!

The importance of developing and nurturing these sorts of micro-communities was important in relieving student isolation and stress on campus; it helped students keep a foot in each identity without having to choose one over the other:

Eva (DC): It helps you survive. I feel like if I didn't have my friends and my group members, I always think on Sunday, when we have our meeting [for Latinas], every time I'm with them, *my stress is not there!* [Italics added.]

Almost without exception, all of the participants discussed being active in one or more groups designed for Hispanic students; many of the participants held leadership roles in these clubs. But it was clear that the support of fellow Hispanic students was felt not only through formal membership structures, but also through informal connections, which seemed to happen regularly:

Ana (STM): Because everyone is so busy I wouldn't say everyone goes [to the Latina group meetings]. ... But the interesting thing about [the group], because Hispanics all click together, it's like, we have a meeting at 7:30 but we all see each other at campus parties and we all see each other at each other's rooms. Cuz *we're Hispanics, we stick together.* We see each other here and there. [Italics added.]

Marisa's comments reiterate an informality of connection that also plays an important role in her experience of Damas. "To me it's very important to have friends here and *the*

*best way to get out frustration*, besides reading and singing is complaining about it to friends. ...We know we are here for a reason.” [Italics added.] Claludia adds: “*My friends keep me sane*. If it wasn’t for them, I wouldn’t be here.” [Italics added.]

The choice of words used in describing the impact of being connected with formal and informal Latina micro-communities is striking: “*we’re Hispanic, we stick together,*” “*my stress is not there,*” “*the best way to get out frustration,*” “*my friends keep me sane.*” Friends of the same ethnicity played a key role in helping these students value both their cultural selves and student identities.

While integrating their two world experiences was important, students seemed aware that at times there were boundaries to acknowledge. They spoke about the importance of knowing “how to be” at their college, knowing how to talk and knowing how to present like a Damas/Millers Falls/St. Margaret’s student. But it was also important that they have opportunities to act, talk and present like a Latina; to be culturally authentic. In the following exchange between Claudia and Marisa, we see an example of dual identity and bilingualism, what Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2000) might have called a *hybrid identity* (p. 249):

Marisa (DC).I mean I speak louder [when I’m with my friends], and I speak Spanish and I can’t do that with my other friends in my classroom. Maybe it’s subconscious but that’s how I think I am. You can’t speak the same way you do to your [Latina] friends as you do in the classroom; people would be like, “What are you from, the ’hood? Like, what are you doing?”

Claudia - We’ll sit [together] at dinner and be loud and talk and be ourselves. At [dorm name] people will look at us and think, “What is *wrong* with those people of color?” [Lots of laughter and comments of agreement from other participants.] Cuz there will be like 10–12 people of color at the table (and those tables aren’t meant for 10-12 people, but we squeeze them in), eating, laughing, being loud, laughing at the most random things... it’s our way of getting out, it’s the way of *not* being in that academic setting. Being ourselves. Of not speaking in academic

vernacular all the time because that's *not* how I speak. I don't. I speak in improper English and that's how my friends understand me. If it's spanglish, its spanglish, if its English it's English, if its Ebonics its Ebonics. We get it out and we enjoy. And then 10 minutes before going back there, we go back; we go back to that *academic persona*.

The support and cultural familiarity provided by micro-communities play an essential role for students as a means to maintain a balance between cultural identity and student identity, to relieve stress, and to provide positive and supportive spaces which embrace the fullness of their cultural selves.

Dalma's comments about connecting with the Hispanic community, however, present a strikingly different perspective from other students in this study. Dalma is an incredibly strong and independent young woman who is also clearly bright and insightful. She chose not to avail herself of numerous campus resources that help bridge cultural and student identities:

Dalma (MU): I don't feel super connected with the people of color in the [MU] community but I think it has to do with points of contact in the community. Like I'm a history major, I don't see a lot of people of color in my major. I'm not *Bachata'ing* myself away at [names Hispanic student group]. I'm not at [names another Hispanic student group] 24/7, and I don't want to live in [the Latina] house cuz its mad far [laughter]. I don't want to, interest-wise. I don't want to do that stuff. Like that's not what I'm interested in.

Perhaps not surprisingly, she also did not identify strongly as an MU student either. When I asked her why she stayed at MU she replied:

Dalma (MU): Well, yeah I have to graduate from college. [laughter] Like, I don't know, I've been "done" since freshman year. Freshman year was fun. I, I have to finish. Where am I going to go? Where ever I go it's going to be the same thing. I definitely feel ready. ... I also just want to add that I feel like after four years of boarding school and as I spend more time at MU, I definitely feel like [struggles for words] like I really am grateful for the fact that all we do here is chill and spend points to eat; we live in a total imaginary world, and that's fine. All we do is study—kind of [laughter]. I totally appreciate that, but I'm so tired of intellectual pursuits I think. I'm not even joking. I was thinking the other day and I

realized I don't know any *real people*. ... *I just want to be a regular person.*  
[Italics added.]

Despite some ambivalence in attending a predominantly White institution, Dalma did not avail herself of the institutional opportunities that might have helped her to better integrate her MU experience and her sense of herself as “regular person.” I can't help but wonder if when she says a “regular person” she is referring to is someone like her, a Latina from conservative means. Beginning with eighth grade, this young woman had made choices that on the one hand advanced her educational opportunities (private “super, super White” high school, elite college) and on the other hand had plunged her into isolation from “real” people. Her choice of major (history, with a concentration in the Middle East) and choices about community group memberships further isolated her from cultural connections.

At one point Dalma stresses the contrasts between her two worlds. In one world there are Latinos who live and work together; in another world, Latinos are marginalized in roles not central to the community:

Dalma (MU): I mean, like here at MU, do I know any Latino or Latina professors? No. Like where are they? Where are the Latino people, like adults here other than the people who like clean our bathrooms, to be quite honest?

As her academic pursuits prepared her for roles outside of the “Latino world” she seemed to struggle to integrate the inconsistency. She states that she wants to be a “regular person” like people who work construction or fold clothes.

Dalma (MU): I don't have any cousins my age, so all of my social circles revolve around people I know from my high school and people from the east coast and people from college. And I just want to be a regular person. Like someone that has a job and works. I don't want to sound like, not to say that construction is something simple or base, but I just want ... I mean I've never even worked in a



store or anything. I mean I do all these internships. I just want to like fold clothing.

The distinctions between academia, a predominantly White and upper class world, and her own community where “regular people” lived were complex for Dalma and she seemed to be struggling to understand how to make sense of where she fit in both worlds. I was left to wonder about the impact of this isolation and its connection to her feelings about the irrelevance of her educational experiences in the “real world.”

Although Sylvia was significantly more connected with cultural groups on campus, she shared some of Dalma’s longing to become “normal” again:

Sylvia (MU): As soon as I get out I’m not thinking of like grad school or anything because well, I want to do construction when I want to get out of college. ... I’m like much more hands on and I came to realize that being here. And I definitely appreciate all of these experiences and all the opportunities I have come across and taken up, but in the long run I know that my place will not be in an enclosed environment like this, but more *doing* what I want to do...

Sylvia’s reference to Millers Falls as an “enclosed environment” resonates with Dalma’s perspective that Millers Falls is not a part of what they called the “real” world. Although attending one of the finest and most highly respected liberal arts institutions in the country, these students seem to be struggling to bridge the connection between the “real world” and “liberal arts.” Having almost completed just her sophomore year, Carolina also shared her panic about this disconnection and her hope that somehow the integration would happen before she graduates:

Carolina (MU): I think MU scares me sometimes in terms of, well like I definitely did not know what an Af Am [*sic*] major was coming to college. And when I declared, my parents were like, “What? So we sent you to college so you could study Black people?” [laughter] And Soc? Like what? And sometimes I’m like, “Fuck, what am I gonna do with that? Like Af Am and Soc Studies—*Af Am and Soc Studies*? What do you do with that in the real world? I cannot go into the real

world and write papers about civil rights! Like you don't make money that way. You need money in the real world, I mean you don't have points in the real world.

These comments drew me back to the earlier conflict of advancing oneself but staying rooted, of changing without “becoming White.” The predominance of wealth and privilege on these campuses, and in the communities in which they are located, contrasts starkly with the home communities they retreat to and find solace in each break—the “real world.” This is an important gap for institutions of higher education to understand; it suggests that greater attention should be paid to making meaningful connections between elite educational communities and disadvantaged communities of color, specifically Hispanic communities.

Alys describes how she was able to make this connection for herself through a summer work job she arranged:

Alys (MU): I went through that, as freshman though. ... I just needed to do something more, that I feel more committed to. That's why this past summer I did union organizing in Texas and that was more like—it was nice because we were kind of putting into practices all these theories and all these things that we had talked about hypothetically and now we were seeing how things worked and how things benefited some but didn't benefit others. That was a really big thing for me.

While Alys was able to use her Millers Falls access to leverage a position to make that connection back to the “real world.” Diagram 2 illustrates connecting externally enhanced boundaries of capital back to the original boundaries of student, family and community capital. Not all students have been as successful in constructing this path on their own; for them, the expanded capital still feels foreign and vulnerable to challenges from family or community as inauthentic to their ethnicity.

### Expanded Educational Pathways...

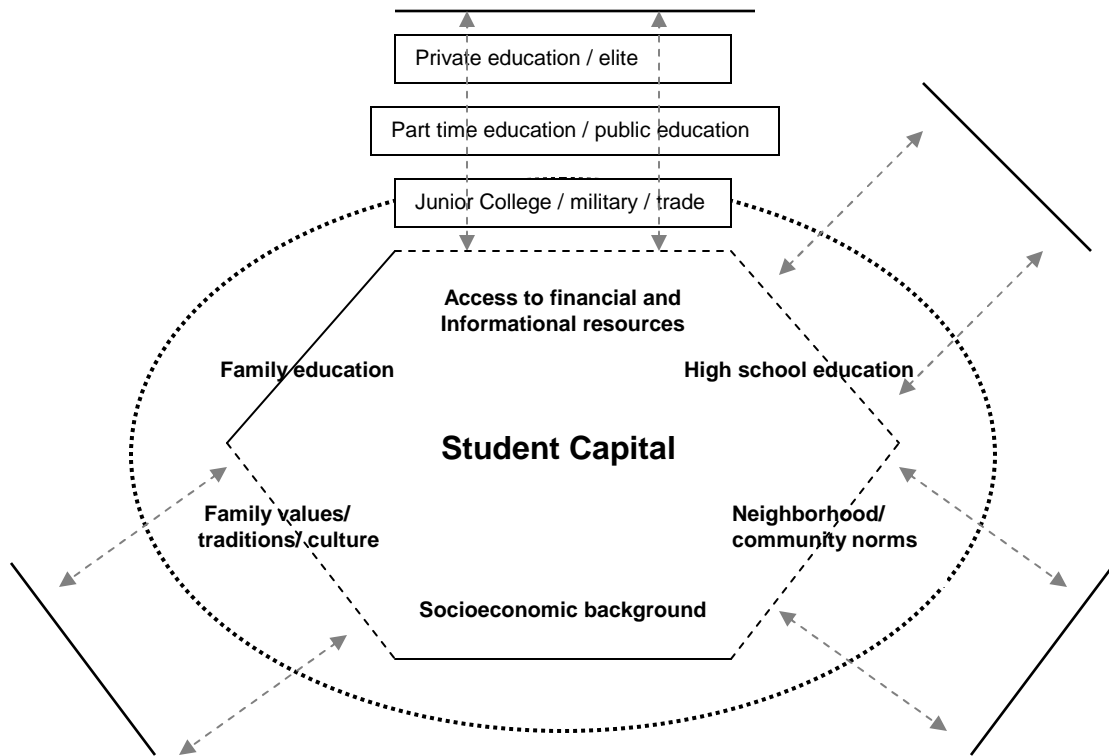


Figure 2 – Integrating externally enhanced student capital.

First generation Latinas attending college, especially elite schools, have accessed opportunities normally outside of the boundaries accessible through their own social and cultural capital. It is important for these students to integrate both personal and newly expanded capital into their cultural identities so that they feel anchored in their Hispanic identities and less vulnerable to feelings of uncertainty about belonging, doubts about legitimacy, anxieties about acceptance by family/community, and fears about their ability to succeed on campus. Integrating external capital into their cultural identities results in education which feels meaningful and relevant. Preserving cultural norms and traditions play an essential role in maintaining an authentic sense of self and in nurturing the pride a

student takes in being a Latina student. Faculty, friends, college programs and micro communities can all contribute to this integration in important ways.

### **Reflections on the Ideal Latina Academic Community**

#### **“How are you Going to Keep on that Lineage?”<sup>15</sup>**

The final question posed to students was: If you were able to design a college for Latinas what factor/program/policy do you think would be essential to ensure their success? This question allowed students to think creatively about the strengths and weaknesses of their specific academic community. Some responses amplified one or more of the five themes already discussed, while others raised new issues specifically related to the communities in which they were studying. Responses were primarily considered by specific college.

#### ***La Familia*<sup>16</sup>**

The first important characteristic of the ideal Latina college was family involvement; this characteristic was cited in different ways on all three campuses. This was the most prominent recommendation made by students at Damas College, the all women’s college. For the Damas students the recommendation about family involvement focused on family interdependence. They felt it would be important that the campus’s cultural understanding of family be broader and more inclusive and that the resulting policies would be responsive to Hispanic family obligations:

Marisa (DC): I think having a support system is important; having people know that Latinas have different struggles. Because this is a predominantly White institution, people don’t understand that Latinas may have it very different from Caucasian students. We have really strong ties with our families. This one time

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<sup>15</sup> Quote by Laurita (MU).

<sup>16</sup> Translation: The Family

this one girl said, “My parents listen to me; a ‘no’ is never a ‘no.’ I rule my parents.” And we were like, “What?” There are differences that—not sets us a part—but [that] people don’t really understand.

Students at Millers Falls also cited the importance of providing opportunities for students to be involved with families and ways for Hispanic families to be part of their student’s college experience. This recommendation was based on the enormous success of a current alumna-sponsored program at MU which focuses on Latina families:

Laurita (MU): A program [that is] specifically about trying to integrate families into this experience is, to me, one of the best things. I feel like now my parents have some confidence. I don’t know, [it] just like gives them this motivation that they also have a say, that they have this like sense of empowerment about the education. Like this institution can do things for them as well cuz they’re associated with it and that’s something I really, really like. ... [In high school my mom would say], “I *hate* speaking in English, my accent!” and all those issues. When she comes here for the weekend, she can speak Spanish and everyone understands her and she feels in her own element! I think a program like that would definitely be great to have [in this ideal school].

Interestingly, students at St. Margaret’s felt that because the Jesuit tradition was, in their estimation, very family oriented it naturally provides a greater accommodation for the family obligations of Latina students and endorsed the Jesuit tradition as a way to sustain family values. Margót highlighted the Jesuit orientation as a strength of St. Margaret’s, not because of its religious connotations but because of its family values:

Margót (STM): I feel like the whole Jesuit thing resounded for me, like they care for the whole person.... They have a resounding thing with you. They do try to make the school like a family almost—almost—because they’re grounded in Jesuit philosophy. And I think that speaks to Latinas because we’re grounded in our families and I feel like we’re really grounded in being close to each other. It’s almost like the school is trying to give you the whole package, in a way, with their Jesuit philosophy. I have issues with it at the same time, but it has also kept me here as well.

In sum, family involvement in the ideal Hispanic institution would include three important factors: first, institutionally there would be a broader understanding, valuing

and support of the range of family obligations Hispanic students carry; second, overall, students would be viewed not as individuals but as part of a family, policies that foster close ties with family would ultimately foster stronger, more committed students; and third, institutions would develop opportunities that created spaces on campus for family involvement which would promote a sense of belonging for extended family members. This recommendation reiterated two of the primary themes that emerged from the group discussions: Latina interdependence with families and the importance of staying rooted in family/community.

***Aquí Estoy: Caras Latinas***<sup>17</sup>

A second recommendation for the ideal community focused on cultural identity and representation. This theme was raised to a lesser degree from the students at Damas College; recall from Table 4 that with 96 students (3.7% of the entire student body), Damas hosted the largest population of Latina first generation students of the three campuses. But even with this comparatively larger representation, students felt they needed to make their presence known and acknowledged:

Marisa (DC): They want you to conform to what it is here. Damas is not Latina. It's not a Black institution; it's predominantly White. They expect you to conform. It doesn't matter. We have to understand them; they don't have to understand us. We are on the outskirts. Unless we make ourselves be heard, we won't be. And I think that's always a scary thing trying to put yourself out there, saying, "I'm here and I'm going to make myself known!"

It was interesting to note that earlier in their lives, these students had been at times marginalized by others in their community as different and non-conforming; and they

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<sup>17</sup> Translation: I am here: Hispanic faces

continue to be unwilling to conform to the dominant population at college. Their academic drive and independent spirit served them well.

Cultural presence was the central thrust of the ideal Latina community cited by the Millers Fall community. Perhaps because by comparison, the Millers Falls community was so small (60 students and just 1.7% of the student body), the response from the Millers Falls students conveyed a greater sense of isolation and need for representation in community. Both Dalma and Carolina talk about not seeing Hispanic faces other than in the few in the student community or in the housekeeping staff:

Dalma (MU): I think it's really important to have maybe some, I mean, like here at MU, do I know any Latino or Latina professors? No. Like where are they? Where are the Latino people, like adults other than the people who like clean our bathrooms, to be quite honest? So I find that problematic. ... For a long time of my idea of a future after college was just blank, because I couldn't see what I could do. Like what does that look like? So I think it's important to have a program or Latina women who are given the opportunity to see a notion of what life could be like after you put in all this work to try and be successful.

Carolina (MU): I think that was a good point that she brought up about seeing ourselves reflected in the administration. I mean even here, this pisses me off so much, I mean, you'd think that the Latin American Department here would have Latinos—like *maybe*? And it's like White men! That is the most *bizarre* thing ever! ... Yeah, I feel like I can relate more to the professors in the Af Am [*sic*] department cuz at least they're Brown people. That's really lacking at times, especially women of color!

Other Hispanic faces in the student body, in the school's administrative structure and or in power/decision-making positions provide meaningful roles models which impact on a student's ability to integrate her newly acquired social capital (elite education) into the fabric of her cultural identities. As a comparison to the ideal Latina college, Carolina discussed her anxiety about how MU is preparing her for a world she knows nothing

about; although she felt academically prepared, she worried about professional survival without some role models to guide her:

Carolina (MU): Like this is not a majority Latino school (MU) and you have to learn. I mean if you go into the real world, if you go into NY, if you go into corporate diversity, I mean—I'm going to go into corporate law and there's only .8 percent Latina women in corporate law. I'm *definitely* going to be a minority!

On the other hand, Dalma described a recent experience where she was exposed to Latina's in professional roles and the powerful impact it had on her ability to see herself in a professional role:

Dalma (MU): This summer I worked at an investment bank and the group that I worked with was all women of color and two Dominicans which was like *ridiculously* beneficial. For me to like see, like Hispanic women, post college, who had been on the same track as me, making money, living pretty successful, normal lives. Like I'm the first person in my family that's gone to college, but not only that... [but] like a job that's not service oriented, or like something that I'm not going to be doing.

In response to Dalma's earlier critiques, I wondered if living a "normal life" fulfills her expectations of living in the "real world"? If so, then it is clear that for at least Dalma, the key to integrating an elite college experience into a cultural identity lies with connection to members of an individual's ethnicity who have been successful in developing a bicultural identity.

The Millers Falls students' comments went even further than representation administratively and role models that would link them back to community. These students talked about developing an academic community where their culture would feel central, celebrated and honored, rather than marginalized. There seemed to be an urgent need to see themselves in the college's epistemology, a validation of who they are as a culture and recognition of their contributions to and place in society. In the final passage,



Laurita talks about feeling like she has no historical roots or context at Millers Falls; for her an ideal Latina institution would provide a context for being Latina, it would in essence be the campus cultural norm:

Laurita (MU): One thing for me that I'd want [at this university], something that would talk a lot more about your ancestry and your history. Like me, I'm Dominican and I, myself, have had to do a lot of research. I ask my parents constantly, like, "What part of the DR are you from? What was it like you growing up?" And they're like, "Why are you asking me all these ridiculous questions? Are you doing a project on us or something that you've been asking all these questions?" And I think it's because in the Dominican Republic families there's a lot of silencing going on; no one likes to talk about these issues. ...So I would want the program to have not only talking about your history and your family, but doing cultural things, like learning how to cook whatever your favorite food is like maybe your mom knows how to make it but what if you don't know how to make it? How are you going to keep on that lineage?

This focus on cultural identity, representation and integration into the college culture resonated strongly with the themes of staying rooted in community and the need to find ways to integrate expanded capital back into their cultural selves. In their recommendation, however, students shifted the responsibility of integration away from being student driven and onto the institution as one of its responsibilities.

### *La Voz de Mujeres*<sup>18</sup>

A third recommendation, again voiced at all three campuses, was the importance of focusing education on women's issues; St. Margaret students overwhelmingly cited this characteristic as a central factor for the ideal Latina institution. Although most strongly voiced at St. Margaret's, creating space for women's voices was also echoed at Millers Falls. Margót talked about the competition in social issues on campus that might

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<sup>18</sup> Translation: Women's voices

normally crowd a campus agenda, but at a Latina institution women's issues should take priority:

Margót (STM): women's issues. ... It never struck me before, I was like, ok fine, there's sexism and women make less money than men, yeah, yeah we know all about that. But I never saw it as really important. It's more important to talk about racism or something like that, but now I feel like women's issues are in-depth. Once you get into feminism, there all sorts of depths of feminism. ... So if I was to develop a college for Latinas I'd definitely target women and women's issues because it's striking a chord for me.

Perhaps because the Catholic Church continues to be male dominated and conservative on women's issues, the recommendations about education on women's issues at St. Margaret were the most passionate and issue specific. The following excerpts focus on birth control, women's rights, women in relationship, and interpersonal violence:

Flora (STM): Let's talk about birth control pills because you don't want to fall into a stereotype. It's not emphasized a lot I feel like. It needs to be everywhere. Let's make a poster that says so. That's a really big one. I have friends from high school—my senior class, nine girls got pregnant after we got out. That's a lot. *Nine girls!* I went to an all girls' school—my class was just 100— and nine girls got pregnant.

Carmen (STM): ... If I had a Latina university, [I would focus] just an awareness of how we [Latinas] are viewed outside. Like how we view ourselves but also how other people view us. How men view us.... So I think definitely awareness of what women's rights and women in general—our bodies, how important education is, how important it is to just focus on yourself and make a change of how we are viewed. People say feminists are hard core men haters, and that men can't be feminists and they definitely can! There are different ways to be feminist.

Ana (STM): I agree with what everyone is saying. I would add just also some training on relationships. I know Latinas make up a big percentage of domestic abuse and stuff and a lot of them feel like there is no way out for them, so something about that. And ... not to feel that guys have power over them. I was in the nursing school, which is a female career, but in thinking about people that were in bio that wanted to do pre-med or business.... There isn't a large female population and there's an opportunity for guys to put you down and saying you

can't make it in things like med school. And I think that a course would empower women not to feel intimidated by men.

While the Jesuit orientation to family resonated with the Hispanic family values in a positive way, it seemed the male domination of the Catholic Church also resonated with the male domination of the Hispanic culture, in a negative way. These students were well informed of the extent to which male dominance in the Hispanic culture can have negative implications for Hispanic women in the United States. It is impressive that they were selective about which values in the Jesuit traditions they were willing to espouse; this was a critical assessment not only of the campus culture, but also their own Hispanic culture in the United States.

Less focused on political issues impacting women, the students at Millers Falls suggested that there might be advantages in learning for Latinas if they were occasionally given the opportunity to learn and think without men around. While also responding to Hispanic male dominance, these students were more interested in providing Latinas with the opportunity for voice and self-empowerment:

Elena (MU): I actually think guys create drama cuz I went to an all girls' school for high school and I loved it like I was so focused on my work. The only thing was like, sometimes we'd throw theatre productions and if there were like guys, really, like catty girls would get all crazy and like you would lose a friend over a guy coming to visit. But my group of friends, like we did so well without guys. I think the world is nice without guys!

Carolina (MU): The program I was in at Columbia during the summer when we took classes, they separated us so we took classes only with females even though it was a coed program.... They were like, "You guys do not concentrate when you're in the same room." There was also some research they had done and for a lot of the students of color, the girls didn't feel comfortable speaking up in front of men of color. Like wouldn't speak up at all. Which I never had that, probably cuz I talk way too much, but I can see how people could have that problem but I'm still... I feel like perhaps if you have like, in this ideal college, if you sort of have like a program or a class that's only females cuz that's beneficial, but it

would have to be coed. I mean, you have to be put into situations where you're not comfortable.

Although none of the students directly criticized the traditional male dominance documented in Hispanic cultures (Organista, 2007) their recommendations respond to the unequal voice of women in U.S. Hispanic families. As a non-religious, liberal, and forward thinking institution, I would assume that it is not uncommon for Millers Falls' campus discussions to include topics such as birth control, abortion, interpersonal violence, etc., whereas these same topics are more likely to be censored on a Catholic campus.

While providing educational opportunities for education about women's issues and creating opportunities for women's voice seemed to be a very meaningful characteristic for an ideal Hispanic institution, it interestingly did not come up in the broader small group discussions nor did it connect with any of the of the five themes cited in the group discussions.

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION

#### **“I’m Not a Statistic!”**

(Claudia, Damas College)

The women in this study embodied the characteristics most frequently cited as predictors of college departure: low socioeconomic status, speaking Spanish as a first language, being raised in communities that are more Hispanic/Black than White, and being first in their families to attend college (Fisher & Hartmann, 1995; Gonzalez, 2002; Johnston, 2005; McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2000; Tinto, 1986). In addition, these women were attending private, selective, predominantly White colleges located in predominantly White communities; the striking gap between their home communities and their college communities further increased the likelihood that they would not graduate (McDermott, 1997; Tinto, 1986).

Despite the predictions, the women I met were strong, proud, and smart; many of them within just months away from graduation. They projected a strong academic confidence and credited their families for having developed in them their drive for education and the strength to persist. They were not only secure in their cultural heritage but also strongly identified with the college they attended. They saw college as a life changing opportunity with implications not just for them personally, but for their brothers, sisters, cousins and community; this was a source for their passion. Despite these strengths they confided some uncertainties: sometimes they felt unsure about what it was they were doing at college, or how to do it. At other times they felt “different from other students,” “out of the box” (Carmen, STM), or as though they were involved in a

“weird paradox” (Dalma, MU). They credited many relationships outside the family for having supported them, some having helped make college accessible, and others for having helped them make the connection between being a college student and being a Latina. They were *Latina* Students and they “refused to be a statistic” (Claudia, DC).

This summary highlights the central themes echoed by the 17 women interviewed on three distinct campuses; they include:

- ❖ Families inspired academic drive but had limited means to help achieve that goal
- ❖ Latinas are *both* independent and interdependent
- ❖ Staying rooted in community is essential
- ❖ Externally expanded capital is vulnerable
- ❖ Integration of expanded capital and cultural identity is essential for success

Some of these themes may seem familiar, but when one considers that in 2000 fully 40% of all Hispanics were immigrants and another 28% were children of immigrants (Suro & Passel, 2003), it is not surprising that some Hispanic concerns are perennial. However, I maintain that, while they may not all be new, they are nuanced by the landscape in which these young women are living today.

The themes also respond strongly to the study’s original questions which asked: how do first generation Latina’s develop the scholastic capital to persist? Are these ways consistent with traditional persistence models? And does the connection between culture and campus experience relate to persistence? I would like to consider the above themes more detail and their relationship to the questions in this study.

***1. Families inspired academic drive but had limited means to help achieve that goal***

That Hispanic families, especially mothers, support academic aspirations for their children is not new; Perna (2000), Perna and Titus (2005), and Zambrana and Zoppi (2002) have all written about this family value. But the limits these families used to define their academic goals, however, were out of the ordinary. McDonough's (1997) study of college decision making found that students made college choices based on their social capital; choices that fell outside of the range of this capital made little sense to family or community (Diagram 1). While these findings were based on extensive interviews she had with young women and their parents, the paradigm is inconsistent with the experiences described by the women in this study. For these women, college aspirations reached out to the highest echelons of education, despite the fact that parents were unfamiliar with these worlds and unable to provide guidance within them.

That parents lacked means to help achieve goals was the second important part of this theme, and it adds an additional depth to our understanding of what constitutes parental support of education. The parents in this study were unable to provide academic support, resources from social relationships to help access college, or financial resources to attend college or even buy books, yet they expected high academic aspirations from their daughters. The women in the study discussed this inconsistency simply: it was their job. Recall Claudia's grandmother who launched her into math and then told her, "You're on your own. Have fun and work with the examples and the instructions." Or Ariel's parents who moved back and forth from Puerto Rico as academic opportunities presented themselves. Or Carmen whose parent's ongoing struggle and work served as her motivation to achieve. There was a mutuality to their endeavors, as though to imply, "I'll

work hard, so you can go to school. I have a job, and you have a job; your job is to go to school and do well.” They each played a role in achieving success for the family; there was reciprocity to the relationship between parent and daughter. It is possible that the reason why it was easy for parents to aim so high was that when their daughters succeeded, the family would also succeed.

## ***2. Latinas are Both Independent And Interdependent***

The women in this study were undoubtedly independent. Without exception, they all described quickly outpacing their parents academically and needing to negotiate on their own well before high school. Carmen shared that she had had a job since junior high and currently held three jobs in college; an experience familiar to most of the students. These students were unable to rely on their family for material resources to negotiate college or practical advice on how to access resources in these foreign systems.

Despite these measures of independence, Latina students are often described as enmeshed or dependent on their families; values which are inconsistent with American values of adolescent independence, self-sufficiency and individuation. In this way, the experience of the Latinas in this study varied from that of students in the dominant population. The Latinas in this study could best be described as interdependent with their families. As described in the first theme, the students saw themselves not as separate from their families or as reliant upon their families, but partnered with their families to achieve mutual goals. This is the essence of *familismo*, that strong interpersonal relationship between and obligation to family members. Students described staying connected for emotional support, for cultural identity, even for cultural sustenance (i.e., food, music). This independent interdependence is a corner stone of their cultural capital, or what



Zambrana and Zoppi (2002) called “cultural wealth” (p. 45); and this cultural wealth was a crucial source of personal strength. While the value of interdependence conflicts with independence and self-sufficiency so valued in college, I suggest that for students who come from communities that have so little to offer, it is important to value the strength that they do bring and to build on that strength.

### ***3. Staying rooted in community is essential***

If family is a central source of support for students, it follows then that the next important theme would be that staying rooted in one’s community seemed essential to their success. Achieving this goal, however, was not without its challenges. The struggle for students to both achieve academically but to remain authentic to who they were was the source of significant anguish. This conflict was the source of the “weird paradox” (Dalma, MU), or the cultural paradox.

Yeah... it’s a weird paradox, like on the one hand you have them saying “O, estas mejorando la raza!” [Oh, you are bettering the race!] and there’s all this weird ideology, like we came here to do something but then, make moves to do that and then you’re like, you’re betraying where you came from becuz... I don’t know, for some weird not very relevant reasons. (Dalma, MU)

The dominant paradigm in education is that families want their children to acquire the academic skills, norms and culture of academia; the culture of academia is that of a predominantly White society including, among others, the norms of independence and self-sufficiency. Hispanic families wanted their daughters to be educated (rather than to become educated) by acquiring academic skills but not the norms and culture of the dominant population. They wanted their daughters to hold on to the norms and culture of their community, that is, to stay authentic to who they were.

#### 4. Externally expanded capital is vulnerable

These final two themes go hand in hand and follow logically. Despite the push from family and community, the means to gain entry into the selective colleges these students were attending fell outside the family. Let us revisit the diagram on “educational pathways defined by the boundaries of student capital” (Diagram 1). In order for a student to aspire to the goals of a selective college, envision that one or more of the boundaries on this chart are being pushed up (Diagram 3).

#### Expanded Educational Pathways...

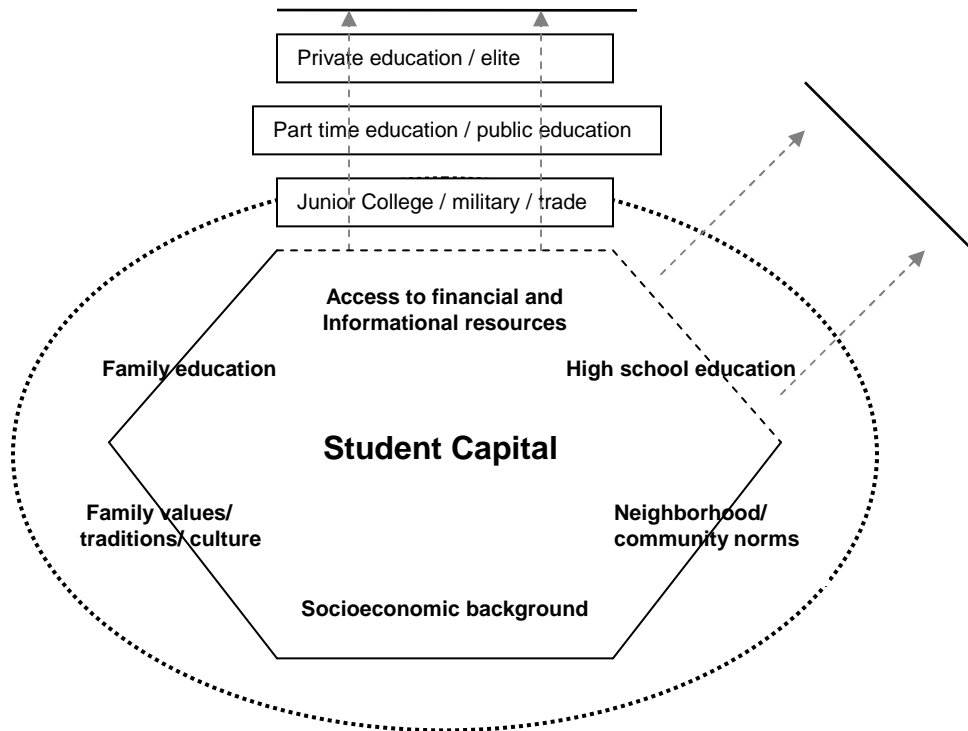


Figure 3 – Externally expanded capital is vulnerable.

Visually we would see that an externally expanded boundary leaves a gap between the student capital and the place where that boundary now rests; there is nothing beneath

that boundary to support it. In a similar way, when these young women went off to colleges and college experiences unfamiliar to their families and communities, they were left vulnerable without their cultural wealth for support.

Repeatedly, we found mediators (de Anda, 1984, p. 103) (mainstream individuals who facilitated access to resources but weren't able to help students negotiate between two cultures) who helped expand one or more boundaries for the students to access college. The evidence was found in the preponderance of students who described serendipitous journeys to college: Eva, who added Damas to her Common App because her advisor asked her to and later found herself getting accepted to an all girls school without knowing it, ultimately enrolled in Damas because her friends did; Sylvia, who followed a friend to a different high school only to find out that everyone else had chosen that school because it had the best college preparatory programs, enrolled in MU because her mother's friend attended MU; Dalma, whose elite high school made it possible for her to be accepted at eight selective colleges, chose her college at random because she assumed they would all be the same – all White; etc. The boundaries to access had been expanded for these students yet their decision making seemed arbitrary because they lacked informed guidance from their traditional supports. The boundaries had been expanded but remained vulnerable without supports; it was incumbent upon the students to construct additional, not new, systems of support for these decisions and for the very new environments in which they now found themselves.

##### ***5. Integration of expanded capital and cultural identity is essential for success***

In a way this final theme tied all of the earlier themes together: achieve academically, stay rooted in community, stay loyal to family, find a way to hold on to that

new capital, but *always* stay authentic to who you are. It is understandable that despite stories of strength, students nonetheless struggled with anxieties about who they were and where they belonged—a “weird paradox” indeed. This integrating theme responded most expansively to the questions on which this study focused: how do first generation Latina’s develop the scholastic capital to persist? And are these ways consistent with traditional persistence models? These were the very same questions with which the students struggled to find answers. The students in this study had developed both very strong college going identities *and* very strong Hispanic identities; but the tension created around how to integrate these identities was a challenge alluded to throughout the interviews.

Tinto actually addresses this tension in his interactional theory (1986). He refers to this tension, which is created by the pull between home and college, as an important step to college persistence. Students can relieve this tension by taking on a college going identity and letting go of previous identities. Alternatively, however, students could relieve this tension by letting go of college, that is leaving college, and affirming their cultural identities (Tinto, 1986). I won’t argue that developing a strong college going identity wasn’t important for these women. Despite their challenges, they seemed dedicated to completing their education. It may even be apt to say that because they had taken on a college going identity, they were better able to manage the challenges they experienced; developing a strong and positive college identity, and the resources afforded by this identity, seems to have been an important factor in the academic persistence of these women. Additionally, adding a college going identity was important for long term

change in Hispanic norms and experiences of higher education; students who were asked said yes, they would recommend their college to another Latina.

But Tinto's model of persistence is a poor fit for these students. Instead of relieving this tension as advised by Tinto, my conversations with these students would suggest that it is important to engage and hold onto that the tension between cultural identity and student identity. I see the answer lying in what Anzaldúa (1987) called developing a "borderland identity;" an identity summoned forth where the distance between two cultures "shrinks with intimacy" (p. i). (There are few environments as intimate as college residential living.) If Latinas let go of their cultural identity, they strip themselves of their greatest assets and supports; connection with family/community represented inspiration and support and reflected the richness of their cultural selves not visible in campus; they were essential sources of their support in pursuing and persisting in education. But cultural context matters in the real world and students who develop a cultural context in education can help balance that tension to a productive end. By developing a bi-cultural identity they are neither the Latina they were before they entered college, nor the college student reflected by the dominant population; they are a *Latina student*, a hybrid of both.

Once admitted to college, a number of additional resources served to augment their scholastic capital. In this study, family members played an important role in providing ongoing messages about the value and importance of college, a cornerstone value of scholastic capital. The students also spoke about the important role of personal friendships in maintaining their commitment to academic achievement; formal and informal micro-communities were described as particularly important in their capacity as

validating agents (Rendón, 1994) and cultural translators (de Anda, 1984); they were also effective counterbalances to the experiences of isolation and self doubt that students experienced. Micro-communities served as an effective tool in helping neutralize potentially negative campus climates and the experience of microaggressions on campus (Solarzano et al., 2000; Sue et al., 2007). They served as bridges between the two worlds that students were navigating.

After talking with these students my conceptualization of what entails a micro-community for Latinas has shifted and has taken on a shade of the Hispanic family. In the Hispanic community, the term family includes the traditional family unit (mother, father, siblings) as well as a number of extended family members. These extended family members include the traditional blood relatives (grandparents, cousins, aunts/uncles, godparents, etc.) but also a myriad of people not related by blood but by role, proximity, love, familiarity, etc. Though technically not related, these people enter into a mutual bond of responsibility and loyalty with the family. For the Latinas in this study, the micro-communities constituted a form of “extended family” who provided a unique network of support. First and foremost the micro-community included the students themselves and other Latina members of the institution. The community also included faculty, administrators, and other mediators (de Anda, 1984) who committed themselves to supporting the students’ endeavors. The students’ friendship and relationships with individuals in their micro-communities were central to the integration of expanded capital (Diagram 2) so that the college experience was reconnected to their cultural selves.

There were numerous examples in which the micro-community helped students integrate their new worlds into their cultural selves. In Claudia’s (MU) situation, the

micro-community stepped in to make it possible for her to get to New York to deal with her responsibilities and return to college without missing a beat. For Ana (STM) her weekly meetings with the Latina group grounded her and helped things “click together.” But perhaps no story more vividly painted this integration than Eva’s story about the role a faculty member played in helping her attend the week-long funeral obligation for her grandfather. Recall that when I asked Eva what anchored her at Damas, she had replied that at the beginning she worried about that very question, what would keep her at Damas? Then she told me the story about her grandfather and the assistance of the English Director. At the end, as though his assistance helped tie it all together for her, she commented, “And now I have the satisfaction that I know that it’s for me now...I’m doing this for *me*.” She was no longer an incidental member of the Damas community; she had integrated her college going identity into her cultural identity and felt proud and strong in both worlds. Eva’s affective response to this question was so strong, that it begged the question, could she have persisted at Damas if she had *not* gone to the funeral? Not because of an academic shortcoming, but because she had been forced to choose one world over another.

In addition to micro-communities, some students took advantage of programmatic opportunities to bridge this new capital back into their cultural selves, for instance by acting as a cultural translators (de Anda, 1984) modeling successful bicultural identities in an academic environment or tutoring in community settings during the summer. Others took leadership roles in community returning college resources to community (i.e., interning as a union organizer; etc.). These are all meaningful ways for students to stay

rooted in community and in fact serve as a conduit that can share the wealth of the new capital they have acquired with others in the community.

When a student is able to successfully weave together the various aspects of her culture, she is able to stay rooted in community and influence family perceptions about education, shape community and neighborhood norms/expectations about college, and ultimately expand college choices for others based on her achievements as a successful role model.

### **Does the Interaction between Culture and Campus Context Effect Persistence?**

Finally, I asked participants a pointed question about the characteristics of the ideal Latina educational community in the hopes of identifying particular strengths or weaknesses of each of the distinct college settings. Not surprisingly, the themes of family, community, and cultural identity were the most salient in the comments about the ideal Latina college. Most concretely, they longed for greater Hispanic representation in the student body, in faculty, administration, micro-communities, and epistemology. They wished that their identities did not feel so tangential to the dominant community. This was a sentiment expressed on all three campuses.

Additionally, students expressed the need for validation of who they were not as an individual, but as a part of a family unit. They wanted space for family involvement and policies that provided flexibility for them to maintain family connections and responsibility. And while this was a characteristic voiced again at all three campuses, there was agreement at St. Margaret's that the Jesuit orientation of the college was an meaningful way in which being part of a family felt more accepted on campus than it did in the greater dominant community. Interestingly, however, when I asked if any of the



students were actively Catholic, they all replied ‘no’ (with some amounts of embarrassment). That a religious community values family and community responsibility is not unusual. But it did make me wonder, if Latinas are not actively Catholic, was this alignment with Hispanic family values restricted to Catholic institutions or might it also be equally felt in non-Catholic or non-Christian campus environments?

Most central to the feedback, however and roundly consistent at all three campuses, were comments centered on education about women’s issues. Despite an effort to isolate feedback to issues of ethnicity alone, the complex and interwoven nature of gender, class and ethnicity seemed apparent in these responses. Though the women in this study may not have considered a women’s college based on the specific benefits of attending a women’s college, the findings do seem to suggest that there might be some advantages for Latina students who attend a women’s college or are at least able to access strong Women’s Studies programs.

Specifically because the Hispanic culture tends to be male dominated and perhaps because in the U.S. Hispanic populations tend toward higher rates of domestic violence, sexual assault, teen pregnancy, etc. all associated with poverty and lack of education (Organista, 2007), the students in this study gravitated toward education about women’s issues, women’s health, birth control, and women’s rights. Students also talked about valuing spaces in academia where their voice as women could be heard and valued; these latter comments spoke to issues of women’s voice and self-empowerment. These unexpected findings, consistent on each campus, emphasize a unique role that women’s colleges might be able to play in the education of first generation Latinas, particularly in light of the current number of immigrant and first generation Hispanics.

### **A Final Note: Do Elite Institutions Hold a Unique Social Responsibility?**

A frustrating aspect of this study was finding enough students on each campus who met the criteria of being both Latina and first generation college attendees.

Considering that that only 11% of Hispanics over 25 have at least a bachelor's degree (Swail et al., 2003), it was surprising to see how few Hispanics on each campus were first generation college attendees. Though the Hispanic populations were small to begin with, almost half of the Latinas at Damas were found to *not* be first generation students (44 percent), and well more than half of the Millers Falls (66 percent) and the St. Margaret Latinas (62 percent) had at least one parent who had completed a college degree. Despite abundant resources to recruit, fund and support students, the overall representation of first generation Latinas on each campus was remarkably small.

The students in this study gained access to higher education thanks to the intervention of a teacher, friend mentor or program who “opened the door to opportunity” for them. I would say that this a swinging door that closes as soon as the teacher, friend, or mentor completes their intervention. Institutions of higher education have the capacity to institutionalize access to educational opportunities. The distinctive resources available to elite institutions coupled with their extraordinary rates of academic success with Hispanic students make them uniquely positioned to have the most substantial long term impact on the social and economic circumstances of Hispanic families. Based on the findings of this study, it is suggested that elite institutions consider carefully the social impact they are able to effect through strategic decision making regarding the outreach, recruitment and enrollment of Hispanic students.

The women in this study were remarkably aware that they represented a potential change in the current demographics for Hispanics. Claudia (DC), a senior, entered the interview room glowing about having just passed a test and added before beginning our interview, “YES! I am *not* a statistic!” Resilience, fortitude and the ambition to succeed were perhaps the most palpable and consistent characteristics found at each of the interview sessions. The conversations were passionate and full of thoughts, ideas and recommendations; conversations were so enthusiastic that it was difficult to end meetings at the agreed upon time. The students felt empowered to have been invited to speak and generous in their thinking about future possibilities. If institutions of higher education are committed to the academic success of Hispanic students, it is important that Hispanic students have an active voice in defining college culture and experiences.

## APPENDIX A

### DEFINITIONS

Academic Capital—Those characteristics that predispose one to applying for college such as essential academic skills; a mindset that values a dedication to high academic standards, structure and discipline; and a commitment to academic achievement and college aspiration (Tierney, 1999).

Cultural capital—Characteristics learned from parents and family members, such as language, cultural knowledge, traditions and values, which define class status (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

First Generation Latino/Hispanic—First generation Latino/Hispanic implies that the student represents the first generation to *attend college*, meaning neither their mother nor their father graduated from college. This fact is independent of the whether or not the student is first generation in the United States.

Persistence/Retention—Arguably two sides of the same coin, student persistence and student retention have distinct meanings. *Student persistence* focuses on the individual and his/her ability to continue based on personal factors such as academic readiness, personal/family values about education, cultural capital, commitment, motivation, family resources/income to finance education, etc. *Student retention* refers to the institution's role in supporting an admitted student, such as academic instruction, mentoring, advising, academic support, community, ethnic representation on campus, cultural inclusivity, empowerment, extra curricular activities, financial aid, etc. (The primary focus of this paper is student persistence within the context of the institution.)

Scholastic capital--Characteristics constructed by or with a college student to fill in gaps in the academic, social and cultural skills, the foundations of which are traditionally developed in school, home and community prior to college. These skills serve to enhance a student's commitment to college and their persistence to graduation. Scholastic capital includes but is not limited to understanding college culture, norms about college life, ways to access college resources, and the role of relationships with faculty, as well as ways to integrate cultural identity with a college going identity.

Social capital—Social networks (resources, relationships, systems) that families access, often defined by the bounds of their class status (Dufur, Pacel & McKune, 2008); social capital enhances socialization and an understanding of social norms and behaviors.

White—White refers to non-Hispanic White individuals or students.

## APPENDIX B

### DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

#### Insights into the Complexities of Identity in Persisting Hispanic College Students BRIEF DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Thank you again for agreeing to be interviewed for my project. To provide a little background, it would be helpful if you could complete the brief questionnaire below. Once it is complete you can return it to me either in person, by mail or as an email attachment at: [imartin@acad.umass.edu](mailto:imartin@acad.umass.edu). If you have questions you can call me at (413) 585-7962.

Your Name\*: \_\_\_\_\_ email address: \_\_\_\_\_  
\* A pseudonym will be used in report of findings

Number at which you can be reached: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Undergraduate college/university: \_\_\_\_\_

4. In what year did you begin your undergraduate studies? \_\_\_\_\_

In what year do you plan to complete your undergraduate degree? \_\_\_\_\_

5. Prior to beginning your baccalaureate degree, did you attend a two year college?  
\_\_\_ yes \_\_\_ no

6. What is your current major? \_\_\_\_\_

7. What do you *estimate* your GPA to currently be? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Are you currently on academic probation? \_\_\_ yes \_\_\_ no

9. With which Latino group do you *primarily* identify?

- |                                      |                                       |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cuban       | <input type="checkbox"/> Dominican    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Guatemalan  | <input type="checkbox"/> Puerto Rican |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mexican     | <input type="checkbox"/> Salvadorian  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ |                                       |

10. Where were you born? \_\_\_\_\_  
City/state or country

If you were not born on the U.S. mainland, how old were you when you arrived on the U.S. mainland? \_\_\_\_\_

11. Is or was Spanish spoken in your home? \_\_\_ yes \_\_\_ no

What was the first language you spoke at home? \_\_\_\_\_

What do you consider your first language now? \_\_\_\_\_

12. How do you identify racially? \_\_\_\_\_

13. Were your parents born on U.S. mainland?

Mother  yes  no; if no, where was she born? \_\_\_\_\_

Father  yes  no; if no, where was he born? \_\_\_\_\_

14. Did your mother complete her bachelor's degree?

Yes, she completed a bachelor's degree

If yes, did she receive her degree in the U.S.?  yes  no

No, she did not complete a bachelor's degree; she attended some college but did not complete a 4 year degree

She did not receive any college education

I'm not sure/don't know about my mother's education

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

15. What is your mother's occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

16. Did your father complete his bachelor's degree?

Yes, he completed a bachelor's degree

If yes, did he receive her degree in the U.S.?  yes  no

No, he did not complete a bachelor's degree; she attended some college but did not complete a 4 year degree

He did not receive any college education

I'm not sure/don't know about my father's education

Comments: \_\_\_\_\_

17. What is your father's occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

18. Would you generally describe the neighborhood in which *primarily* you grew up as:

- Predominantly Latino and or Black
- Somewhat more Latino/Black than White
- About equal Latino/Black and White
- Somewhat more White than Latino/Black
- Predominantly White

Thank you for your time! Please return this questionnaire to me either in person, by mail or as an email attachment to [imartin@acad.umass.edu](mailto:imartin@acad.umass.edu)

## APPENDIX C

### LETTER REQUESTING CONSENT

[name]

[date]

Dear [name],

I am currently a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts School of Education and am undertaking a research project which will hopefully provide insights into the educational experiences of Latino undergraduate students who continue on in college.

Your participation will involve being interviewed as part of a group of Latina students from your college for about one hour. I will also invite you to participate in a follow up review of transcriptions to ensure that I have understood those issues which presented with the greatest importance. You may participate both in the individual and follow-up conversations, or just in the initial conversation. With your permission, I will record the interview; all recordings will be safeguarded under lock and key and will be erased after transcription. Only pseudonyms will be used in the transcriptions.

The results of the interview will be used in my dissertation and in potential future papers from my research. While I may quote you directly from the interview, I will not use your name in any written materials and every effort will be made to disguise your identity.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this study but your participation may provide valuable insight into ways institutions of higher education can better support future Latino students.

I appreciate your willingness to give your time to this project. Your participation is entirely voluntary. Should you agree to participate, you may withdraw without any negative consequences. If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at (413) 585-7962 or email me at [imartin@acad.umass.edu](mailto:imartin@acad.umass.edu) .

Thank you,

Irene Rodríguez Martin

## APPENDIX D

### CONSENT FOR VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

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

1. I will be interviewed by Irene Rodríguez Martin using a guided interview format lasting about an hour.
2. The questions I will be answering address my personal views about college, college life/experiences, and my academic goals. My responses may provide information that colleges might use to academically support other Latina students.
3. I will be interviewed in a small group and the discussion will be 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 in Ms. Rodríguez Martin's writing. I understand that it will be necessary to identify participants in the study by ethnic group, year and college.
5. I may withdraw from part or all of this study at any time.
6. I have the right to review materials prior to the oral exam or other publication.
7. I understand that results from this interview may be included in Ms. Rodríguez Martin's 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.
9. Because of the small number of participants, I understand that there is some risk that I may be identified as a participant of this study.
10. Because interviews will take place within a group, I understand that the researcher cannot guarantee that group members will uphold agreements to maintain my comments confidentially.

\_\_\_\_\_ I give Ms. Rodríguez Martin additional permission to use an audio clip of my comments in possible presentations of her research.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



## **APPENDIX E**

### **GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR GROUP INTERVIEWS**

Group interviews will be conducted using an open-ended, semi-structured format. The following questions/topics were outlined to guide the interview, but questions will be adapted as appropriate to the group, group responses/reflections, and the flow of the conversation. Reflective listening will be used to maximize participant responses and to increase the depth of the interview content.

1. To begin, can you introduce yourself and tell me how do you identify yourself?
2. What messages/feelings about education did you receive from your family, your community, friends before coming to college? (Different messages? In what ways? Meaning to you? How young were you?)
3. Can you describe your experience here at [name of school]?
4. How does your family feel about your attendance at [name of school]?
5. Are there significant experiences/relationships/programs you can recall at college that positively impact your success or aspirations as a student; or conversely significant experiences/relationships/ programs that challenge your success or aspirations as a student?
6. If you were able to design a college for Latinas what factor/program/policy do you think would be essential to ensure their success?

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